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Citizen Diplomacy Through Study Abroad: Patterns of Declining Intercultural Sensitivity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines patterns of declining intercultural sensitivity among international students during study abroad, with implications for their role as citizen diplomats. While prior research has largely highlighted positive intercultural outcomes, it has paid less attention to empirically identifying patterns of regression. Using a pre–post survey design based on the Intercultural Development Inventory, this study examined 147 Japanese university students who participated in study abroad programs. Approximately half (n = 72) of participants showed a decline in instrument-assessed scores between pre- and post-program assessments, and this subgroup became the focus of a detailed analysis. Drawing on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity as an analytical framework and Kolb's experiential learning theory as an interpretive lens, the analysis identifies distinct patterns of decline, including stage-level regression and within-stage decreases. A widening gap between self-perceived and developmental (instrument-assessed) scores further suggests reduced accuracy of self-understanding among students whose scores declined. The paper argues that international higher education contributes uniquely to citizen diplomacy by providing structured pedagogical support. The findings suggest that intentionally designed pedagogical interventions are essential to help students transform cultural conflict into intercultural growth and strengthen their capacity to serve as citizen diplomats.

Keywords: citizen diplomacy; citizen diplomat; study abroad; experiential learning; educational intervention

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary diplomacy has entered an age of diversity that involves not only official government diplomats but also various nonstate actors, including students, teachers, athletes, artists, and businesspeople (Lawton & Sharnak, 2010). In the area of citizen diplomacy, international students on study abroad programs are positioned to serve as citizen diplomats, aiming to build mutual relationships with people they encounter in host countries (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011; Hanada, 2022; Lachelier & Mueller, 2023). According to UNESCO (2025), approximately 6.9 million students study abroad worldwide, representing more than a threefold increase over the past two decades. With this expansion, citizen diplomacy through study abroad is playing an increasingly important role as a grassroots channel for cross-border interactions, particularly in situations where diplomatic relations between nations are strained.

However, empirical research linking study abroad to citizen diplomacy remains limited. Moreover, existing studies on study abroad tend to emphasize the positive outcomes of cross-cultural interaction. These reported positive outcomes may stem in part from the reliance on self-reporting methods, which are susceptible to the participants' tendency to view the substantial investment in study abroad as worthwhile. Nevertheless, several empirical studies have reported that, rather than improving, some students' intercultural sensitivity declines after they study abroad (e.g., Lokkesmoe et al., 2016; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004). These studies treated the decline as a secondary finding, without systematically analyzing its patterns or underlying dynamics.

Understanding these patterns of decline is important for both research and practice in international higher education. From a research perspective, identifying the specific patterns through which intercultural sensitivity declines facilitates the development of more refined theories. From a practical perspective, diminished intercultural sensitivity among students represents a lost opportunity for citizen diplomacy. For example, if nearly half of a program's participants return home with lower intercultural sensitivity than they had when they left to study abroad, simply expanding study abroad opportunities will not automatically promote citizen diplomacy. Targeted interventions are necessary, but their design must be based on evidence regarding how and why this decline occurred.

This study focuses on intercultural sensitivity, defined as the ability to recognize, tolerate, and accept relevant cultural differences (Bennett, 1993), and empirically examines the patterns through which it decreases among study abroad participants. Rather than limiting itself to aggregate-level analysis, which averages the gains and losses across all participants, this study identifies the specific trajectory of this decline and examines its educational significance for citizen diplomacy.

Cultural conflict almost inevitably arises in study abroad experiences. If this does not occur, it is often because the experience has not yet reached the point of confronting the deeper layers of cultural differences, often referred to as invisible culture or deep culture (Shaules, 2007). When students face such conflicts, their intercultural sensitivity may either improve or regress (Kim, 2001). Based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS; Bennett, 1993), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer, 2011) provides a means to empirically detect such regression. A decline in intercultural sensitivity, particularly a regression between DMIS stages, is the most empirically accessible indicator of the difficulties students face in accepting cultural differences.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following two research questions: (1) When measured using the IDI, what patterns of decline are observed in the intercultural sensitivity of study abroad participants? (2) What educational implications do these patterns hold for students' development as citizen diplomats?

In addressing these questions, this study advances three strands of scholarship. First, it extends research on study abroad outcomes by treating a decline in intercultural sensitivity as a primary object of analysis rather than a peripheral finding and by classifying such outcomes into qualitatively distinct patterns. Second, it contributes to IDI-based research by jointly examining developmental orientation (DO) and perceived orientation (PO), thereby capturing changes in the accuracy of students' self-understanding.

Third, it links the empirical patterns to the citizen diplomacy literature by specifying the pedagogical conditions under which student mobility can realize its diplomatic potential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Citizen Diplomacy

Diplomacy has traditionally been defined as a government-led system for conducting negotiations and mediations between states (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012; Nicolson, 1954). However, since the 1990s, owing to the expansion of information flows and increased mobility of people, actors in diplomacy have expanded to include nonstate actors (Lachelier & Mueller, 2023). Citizen diplomacy specifically refers to the right, indeed the responsibility, of individual citizens to help shape international relations through direct, grassroots interaction across national and cultural boundaries (Lachelier & Mueller, 2023; Mueller, 2020). Citizen diplomacy overlaps with, but is not reducible to, related concepts such as public diplomacy (Cull, 2019), cultural diplomacy (Akli, 2012), and knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2022); its distinguishing emphasis lies not on a nation's image, cultural products, or research and innovations but on the people themselves.

In the context of international higher education in particular, study abroad programs serve as vital arenas for citizen diplomacy. Through direct interaction with people in their host countries, international students are expected to act as citizen diplomats and build cross-border mutual relationships. Theoretically, citizen diplomacy can be explained from a constructivist perspective. In a sense, shared norms and values are thought to be shaped by social interaction, and the relationships they constitute are open to change (Theys, 2017). This bottom-up exchange serves as a foundation for grassroots-level dialogue between peoples and, however indirectly, provides an impetus for political openings even when formal relations between states have reached an impasse (Davies & Kaufman, 2002; McFadden, 2022). Because this influence operates through individuals rather than institutions, the intercultural capacities of those individuals become consequential.

The concept of citizen diplomacy received attention in the mid-20th century through the promotion of people-to-people exchanges in the United States and the reconciliation process facilitated by youth exchanges in postwar Europe (Jobs, 2017; Mueller, 2020). Today, a variety of programs and organizations, such as the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) and Sister Cities International, offer programs that support direct exchanges between individuals (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, n.d.; Sister Cities International, 2025).

For citizen diplomacy through study abroad to achieve the desired results, however, simply providing opportunities for exchange is not enough (Hanada, 2022). Given the conflicts in global politics, making citizen diplomacy effective requires an understanding of mutual relationship-building mechanisms that go beyond superficial friendliness (Chigas, 2003). To achieve this goal, it is essential to examine how to manage the cultural friction that inevitably arises from intercultural contact at the individual level and how to accept others.

Study Abroad and Intercultural Sensitivity Outcomes

Among the many constructs examined in relation to study abroad, including cultural intelligence (Butkovic et al., 2024) and acculturation (Lee & Negrelli, 2018), this study focuses on intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity refers to the capacity to identify, tolerate, and accept relevant cultural differences (Bennett, 1993). It is measured using the IDI, the most widely validated instrument that operationalizes the DMIS. The IDI yields two distinct scores—the DO score, which reflects how an individual is currently positioned with respect to cultural difference, and the PO score, which reflects how the individual perceives their own intercultural capacity. This makes it well suited for examining both instrument-assessed change and self-understanding.

Over the years, empirical studies have used the IDI and related DMIS-based measures to examine the impact of study abroad experience. For example, Williams (2005) reported that students who spent a semester at host institutions showed significantly greater development than did students who remained at their home institutions. In more recent years, Hanada (2019) identified the type of study abroad program, the degree of proficiency in the language spoken in the host country, and the level of predeparture intercultural learning as key predictors of development.

However, such positive outcomes are not guaranteed. In the Georgetown Consortium Project, which administered pretests and posttests to approximately 1,300 students, Vande Berg et al. (2009) concluded that exposure to cultural differences is a necessary but not sufficient condition for intercultural learning and argued that on-site cultural mentoring and guided reflection are what enable students to transform that exposure into personal growth. This limitation is not confined to IDI-based studies: participants in both Erasmus and virtual exchange programs report that their interactions remain largely confined to fellow participants or assigned coursework (Rogler et al., 2026; Silva et al., 2026).

Negative or Mixed Outcomes: Decline and Regression in Intercultural Sensitivity

Deardorff (2017) cataloged five myths about international educational exchange: bring diverse people together and "magic" will happen; study abroad and come back interculturally competent; exposure to another culture is sufficient for intercultural understanding; no special training is needed when going into another culture; and results of international educational exchange can be measured by one evaluation tool (pp. 12–13). These myths may persist in part because predominantly aggregate or positive findings have been reported, leaving the question of negative outcomes empirically underexplored.

Some studies have reported a decline in intercultural sensitivity among students who gained international experience through study abroad. For example, Medina-López-Portillo (2004) examined 16 of the 18 American college students who participated in a 7-week program in Taxco, Mexico, and reported that seven students exhibited a decline in intercultural sensitivity (p. 185). In a similar vein, Lokkesmoe et al. (2016) investigated 35 students who participated in an exchange program between two U.S. universities and two Brazilian universities. Their findings revealed that 15 students experienced negative changes (p. 165). However, none of these studies was designed to examine reduced intercultural sensitivity within a theoretical framework. The decline tends to be absorbed into group-level results, even when nearly half of the individual participants exhibit it. This pattern of peripheral treatment of decline reflects a broader issue in this field: Although the conceptual literature recognizes that intercultural (or cross-cultural) sensitivity does not develop linearly and that regression is theoretically predictable (Kim, 2001), empirical research rarely applies theoretical perspectives to actual data on students whose scores declined.

There are two aspects of this decline that have not yet been fully examined. The first concerns trajectories. Specifically, this involves examining whether the students in question are not merely experiencing a decline within a single stage, but are instead following qualitatively different trajectories across the different stages of the DMIS, and what such trajectories imply regarding underlying issues. The second aspect concerns self-understanding. It examines whether, as scores decline, a discrepancy arises between the level of intercultural sensitivity students perceive in themselves and the level assessed by the measurement tool.

RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

A review of the literature cited above reveals three key challenges. First, while citizen diplomacy through study abroad is advocated in theory, empirical research into the conditions that foster or fail to foster the intercultural sensitivity expected of student citizen diplomats remains limited. Second, previous studies have not systematically examined the patterns of this decline or what these patterns suggest with respect to the underlying difficulties. Third, the relationship between instrument-assessed intercultural

sensitivity and self-reported intercultural sensitivity among students who show a decline has not been sufficiently examined, despite its relevance to the design of educational interventions.

This study fills these research gaps by analyzing 72 Japanese study abroad participants whose IDI scores decreased between the preprogram and postprogram assessments. Specifically, this study (a) classifies declines into qualitatively distinct patterns based on DMIS stage transitions, (b) examines whether the gap between self-perceived and assessed intercultural sensitivity widens among students whose scores decline, and (c) utilizes Kolb's experiential learning model as an interpretive lens to explore educational implications. Although direct measurement of introspection falls outside the scope of this study's quantitative dataset, this analysis provides a more detailed empirical foundation for designing interventions in study abroad programs as a means of citizen diplomacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical framework, this study employs the DMIS developed by Milton Bennett, which outlines the developmental stages of intercultural sensitivity. However, while this model identifies students' developmental stages, it does not provide details regarding the specific process by which students reach those stages. The experiential learning model developed by David Kolb helps address this gap as it describes the process by which experience is transformed into learning. Therefore, this study combines the two frameworks. Specifically, it analyzes DMIS results using the experiential learning model to decipher these patterns.

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The DMIS, which focuses on intercultural sensitivity, outlines specific stages of intercultural development. In concrete terms, this model posits that intercultural sensitivity comprises six distinct stages that describe how individuals view cultural differences: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration (Bennett, 1993).

The first stage, denial, refers to the point at which individuals are unable to recognize cultural differences. Notably, this does not imply a rejection of cultural differences; rather, it reflects a failure to acknowledge them and a view of the world from one's own cultural perspective. In the next stage, the defense stage, people can recognize cultural differences. However, they view these differences in a dualistic manner, often through comparisons between their own culture and others, and make assumptions of superiority or inferiority. In the IDI, this evaluative stance corresponds to polarization, which encompasses both defense and its inverse, reversal; because the developmental orientation score does not distinguish between them, this study refers to the orientation as polarization throughout. In the minimization stage, people no longer take a binary view of cultural differences; rather, they trivialize them and emphasize humankind's similarities regardless of cultural differences. This may appear to be an understanding of different cultures, but it is, in fact, an inability to see cultural differences, as it fails to recognize that there are many cultural differences worldwide, that cultures are not uniform, and that each culture has its own characteristics. When individuals reach the acceptance stage, they develop a relative view of culture. That is, cultural differences are relativized without being evaluated positively or negatively, and people come to respect them. However, they have not yet mastered coping in an actual intercultural environment. This takes place in the next stage, the adaptation stage, in which individuals acquire behavioral skills, such as communicating with people from different cultures. Specifically, this is the stage at which individuals can shift their perspective away from their own culture, namely, viewing the world from the perspective of another culture. Finally, although the IDI deliberately excludes this stage, the integration stage is the stage in which people not only adapt to other cultures but also construct their own identities to embrace these cultures. People in this stage establish their mindset and behavior by integrating their original cultural perspective with those of other cultures. Thus, the first three stages focus on intercultural sensitivity and

perspectives, whereas the latter three focus more on behavioral skills underpinned by such sensitivity and perspectives.

However, intercultural sensitivity does not progress linearly to higher stages (Kim, 2001). For instance, even after advancing from polarization to minimization, experiencing cultural conflict can cause a regression back to polarization. Rather than progressing linearly, development follows a cyclical "draw-back-to-leap" process between psychological stress and adaptive response. Cultural conflict therefore delays adjustment but also elicits the will to adapt, making it an important component of the development of intercultural sensitivity.

As the preceding description suggests, the DMIS spans both perceptual orientation and behavioral capability. This is relevant to an apparent terminological inconsistency: the DMIS is a model of intercultural sensitivity, whereas the IDI is often described as a measure of intercultural competence. The difference is terminological rather than substantive. Hammer et al. (2003) distinguished between intercultural sensitivity—the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences—and intercultural competence—the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways—and argued that the former enhances the potential for the latter. The same article describes the IDI as a measure of intercultural competence, suggesting that this dual terminology was not introduced later but existed from the outset. Both labels apply because the DMIS is a model of changes in worldview structure rather than attitudes and behavior (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 423); what the IDI captures is the perceptual orientation underlying competent intercultural conduct, not an observation of that conduct itself. This study uses intercultural sensitivity because it employs the DMIS as its analytical framework and because, in the absence of behavioral data, its claims are confined to the perceptual orientation the IDI captures.

Experiential Learning Model

The mechanism of this nonlinear developmental process is theoretically explained by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which conceptualizes learning as a four-stage model, or cycle, in which experience is transformed into knowledge: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This study draws on the four-stage model rather than on the learning-styles component of the theory.

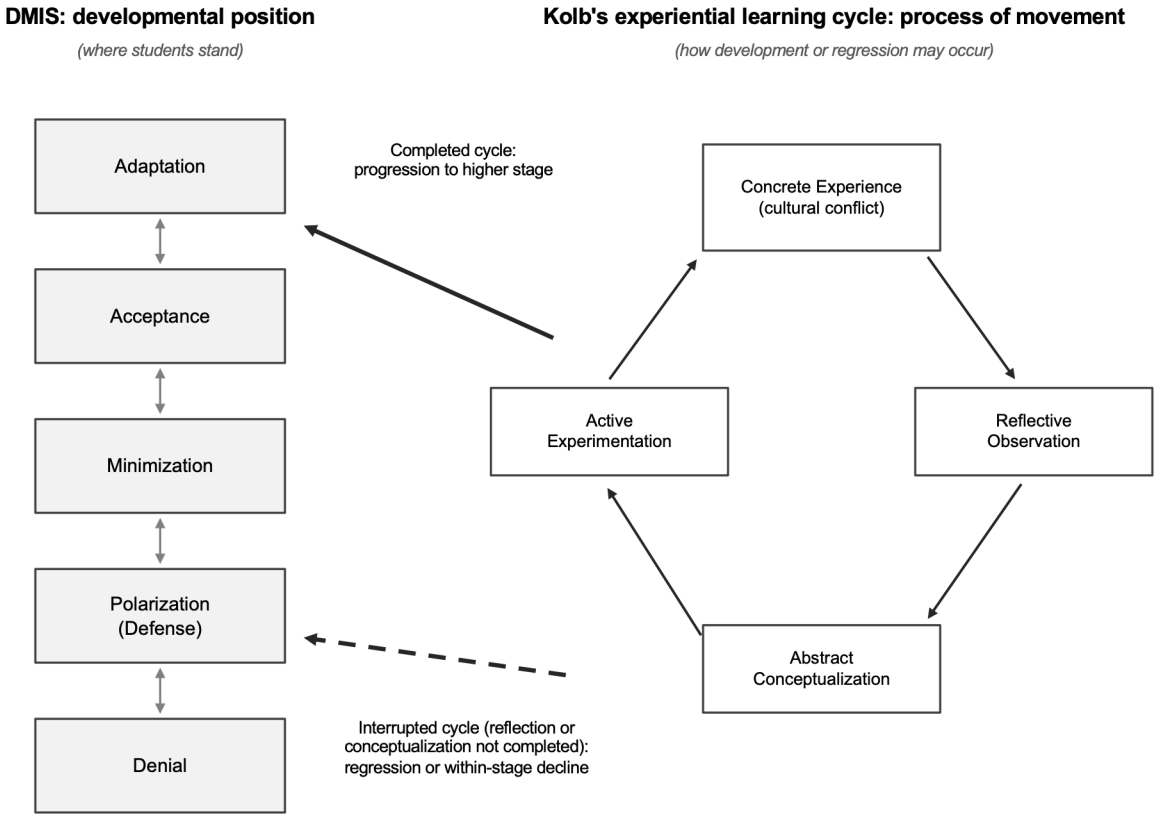
In the first stage, learning from cultural conflict begins with encountering different cultures (concrete experience). In the second stage, students are asked to engage in self-reflection on the experiences of cultural conflict (reflective observation). This involves questions such as, "How did my own cultural values influence the conflict?" In the third stage, through self-reflection, students are expected to understand and abstract the meaning of the experience (abstract conceptualization). This allows even experiences that brought conflict to be viewed positively as contributing to the growth of intercultural sensitivity. In the fourth stage, students can progressively enhance their intercultural sensitivity by deepening their practice toward a higher DMIS stage, drawing on both positive and negative experiences as sources of subsequent development (active experimentation). This involves practicing through trial and error, such as altering communication styles the next time. This model posits that learning from experience requires this transformative process: concrete experience → reflective observation → abstract conceptualization → active experimentation. Learning is not the absorption of experience, but rather something gained through the learner's active, constructive process.

Figure 1 summarizes how the two frameworks operate together. The DMIS specifies where students stand in their orientation toward cultural difference and provides the empirical categories used to classify decline: between-stage regression and within-stage decrease. Kolb's experiential learning cycle, in turn, offers an interpretive account of how movement between these classifications may occur: cultural conflict constitutes a concrete experience, and whether that experience is transformed into development or regression may depend on whether reflective observation and abstract conceptualization take place. Within

this integrated view, the regressions observed in this study are interpreted as consistent with an interrupted learning cycle in which experience remains unprocessed.

Figure 1

This Study's Integration of the DMIS and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle



Note. Since the Integration stage is not covered by the IDI, it is not included in this figure.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a single-group pre–post survey design to examine changes in intercultural sensitivity among Japanese university students who participated in study abroad programs. The IDI was administered before participants' departure and again upon their return, enabling within-person comparisons of intercultural sensitivity scores. The decline in IDI scores is used as the empirical basis for its analysis. By employing the DMIS as an analytical framework and adopting Kolb's experiential learning model as an interpretive lens, the study's design enables the identification of clear patterns in this decline and the examination of its educational implications.

Participants

The participants were 147 Japanese university students enrolled at a Japanese university, all of whom participated in short-term study abroad programs lasting approximately 1 to 6 months. The 147 students were classified into two subgroups on the basis of changes in their DO scores between the preprogram and postprogram assessments. While the scores of 75 students (51.0%) increased, those of 72 students (49.0%) decreased. Since this study focuses on the patterns and dynamics of score decline, the analysis examines the subgroup of 72 students whose scores declined. To provide a contextual background for this subgroup, the results section also reports comparative descriptive statistics for the 75 students whose scores increased, allowing readers to assess the relative position of the group with declining scores within the full sample.

Of the 147 participants, 55.1% (81 students) were female, and 44.9% (66 students) were male. Study abroad destinations included Canada, China, France, Ireland, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States; 107 students reported durations of approximately 1 month, and 40 students reported longer durations of up to 6 months.

Procedures

Data used for this study were collected at a Japanese university from 2015 to 2017 in cooperation with its international affairs office. The IDI was administered online via the official IDI platform at two time points: preprogram and postprogram. Participants completed the IDI by answering standardized questions in Japanese under online conditions, and each participant received an individualized link from the author, who is a qualified IDI administrator. Responses were stored on the secure server of the IDI official platform and subsequently retrieved for analysis. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the administration of the IDI: participants clicked a start ("I agree to participate") button before proceeding to the questionnaire items. All data were stored on a secure institutional server at the author's university and were protected by individual login credentials issued by the university. Access to the data was restricted to the principal investigator and authorized international affairs office staff; third parties were not permitted to access them. Personally identifiable information was separated from the response data, and analyses were conducted using anonymized identification numbers. The reported results do not contain any personally identifiable information. The data collection procedures were approved by the ethical review committee of the author's university.

Measures

In this study, intercultural sensitivity is operationalized as the DO score. A decrease in intercultural sensitivity is operationalized as a negative change in the DO score between the preprogram and postprogram assessments (i.e., post-DO minus pre-DO < 0). Self-perceived intercultural sensitivity refers to the PO score, and the accuracy of self-understanding is operationalized via the PO-DO gap: a wider gap indicates a greater discrepancy between perceived and actual orientation.

The IDI has been subjected to cross-cultural validity testing that included the Japanese population. The validity test was conducted with 4,763 participants across diverse cultural groups, including 277 Japanese (Hammer, 2011). The IDI is also available in Japanese. In this study, the IDI was administered in Japanese to eliminate the confounding effects of foreign-language proficiency on response accuracy.

Analytical Strategy

The data analysis process consisted of five steps. The first step was the score change calculation. For each participant, changes in their DO score, PO score, and gap were calculated as the postprogram score minus the preprogram score. Negative DO score changes indicated a decline in intercultural

sensitivity. The second step was subgroup identification. Participants were classified into two subgroups: the declining subgroup (post-DO < pre-DO, $n = 72$) and the improving subgroup (post-DO ≥ pre-DO, $n = 75$). Subsequent analyses focused on the declining subgroup, with descriptive comparisons to the improving subgroup reported for context. The third step involved significance testing. Because the Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the change scores deviated from normality, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted using SPSS 31 to assess whether changes in the DO score, PO score, and gap were statistically significant. Effect sizes were calculated as $r = z/\sqrt{n}$. Because the declining subgroup was selected on the basis of negative change, these tests were used descriptively to characterize the magnitude and consistency of change within each subgroup rather than to support population-level inference. The fourth step was pattern classification. Cases showing a declining trend were further classified into qualitatively distinct patterns based on transitions between DMIS stages. Specifically, between-stage regressions (e.g., a transition from minimization to polarization) were distinguished from within-stage decreases (e.g., a decrease within polarization without a change in stage). For each cell in the cross-tabulation table, the frequency, mean, and median of the decrease were calculated. The fifth step was an interpretive analysis. The patterns identified in the fourth step were interpreted in light of DMIS theory and Kolb's experiential learning model. Notably, this interpretive step did not constitute a direct empirical validation of Kolb's model. In this study, the reflective process was not directly measured. Rather, using Kolb's framework, the potential mechanisms underlying the observed patterns and derived implications for educational interventions were examined.

RESULTS

Of the 147 participating students, 72 exhibited a decline in their DO score between the preprogram and postprogram assessments. Since this subgroup was defined by that decline, the DO test confirms the selection criterion rather than testing it, whereas the PO and gap tests are informative because self-perception could have moved in either direction. All three are reported to describe the magnitude and consistency of change within this subgroup (Table 1). The DO scores decreased from $M = 86.47$ ($SD = 10.51$) to $M = 78.42$ ($SD = 11.35$); *Mdn* of change = −5.68, $z = 7.37$, $p < .001$, $r = .87$. The PO scores decreased from $M = 119.55$ ($SD = 4.37$) to $M = 116.86$ ($SD = 4.23$), with *Mdn* of change = −1.84, $z = 5.99$, $p < .001$, and $r = .71$. Additionally, the gap between the PO and DO scores widened significantly from $M = 33.07$ ($SD = 6.59$) to $M = 38.44$ ($SD = 7.51$); *Mdn* of change = +4.25, $z = 7.26$, $p < .001$; $r = .86$, indicating that students' self-perception increasingly differed from their assessed orientation. Because this subgroup was defined by declining DO scores, the DO test is degenerate by construction (see Table 1, note a). The PO and gap results are not constrained in the same way, since self-perception could move in either direction, but they too characterize change within this subgroup rather than support inference about study abroad participants in general.

Table 1

Preprogram and Postprogram Changes in IDI Scores: Declining Subgroup (n = 72)

IDI score	Preprogram *M* (*SD*)	Postprogram *M* (*SD*)	Mean change	*Mdn* of change	*z*	*p*	*r*
Developmental orientation (DO) score[a]	86.47 (10.51)	78.42 (11.35)	−8.06	−5.68	7.37	< .001	.87
Perceived orientation (PO) score	119.55 (4.37)	116.86 (4.23)	−2.68	−1.84	5.99	< .001	.71
Gap between (PO) and (DO)	33.07 (6.59)	38.44 (7.51)	+5.37	+4.25	7.26	< .001	.86

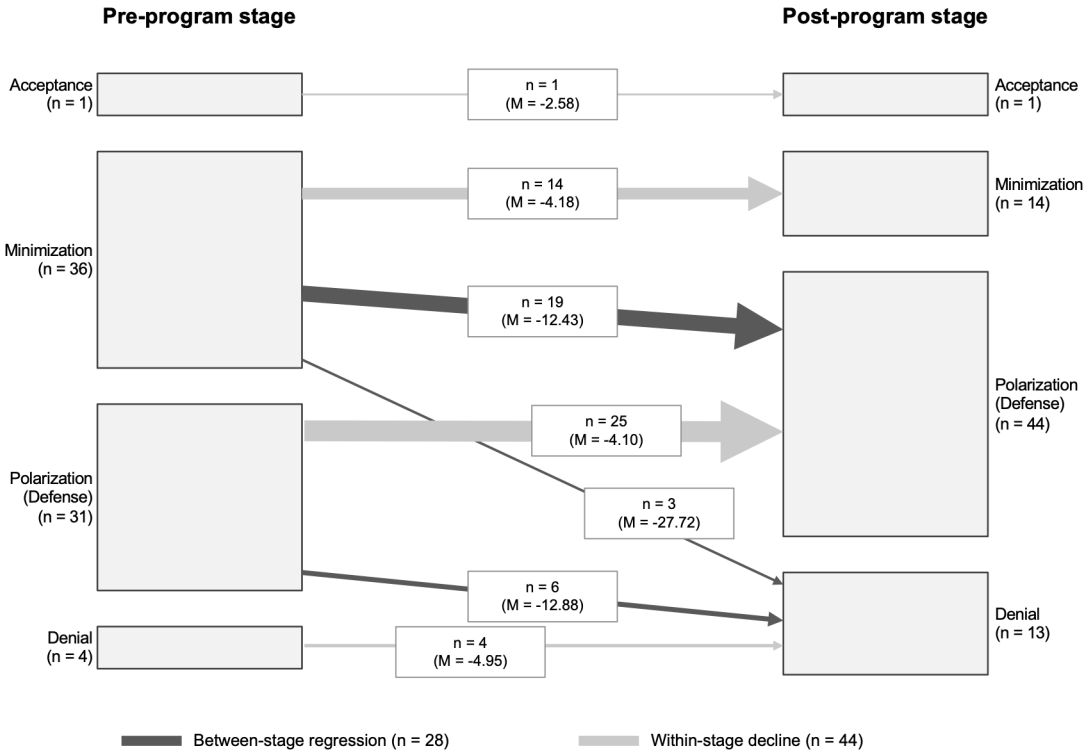
Note. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests; change scores are post minus pre. z is reported as an absolute value; $r = z/\sqrt{n}$, where n is the number of pairs (72). A positive gap change indicates a widening PO–DO gap. Values were rounded from unrounded scores and may differ by .01 from table-based calculations.
[a] The subgroup was defined by post-DO < pre-DO, so all cases decline by construction and $W^{+} = 0$; this row carries no inferential information.

For context, descriptive statistics for the 75 students whose scores improved showed a mean DO increase of 9.69 points (preprogram $M = 77.94$, $SD = 10.57$; postprogram $M = 87.63$, $SD = 11.93$). Their preprogram scores were lower than those of the declining subgroup ($M = 86.47$), a pattern considered further in "Other Potential Factors for the Observed Decline." No participant showed exactly zero change. Across the full sample, the mean DO score rose only slightly, from 82.12 to 83.11. The remainder of this paper focuses on the subgroup whose scores declined, because the mechanisms underlying a decline have received little empirical attention in the literature to date.

Patterns of Decreased Intercultural Sensitivity

To examine the structure of this decline, we classified 72 cases based on their DMIS stages before and after program implementation (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Transitions in DMIS Stages Among Students Whose Scores Declined (n = 72)



Note. Arrow width is proportional to the number of students. Labels denote the number of students (n) and the mean change in developmental orientation scores (M). Stage cutoffs are as follows: denial (≤70),

polarization (70.01–85), minimization (85.01–115), acceptance (115.01–130), and adaptation (130.01–145). These cutoffs are applied to continuous scores; 13 of the 28 between-stage cases scored within two points of a cutoff, so this distinction is approximate at the margins.

The first pattern is a regression between stages (n = 28). Twenty-eight students transitioned from a higher DMIS stage to a lower one. Specifically, 19 students moved from minimization to polarization, 3 from minimization to denial, and 6 from polarization to denial. These cases represent not only a numerical decrease but also a transition between qualitatively different orientations toward cultural differences. The second pattern is a decline within the same stage (n = 44). Although 44 students remained in the same DMIS stage, their DO scores decreased. The breakdown is as follows: 14 within minimization, 25 within polarization, 4 within denial, and 1 within acceptance. Although these decreases do not cross stage boundaries, they nonetheless reflect a shift away from higher levels of intercultural sensitivity in the participants' initial orientations.

DISCUSSION

Patterns of Decline and Theoretical Interpretation

Because the data consist solely of preprogram and postprogram IDI scores, the interpretations offered in this section are presented as theoretically informed possibilities rather than as demonstrated psychological mechanisms. The between-stage regressions identified in the previous section provide a basis for theoretical interpretation, while bearing in mind the limitations of what can be demonstrated using the IDI scores alone. In the case of the first pattern, the most frequent transition was from minimization to polarization (n = 19). This shift is theoretically significant because these two stages represent qualitatively different attitudes toward cultural differences. Minimization tends to emphasize universal human commonalities and relativize differences without strong evaluative judgments. In contrast, polarization is characterized by an evaluative orientation toward cultural differences and often manifests through a preference for one's own culture or the host culture (Bennett, 1993).

One possible interpretation of this pattern is that students who entered minimization with confidence in their openness to other cultures subsequently faced cultural conflicts that their mindsets could not fully resolve. Bennett (1993) noted that minimization may serve to mask unchallenged ethnocentric assumptions, and the data from this study are consistent with the possibility that when such assumptions were challenged in the field, some students retreated to a more evaluative orientation. Furthermore, attention should be given to two smaller subsets within the between-stage regressions. Three students transitioned from minimization to denial, whereas six transitioned from polarization to denial. Although the absolute numbers are small, both transitions involve a shift toward cultural differences becoming less perceptually prominent.

From the perspective of DMIS developmental stages, these transitions may suggest, although they cannot demonstrate, a form of withdrawal. In other words, rather than reevaluating their own cultural assumptions in response to persistent cultural conflict, students cope by withdrawing from the perceptual task itself. This interpretation should be treated with caution. Since there were only nine students corresponding to these two transition types and there were no independent indicators to measure withdrawal, the current data cannot substantiate this mechanism with certainty. Nevertheless, these transitions are theoretically distinct from declines within the same stage.

The second pattern, declines within the same stage, differs in kind from these between-stage transitions. Many of these cases occurred within the polarization (n = 25) or minimization (n = 14) stages, which are not particularly advanced stages in the DMIS framework. The only case at a more advanced stage was the one student in the acceptance stage; the remaining four occurred within denial. The decline in scores

among students who remained at these early stages may indicate that intercultural exposure alone, without structured support, was not associated with growth.

This observation is consistent with Vande Berg et al.'s (2009) finding, based on the large-scale Georgetown Consortium Project, that IDI gains were limited without cultural mentoring and guided reflection. The findings of this study further extend this line of work by demonstrating that, in the absence of such interventions, a substantial proportion of students may not only fail to develop but may also experience declines in assessed intercultural sensitivity. For citizen diplomacy, the direction of these regressions matters: movement toward polarization or denial implies a more evaluative or less perceptive stance toward cultural difference, which is difficult to reconcile with the mutual relationship-building expected of citizen diplomats.

Widened Self-Perception Gap and Reflective Processes

Another notable trend is that the gap between DO scores and PO scores widened among students whose scores declined. While the observed DO score decreased by 8.06 points, the PO score decreased by only 2.68 points. Because the subgroup was defined by declining DO scores, this widening partly reflects that selection; what selection does not determine is the asymmetry in magnitude between the two declines. Conceptually, this asymmetry is also related to Kolb's experiential learning model, which posits that learning from experience requires reflective processing of that experience. If students with reduced intercultural sensitivity nevertheless perceived their orientation as relatively unchanged, this suggests that the reflective integration of their experiences may have been incomplete. This widening gap is also consequential for citizen diplomacy: students who overestimate their intercultural sensitivity may engage in intercultural interactions with more confidence than is warranted, potentially reproducing the misunderstandings that citizen diplomacy seeks to overcome.

Other Potential Factors for the Observed Decline

While the interpretation discussed above focuses on incomplete introspective processing, several other explanations are worth considering. First, the timing of the postprogram evaluation may have coincided with a low point in the adaptation curve. As suggested by cross-cultural adaptation models such as the Revised W-shaped Adaptation Model (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012), students often experience culture shock while abroad and reverse culture shock upon returning home. Read alongside Kim's (2001) account of stress-induced draw-back, this raises the possibility that scores obtained shortly after return reflect a temporary trough rather than a stable orientation—a possibility the present design, which lacks a delayed follow-up assessment, cannot rule out. Second, and independently of timing, a response-shift bias may have contributed to the observed declines. As students' internal standards for judging cultural differences become stricter through direct experience, their postprogram responses may reflect readjusted standards rather than true regression (Little et al., 2020). Third, regression toward the mean may account for part of the observed pattern. Because subgroup membership was defined by the direction of change, students with higher preprogram scores were more likely to be classified as declining. The two subgroups did indeed approximate mirror images of each other: the declining subgroup moved from $M = 86.47$ to $M = 78.42$, while the improving subgroup moved from $M = 77.94$ to $M = 87.63$. This near-symmetry is consistent with regression toward the mean and cannot be ruled out on the present data. It does not, however, account for the qualitative differences among the patterns of decline described above, since regression toward the mean predicts the magnitude of change but is indifferent to whether a decline crosses a DMIS stage boundary or remains within one. Fourth, although this falls outside the scope of control in this quantitative analysis, characteristics of the host environment, such as unusually stressful living or academic conditions, may have lowered postprogram scores independently of students' reflective engagement. Finally, as with other standardized measurement tools, it is not possible to completely eliminate the limitations of the IDI as a measurement tool. Nevertheless, the educational implications discussed below

remain valid for most of these explanations, as structured reflection and postreturn support address several of these mechanisms simultaneously. The observed decline in intercultural sensitivity and accuracy of self-awareness provides direct implications for educational design, which will be discussed below.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

The patterns identified above are consistent with the view that, in the absence of systematic support, studying abroad alone may not be sufficient to foster intercultural sensitivity for a substantial number of students. The data from this study provide an empirical basis for exploring intervention strategies to address the observed patterns. Using Kolb's framework as a guide for interpretation, the following three specific intervention strategies are considered particularly relevant.

First, there is a need for a predeparture orientation that focuses on developmental expectations. By preparing students for the nonlinear nature of cross-cultural adaptation, including the possibility of temporary setbacks following deep cultural conflicts, during predeparture orientation, international educators and practitioners can prevent them from interpreting stressful experiences as personal failures or as evidence that the host culture is incompatible with their own values. Hanada (2019) demonstrated that predeparture orientation is a significant predictor of the development of intercultural competence among Japanese students, thereby supporting the effectiveness of this intervention. This paper identifies intervention points focused on cultural conflict and setbacks.

Second, structured self-reflection during the program would be useful. Providing cultural mentoring by trained facilitators to students who experience cultural conflict during the program before such experiences alter their perspectives or attitudes toward other cultures can help prevent this decline. Such support includes guided reflection journals that incorporate questions encouraging students to examine their own cultural assumptions (e.g., "What has this experience revealed about my cultural expectations?") and regular facilitator-led reflection sessions.

Third, postprogram reflection that incorporates feedback from the IDI would be helpful. Given the widening gap between PO scores and DO scores observed in this study, postprogram reflection is considered particularly valuable when it helps students compare their self-perception with their assessed orientation. Such feedback serves as a benchmark for self-reflection that cannot be provided by either self-reporting or objective evaluation alone and may help students recalibrate their understanding of their progress in intercultural development.

These three interventions share a common rationale: rather than expecting students to transform cultural conflict into intercultural growth through individual effort alone, they treat reflection as a structured educational process that requires systematic support.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CITIZEN DIPLOMACY

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for understanding the role of international higher education in citizen diplomacy. As discussed in the literature review, the distinguishing emphasis of citizen diplomacy lies in its focus on the people themselves. In this context, citizen diplomacy is particularly closely linked to international higher education, whose very function is to shape people.

However, the findings of this study also suggest that this affinity does not translate automatically into effective citizen diplomacy. Where, as in the present sample, a substantial proportion of participants return home with lower intercultural sensitivity than they had upon departure, the diplomatic potential inherent in student mobility risks being squandered. The distinctive contribution of international higher education to citizen diplomacy lies not in the study abroad experience itself but in its ability to provide a systematic educational framework, including predeparture preparation, in-program reflection, and postprogram review, which ordinary cultural exchanges cannot offer (Hanada, 2022; Vande Berg et al., 2009).

Given that 6.9 million students now study abroad worldwide (UNESCO, 2025), even minor improvements to program design have the potential to significantly expand the pool of well-prepared citizen diplomats. With this in mind, this study argues that the effectiveness of studying abroad depends on deliberate educational initiatives and that this is precisely what distinguishes international higher education from general cultural exchange.

This analysis contributes to the field of study abroad research by elucidating the patterns underlying a decline in intercultural sensitivity. Specifically, it demonstrates that among students whose IDI scores decreased, the gap between their perceived orientation and their developmental (assessed) orientation widened. Furthermore, by identifying systematic educational support as a distinctive mechanism through which international higher education can transform student international exchange into effective grassroots diplomacy, this study advances the discussion on promoting citizen diplomacy.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

While this quantitative approach makes visible macrolevel trends in intercultural development, it relies on shifts in IDI scores to infer internal cognitive processes. Accordingly, future research should incorporate qualitative methods, such as reflective journals and in-depth interviews, to capture the nuances of how students negotiate cultural conflicts and complement these quantitative findings. In addition, because this study employed a single-group pre–post survey design without a comparison group, the observed changes cannot be causally attributed to the study abroad experience; unmeasured factors, including those discussed as alternative explanations, may have contributed to the observed patterns. The data also predate the COVID-19 pandemic, and replication with more recent cohorts is needed to confirm these patterns.

Another limitation is the inherent challenge of generalizability. As this study is based on data specifically from Japanese students, future comparative research among students from different cultural backgrounds is necessary. Future research is expected to provide more reliable verification by examining case studies of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

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