

Study Abroad Increases Risk for Sexual Assault in Female Undergraduates: A Preliminary Report

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Since 2007, more than 250,000 American students have studied abroad annually for a semester or more. While there are obvious benefits associated with study abroad programs, personal risks (including interpersonal victimization such as sexual and physical assault) occurring during the experience have been anecdotally reported but not systematically assessed. This study is the first to investigate the possibility of increased risk for sexual assault in female undergraduates while abroad. Two hundred eighteen female undergraduates completed a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss et al., 2007) about their sexual experiences abroad and on campus. Findings indicate increased risk for sexual assault while abroad relative to on-campus rates, particularly in non-English speaking countries. Study abroad programs should consider educating students about increased risk and develop response protocols when sexual assaults happen while abroad.

Keywords: sexual assault, unwanted sex, rape, study abroad, college

The number of Americans studying abroad has been steadily increasing over the past two decades and in the 2009–2010 academic year more than 270 thousand studied abroad (Institute of International Education, 2011). These numbers are likely to increase because of a rising emphasis on study abroad programs in colleges and universities as well as active federal support. For example, in 2011 Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton officially launched the “100,000 strong initiative,” a program designed to provide financial incentives to encourage American students to study in China. This type of federal support in combination with long-standing college and university programs that continue to espouse the value of international exchange assure the placement of American students throughout the world in the 21st century.

The increasing numbers necessitate a more thorough look at the college experience abroad. While colleges and their study abroad offices tout the interpersonal, social, and global benefits of these experiences, the risks have been largely ignored. At a minimum, students abroad face comparable risks to all Americans traveling

abroad, including (depending on the locale) increased risk for robbery, assault, terrorism, infection, disease, and political turmoil (Department of State, 2011). The recent death of Katey Puzey in March of 2009 and the reports of more than 1,000 sexual assaults of Peace Corp volunteers between 2001 and 2009 (Peace Corp, 2010) highlight the particular risks to American women for trauma in general and sexual assault in particular. There are a number of reasons why risk may be high for women studying abroad including minority status within the country (Breinbauer & Maddaleno, 2005; Cachelin, Schug, Juarez, & Monreal, 2005; Hishinuma et al., 2005; Decker, Raj, & Silverman, 2007), decreased supervision (Buddie & Testa, 2005), a lack of familiarity with the culture and the language, and first exposure to legalized alcohol (Hummer, Pederson, Mirza, & LaBrie, 2010; Parks, Romosz, Bradizza, & Hsieh, 2008; Abbey, Clinton-Sherrod, McAuslan, Zawacki, & Buck, 2003; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987).

The hypothesis that studying abroad might increase risk for sexual assault is also reasonable given relevant data from the American domestic college experience. In addition to the generally high rates associated with the college experience, there is further evidence to indicate that the initial transition to residential colleges and universities is associated with even higher risks for sexual assault. Specifically, younger females at college are at elevated risk for sexual assault relative to older female students (Humphrey & White, 2000; Flack et al., 2008; Kimble, Neacsiu, Flack, & Horner, 2008; Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957). For example, higher rates for sexual assault are present for first year relative to second year women (Kimble et al., 2008). Flack et al. (2008) found the highest risk for sexual assault during the sophomore year during a period of fraternity and sorority rush. Finley and Corte (1993) reported that “sexual assault that meets the legal definition is

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primarily a first year phenomena" (p. 116). This body of research suggests that moving away from home and times of transition may be particularly risky periods for college women.

The goal of this study is to investigate the hypothesis that there is an increased risk for sexual assault for college women while abroad. In this study, we compare risk for nonconsensual sexual contact, attempted sexual assault, and completed sexual assault for women while studying abroad relative to their on-campus experience.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 218 junior and senior females who had studied abroad within the past two academic years. The entire sample came from a single, small northeastern college. Seventy percent of the sample were 20 or 21 when taking the survey, the remaining were 22 years or older. Eighty-seven percent reported themselves as heterosexual, 5.5% as bisexual, 2.3% as homosexual, and 5.1% either reported "other" or had missing data. The sample was largely Caucasian (75.2%) with 12.4% reporting as Asian, 1.4% as African American, 4.6% as Hispanic, and 6.4% reporting no data. Seventy-eight percent of the sample studied abroad for one semester, 13.8% for the entire year, 6.9% for a year in two locations, and 1% were abroad for a one-month January semester. Eleven percent were abroad in English-speaking Europe plus Australia, 40.8% in non-English-speaking Europe, 14.7% in Asia, 20.6% in Central and South America, and 8.7% in Africa. Nine students studied abroad in more than one country (4.1%).

Materials

The data reported in this article are based on participants' responses to a modified Sexual Experience Survey (Koss et al., 2007) administered via the Internet. The core of the survey focused on three types of sexual assault: nonconsensual sexual contact, attempted sexual assault (oral, anal, or vaginal), and completed sexual assault (oral, anal, or vaginal). The language used to define sexual assault in this instrument was taken from the revised Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss et al., 2007). The original version of the SES has demonstrated good reliability and validity and the revised version differs primarily in adding attempted unwanted sexual experiences and some updating in language (Koss et al., 1987; Koss et al., 2007). Questions about each type of unwanted sex were asked in relation to experiences while they were abroad as well as when they were on campus. In the case of sexual assault abroad, participants reported whether it was perpetrated by a classmate in the same program, a resident student at the university, or a local, nonstudent resident.

Participants also self-reported on language fluency before their departure abroad on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all fluent" to "extremely fluent." In addition, participants reported on country of study. For analyses, countries were divided into five major regions: English-speaking Europe including Australia (11%), non-English-speaking Europe (40.8%), Asia (14.7%), Central and South America (20.6%), and Africa (8.7%). Nine students studied abroad in more than one country (4.1%), and no region had fewer than 19 participants.

Procedures

All procedures were approved by the institutions' research review board. An e-mail invitation to participate was sent to all juniors and seniors who had studied abroad within the past two years. The email solicitation informed them that they had been chosen because they had studied abroad and then asked them to participate in a survey "that focuses on unwanted sexual experiences while abroad." The email message contained a brief description of the study, the approximate time required to complete the survey (20 minutes), and an online link to the survey. The initial e-mail was sent in the final full month of the spring semester (April 2009) and was kept open for a month. Follow-up messages were sent to nonresponders to encourage participation. In total, 380 solicitations were sent to junior and senior women. Participation was encouraged through the use of a raffle in which 20 \$25.00 gift certificates were offered to be redeemed at a campus restaurant. The 218 responses represent a response rate of 57.1%.

Interested participants clicked on a link that led them to the online survey. Materials on the online site were a consent form, the survey, a debriefing, and instructions on how to register for the raffle. The debriefing reiterated the purpose of the study and provided information about local resources for assault victims.

The study had a within-subjects design. To evaluate the risk of going abroad relative to staying on campus, semester risk was assessed for each student while abroad as compared to while on campus. Risk was calculated separately for contact, attempts, and completed assaults. Semester risk represents the percent of the sample, on average, that is likely to have a particular unwanted experience during a given semester. Semester risk *abroad* was calculated by the likelihood of having the experience while abroad divided by the number of semesters abroad. For example, a student who had an assault while abroad for a year would have that number divided by two given the two semesters spent out of the country. *Campus* semester risk was calculated by the likelihood of having the experience divided by the number of semesters on campus. Campus semester was calculated by dividing exposure to an experience by 5.5 [the average of the number of semesters a junior who went abroad would have been on campus (4.5) and the number of semesters a senior who went abroad would have been on campus (6.5)]. This equated risk across both on campus and study abroad experiences and allowed for a direct comparison between the two. This also allowed for a within-subjects comparison which minimized error associated with subject variables, for example, those studying abroad possibly being higher in risk taking.

Results

Rates of Sexual Assault While Abroad

Eighty-three participants (38.1% of the sample) reported some type of unwanted sexual experience while abroad. Sixty (27.5%) women reported at least one experience of nonconsensual sexual contact ("unwanted touching") while abroad. Thirteen (6.0%) reported an attempted sexual assault (either oral, anal, or vaginal), and 10 (4.6%) reported completed sexual assault (either oral, anal, or vaginal).

Semester Risk

Nonconsensual sexual contact. The semester risk for having nonconsensual sexual contact while abroad was 24.54%. [Semester risk differs from the overall risk noted above (27.5%) because some women were abroad for two semesters, thus lowering the semester risk relative to the overall risk.] The semester risk of having nonconsensual sexual contact on campus was 5.59%. This represents a 4.3-fold increase. This difference is significant, $t(217) = 7.08, p < .01$.

Attempted sexual assault. The semester risk for having an attempted sexual assault while abroad was 5.28%. The semester risk on campus was 1.67%. This represents a 3.2-fold increase. This difference is significant, $t(217) = 2.49, p = .013$.

Completed sexual assault. The semester risk for having a completed sexual assault while abroad was 4.13%. The semester risk on campus was 0.83%. This represents a 5.0-fold increase. This difference is significant, $t(217) = 2.55, p = .011$.

Perpetration of Unwanted Sexual Experiences Abroad

Perpetration of nonconsensual sexual contact was primarily carried out by nonstudent local residents (86.8%). The remainder was carried out by fellow students from the study abroad program or students who were residents of the country. Similar patterns were found for completed sexual assault (67.7%) and attempted sexual assault (77.8%).

Fluency as a Risk Factor for Unwanted Sexual Experiences

To analyze whether fluency was related to sexual assault while abroad, those with and without assault experiences were compared on a self-rated measure of fluency. In these analyses, English-speaking students attending English-speaking countries were not included. Fluency did not differ between those with and without nonconsensual sexual contact [$t(180) = 0.27, p > .05$], with and without attempted sexual assault [$t(180) = -0.74, p > .05$], and with and without completed sexual assault [$t(180) = 0.94, p > .05$].

Geographic Risk Factors for Unwanted Sexual Experiences

Risk for unwanted sexual experiences differed based on the region visited. Those visiting two countries while abroad were excluded from analyses as were those who went to another college in the United States. Separate one-way ANOVAs indicated regional risk for nonconsensual sexual contact [$F(4, 204) = 2.52, p = .04$], and a trend for attempted sexual assault [$F(4, 204) = 2.32, p = .06$] and completed sexual assault [$F(4, 204) = 1.96, p = .10$].

LSD post hoc analyses indicated higher risk for nonconsensual sexual contact (at the $p < .05$ level) in Africa and the Americas relative to English-speaking Europe and non-English-speaking Europe. There was also risk for attempted sexual assault (at the $p < .05$ level) in the Americas relative to English-speaking Europe, non-English-speaking Europe, and Asia. Risk for completed sexual assault was higher ($<.05$) in the Americas relative to

English-speaking Europe, non-English-speaking Europe, and Africa.

Next, risk was evaluated in each region relative to risk on campus. Paired sample t tests indicated no increased risk relative to campus when studying in English speaking Europe for any type of sexual assault. There was increased risk for nonconsensual sexual contact when in non-English-speaking Europe ($p < .01$) and Africa ($p < .01$). There was increased risk for nonconsensual sexual contact ($p < .01$) and attempted sexual assault ($p = .02$) while in Asia. There was increased risk for nonconsensual sexual contact ($p < .01$), attempted sexual assault ($p = .04$), and completed sexual assault ($p = .05$) while in the Americas.

Discussion

This is the first study to investigate and report increased risk for sexual assault for college females who study abroad. All three types of unwanted sexual experiences assessed in this study (nonconsensual sexual contact, attempted sexual assault, and completed sexual assault) were higher when students studied abroad than when they were on campus; the risk being 3–5 times greater. Eighty-nine percent of the unwanted sexual experiences while abroad were reported to be perpetrated by nonstudent, local residents (in comparison with other students). This differs dramatically from the pattern seen domestically in which the majority of unwanted sexual experiences are student on student (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Berkowitz, 1992; Flack et al., 2007).

The rates for sexual assault in this study were also high relative to national college data. Across an American female's tenure at college, the risk for sexual assault is estimated to be between 15% and 25% (Fisher et al., 2000; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). With semester risk in this study at 4.13% (for completed sexual assault), this places risk for rape extrapolated over an eight semester college experience at roughly 33%.

This study did not directly assess the factors that may have played a role in the increased rate and patterns of sexual assault. However, factors that are thought to place undergraduate females at increased risk for sexual assault on domestic campuses may also play a role in a semester abroad: lack of familiarity with local culture, legal access to alcohol, and being targeted by perpetrators who see new students as vulnerable (Fisher et al., 2000; Abbey et al., 2003; Sweeney, 2011; Testa & Hoffman, 2012). For example, a lack of familiarity with the locale may place women in more dangerous situations. Legal access to alcohol for the first time may increase drinking rates—a known risk factor for sexual assault. American students abroad may also be targeted either because they are perceived as sexually available or less likely to go to foreign authorities if they are sexually assaulted. The placement of many study abroad programs in major cities throughout the world may explain the increased risk of assault by nonstudent residents. There is a clear need for future research that evaluates the causes of sexual assault while studying abroad.

One risk factor that does appear to affect assault rates is region of study. All regions, other than English-speaking Europe and Australia, posed some additional risk for sexual assault relative to staying on campus. Most regions were associated with increased nonconsensual sexual contact, and Africa and the Americas had significant increases in the more severe forms of sexual assault.

Relative to each other, nonconsensual sexual contact was significantly higher in the Americas and Africa relative to English-speaking Europe and non-English-speaking Europe. Risk for completed sexual assault was higher in the Americas relative to English-speaking Europe, non-English-speaking Europe, and Africa. Unfortunately, given the sample size, risk could not be assessed for specific countries. It is possible that the majority of risk could be associated with a particular country in a given region. Thus conclusions about any given region need to be circumspect. It is also important to consider that the student who travels to particular regions of the world (such as a country that speaks a different language or a non-“Western” culture) might differ in personality and behavior in a manner that might put them at slightly higher risk for assault.

In this sample, one factor that does not appear to play a role in risk is language fluency. Students with and without assault history did not differ on self ratings of fluency. However, conclusions regarding fluency at this point are tentative given the small sample consisting of students from one school and the use of a single rating for fluency. However, acquiring more valid measures of fluency may be challenging. Having students taking a fluency test as part of an assessment would be difficult, and access to teacher ratings or grades would pose risk to anonymity. Given the current findings, future studies might continue to assess fluency with a few simple self report items to see whether findings emerge that suggest fluency to be a fruitful area for further study.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the sample size was adequate and represented 57% of all women who had studied abroad in the past two years, all the students came from a highly selective school with an active study abroad program that emphasizes study in foreign languages. Replication at this institution and others is important. Future evaluation of sexual assault while abroad should include an opportunity for participants to report in a free response box what factors they felt played a role in their assault. At this early stage of the research, these qualitative responses would play an important role in identifying risk factors for sexual assault while abroad.

The within-subjects design had both advantages and disadvantages relative to the reporting of sexual assault. As is the case in any survey, it is difficult to know whether those who experienced sexual assault were more or less likely to fill out the survey, particularly in a survey that was explicitly about “unwanted sexual experiences while abroad.” However, the within-subjects design at least further diminished further selection bias in that those who study abroad may be very different from those who choose not to—a significant problem with a between subjects design. In addition, the fact that sexual assault rates increased during the student’s junior year, when rates are typically decreasing on domestic campuses, further speaks to the negative impact of the study abroad experience. It appears that studying abroad “renews” risk for female college students for the period they are out of the country.

However, despite very clear definitions and guidelines provided as part of the study, students may have been less inclined to consider an on-campus experience a sexual assault. The more recent study abroad experience may be more salient in their memory and therefore more likely to be recounted. A between

subjects design may minimize this problem as students who did not go abroad can be asked the same questions regarding the same semester while they were on campus.

The fact that women in this sample faced higher risks for sexual assault while abroad also poses the possibility that risks for other traumas may be higher as well. For example, largely unnoted in the Peace Corps data is the fact that sexual assaults were less frequent than physical assaults—a risk present for both men and women. Future studies should look at the relative risk for a broader range of traumas in both sexes. Understanding such risks and their causes could lead to improved prevention strategies and better responses after the fact.

Implications

Despite the limitations, there is evidence to suggest that, in this sample, studying abroad in certain regions puts female students at risk for unwanted sexual experiences. In particular, any non-English-speaking country placed this sample at some increased risk relative to staying on campus. Student Affairs offices and Study Abroad programs might consider assessing the risk for their students in their programs as there may be important differences attributable to local norms and student populations. If data from other schools are consistent with the findings in this sample, warning females going abroad, particularly to non-English-speaking countries, would be appropriate. Reminding those students of precautions around separation from friends, heavy alcohol use, and entering unknown environments is likely to pay the same dividends abroad as they do on campus. Reminders regarding safe walking, safe dating, and safe partying could be provided by Student Affairs offices before students go abroad.

Just as important, however, is the need to be able to respond to a sexual assault appropriately when it occurs outside the country. Most college and universities now have well-established procedures to respond to sexual assaults that happen on campus. Domestically, contact information for sexual assaults tends to be well publicized with response protocols in place. In contrast, where would a student turn when studying abroad? Students might be understandably reluctant to go to local authorities. Language limitations might produce additional barriers to care. In some settings, the health care systems may be entirely inadequate. If the Peace Corps cases highlight any particular point, it is not so much that sexual assaults occur while abroad but that the Peace Corps’ response was inadequate. For these reasons, and others, one might speculate that sexual assault while abroad may confer additional risk for subsequent psychopathology. [Brewin and colleagues’ \(2000\)](#) meta analysis demonstrated that poor social support and ongoing life stress are the most reliable predictors of the development of PTSD. For some students overseas, social support may be reduced and ongoing life stress relatively high. Women who are assaulted while abroad, therefore, may be at particular risk for subsequent impairment. Therefore, establishing responses that meet the needs of women who study abroad becomes particularly important.

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