THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS:
STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF STUDY ABROAD

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ABSTRACT

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While many studies exist on the effects or benefits of studying abroad, few studies seek to examine study abroad from a student point-of-view. Based on previous studies of the outcomes of study abroad programs, this thesis examined the student perspective of the impact of participation in a study abroad program. The research drew on her participation in several different study abroad programs and experience as a study abroad advisor/coordinator in order to bring a unique and personal appreciation of the inner workings of various study abroad programs to the inquiry. This study used grounded theory to examine data collected from student questionnaires, focus group sessions, and personal interviews to gauge the experience of ten university students, 18 years and older, who participated in a study abroad/education abroad program of any length while enrolled as a student at a mid-sized midwestern university.

The overarching query guiding this study sought to examine students’ perspective on the impact of participation in a study abroad program. In order to unearth a response to that guiding theme, five specific research questions were posed: (1) What sort of impact does participation in a study abroad program have on its student participants? (2) How are students’ perceptions of the impacts of study abroad similar or different to the effects found or predicted by other scholarly studies? (3) Why do individuals choose to study abroad? (4) Do students think they experienced culture shock? (5) If yes, how does culture shock influence a student's study abroad experience?
Seven themes pertaining to students’ perspective of their study abroad experiences emerged from the data collected from the group of students who participated in this study. These themes, in no particular order of significance, included topics relating to study abroad as goal fulfillment, culture shock and the study abroad experience, perceived influences of studying abroad, learning culture, returning home, the role of social support in study abroad, and student reflections on the study abroad experience. Information was drawn from each of the seven themes to answer the research questions, make further observations, and work toward building theory grounded in the data.
This thesis is dedicated to Mum and Dad
for their unwavering love and support;
and to Grandpa Frank and Great Aunt Mabel,
two individuals who inspired me to always
strive for excellence and understand
the value of education.
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Last but certainly not least, I thank my family. Mum, Dad, and Kristen, I would not be at this point in my life if it hadn’t been for your steadfast support, unconditional love, and inexhaustible faith. Even though we’re hundreds of miles apart, you were always there to rejoice in my successes and pick me up off the floor when the going got rough. I am so blessed to have you three in my life.
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CHAPTER 1: WHY EXAMINE STUDY ABROAD?

The primary drive behind my decision to study abroad for the first time was my longing to live and study in Scotland. Little did I know what a huge impact that decision would have on my life. Studying abroad provided the opportunity for new experiences on a daily basis. Initially, life advanced in a euphoric state; every day provided new adventures, from learning to *ceilidh* dance at a local town hall to witnessing firsthand the devastating beauty of the Scottish Highlands. As time progressed, the exhilarating glamour of studying abroad diminished and a more realistic perspective of life in another country emerged. Unexpected obstacles, such as the confrontation of mashed potatoes with nutmeg to the necessitation of donning scarves and mittens indoors, ensured a genuine perception of the lived experience. The culmination of these various incidences resulted in an unsurpassable impact on my life. My experience in Scotland ultimately encouraged me to change my career trajectory, pursue a higher-level degree, and dedicate my life to providing similar opportunities for future students.

No study abroad experience is the same for any two students; every person will be subjected to different situations and influences from their time spent abroad. This plethora of experiences adds richness to the field of study abroad research. While numerous studies exist on the effects or benefits of studying abroad, few studies seek to examine study abroad from a student point-of-view. This thesis examined the student perspective of the impact of participation in a study abroad program. The study used grounded theory to examine data collected from student questionnaires, focus group sessions, and personal interviews to gauge the experience of students who participated in a study abroad program and compare it to previous studies focused on the impacts of studying abroad.
Many of the current studies regarding study abroad focus on the effects of study abroad, using a variety of theoretical frameworks to measure or explain some of the benefits provided by a study abroad experience (e.g. Xiaoxuan, 2004). Other scholars examine the role study abroad plays in second language acquisition (e.g. Milleret, 1990), and still others proclaim the need for an established set of study abroad evaluation tools. Clearly, study abroad offers scholars a plethora of topics for study.

The need to develop comprehensive methods for evaluating study abroad programs, as well as the need to develop research strategies for conclusively identifying the effects study abroad participation may have on students, is clearly stated by scholars in a variety of disciplines (see, for example, Marcum & Roochnik, 2001; Smith, 1983). Currently, “formal assessment of study-abroad programs lags behind the assessment of other kinds of programs on college campuses. While institutions are likely to apply their own standards to their programs, no national standards exist to guide them” (Gillespie, 2002, p. B20). Gillespie (2002) called for a “set of minimum standards” (p. B20) for study abroad programs, and “comprehensive standards for different types of programs” (p. B20) in order to construct study abroad programs that would prove most beneficial to students. She suggested study abroad evaluation consist of both qualitative (i.e. “students’ awareness of culturally shaped knowledge”) and quantitative measures (i.e. “the number and kinds of opportunities that expose students to the local intellectual and material culture”), for both forms of research would collect useful information (Gillespie, 2002, p. B20).

Following Gillespie’s recommendation, this study investigated study abroad through a qualitative lens. Participation in several different study abroad programs and experience as a study abroad advisor/coordinator gave the author a unique and personal appreciation of the inner
workings of various study abroad programs. The dichotomy of roles played--both as program organizer and as program participant--introduced the interesting situation of investigating the possible impact study abroad program participation has on students while being subjected to such impacts herself. Based on previous studies on the outcomes of study abroad programs, this thesis examined students’ perspectives on the impact of participation in a study abroad program.
CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING STUDY ABROAD

In order to fully comprehend students’ perspectives of their study abroad experiences, one must first understand the context in which study abroad is situated in current scholarship. Literature involving study abroad covers a variety of topics, but the research topics explored in this study were drawn from research on (1) current trends in study abroad, (2) previous research on the effects of study abroad, and (3) culture and culture shock.

Current Trends in Study Abroad

Kitsantas (2004) defined study abroad as “all educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the country of origin” (p. 441). No modification of this definition was necessary for the purposes of this study as the focus of this thesis was on the international experiences of students from the both United States and from other countries. The first part of this chapter will provide background information on the current trends in study abroad, as well as examine U.S. federal government involvement in promoting the study abroad experience.

The Institute of International Education (IIE), the leading non-profit organization dealing with cultural and educational student exchanges in the United States, split the umbrella term “study abroad” into three categories defined by duration: short-term, mid-length, and long-term (2007). Programs are considered short-term if they have a length of less than eight weeks; this category includes the popular summer, January term, and spring break programs. Mid-length programs include one- or two-quarter-length and semester-length programs; long-term programs consist of those study abroad opportunities lasting an entire academic or calendar year.

An interesting phenomenon to note is the absence of a defined category for those U.S. students who choose to directly enroll in a foreign institution for the entirety of their
undergraduate and/or graduate degree program. These students spend several years away from the United States and, undoubtedly, have a much richer cultural and educational experience than students who spend only a few days, weeks, or months in a different country; however, no IIE study abroad category is defined for them. This study does not wish to ignore the presence of students who choose to take a most adventurous journey by spending the entirety of their degree program abroad; but, due to the lack of information, data, and previously published work regarding these particular experiences, this study will focus only on the participants of short-term, mid-length, and long-term programs.

Certain types of short-term study abroad programs are sometimes referred to as “study tours.” These programs usually consist of a group of U.S. students traveling together for educational purposes; a U.S. professor or tour guide often leads these groups. Study tour participants are often treated to a whirlwind experience of the host country since their time is limited. Obviously, the longer study abroad programs offer more time to interact with the host culture and, understandably, may offer greater benefits to the participating student; however, research has shown that even participation in a short-term study abroad program—a study tour—can have a positive impact on student participants (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; Mapp, McFarland, & Newell, 2007; Penington & Wildermuth, 2005).

Mid-length and long-term programs can, usually, be sub-categorized into programs known as immersion programs or island programs. An immersion program finds the study abroad participant directly enrolled in a foreign institution, often living with a host family and away from other Americans. The student from the United States attends classes at the foreign institution; classes are usually led by a foreign professor and are often taken in the host nation’s language. Island programs, on the other hand, are characterized by a student from the U.S.
remaining enrolled in his or her home institution but studying abroad; living with other U.S. students in a typically dormitory-like situation; and taking classes primarily from U.S. professors in English.

In 2007 almost a quarter of a million students from the United States participated in some form of study abroad program, an 8.5% increase from 2006 (Institute of International Education, 2007). Scholars agree that more attention needs to be paid to this rapidly growing study abroad phenomenon (Altbach, 2004; Bollag, 2004; Desruisseaux, 2000; McMurtie, 2005). In recent years a steady rise of U.S. students choosing to study abroad increased at the impressive rate of 150% in the last decade, up from only 84,403 students in 1994-95 (Institute of International Education, 2007). The growing popularity of study abroad has caused some colleges and universities to take note, especially because the phenomenon could be larger than currently assessed.

At the dawning of the new millennium, nearly 48% of college-bound high school students indicated an interest in adding a study abroad program to their college experience (Wheeler, 2000). Some universities take an innovative approach to nurturing the seed of interest in international education. Tufts University, for example, includes a world atlas in the freshmen orientation packet (Rooney, 2002) and many institutions, including the University of Wisconsin at River Falls, include a session on the various study abroad opportunities offered by the institution during freshman orientation programs. However, despite the efforts of numerous universities, only about one percent of college students actually follow through on their indicated interest in study abroad (Wheeler, 2000). Thus, institutes of higher education need continuing efforts to determine what else can be done to cater to and foster the study abroad phenomenon.
One way to achieve this understanding is to examine the current trends in study abroad.

**The Open Doors Report, 2007**

Every year since 1949 the Institute of International Education (IIE), in conjunction with the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, has published its *Open Doors* report, a statistical survey of international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2007). In 1985 another survey was added to the report to monitor the number and characteristics of U.S. students studying abroad. In the 2007 report the total number of students studying abroad via an accredited U.S. institution reached 223,534, an 8.5% increase from the previous year (Institute of International Education, 2007). Despite the growing numbers, however, the number of students studying abroad constitutes less than 1% of all students enrolled in U.S. institutes of higher education (Obst, Bhandari, & Witherell, 2007).

While more students are studying abroad, the duration of the average study abroad program seems to be shortening. Almost 53% of students who studied abroad participated in a short-term program, meaning they were out of the country for eight weeks or less. Just over 40% studied in a mid-length program, while only 5.5% studied abroad for a long-term, full academic or calendar year program (Institute of International Education, 2007). Students had many study abroad programs from which to choose; the 2007 *IIEPassport* directories, the IIE’s listing of study abroad programs available to U.S. students, swelled from 2,005 listed programs in 1986 to over 7,500 listings in 2007 (Obst, Bhandari, & Witherell, 2007).

Europe remained the most popular study abroad destination, though its overall popularity somewhat declined as other countries become more accessible for U.S. students wishing to study abroad. The 2007 *Open Doors* report showed 53.8% of students studying abroad chose Europe as
their destination, down from 64.8% in 1995-96. Africa, Asia, and Oceania all saw increases in the number of U.S. students who study within their borders, though added together these three regions still accounted for less than 20% of the total number of U.S. students studying abroad (Institute of International Education, 2007).

The Social Sciences, Business and Management, and the Humanities remained the top three fields of study for students choosing to study abroad; these three fields have consistently produced the most study abroad participants since the Open Doors report began (Institute of International Education, 2007). Also remaining consistent within the last decade is the profile of the “average” study abroad student: female students in their junior year study abroad more often than any other type of student (Institute of International Education, 2007). The 65% female, 35% male ratio has been fairly consistent since IIE began collecting data, though as of yet no definitive explanation has been offered for this skewed gender division.

Another discord found within the Open Doors report has raised valid concerns within the international education community. For over a decade, roughly 83-84% of students who study abroad are Caucasian (Institute of International Education, 2007). Asian or Pacific Islander students represent the next largest percentage, making up 6.3% of the U.S. study abroad student population. Hispanic-Americans follow with 5.4%, African-Americans with 3.5%, Multiracial students with 1.2%, and Native American or Alaskan Native students with less than 1% (Institute of International Education, 2007). An imbalance clearly exists. The study abroad community, including the IIE, is working to repair this imbalance and “ensure that access to study abroad is available to all, including students of diverse backgrounds, low incomes, and underrepresented fields” (Obst, Bhandari, & Witherell, 2007, p. 5). Several institutions, such as Florida A&M University, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Valdosta State University, and Emory
University implemented programs designed to diversify the types of students who are able to study abroad (Obst, Bhandari, & Witherell, 2007). Paired with U.S. government and private foundation programs and funding, including but not limited to the Fulbright U.S. Student Program and the Gilman Scholarships for undergraduate students who have financial need, these initiatives “show success in attracting traditionally underrepresented students” (Obst, Bhandari, & Witherell, 2007, p. 9).

Government Involvement

Colleges and universities are not alone in their promotion of study abroad participation. Congress recently became involved in study abroad program development, proposing two acts (H. R. 1469, 2007; S. 3744, 2006) intended to raise the number of U.S. undergraduate students studying abroad to one million within ten years. The U.S. Department of Education presented the following rationale for the government’s role in encouraging study abroad:

To continue to compete successfully in the global economy, play a leadership role in the world, and enhance the national security, the United States must ensure that its citizens develop a broad understanding of the world, including other languages and cultures. America’s leadership also depends on building ties with those who will guide the political, cultural and economic development of their countries in their future. Our increasing engagement with other nations requires a greater awareness of cultural diversity and a recognition of shared values and challenges as well as the differences between nations and peoples. Expanding our horizons will promote deeper understanding of the cultural heritage and diversity that exist within our own country. (2000)

Furthermore, in January of 2006, the U.S. State Department hosted a two-day U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Education to discuss ways to improve U.S. relations with
other countries and cultures via international student exchanges. At this summit the U.S. government unveiled plans to attempt to improve the image of the United States as a study abroad destination, as travel to the U.S. became very difficult for international students after September 11, and to propose an increase on spending for intensive language program, Fulbright scholarships, and additional Gilman scholarships designed for low-income students studying abroad (Bollag & Field, 2006).

Pursuit of Student Perspectives

A great deal is being done to encourage student participation in study abroad programs, but whether or not colleges, universities, and government programs will be successful in their promotion and enrollment goals is yet to be determined. For whatever reasons students choose to study abroad, and with the backing of both institutes of higher education and the national government (both with high expectations in place, no doubt), the study abroad programs currently in place and those being developed need to be of a high caliber. In other words, programs need to be structured in such ways as to have the greatest positive impact on student participants; if students choose to go abroad they should be able to reap as many benefits as possible from their experience. One way to determine which facets of a study abroad program have the greatest constructive influence on students is to examine the personal experiences of study abroad participants.

Understanding study abroad from a student perspective may provide insight into areas not frequently explored in the literature. Students’ opportunities to voice their own ideas regarding their perceptions of the study abroad experience are few and far between. In fact, only a smattering of studies linking students’ perspectives to their study abroad experiences appeared in an exhaustive review of the literature. One such article (Miller, 1993) described the author’s
experiences as a participant in a Mexican study abroad program. He examined the coping strategies utilized in each of the three stages of his sojourn in Mexico: (1) the pre-departure phase, (2) the in-country phase, and (3) the re-entry phase. Miller concluded that his own study abroad experience provided him with some of the necessary tools required to thrive in today’s increasingly internationalized world and that, as the direct result of the study abroad experience, he was able to “recognize and accept differences in the dimensions of other cultures” (p. 9) and develop an objectivity about his own country. The findings from Miller’s study provide an interesting glimpse into one student’s perspective, but would similar results be found if multiple students discussed and reflected on their own study abroad experiences? Research questions number one and two emerged from this context:

RQ1: What sort of impact does participation in a study abroad program have on its student participants?

RQ2: How are students’ perceptions of the impacts of study abroad similar or different to the effects found or predicted by other scholarly studies?

The next section of this chapter provides an overview of what previous research has shown on the topic of study abroad and the impacts it has on student participants. Appreciating the current understandings in study abroad literature will allow for a comparison to student perceptions of the impacts of their own study abroad experience.

Study Abroad: Previous Research

Study abroad is a subject studied in a wide array of academic disciplines; scholars in psychology, business, education, language, marketing, and communication studies (among others) have contributed to the considerable body of knowledge regarding study abroad. Many of these published inquiries focus on the effects of participation in a study abroad program. A
number of studies centering on the effects of study abroad on students have demonstrated that study abroad programs enhance students’ global perspective (McCabe, 1994); cross-cultural effectiveness (Kitsantas, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2002); worldview (Black & Duhon, 2006); and interest in foreign languages, history, travel, art, architecture (Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Ringer 1996) and culture (Langley & Breese, 2005). Study abroad has also been found to increase self-confidence, reflective thought, self-reliance, and personal well being (Kuh & Kaufman, 1984); foster intercultural adaptability and intercultural sensitivity (Williams, 2005); and broaden students’ general education (Barrutia, 1971). Additionally, study abroad programs have been described as “‘life-changing’…vehicles for the development of students’ intercultural communication competence” (Penington & Wildermuth, 2005, p. 180) and “ideal means for the development of students’ foreign language skills, cultural knowledge, and international awareness” (Talburt & Stewart, 1999, p. 163).

Participation in a study abroad program impacts the way students think about other cultures and the way they think about themselves (Younes & Asay, 2003). Mapp, McFarland, and Newell (2007) conducted a study on the effects of short-term study abroad. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the researchers drew a number of conclusions, including the idea that participation in a short-term study abroad program improved students’ “ability to be more aware and tolerant of cultural differences in the future” (p. 43). Lindsey (2005) also found, in her study of social work students studying abroad in Scotland, that “students reported becoming more receptive to new perspectives and ways of thinking as a result of living and studying abroad” (p. 236) and learned much about themselves in the process.

Studies show students who studied abroad were “able to analyze their native country more critically, appreciating both its strengths and shortcomings, rather than focusing on simply
one or the other” (McCabe, 1994; Mapp, McFarland, & Newell, 2007). Dolby (2004) went so far as to claim that an “encounter with an American self is the most significant component” of a student’s study abroad experience (p. 171). In their study of twenty-five study abroad participants, Mapp, McFarland, and Newell (2007) identified increased “awareness of the differences and similarities between the culture in the United States” (p. 44) and the culture in the host country. Lindsey (2005) also concluded that studying abroad caused students to challenge the way they perceive the values of the United States.

Personal characteristics of students who study abroad may influence the way in which they are affected by their participation in the program. Mapp, McFarland, and Newell (2007) found in their study of the effects of short-term study abroad programs that previous international travel or study may have fostered changes in the way students thought about or reacted to other cultures; in other words, the students’ cultural perspectives were already molded by an international experience before they even participated in a study abroad program. Furthermore, students who choose to study abroad have been identified as being “more interested than the rest of the student body in widening their horizons concerning international issues--even before they study abroad” (Hadis, 2005, p. 5) and so may be naturally inclined to travel to another country as part of their degree-seeking program.

In addition to a globally-interested predisposition, other factors also influence students’ decisions to go abroad. Sánchez, Fornerino, and Zhang (2006) found several motivations for studying abroad in their analysis of U.S., French, and Chinese students. The U.S. students represented the only sample motivated to study abroad by the opportunity to learn a foreign language and appeared more motivated than their foreign colleagues to “search for a new experience” and seek personal change while abroad (Sánchez, Fornerino, & Zhang, 2006, p. 45).
Additionally, the American students saw study abroad as an opportunity to improve their future careers and social situations more so than did the French or Chinese students. While interesting, the research on the motivating factors behind a student’s decision to go abroad does not seem to fully explain how or why the choice was made. More research in this area would provide a welcome addition to the literature, providing the inspiration for the third research question:

RQ3: Why do individuals choose to study abroad?

Whatever the motivating factor behind their decision, all students who study abroad will most likely have at least one attribute in common: they will study in a culture different from their own. To understand the impact such a situation may have on student participants, one must first understand the notion of culture.

Culture

Culture is a concept considered controversial by many scholars and communities; one reason for this assessment is because the term itself is so difficult to define. For years, scholars have been attempting to generate a comprehensive definition of culture; as such, a multiplicity of definitions exists. Hall identified culture as “a series of situational models for behavior and thought” (1976, p. 13), while Geertz (1973) saw it as a fundamental social process that guides life experiences, including both explicit (rules and laws) and subtle forms of control (hegemony). Ting-Toomey and Oetzel referred to culture as a “learned system of meaning that fosters a particular sense of shared identity” (2001, p. 9), and Kohls as “the total way of life of any group of people” (2001, p. 26). Anthropologist Raymonde Carroll (1988) defined culture as the logic by which I give order to the world. And I have been learning this logic little by little, since the moment I was born, from the gestures, the words, and the
care of those who surrounded me...I learned to breathe this logic and to forget that I had learned it. I find it natural. (p. 3)

Carroll’s explanation highlights the learned quality of culture and reflects the conceptualized definition of the term utilized in this study: culture is a learned process that guides behavior and thought, creates a shared community between individuals, and gives “order to the world.” Individuals learn about their culture from the moment of birth, relying heavily on parents, siblings, peers, teachers, television, movies, and other sources to teach them correct cultural rules and nuances. Culture also creates a shared community because members within it share many of the same thoughts, values, beliefs and, often, language.

Clearly, culture is integrally linked to an individual’s identity. The surrounding culture can have far-reaching impacts on an ever-fluid identity, as an individual’s identity is never fixed. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think instead of identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process. Identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. (Hall, 1990, p. 222-237)

What, then, happens when individuals are faced with a culture different from the one to which they are acclimated and their identities feel threatened? According to Kohls (2001), when encountering “other and different patterns of culture...conflict, dissonance, and disorientation are the almost inevitable result” (p. 26). This perplexity and irritation is known as culture shock.

Culture Shock

Oberg (1960) was the one of the earliest scholars to provide a definition for culture shock: “anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social
intercourse” (p. 177). Since Oberg’s conceptualization of the term, culture shock has been a favorite topic for social scientists; innumerable studies exist on the subject, focusing on a multitude of issues ranging from the actual culture shock process to the effects of culture shock on immigrants/ex-patriots/business and military personnel (for example, see Kaye & Taylor, 1997; Nice and Beck, 1978; Thomas, 1995; see also Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; and Kim, 1988 for meticulous reviews of literature in the area of culture shock).

Many scholars have simply adapted Oberg’s definition as they research this particular phenomenon. Culture shock, as defined by Martin and Nakayama (2001) is “a relatively short-term feeling of disorientation, of discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of surroundings and the lack of familiar cues in the environment” (p. 89). Kohls (2001) likens culture shock to a particular bout of illness, caused by “the psychological disorientation most people experience when they move for an extended period of time into a culture markedly different from their own” (p. 91). This disorientation causes “symptoms” including “intense discomfort, often accompanied by hyperirritability, bitterness, resentment, homesickness, and depression” (p. 92). While scholars no longer view culture shock as an actual disease, Kohls’ illustrative example helps to clarify the significance of the phenomenon.

Culture shock can refer to the stressful situations encountered when sojourners, or individuals who travel from one culture to another (Oberg, 1960), experience social differences in the host culture (Chen, 1992). Feelings of culture shock can be sparked by a variety of instances and circumstances, such as language issues (i.e. not speaking the host language), food that varies from what the sojourner is used to, and even weather or climate differences (Martin & Nakayama, 2001). Cultural distance, or the degree to which the host culture is different from the home culture, is also a trigger of culture shock; the more different a host culture is from a
sojourner’s home culture, the more likely he or she is to experience culture shock (Mumford, 2000). Triandis (1994) identified other situations which may trigger feelings of culture shock in an individual: vast perceived differences between the home and host cultures, little understanding of the host culture (and, conversely, a host’s insufficient understanding of the sojourner’s home culture), a history of negative interactions between the host country and the home country, and so on. Culture shock has also been positively correlated with sojourners’ current levels of dysphoria (Pantelidou & Craig, 2006) and linked to the degree to which the sojourner has social difficulty in the host culture (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

**Stages of Culture Shock**

Lysgaard (1955) introduced the popular concept of the “U-curve” model for the culture shock experience. His original model consisted of three stages, but scholars have since adapted the model to include four (or sometimes five) stages. As interpreted by Kohls, (2001), these stages are (1) initial euphoria, (2) irritability and hostility, (3) gradual adjustment, and (4) adaptation or biculturalism (p. 97). (A fifth stage is sometimes included in the U-curve model is known as either re-entry shock or reverse culture shock.) The initial state, euphoria, is sometimes referred to as the “honeymoon” stage as it is characterized by excitement and a positive attitude toward the host culture. This stage finds sojourners eager to explore their new surroundings and intrigued by the apparent similarities between the local host culture and their home culture. Everything in this stage is seen in a positive light or through the proverbial rose-colored glasses. For example, a sojourner visiting Florence, Italy, for the first time may be delighted by what she perceives to be quaint winding streets and piazzas bathed in golden light; the whole urban area looks just like Disney World! The city is full of charms, from the welcoming smiles bestowed by a wrinkled *nonna* at a San Lorenzo Market stall to the aura of elegant intensity exuded by
Michelangelo’s timeless *David*. Like most good phenomena, however, the initial euphoric stage eventually comes to an end.

The second stage of the U-curve culture shock model is known as the irritability and hostility stage. It is within this stage that many of the negative aspects known as culture shock occur. Sojourners, including students studying abroad, suffer psychological and sometimes physiological distress in this stage due to their encapsulation in unfamiliar surroundings (Pantelidou & Craig, 2006) and lack of knowledge of the implicit social rules governing interaction in the host culture (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). To the sojourner, seemingly insignificant details of the host culture suddenly start to irritate and antagonize. For the visitor in Florence, her original enjoyment of meandering down new streets looking for hidden cultural treasures is replaced by a feeling of fatigue, irritability, and annoyance. She’s tired of walking everywhere every day. The harmless flirtations tossed out by the local men, too, has lost its charm; flattery is set aside and she is instead offended by what she deems chauvinistic behavior.

Tange (2005), in the second stage of her culture shock model known as “The Two Year Crisis,” noted the impact this shift can have on an individual: “From being all excitement and new adventures the host culture becomes a threat to [the sojourner’s] identity” (p. 7). Rather than noting the similarities between the home and host cultures, the differences are strongly emphasized. Often, this comparison leads to the “we do things better at home” mentality. The Florentine sojourner starts to compare every aspect of her life in Italy to an idealized version of life at home. She misses her air conditioning, her microwaveable dinners, and her one-stop supermarkets. Why can’t Florence have the same conveniences as home?

Gradual adjustment to the host culture is the identifying attribute of the third stage of the U-curve model. The sojourner starts to feel more comfortable and oriented in his or her
surroundings and begins to actively function in the host culture. Kohls (2001) notes this stage may be unrecognized, may “come so gradually that at first [the sojourner] will be unaware it’s even happening” (p. 98). For example, the visitor in Florence does not realize she adapted her behavior to only smile at people on the street with whom she is acquainted; smiling at strangers in Italian culture is not regularly done. Nor is she consciously aware of the fact that a three-hour dinner no longer seems strange.

This third stage of adjustment often blends into the fourth stage of adaptation and biculturalism; indeed, Tange (2005) saw a definite overlap between the two. This final stage of the U-curve model of culture shock is characterized by the sojourner’s ability to function confidently in both the host and home cultures. The sojourner in Florence now switches between English and Italian communication with ease, shrugging on and off the language and nonverbal behaviors indicative of each culture as easily as she changes her shoes. She feels as at home in the grocery store she shops at while on a visit home as she does going from the cheese store to the bakery to the butcher’s store to the produce stand in Florence.

Some scholars add a fifth stage to the U-curve model: re-entry shock (Kohls, 2001). Individuals suffering from this condition must endure a process very similar to culture shock, but in this case re-entering one’s home culture causes the shock. Re-entry shock, or reverse culture shock, often follows the similar “U” pattern utilized by the culture shock model. It takes time for individuals to readjust to the way of life that used to be second nature; they must now attend to various cultural adjustments made when abroad. If the sojourner in Florence were to return to her home culture in the United States after any extended period of time, she may experience some difficulties readjusting to her normal habits. Having to drive everywhere, for example, may suddenly seem bothersome to one who was used to walking everywhere. Even though the
returned sojourner used to drive everywhere before she spent time in Italy, she adjusted to the (literal) pedestrian mode of transportation in Florence and now has to re-acclimate to her former routine.

**Studies on Culture Shock**

Lysgaard’s U-curve model of culture shock presents a visual representation of the ups and downs of experiencing a culture different than one’s own. When faced with such a change, culture shock is a very normal occurrence that is sometimes unpleasant to experience; however, positive benefits can be obtained by undergoing the culture shock process (Montuori & Fahim, 2004; Adler, 1975). Since study abroad participants usually seem to experience some degree of culture shock, the benefits of going through culture shock may be linked to the benefits of study abroad participation. For example, culture shock can be used as a learning experience, increase intercultural understanding, or enhance an individual’s feelings of self-efficacy (Milstein, 2005). The culture shock process can also lead to the creation of a new “bicultural” identity (Tange, 2005).

Before attempting to completely dissect the possible effects culture shock may have on students choosing to study abroad, however, it would be beneficial to more fully understand the impacts culture shock has on various individuals. Inestimable studies exist on this topic; beside the articles and texts previously mentioned, only a small sampling of studies was selected for this review so as not to overwhelm the paper. The following articles are representative of a much wider expanse of literature and were chosen based on the similarity of their studied populations to students studying abroad.

In 2000 Mumford published a quantitative study that examined the predicting circumstances and factors surrounding culture shock in post-high-school-aged British volunteers
working abroad. Three hundred and eighty young British volunteers living in 27 different host
countries agreed to participate in the study and were subsequently asked to fill out a
questionnaire containing a new culture shock scale developed by Mumford. The results of the
study suggested that cultural distance, or the degree to which the host culture varies from the
home culture, was the strongest predictor of culture shock. The second strongest predictor of
culture shock was the presence of problems at work (Mumford, 2000). Based on the findings of
Mumford’s study, an easy conjecture to make regarding the outcome of this thesis study would
be that students who chose to study in a culture very different from their own may have a greater
degree of culture shock that those students who chose to study in a culture not as “distant” from
their home culture. Similarly, students who experienced some sort of disturbance or difficulties
at their host school (or other work-like situation) may experience greater levels of culture shock
than their peers who encountered no complications.

Pantelidou and Craig (2006) also chose to study a group of students, though their target
audience differed from Mumford’s British volunteers. In their study on culture shock and social
support, Pantelidou and Craid surveyed one hundred thirty-three Greek students who attended
King’s College at the University of London. Interestingly, 93% of the surveyed students had
never lived outside of their home culture for more than six months before they chose to study in
London (Pantelidou and Craig, 2006). In this study gender and quality of support were strongly
associated with culture shock; females experienced higher levels of culture shock than males (a
correlation also found in the Mumford study but explained in that situation as being due to the
female preference for more exotic locations and, hence, greater cultural distance), and
individuals with strong social support groups experienced less culture shock than those with
social support of a lesser quality.
Furthermore, the students who had been in the United Kingdom for the greatest length of time has significantly lower culture shock scores than did the students who had been in the host country for the least amount of time; it seems culture shock symptoms decreased with time. Pantelidou and Craig suggested this last finding provided “an interesting validation of the culture shock concept” (2006, p. 780). If the findings are again applied to students studying abroad, one might expect to find females with higher levels of culture shock than males, students with strong social support groups experiencing fewer instances of culture shock than those with weak support groups, and students who stayed for longer periods of time in their host culture experiencing weakening levels of culture shock.

Chen’s (1992) study examined the influence of communication adaptability and interaction involvement on culture shock. One hundred forty-two international students responded to a questionnaire “measuring the components of communication adaptability, interaction involvement, and their ability to cope with social difficulties in the host culture” (p. 35). The results of this study indicated that international students who were most able to adapt their communication patterns and interact with individuals from the host (American) culture had lower levels of culture shock and were less likely to experience social difficulties in American culture. Greater communicative flexibility led to lesser instances of culture shock discomfort. Applied to the current study, one would suppose that American students with greater communication adaptability would experience less culture shock in a host country.

While a review of studies pertaining to culture shock could continue indefinitely and countless suppositions could be made pertaining to the possible relationship between the identified culture shock studies and the experience of American study abroad students, a deficiency in the literature could still be uncovered: existing studies do not use enough primary
data drawn from students’ own personal testimony. Conducting a qualitative study allowed students a voice in expressing their own ideas of how culture shock impacted their study abroad experience; this present study aimed to address the aforementioned deficit in the literature. To this end, the fourth and fifth research questions are posed:

RQ4: Do students think they experienced culture shock?

RQ5: If yes, how does culture shock influence a student's study abroad experience?

Summary

This study significantly adds to the body of research pertaining to study abroad. First, it allowed student participants a voice in expressing their personal interpretations of study abroad experiences outside the confines of a pre-determined measurement scale or survey. Very few studies have been conducted which examine study abroad through the lens of student perspectives, and fewer still allow the students to reflect and remark on the impacts such an experience may have had on their lives. Second, this study sought to provide more information regarding the mystery of why students choose to study abroad. Any information provided in this area will undoubtedly prove useful to individuals or organizations hoping to promote study abroad participation. Finally, the use of a qualitative grounded theory methodology allocated a degree of freedom and flexibility in the analysis of the collected data, allowing for a fresh take on the subject of culture shock. The findings of this study contribute to the literature on study abroad, culture shock, grounded theory, and have practical implications for the coordinators and administrators of study abroad programming.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This chapter introduces the participants, method, and analyses employed in the study of student perspectives on the impact of their participation in a study abroad program. The methods utilized for this study were shaped by grounded theory analysis. In the following sections, a brief explanation of grounded theory will be provided, followed by the explanation and rationale for this particular study’s method of analysis, an introduction to the study’s participants, and the actual methodological steps used to collect the data.

Grounded Theory

Because this study is exploratory in the sense that little research has been done on how students perceive and react to their study abroad experiences, and because the student respondents covered a wide array of topics in their journals/focus group/interviews, this study employed a qualitative variety of data analysis. Originally conceptualized by Glaser and Strauss (1967; see also Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987) and further developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Glaser (1992), grounded theory provided the method of data analysis for the narratives collected in this investigation. The basic tenet of grounded theory is that a theory must be grounded in data, or that a theory can systematically emerge from a body of research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, the underlying goal of this study is to generate explanatory and descriptive theories of the impact of study abroad on its student participants.

Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) original work, and that more closely related to the later work of Glaser (1992, 1998) than the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990), laid down basic strategies of all grounded theory approaches. These strategies include

(a) simultaneous data collection and analysis; (b) pursuit of emergent themes through early data analysis; (c) discovery of basic social processes within the
data; (d) inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these processes; (e) sampling to refine the categories through comparative processes; and (f) integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies the causes, conditions, and consequences of the studied processes.

(Charmaz, 2002, p. 677)

Grounded theory, then, is a general methodology characterized by simultaneous data collection or sampling, data analysis, and theory construction, ultimately leading to the saturation of the data and the theoretical explanation of a researched event. Saturation is reached when the emerging theory is no longer affected or changed by new data. According to Glaser, “a well constructed grounded theory will meet its four most central criteria: fit, work, relevance, and modifiability” (1992, p. 15). In other words, it will use concepts to accurately and neatly represent the incident under study (the fit), can account for how the incident under study is explained amid multiple variations (workability), deals with real-world issues rather than strictly academic ones (relevance), and is changeable whenever new data introduces variations in the conclusions (modifiability) (Glaser, 1992).

Glaser and Strauss had a parting of the methodological ways after the publication of Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); Glaser later offered a rebuttal to this text in his Basics of grounded theory analysis: Emergence versus forcing (Glaser, 1992). Strauss and Corbin chose a more critical route, emphasizing the importance of validation criteria and a systematical approach to the method. Glaser, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of induction or emergence; he strongly and repeatedly warned researchers against the “forcing” of the data (1992).
This study most closely follows Glaser’s version of grounded theory. Borrowing his words,

The grounded theory approach is a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area. The research product constitutes a theoretical formulation or integrated set of conceptual hypotheses about the substantive area of study. That is, the yield is just hypotheses! (Glaser, 1992, p. 16)

In order to reach these hypotheses, the data collected for the study--and, according to Glaser, “all is data” (1998, p. 8)--is sent through a variety of coding procedures. Starting with open coding, concepts are identified, merged, renamed, and modified until no data is left to conceptualize and a core concept has been identified. Selective coding follows open coding, using the identified core concept as a guide, and is followed by theoretical coding, which knits a hypothesis together from the various strands of concepts until the main concern of the study is explained (Glaser, 1998).

A few of Glaser’s more virulent suggestions (1998) had to be modified for the purpose of this study, but for good reason. First, the idea of no pre-research literature review was next to impossible as this researcher has been collecting and reading data on the topic of study abroad for almost five years before this study came into fruition. Glaser’s adamant no-taping-because-it’s-a-waste-of-time declaration was also (respectfully) disregarded as this researcher is new to the use of grounded theory and is, as such, a novice at the coding system. The tapes and transcriptions were necessary for this study so none of the possible themes or categories expected to emerge on their own were missed due to incomplete field notes.
Participants

The sample for this study consisted of ten university students (undergraduate and graduate), 18 and older, who participated in a study abroad/education abroad program of any length (summer, semester, year, or other established time frames) while enrolled as a student at a mid-sized, midwestern, state-assisted university. Two of the students were in a graduate program while the remaining eight students were undergraduates. Of the ten students, eight identified as white or Caucasian and two identified as Asian. They ranged in age from 20 to 26, with an average age of just over 22 years. All of the students had traveled abroad before and most cited rather extensive travel adventures beyond their study abroad experiences.

Overview of the Ten Study Participants

(In chronological order by age. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the study participants.)

Susan.

Susan was a 20-year-old third-year International Studies major who also minored in Spanish and Italian. She grew up in an urban area in the midwest region of the United States. Susan had several international traveling experiences in her past, including several week-long trips to Mexico, a two-week and several one-week trips to the Cayman Islands, a week-long trip to Jamaica, and a few days spent in Canada. Her short-term study abroad experience consisted of six weeks spent in Rome, Italy; she gave the program the highest possible rating, a score of seven on a seven-point scale.

Jackie.

Jackie was a third-year Broadcast Journalism major, Marketing/Women’s Studies minor originally from a large town in the Midwest. By her 21st year she spent two weeks in Italy and Amsterdam and a week in France. Jackie’s short-term study abroad experience took place in
Paris, France, where she attended a seminar hosted by the American University of Paris. She, too, gave her program the highest possible rating.

Katherine.

At the time of the study, Katherine was a 21-years-old Art major who originally hailed from a small midwestern town in the U.S. She had previous international travel experience, spending a month with a host family in Japan and two weeks visiting in the United Kingdom. Katherine also studied abroad on three different occasions. Her first short-term experience took her to Germany for a two-week homestay, one-week sightseeing trip with her high school’s German club. In college she spent a semester in Scotland and also participated in a short-term arts and architecture program in the U.K. and Ireland. Katherine granted her most recent study abroad experience, the arts and architecture programs, a rating of four out of seven possible points.

Becky.

Twenty-one-year-old Becky was an exchange student from Asia, though she spent the first 3⅓ years of her life in the U.S. before her parents moved back to their native country. She majored in Policy Studies while attending college in the United States. Becky spent ten days in New Zealand and a month in Korea in addition to the time she spent as a child in the U.S. Her study abroad experiences included the year she studied in the United States and a short-term program in Korea. Becky gave her most recent study abroad experience, the year in the U.S., a seven out of seven rating.

Elizabeth.

Elizabeth grew up in a large town in the Midwest before going to college to pursue a degree in Journalism with a German minor; at the time of the study she was a fourth-year
student. At 22 years of age, she, too, had spent some time abroad: one week in Cancun, Mexico.
Elizabeth’s short-term study abroad experiences included a three-week program in Salzburg,
Austria and various cities in Germany; and a 10-day seminar in Paris, France. She plans to return
to Salzburg next year for year-long program. Elizabeth granted her most recent study abroad
experience a rating seven out of seven possible points.

Ella.

Twenty-two years old, Ella grew up in the same small town in the Midwest where she
attended college to major in Print Journalism and minor in Spanish. Ella had two international
trips in her repertoire before she started studying abroad: a two-and-a-half-week excursion to
France and a two-and-a-half-week trip to England and Scotland. She then added two study
abroad programs to her life, a short-term and a long-term, when she studied for three weeks at a
drumming camp in Accra, Ghana and for an entire school year (eight months) in Alcalá de
Henares, Spain. Ella also gave her most recent study abroad experience the highest possible
rating.

Meredith.

Meredith was a fifth-year student from a mid-sized town in the Midwest. At 22 years of
age, she was almost finished with her degree in Communication Studies. Meredith had extensive
international travel experience, citing trips to Toronto, Canada; Jamaica; the Grand Cayman
Islands; Mexico; the Dominican Republic; Rome and Florence, Italy; and Paris, France.
Meredith spent five weeks in Florence, Italy, for her short-term study abroad experience and
gave it a six out of seven possible points.
Nikki.

Twenty-three-year-old Nikki grew up in a suburb of a large, midwestern, urban area. She majored in Interpersonal Communication. Nikki had been to Mexico, Canada, and the Bahamas on family vacations, but the first time she went to Europe was when she signed up for a short-term study abroad program. Nikki took part in a program in Italy and gave her experience the highest possible rating.

Anna.

Anna was a graduate student working toward her master’s degree in Communication Studies. She spent the majority of her 24 years growing up in a small town in the Midwest before going off to college and then graduate school. Anna’s previous international travel experience included a 10-day excursion to Germany, Switzerland, and Italy and two weeks in Eastern Europe. She participated in a short-term study abroad program in Paris, France, and gave it the highest possible rating.

Matilda.

Matilda was an exchange student from Asia who had been living in the United States for the past ten years. She was 26-year-old graduate student in Communication Studies who earned her undergraduate degree at a different midwestern university and her high school diploma from a small midwestern high school. Matilda traveled to the U.S., Turkey, and Russia before coming to the U.S. as an exchange student; she gave her most recent long-term study abroad experience (graduate school) the highest possible rating.

Procedure

Study participants were recruited via an e-mail to all study abroad alumni still enrolled in the university. A follow-up e-mail request was sent one week after the initial e-mail. Reminder e-
mails were also sent to all students who agreed to participate in the study just before the focus group session and personal interviews took place. Before any recruitment or data collection occurred, the researcher applied for and received Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) clearance; informed consent was obtained from each study participant. Please refer to the Appendices at the end of the manuscript for copies of all of the soliciting and supporting materials from this study.

Students who chose to participate in this study had three “tasks” to complete: (1) fill out a short questionnaire, (2) participate in a 90-minute focus group session, and (3) complete an in-depth individual interview. One focus group session, 110 minutes in length, was held while shorter personal interviews, conducted after the focus group sessions, were arranged according to participants’ schedules. The study employed a variety of data-collection techniques in an attempt toward triangulation. Theory generation is especially enriched by the multiple perspectives, variety of in-depth information, and chance for cross-checking afforded by triangulating the data.

When participants arrived at the focus group session, the researcher explained the information in the informed consent, answered any questions the participants had, and collected the signed consent forms. Study participants were then asked to complete a personal data questionnaire in order to collect demographic data and basic information (age, major, previous international experience, and other relevant information). Once all of the participants arrived and completed the form, the focus group session began. The focus group was videotaped for ease of transcription following the session. Finally, participants were asked to schedule and participate in a one-on-one personal interview with the researcher; this audiotaped interview used open-ended questions to gain more specific information pertaining to each individual participant and followed up on questions from the focus group session. Any participants who were unable to
attend the focus group session were asked to schedule a longer (45-60 minutes) in-depth interview so the questions from the focus group could be addressed.

Once the data were gathered from the focus group, interviews, and personal data questionnaires, the researcher employed grounded theory to examine the collected information. Grounded theory data analysis follows a fairly abstract yet simple process. First, several research questions had to be developed to guide the trajectory of the investigation but could not be so specific as to limit the outcome of the study. As detailed in chapter two, this study posed five research questions:

RQ1: What sorts of impact does participation in a study abroad program have on its student participants?

RQ2: How are students’ perceptions of the impacts of study abroad similar or different to the effects found or predicted by other scholarly studies?

RQ3: Why do individuals choose to study abroad?

RQ4: Do students think they experienced culture shock?

RQ5: If yes, how does culture shock influence a student's study abroad experience?

Next, following Glaser’s (1992, 1998) steps (as outlined in chapter two), each narrative was compared to the others; the body of data was then coded into different concepts to identify any recurring themes, phenomena or experiences within the narratives. These concepts were then sorted into categories based on identified relationships between the variables. Essentially, the information gathered from the student participants was sorted into general themes that emerged naturally from the collected narratives. Almost every comment could be placed into one of several themes identified in the data as constituting the students’ perspective of study abroad.
CHAPTER 4: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF STUDY ABROAD

While self-reporting data is often anecdotal, eliciting the study abroad student’s perspective directly provides enlightening information. “Hearing firsthand accounts about the learning benefits students think they have gained from the study abroad experience is both instructive and heartening” (Gray, Murdick, & Stebbins, 2002, p. 49). When the students participating in this study were offered an opportunity to reflect on their own study abroad programs, considering each student brought a unique experience to share, several overlying themes became evident throughout all of the gathered information. The statements chosen to illustrate each of the following themes are representative of the majority of the student respondents’ narratives.

Deciding to Study Abroad: Study Abroad as Goal Fulfillment

The first theme identified in the narratives focuses on the factors that influence a student’s choice to study in another country. Students spoke at length about reasons they chose to go abroad with a recurrent theme ever present in the data: students chose to study abroad to fulfill some sort of personal goal. This goal setting was influenced by a variety of factors. For example, going abroad to achieve credits was in itself a “goal” for some students; for others, it was a means by which other goals were achieved, even to the point of satisfying a whim. Some students, like Ella, made an almost spontaneous choice to go abroad and fulfill a long-term interest in seeing the world:

For the first time, for Ghana, it was just like, I found out that that opportunity existed, and so I just signed up for it without really thinking about it, and I had to scramble to figure out funding and try to get, you know, money in order and tell my parents and, you know, all that stuff. (Ella Interview)
Elizabeth, too, cited her reason to participate in a ten-day media seminar in Paris, her second study abroad adventure, as a spontaneous chance to see the city (Elizabeth Interview). Spontaneity, however, clearly did not seem to be an overriding factor in the decision to study abroad; most students had some sort of previously-determined goal to study in another country.

Previous Goals

Eight of the ten students from this study who chose to study abroad had already decided to do so before they entered college, whether or not certain of the specific program in which they wanted to participate. Even Elizabeth, who cited spontaneity as an influencing motive in her decision to study in Paris, had a previous inclination to study in a foreign country: “My mom always says that…if someone was willing to send me anywhere I’d go, like, it wouldn’t matter where it was or how long, or wherever….But I just didn’t know what I wanted to do” (Elizabeth Interview)” Ella, too, mentioned that to study in Spain “was always something I thought about doing, but never really, like, thought it through” (Ella Interview). Nikki also knew she “always wanted to study abroad” (Nikki Interview). Jackie went as far as to cite the presence of study abroad opportunities as a major deciding factor in her choice of colleges: “Actually, one of the reasons I came to school here, the first reason was the journalism program and the second was the study abroad program because I definitely considered studying abroad” (Jackie Interview). Study abroad options also impacted Anna’s university choice:

I knew I wanted to study abroad somewhere before I went to college. I think I, um, made that decision back in high school or grade school or something. And it did, it played a part in picking which school I would go to, like, I had to check out their study abroad programs before I would decide to go there. (Anna Interview)
While it may have not impacted her choice of colleges, Susan knew studying abroad was something she wanted to do: “I thought I’d go for a semester in Australia…I came into college going I definitely want to study abroad. I just wasn’t sure where” (Susan Interview). Students set goals to study abroad for a variety of reasons; several factors played a role in fostering students’ interest in study aboard and cemented their desire to do so once they reached college.

*Family influence.*

The influence of family seemed to play an important part in a student’s decision to set a goal to study abroad. Meredith, for example, identified her globally-embracing family culture as a major influence in her decision:

> It was something that I knew I wanted to do…because I was raised in a house where traveling was something that was valued. And travel was something that was important to do…it wasn’t a luxury, it was a necessity. And so, in order to be a worldly person, in order to even understand how the world works, you need to travel. My parents were both people who joined the military at young ages…for the sole purpose of wanting to travel. So, I knew that, like, when I went to college…that’s something that I wanted to do right away, like it wasn’t something I just kind of settled into…I knew that I was going to study abroad. (Meredith Interview)

Having parental support, and a pro-study abroad family climate due in part to the presence of a parent who was also a study abroad alumni, also encouraged Ella when she made the decision to go abroad for a second time:

> Both times they were like, “ok, yeah, good, you know, that’s really good.” …It was never like off the table, you know. …I guess it was always an option. Like my mom studied abroad in France when she was in college and I was aware of that. (Ella Interview)
Some parents went beyond providing support and actually encouraged their children to study abroad in another country. Becky, whose parents lived in the United States when she was a toddler, was persuaded by her parents to study in the U.S. (Becky Focus Group): “Yeah, the biggest thing was that my mom wanted me to study abroad. Until that, I never thought about studying abroad. But after she gave me advice, I started just thinking I wanted to go” (Becky Interview). Anna said she also received encouragement from her mother when she first displayed an interest in study abroad because it was an opportunity her mom had not been able to take advantage of when she was in college (Anna Interview).

Katherine and Nikki both disclosed the impact their family had on their decisions to undergo their own study abroad adventure. Katherine cited her sister’s experience as a motivating factor: “My older sister had done a trip very similar to this and had such wonderful things to say about it that I wanted to experience a semester abroad for myself” (Katherine Interview). Maggie also found that, though it was not the only motivating factor, her older sister’s travel experience made her decision to study abroad easier:

My older sister’s been everywhere, she went to Spain for two weeks when she was in high school, um, then she lived in London then went back to Spain, went to Ireland…. she had an impact on my decision, yes …to many people traveling that far seems impossible and seems to take too much money, but it made it doable for me when she went to so many places. In my mind it didn’t seem so complicated. (Nikki Interview)

Personal encounters.

Another factor that appeared to play a role in helping some of the students set a goal to study abroad was an experience in their past which led to an interest in other cultures or foreign
travel. Matilda, for example, was influenced at the age of twelve or thirteen (Matilda Interview) by the Peace Corps volunteers who came to her hometown and taught English:

And when I met Peace Corps volunteers they were just so amazing and I think those are the ones that sort of like, hey, you know, I want to know more about that person’s culture; I want to know where they live because they talk so much about their culture. And I basically wanted to be in that person’s shoes just for a day. And, so, really, I think it was practicing, seeing that person from America and how much personality they had, how…freely they can laugh and joke and just the way they communicated everything just had a huge impact and ever since I was like, “I have to go.” (Matilda Interview)

Susan’s interest in studying abroad was sparked when she was in junior high school and had an opportunity through her school to take an international trip led by one of her teachers. Unfortunately, post-9/11 fears prevented her parents from allowing that trip, but the memory of the opportunity planted a seed of interest in Susan’s mind:

[The teachers told] us about the program, they had a seminar and my parents all went to it. …We were like really looking into it and I thought I was for sure going. I had a pamphlet I saved for probably, like, two years after that hoping, you know, that I’d get to go. It’s like “a year later, a year later.” It was just, like, a ten-day trip around Europe and I thought that was way amazing. …And so, like, I saved that pamphlet and I looked at all the pictures and I wanted to do this. But, um, because of all the unrest, there was a bombing in France on a train at that time, my parents said, you know, we can’t let you go at this time. I just didn’t understand it. So I kept the pamphlet and probably moped about it for a few months and I don’t know, I just kept that in my mind, like when I was in high school. Like, “I want to go abroad.” (Susan Interview)
Anna did not have an opportunity to go abroad when she was in junior high, but two factors influenced her desire to study abroad one day:

So, one of my friends had an older sister who studied abroad in, like, Denmark or something like that. And I thought it was the coolest thing ever that she got to go and spend, like, a year in a different country. I mean, it sounded kind of scary and all because she had to learn the language and, because she didn’t know it before she went over there and stuff, but it sounded like so much fun. I was like, “I totally have to do something like that.” … And my family had hosted exchange students from all over, like, even before I was born my parents had hosted students... And I wanted to have that kind of experience, you know, to study in a different country and learn about how it works and how its people live and all. (Anna Interview)

Specific Programs

While the aforementioned students seemed to know studying abroad was a specific goal they wanted to accomplish in college, other students had different goals that were eventually fulfilled by studying abroad. For several of this study’s participants, study abroad presented a unique opportunity to earn college credits and work toward degree requirements through the presence of a specific program. These programs were tailored to specific fields of study, provided an opportunity for the student to sample the study abroad experience without too much of a commitment, or worked in conjunction with a student’s future career goals. Katherine chose to take part in a short-term program in the U.K. partly because it aligned with her area of study:

This particular trip…meshed really well with both my major and my minor and it was a trip I had planned on taking two years earlier that was kind of put on hiatus due to my semester abroad. And the location fit in really well with the previous studies I had done
for my minor, um, and just sounded like a very different, interesting trip to take.

(Katherine Interview)

Becky escaped having to pay dual-tuition to her home and host institutions by deciding to do a yearlong program as an “official” exchange student rather than a shorter language-intensive program (Becky Interview). Jackie’s interest in her study abroad program stemmed from her interest in international media:

I ended up taking tons of international media courses to fulfill the requirement to go on the trip. …Going on a trip to study in France seemed like something I would really love to do, especially because it was combining, um, my interest in and love for traveling with my love for journalism. And the whole international media concept, um, being able to learn about that in a foreign country was really cool for me, it was a good experience…The program I went with was an international media program and, um, something I might be interested in doing as a career is working internationally with the media, so I thought it would be a good experience to not only go to another country and experience the culture but also learn how the media operates in another country. (Jackie Interview)

Like Jackie, Matilda also saw study abroad as an opportunity to gain skills she could use for future employment. “So I thought, ok,” she explained, “I can practice my English, get it better, come back and teach English” (Matilda Focus Group).

Elizabeth knew she wanted to study abroad but was not certain of where or in what capacity she was willing to go:

When I went the first time…I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, um, the people in the German department like to say if you’re unsure if you want to go or if you’re unsure
if this is what you want to do, like the three weeks isn’t a big commitment so you can go and experience it and know…if it’s right for you or not. Like I really wasn’t concerned about not having a good time there, I just didn’t know German was what I wanted to do. So, um, so that was a really good way to go and get really excited, like I want to go back now. (Elizabeth Interview)

Elizabeth’s trip to Salzburg whet her appetite for study abroad programs, and she decided to return to Salzburg for a year to improve her German language skills (Elizabeth Questionnaire). The goal to learn a second language often played a prevalent part in a student’s decision to study abroad.

**Study Abroad and Language**

The desire to become proficient in a second (or third) language is often a strong motivator for studying in another country. Being immersed in another culture and speaking in a different tongue every day often proves the best way to perfect a language. As Ella said, “You can’t really learn a language sitting in your home country” (Ella Focus Group). Several of the students who participated in this study expressed their wish to study abroad as a way of meeting their goal of speaking another language. Elizabeth, for instance, participated in the summer program in Salzburg in order to improve her German language skills; she wanted to be able to speak the language she studied in a natural setting:

My minor is German, uh, which is why I went on the summer program. I hadn’t really decided if German was my minor at that point…I took German classes in high school and I continued taking them here and…I said that I was going to take German until I finally got to go somewhere where I could use it. …I didn’t get to go [in high school] so I was like, “I’m going some time, I have to go.” (Elizabeth Interview)
Becky, too, went abroad to work on her language skills. She had a background in the English language since she briefly lived in the U.S. when she was very young, but wanted to improve her fluency: “Then I thought it would be a really good experience and I wanted to be able to speak English. And I could speak a little bit, so that’s what made me study abroad” (Becky Interview).

Matilda, like Becky, decided to study in the U.S. to gain fluency in the English language. The learning opportunities she had in her home country provided a foundation for learning a language, but she wanted to perfect her language skills and learn about an English-speaking culture:

I started learning languages since I was in second grade and I’ve been fascinated, and I think English was one of the first, ah, foreign languages that, um, I got more fluent in. And then I started learning about the culture and then practicing my English with the Peace Corps volunteers and missionary people and, um, I heard more and more about freedom, you know, America. I went for a year and basically the main thing was learn the language even more and experience it through the culture, ‘cuz I really didn’t know the culture and obviously [culture is] half of the language only. (Matilda Interview)

Susan, too, noted how her love of languages inspired her to pursue study abroad options. She was already fairly fluent in Spanish but wanted to learn additional languages. An Italian minor and the short-term language-intensive study abroad program in Rome, Italy, provided the perfect opportunity for Susan:

I knew wanted to take other languages [in addition to Spanish]…I love languages…And so when I started taking Italian, um, at the end of the first semester my teacher started talking about this program and I started seeing signs for it all over campus and I was like, “I’d love to go to Italy!” …I was looking at a semester program but then I realized that in
order to get the Spanish cluster program I needed, for like the language, I needed to go in
the summer. So I’m a little bummed about that because I wanted to go longer, but at the
same time I thought this was a great time for my first abroad experience. (Susan
Interview)

Students also reported other language-related impacts on their decision to study abroad.
Katherine, for example, decided to study in an English-speaking country because she “wasn’t
comfortable in another language yet” (Katherine Interview).

_Culture Shock and the Study Abroad Experience_

The second theme identified in the students’ narratives pertains to the concept of culture
shock. Again, culture shock can be defined by as “a relatively short-term feeling of
disorientation, of discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of surroundings and the lack of familiar
cues in the environment (Martin & Nakayama, 2001, p. 89). Culture shock “indicates the
stressful situations” encountered when sojourners experience social differences in the host
culture (Chen, 1992). No matter the length of their study abroad program, students reported
varying degrees of culture shock because, understandably, they encountered cultural differences
on a daily basis. For example, Jackie was taken aback by the many cultural differences she
experienced when she studied abroad:

> Well that’s huge…about the culture shock you get initially when you go to another
country. Because, you know…you get so used to things being just a certain way that once
you leave you’re like “oh my gosh, like it really is totally different outside of my niche.”
(Jackie Focus Group)

Katherine also related a situation when she experienced culture shock and had to learn to cope
with the feelings of frustration the circumstances produced:
Probably about two-thirds of the way through my trip I had a real issue with what could be described as culture shock because I was in such a different environment I tended to keep all of my anxiety and frustration kind of pent up and it eventually just got to a point where I wanted to be completely done with it and just home but after a while you kind of work things out and just learn to rebalance your life a little and then things kind of start picking up again. (Katherine Interview)

Some of the students reported a need to cope with feelings of culture shock due to specific happenings or circumstances. Meredith, for instance, experienced culture shock when she became ill during her month in Florence and when she and her friends experienced a difficult interpersonal encounter:

There was one time when I was really, really sick…and I was trying to find, like, chicken broth and Gatorade to…re-hydrate myself and put some electrolytes back in my system. And I think it was really hard being sick and away from home. …And there was also a time where, again, like the way the Italians treated the American students, um, we were refused service at a restaurant. That was like, just simply because we were speaking English and we were young, American girls we were refused service. And then the way the men treated the American girls was just disgusting, like, vulgar and disgusting. And that’s just what I didn’t understand. (Meredith Interview)

Susan experienced frustration on the crowded Italian subways and devised strategies to manage the anxiety caused by her culture shock:

I realized I needed more personal space, physically…in the subways, I absolutely dreaded being on the subway at certain times of day when the commuters were going to work and stuff. Um, so when I realized that there was actually a pattern to how crowded it would
get I realized I shouldn’t be on the subway at that time, especially as it got hotter in the
summer. …I definitely avoided that, um, so I could have more space. Because people
would literally be, like, smashed, like, it was like cattle cars. So that was really, really
uncomfortable for me. And, um, I didn’t like, the Italian men are very, they love
American women, they love American blondes, so I feel like I was really turned-off by
all the cat calls and all that but I realized, like, part of their culture is just being able to
appreciate physical beauty, but at the same time I was, I remember thinking, “I miss my
American boys.” (Susan Interview)

Several of the students, as the above comments from Susan and Meredith suggested, found that
facing male-female interactions in a different cultural setting proved to be one of the most
difficult cultural variations to cope with. Ella seemed to be especially vehement in her unease
with such situations:

[The guys are] super, super, like, up front, in-your-face forceful….Growing up here you
expect a certain kind of thing and then, you know, I mean like, well when I was in Africa
it was completely different than when I was in Spain, but both were comparable in that
[the men] were so straightforward, and persistent. And the persistence is where it is that I
think Americans get uncomfortable, it’s like “why are you, you know, still hanging
around?” … But in the eight months I was over there, there was definitely more than one
uncomfortable situation where I was like, “you need to get away from me right now,”
you know, “this is making me uncomfortable,” and whatever. And then, there was only
one time where I really had to like, get kinda forceful and, like, shove somebody away
because he was…so persistent….That’s one thing I never did get used to because I’m like
if somebody’s being so clear, you know, “get away from me, I don’t want to talk to you,”
you know, “don’t be near me, don’t touch me,” I still don’t understand why they keep coming. (Ella Focus Group)

Jackie reported an instance of culture shock when she and a friend were confronted with an example of their host culture’s open attitude toward sexuality, a cultural value that proved quite different from her self-identified “conservative” American culture:

I thought it was interesting because I went to the Red Light District in France and I couldn’t have felt more uncomfortable in my entire life….My girl friend and I could get into this, like, you know, one museum [with our student IDs]….It was like a sex museum I think? Um, but it wasn’t what you would think in America of being, you know, like a porn store or something. It was actually a museum with artwork and things like that…And, and so my girl friend and I thought, “ok, well this is interesting. Why don’t we try it?” …It was very interesting what was acceptable there, um, you know we could never have a museum like that…in the United States and, and it wasn’t, you know, necessarily lewd, it was artwork, it was history. But it was funny because they do, they think we’re so bad and yet, like, nude photos in magazines are perfectly acceptable there. And these museums. And, you know, they have women in, in, shows that are, are there and I, like I said I was very uncomfortable. I was just like, “oh my gosh, this is really strange to me,” you know?… And, and, um, my friend and I were just kind of shocked a little bit (Jackie Focus Group)

A recurrent source of culture shock among the students seemed to be related to the non-availability of certain conveniences and being faced with cultural idiosyncrasies--how the host culture does things--that were very different from home. Elizabeth found herself having to adapt to schedules that, in her home country, may have seemed inconvenient:
In Salzburg you kind of have to get used to places closing at, like, 5:00 or 6:00, um, it’s still a small town kind of city. Um, and, you know, they don’t have Wal-Marts that are open 24 hours. If you need to go grocery shopping for dinner you need to do it before the store closes and, um, that was a change for us because we were like, “it’s 7:00 and nothing’s open.” …There were other things for us to do, just go walk around and look at sights or eat ice cream….So that was a big cultural change. (Elizabeth Interview)

Meredith missed the conveniences of living with readily available technology and conveniences, and also found some of her social interactions to be potentially stressful because of their variation from the home culture she was used to:

I missed having the Internet, and fast Internet. I mean we had the Internet there but it wasn’t fast. It was kind of slow and kind of archaic. That was something I missed….Something else I missed about home is, especially when I was sick, I didn’t want to really get into to a whole lot with a lot of people….If I need [Pepto Bismol] I go to CVS….So you go to CVS, I get the Pepto Bismol, the lady looks at the Pepto Bismol, asks me how I am and I say I’m fine and I ask how she is and she says she’s fine, and we go about our business. But you can’t do that in Italy. You go into the farmacia and…you ask for something for zanzare, which is mosquitoes, because the mosquitoes were horrid there. And you ask for something for mosquito bites and you get into this whole conversation about “why don’t you have screens in your apartment? Do you have bug spray? Like, what kind of skin do you have? Do you normally get rashes?” And they ask, like, your whole medical history. And you’re just like, “I’m itchy and I want cortisone cream. That’s it, I’m fine.”…And something else I missed, um, I mean obviously the food, I mean every once in a while I just, um, especially when it came to, like, the
temperature of beverages, um, I wanted, like, a lot of ice in my Coke at McDonald’s. And, you know, I wanted a Diet Coke with a ton of ice because it was hotter than sin some of those days. It was really, really, really hot. That’s all I wanted, just to cool off, and I went in there and was like, “a lot of ice, like, molto ghiaccio.” And the lady looked at me like, “what?” And so puts, like, five little pieces in there. I’m like, “no, no, no, no, no, like molto ghiaccio, like lots of ice.” And she looked at me again and put like two more cubes and I was like, “no, no, no, no, no,” and I picked up my cup and I like showed her, like, “here, qui, here.” And she was just like, “oh, crazy American,” and filled up my cup with ice and pop. (Meredith Interview)

Katherine, too, missed some of the conveniences of home when she studied in Scotland; the lack of independence usually provided by her own automobile created a culture shock situation:

[I missed] my car, but that was kind of more toward the beginning of my trip when I was still used to being able to get up and go wherever I want whenever I want rather than having to wait for public transportation or having to get a ride from someone else. One example was buying groceries; I had to wait for a bus that only came once an hour both to and from the grocery store rather, or instead of being able to drive back and forth at my leisure. (Katherine Interview)

Understandably, since she has been studying abroad for almost ten years at the time of this study, Matilda experienced a wide variety of culture shock moments. Interestingly, though she was a foreign student studying in the U.S., the instances she reported are very similar in nature to the types of occurrences that spawned feelings of culture shock in American students abroad. Culture shock seems to be a universal phenomenon experienced by study abroad students regardless of their country of origin. Matilda, for example, underwent culture shock when she
attended an American high school. “My experience was great after about a month because of the culture shock, ‘cuz I was sixteen and I was, and I was just, high school was totally different. So the schools, the education system was different” (Matilda Focus Group). Matilda also brought up other instances when she felt the effects of culture shock:

I landed here and the real culture shock, um, happened when everything was different, even the language, because I learned British English. Here I had to re-learn the language in an American way and then the slang….I also had to learn the way people, uh, spend their free time, um, so culture shock to me was, uh, waking up and not being able to see the same settings as my home and, ah, being more directly told on what I should and should not eat and what I should and should not do. (Matilda Interview)

During the focus group Matilda also discussed variations from her home culture that incited feelings of culture shock when she first studied abroad.

I wanna say that here, part of the culture shock was when I was a student I didn’t have a car yet, I had to…go get my license, um, there was no way to get around because small town, they don’t have taxis like we do or subways…. [At home] we can get around with those, kind of like a minivan, but it’s taxi, they go every five minutes everywhere. We have subways….But you still have to walk from the station to the station, we end up walking our whole day and then here it’s like, you even have drive-through banks which is ridiculous. But I like it. So see how I got adjusted? And drive-through everything, and then I think we saw, there’s a drive-through liquor store, cigarette store….It’s like here, it’s just driving a lot….I [also] had to…get used to the difference, kind of the politeness in this culture….When we offer [food in my culture] we have to offer it three times before the person says yes. Three or four times, maybe. We have to basically make them
[take it]. So that’s what I expected for people to do here, so when my host family would offer me food, I’d have to say no and they wouldn’t offer me again. And I would get hurt, I’d be like, “well, you know, you have to ask me more times.” And then I got adjusted to it. (Matilda Focus Group)

Learning the cultural schemas indicative of her host country allowed Matilda to adapt and function in American culture better than she would have had she only learned the language; however, the importance and role of language in the culture shock process seemed to be a frequently occurring theme for many of the students.

*Language and Culture Shock*

Language proved to be more involved in the students’ study abroad experience than just acting as a catalyst for their decision to study in a different culture, as discussed in chapter two. In addition to providing the motivation to leave their home country, learning another language and experiencing life in a setting where the primary language is different from one’s mother tongue had a definite impact on students. Elizabeth, who is almost fluent in German, summarized the importance of language in her study abroad experience in Salzburg:

Yeah…I think it really makes a difference if you can somewhat communicate with the people. Um, ‘cuz if you go there not being able to talk to them, like, you’re going to miss out on so many things….I mean even with my German, I still missed out on a lot of things because I don’t know everything…there’s just so many things that are easier to understand if it’s not translated in English. (Elizabeth Interview)

Elizabeth also commented on how she felt being able to communicate in the native language of a host country really added to the study abroad experience. She compared her experience as a tourist in Mexico, a country in which she was almost completely unfamiliar with the language, to
her study abroad experience in Paris, where she had at least a minor understanding of the native language:

I made myself learn some French before I went because I knew that I couldn’t go there and not speak any French. After I graduated from high school, my family went to Cancun and, um, I didn’t really know any Spanish…[I] could count and say “hi” and say, like, “please” and “thank you” and “you’re welcome.” …So I felt…bad there not being able to tell people at least that I couldn’t speak Spanish…I felt I should have been able to somewhat speak to them. So, um, that’s why I made myself learn French before I went [to Paris] because I was, like, I’m not having that happen again. Like I wanted to be able to be at least polite to them. So I could tell them, “No, I’m sorry, I don’t really speak French, I speak a few words. I speak English.” (Elizabeth Interview)

Meredith also found knowing the language of her host country, in addition to understanding elements of Italian culture based on the lessons accompanying her study of the language, added an element of ease to her study abroad experience:

The easiest part for me was one, I knew the language. And that was something that almost every single one of my classmates, study partners, etcetera, they didn’t know the language. And so that was really helpful for me, knowing the language and understanding, like I knew a lot about the Italian culture and how it worked…just from having parents who lived in Italy and Italian family and, um, taking Italian classes and culture courses. Like I understood the inner workings of the culture and the language and I think that was the easiest part for me, was going over there and kind of assimilating myself into the, you know, pseudo-traveler-tourist-study-abroad-person identity right away. (Meredith Interview)
Meredith also explained how knowing the Italian language impacted the way she was able to communicate with Italian locals, such as some of the Italian storekeepers she interacted with on an almost daily basis. Knowing Italian built her credibility with these individuals; as she explained, “They thought I was a random American girl until I opened my mouth and they were like, ‘whoa, she speaks the language’” (Meredith Interview). Similarly, Jackie was reassured of her ability to communicate in a different culture (and was thus set at ease during her study abroad experience) because of her ability to speak French and the Parisian’s inclination to speak English to cater to tourists:

I had studied French for four years before I went on my trip. Um, but I definitely didn’t speak fluently, it had been a year since I had taken any classes since I went on this trip. Um, but I found that, um, being able to interact with people really brought back a lot that I had studied. And, a lot of people do speak English. Um, but also when you’re forced into a situation where you just have to interact with people, speak their language, you pick up a whole lot, too. So I, I didn’t have a problem getting along. (Jackie Interview)

Even with a basic understanding of the host language, many of the students who studied abroad reported instances of culture shock related to language use. Ella found speaking a foreign language in the classroom was far different from speaking it in a foreign country:

Knowing Spanish over here, being able to conjugate stuff, uh, is like so different than actually trying to speak it. So, you know, initially I couldn’t even understand what people were saying to me. And…you learn Spanish over here and it’s all with a Mexican accent or South American, Latin American, whatever, Puerto Rican, and then you get over there and it’s all like Spain-Spanish and they’re, like, talking so fast…the first thing I learned to say was, you know, “slower please.” ‘Cuz I was just like, “I can’t hear what you’re
trying to tell me,” and I lived on that, you know. And I talked in the present tense for probably the first three weeks I was there, like, just exclusively present tense and then, it was really slow….I hadn’t known any Spanish, it definitely, like, would have been way harder. (Ella Interview)

Elizabeth, too, had some difficulties navigating the language landscape when she first arrived in a German-speaking culture; she encountered some language obstacles even after studying German for six years:

The worst thing was definitely, um, the transition from the Munich airport to the Munich train station. We’d been told there was a certain kind of train ticket you could buy from the ticket machine and we couldn’t find a ticket machine, so we were like freaking out, um, but we still…managed to get a ticket that would work to get us from the train station, or to the train station. We got to the train station, we couldn’t read any of the signs, so we were like, “we’ve studied German for how long? And we can’t read any of these signs, we can’t figure out where we’re supposed to go,” and we have all of our luggage and we just like stand there, and we’re like, “ummmm…..” (Elizabeth Interview)

Being unable to understand the native tongue was not the only language-related incident to create feelings of frustration in the students from this study. Elizabeth also described a situation from her time in Salzburg when understanding the native language was not the problem; it was the storekeeper’s inclination to speak English that upset this student of the German language:

And a lot of storeowners have had to, like, learn English so they can communicate with tourists who don’t speak German. So when we’d go in and we’d try to speak German to them they knew that we were English speakers and they would just automatically speak
to us in English. We were like, “no, please,” you know, “speak to us in German! Just suffer through our poor German, you’ll help us make it better.” (Elizabeth Interview)

Overall, language seemed to play a large role in the culture shock process for several of the students in this study. For example, Ella used her potential feelings of unease created by not being wholly comfortable with a different language to fuel her desire for Spanish fluency. In this case, Ella used a potential culture shock situation to adapt and learn:

Like I said, if I hadn’t known any Spanish it just would have been outrageous. I think I probably would have felt, like, secluded. But yeah, it was just kind of like getting comfortable making a fool out of yourself regularly. It has to be, like, the norm. Once you get used to looking like an idiot, you know, and you kind of have to throw yourself out there like that, you do, or else you’re never going to. ‘Cuz if you just, like, clam up and don’t say anything, you’re not going to get to practice speaking, you know, your listening would absolutely get better but you wouldn’t be able to speak. So you have to, like, you know, just blunder through a sentence or a paragraph or whatever, um, until it’s not, you know, until it’s not a struggle anymore. (Ella Interview)

_Adaptation_

The students in this study employed a variety of techniques to deal with some of their symptoms of culture shock. Though Adler hesitated to describe culture shock as “a disease for which adaptation is the cure,” (1987, p. 29) many of the student participants used adaptation as an either conscious or unconscious way of combating culture shock. Several of the students described adaptation as “getting used to” the cultural differences, from food to daily life to manners and beyond, that may have shocked them when they first arrived in their host country.
One of the students, Becky, described how she was able to adapt to a facet of American life that had perplexed her when she first arrived in the U.S.:

I was surprised by the amount of food. Like, if you go to restaurant and you order one meal, it’s a [much greater] amount than Japan. But the surprise is that it’s cheap, so even if you spend a little money you can eat a lot...when I first came I thought it was too much and I couldn’t finish all the plate but my, I got adjusted and now I can finish the plate. And I thought everything was too sweet, too much sugar, too much greasy. But now I’m used to it and I think it’s great. You can adjust to culture in that way, too. (Becky Focus Group)

Adapting to another culture obviously goes far beyond “getting used to” the food, even if cuisine variations between cultures often provide a source of culture shock. Getting over culture shock and adapting to life in a different country is an occurrence several of the students seemed proud of achieving. Ella, for example, described how her host surroundings became “her city”:

After like four months it’s, um, it’s almost like right around...Christmas time I was feeling, like, this is my city, you know, these are my friends, this is my family, you know, I’m not touring, I’m like here, living here. And, you know, you’re getting to know [the city], like, I’ve got this favorite coffee shop and that favorite bar and this favorite, you know, whatever, park. And I finally knew, like, you know, the bus routes, getting used to going into Madrid and, you know, I had kind of like a routine going. (Ella Interview)

Ella adjusted to life in Spain to a degree where she felt as though she belonged in that country. Several of the students, including Nikki and Anna, also described how they felt “at home” in their host culture (Nikki Interview; Anna Interview). Additionally, Matilda described how living
in her host culture for a length of about ten years has impacted her; she stated she felt more at home in the U.S. than she did in her home culture:

I would consider myself very americanized. Although, sure, to my American friends I still have…my own values that I don’t give up because I think they’re so instilled in me. But I think a lot of, like, the, um, manners, um, maybe some food stuff, um, behavioral patterns like conversations with friends, um, those are the ones that come to my mind. But…a lot of the things I’ve adopted since I came when I was so young. But because also I fit in more into this culture than my own. (Matilda Interview)

Adapting to a new culture could only be accomplished after students recognized the differences from their home culture that they needed to adapt to. Culture shock, it seemed, and the confrontation of such differences, brought to light these issues and helped students come to an understanding regarding their host culture. For instance, Susan recalls the moment she stepped out of the initial euphoric stage of cultural adjustment and recognized her host country as an entity in its own right:

I don’t even know how far into the trip I was. But I definitely felt like, you know you go through the honeymoon stage in the beginning, for sure. And after…a month into the trip I realized, like, this is life for some people. I mean, I was a tourist, I was in Rome and it’s filled with tourists. But, from the American perspective I used to have it’s like “it’s Rome,” You know, it’s this exotic place where life is just dreamy everyday. Then I realized that…this is everyday home for, like, people. The Italians live there and [are] going to work, commuting, they’re having life struggles. I mean I saw people who were not happy on the subways, um, I just realized, it just hit me one day that, like, this is life for people. And life is life everywhere. That was big to me. (Susan Interview)
Ella recalled how culture shock, and subsequent adaptation, impacted her overall experience in Spain. She believed that she formed a strong attachment to her study abroad experience because she was so “out of her comfort zone” and, therefore, identified with people, places, and events that provided comfort to her:

I think there’s another thing, too, like stepping outside of your comfort zone when you do find things that…you can relate to or you enjoy or. It’s like once you’re outside your comfort zone you’re more vulnerable. And so, then when you latch on to something I feel like you latch on all the more strongly…because you were out of your comfort zone for that whole time period….When I latched on for comfort in Spain it was so much more quickly and consciously became a comfort…So the things you learn there are more likely to stand out in your mind, I guess, just for that reason. I think it has a lot to do with stepping outside of your comfort zone, and like, even to the people in my group, we got really close, too, because we’re all outside of the comfort zone together. (Ella Interview)

Ella definitely stepped out of her comfort zone during the year she studied in Spain in order to make the most of her experience abroad. Eventually, as she said, she felt as though she lived in Spain; Ella had “gone native.” In addition to feeling comfortable in the Spanish culture, Ella’s adaptation to her new environment led to some behavioral changes. For example, she smoked heavily (more so than her usual amount) after arriving in Spain and encountering a culture in which most of her Spanish friends chain-smoked. Ella attributed this increase to both cultural pressures and her “being uncomfortable the first month” since smoking, to her, is “kind of a habit you do when you’re nervous” (Ella Focus Group).
In addition to her changing smoking habits, Ella also noticed a change in her conversational style while she was abroad. Her lack of total fluency in Spanish fostered a new communication pattern:

I think [I started] listening more, because I couldn’t add as much to the conversation for, you know, the first couple months, um, and then weighing what I wanted to say because if I wanted to say it, it’s not just like in English where I could just talk, for hours….It was like I had to really want to say something, you know, and so it made…my conversation style over there was just a lot different because I listened more, talked less, and then when I did talk it was specific. (Ella Focus Group)

Incidentally, the two behavioral changes Ella experienced did not become permanent once she returned to the United States. Once she was removed from the culture of smoking, for example, she realized she did not like her new habit. “But when I got back here, um, I was like, ‘ok, I can’t do this any more’” (Ella Focus Group). So she quit; had she not encountered smoking at an extreme level in Spain she thought she might not have given it up when she returned home. Ella’s talk-less-listen-more behavior changed, too, once she returned to her home culture and resumed communication in her first language. (Ella Interview).

Perceived Influences of Study Abroad

The third theme identified within the narratives of the students focused on how the students perceived the influences of their study abroad program participation. This theme contains instances of how study abroad impacted the way students perceived themselves and other cultures, how a study abroad experience spurred several life changes in the communication and culture students, and how studying abroad influenced the way students think about the their home culture.
In general, many of the participating students reported their study abroad experience had some sort of major impact on their lives. Studying abroad opened doors of understanding for Katherine: “It gives you a greater appreciation of the world we live in and makes you acknowledge that there is life going on outside your personal space and what you do can really have far-reaching effects in the long run” (Katherine Interview). Jackie, too, commented on how her study abroad experience “enriched” her life and provided “insight, you know, really made [her] feel like there’s more than just what we see here” (Jackie Interview).

Students also reflected on several of the learning opportunities with which participating in a study abroad experience allowed them. Many different responses were noted, with the student participants reporting everything from learning about themselves to learning about other cultures and why and how different people embrace different values. Elizabeth valued the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of people from other cultures: “[My favorite part of studying abroad was] learning about other people. Um, like I like having to go through changes just so you can learn what it’s like to be like them” (Elizabeth Interview). Becky, too, noted the learning opportunities afforded to her by her study abroad experience: “If I have not [studied] abroad I will never be able to experience this worthy life. I meet many new friends, gave me time to think about myself, and at the same time I could learn English” (Becky Questionnaire). Katherine also recognized the impact her study abroad experience had on the way she thinks about people from various cultures:

I would say I’m a lot more willing to be patient with any issues [regarding people from other cultures] that come up rather than just writing it off as something I don’t need to waste time trying to understand. Like differences in everyday habits, like grocery shopping or spending time with friends and family or just general life dynamics and, you
know, variances in, uh, priorities be it school or work or spending time with friends versus spending time studying. (Katherine Interview)

External Impacts

Under the umbrella of the impacts of study abroad, the students who participated in this study identified several impacts that can be placed under the sub-category of external impacts, or impacts that affect behaviors/thoughts/beliefs toward other people. The types of influences resulting from studying abroad in this grouping include items such as recognizing cultural differences and changing the way one thinks about and behaves toward people from other cultures.

Recognizing cultural differences.

When students reported the recognition of cultural differences gleaned from experiencing another culture in a study abroad setting, they also noted the impact such recognition had on their lives. Ella, for example, identified the Spanish cultural incident that made her re-think her personal concept of how to spend time:

I have to mention, since I studied in Spain, obviously, siesta. I mean, that was one of…my favorite things about living there…from 2:30 to 5:30 every day there was a break and you go could do whatever you wanted. And, you know, often times…the weather was a lot nicer that it is here, so I just would go outside or sometimes we’d go to the plaza. Usually I wouldn’t do anything, I mean…I’d go home and eat with my family and then chill out, head back to school. I usually had another class or two in the evening….I thought the message that that sent was powerful, that no matter what you’re doing, it’s not so important that you can’t take two hours out of your day for your self, or three hours out of your day for yourself, and that’s perfectly acceptable. (Ella Focus Group)
Studying abroad helped students recognize that discrepancies in behavior, thoughts, or values between cultures are not better or worse than each other, but are, instead, simply different. For example, when the tour guide leading Elizabeth’s student group on a hike through the city showed up for the day in a skirt and heels, Elizabeth recognized a significant difference:

By seeing how they do things differently you realize how, oh, this is how we do it. Maybe everyone doesn’t do it the same…the dress there is so different, um, they’re so much more formal about everything. Like, our tour guide, um, even the day that we climbed…she still wore a skirt and heels, and we were like, “you’re crazy.” But, you know, that’s what they do, they wear dressy clothes and, so, like, it was hard for us to not wear shorts. I went there knowing that I couldn’t really take shorts with me because they don’t wear shorts. And so it’s just interesting to learn about what they do which makes you realize oh, this is how we do it. And we don’t think it’s weird but they do. (Elizabeth Interview)

Matilda, too, noted differences in her host cultures versus her home cultures and, rather than placing a value judgment on such behaviors, rationalized the disparities as indicative of each unique culture:

I learned that everything--everything--is different….I mean of course studying the language and the culture, the manners, nonverbal behaviors, um, mannerisms, everything….But I also more learned about my own culture, so then you sort of start comparing and you learn about both cultures from the outside and the inside. Um, but the biggest thing I learned is that the, um, cultural values are different. What, what, um, what Americans value versus what we value. And they are, um, two different wavelengths, both are important. (Matilda Interview)
Susan, too, said she recognized cultural differences between Italian culture and her home American culture; like Matilda, she recognized the value in such variations. “When I realized, like, not everyone thinks the way I do, I realized I had to start searching that and looking how deep that goes. I’ve only scraped the tip of the iceberg” (Susan Interview).

Thinking about other cultures.

A most heartening discovery regarding an impact of study abroad focused on how students perceived, reacted to, and treated people from different cultures. Many students noted their study abroad experience definitely had a positive impact on the way they understand other people. Jackie, for instance, reflected on how experiencing a different culture cultivated an understanding of lifestyles different from her own:

Well definitely you learn how…people operate outside of your own culture, and that’s huge. Um, I think any study abroad experience allows students to, to really learn what it’s like to live outside of their bubble. I mean…we are in a college environment and we’re very sheltered. And, you know, getting out of that and seeing what it’s like for other people, I think it’s a really big eye-opener. (Jackie Interview)

Susan also gained greater cultural understanding after her study abroad experience in Italy, and the lesson impacted not only her subsequent class trip experience in Mexico but also her future interactions with people from other cultures:

I went to Mexico for a spring break trip with a class and…I was living with a family, and…that was my first time really living with…another culture, uh, for that long and, um, being immersed in it. And I feel like I was open to them…[after I studied in Italy] and trying to learn, like, what they think about everything about life. I mean, their concept of work and their concept of leisure and their concept of time…and…just how everything
intertwines in their lives. So, I think that my trip to Italy kind of…when I go to other
cultures, when I go back to Mexico, when I go to Spain this upcoming year…makes
me…more aware. I’m not going to even assume similarities between us, like I just can’t
assume that they think a certain way, and I’m aware of that. (Susan Interview)

In Ella’s situation, the cultural lessons learned from her drumming program in Ghana were
enhanced and supported by the lessons learned in Spain. She experienced a change in the way
she reacted to people from cultures other than her own after she returned from each of her study
abroad programs:

I’d like to think I’m more open-minded [after studying abroad]. Uh, I worked at the
writing center so we get a lot of ESL, English as a Second Language, students, or English
as a third language or fourth language, and…I’ve been better able to work with them this
semester than last semester. Um, just because, like, having gone to…learn a language
myself, um, I kind of kept in mind how difficult that was and also, you know, how much
it says about you to care that much to go to that length to try to learn something. It’s
really humbling. And to see people over here doing it just make me feel like, you know,
“good, I’m glad you were that passionate about it.” I think it’s made me definitely more
tolerant of, you know, people who are studying here, you know, waiting to get through a
sentence and not try to add on a word for them, just let them kind of say it. (Ella
Interview)

**Internal Impacts**

External impacts were not the only type of impact noted by the students who participated
in this study. Several impacts were identified that can be placed under the sub-category of
internal impacts, or impacts internalized by the student who studied abroad. The types of
influences resulting from studying abroad in this grouping included changes in behavior, self-image, personality, maturity, open-mindedness, and life in general. As Matilda explained, studying abroad is “…enriching to the cultural mind, …it opens up minds, it really changes the person, it transforms the person in a way that the person almost functions differently (Matilda Interview).

Changing behavior.

Their experience abroad changed not only the way students thought about themselves and other cultures but also sparked some interesting lifestyle changes. In addition to the cessation of her smoking habit (though that was admittedly an anti-Spanish-culture-induced change), Ella’s time in Spain influenced her preferences for certain items, like food and music:

After living in Spain I took, like, some of the things that I was doing with food back home. Like, you know, the entire time I was there my host family would always ate fruit for dessert and I can’t stop doing that, like, I still do that...[Also,] I actually brought, like, quite a bit [of music] back with me ‘cuz at first I was, like, “this sucks,” and then, like I got three months into it, four months into it and I was like, “yeah, this is pretty good” and I got, like, you know, favorite artists from listening to this stuff. And I actually really liked it and so I, you know, traded kinda some of my American tastes for Spanish music. (Ella Focus Group)

Some of Susan’s habits were changed, too, upon her return from Rome, Italy:

I’m not a big cooking person, [but] I did try to cook some Italian food, but it’s just not the same. And, um, I do know that if I go get a coffee I won’t get a bunch of stuff in it, um, I don’t drink coffee every day but if I do go and get it I get straight-up coffee. Um, yeah, and I pursue the language, like, every day and I go on, like, [website name] online and I
also read the *La Republica*, the newspaper there….I read that pretty often to see what’s going on and I love seeing what they have to say about the world, and even what they say about American life and the election and things like that coming up, but also their own elections they just….That’s a big thing, just reading the newspaper every day and getting that different perspective on our news. I actually don’t read American news or English news, I read only in Italian or Spanish. So, um, I think is definitely part of the culture that I take in. (Susan Interview)

Anna, too, found that, among other changes spurred by her study abroad experience, she started actively seeking out sources for world news:

I think another thing that, um, studying abroad has gotten me to do is to pay more attention to what’s going on in the world. Like, I’ll actually check out the world news pages on several different websites just so I can keep up with what’s going on. (Anna Interview)

Meredith’s study abroad experience greatly impacted her life and the way she operated on a day-to-day basis. For example, Meredith said she now foregoes the “to go” cup at her local Starbucks in favor of drinking her beverage at the coffee house like she started to do in Italy, mirroring the Italian way of living life at a slower pace, for “…it’s nice to, you know, take, you take the time to enjoy whatever you have” (Meredith Interview). Additionally, Meredith cited her study abroad experience as having an impact on the way she views material possessions and on the way she dresses:

…and that’s definitely changed my, um, the way I operate here. Like I make sure to really, you know, conserve space and kind of pare down my belongings because…I’m moving into this small apartment. So I’m going to try to live very European and have a
few nice things instead of, like, a lot of stuff like Americans tend to have. We’re a very pack-rat culture. (Meredith Interview)
The way I dressed [changed], for sure. Here I live in jeans, tennis shoes, and hoodie sweatshirts, that’s what I live in….But there, like, you wake up and everyone is so dressed up around you, the Italians take such pride in the way that they look and the way that they present themselves that I started doing that right away….And I brought that back with me. I love how…simple everything is… I’m planning on…being sure those things…last. You know, keeping fit like the Italians do so they stay the same size for thirty years instead of, you know, ebbing and flowing and growing out of your clothes and getting rid of them or saving them or throwing them all away and that’s something that I found myself doing. Like, focusing on the way that, kind of trying to pare down and have fewer nicer things instead of a whole lot of crap. (Meredith Interview)

Changing self-image.

In addition to impacting some student behaviors, studying abroad also seemed to have a major impact on the way students viewed themselves; in other words, an international experience changed their self-image. Elizabeth, for example, explained that her study abroad experiences allowed her the opportunity to learn a lot about herself and her fellow travelers, an occasion that allowed her to better understand herself (Elizabeth Questionnaire). Becky also reflected on the opportunity studying abroad gave her to understand elements of her own self-image:

I think it really gave me time to think of myself and my characteristics and what kind of people I am. I really talk about, like, what kind of person I am with my friends, here, and then she, my friend, one of my closest friends, she like taught me about. She is different
kind of people than me and, like, I compared with her and then I kind of learned my weak point and the friend’s. (Becky Interview)

Susan and Meredith both discussed how their study abroad experiences gave them a newfound confidence, how going abroad instilled a sense of self-respect and independence into the image of themselves. “It made me more independent,” explained Susan, “and made me more, just made me braver. Um, I’m just braver to go out and travel around” (Susan Interview). Meredith echoed similar sentiments:

I found, um, I respect myself more after I came back because I was like, “man, I did this. I, you know, went by myself,” it was the first time I ever did anything by myself, like, my parents raised us, my sister and I, to be very independent but I hadn’t really ever had the opportunity to be independent…. [Studying abroad was] something that I went for and I did it and it was very scary at first, but I was totally excited. You know, I have a whole newfound respect for myself, like, “oh, wow, well look at me. I can do this, I can do anything by myself.” …So, I have a new respect for myself….And I realized that I can do something like that, if I need to do something like that it’s not scary, just go. And so, I don’t know, and I took a lot back and I think that I’m better as a person now than I was before I went over there….Everyone has room for improvement. And I think I have a better attitude about things and that’s why it was wonderful. (Meredith Interview)

Changing level of maturity.

A final internal impact of studying abroad noted by the students who participated in this study was a perceived maturation; many of the students described feeling they had “grown up” as a result of their study abroad experience. This feeling of gaining some level of increased
maturity covered a variety of sensations, from feeling more independent to becoming a more selfless and open-minded individual:

I think it just taught me a lot…and also just like living on your own in another country is another kind of, like, being able to take care of yourself on your own kind of a thing. It’s a lot of, like, trial and error. It was just a big, you know, maturing section of my life and my education certainly would have been incomplete without it, that’s for sure… So I guess it’s just kind of become, it’s a part of my identity and it’s like, you know, 18 to 24 you do so much growing up anyway that I can’t tell if it, you know, was a catalyst or if it was just part of it. (Ella Interview)

Matilda was more sure of the impact of her study abroad experience on her maturity level; she cites her study abroad experiences as providing a major contribution to her current identity, attitudes, and behaviors:

I am the baby of the family so I was a huge brat…[I was] spoiled with six siblings, two parents, four sets of grandparents, you know? …It’s like I was just a totally different person. And then I come [to America] and you have to do things, you have to be more independent, and not everyone is going to spoil you because, well, nobody is going to spoil you. Um, so as an individual I think, um, my heart got bigger and it sounds funny but, um, I’m not selfish as I used to be….I grew as a person, I appreciate people’s differences a lot more than versus when I used to just have this one-dimensional look at the person, and I just feel like, “oh, well, this person,” you know, I’d just assume things…I’ve grown up so much, my mind has opened up to many things that I didn’t imagine they would, a lot of like, um, views like ethnicity, race, sexuality, um, just different politics, all these issues, controversial issues that I would have had a different
opinion on, it really opened up my mind because there’s so much more liberated here.

Um, so I think I’ve grown up and I also have, like, created myself, like my identity.

(Matilda Interview)

Life Impacts

The students from this study reported that studying abroad had a definite impact on their lives. Spending time away from their home culture gave the students an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, values, desires, and even the direction their future lives would take. It was as though studying abroad allowed the students an opportunity to step away from their lives for a moment in order to re-evaluate the direction in which they were moving.

Susan, for example, changed her major from Interpersonal Communication to International Studies upon her return from Italy in order to reflect her stimulated interest in international affairs. (Susan Interview). Katherine added an International Studies minor to her degree program after spending a semester in Scotland (Katherine Interview). Anna, too, chose a different direction for her life after she returned from one of her excursions abroad:

I changed my major after I got back from studying abroad. I was, um, originally I was an elementary ed. major, I was going to teach either second grade or middle school science. But I realized, after I went abroad, um, that I didn’t think I could have a job that was so repetitive, you know? I need something that’ll take me out and about more, have a bit more, um, I don’t know, adventure or something. And if I hadn’t gone abroad I would probably be teaching because I wouldn’t have learned that about myself. (Anna Interview).

Studying abroad provided Nikki with the clarity she sought regarding the path her future life would take:
I think in a lot of ways…being there gave me clarity for what I want to do and what I want to be, and also gave me insight into the fact that you can do what you want to do. You know what I mean? You don’t have to go home and get first job that pays and work, like nine to five until you die, you can find something you like and do that. Um, it had an impact on me, like I realized you have a say in your life. (Nikki Interview)

Becky experienced a realization about her own academic motivations and made a life change regarding the way she thought about school and studying:

I thought, in college in Japan we don’t study a lot because we try hard to enter college but after we enter we just, like, hang around, try to pass the exam, just try to graduate. But here I see every people, like, at week, on weekends they, like, party and stuff but on weekdays they study really hard. And since I didn’t, I haven’t studied a lot in Japan, that was a great thing to see because I believe, I thought I need to study more and I thought I had to try hard. (Becky Focus Group)

For a few of the students, studying abroad, indeed, led to some life changes but also allowed them to re-affirm some of the beliefs or goals they already held. Susan’s time abroad allowed her to reflect on her religious understandings and arrive at a more personal awareness of her own beliefs:

I remember thinking I reevaluated all of my values. Um, I’m a Christian, a really strong Christian, and I remember…evaluating my sense of God….I believe God is bigger than cultures but when I was there I just struggled with that idea….I feel like sometimes my sense of God or my sense of how God relates to me is depending on who I’m surrounded with. And so I was evaluating that….I still came back to the conclusion that God is bigger than cultures, but that’s a big thing and I think that’s something. (Susan Interview)
While her re-affirmed beliefs were not religious in nature, Elizabeth’s study abroad experiences worked to strengthen her resolve to follow an internationally-related career path:

I want to be some sort of travel writer slash foreign correspondent, something like that where I spend my time abroad learning about people and writing about them. Like, I think we need more international news that isn’t, like, “these people got killed today in this thing in this place,” um, ‘cuz that doesn’t teach you anything about these other people. And, um, [we need] stories about them and what they do and, not necessarily happy stories but not, like, bad stories. Um, so maybe if my study abroad experiences had been bad I wouldn’t want to do that, but since, um, they’ve been good, um, that’s what I want to do. I’m going to write a column from Austria next year for the [school newspaper] so I’m going to start that a little bit. Right now it’s what I want to do.

(Elizabeth Interview)

A final life impact that seemed to be a result of studying abroad was the reinforcement or reaffirmation of an individual’s decision to travel and see the world. It seemed that study abroad is associated with a travel “addiction”: once students start learning about cultures beyond their own and are able to explore what the world has to offer, they often incorporate international travel into their plans or goals. Jackie, for instance, planned to go abroad to travel the summer after her junior year; wanting to experience other cultures has become a part of her life plan: “It’s something I hope to make my life about, not just my four years at college” (Jackie Interview).

Matilda succinctly encapsulated an opinion several of the students alluded to in their interviews:

I think I want to see the world because if one culture can impact you so much, imagine how much richer I will be after seeing half of the world. So yes, I want to learn more languages and hopefully go to the country that I speak their languages and really
experience it. Um, that’s my goal, actually, to travel around the world in the future.

(Matilda Interview)

*Learn by Leaving*

An often-occurring theme that ran through the narratives in this study reflected the students’ beliefs that they were only subjected to the impacts previously discussed because they were removed from their home culture for a span of time. Many of the students stated with certainty that they, and anyone else who went abroad, were able to understand aspects of their home culture only when confronted with differences in another culture. Ella summarized her belief regarding the importance of “stepping away from” one’s own home culture in order to look at it objectively:

> It’s like your education wouldn’t be complete if you didn’t step out of the structure that you were raised in and take a look at that, too. And, um, that’s what study abroad really does. It’s like, ok, you go K-12 and then you start college, and the system in this country is totally normal, to you….This can apply to anybody in any county and any kind of study abroad at all. Step aside from where you’re from and take a look at that and you get not only a new appreciation of where you come from but often a new respect or just a feeling of, like, connectedness to other places….And so, um, being outside of the U.S….showed me how much I don’t know still. And it made me feel ok…about…continuing to learn. (Ella Interview)

Ella’s recognition of the need to leave one’s culture in order to begin to fully comprehend all of its nuances was mirrored in the statements of other students in the study. Like Ella, Matilda also identified stepping away from one’s home culture as a learning experience:
I think because you see other places, you see how other people live, you see how they interact, what they value, what they appreciate. Um, just the way they are. And then you sort of compare it to your own and you, first of all, of course, you learn about those, too, but also, um, it’s so enriching to the mind because you learn amazing things that you would have never experienced even through the media. Um, you know, if you didn’t travel then you wouldn’t experience those. (Matilda Interview)

*Learning Culture from Studying Abroad*

Another emergent theme in the student narratives of their study abroad experiences focused on how studying abroad facilitated learning about culture. A few of the students used metaphors to describe how studying abroad opened their eyes to culture and cultural differences in the world:

It’s like if you’re looking at the world in black and white and then somebody handed you a pair of glasses that let you see color all of a sudden, you’d have so many more questions in your head. (Ella Interview)

It’s sort of like if you only eat cake and you’ve never tried pie you don’t know what the beauty of pie is or the taste of pie is. So I guess the travel abroad and study abroad makes you eat the pie and the cake. I don’t know if that makes sense. Basically, yeah, you know what another thing, an artifact, basically “tastes” like, but really you’re learning so many things and it puts a lot of things into perspective and, um, it’s indescribable, almost. Indescribable of how you can be transformed, because when you do it’s like a phenomenon, a great thing. (Matilda Interview)
These metaphors describe how Ella and Matilda believed their study abroad experiences introduced them to both elements from their new host cultures and previously unrecognized facets of their own home cultures.

**Recognizing the Home Culture**

Learning about culture from studying abroad was not limited to achieving a greater understanding of the host culture the students studied in. In fact, more so than any other phenomenon related to studying abroad, students reported learning about their home culture as a result of experiencing a different culture:

> I think that if you go other places not only do you learn about them but you learn about yourself through them. So like you can learn more about what it means to be an American by doing this, and, like, if you haven’t experienced other people how do you know what it is to be an American? If you have nothing to compare it to? (Elizabeth Interview)

Becky’s thoughts paralleled Elizabeth’s, another example of how students perceived their study abroad experience as an opportunity to reflect upon their home cultures:

> I can see some more different. When I was little I didn’t think about, like, [my home country] being like that and American being like that, but now I can feel, um, a good part of America and I also I can see [my home country] from our side (Becky Focus Group)

Becky also explained how teachers from her native country warned her before she came to the United States about the “dating scene” and potential risks associated with intimate behavior in a culture other than her own. She finally understood their warnings when she realized something about her home culture:
[We] are, like, easy to [sexually harass] because they can’t refuse. We can’t refuse, and, even after, like, some things happen we can’t appeal, like we can’t say to others that things happened because we’re kind of, like, embarrassed. (Becky Focus Group)

Matilda also reflected on the impact of studying abroad on how students perceive their home culture:

…that I think that’s the first thing when you go abroad, you learn…the more you learn about the other culture the more you’re learning about the US. I was also learning, well maybe re-learning, my own culture because I never really realized, you know until I left, what, what I am. Who am I, what’s my culture. It’s sort of a blur….And then you develop, like, a perspective of your own culture as an outsider, as an insider, or from the outside, from the inside. So you have this whole view that just changes. It’s sort of, like, you know, globe-shift or something. So it really changes the view. (Matilda Focus Group)

Visiting a culture different than their home culture also enlightened the American students who studied abroad. As Susan summarized, studying abroad allowed “[me to] became aware of my American culture and worldview” (Susan Questionnaire). Students who participated in this study identified certain changes in their thinking about the United States. For example, Susan discovered her life in America seemed too frenetic after she returned from her study abroad experience:

Here in America, part of it’s my personality and part of it’s our culture, I get, I get involved in everything here, especially on a college campus. So I was kind of surprised about that this year, when I got involved in everything I didn’t enjoy it as much than
before I traveled abroad. Because I found myself not being free, um, to interact with
people in a more leisurely and spontaneous fashion. (Susan Interview)

Several of the students found certain elements of American culture problematic once they
returned from their study abroad experiences; interestingly, these negative facets of American
culture went unrecognized by the students before they studied abroad. For example, Meredith
came to terms with what she identified as wasteful behaviors in her home culture once she spent
some time in Italy:

I realized how wasteful this culture is…and…I’m not going to America-bash, but just,
like, how different everything is compared to the Florentine culture, specifically, like
everything’s so big here and everything’s so oversized and everything’s like pointless and
useless and the way that space is just, like, wasted here. I mean we have whole rooms to
do laundry in. And I mean, in our apartments in Florence our washers were in the
kitchens and they were used for counter space. So, I mean, that’s something I perceive as
American. (Meredith Interview)

Nikki also commented on the “excessive” consumerism of American culture:

Everything we do is more intense: the lights are brighter, the air conditioning is set
higher, and the cars are bigger. Everything is so excess, you know, America is always to
the limit. Serving sizes, house sizes absolutely everything is overdone. We pride
ourselves on that but it’s actually problematic. Americans are really dumb sometimes.
(Nikki Interview)

Katherine also discovered an element of her American culture that had, before her study
abroad program, hitherto remained unrecognized. She identified Americans as being “very
demanding,” “far too used to being catered to,” and inclined to overreact when situations do not occur the way they wanted (Katherine Interview).

A facet of American culture brought up by several of the study participants focused on how work-centered Americans tend to be. Susan, for instance, provided a comment on the American Dream and its comparison to the working goals in another country:

The Italians are very laid-back, and they just live, they work to live and we, like, we live to work. You know, um, I also realized that…not as many Italians had, um, the need to find work that feeds their passion. Whereas in America, I think it’s the American Dream not only just to be rich and have a big house and cars but to have a job that you like. I think that we think we’re entitled to a, to most of our life being enjoyable to us. I think we’re supposed to love it. (Susan Interview)

Jackie also saw discrepancies between the American “need” to work--be it occupational work or educational work--and the attitudes she encountered while abroad. From what she observed, Jackie made comparisons between how work ethic seemed to affect social interaction in each country:

I think, also, we’re conditioned in the United States to…get an education, go to school, work, work really hard. Go to work, go to school, you know, those are most important. Your friends come last, your fun is last priority, you know, you really need to get these things done before you can go out and have a good time. Whereas in other countries, in France, you know, people will budget time to just go out with their friends, go to the park. And they drop everything to go out with their friends, and it’s something that’s embedded in their culture, you know, like, socialization is very important. And here, you know, although it is important [to spend time with loved ones], I went my whole summer
without ever going out. You know, my friends would ask me to go out and I’m just like, “oh, I totally can’t,” even though it didn’t occur to me at the time that everything I had to do that, you know, I thought was so important totally could have been done at a different time….But I didn’t because…our mindset is, like, it’s much more important to work and go to school and get our business taken care of and done, you know, than it is to go out with our friends for fun. (Jackie Focus Group)

Ella’s recognition of cultural elements from her home culture did not reflect observations of the American work ethic, but rather focused on understanding how some of the issues or problems she faced as a citizen of the U.S. paled in comparison to the circumstances of some people from other countries. Her time in Ghana led Ella to the conclusion that, as an American citizen, she “had it good”:

I was all focused on, like, our government’s problems and uh, then I stepped out of the country and it’s like, ok, there’s so many other problems. And every single country has problems, you know, and when you’re in the middle of it seems like yours is possibly the worst and as soon as you step outside you’re like, ok, there’s other things. You know, when I was in Ghana, the big things they were working on there was electricity for all of Ghana, …a national African currency for all the countries, all the major ones, and, um, AIDS education and awareness. And those were like the three main issues. So, like, in the villages and stuff, there was a lot that was obviously not being addressed. The biggest one that I noticed was alcoholism. And I was like, “this is such a huge issue, how can the government not being doing something about it?” But when you look, like, they’ve got their hands tied over here. And then our government, if you look at where we are, we’re so far past that, you know, so it’s like our problems…stem around the fact that “I don’t
feel I have adequate health care coverage,” and, um, “I’d like to find, you know, a well-paying job and be a middle-class American after graduating college and studying abroad,” so like my problems seem really bad over here and, like, I’m upset with our two-party system etcetera and so on, but then you step outside and you’re like, “ok, every single country’s struggling with their own internal thing.” And so when I came back over here I was just, like, really like, “you know, we’ve got it really good.” …I mean I could probably stand to leave again because I’m getting frustrated now with the election, but ah, as soon as you come back…I could see the good of what we had going. It’s like the old euphemism, you know, the grass is always greener on the other side. And you get over there and you look back and you’re like, “huh, look at that.” Like I did, kind of.

(Ella Interview)

Yet another facet of American culture recognized by some of the students in this study centered on realizations regarding the role of family in U.S. culture. Not only did most of the students express their belief that Americans spend less time with their friends and family than do people from some of the other countries in the world, but they also provided commentary on various elements of the family interactions they observed while abroad:

[Italian culture is] just more active, and then you see, like, old ladies climbing the stairs …marching up and down the stairs living in that way. The Italians, um, embrace the elderly and you don’t see that here. When people, when your grandmothers get too old to take care of themselves they’re not brought in, into your home, they’re shipped off to a nursing home. And that’s something else that I noticed, like very, you know, older women who would normally be in a nursing home here were still, like, marching up and
down their stairs at their apartment, like, going to the market every day. Like, that’s
another thing that I noticed that’s just very different. (Meredith Interview)

Meredith’s interpretations of Italian family interaction (and, as a result of comparison, American family interaction) were mirrored by some of the suppositions Susan reached after spending time in Rome, Italy:

Another thing I did realize about our culture is family, our sense of family is very
different…we put our families, our extended families in the nursing home and things like
that where they don’t do that [in Italy]. They take care of their family ‘til the end and
everyone’s so loyal. I don’t think we have a very loyal system….Before I thought it was
just unfathomable that someone could live with their family ‘til they were, like, thirty,
and still have respect for themselves. I automatically, I have that American value, like
“you should be getting out on your own, you should be maturing.” Whereas…they do
believe you can grow up and be an adult but you can still live with your family. So it’s
just different, I don’t think we should say that one’s better than the other. It’s just
completely different. (Susan Interview)

Appreciating home.

In addition to recognizing different facets of their own culture once they were exposed to
a different culture, several of the students who studied abroad explained that their experiences helped them gain a new appreciation of their home culture. One of Anna’s reflections summarized this concept:

I also know that going abroad opened my eyes to the “good things” back home. I used to
have really negative thoughts about my hometown and, sometimes, about the U.S. in
general, but once I was able to step back and look at “home” from an outside perspective,
I realized just how important it is to me. I always love to go abroad, but it’s always nice to come back home, too. (Anna Interview)

Ella explained how studying abroad and experiencing how other people live in the world allowed her to recognize benefits and conveniences Americans usually take for granted. Everyday occurrences in her home culture, from university fundraising drives to road construction, suddenly seemed extraordinary:

And then, I remember driving by the university and seeing the centennial campaign, and it’s like 180 million dollars or something. And driving by that and looking at that seeing that…like that’s such an insane amount of money that it, you know, kinda blew me away….You could use that [money] for so many things in so many different places….[There was also] road construction going on and…they had hauled in this like flashing like, you know, digital like caution bump sign. And…when we were driving around in Ghana there weren’t roads. You know, we were just like driving, you know, there was no bump warning, it was just like all of a sudden your head is near the ceiling. You come back and see the like flashing and I was like “God, we’re so, you know, I don’t know, padded,” or it’s such a different…experience here than everywhere else. Yet coming back it was just like more of a shock, I guess. (Ella Focus Group)

*Experiencing guilt.*

Gaining a new appreciation for the rights and privileges Americans experience on a daily basis also created a sense of guilt for some of the study abroad students from the U.S. Experiencing first-hand the challenges some people in other countries face provided a much greater impact than simply hearing about such problems via the U.S. media:
There was a level of like guilt that was associated with that trip just because, like, I was paying to fly from the US to Ghana to study drumming. And I’m in college. And there’s, like, a complete disconnect with what I was flying into, which was a village with no electricity, no running water, wells, a population of, like, fifty, you know….I was going there to learn from them, which was really…amazing. I would see like the little kids begging and I would want to give them, you know, spare change or whatever, and they all thought we were…millionaires. It was hard to explain, you know, I don’t have that much money here, I don’t have really any power, and they were all trying to figure out how they could get over to the US and can we help them get over to the US. [The director of our program], was like, you know, “don’t give them, you don’t need to give them anything, you know, because they make it every day with or without you there, you know, that’s not your job, you know, to kind of mediate who’s getting what.” …So that was, it was different because that one was third world and it was really, like take a really hard look at the amount of privilege you have in your everyday life and just, like, stare it in the face for like three weeks and then come back home. (Ella Interview)

Understanding Stereotypes

Students who studied abroad clearly gained a greater understanding of various facets of their home culture from their own observations, but they also had to come to terms with different forms of stereotyping. The students from this study learned to face their own assumptions and stereotypes regarding people from different cultures and were also forced to come to terms with the (often unflattering) image held by people in other countries of Americans.

Matilda explained how studying abroad helped her try to curb her use of stereotyping or at least understand why she stereotyped people from other cultures:
But I’ve sort of destroyed those assumptions, um, stereotypes, I used to stereotype a lot. So I think it helped to also deal with the stereotyping, I think everyone stereotypes so you can not necessarily stop stereotyping but you sort of question why you stereotype, you question the things behind it. (Matilda Interview)

Elizabeth, too, observed how her study abroad experience hindered her assigning of stereotypes to people from other cultures:

I think maybe you judge people less quickly by getting to know more types of people in foreign countries, I guess. Um, because like if you’re quick to say, “Oh, well that’s just weird,” you don’t actually get to find out why they do it. And I like that, the learning of this is what they do, this is why they do it. And you give them, like you need to give them a chance to explain, to show what they’re doing. (Elizabeth Interview)

Anna also used her study abroad experience to come to terms with some of the stereotypes she held about people from different countries. Actually meeting people from a stereotyped culture and interacting with them helped her break through misconceptions and recognize her own prejudices:

I had this preconceived notion of what the French people were like before I went to Paris. I don’t know where it came from, maybe, um, from the media or from the two encounters, both unpleasant encounters, I had with some people from France before I went over there, but, um, I had this image in my head that they were all stuck up and snooty and hated Americans. And that might be true for some French people, but, um, a lot of the ones I met on my trip couldn’t have been nicer or, well, they were very warm and pleasant to talk to and friendly. I have a new image of the French now. (Anna Interview)
Studying abroad allowed students to re-think their opinions of other cultures and also introduced the American students to the way their fellow U.S. citizens are perceived abroad.

*Encountering the American image abroad.*

Students from the U.S. who studied abroad often had to deal with the negative image of Americans held by many people from other countries. Some of the stereotyped impressions created awkward social situations for the American students studying abroad. Jackie, for example, explained a strange influx of men who romantically pursued her and her friends:

I don’t think I’ve ever had more men try to come after, like not come after me, but talk to me and interact with me as I did in a foreign country. In France, um, you know I was with a girl friend and, you know, we met so different men…and I know that sounds kinda weird but I think there is a stigma against American women and they’re dubbed as being easy. So, you know, you do, you get all these, uh, men. (Jackie Focus Group)

Unfortunately, several of the students remembered seeing other Americans acting just as the stereotype predicted; it seemed the “easy” label assigned to American women had some of its origins in reality. Meredith commented on how much of a struggle it was to counter the stereotype and leave individuals from the host culture with a different perspective of Americans:

There were a couple of girls in our program who were over there to party. And so that was difficult seeing that because…that’s the kind of person that we get a bad name from. And so that was difficult.…I understood before that the Americans don’t have such a great reputation throughout the rest of the world, but now I really, like, on a first-hand basis, understand that, like, we’re kind of the bad guy right now. And…so I feel like I’m going to have to, like, constantly, like, prove myself or do that kind of thing and it’s hard, like, not just being able to travel for the sake of traveling because of American-
bashing…And before I would open my mouth, like, the Italians would just treat me like a normal Italian, like, I don’t know, here she is, hanging out by herself, dressed like an Italian. Then I’d open my mouth and they’d be like, “oh, she’s an American.” And so I think that’s definitely changed my view on traveling, that the world is not your oyster, like you kind of have to fight or scrimp just for respect just to, you know, go out to eat in a foreign country. (Meredith Interview)

Katherine recognized the importance of moderating one’s behavior so as to not add to the negative stereotype of Americans:

I also learned that the general stereotypes of Americans that many foreign people have is based off of a very, very small percentage of Americans actually abroad and if you take the time to be courteous, to get to really know a culture, um, it really does make a difference in how Americans are viewed. (Katherine Interview)

Understanding how the U.S. is perceived by many people in the world gave the students in this study a better understanding of their home culture before they returned home.

Returning Home

A fifth theme that emerged to create an image of students’ perceptions of their study abroad experiences focused on the shock of returning to one’s host culture. Some of the problems the students in this study faced were associated with missing certain elements from the host culture. Jackie summarized this concept:

And, you know, it then almost seems weird to come home to, to the United States after you’ve been away for so long and you’ve grown used to, you know, culture in another place. Like I know a lot of the students that went on our trip to, to, uh, France came home
and said, “oh my gosh, you know, I miss this aspect of, of life there, you know, that we don’t have here.” ‘Cuz you get accustomed to it. (Jackie Focus Group)

Becky assumed she would miss elements of her host country even before she returned to her home country.

Um, because I live in dorm now I can, I see friends so close every day. After I go back to [my home country] I live by myself ‘cuz in [my country] we don’t, like, share rooms. So we all live by ourselves or in our house. And I don’t have house so I live by myself, and I will be so lonely because I will go from dorm to all by myself. (Becky Interview)

For some of the students, different types of social interaction proved to be the most-missed component of their host country. Elizabeth, for example, craved the European café atmosphere and the social time with friends it provided once she returned to the U.S.:

I guess in both places, like they have such a…standard for cafes. Like the whole café scene [in America], there isn’t that, like, café atmosphere where you just go sit in the café for hours and hours and hours with your friends. I mean you can kind of do that at [a local coffee shop] here but it’s not the same at all. And…I like that. Or even at the beer garden in Salzburg, like it’s just such a cool atmosphere, like you’re like, “this place is really old, like it’s older than the United States.” So just something like that is really cool and I think it would be hard to have that here. Or to have, like, the day be done at 5:00. And you just go home and you have dinner and you relax and hang out with your family. (Elizabeth Interview)

While she also discussed missing various other facets of Italian culture, such as the slower pace of life and the easy access to Renaissance art masterpieces, one of the more unique elements of her host culture that Meredith missed once she returned to the U.S. involved food:
I miss how fresh everything was. I mean, obviously it was summertime and, um, I was only there for a month and so I only know the kind of food that we had at that time. But I imagine that when it starts getting cooler, they’d start switching over to a lot of root vegetables because that was seasonal. And so here we don’t have a lot of seasonal foods, we ship foods from Argentina in. And so I remember I went to the grocery store to look for thyme and they were like, “oh, well we don’t have that, it’s not in season.” Like I was crazy that I was looking for thyme in July. (Meredith Interview)

Like several others, including Anna, Meredith, and Nikki, Katherine found she missed the slower pace of life once she returned home from Scotland:

[I miss] the pace…because after a while you learned to just kind of slow down a little bit and enjoy life. Once I got back to the States, everything picked up again really quickly and you really realize how much we take for granted over here. (Katherine Interview)

Other issues associated with returning home included the shock students went through when they recognized the new perceptions they held regarding their home culture, the pressure to revert or re-conform to values and behaviors associated with the home culture, and the stress created by interacting with people who have yet to encounter the cultural awakening experienced by study abroad students.

Re-Entry Shock

Many of the students recounted feeling surprised when the shock they felt upon returning to their home culture was greater than the shock of experiencing a new culture:

You know, coming back was almost…more of a shock than like getting there….When you’re leaving your own country you’re expecting to have everything be different. And
then when you’re coming home to your country you’re expecting everything to be exactly like it was, which, like, you know, all of my friends and everything, they were exactly the same but, like, I was just looking at things differently. (Ella Focus Group)

As Ella explained, when the students returned home, they expected left to be the same as when they left. It came as quite a shock to her when familiar cultural phenomenon, ranging from greetings to food to use of time, seemed suddenly unfamiliar and strange. “Hand shaking felt weird when I came back. It felt awkward. Like, let me just stick my hand out there and you just latch on and it’s like ‘hi’” (Ella Interview). Even a seemingly insignificant detail of life in her home culture gained new awareness:

And then when I think back from Ghana, like, one of the things that I really missed when I was over there was milk, ‘cuz I like milk a lot, and I, uh, I got some and I drank it and I never realized, like, how thick and sweet it was. I mean, I don’t know, it was just like after being over there and drinking, like, you know hot, basically, hot water, you know, for like three weeks and then coming back and having that, it was like almost too much, it was like a dessert. (Ella Focus Group)

Other students in the focus group also discussed the re-entry shock they experienced when they returned home from their study abroad program. Susan, for example, suddenly found her American lifestyle to be overwhelming:

I think I had reverse culture shock just a little bit because I was overwhelmed. As soon as I got back everyone wanted to see me, so I was scheduling appointments with people. That’s something, you don’t schedule appointments with people in Italy, I mean, you’ll just meet up. I mean, it’s just not the same. I felt like I had to rip out my planner and start writing down appointments time. I had all of these last-minute things, I was settling back
in, um, picked up a job and just got really busy really, really quickly. So I was really overwhelmed. I had a cell again, that was weird, and, uh, I remember thinking, “oh, this is great!” And then about two minutes into it I was like “no, this isn’t great.” …I was constantly overwhelmed just with information….And I remember driving on the highway for the first time, it was weird. I went six weeks without driving, I was like, “whoa.” Um, yeah, I remember getting on the highway and thinking everything was just happening too quickly…I think that life was just too fast, I was really overwhelmed. I couldn’t understand, once I got back, why people can’t just sit around and, you know, just talk or walk and talk. But they’re like, no, we have to be doing something. Being productive all the time, yeah. So I didn’t like that. I also didn’t like how they have a cut-off time, like “ok, we’ll hang out from this time to this time.” And still, I do that now, like I’m back and I’m acculturated again, and I don’t like that, like I don’t like scheduling time for when I want to hang out with people. I’d love to just let it go ‘til it finishes. So many times people will say well we have to end at this time. We might be in the middle of a great conversation but we have to end at this time. Like, ok then, that’s not what it’s about. (Susan Interview)

Nikki also reported feelings of re-entry shock when she returned home from her summer in Italy; her “shocked” reactions began as soon as she landed at the airport in the U.S.:

I had culture shock when I came back. Everything, um, the atmosphere, everything seems so much more high stress. Even being in the airport was hard; everything was crazy and more fast-paced. Now that I’m back, everything is more fast-paced and stressful. I’m a fast paced person, you know, but it was a lot easier to slow down than it is go back to crazy. (Nikki Interview)
One instance of Matilda’s re-entry shock occurred as a result of a nonverbal communication habit she acquired while studying in the U.S. She adopted the American practice of smiling at almost everyone she encountered and then had to face the reactions to this behavior from people from her home country:

One of the things that I had to adjust, and I think I still am, even if it’s been about ten years that I’ve been here on and off, was the space and nonverbal communication. Of course, having the neutral face, we don’t smile a lot, we’re serious people. Um, the smiling means something else. It means promiscuity or it means craziness or anything like that. So coming here and seeing everyone smile at me…So then I saw everyone smiling and saying hi, even the strangers in the street they do a little smirk. And then if they, if you pass them, you can see like automatically, it’s like a rubber band going back, their face going back to normal. They’ll like smile and then it’ll go back. …When I go back home and I do smile, ’cuz I forget, I’m so, it’s so embedded in me, that people say, “well what the hell are you looking at? What’s so funny?” (Matilda Focus Group)

Experiencing re-entry shock was just the beginning of the challenges many of the students who studied abroad faced after they returned home. Even though many of them cited their study abroad experience as an opportunity to learn about the world and change as a person, once they returned home they faced immense pressure to re-conform to the standards set by their home culture.

Pressure to Re-Conform

As previously discussed, the students from this study recognized a variety of impacts their study abroad experience had on them. Students were introduced to different of thinking, to a variety of different foods, to different lifestyles, to different mindsets, and to different
languages. Many of the students expressed their desire to retain the cultural lessons they brought home from abroad but also recognized the pressure their own culture placed on them to revert to their previous standards. Nikki, for example, explained why she reverted to her pre-study abroad behavior:

I fell back into all my old habits ‘cuz I had to. I came back and I had school and work and obligations that I had to get back into the swing of things. And the atmosphere that is here doesn’t really allow anything else. (Nikki Interview)

Ella recognized a shift in the way she communicated; in Spain, because she was not completely fluent in Spanish, she listened more and talked less. Ella valued this communication style but was cognizant of the fact that her old style was again becoming dominant:

I’m sure I went back to talking more and listening less. Um, I think part of that is just, being here it’s easy to do. You know, it’s hard to just listen, it’s easy to talk. And so, um, now it’s, I think it’s something I pay more attention to, but yeah, I would imagine that it’s something I’m losing the farther away I get. That’s why you can’t just study abroad once, you have to go more than once. (Ella Focus Group)

Other students, too, commented on the difficulty of keeping the elements of their host culture they wanted to retain in their lives. For many of the students, the pressures of their home culture created a massive obstacle to change. Susan tried to recapture elements of her study abroad experience and host culture but found the American “schedule” to be difficult to adjust:

I don’t know, I just, just my sense of leisure and my time, I try to remember what I loved about that and try to see if I can fit it into my life. Seriously, though, I feel like it’s almost impossible to free up your schedule. (Susan Interview)
Jackie, too, experienced obstacles when she tried to retain the practice of healthy living she developed while in France and on her other international travels. For her, eating unhealthily and not getting enough sleep proved to be easier than living a healthy lifestyle in American society:

And I think a lot of it is, like, people [in France], you know, they buy their food every day and they buy fresh food and they’re, you know, not eating, you know, stuff that’s been manufactured a million times before it’s been sold on shelves and, um, and I just think it was really kind of fascinating because, um, I do, I felt like I was just by default going to be just, you know, go back to being unhealthy because it’s just convenient to pick up something that’s….It was definitely tough…. [I am] kind of taking away as much as I can but it’s very hard…to do something that most of the culture isn’t and so they make it much more convenient to be this other way but I don’t necessarily want to be, um, as far as like eating or making more social time….Because everybody wants to be thin in our country, and the norm is to be overweight, and find conveniences, and over-indulge. You know, it’s much easier and cheaper to eat too much food, eat unhealthy food…and find time for yourself…and sleep, like I lose sleep over studying, you know, and it’s very hard to just like tell myself…“you just need to go to bed, like you need to get eight hours of sleep.” …I think because we’re one of the few countries that, you know, doesn’t value things like that, you know, we just don’t care. And we don’t realize, like, how unhealthy it’s making us. And…it’s much easier in a different country where, like, they don’t even have unhealthy foods as an option and you’re not, it’s not even about temptation. Like I’ll eat unhealthy [here] because it’s easy. I mean, it’s just terrible.

(Jackie Focus Group)
Interaction with Non-Travelers

Another challenge the students from this study faced once they returned home was the difficulty in interacting with people who have not had a similar international experience. Previous sections of this study described the various impacts studying abroad had on student participants, and the students explained that people who live without those impacts had a difficult time understanding why study abroad and other international travel is so important. Some non-travelers do not understand the expense, others retain a narrow view of the world, and others see study abroad as simply “bragging rights.” Many students in this study expressed their displeasure and frustration with trying to explain why their study abroad program was such a life-changing experience. Jackie, for example, found it difficult to explain why she traveled abroad and justify why she had no qualms regarding the cost of study abroad programs:

On all the trips I’ve ever gone on abroad, I’ve had to work really hard to be able to afford to go on them. And I think that the, you know, people are like, “you’re working so many hours, like, this is insane.” And it’s like, they have no idea what it’s like and, you know, you get off the plane and you’re there and it’s just like this is so cool. I wish they had a clue ‘cuz they wouldn’t think I was so crazy, you know, if they could experience it firsthand. (Jackie Interview)

Jackie also discussed how difficult it was to explain the lessons she learned while abroad to people who had yet to leave their home culture. She explained that because they had not had a similar experience, they “just don’t understand or just don’t get it” (Jackie Focus Group). In Jackie’s opinion, failing to make the decision to experience other cultures, whether via study abroad or other international experiences, makes life “more difficult…because we just don’t see it from that other side…and ignorance is bliss.”
Susan, too, reflected on the difficulty of returning to her home culture and encountering individuals who had not been outside their home culture:

It was hard, you know, coming back because, like, I realized I’m still surrounded by people who…have not been able to have that experience and they still have that narrow view. And it’s really hard. So I mean, like, I can just blow people’s mind when I say, “you know, not everyone even thinks of the concept of time the way that we do.” (Susan Interview)

Trying to explain an international experience and the impacts it had on them as individuals, as Susan suggested, was often a trying experience for the students in this study. Anna, for instance, was accused of bragging when she tried to share some of the lessons she learned while abroad:

Sometimes it’s really hard to talk to people who haven’t studied abroad about the different experiences you had. I guess it comes off as bragging or something, like, when you try to tell them a about something you learned “this one time in Paris,” or whatever. But it’s not bragging, I’m not trying to brag, I just want to be able to share some of the things that happened to me over there and that I learned. It was a big part of my life, you know? Um, but because they haven’t experienced anything like that, like, for all I know they’ve never left their hometown, they think I’m bragging when I talk about going to another country. They just don’t get it. (Anna Interview).

Study Abroad and Social Support

A sixth theme emerged from the data collected in this study, a concept interwoven into many of the themes already discussed. Social support seemed to play a large role in many students’ study abroad experiences. As defined by Albrecht and Adelman (1987), social support is “verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces
uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one’s life experience” (p. 19). Studies demonstrate social support is often experienced and desired during “times of stress or upset” (Burleson, 2003, p. 2; see also Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1990) and is based on the “frequency of communication, content of the communication and the extent to which members view their relationship similarly” (Ray, 1991, p. 92).

Social support is widely studied in the communication field, though rarely in conjunction with study abroad experiences. Most of the literature focuses on social support in interpersonal relationships (for example, Xu & Burleson, 2001; Zimmerman & Applegate, 1992), work groups and teams (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006), and informal networks (Ray, 1991). In a 1999 study by Sass and Mattson, social support was examined in the context of a youth intervention program. The researchers were interested in how social support was accomplished and constructed. In this program, support was “understood and enacted in the context of two other salient constructs: commitment and coaching…[and] had both comfortable and uncomfortable dimensions” (p. 511). In other words, the social support enacted by the adult volunteers toward the troubled youth consisted of a commitment to supporting the young adults and coaching of these young adults (and, sometimes, other adult workers) toward their goals.

Social support, according to the literature, often plays a role in an individual’s satisfaction level. In a study on modern marriages, Xu and Burleson (2001) discovered that women desired more social support from their marriage partners than did men, and were more satisfied if the desired level of support was reached. A study of social support in team satisfaction found that individuals who are happy with the social support they receive from the
group are “more likely to assign a higher rating to satisfaction with the team’s communication and success in accomplishing its goals or tasks” (Zimmermann & Applegate, 1992, p. 241).

While few studies examine the role of social support in study abroad programs, a more thorough examination of the topic may provide useful insights for the fields of both social support and study abroad.

Many of this study’s participants’ study abroad experiences were affected by the presence of a perceived social support system: friends to travel with or meet during the study abroad program, a host family to help lessen feelings of homesickness and aid with cultural adaptation, and peers to rely on in new situations. A lack of social support factored into some elements of unease in a new setting, suggesting a lack of social structure may lead to some instances of culture shock. If, as Burleson (2003) and Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason (1990) suggested, social support is most actively sought and appreciated during times of stress, then the stress-inducing process of culture shock is undoubtedly linked to the social support process.

Presence of Support

Several of the students who participated in this study specifically commented on the presence of social support during their study abroad experience. Some, like Ella, lived with a host family and thought the arrangement was “really cool” (Ella Focus Group). Elizabeth also reflected on her host family experience and the impact it had on her overall study abroad program:

And in Salzburg I stayed with a family so I kind of, like, had a faux family there that took care of me and worried about me and had someone to, like, keep me entertained. I know it would have been a lot different if I’d stayed in the dorm, um, ‘cuz then I might have been a little bit homesick because I would have been my myself. But I liked having the
family and it worked out good and so now I have them there and I’m comfortable staying in a dorm when I go next year because I know that they’re down the street and I can call on them. (Elizabeth Interview)

Matilda also explained how living with a host family impacted and enriched her study abroad experience:

I was...living with a host family, so I think that was great because I got to know the culture as an insider, you know from the host family perspective. Um, so after a while we sort of really bonded and became a real family. But then when I came back to University, the experience was a little bit different because I didn’t have [them], the host family was still there to support me but I lived on my own. So that was a different experience but still...a good experience. (Matilda Focus Group)

Social support also existed in the students’ study abroad experiences in situations other than the presence of a host family. Building and maintaining friendships, too, played a role in how students reacted to their study abroad program. Matilda, for example, cited the opportunity to make friends as one of the motivating factors behind her decision to pursue study abroad (Matilda Interview). Meredith also forged friendships during her study abroad experience: “I got very close with one of the girls in the program and with one of my roommates, I mean, I’m going to [travel to another state to] see her again. And I became really close with [our professor]” (Meredith Interview).

Nikki described “meeting people” as the easiest and most enjoyable aspect of her study abroad experience. “Meeting people, making friends, um, was the best part. In general, meeting people, even the people I met for only three hours, that was a lot of why my experience was
good” (Nikki Interview). Because it was mentioned so often, the topic of social support in study abroad seems to demand a closer examination.

**Social Support and Culture Shock**

The students who discussed the importance of social support often referred to situations where the presence of friends eased situations that may have been otherwise uncomfortable. When study abroad students traveled together, for example, they found strength in numbers when it came to dealing with cultural differences. They learned to rely on each other to find solutions to the challenges they faced by studying in another country. Jackie and her peers, for example, utilized each other’s presence when they tried to navigate the French language:

Some of them, you know, even brushed up and used some stuff I didn’t know, so that was good, um. But we all go through pretty well, it’s strength in numbers, all of us were picking up the extra words the other people in the group couldn’t figure out. (Jackie Interview)

Elizabeth relied on a traveling companion, and her traveling companion on her, to provide the security necessary to make the decision to study abroad:

Um, well going to Salzburg the first time was really, it was somewhat scary. Um, another girl who was in my German classes went with me, um, we were both kind of scared to go alone so we convinced each other. We were like, you know, let’s just for over the summer, it’ll be short, um, we can fly together, we can travel everywhere together, like, have a little buddy system and not be worried. (Elizabeth Interview)

Susan also commented on the social structure of the Americans with whom she traveled in Italy, citing the difference she observed between the teenaged Romans who were very
comfortable in their surroundings and the twenty-something Americans who clung to each other for support:

Um, because their teenagers, from like twelve or thirteen year olds, they’re like going around the city by themselves and transportation and everything, and the Americans were very dependent on each other. Like, “oh my gosh.” We’re twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four years old and we’re still like “oh my gosh, like, we can’t go anywhere by ourselves.” Even during the day, ‘cuz we’re like “oh my gosh, we’re going to get lost, we’re going to die.” And we’re not independent as much as we think we are. (Susan Interview)

The presence of some sort of social support, from host families providing a safe haven to peer groups experiencing the same cultural dissimilarities, ultimately gave the students who participated in this study a form of resistance against culture shock.

*Lack of social support.*

If the presence of a social support group acted as a defense against culture shock, then the absence of such a congregation seemed to contribute to individuals’ culture shock levels. For example, Becky was far more nervous about her most recent study abroad venture because it lacked the “safety net” provided by a social support group that her first trips possessed:

Um, the ten-day was like from my city and there was, like, ten people, and then the Korea was, there was twenty people. So from the first time there were people I knew together. But here, I came by myself and, so, I was more anxious and worried about it. (Becky Interview)

Susan, too, suffered from anxiety when the people she counted on as allies turned out to be different than she expected. She reported feeling her greatest levels of culture shock when she was faced with a situation where her supposed social support group crumbled:
I mean it definitely was culture shock, um, about two weeks into it, and I was just having trouble interacting with, um the other Americans on the trip. I mean I’m still, um, friends with them but not, like, I wasn’t close to them. I expected to go on this trip and I expected to make the best friends in the world with the people I was on the trip with. I was like, “oh my gosh, we’re experiencing this together, of course we’re going to be best friends.”

And, um, I wasn’t. I think maybe it was because I didn’t want to have the same experience they were having, I mean, they were just there to party. And that’s just not what I wanted, so I ended up just breaking if off with them. I made some really good friendships with other Europeans and I’m going back to visit them this year, so that’s fantastic, I have places to stay in so many countries. Um, but, I think that was when it hit me. (Susan Interview)

Susan only overcame her culture shock once she formed a new social support group and made friends with several European students.

Katherine expressed her reaction to the lack of social support she experienced when her semester-length program began:

I think another difficult part was learning to live with a bunch of people you knew absolutely nothing about. It was kind of like freshman year in college all over again without the, without home court advantage, you know, being Stateside. (Katherine Interview)

The fact that Katherine identified living with a bunch of people she “knew absolutely nothing about” as one of the most difficult obstacles to be overcome during her semester abroad serves to reinforce the notions that social support plays a very important role in shaping students’ study abroad experiences. At the time this study was conducted only one article (Pantelidou and Craig,
2006) examined a possible connection between study abroad student experiences and social support, but the goal of the study was to examine a possible link between culture shock and support rather than to understand how social support may affect study abroad experiences in general. Clearly, much room exists for more work on this topic.

Reflecting on Study Abroad

The seventh and final theme that became apparent after analyzing the data collected from student participants in this study expressed students’ overall opinions of their study abroad experience. This theme explored how students compared studying abroad to studying on their home campus, contrasted study abroad with travel abroad, and encouraged other students to participate in study abroad programs.

Study Abroad Versus the Classroom

One opinion repeatedly expressed throughout the interviews and focus group session was the idea that study abroad programs created a learning environment for student participants that was completely unique to the program. “I learned things while I was abroad that I couldn’t have learned at [my home institution]” (Anna, Interview). Students viewed their study abroad program as a unique learning experience that had great impacts on their overall education. For the students in this study, studying abroad provided them with the opportunity to take their understanding of certain topics to a higher level. For example, Elizabeth related a story regarding a lesson in the German language that she believed only occurred as a product of her study abroad experience:

A friend of mine and I were in a bakery buying rolls for our lunch, like, you’d go and buy every meal the pieces you’d need for that meal, it’s not like here where you have your supermarkets and your cupboards aren’t stocked. You go buy what you’re going to eat
for that meal and so we were buying rolls and, like, ham and cheese or something, and we were asking for the rolls to be cut in half and we automatically assumed, you know, that you’d be cutting it, like, horizontal to open like a bun. So we said *halb schnitten* and the bakery lady was just looking at us like, “what are you asking for?” And she’s like, “don’t you mean *durch schnitten*?” And so that would be to cut through, ’cuz cut in half would be a vertical cut, cutting through is a horizontal cut. And we didn’t know that! But, it’s just things like that, like, that you’re never going to learn in class, but you have to talk to people to find out those things. And, like, yes, it’s kind of foolish and they look at you weird and they’re like, “don’t you mean this?” And you know I’m never going to forget that now. (Elizabeth Interview)

Ella, Jackie, and Katherine were also adamant in the belief that their study abroad experiences taught them far more than they would have learned had they stayed at home. Ella’s reflected on how living in the culture provided the most opportune chance to learn about Spain and its people and how her classroom experience was enriched by country-specific field trips:

> And uh, so that was phenomenal for me, like just going over there was, just the amount I learned about, like, Spanish culture, that was really like, that was good. I mean, I took an art museums class and, uh, we would learn about it in the classroom and then we’d just go there to see it. And it was outrageous! (Ella Interview)

Jackie, too, lauded the opportunity to have a unique and un-replicable learning experience; since one of her passions focused on international media, her study abroad program provided the perfect occasion for out-of-classroom learning:

> And you know again these programs that they put us through, um, we took classes to learn the international media culture and, you know, to prepare us for the trip and it was
really helpful but also a lot of fun and nothing I could have done anywhere else, you
know, so it was good. (Jackie Focus Group)

Katherine was also grateful for the learning opportunities presented by her study abroad
program. She indicated her semester in Scotland created a learning environment that forced her
to not only learn about her host and home cultures but also to turn the evaluative lens toward
herself:

A lot of it has to do, or a lot of the differences are based between culture, you can read all
the books you want but there’s nothing that can compare to learning about a culture
firsthand and it also interrupts the everyday habits we get so comfortable with and forces
you to kind of reevaluate how and why you do things. (Katherine Interview)

Meredith was in a unique situation in that she was able to compare two courses in the
same content area: one course was taken at her home institution and the other was taken while
she was abroad. Like Elizabeth, Meredith extolled the virtues of the study abroad course because
she believed it offered her opportunities for learning that could not have happened on her home
campus:

The main difference [between the classes], I mean, obviously was in Italy we went to the
museums and we stood in front of David. And we got to look at David in a panoramic,
like, you know, walk around David, look at his butt, come around the side…[And the
teacher would] be like “ok, get up close to the paintings and look at the brushstrokes.”
Or, you know, “let’s go to this place and stand inside this church and look at the mosaics
on the ceiling.”… And here, like, well, when we were over there I took notes on like the
first day and then I realized that this is pointless, I don’t need notes. I’m going to hold my
head up and really look at the art. And when I took the classes here, and I actually did
take an Italian Renaissance course, and so it was the same course, same paintings, way different experience. And you sit in a classroom and they project an image on the screen and you write down the artist, the medium, the date, the title of the painting, and the place that it was in. And you memorize the painting and the date and you take a test over it. And that’s the whole art history here. And so it was just way different, way cooler, over in Italy. Way cooler. And I’m sure that any course that gets you out and gets you looking at things and gets you appreciating, like, the thing for what it is and not for the historical impact. (Meredith Interview)

Meredith, and her fellow study abroad alumni, also expressed their opinions on the difference between studying abroad and traveling abroad.

Study Abroad Versus International Travel

While most of the students in this study recognized the benefits of any sort of international travel, most were resolute (and quite verbose) in their belief that the best way to understand a culture is to spend time in it outside of the confines of the typical tourist experience. Studying abroad, they explained, allowed them to learn much more about their host culture. Matilda promoted the study abroad experience as the ideal way to experience other cultures and types of education:

I think, though, traveling abroad is, is great, if someone has a chance they should do it, but if they have a chance to actually study abroad I think it’s a lot more, uh, enriching and a lot more, um, mind opening experience because they actually get to experience a different type of education. See, if I came as a tourist for a few month, I would only see the cultural different things, like not the education part. Because I came and I learned so much more I think that’s the part that actually pulled me here, the education system. So I
think the differences between the travel abroad and the study abroad are huge because the studying abroad, I think, is taken more seriously and it has a more impact than versus just being a tourist and doing things and not being influenced at all, like, your mind. (Matilda Interview)

Anna also commented on the differences she noted between her study abroad and travel abroad experiences. For her, just traveling abroad did not provide the same learning opportunities as did studying abroad:

When I traveled to Eastern Europe I didn’t speak the language at all, nobody did. So…our group had to rely on a translator who took us around and explained all of the major sights. I mean, we were on this gigantic tour bus and just tooled around to the major tourist sites in, like, Prague, then we’d get off the bus, listen to our guide explain what we were looking at, take some pictures, and then, you know, get back on the bus and go to the next place. It was really cool to see all the different stuff over there, but I don’t feel like I actually understand the culture any better than I did before I went. I didn’t get to experience daily life there, you know? Living in a hotel just doesn’t cut it. (Anna Interview)

Like Anna, Susan found her travel abroad situations were very different from her study abroad experiences. Reflecting on her tourist experiences, she lamented the lack of contact with the host culture and people:

Well because those [other international trips] were like tourist situations I didn’t interact with the locals at all, unless they were like, like, in places where you’d get service from them. So I never got to hang out with them or talk to them. A lot of it when I was younger…and I wasn’t courageous enough to talk to people outside of my culture. And I
Meredith, too, preferred studying abroad to simply traveling abroad. For her, study abroad provided the opportunity to develop an intimate familiarity with her host culture and negated the “rush-here-rush-there” mentality often associated with a common tourist experience:

I liked studying there better because I got to have, like, an intimate look at the city because. And I… had pseudo-relationships with the people like in my neighborhood, like I went to the same coffee shop every single morning and I talked to the same guy every single morning and, like, I said hello to my landlady every single day, you know, the woman who rented out the apartment that I lived in. Um, so, I had like a really intimate introduction to the city and to the, um, the people. Which was really nice because when you travel, like when you’re on vacation, when you’re just traveling, like, you know, two weeks here and a week here and a week here, and you just pack so much in and you just miss, like, the daily nuances of living in a city… I think that’s the main difference, it’s just that you have more, you get to know the city and the people in the city on a more intimate level than when you’re a tourist. You also have more credibility as a student than as a tourist. I think you just miss so much when you’re a tourist because there’s so much stress on you. “I have to see this and I have to see this and I have to see this.”… Life is so slow, so, like, nice and it’s nice being in a country that has a slower pace of life and being able to live at that slower pace of life. If you’re a tourist you don’t have that privilege of
having that slower pace of life, and waking up when you want to wake up and not being scheduled. (Meredith Interview)

Promoting Study Abroad

An interesting phenomenon occurred when this study’s participants were asked whether or not they would recommend study abroad to other students. Without fail, every single one of them responded in the affirmative. Study abroad, most of the students declared, should be mandatory for all students who attend college; it should be part of the well-rounded education. “Seize the opportunity,” maintained Susan, “or else you will regret it for the rest of your life” (Susan Questionnaire). All of the students steadfastly promoted study abroad as an opportunity not to be missed. “So, you know, good or bad it’s still, like, a ridiculously awesome experience, no matter what happens” (Ella Focus Group).

Additional Observations

While not a part of the identified themes for this study, some additional information arose from the data that may prove useful to study abroad administrators and program organizers. Some of the information the students shared should be taken into consideration by those who are responsible for the both the design of study abroad programs and the return of students to their home campus.

Designing Study Abroad Programs

While most of the students were happy with the options available to them for studying abroad, a few comments suggested areas in study abroad design that may need further investigation. First, a few of the students specifically expressed the desire they had to participate in a study abroad program that was related to and supportive of their major field of study.
Meredith, for example, was able to overcome the initial stumbling block of not finding any study abroad opportunities that would fit with her degree program:

Unfortunately, for the majors I picked, there were no opportunities to study abroad. There were no programs that I was able to get credit for and I was on what my dad likes to call the four-year plan, like after four years, time’s up, like, tuition’s no longer on us. So I was under time constraints, so, you know, I kind of gave up the idea that I was ever going to study abroad until this program, you know, literally fell into my lap. I ran into [the trip advisor], I was having an Italian club meeting and she wandered in with her son and she was like, “I’m taking people to Italy, do you want to come?” And I said yes and there was really no turning back. (Meredith Interview)

For Meredith, bad program fit and monetary considerations almost cost her the opportunity to study abroad. Perhaps institutions need to take into account students’ desires to be able to finish their college education in four years (or so) and provide more affordable study abroad programs to enhance, rather than hinder, students’ degree progress.

Importance of Re-Entry Programs

Another topic that came up in this study’s discussions pertained to students’ perceived need for more information and training regarding the re-entry process. Many of the students felt cut-off when they returned from their study abroad experience, as though all of the preparation went into sending them to another country rather than into welcoming them home. The students who studied abroad with the intent to learn another language were especially concerned about the apparent lack of post-abroad programming:

One thing I wished they’d had when I got back here is more of an organized thing…to get back together with people that you’d studied abroad with, or with the faculty in the
department. I was a Spanish minor, I finished it over there, I’ve been back here doing journalism since then. [I only use] my Spanish is when I go to [a local Mexican restaurant], you know, and so I wish that there was a more constituted effort to continue that once we got back….There’s some people that studied over there when I was there, but when we hang out, you know, like you meet somebody in English, you’re going to talk in English with them. You meet somebody and the first language you talk is Spanish, you’re going to talk Spanish with them. It’s like whatever language you meet somebody in. So, again, it’s like we have to both make the effort, like “ok.”…I wish that there was more of a, just a language, like, follow-through, like, even just, ‘cuz we got back and it was just sort of like, you know, “ok, thanks for studying abroad”…And I was like, oh, you guys did such an awesome job over there, like, how ‘bout a little bit of a, like I had an introduction course before I went, how ‘bout like an “extraduction,” or whatever word you want to use there. (Ella Focus Group)

Susan was also troubled by the lack of a formal follow-up to her language program in Italy and the evident dearth of language courses available upon her return, though she did take measures of her own to ensure the continued development of her Italian:

[My language skills have] developed since I’ve come back, too. Because I’ve sought after it, I’ve pursued the language a lot. I haven’t been able to take classes in it, I’m taking an Italian film class because they canceled one class here… So, um, Italian’s my language so I want to keep on it. I go online and find things in Italian, read it all the time, I’ve got some Italian books and I just work on it, so. And I’ve keep in touch with some of the various people I met there… I mean, I think I’m the only one from my program who actually continued to actually study the language. (Susan Interview)
Students also had re-entry worries beyond losing their newly-acquired language skills. Becky’s unease, for example, highlighted some of the personal worries the students said they faced before they returned home:

I’m kind of worried about people being different, like the change. I don’t know the trends or, um, how my friends have changed. Like when I’m talking to them, I don’t know the details about it. I only know my close friend, and even my close friend I don’t talk often as I was when I was [home] so I don’t know about it and it’s much busier there. (Becky Interview)

Becky was also worried about completing a job search once she returned to her host country, a concern undoubtedly mirrored by many third- or fourth-year students who choose to study abroad at the end of their formal education.

The message to study abroad program providers offered by these students’ responses was fairly clear: they wanted and needed more assistance with the re-entry program than granted upon their return home. Post-study abroad classes, from Ella’s “extraduction” idea to language-maintaining seminars, would greatly enhance the continuing success of study abroad program alumni.
CHAPTER 5: A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING OF STUDY ABROAD

This final chapter will serve as an amalgamation of the various themes described in chapter four in relation to the original research question(s) and previous studies on study abroad, culture shock, and other related topics. Additionally, suggestions for future research in the field will be explored. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the study’s limitations and the implications of the findings from this study in regard to study abroad program development and administration.

The overarching query guiding this study sought to examine students’ perspective on the impact of participation in a study abroad program. In order to unearth a response to that guiding theme, five specific research questions were posed: (1) What sort of impact does participation in a study abroad program have on its student participants? (2) How are students’ perceptions of the impacts of study abroad similar or different to the effects found or predicted by other scholarly studies? (3) Why do individuals choose to study abroad? (4) Do students think they experienced culture shock? (5) If yes, how does culture shock influence a student's study abroad experience?

As described in the previous chapter, seven themes pertaining to students’ perspective of their study abroad experiences emerged from the data collected from the group of students who participated in this study. These themes, in no particular order of significance, included topics relating to study abroad as goal fulfillment, culture shock and the study abroad experience, perceived influences of studying abroad, learning culture, returning home, the role of social support in study abroad, and student reflections on the study abroad experience. Information was drawn from each of the seven themes to answer the research questions, make further observations, and work toward building theory grounded in the data.
Impacts of Study Abroad

The first two research questions posed for this study focused on the impacts of study abroad on student participants, both the perceived impacts from a student’s viewpoint and the similarity or dissimilarity of such impacts to the influences predicted by the literature. The students who participated in this study reported several different types of impacts they felt were a result of studying abroad. Some impacts were external and included learning about other cultures, recognizing cultural differences, and changing the way one thinks about and behaves toward people from other cultures. Other impacts were internal; the study abroad student imbibed these changes. The types of influences resulting from studying abroad in this grouping included changes in behavior, self-image, personality, maturity, open-mindedness, and life in general. In general, the findings from this study added to the body of literature on the impacts of study abroad. Many of the findings from previous studies were reinforced by the data collected for this thesis.

For example, researchers Myers, Hill, and Harwood (2005) conducted a case study on an interdisciplinary landscape and conservation-based study abroad program in Costa Rica. The North American students who participated in this study reported experiencing impacts from their study abroad experience that were similar to the impacts reported by students in this study. “Students learn new ways of looking at the world, sharing their perspectives, and cooperating with others. They comment that they are more sensitive to cultural values held by those outside the U.S.” (p. 181-182). The students from the Myers, Hill and Harwood study also recognized “North American materialism” (p. 182), a subject that the students from this thesis study also commented on as they recognized previously-unseen facets of their home culture.
A 2006 study by Black and Duhon used a quantitative instrument to measure cultural awareness in students participating in a short-term study abroad program in London, England. The scale was administered twice, once at the start of the summer program and once at its conclusion. Black and Duhon’s scale indicated cultural awareness was enhanced via participation in a study abroad program and that students’ personal development, their self-confidence and independence, was also augmented. These findings were supported by the data collected in this study as many of the students found they had “grown up” or realized they “could do anything” as a result of studying abroad.

Penington and Wildermuth (2005) sought to provide empirical evidence to support the anecdotally-provided claim that study abroad opportunities, specifically short-term programs, allow students to develop greater levels of intercultural competence. Their study, which focused on 19 students who participated in a short-term study abroad program to either Ireland or China, found that significant growth in students’ intercultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, and self-awareness occurred as a result of studying abroad. Also, “though experiencing the disconcerting feelings of being ‘the other’ in their host cultures, students appeared to develop greater empathy, which, in turn, made them more competent communicators” (Penington & Wildermuth, 2005, p. 180). Again, these findings align with the perceptions of the students who participated in this thesis study.

Hadis’ (2005) analysis of the impact of study abroad employed quantitative techniques to measure the degree to which students’ behavior changed after they participated in a study abroad program. The results suggested

[a]lumni from these programs have returned more worldly than before, are more interested in international affairs, read newspapers more often than before going abroad, increase their
fluency in other languages, acquire a more solid knowledge about their host countries’ societies and cultural manifestations, and also show definite signs of personal development: they are more independent, more outgoing, more friendly toward people from other countries, more self-assured and uninhibited about traveling to countries where English is not the first language. (p. 16)

Many of these behavioral changes were mirrored in the information provided by the students in this study; Anna, for example, started reading about world events while Elizabeth, Ella, and Meredith increased their fluency in a second language. Furthermore, most of the students reported feeling more independent after their study abroad experience, and many admitted to developing an “addiction” to international travel after participating in their study abroad experience.

Continuing the trend, personal growth and self-discovery, with an increased sense of personal efficacy attributed as well, were a few of the effects of studying abroad Younes and Asay cited in their 2003 study on the impact of international study experiences on college students. This study examined the influence participation in one of a variety of study abroad programs had on student participants. Again, the impacts were very similar to the ones derived from the student narratives in this investigation.

Clearly, the results from this study are echoes of previous work. In general, studying abroad has been widely demonstrated to have positive effects on students who participate in a program regardless of the program length. This study offers a fresh examination of the topic area for it allows students a voice of their own to describe their experiences. More research could be conducted to continue to gather information regarding students’ perceptions of their time abroad.
Why Study Abroad?

The third research question posed in this study sought to answer why students decide to study abroad. Recent reports demonstrated that only about one percent of college students choose to study abroad (Obst, Bhandari, & Witherell, 2007) despite mass promotion from various universities and the U.S. federal government. The vast majority of students who study abroad are white females (Institute of International Education, 2007), a conundrum that no study has yet been able to explain. This study was not able to solve the gender and race mystery, either, but did provide some new information regarding students’ decisions to study abroad. Currently, the literature in this area is sorely lacking and any contributions would be welcomed.

Students from this study seemed to study abroad for one all-encompassing reason: they wished to fulfill some sort of personal goal. This goal may have been to visit exotic locations in the world, to accomplish a life-long dream, to improve second-language skills, or to fulfill the wish of a family member. Whatever the actual cause, every student seemed to have a goal associated with her enrollment in a study abroad program. Accordingly, a theory relating to students’ study abroad experience emerged from the data: the decision to study abroad is goal-driven. This theory fits Glaser’s (1992) definition of a well-constructed theory because it meets the four central criteria: fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. The theory fits the data because it accurately represents the main thread connecting all of the students’ reasons to study abroad, it continues to work no matter which reason is under examination, it is relevant to students’ real-life experiences and goals, and is, ultimately, modifiable if any new contradicting data arises.

The Relevance of Culture Shock

The final two research questions posed by this study focused on the topic of culture shock. Culture shock appeared to play an active role in students’ study abroad experiences no
matter the length or location of the program. The participants in this study all voiced some sort of culture shock experience, whether it was an unpleasant interaction with an overly-aggressive man in romantic pursuit or the surprise felt when a meal ordered in a restaurant turned out to be much bigger than expected.

Since the students reported incidents of culture shock, the question remained as to how this process influenced their study abroad experience. Initially, the existence of culture shock led students to consciously recognize and compare cultural elements of their home and host cultures. Confronting and feeling shocked by a new cultural phenomenon first produced a bout of self-reflection and analysis. The recognition of such differences allowed students to reflect upon elements of their home culture that had hitherto been unobserved. Boulding (1977) observed that basic patterns of behavior and perception are often processed unconsciously; the human mind is never actively aware of what it does on a regular basis. Such understandings only come into consciousness “where there is a deviation from the familiar” (p. 13). In other words, people only begin to understand some facet of their culture or identity when met with a contrasting element of disparity. “Just as a sense like touch is not noticed until it is violated or disappears, so, too, identity is most salient when it is confronted, perhaps threatened, by difference” (Kramer, 2003, p. 2-3).

Continuing the progression, students were only able to experience the eventual impacts of studying abroad, from developing an open-minded approach to thinking about other cultures to gaining a greater sense of independence to recognizing both benefits and shortcomings in their home culture, when they could recognize cultural differences between their home and host cultures. A conscious or unconscious decision had to be made in which the students decided how to respond to these differences; this choice eventuated in how students responded to their study
abroad experience. Most of the students turned their incidences of culture shock into positive impacts in their lives, reflecting Kim’s (1995) belief that “once the initial phase [of shock] has been successfully managed, people almost always develop more refined and positive views toward the host society and toward themselves” (p. 191).

The idea that emerged from this section of the data reflected the major impact culture shock, even in tiny amounts, seemed to have on students’ study abroad experiences. Many of the stories and other examples shared by the students about how their participation in a study abroad program “changed their lives” could be traced back to an underlying root in culture shock. More research needs to be done before this idea can be called a theory but its initial support lies grounded in the data.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study contribute to the literature on study abroad, culture shock, and grounded theory and have practical implications for the coordinators and administrators of study abroad programming. Information provided by this study can be used for study abroad program development, the assessment of students’ study abroad experiences, and initial inquiry into future research projects. Perhaps the most pressing issue introduced by this study revolves around the desperate need for the further development and implementation of re-entry programs for when students return from abroad. The call voiced by the students from this study for such “extraduction” programs also resounds through the literature.

A 2004 study conducted by Koskinen and Tossavainen examined the process of learning intercultural competence undergone by Finnish college students studying abroad in England. The findings of this study reinforced the notion that orientation and re-entry sessions are just as an important part of the study abroad experience as the program itself, though are often sadly
lacking in structure. The re-entry process was especially lacking quality in the Koskinen and Tossavainen study. “At re-entry, the study abroad period seemed to remain an isolated part of the student’s personality and life that included unprocessed components” (2004, p. 118)

The previously-discussed Penington and Wildermuth (2005) study also provided support for the notion that the study abroad experience should incorporate more than the time spent abroad. In this study, emphasis was placed on the providing of background information before students went overseas; “it was the combination of the lived experience and the background that they had received in their pre-departure classes or while in-country that made the culture ‘come alive’” (p. 180).

A study on how out-of-class activities helped a group of students learn more about their host culture during a long-term program in Ireland also noted the importance of re-entry programs. Such programs, Langley and Breese (2005) insisted, “should provide students with the opportunity to follow up on behavior changes” (p. 320), such as better treatment toward minority groups and an increased interest in other cultures, they were expected to face upon their return to the U.S.

**Limitations of the Research**

This exploratory study has several limitations. First, the study worked with only a few variations of the many possible study abroad program possibilities. Since study abroad programs exist in a multitude of shapes and forms in almost any country, the ten snapshots of study abroad experiences provided by the students in this study may only begin to encapsulate the entire student study abroad experience. The ten students were also all female, meaning male voices were left unheard. Furthermore, grounded theory in general is a very interpretative form of data analysis and, in this case, was based on the self-reported personal narratives of study abroad
participants. Both the providing of the data and the analyzing of the narratives is subject to personal interpretation and, possibly, some form of partiality. For example, the student respondents may have had concerns talking about certain topics in front of their peers at the focus group, or they may have provided written narratives or interview responses they thought the researcher wanted to document.

Conclusion

Clearly, intercultural challenges still exist for the design and evaluation of study abroad programs. One way to gauge the effectiveness of study abroad programs is to examine the perspectives of the students who participated in it. Students’ responses suggested that studying abroad, even for a short time, does produce certain effects in student participants, whether the students are cognizant of the effects or not. “Any trip outside the United States can be a learning opportunity for students…even a short-term trip can inform students about cultural differences and encourage global understanding” (Mapp, McFarland, & Newell 2007).

As the results of this study and other like it demonstrate, study abroad can provide an unmatchable experience for the students who choose to participate. In future years it will be important to continue to make study abroad opportunities available to students, and it will be just as important to continue research in this area so the existing study abroad programs will be as effective as possible. If Congress’ acts are successful (S. 3744, 2006; H. R. 1469, 2007), the number of students studying abroad per year will increase to at least one million students by the end of the next decade. Understanding the impact study abroad can have on students and tailoring the study abroad programs to encourage positive influences will help these students best benefit from a study abroad experience.
REFERENCES


Dear BGSU Education Abroad alumni,

You are invited to volunteer for a research study on the impact participation in a study abroad program has on student participants. As part of my work on my Master’s thesis in the School of Communication Studies, I am conducting a research study of why individuals choose to study abroad and what factors influences a student's study abroad experience. This study may help educators better understand what students think about their study abroad experience and the impact such an experience has had in their lives.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete a short background information form, participate in a 90-minute focus group session with five-nine other students, and schedule and participate in a 30-45-minute personal interview. Overall, your time commitment to this study is 2-2.25 hours. Two focus group sessions are scheduled; please choose to attend the one that best fits into your schedule:

Focus Group A: [TIME-TIME, DATE, PLACE]
Focus Group B: [TIME-TIME, DATE, PLACE]

The personal interviews can be arranged for almost any time during the month of March; once you agree to participate in this study we can set up an interview time that works best for you.

If you wish to participate, please e-mail me (learmma@bgsu.edu) by [DATE]. Include your name, which focus group session you’d like to attend, and a few times/dates that might work for your personal interview. I have attached an informed consent form for you to read if you want more information about my study. Please be aware that e-mail is not 100% secure, so anything you send to me might be intercepted by a third party.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at learmma@bgsu.edu or (419)807-8460 or Dr. Lara Martin Lengel, my faculty advisor, at lengell@bgsu.edu or (419)372-7653.

Thank you so much for considering taking part in my study!

Sincerely,
Meg Learman
MA Student
School of Communication Studies
Bowling Green State University
learmma@bgsu.edu
419-807-8460
Dear BGSU Education Abroad alumni,

THANK YOU TO THOSE WHO HAVE ALREADY Responded!

About a week ago you received an invitation to participate in a research project on the impact participation in a study abroad program has on student participants. As part of my work on my Master’s thesis in the School of Communication Studies, I am conducting a research study of why individuals choose to study abroad and what factors influences a student's study abroad experience. This study may help educators better understand what students think about their study abroad experience and the impact such an experience has had in their lives.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete a short background information form, participate in a 90-minute focus group session with five-nine other students, and schedule and participate in a 30-45-minute personal interview. Overall, your time commitment to this study is 2-2.25 hours. Two focus group sessions are scheduled; please choose to attend the one that best fits into your schedule:

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The personal interviews can be arranged for almost any time during the month of March; once you agree to participate in this study we can set up an interview time that works best for you.

If you wish to participate, please e-mail me (learmma@bgsu.edu) by [DATE]. Include your name, which focus group session you’d like to attend, and a few times/dates that might work for your personal interview. I have attached an informed consent form for you to read if you want more information about my study. Please be aware that e-mail is not 100% secure, so anything you send to me might be intercepted by a third party.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at learmma@bgsu.edu or (419)807-8460 or Dr. Lara Martin Lengel, my faculty advisor, at lengell@bgsu.edu or (419)372-7653.

Thank you so much for considering taking part in my study!

Sincerely,

Meg Learman
MA Student
School of Communication Studies
Bowling Green State University
learmma@bgsu.edu
419-807-8460
APPENDIX C:
REMINDER E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANTS
IN THESIS RESEARCH
(APRIL 2008)

Dear [STUDENT NAME],

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in the study I’m conducting on the impact participation in a study abroad program has on student participants. Just a reminder, you’ve signed up to take part in a focus group session on [TIME, DATE, PLACE].

You’re also arranged to have a personal interview at [TIME, DATE, PLACE]. Hopefully this time still works for you, but if something has come up please let me know and we’ll reschedule for a different time.

-OR-
We still need to schedule a time that works for you to have your personal interview. Please let me know what day and time you’re available to chat for 30-45 minutes.

I look forward to seeing you soon!

Thanks,
Meg Learman
MA Student
School of Communication Studies
Bowling Green State University
learmma@bgsu.edu
419-807-8460
INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

_you must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study._

**Project Title:** “Through a Different Lens: Students’ Perspective on the Impact of Study Abroad.”

**Principal Investigator:** Megan A. Learman, MA Student (learmma@bgsu.edu)

**Contact Information:** My e-mail address, contact number, and mailing address and those of my faculty advisor are on the bottom of this page.

**Purpose of the Research Study**

You are invited to volunteer for a research study on the impact participation in a study abroad program has on student participants. As part of my work on my Master’s thesis in the School of Communication Studies, I am conducting a research study of why individuals choose to study abroad and how/if culture shock influences a student's study abroad experience.

**Procedures**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete a background information form, participate in a 90-minute focus group session with five-nine other students, and schedule and participate in a 30-45-minute personal interview. Overall, your time commitment to this study is 2-2.25 hours.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

*Risks:* there are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study other than those encountered in normal daily life.

*Benefits:* you will be participating in a research project that aims to show the impact study abroad participation can have on students. Your participation will help further research on culture shock and study abroad in general. As an individual, you will have the opportunity to talk with other people about your own reactions to, ideas about, and perspectives on your study abroad experience.

**Confidentiality**

I ask you to please keep confidential the information discussed during our focus group session. Even though I will know who filled out the questionnaire and took part in the focus group and interview, no identifying information or names will be used in my final thesis/presentation/etc. While the focus group will be videotaped and the interviews audiotaped, I am the only one who will view or hear the tapes for transcription purposes. All tapes will be destroyed at the end of the study. Please be aware, however, that direct quotes from the transcripts may be used, though they will not be linked to your real name in any way. Please be aware that these quotes may provide enough information to identify you.
Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not result in penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without penalty and without affecting your relationship to the university or education abroad/study abroad office.

Contacts and Questions

Primary Researcher: Megan A. Learman, MA Student: learmma@bgsu.edu or 419-807-8460
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Lara Martin Lengel, Associate Professor: lengell@bgsu.edu or 419-372-7653

You are encouraged to contact me or my advisor if you have any questions.

You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
If you are not given a copy of this consent form, please request one.

I have read the information above, have had my questions answered, and consent to participate in the study titled, “Through a Different Lens: Students’ Perspective on the Impact of Study Abroad.”

_____________________________ _____________________________ ____________
Printed Name Signature Date
APPENDIX E:
PERSONAL DATA QUESTIONNAIRE
(APRIL 2008)

Background Information

Name: _____________________________________________________________

Preferred Pseudonym: ____________________________________________

(This name will be used in lieu of your real name when I write my thesis)

Year of Birth ____________________  Gender: M___  F___

Race: ____________________________

Major/Minor: ____________________________________________________

Hometown/State: _________________________________________________

Class Status:

___Freshman  ___5th Year Senior

___Sophomore  ___Graduate Student

___Junior  ___Other: ______________________

___Senior

Have you ever traveled abroad before?

YES  NO

If yes, when? For how long? In which country/countries?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Have you ever studied abroad before?

YES  NO

If yes, when? For how long? In which country/countries?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
On a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the best rating and 1 being the worst, how would you rate your study abroad experience overall? If you have participated in more than one study abroad experience, please rate your most recent trip.

Worst 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Best

Why did you give your study abroad experience this score?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What would you say to someone who was thinking about studying abroad? What advice would you give to this person?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
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______________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX F:
LIST OF POSSIBLE FOCUS GROUP
AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
(APRIL 2008)

Focus Group Questions

1. Why did you choose to study abroad?
2. What was your study abroad experience like?
3. What was the easiest part of studying in another country?
4. What was the most difficult part of studying in another country?
5. Did you have any problems with the phenomenon of “culture shock?”
6. How did you deal with culture shock symptoms?
7. Have you noticed any changes in your attitudes toward other cultures since you studied abroad?
8. Have you noticed any changes in your attitudes toward your own culture?
9. What was your favorite part of your study abroad experience?
10. What was your least favorite part of your study abroad experience?
11. Did you notice any specific cultural differences between your host culture and your home culture?
12. Were you homesick at all? How did you deal with it?
13. What did you miss most about home?
14. What do you miss most about the host culture now that you’re home?
15. Do you have anything else you’d like to share regarding your study abroad experience?

Interview Questions

1. What study abroad program did you participate in? (Where was it located? When did you go? How long was it?)
2. What was the program like?
3. Why did you choose to study abroad?
4. What made you decide to study in this type of program (short term, summer duration)?
5. Did you consider any other types of study abroad programs?
6. Do you speak the language of your host culture? (I.e. “Do you speak Italian?”)
7. How did knowing the language/not knowing the language impact your experience in the host culture?

8. Have you studied abroad before? If so, how was that experience similar/different?

9. Have you traveled abroad before? How was your travel abroad experience similar/different from your study abroad experience?

10. If at all, how did your participation in the study abroad program influence you?

11. Would you study abroad again? Travel internationally again? Why or why not?