

STUDY-ABROAD'S DOUBLE CULTURE SHOCK: A SOCIAL ACTION SOLUTION

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*This paper will interpret the pedagogical, social, and personal benefits of study abroad by applying the insights of Addams' historic social activism as described in her biography *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. When one lives in the richness of America and attends some of the best schools in the world, one inevitably becomes disconnected from the brutalities, injustices, and human tragedies elsewhere, and even in one's own community. For Addams, the trip outside of America and the sight of Spanish poverty became a turning point. It revealed to her the truth of human challenges in the world and it motivated her to a sense of social purpose and need for her direct action to address these challenges.*

In this paper I will explore in detail Addams' theory of how study abroad can instigate the subjective necessity of social settlements. I will then apply that theory to frame my own study abroad experiences in Uganda and Rwanda and draw conclusions about the continuing relevance of Addams' theory regarding the potential of encounters with people in very different conditions of life to transform the purpose of one's own being.

In my sophomore year of college, I went on a study abroad trip to Uganda and Rwanda where I was shocked to encounter the reality of extreme poverty, malnutrition and poor health care. When I returned to America, I faced an additional shock in my own reactions to the lifestyles of my fellow students, which suddenly seemed incredibly superficial to me. Things that had once seemed substantial, such as acquiring the newest technologies or discussing the latest pop culture developments, suddenly were empty and inconsequential to me. Upon sharing my sense of frustration and even revulsion with one of my professors, he pointed me towards *Twenty Years at Hull House*, the famous autobiography of turn of the century social reformer, Jane Addams, and advised that I might find some inspiration in learning how Jane Addams handled very similar experiences in her own life. As I read this autobiography, the term anomie pulled at my heart; the feeling of purposelessness and moral insignificance. I learned that the experience of culture shock, both upon leaving the United States and encountering the reality of global poverty and other challenges abroad, and then

again upon returning to America, is commonly shared by student travelers. I also took inspiration from the productive way in which Jane Addams sought to resolve her own "culture shock" by politicizing her personal despondency and her anomie, turning her shock and disgust at her own privileged life into a lifetime of progressive social engagement.

In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams describes a common challenge for American college youth: *the snare of preparation*. The snare of preparation is the trap faced by college students who spend their ambitious college years studying great themes of social justice and social transformation, and preparing for campaigns of social improvement to follow, only to learn that upon graduation the most likely life that awaits them is simply one of "passive receptivity" (Addams 1910, 74) through dull acceptance of the same kinds of jobs and family lives that their college studies had prepared them to critique.

Addams escaped this snare herself by following motivations that were catalyzed in her during her own study-abroad travels to low-income areas of southern Europe. Addams'

experiences show that study abroad has the potential to empower student participants to escape the “passive receptivity” of the snare of preparation. But this escape often entails bouts of personal alienation and despondency as old cultural forms and familiar patterns are cast off. Students on study abroad can encounter deep culture shock in confronting the realities of global poverty, illness or other challenges. These students may then experience “reverse culture shock” upon returning to America, as they feel a deep revulsion at U.S. culture and even a personal sickness in facing their own uselessness and purposelessness in the face of the global realities they have recently witnessed.

However, Jane Addams outlines a possible solution to this double culture shock and the bouts of anomie it provokes, a solution she calls “The Great Refusal” and “The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements.” What she means by these concepts is to describe a process by which alienated and anomic young people, shocked at an awakening sense of their own inadequacy in the face of profound global challenges, may be provoked into a “great refusal” of the status quo. They may turn away from a lifetime of “curious inactivity” and instead find a sense of personal health through a creative lifetime of political and social action. By turning one’s personal shock and illness into meaningful social action and engaging the challenges within the community which one becomes alerted to through study abroad, a sense of personal efficacy and purpose may be restored. In this way, Addams argues, one can rise above personal anomie into a broader sense of the “solidarity of the human race.” One can learn through this kind of politicized reaction to study abroad that “without the advancement and improvement of the whole, no man can hope for any lasting improvement in his own moral or material, individual condition; and that the subjective necessity for social [action] is therefore identical

with that necessity which urges us on towards social and individual salvation” (Addams 1910, 100). In this paper I will examine how study-abroad can foster double culture shock in an individual, causing them to seek an outlet for their personal anomie as they free themselves from the snare of preparation”.

The Snare of Preparation

As she describes in her autobiography, famous social activist Jane Addams in the late 1800s was an upper middle-class educated American living a sheltered life in the Chicago suburbs. Addams describes how her early college courses “were essentially an effort in far-off abstractions” (1910, 61), such as lengthy struggles to memorize precise lines of the Iliad, which led her to conclude that “the contemporary education of young women had developed too exclusively the power of acquiring knowledge and of merely receiving impressions; that somewhere in the process of ‘being educated’... [they became] so sheltered and pampered they have no chance even to make ‘the great refusal’” against the forces of social injustice around them (1910, 64).

Addams argued that when one lives in the abundance of America and attends some of the best schools in the world, one is likely to become disconnected from the brutalities, injustices, and human tragedies elsewhere on the globe, and even in one’s own community. Addams came to learn that “the sheltered, educated girl has nothing to do with the bitter poverty and the social maladjustment which is all about her,” which leads to seeing “a sense of snobbery” within herself which she was repulsed by. “Because civilization has placed me apart...I am simply smothered and sickened by advantages. It is like eating a sweet dessert the first thing in the morning” (1910, 65). While leading this life of advantaged college study and social inaction, Addams described that she “was lulling [her] conscience by a dreamer’s scheme, that a mere paper reform had become a defense for continued

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idleness.” Addams later called this “the snare of preparation”, saying “It is easy to become the dupe of a deferred purpose, of the promise the future can never keep, and I had fallen into the meanest type of self-deception, in making myself believe that all this was in preparation

for great things to come” (1910,73).

I felt the snare of preparation in my own studies at CU Denver. In my sophomore year I was a declared English major, reading Shakespeare, Austen, and Thackeray. I delved into the poetic *Les Misérables* with a fervent passion as I absorbed all of the tragedies of poverty in the printed word, but never experienced the reality face to face. I had no real plan for direct action or engagement in these issues, but simply to graduate and get a job teaching English in high school. I produced portfolio presentations of my learning on tri-fold cardboard posterboard, with the illusion “that all this was in preparation for great things to come” (Addams 1910, 73).

Study Abroad and the Double Culture Shock

My comfortable period of abstract college study came to an abrupt halt after my sophomore year, when I completed a month-long study abroad trip to Uganda and Rwanda. My pilgrimage took me to the slums of Kampala, where I saw malnourished children with open wounds, raw sewage running through the tiny alleys between houses, bridges made of cardboard so that people could pass over the dredge, and was surrounded by an immense poverty for which I could never have been prepared. From there I went to Lira where I was confronted by a different kind of hardship. I visited child soldier rehabilitation camps and spent time at an

orphanage that lost babies monthly to malaria because they couldn’t afford simple mosquito nets. At one point, our group was distributing clothing to impoverished children and I found myself in the position of deciding which children would receive the limited clothing we had available, giving priority to those who looked most destitute, while other children gathered eagerly around me, only to be denied. I spent evenings alone, in tears and shame at my own wealth and advantages, disgusted by my uselessness. My only confidante became a Ugandan college student who was helping guide our trip, but in the end I was largely isolated from her as well. Facing a similar situation in her own studies abroad to the slums of Spain where she felt briefly connected to a local waiter, Addams writes that “you feel it would be almost grotesque to claim from him the sympathy that you crave because civilization has placed you apart, but you resent your position with a sudden sense of snobbery” (1910, 93).

In fact, Addams’ personal experiences on her own study abroad trip during college had many parallels to mine. While at college, Addams participated in a study abroad trip: the grand tour of Europe, common to colleges of her day. While on this voyage, Addams had a profound transformational experience. She attended a bull fight in Madrid where she was shocked and disgusted at the horror and brutality of the massacre of many bulls and horses in front of a cheering crowd. As she describes, “I felt myself tried and condemned not only by this disgusting experience but by the entire moral situation which it revealed” (Addams 1910,73). These experiences taught Addams that isolated education in the ivory tower of affluent America can be profoundly disconnected and enervating.

The trip outside of America, the encounter with the primordial brutality of the bull fight and the sight of associated Spanish poverty revealed to her the truth of human challenges in the world

and it motivated her to a sense of social purpose and need for her direct action to address these challenges. As Addams described her own reaction to the bullfight:

This, then, was the difficulty, this sweet desert in the morning, and the assumption that the sheltered, educated girl has nothing to do with the bitter poverty and the social maladjustment which is all about her, and which, after all, cannot be concealed, for it breaks through poetry and literature, in a burning tide which overwhelms her; it peers at her in the form of heavy laden market women and underpaid street laborers, gibing her with a sense of her uselessness (1910, 65).

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- Jane Addams

This kind of experience is exactly what I was facing in the slums of Kampala and orphanages of Lira, and it has been felt by many other students on similar study-abroad trips. Kiely (2004, 14) describes how a representative student on a Nicaragua study-abroad trip came away rethinking “my whole way of looking at the U.S. and the rest of the world...I had basically been living in a sheltered world and the whole time thought of myself as wordly.” Another student described the experience of “emotional weakness in the face of extreme poverty” and a strong desire to “purge”

or “cleanse” their revulsion at their own life. Kiely (2004, 13) describes the common experience of students “recognizing one’s privileged lifestyle and questioning American cultural hegemony that supports consumerism, materialism, and individualism.”

This experience of student travelers is commonly called “culture shock”, which Adler (1975, 13) describes as follows (see also, Guru et al. 2012).

Culture shock is primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perpetual reinforcements from one’s own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, or to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences. It may encompass feelings of helplessness, irritability, and fears of being cheated, contaminated, injured or disregarded.

While Adler (1975) describes the general experience of culture shock in new international settings, my own experience was a particular form of shock tied specifically to a growing emotional repudiation of my previous life in America and associated cultural hegemony. As Kiely (2004, 13) describes, “participation in international service learning programs can trigger extremely powerful visceral, emotional, cognitive reactions from students who begin to critically reflect on long-held and taken for granted assumptions about themselves, their lifestyles, careers, relationships, social problems, and unjust hegemonic dimensions of the world around them” (see also Brookfield, 1994; 2000). While I travelled through Africa, facing poverty and environmental challenges I had never seen before in America,

and learned of America's own inadequate responses to challenges like the Rwandan genocide or infant malnutrition in Africa, I experienced exactly this kind of culture shock, and grew increasingly disturbed at my own place in this unjust system.

While my experience of culture shock when travelling in Africa was profound, I felt a second kind of shock upon returning to the United States. When I returned home I was in such a state of despondency and repulsion for myself and those around me that I found readjustment difficult. In one of my classes a Caucasian middle class woman was bemoaning the quality of car that her father had just bought her. In an instant I flashed back to the streets of Kampala where fifteen people would flatten against each other in one cab, in order to get a cheaper taxi fare. I couldn't look at this student without feeling disgust with her and all of the broader American culture.

My displeasure extended far beyond the classroom. I could barely stand to go to work and see the parking lot full of new expensive cars, or go inside and see my coworkers in fashionable suits as they worked away using the best technology. I recalled the Kampala mothers in tattered clothing without enough breast milk to feed their crying babies. One night as I was sitting in my apartment texting on my smart phone while watching Netflix on my flat screen TV, I suddenly and powerfully burst into tears. I had abruptly remembered the way children in Africa had looked at my camera in awe as something they had never seen before. I was nauseated at myself for all of my luxury. I couldn't force myself to forget what I had seen while abroad, but I also couldn't become accustomed with the return home.

In her own description of her lethargy upon returning home from her European travels, Jane Addams calls this experience one of "anomie," by which she meant a kind of moral aimlessness, a

loss of purpose. Gaw (2000), Church (1982) and Zapf (1991) all call this experience one of "reverse culture shock", which refers to "the difficulties of re-adapting and re-adjusting to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural environment" (Gaw 2000, 3). Common symptoms of this reverse culture shock include depression, alienation, isolation, loneliness, and anxiety (Guru et al. 2012; Gaw 2000). Zapf (1991) and Adler

(1975) have found through interviews that almost all

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feel this reverse culture shock, while additional quantitative studies have found that 18% of student travelers report clinical levels of post-return depression, 45% to report "problem anxiety," and 43% to report regrets about either returning home or leaving in the first place (Gaw 2000).

For United States college students, this reverse culture shock upon return is commonly experienced as a revulsion against American wealth, materialism and world power. As one study-abroad traveler to Nicaragua reported upon his return: "I now have feelings of guilt over having so much, of being privileged enough to be born in a stable, prosperous country, and into an educated White middle-class family" (Kiely 2004, 1).

Scholars have found reverse culture shock to lead to difficulties in communicating or maintaining relationships with friends and family who seem unable to understand the depth of shock facing the returnee (Kiely 2004). For my own part, I indeed found that I could not talk to my friends about the emotional turmoil I was experiencing. They would shake their heads at me and say "You'll get over it." Family members

would pat me on the back in silence and then move on to discuss their own problems. Kiely (2004, 16) describes similar experiences of students reporting upon their return that “no one understands me,” or “my coworkers think I am a radical,” or “friends and family don’t seem to care.” Addams writes of her own similar experience upon return as follows: “the girl loses something vital out of her life to which she is entitled. She is restricted and unhappy; her elders, meanwhile, are unconscious of the situation and we have all the elements of a tragedy” (1910, 94).

Resolving the Double Culture Shock

Whether experienced as a deep revulsion at one’s own witnessing of violent bull fights and subsequent anomie in returning to studies in the 1800s America, or as an alienation from one’s own friends and community upon returning from a sojourn in impoverished Africa, how is it that the double culture shock can be resolved? Lysgaard (1955) and Guru et al. (2012) describe the process as one of moving through a U-curve of initial euphoria at encountering another culture, subsequent depression as various culture-shocks set in (the low point of the U-curve), and final resolution as one rises out of despondency into a renewed sense of self and community. But how is that final resolution to be achieved?

Kiely (2004, 14) describes how some students seek resolution in personal lifestyle changes, such as selling their car, giving away material possessions, or “washing their clothing by hand in the bathtub.” Gaw (2000) suggests that a better system of post-travel counselling sessions would help students avoid personal depression and psychological withdrawal. In her autobiography, however, Addams suggests a third course: the politicization of one’s personal angst by channeling anomie into social action. Though both Kiely (2004) and Gaw (2000) believe that psychological counselling and other such individualized actions can usefully help students adjust to their return, Kiely (2004, 88) also notes

that “sometimes students choose the safety that blending in affords, but rarely feel comfortable with such conformity.” Some may be feeling what Addams described as a longing for the “Great Refusal” — a desire to forsake all normal social paths in favor of a life of transformational political and social engagement. Just as Addams was inspired to break out of her pre-ordained social role and found the American Settlement House movement upon her return from study abroad travels, Mezirow found “that the experience of returning to school caused many women to critically reexamine their assumptions and dependence on culturally defined gender roles and expectations” (1981, 3).

What Addams and Mizerow point to is how study abroad may in fact solidify a commitment to social activism within returning students, as they search for a healthy resolution to their feelings of anomie upon their return (see also, Kadel, 2002). Addams points out how real-life encounters with extreme poverty can lead students to “seek an outlet for that sentiment of universal brotherhood...the desire for action, the wish to right wrong and alleviate suffering haunts them daily...our young people feel nervously the need of putting theory into action” (Addams 1910, 91-95). Kiely similarly finds that a common trajectory for returning students of study abroad programs is that “they feel compelled to act on their emerging global consciousness, which tends to involve significant personal risk and interpersonal conflicts...Participants describe political transformation as ‘rethinking their citizenship role’ from a passive form of voting and volunteerism to more active involvement” (Kiely 2004, 11, 18). As a result, returning students commonly increase their political and social activism in institutions such as immigrant rights campaigns, local service organizations, global fair-trade movements, anti-war campaigns, church service work and school educational campaigns (Kiely 2004; Gaw 2000).

These preceding insights resonate for me. Like so many other students, I returned from my study abroad with a powerful experience of double culture shock. I was shaken by the level of challenges I witnessed in Africa, and shaken anew upon my return to America where I felt personally aimless and revolted at my own home community. But similar to Addams and these other student returnees, political and social activism became a path of personal health. I was fortunate that within a few months of returning from Africa, I was able to take a position with the Global Livingston Institute (GLI), an organization that is dedicated to creating positive social impact in East Africa by cultivating a global understanding of poverty and by partnering with community development projects throughout East Africa.

Through GLI I have been able to accommodate my desire to do *something* to address the global situation, both in Africa and America. My work with GLI involves developing partnerships for meaningful activities in Africa, such as supporting a women's cooperative, developing a swimming school in a community with a high number of youth drownings, self-defense training for young women, and efforts to support a bio-conservation reserve in the area. Since taking this position, I have been able return to East Africa twice and grow a deeper understanding of the communities and the culture, and I now work to organize and recruit for multiple study-abroad trips to Africa for students and educators each year. I have seen and been a part of an effort to make a real difference on the ground in African communities, and in enlarging the understanding and sensitivities of American partners.

My own path into engagement in this important work started with study-abroad. As Eyler and Giles (1999, 129) write in this regard, study-abroad programs are “not about accumulating more knowledge, but about seeing the world in a profoundly different way, one that calls for personal commitment and action.” For Addams direct contact with brutal realities outside of America changed the direction of her life, leading her to a sustained commitment to meaningful social action, including founding the famous Hull-House social settlement, which worked for decades to improve the lives of poor people in Chicago. Addams described the founding of the Hull-House as flowing from the “subjective necessity” of social settlements, by which she meant that social service is not only necessary to improve the conditions of other

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suffering people, but it also subjectively necessary to give one's own life a sense of purpose.

Like Addams, I had no idea that an exotic trip to a foreign country as part of my romantic college studies would shake me to my core and shock me into fundamentally new social commitments. Addams concluded that study-abroad could provoke anomie and aimlessness in returnees, while modern scholars call it the “reverse culture shock,” but regardless of nomenclature, the experience is real and it can be transformational. Anomie need not end in aimlessness — but instead may result in action; and whatever study-abroad experiences tear down in the travelers' psyche, it can be the task of committed social action to rebuild.

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