4-18-2014

Influences and Perspectives: Studying Abroad in Germany

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Stereotype *n*: "something conforming to a fixed or general pattern, *esp* : a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an over simplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment" (1224).

Stereotypes affect everyone on a daily basis. They have no boundaries or restrictions and are not limited to only certain groups or individuals. Stereotypes have formed, evolved, disappeared and returned in a different form, or not disappeared at all, for centuries; they have been around ever since individuals started interacting with each other and noticed differences between each other. But where do they come from? How do they form? Finding out how every stereotype was formed would be an impossible undertaking. However, by taking a small group of individuals in a specific situation and observing their individual and surrounding opinions may help us to understand more about the existence of stereotypes. This thesis attempts to bring to light what influences our opinions of other cultures and to what extreme. It analyzes the situations and experiences that shape our opinions, and how our opinions can change. Stereotypes are not all negative; they can be positive also. A stereotype is also not necessarily a negative concept either. "Although stereotypes are regarded as undesirable because of the prominent role they play in social oppression based on characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity, and age, in an important respect they are essential for social life. When a situation in which we do not know anyone, for example, we must have some basis for knowing what to expect of others and what they expect of us" (Stereotypes).

Project Summary

A small group of Western Michigan University students were asked to fill out a short survey comprised of 23 questions asking about their experiences and opinions of Germany/Germans before, during, and after their study abroad in Germany.[1] The selection criteria consisted of American students who had studied abroad in various cities around Germany in the past two years. The questions were created to discover the origin of the students' stereotypes, how the stereotypes evolved or how they were shattered, and the situations and experiences that caused a change in opinion. Furthermore, the findings of this study are meant as a source of information, as well as an opportunity of future WMU students of German who are preparing to study abroad, to be aware of their own preconceived notions of what is foreign. Ultimately, in lieu of an in-depth analysis either through a culture course or through a similar program as part of the curriculum, the future students will go to the host country with an open mind.

There are many factors that influence our opinions. Some examples are upbringing, religion, politics and media. However, this thesis will focus on three main factors. First, influences from family and the society/culture from the country of origin; second, influences from the society/culture from Germany; and third, influences from personal experiences at home and abroad. These three factors suffice to discover and better understand how opinions are influenced. Furthermore, they are easily discovered during recollection.

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[1] Let it be noted that the answers these students provided on the surveys may not be as accurate as they could have potentially been. It was unfortunately not possible to send out three separate surveys before, during and after their study abroad experience. Nostalgia, defined by *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* as "… a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time," (1325) had most likely already set in when the surveys were taken, thus altering the students' perceptions of their study abroad experience. According to Helmut Illbruck in *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease,* there is no other cure for nostalgia than to return to the location and the time of the original experience (65).

The influence that family, society, and culture have over opinions is most likely underestimated. As a child grows up, she is surrounded by thoughts, ideas, and opinions that she most likely did not form alone. When she is younger, she trusts that her family is telling her the truth and she embraces those opinions and ideas as her own, not yet understanding that she is entitled to her own thoughts and opinions. And so, by jokes told around the dinner table, in war movies, or in history class, stereotypes start to form in a child's mind.

It is possible, however, for those stereotypes to be extracted from our way of thinking. Once people grow older and set foot into the world, they notice that not everyone thinks the same way they do. When individuals find their independence, they start seeing things in a different light. When their ideas and opinions are challenged, they begin to accept the fact that they might not be completely right. Different life experiences play a role in how easy it is for individuals to accept the possibility of being wrong. Some examples are the amount of traveling done during childhood or how diverse the surrounding community was when growing up. If someone traveled outside of their country at least once during his childhood or even to various places in his home country, he will have been exposed to different ways of life and thinking at a young age. Also, if someone grew up in a community that had different ways of life and thinking all around her, she would have realized that everyone is an individual within a larger group.

For some, transitioning into a new life in a different culture is easy. But for others it's difficult. There are various characteristics that contribute to the ease of transition into a different culture. One of the characteristics is the individual's knowledge of the foreign country or culture before living there. This knowledge would come specifically from their experience in a previous visit to that country or from unbiased sources about the country's history and culture. Those

who have an idea of the differences between their culture and the foreign culture before living there will adjust and pass through culture shock more quickly than those who move blindly.

The communities and culture we grow up in aren't the only influences that affect our stereotypes. The perception of a culture can change and evolve after living for an extended period of time in that culture. The views that we have held for years can alter after experiencing the culture first hand. They can change for the better or worse, depending on individual experiences. Some examples of these experiences are how the students' opinions and stereotypes were confirmed or negated, how the students were treated by the Germans, how easy or hard it was for the students to adapt to the new culture, and the overall good or bad experience they had while studying abroad.

Western Michigan University Student Surveys

For this thesis, I comprised a survey specifically for Western Michigan University students who have studied aboard in Germany within the past two years. All of the questions target the three main influences which affect the opinions that are the focus of this thesis: (1) the influences from family/friends and the society/culture of the county of origin, (2) the influences from the society/culture of the country studied in and (3) the influences from the individual experiences while studying abroad. Each question was created to fit into one of these influences.

Background of students

A few questions were asked in the beginning of the survey to get an overview of the diversity of the university students who participated in this study. Unfortunately, with the limited response, the diversity was not as vast as was expected. The age range of the Western Michigan University students when they studied abroad was between 18 and 22. This small

range was not unexpected because the typical time for a university student to study abroad is during his/her undergraduate education. All of the students who responded grew up in, or lived for a significant amount of time, in the lower portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. A few examples of these cities are Allegan, Lansing and Detroit. There was one outlier, however, who grew up in Wisconsin.

Knowing the intentions and the drive behind why the Western Michigan University students chose to study abroad in Germany is a stepping stone to understanding the opinions they held of Germans before they left and how they evolved after spending an extended period of time in Germany. The students were asked why Germany was their country of choice and the majority of their answers were scholarly based. Every student had at least a general knowledge of the German language and each saw study abroad as a way to better their skills in the language with the benefit of experiencing a new culture first hand. There were a few students in particular whose pull towards Germany differed from the others. Their interest in Germany was sparked by German family ties or siblings who studied in Germany prior to their personal experience.

Family, friends, societal and cultural influences

As was stated previously, it is inevitable while growing up to escape the influence family has on forming opinions. It is not surprising that when someone is surrounded by specific opinions held by those close to him/her, he/she assumes that those opinions are true. The acceptance of those opinions as truth was proven to be accurate through the responses of the students in the survey.

A little more than half of the Western students surveyed had never visited Europe or left the United States prior to their study abroad. As well as not having a previous experience in

Europe, some of the students had also never met a German before their time abroad. The stereotypes and opinions that these students had of Germans/Germany before leaving the United States were mostly negative. A few negative opinions that were shared by most of the students were that Germans were rude, not very social, and hard to get to know.

Not all of the students, however, held negative stereotypes of Germans before their departure. The students that had a more positive outlook of Germans and their culture were previously able to visit Europe or specifically Germany. The students' personal experiences of traveling allowed their perspectives of Germans to be formed in such a way that they held a deeper understanding of the German people. With this new understanding, the students were able to look past the attitudes and demeanors of the German people. The opinions formed by these students were that Germans are intelligent, hard-working, organized, clean, punctual, economically secure, efficient, and leaders in sustainability.

The influence that the family and friends had on the Western students' opinions of Germans was noticeable just by asking one specific question. With the exception of one student, who was determined to go to Germany with an open mind, almost all of the students stated that their family and friends shared the same or similar stereotypes before the study abroad experience, whether the opinions were positive or negative of Germans.

Influences, however, do not only come from family and friends. Society and culture also play a major role in the formation of stereotypes and opinions. Individuals are bombarded with perceptions of a wide variety of various topics in advertisements, the media, in movies and in school. Individuals may not realize the impact their surroundings have on the formation of their

opinions. However, society's influence is inevitable. This was apparent in a few of the students' responses.

In the United States, it is not uncommon to witness an advertisement portraying a German wearing Lederhosen and/or drinking beer. Most of the movies involving Germans are about World War One or World War Two, in which they are almost always the bad guys. In high school history classes the majority of what the students are taught about Germans or Germany are the negative aspects, for example the Nazis and the Holocaust. And so, it was and unsurprising discovery when most students answered that they thought Germans were Nazis who drank beer and ate sauerkraut and bratwursts all day.

The many uncertainties that come with studying abroad were most likely a large portion of the parents' uneasiness of their child leaving the country. However, a portion of some parents' anxiety came from their stereotypical opinions of Germany and Germans. Two students specifically stated in their responses that their families were worried about their safety while they were abroad. A female student who studied in Berlin, said "Many people thought (hopefully jokingly) that I would be approached by Nazis or something. Also, some people thought I was going to some village." Granted, Germany is famous for its cute villages scattered across the country, but Berlin is the capital and probably the most modern city in Germany. The male student stated that his parents' concern for his well-being during his study abroad made him wary at first, because they were under the assumption that Germany/Europe was dangerous; but once he had arrived in Germany, he didn't worry about his safety any more than if he was in his home town.

Factors that influence transition into new culture: language, living accommodations, relationships, and travel

As we have seen, the experience one has when interacting with a new or different culture has its influences on developing opinions of that culture. However, those experiences also have the possibility of negating previously held opinions or stereotypes of that culture. There are many factors that contribute to whether the experience is enjoyable or horrible. Some examples of these contributing factors are finances, weather or health. The four influences that were specifically addressed in the survey are (1) the students' knowledge of the German language before leaving the United States, (2) the students' living accommodations while studying abroad, (3) the amount of traveling the students were able to accomplish, and (4) the relationships built during their time in Germany. Experiences could vary drastically depending on the outcome of these factors.

Dealing with a language barrier is sure to turn a study abroad experience into an adventure, whether it's a frustrating or exciting adventure. The level of German, at which the majority of the students were before arriving in Germany, was intermediate. Some students were more advanced in the language than others; however, the amount of the German language everyone had acquired was considered sufficient to survive in Germany before they further developed their knowledge of the language. All of this was true for the students, except for one. She had only a basic knowledge of German before she studied abroad. This may have caused more difficulties trying to communicate in German. However, the Germans' knowledge of the English language made communication fairly simple for her. Fortunately for the Western students, a language barrier (at least in Germany) was not a difficult obstacle to overcome.

Living accommodations have a major impact on any experience. If someone is living in a place that he despises or surrounded by people that he isn't compatible with, he is obviously less likely to feel as comfortable or have a sense of belonging than someone else who loves everything about his living situation.

The most common arrangement of the students' housing situation in Germany was a community style set-up. There were between five to seven students per apartment level, each having a personal bedroom, but sharing a kitchen and bathroom with each other. There were a few students whose living situation was slightly different. These students had their own personal bedroom, bathroom and kitchenette, but there would be around 80 students per apartment level; a very similar set-up to the Residence Halls on Western's campus.

Most of the students seemed to enjoy where they were living during their study abroad, whether it was the private room or the community environment. One student had the opportunity to study in Germany twice and was able to experience both living situations. He stated that the arrangements were very different from each other and both had their pros and cons; but he enjoyed being placed in both settings. The annoyance that some students that experienced with where they were living had to do with the typical frustrations of living with other students, for example cleanliness (or lack thereof) and being courteous of noise level (or lack thereof).

All of the apartments the Western students lived in had vastly diverse communities. The students had lived with other university students from Mexico, Egypt China, Kazakhstan, Brazil, Greece, Saudi Arabia, and many other countries. The Western students living in the community setting were able to experience this diversity to a greater extent than the students living in a private room. This was because the students were gently forced to coexist with the other

students. The Western students enjoyed learning about even more foreign cultures and how to cook a wide variety of food they had never hear of.

Traveling is an enlightening experience that also influences the overall tone of the study abroad experience. Not only does one become more knowledgeable of the country in which they are studying, but she also comes back home a deeply cultured world traveler. Travel complements and enhances studying abroad.

One of the benefits of studying in Europe is having the option of affordable and simple travel. Fortunately, all of the Western students seized the opportunity not only to travel in Germany, but also around Europe as well. Some of the students were involved in programs that offered day or week trips to various cities around Germany, but everyone still took the opportunity to travel on their own or with friends. Each of the Western students visited at least five different German cities other than the one in which they were studying, and most of the students were able to visit at least four other countries, ranging everywhere from Spain to Sweden to India. Not only did these students take advantage of visiting other countries, but some were able to experience the countries' cultures for an extended period of time, rather than just for a day.

If the impact of creating and keeping relationships is important in one's own country, it is tremendously more influential when studying abroad. Forming bonds with others and having a sense of belonging, or possibly even not creating friendships, while away from home can have a profound effect on the study abroad experience, whether it is positive or negative. Having healthy relationships provides the support and comfort that is most often needed while away

from home. Not forming healthy relationships while abroad could possibly leave the student feeling depressed and homesick.

All of the students who participated in the survey stated that they miss and remember the friendships that were created while abroad the most. Out of all of the experiences that the students endeavored, they value the connections they made with others most. For some these relationships are still intact.

Knowledge of the language, living accommodations, traveling, and relationships not only influence an individual's experience and opinions of another country, but also aid in the individual's adjustment of living in another country. If an individual is confident in the country's language, enjoys her living situation, has experience in more than one foreign culture, and has created many positive relationships, her adjustment to the new country and culture would come with greater ease than another individual whose knowledge of the language is lacking, has a poor living situation, doesn't have experience with other culture, and doesn't make close friends while away.

Having at least a general knowledge of the country before studying abroad also has a great impact on the ease of adjusting to the new culture. Western Michigan University offers a German Life and Culture course, which is a history course of the German people and culture. Only one student had taken this course before her study abroad experience. This being said, the majority of the students experienced an easy transition of living in Germany. The transition was easy for the students for several other reasons, for example some of the students had visited Europe or even studied abroad before they lived in Germany or were a part of a German-American family. However, even though only one student took the course before her study

abroad, the knowledge that she acquired from the course still helped her transition more easily than the other students surveyed.

Even though more than half of the students had never been to Europe or even left the United States before their study abroad, the majority of the students didn't have a difficult time adjusting to life in Germany. There were some students whose transition was challenging at first, due to a language barrier, different food and schooling system, confusion with transportation, and forgetting that everything is closed on Sundays in Germany. However, the students soon grew accustomed to the differences from their life in the United States because of the support from the other international student and friends. They soon realized that Germany was not as different from the United States as they once thought.

Stereotypes and stereotyping

Personally witnessing the confirmation or inaccuracy of stereotypes can not only have a profound effect on someone's preconceived opinions, but also on the development of his opinions in the future. If an individual witnesses that his stereotypes of another culture were to be true, he might believe that his views of every culture are correct. However, if another individual realizes that her stereotypes of a culture were false, she is more likely to view the world with an open mind in future situations. Being falsely stereotyped can also provide clarity to the inaccuracy of stereotypes. Being the target of a false stereotype can open someone's eyes to the possibility of the inaccuracy of the stereotypes he holds of others.

The expected answer in the survey, when the students were asked if they remembered stereotyping Germans while studying abroad was not a simple 'yes'. Most individuals don't realize when they are stereotyping. However, one student answered with a very true statement.

"I'm sure that I did some subconscious stereotyping that I wasn't aware of, because that is hard to avoid, and anyone who says they don't do it is probably lying to themselves." The other students stated that they do not remember stereotyping Germans during their study, but their answers say differently.

The majority of the students answered that they were surprised that Germans didn't behave a certain way or eat certain foods. Their surprise proves that they were, in fact, subconsciously stereotyping Germans. The students were expecting Germans to act in a particular way based on their preconceived opinions, and the students were caught off guard when the Germans didn't fit their stereotypes.

After many of the students became friends with Germans, they realized that they are not so different from Americans. After observing and becoming close to Germans in everyday life, the students realized that it is possible for Germans to be late and to not drink beer, that some Germans do smile back even if they are strangers, that Germans don't mean to be rude, but are just more private than Americans and open up once you become friends, and that German youths have a lot of the same interests as American youths. These answers show that the stereotypes the students had of Germans were proven untrue after being exposed to the German culture for an extended period of time. However, there was one student who had a poor experience with a German and still to this day thinks that Germans are rude and stubborn.

As stated in the introduction, everyone tends to stereotype to an extent. Not only did the Western students stereotype the Germans, but the Germans also stereotyped the Western students. Experiencing false stereotypes most likely aided in the students' process of discovering the unreliability of stereotypes.

The Western students did not all study in the same region of Germany; however, this did not stop the fact that almost all of the stereotypes the students personally experienced were the same. The students studied in cities all over the country, for example in the west (Bonn and Paderborn), in the east (Berlin), and in the south (Tübigen); but the students were stereotyped similarly by Germans and Europeans. The most common stereotypes the students experienced were that Americans are loud, crazy, stupid, play American Football, and have poor diets. One student stated that, "I have always been asked if I eat McDonald's every day." A second student, who did not fit into the stereotypes the Germans had of Americans, said that: "Most Germans I met always told me that they did not believe I was American. I think they were under the impression that all Americans were rambunctious and loud."

Another common assumption Germans had of Americans was that they are incapable of speaking well in another language other than English. Many of the students said that Germans were surprised that they knew as much German as they did. They also said that Germans would automatically switch to speaking in English as soon as they found out the student was American. This was because the Germans thought it would be less of a hassle for the student to have a conversation in English rather than in German, or because the Germans wanted to practice their English. This was usually the case for the younger generation.

Adjusting to coming back home

Living in a different country for an extended period of time can alter the way an individual views his own country upon returning. Being surrounded by a different culture and living a different way of life can cause an individual to view his own culture with a fresh set of eyes. Things that an individual took for granted or didn't notice about his culture could possibly

turn into relief or resentment when he returns home. Some examples are transportation, shopping, or consumption of food. Based on the individual's experience in a foreign culture, her adjustment to living back in her home country could be easy or difficult. For example, an individual who had an overall good experience while abroad would have a more difficult transition back home than an individual who had an overall poor experience.

Half of the students had an easy time adjusting back to living in the United States and the other half had a difficult time. The ease of adjustment coming home for some students was due to their new found belief that Germany and the United States are very similar. The students who had a difficult time living in their home country again stated that they missed the friends they had made and the study abroad experience. All of the students' adjustment times varied, though. The longest time a student took to be comfortable at home again was 10 months.

Interestingly enough, whether the students had and easy or difficult time adjusting to home again made no difference in one aspect: they all noticed certain things about their fellow Americans that they did not notice before. All of the students observed behaviors and actions of Americans, and for some of the students these actions began to bother them after their return home.

The most common trait that the students noticed of their fellow citizens was the lack of knowledge Americans have of other countries and cultures and the absence of curiosity to learn about the others around the world. One student was asked by very few people about her study abroad experience and when she did talk about her time in Germany, people would avoid talking about it with her.

Another trait the students observed of Americans was the poor eating habits, whether it was poor nutrition or the manner in which they ate. Other traits they noticed were the high number of obese individuals in the United States, the narrow mindedness and pride of Americans when it comes to their country, how loud Americans are in restaurants, in grocery stores or just in general, and that Americans drive everywhere due to the absence or lack of public transportation. The traits that the students began to notice after their return home show that influence that the German culture and society had on their opinions. The students began to view their own society and culture through a different perspective than the one they had before they left to study abroad.

After everything the students experienced during their study abroad, all of them have the desire to go back to Germany or Europe, some students with more enthusiasm than others. There have been some students that have already returned to Germany, whether for another study abroad experience or have been living there for the past two years. Other students are applying for another study abroad program. The remaining students who participated in the survey want to go back to Germany or Europe to visit or work. One student who didn't have a particularly good study abroad experience, however, stated she would go back to Germany only after visiting other new places around the world.

An illustration of a personal perspective

Unfortunately the survey did not allow for questions that would provide a deeper analysis of the students' study abroad experience, of course that would have been the ideal. The students had many experiences that they were not able to share within the 23 questions on the survey.

Some examples would be cultural differences like the German's *Kaffee und Kuchen*.[2] However, by sharing my experiences with German culture and the evolution of a particular set of stereotypes, the reader will better understand the German culture, how the stereotypes might have originated, and the students' study abroad experiences.

I grew up in Hopkins, Michigan, a place so small that it is still considered a village. Hopkins is a secluded place, where houses are scattered in between fields and farms. The individuals have very common interests and beliefs and an altogether lack of curiosity of anywhere else. I was fortunate enough to travel extensively as a child which caused my curiosity to spark and started a chain of events that set me apart from the majority of the people I grew up around. I loved the privacy and freedom that came with growing up in Hopkins, but there wasn't much variety, if any, in the way of life of Hopkins.

By the time I was in high school, I was under the assumption that all Germans were Nazis. This was because the only thing I had learned about Germans or Germany up until that point was when we learned about World War One and World War Two in class and in Hollywood's version of war movies. Germans were always portrayed as the enemy and in the movies they only spoke three words: "Macht schnell" and "nein!" Also, in my high school, Germans were stereotypically Nazis or Lederhosen wearing, beer loving individuals. It wasn't until my junior year of high school when I finally met a German that I realized Germans weren't as different as they seemed.

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[2] An author of an article in *The Sun* describes the tradition of Kaffee und Kuchen almost perfectly. "As a social ritual, Kaffe und Kuchen is all-encompassing: as intimate as having friends over to the house, or as businesslike as a meeting out of the office. It's a way for parents and grown children to get together socially, for workers to congregate for a break, for old friends to see each other and new friends to get acquainted. You can pause for a pastry in a tony café with starched-linen tablecloths and a long history, or drop by a corner bakery in an out-of-the-way neighborhood. Kaffee und Kuchen is part of the cement that holds German society together" (Taking a Break).

Hopkins was fortunate enough to host exchange students my last two years of high school. My junior year we had the privilege of having two female German exchange students attend our school, Meike and Nora. They were lovely girls who got along with everyone. I became close with them during the year and I still keep in contact with them today. They didn't talk much about Germany or the differences they saw between the cultures unless someone asked them directly; and hardly anyone asked them. They eventually blended in with everyone else in the school; only their accents set them apart. My first experience with German international students provided little insight in terms of cultural awareness. It wasn't until my senior year, however, that I truly became aware of the cultural differences between Germany and the United States.

During my last year of high school, Hopkins hosted another German exchange student named Benedikt. We started dating fairly early in the school year without any intentions of something serious coming from the relationship. However, the closer we became, the stronger our bond grew. Because of our relationship, I naturally spent more time around him than I did with Meike or Nora. I was able to notice the differences with greater clarity in his mannerisms and behavior between Benedikt and the other male students in my school and also his interactions with our classmates. The interactions that he had with the other male students are the ones that stick out to me the most. One example is that there were many students that would salute him as if he were a Nazi in the hallway. Their intentions were not to be offensive, but to be funny. However, this is something that I still find offensive to this day. Another example is that the only curiosity the males students had in the German language was to learn the swear words. I remember the students found great enjoyment in their new vocabulary because they

were able to curse loudly in the hallways without having any repercussions. These examples were my first experience with negative stereotypes of a different culture on a personal level.

What initially drew me to Benedikt was his uncommon maturity for his age. There were times where I honestly forgot that he was only 17 years old. His manners were also very rare for someone his age to have in the United States. He would stand up whenever someone would walk into the house or room to greet them, the door was always held open for me and anyone else we were with and he would even pull out the chair for me before eating. Most of these actions were not uncommon to be seen in my family; however, one mannerism that was noticeably different was that he never used his napkin while eating. This was not because he ate like a Neanderthal and just didn't feel like cleaning up after himself, it was because he never needed to use one. The way in which he ate was elegant compared to the way most Americans eat. He never used his fingers to pick up food or push food onto his fork; his fork and knife never left his hands unless he was taking a break from eating. All of these actions were not done only to impress me as we first started dating; they were a custom for him, thus enforcing my perceptions of Germans as respectful, proper and almost old-fashioned.

Not only was Benedikt my first insight to the German culture, but he was also my first chance to hear how Germans perceive Americans. I was curious to see what Benedikt noticed during his exchange year in the United States and so I asked him about the differences that he observed between the American and German cultures throughout his time at Hopkins. He noticed two main differences; one, the way American society and parents treat youths like children and two, the difference in formality in everyday life. Some specific examples that he gave pertaining to these observations were that American parents appeared to be protective over their children and the difference in American and German drinking cultures.

When Benedikt was living with his host family, there were many occasions that he felt he was being talked to as if he was not able to make simple decisions by himself. This was in contrast to what he was used to at home because starting at the age of 14, Germans are treated like adults. He also noticed that parents in this small town were more protective of their children. The parents would need to know where their children would be going, when they would get there, what they would be doing while they were there, and when they would be back home. He noticed that the parents seemed to hover over their children and needed to be omniscient to make sure nothing bad would happen to them.

Age is the apparent difference between American and German drinking cultures. Germans can start drinking at the age of 16, but this means only beer and wine. It isn't legal for Germans to drink liquor until they are 18; however, that is still three years before Americans are legal to drink any alcoholic beverage. The difference that is not as apparent between the drinking cultures is the atmosphere that surrounds the setting. In Germany, when people, young or old, get together to drink, it's a social gathering. Everyone has a drink in their hand, makes conversation with each other, laughs, tell jokes, and eventually everyone ends up intoxicated. In the United States, teenagers typically drink just to get drunk or to be defiant. As Benedikt stated, Germany has a more "civilized drinking culture."

The first time I visited Germany was not my study abroad experience. I was able to spend six weeks in Bonn with Benedikt's family during the summer of 2010, the summer after my senior year of high school.[3] I had no experience with the German language and had never

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[3] I was able to interact with many Germans from older generations than my own because of my stay with Benedikt's family, whereas the other Western students may not have had much contact with other Germans outside of their generation. This may have affected the views and opinions the Western students had of Germans/Germany after coming back to the United States because they may not have had much interaction with a diverse set of demographics of the Germans around them.

been to Europe previously. I remember being scared but my excitement overpowered my fears.

When I arrived in Germany, everything seemed so new and different. The buildings and towns

looked strange to me, the cities seemed ancient, and there were different types of food I'd never

seen before. But after some time, I began to realize that these differences weren't as drastic as

they first appeared. The human interactions, however, are what I still try to understand and adapt

to.

During my first visit, I was able to get to know the majority of Benedikt's family on a

personal level. He is the youngest of six children – five sons and one daughter – with the age

difference of 18 years between Benedikt and his oldest sibling. His family and I get along very

well, but it took us some time getting used to each other. The best way to describe Benedikt's

mother is to say that she is what you would expect of a traditional 1950's housewife.[4] She has a

job as a secretary at a local hospital, but she would only go into work once every two weeks or

so. The rest of her time was spent maintaining her unusually large German garden, cleaning

their home, and making meals for everyone. She is not at all a submissive member of the family;

she leads discussions at the table with family and guests, she argues her viewpoints with her

children, and she is respected by everyone in her family. But still, she tends to fall in the

traditional "housewife" category. In my experience, Germans are much more proper and formal

(even in their own home with family) than Americans. However, I believe that in Benedikt's

household, formalities were more extreme because of his mother traditional tendencies.

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[4] This may seem like an unusual statement in a thesis regarding the common misconceptions of stereotypes. However, this statement is not only not a stereotype, but it is also a compliment. Clara Brockmann stated that the German housewife's role "secures German ways and customs, and a German family life" (qtd. In Reagin 49). Especially in the 1950's and 1960's, during the German *Wirtschaftswunder*, there was a "… strong emphasis on home and family life" (Loehlin 1). Because of the Second World War, German women helped support their families by working outside the home. However, family structure and homes started to fall apart, and so after the war, the housewife's role of rebuilding her family and home became extremely important (Loehlin 5). The presence of the German housewife once more and the German pride in their economy helped rebuild the German national identity after the war (Carter 21).

Formality in Germany is something that is experienced every day, whether you are out in public, at work or at home.[5] The eating etiquette contributes to this, but also the fashion. I have never witnessed a German wear sweatpants or sweatshirts out in public, let alone pajamas – something I have witnessed some Americans do. The only person I remember wearing sweatpants in public in Germany was an American. She ended up going home to change her clothes because of the dirty looks she was given by those surrounding her. In my experience, sweatpants weren't even allowed to be worn in the house except when getting ready for bed. When I came down to breakfast, I was expected to be dressed and ready for the day.

I am almost positive that some of Benedikt's family and friends thought I was insane or socially impaired before they really got to know me. His grandmother for example thought I was the strangest person alive because I was not a coffee or tea drinker when I first visited Germany, which for a while made me feel like an outsider. After I would politely decline her offer of a hot beverage, the next thing she would ask me if I wanted some Coca Cola. However, I have since began drinking both coffee and tea because it didn't matter how many times I told them I was not interested, his mother and grandmother would not stop asking if I wanted any. Answering with a yes made our lives much easier.

Now that I am a coffee drinker, I have noticed the significant difference in the portion size in drinks between Germany and the United States. My father, during my parents' visit to Europe while I was studying abroad, complained to me of how tiny the cups of coffee were in the restaurants for its price. Not only were the cups of coffee abnormally small for what my

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[5] In a survey conducted by Norbert Hedderich of the cultural differences in the German and American workplace, many of the Americans noticed a higher level of formality in the German workplace. Some examples were that there wasn't much small talk, doors were normally closed and everyone addressed each other with the German formal "Sie" and by last name (Hedderich 167).

father was used to, but there was also no such thing as free refills, which was even more upsetting for him. Something I personally learned the hard way throughout my visits to Germany was when I would ask for water. If I did not specifically ask for still or tap water, I would receive carbonated water. One too many times I was unpleasantly surprised. I would also have to ask for ice in any of my drinks if I desired any, because at most you would get three ice cubes in your drink, if you were lucky.

Another cultural aspect that made me feel like an outsider was when one of Benedikt's brothers at dinner one night looked at me and told me I ate like a child. He said that only parents are the ones who cut up the food into tiny pieces before feeding their young child who isn't able to feed themselves. In Germany the proper way of eating is to cut a piece of food and eat it, cut, then eat, without either the fork or knife leaving either of your hands. When he stated I was eating like a child, I was cutting my food into a few small pieces, and then switching the fork to my right hand and eating the pieces of food with only my right hand and my left in my lap. I also learned very quickly to *never* pick something up from your plate and eat it with your hands under any circumstances. There is no such thing as finger food in Germany.

Benedikt's parents did not change what they cooked for meals to accommodate my tastes, because they wanted me to experience the German culture completely. His mother had probably never met such a picky eater before me. I am not a fan of many vegetables or mushrooms, olives or almost every type of nut; and all of these types of food were a daily ingredient in every meal. With that being said, I never asked them to change their food selection. I enjoyed the experience of trying food that I had never eaten before. I didn't protest when there were mushrooms or nuts in the salad, because I knew it would be difficult for Benedikt's mother to remember everything I didn't like; so instead, I ate around those certain types of food. I don't remember his parents

asking me what types of food I would like that I was more used to, however, I noticed that there was always bacon in the house for me. This type of food was a rarity in the house before my first visit to Germany. To this day, I'm not sure if the bacon was bought for me because bacon is an American dish, or if it was because Benedikt told his parents that I loved bacon so he was able to indulge with me.

Barbeques are something that Benedikt considers to be American. One of his oldest brothers spent three years in Texas and has had personal experience with American barbeques. Benedikt's brother is the only German I have met with a grill that Americans would consider to be a normal size. The grills that I had seen most Germans use as their main grill is the standard charcoal grill that Americans would take traveling or camping. Benedikt's parents bought steak once or twice when I was there, but the experience wasn't the same when the meat was cooked on an electric griller.

Another cultural difference that took me a while to understand was the initial greeting between friends. When meeting up with some of Benedikt's friends or going over to someone's house, I would always get strangest looks as I answered "good" to their "how are you?" This would be considered an "American" answer. Germans expect the person on the other end of the "how are you?" to answer the question with details. Upon meeting some of his friends (usually friends who forgot that I was American) they blurted out things like: "American? Ah! McDonald's! French fries! Burgers and steaks!" They would continue to list what they considered American and then try to talk to me about politics or religion. The more often this occurred, the more I began to understand the annoyance and frustration the Germans may have felt when called a Nazi or labeled as Lederhosen wearing, beer drinking individuals.

After meeting Benedikt's parents and all of his siblings, I noticed that one of his brothers was a little different than the rest. Johannes, who is the second youngest child, would do things that none of his other siblings would do. When his mother would call him down to eat, he would show up when he felt like it and once he arrived, he would play with his food. There is one time in particular that I remember having dinner with everyone and he had his elbows on the table while he was peeling the skin off of grapes before he ate them. This was very confusing to me because I was under the impression that it was extremely rude to put your elbows on the table and to play with food, let alone eating with your hands. His personality was more laid back and relaxed than the others and was not afraid to make fun of me. I found that I was able to relate to Johannes more and felt more comfortable around him than being around any of the other Germans I had met. I soon realized that this was because Johannes' personality was more American than German. I felt more relaxed being around Johannes than his parents or even his other siblings (except for Benedikt of course), because my flaws and imperfects didn't seem as detrimental to him as they did to the other Germans around me.

Whenever I'm in Germany, I sense there is a subconscious schedule and routine that underlies everything that goes on. During meals, no one can ask for seconds until everyone is done with their first plate, before guests come over there is a list of tasks that are done automatically before it is acceptable to have someone in the house – and the same concept applies for going to someone else's home – and the train and bus schedule is almost always punctual. There is one part of the German daily schedule that I have particularly come to expect and enjoy: the midday break Germans take for their *Kaffee und Kuchen.* Every day around four it is almost impossible to find a spot in any coffee shop. When at home, a small break is taken from the day to sit and enjoy a cup of coffee with something sweet.

I know that my study abroad experience was different from the other students at Western. It was not my first time in Germany and I was able to stay with a family and was able to witness interactions, traditions and customs that I might not have been a part of otherwise. However, even after my stay during the summer, I still noticed differences between the German and United States cultures during my study in Bonn in 2012.

One thing that I am still not used to when I visit Germany, is the seeming rudeness of the Germans. What I am accustomed to in the United States, is that when you make eye contact with someone, even strangers, you smile. It would be considered rude to not smile at someone and strange not to smile back. However, many times while I studied abroad I was given strange looks from strangers as I smiled at them. In our pre-departure orientation at WMU, one of the presenters made a comparison between Germans and Americans that I believe adequately describes this difference. She used the analogy of Americans being peaches and Germans being coconuts. The reason why Americans seem so much more talkative and polite than Germans, is that Americans are very friendly to everyone, even strangers, and that is why Americans have a soft outer layer. At the center of the peach there is a hard seed that is difficult to break through; but whoever breaks through, is a good friend. Germans are coconuts because they are not as friendly or open to strangers, but once you break through their surface, you are their good friend.

This analogy also helps explain another aspect of culture shock I went through. At home, I have two dogs and two cats and I started to feel homesick after months of no pet interaction. However, in Germany it is not normal to ask a stranger to pet their dog. I have on many occasions asked strangers in the United States if I could pet their dog, and in those experiences it was not a strange question to ask. My mother told me that on my parents visit to Europe while I

was studying abroad, she asked a woman on a train in Switzerland if she could pet her dog and the woman looked at my mother as if she were crazy for asking such a question.

One culture difference I experienced was the drinking culture. I remember being in shock when I saw someone as young as 16 walking from the bus station to the park with a case of beer. My first instinct was that he was too young and shouldn't be drinking at all. Then I saw him open a beer and start playing Flunkyball, a German drinking game, out in the open in the Hofgarten (a large grass section by the university that is a common hang out for students of every age). I looked around and realized that the majority of the people in the Hofgarten were drinking openly. I was confused until I was told that in Germany, you are allowed to drink in public places. Even though it was strange to me at first, going to the Hofgarten on a summer evening to have a beer with friends is something that I miss.

My knowledge of the German language was far greater at the time of my study abroad. I had completed three basic German language courses before leaving for Bonn. This helped my transition into living in Germany greatly, because I felt more self-sufficient and independent than from my other visits to Germany. My German wasn't flawless, but it was good enough for me to get my point across.

The Bonn abroad program gave us the opportunity to go on several trips to different cities in Germany. However, during my first visit in 2010, Benedikt, his parents and I went on a cross country road trip. I was able to visit cities with a great deal of history such as Aachen, Eisenach and Weimar, and other modernized cities like Dresden and Berlin. Many of the trips offered to the international students visited cities that I had already been to, but they offered just as many trips to placed I had never seen, like Trier and Heidelberg. During my six months studying

abroad, I hiked all around western Germany and was able to go on an 11 day hike in Sweden. I also visited many capital cities of Western Europe's countries, like Paris, Brussels and Stockholm and other major cities like Milan, Italy and Maastricht in the Netherlands. The places I traveled when I studied abroad helped with my understanding, openness and acceptance of other cultures.

I had a very different living situation than most of the other students who participated in the survey. The student apartment I lived in during my study abroad was very secluded. The building was a 20 minute Straßenbahn ride to the city and there wasn't much around it except for a lovely trail along the Rhein River. The students within the building were very anti-social, because we all had our own bathroom and mini kitchen and doors were almost always shut. I didn't like where I was staying so the time I spent studying abroad was split between my room and Benedikt's parent's house. I honestly don't know how diverse my living community was while living there, because no one really showed themselves.

During my study abroad, I remember that when Germans would find out that I was American, they either assumed that I couldn't speak German or they jumped on the opportunity to practice their English. The younger generations of Germans usually seemed to enjoy my presence and the older generations seemed to be occasionally annoyed by my presence. However, the ones who seemed truly unhappy about having to deal with a foreigner were the significant Turkish population in Bonn. They seemed the most upset with the occasional language barrier when ordering a Döner or ice cream. I asked my mother soon after their trip about how my parents were treated by the citizens of the counties they visited. She said that they were treated with respect and kindness by the hotel managers and store clerks – except for the incident with the dog. They were most likely picked out as tourists almost immediately by the

citizens because my parents only speak English, but they always were given help when they needed it.

It was easier for me to transition into living in Germany for six months because of my precious visits before. However, that did not mean that it wasn't difficult at first. It took me a little while to find where everything was or plan my schedule according to the bus and train schedules; but once I was used to the differences between my life in the United States and my new life in Germany, I started to feel as if I belonged.

Coming back to the U.S. wasn't as difficult as I was expecting it to be. It was somewhat satisfying to come back to my "old" life. I was able to eat good peanut butter again, shop for everything I needed in one visit to Meijer, and not get scolded for having my feet up on the couch; but I returned to my country with new set of eyes. It took a while for me to get used to seeing people eat such messy food with their hands; but at the same time, I was relieved to finally be free to make the decision to with my hands or not. It was very frustrating for me to have to drive everywhere I wanted to go and not have the option of a train or bus. I also noticed how little Americans get out to go for walks. It's a German custom to go for walks, whether it is alone or with family. It's a way to get up and move about after sitting for a while and to enjoy fresh air. It was not unusual to see my neighbors in Hopkins on walks, because we are fortunate enough to have beautiful scenery and very little traffic. It seems very uncommon for individuals in the United States to be seen outside walking for other reasons other than exercise.

My opinions of Germans had changed significantly since I was in high school. After my experiences with Germans and in Germany, I realized how offensive it was to call a German a Nazi. It took me some time, but eventually I understood that Germans are more private when it

comes to public interactions. Understanding their privacy helped me see that Germans weren't

trying to be rude when I smiled and also helped me see how superficial the friendliness of

Americans is in public interactions. The majority of Germans may love their beer, but I met a

few who were more in love with wine. I only saw Germans in Lederhosen when in costume and

bratwurst and sauerkraut aren't the main part of a Germans diet. What I learned the most is that

things are not always the way they seem.

Conclusion

Stereotypes and opinions of another country are influenced by family, society and culture

before actually experiencing the other country. This is because we grow up surrounded by the

opinions of those we trust and take those opinions to be true. However, once the other country is

experienced first-hand, the opinions and stereotypes once held of that country can be proven

false or confirmed based on the experiences had while abroad. For example, if someone had an

overall good experience during his study abroad, the negative opinions he once had of the

country could be proven inaccurate and he would develop positive opinions of that country.

Also, if someone had an overall bad experience while studying abroad, her negative opinions of

that country could be confirmed and she would continue viewing that country negatively.

The many factors that contribute to a positive or negative experience while studying

abroad also contribute to the ease or difficulty of adjusting to the new culture and also to the

adjustment back home. If a student wasn't deeply affected by the language barrier, had a good

living situation, was able to experience more than one culture while abroad and created strong

relationships during their time away, his transition into the new country wouldn't be as difficult

as someone who had opposite experience as him. Also, if the transition was experienced with

ease, a student could have a more difficult time adjusting back home than someone whose transition into the new country was difficult.

Lastly, if someone's experience was positive while studying abroad, her views of her own country may change more than someone who had a negative experience. The student who had a positive experience remembers the good things about the country and missing those experiences could cause the adjustment back home to be more difficult than someone who had a negative experience and is grateful to be back in his own country.

Even though the other Western students and I came from different backgrounds, our influences from our families and society were similar. Our opinions mirrored those of the people around us before we left to study abroad. However, there were a few students, including myself, that were able to travel abroad before our study. Our opinions started to differentiate from those we grew up around before our initial study abroad.

We all had unique study abroad experiences, but we still had similar experiences during our time abroad. We all were treated similarly when Germans discovered that we were American by switching to English to speak with us or discussing similar topics as small talk. Most of us had a difficult time adjusting to the public transportation system in Germany, but once we got the hang of it, it became a simple and convenient part of our daily schedule. The majority of us had positive experiences with the German language, living situations, traveling and creating friendships which made the transition to the new country easy.

Upon returning, most of the students, including myself, had a difficult time transitioning back to the United States and had similar views of Americans. Missing the good experiences of studying abroad and noticing things that Americans or the United States could do better (for

example, lack of public transportation and eating habits) made the adjustment back home challenging for most of the students.

The negative stereotypes and opinions the Western students once held of Germans or Germany are now no more. Through their personal experiences in Germany, they realized that most of the stereotypes were false and that Germans were not so different from Americans. The overall positive experiences the students had while studying abroad aided in the evolution of their opinions and their will to return to Germany one day. Individuals' stereotypes and opinions may be influenced by outside sources while growing up, but it is possible for those opinions to change through personal experiences.

In summary, it is clear that stereotypes as a learned and acquired attitude cannot be measured on clear scale of negative or positive. Nor can one verbally teach others prior to a trip abroad that they have specific stereotypes that must be unlearned or that they tend to label the different with the negative. Instead, having the students become aware of the pre and post attitude of former WMU American students who had studied abroad – in this particular case in Germany – for a semester or longer will help open the current students' mind as a first step toward become aware of their own values and pre-conceived notions of certain groups of people. After reading this thesis, the students who plan to study in a foreign culture will understand in a completely new way that things are not always what they appear to be, especially when it comes to peoples and cultures. There is so much more to a culture and its people than the stereotypes associated with them. This thesis will enlighten the future students of the depth and complexity of cultures and they will hopefully leave for their study abroad with an open mind to what they are going to experience.

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