RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: SOCIOCULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AFFECTING U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS’ REENTRY ADJUSTMENT AFTER STUDYING ABROAD IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Patricia Kubow, Advisor

This phenomenological study of six U.S. undergraduate students sought to capture the psychological and sociocultural experiences of reentry adjustment upon return from studying abroad in Africa and its relationship with identity. Emphasis was also placed upon understanding the value of the African study abroad experience. This study analyzed the reentry experiences of the participants from one public, Midwestern university who had returned from studying abroad for two to six weeks in either Burkina-Faso or South Africa. Findings illustrated the unexpected difficulties participants faced as they adjusted back to U.S. culture upon return. Participants reported feeling isolated and misunderstood by their family and friends and guilty for their own material items. A critical view of the U.S. media and values of materialism and consumerism were also reported. Cultural, ethnic, and American identities were all modified as a result of the study abroad experience. Appreciation for the host cultures’ higher values for human relationships was also addressed. Thus, this study found that the participants experienced various degrees of personal growth and identity transformation while in Africa and it was the reentry process that made the participants aware of these newfound internal changes. As such, the reentry adjustment process illustrates the participants’ psychological and sociocultural reactions to their awareness of these changes and often sparks a sense of identity conflict as the individuals attempt to navigate their way between their identities adopted in the host culture and readjustment back into the home culture.

Keywords: study abroad, reentry adjustment, Africa, college students, cultural identity, American identity, ethnic identity
“After all of our exploration we will return to the place we started and know it for the first time.” - T.S. Elliot
To the Xhosa people who inspired this journey and the men and women who shared their experiences with me. Thank you.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the number of United States college students studying abroad has significantly doubled to 270,604 students as of the 2009-10 academic year as opposed to the 160,000 students studying abroad in 2001-02 (Institute of International Education, 2012). The 2011 Open Doors Report illustrated which countries, programs, and lengths of time most U.S. students chose when going abroad. Specifically, while the majority of students study in Western European countries, more and more are choosing other locations as they provide unique cultural and lingual opportunities Western European countries cannot. In the 2009-10 academic year, the five most popular destinations, in order, were the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France and China (IIE, 2012). At the same time, the most recent report found that the top 14 of 25 destinations were outside of Western Europe, showing an increase in interest in studying in non-traditional locations (IIE, 2012).

As this interest in studying in non-traditional locations is increasing, the number of U.S. college students studying in Africa is rising as well to 14,738 or 5% of all college students studying abroad during the 2009-10 academic year (IIE, 2012). Often developing countries’ social and economic statuses are compared to those of industrialized nations creating concerns of safety and thwarting one’s desire to study abroad at one of the developing countries’ programs (Pires, 2000). However, as the interest in non-traditional study abroad programs is rising, more and more universities are creating exchange programs with African countries. Advocates for study abroad in Africa highlight its unique programs which offer service-learning components as part of an experiential learning model (Lowe, Dozier, Hunt-Hurst & Smith, 2008; Pires, 2000). By doing so, the programs build knowledge in the classroom as well as offer practical applications in real-life settings, such as a school or hospital, within the host culture. U.S. college
students participating in the African study abroad experience are thus exposed to non-Western perspectives and cultural values that are often quite different from their own.

When college students depart for Africa and arrive at their study abroad destination, they enter into an entirely different cultural system and begin encountering many unfamiliar social situations. Some may experience a certain degree of culture shock as they experience different social situations than what they are used to in their home culture (Gill, 2007; Hunley, 2010). Given their willingness to keep an open mind, the students begin to construct meaning out of their new experiences and begin to successfully adapt within their host culture (Gill, 2007). It is the significance of these new constructions of meaning and adaptation to a different culture and their relationship with reentry to the student’s home culture that often gets overlooked. For college students who remained open to the host culture and adapted to it, they often experienced a sense of personal growth during this time (Kim, 2008). It is the colliding of both newly adapted worldviews from the host culture and old home cultural values that are brought to the surface upon reentry to the home culture and cause the college student to become aware of a change in his/her identity.

**Background of the Study**

While sojourners are often prepared to encounter culture shock during the first weeks in the host culture while abroad, many are not anticipating that they may encounter reverse culture shock or reentry adjustment upon returning to the U.S. As reentry adjustment may often be unexpected, it can prove to be more difficult than the initial culture shock experienced upon arrival to the host culture (Martin & Harrell, 1996). While the process of reentry adjustment entails transitioning back into familiar surroundings after a cross-cultural experience, it may contain both positive and negative effects for the sojourner (Sussman, 2000; Uehara, 1986).
Some researchers state that positive expectations and previous cross-cultural experience abroad influence the ease with which individuals adjust to their home culture (Martin & Harrell, 1996). Others claim that the more successful the sojourner is in adapting to the host culture, the greater the difficulty in reentry adjustment (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Uehara, 1986). While some U.S. college students experience minimal stress during reentry, others report feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and identity conflict (Gaw, 2000; Rogers & Ward, 1993).

During reentry, college students are often faced with the reality of their study abroad experience and how it has affected them after they return home. Often associated with the student’s adaptation to the host culture, difficulty during reentry adjustment may be the result of internal conflicts between host cultural values and home cultural values (Adler, 1981). In the literature, it is well documented that college students experience personal growth and identity transformations during the study abroad experience (Adler, 1981; Hunley, 2010; Jewitt, 2010; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Many college students often report cultural identity conflicts due to the adoption of host cultural values and value confusion they experience after returning home (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). It is due to the students’ realizations that they view their home culture differently and have a newfound awareness of their personal growth that they begin to experience psychological and sociocultural difficulties once home.

This study employs Kim’s (2001) stress-adaptation-growth dynamic model to illustrate the intercultural adaptation process and steps that lead to one’s personal growth and identity reconstruction. Kim’s model explains how the concepts of acculturation and deculturation affect the internal processes of an individual’s experience in a different cultural context. She explains that each moment the individual finds him/herself having to adapt to the host culture, for instance walking a half mile to retrieve water to drink, the individual experiences an internal
disequilibrium until he/she decides to either adapt to that practice or remain tied to his/her home culture’s views of drinking water. As the individual adapts to more of the host culture’s practices, he/she unlearns some of his/her old cultural practices, also known as deculturation. Thus, the greater the acculturation to the host culture, the greater the change in personal growth and identity.

As Africa has many cultures known to be fundamentally different than the dominant U.S. culture, U.S. college students will most likely encounter several social and cultural practices with which they will need to adapt. The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic and Adler’s (1981) coping strategies illustrate the process of identity reconstruction in U.S. college students returning from study abroad in Africa and will contribute to an understanding of the relationship between identity reconstruction and reentry adjustment. In addition, the relationship between identity and the psychological and sociocultural factors affecting U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment will further be explained through this process.

Justification for the Study

As previously mentioned, U.S. college student study abroad rates have increased exponentially in the last decade (IIE, 2012; Stroud, 2010). Because of this, several studies have been conducted with students who have studied abroad across the world. While the experience of culture shock abroad has thoroughly been studied, the interest in reverse culture shock or reentry adjustment research has been more recent (Christofí & Thompson, 2007). As many quantitative research studies have uncovered key difficulties that exist during reentry, the reentry research has failed to describe the experience (Christofí & Thompson, 2006; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991). Although Christofí and Thompson have conducted two phenomenological studies on the reentry adjustment of eight college students from Europe, there
is still little research that focuses directly on U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment after studying abroad (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). Thus, not only will this study contribute specifically to the U.S. college student reentry adjustment literature, it also contributes to the few studies on U.S. college students studying abroad in a non-traditional location and the effects it has on their reentry adjustment. This study will provide benefits to the body of literature concerning reentry adjustment and study abroad students as well as to the participants and society as a whole.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the psychological and sociocultural factors influencing reentry adjustment of U.S. college students who have studied abroad in Africa. Additionally, the research study aims to better understand the experience of reentry adjustment and its relationship with an individual’s identity. This study employed qualitative phenomenological methods to capture the true essence of reentry adjustment in six U.S. college students returning from studying abroad in Africa.

As there are no phenomenological studies focusing on U.S. college students studying abroad in Africa, it is my intention to broaden the scope of the literature by focusing on one of the non-traditional places U.S. college students choose to study. In addition to contributions to the literature, this study will also provide greater insight into difficulties in reentry adjustment and allow for mental health professionals to better understand how to provide proper treatment for this population. Also, the study has the potential to provide higher education institutions with recommendations to provide services that better prepare their students for sociocultural and psychological challenges they may face while overseas and upon their return. In addition, understanding the reentry adjustment process and the impact of the African study abroad
experience on U.S. college students may increase the value of short-term study abroad programs in Africa as well as aid in breaking common stereotypes and misconceptions of African countries.

This study also has the potential to benefit the participant as well. Allowing the participants to discuss their experiences and the potential challenges they faced may aid in a better understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the participants will have the opportunity to meet others who shared the same experiences providing a safe environment to share their thoughts and feelings about the phenomenon. It is my hope that by the end of the study, through reflection, each participant has a greater understanding and appreciation for their experience.

This study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the psychological and sociocultural experiences that U.S. college students face upon their return from studying abroad in an African context?
2. How are U.S. college students’ identities influenced by their African study abroad experience after they have returned to the U.S.?
3. How is the African study abroad experience valuable?

Organization of the Chapters

The structure of this thesis is divided into five chapters to guide the reader through the introduction of the field of study and research questions, provide a thorough review of the literature relevant to the research questions, detail how the research study was carried out, and reveal the findings and implications of the study. Following the introduction, Chapter II provides an extensive review of the literature related to components of identity, study abroad, reentry adjustment, and the value of study abroad programs in Africa. Of particular interest are the descriptions of psychological and sociocultural difficulties of reentry adjustment as well as

Chapter III provides the phenomenological methods used to collect and analyze data for the study. One-hour individual interviews, a one-hour focus group, and participant journals were used to collect data. The chapter also provides demographic information about the six participants along with a detailed description of data collection and analysis techniques used.

Chapter IV employs a phenomenological method to illustrate the findings of the study. Lengthy excerpts from the participants are used to capture the true essence of the reentry adjustment experience. The findings are organized into major themes by data source, specifically, seven major findings emerged from the individual interviews, three major findings from the focus group, and one major finding from the participant journals.

Chapter V discusses the findings illustrated in Chapter IV and connects them to the literature within the context of identity reconstruction, reentry adjustment, and the value of the African study abroad experience. In this way, the research questions are addressed and connected to the findings.

The thesis concludes with a chapter summarizing the participants’ experiences of reentry adjustment and offers implications for the study and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of the current literature that examines identity development and its role in the study abroad experience as well as the psychological and sociocultural effects of readjusting to one’s home culture after studying abroad. The central goal of this chapter is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the experience of reentry adjustment and its relationship with identity. However, before one can understand the relationship between reentry adjustment and identity, one must first understand what characterizes identity. Thus, the chapter is designed to first introduce the nuances of identity, explore how the study abroad experience may influence identity, merge these constructs with the psychological and sociocultural factors known to affect U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment upon their return to their home culture, and finally, illustrate the value of the African study abroad experience.

Markers of Identity

Identity is the product of an individual’s inherent quest to make sense of his or her place in society. Erik Erikson (1959; 1994) describes identity formation as a process that begins as soon as an individual is born. He explains personal identity as the way an individual organizes his or her experiences within an environment in relation to one’s sense of self (Erikson, 1959; 1994). Moreover, one’s personal identity is depicted as a core sense of self defined through the personal meaning, traits, and characteristics one exercises and associates with an experience or membership to a group (Deaux, 1993; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). However, in order for an individual’s personal identity to have meaning, it must be applied to a social context which he/she has experienced (Deaux, 1993; Erikson, 1959; 1994; Frey & Tropp, 2006; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Torres et al., 2009). Once formed, identity is maintained, modified, or even reconstructed through the individual’s experiences in various social contexts throughout his or
her life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Deaux, 1993). Thus, as identity is achieved, one develops a subjective feeling of consistency and continuity of his or her sense of self across varying situations that aids in serving as a guide when making significant life choices (Erikson, 1959; 1994; Savicki & Cooley, 2011) and enabling expression of one’s authentic sense of self (Shields, 2008). In order to organize and make meaning of one’s experiences in various social contexts, social identities help to categorize one’s experiences in relation to their meaning or particular context.

**Social identities.** To better understand the complexity of identity, Deaux (1993) describes identity as multi-faceted in the sense that it is made up of varying dimensions dependent on social context. She describes these dimensions as social identities and illustrates them as relatively stable roles or membership groups of which an individual claims to be a representative (Deaux, 1993). In addition to possessing general stability, social identities often demonstrate duration and permanence (Deaux, 1993). While the expression of these identities may differ according to situation, the structure remains relatively stable with the exception of pertinent changes in internal priorities or external environment (Deaux, 1993). Collectively, these social identities provide the framework and meaning of one’s personal identity. In order to understand an individual’s personal identity, one must understand the individual’s social identities or membership categories of which one claims to be a part of and how these categories influence one another and combine to form meaning in that individual’s life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Deaux, 1993). In this way, when a U.S. college student studies abroad in Africa, one or many of his/her social identities may shift as his/her external environment becomes vastly different. For instance, the student’s gender identity may be influenced by
different social customs and norms that treat the student’s gender differently than what he/she is used to in his/her own culture.

**Gender identity.** From a contemporary American standpoint, gender is defined as a social construct that assigns particular behavioral expectations and social roles to individuals who identify traditionally as either a man or a woman (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). In one’s society, the individual learns through his/her social institutions what the acceptable forms of gender expression are for males and females (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Risman, 2004; Wilchins, 2002). Therefore, gender is contextual as individuals express their gender depending on the cultural, social, and power dynamics of a situation (Shields & Dicicco, 2011). Additionally, sexual anatomy is often associated with gender; however, this is not always the case as some individuals possess the biological characteristics associated with one gender yet personally identify with the other or both genders (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Wilchins, 2002). Thus, gender is complex as it is a socially constructed spectrum of masculine and feminine behaviors influenced by social and cultural factors (Risman, 2004).

Wilchins (2002) defines gender identity as an individual’s internal sense of self as male, female, or an identity within or outside of these categories. By adolescence, most individuals have begun to conceptualize the degree to which they exemplify their supposed gender category, their contentedness with their gender category, whether they want to explore gender categories or conform to gender stereotypes, and whether they feel power and status differences between genders (Egan & Perry, 2001). Individuals are aware of socially acceptable forms of gender expression and have a higher self-esteem the more content they are with their own gender identity (Egan & Perry, 2001). While Western society offers general guidelines and norms for gender expression, gender identity is exemplified by how individuals make meaning of the
personal characteristics they possess and the way in which they interpret these traits within the masculine and feminine scales (Shields & Dicicco, 2011; Wilchins, 2002). Additionally, gender identity is often fluid throughout one’s lifetime as individuals encounter various social contexts that influence the way they may identify within or outside of the male or female categories (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Wilchins, 2002). Consequently, a male college student may encounter a cultural context in Africa in which he feels more connected to the host culture’s male societal roles and then proceeds to reconstruct a new interpretation of his gender identity. In the same way, ethnic identity may also be influenced during the study abroad experience.

**Ethnic identity.** Ethnic identity is defined as the “self constructed understanding of oneself in terms of one’s cultural and ethnic background and the attitudes and feelings associated with that background. It is an internalization of the meaning and implications of one’s group membership” (Phinney, 2005, p. 189). Phinney describes ethnic identity as “not something that one has or does not have; it is, rather, a changing sense of self influenced by both developmental and contextual factors” (2005, p. 190). Often, ethnic identity is confused with racial identity, yet these concepts express two separate ideas. Racial identity is constructed on the basis of one’s physical appearance and the way in which others respond to that appearance in juxtaposition with the history and beliefs in society of the group associated with that appearance (Phinney, 2005). In contrast, ethnic identity is founded on the basis of an individual’s ancestral heritage, values and attitudes that accompany that heritage, and the position of the heritage group within a society (Phinney, 2005). Additionally, ethnic identity is often dynamic as one continues to make meaning of the self in relation to his/her ethnic and cultural groups through an active process of investigation, learning, and commitment (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Thus, as a U.S. college student is introduced to new ethnic and cultural groups in Africa for an extended length of time, they
may develop an ethnic identity that fits into the host cultural schema. With a better understanding of how ethnic identity influences an individual, it is also important to understand how ethnic identity is related to ethnicity.

Ethnicity is defined as one’s ancestral heritage or culture of origin of one’s parents and grandparents (Phinney, 2005). Thus, ethnic identity is often associated with the concepts of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic self-labeling’ (Phinney, 2005). However, while important, Phinney (2005) discusses how these concepts should not necessarily be linked to one’s ethnic identity. Phinney explains that individuals from similar ethnic backgrounds have provided evidence of showing similar patterns in values, beliefs, and behaviors when compared to other ethnic and cultural groups. While these patterns exist at the group level, one’s membership to an ethnic group does not determine how one interprets and experiences one’s ethnicity (Phinney, 2005). In the same way, ethnic self-labels are the categories one subscribes to when explaining ethnicity (Phinney, 2005). Individuals may label themselves in terms of their ethnic culture, mainstream culture, or both (Phinney, 2005). Furthermore, people may label themselves differently depending on the way a question is articulated or the context in which the question of their ethnicity was asked (Phinney, 2005). For instance, Phinney (2005) provides the example of a woman whose grandparents immigrated to the U.S. from China. In terms of ethnicity, she may, by U.S. standards, be considered Chinese American; however she may prefer to label herself as Chinese, American, or Asian American. Thus, one’s cultural attitudes and behaviors are not necessarily related to the labels individuals assign themselves (Phinney, 2005). While ethnicity and ethnic self-labeling contribute to the explanation of one’s ethnic background and ethnic group memberships, they do not define one’s ethnic identity (Phinney, 2005).
Ethnic identity is also related to well-being and self-esteem (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). Phinney et al. (1997) conducted a study on 669 American-born high school students (372 Latinos, 232 African Americans, and 65 White adolescents) to examine ethnic and American identity in relation to self-esteem. The researchers found that ethnic identity can be used as a predictor of self-esteem depending on whether individuals identify as part of the ethnic majority or ethnic minority (Phinney et al., 1997; Umaña-Taylor, 2004). For example, ethnic identity tends to be stronger among groups that experience more discrimination (Phinney et al., 1997) and in settings where one is in the minority (Umaña-Taylor, 2004). Phinney et al. (1997) also found that when individuals are in ethnically diverse contexts, the higher their ethnic identity and positive feelings toward their ethnic group, the higher their self-esteem. Yet, individuals who have negative attitudes or are uncommitted to their ethnicity have been shown to have lower self-esteem (Phinney et al., 1997). Additionally, when researchers studied ethnic majority youths in the U.S., they found that ethnic identity was less salient for these individuals when compared to ethnic minority youths, thus demonstrating the weak relationship between the ethnic majority’s self-esteem and ethnic identities (Umaña-Taylor, 2004). Furthermore, individual self-esteem is influenced by one’s own commitment to and attitudes about one’s group, rather than evaluations of one’s group by others (Phinney et al., 1997). While the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity is significant, people have choices in the ways in which they interpret their assigned ethnic categories and in the meanings and emphases that they place on their group membership (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Thus, if White U.S. college students in the ethnic majority leave the U.S. to become a part of the ethnic minority in an African country, there is a greater likelihood that they may develop a stronger ethnic identity.
Cultural identity. Before one can understand cultural identity, culture must first be defined. Culture encompasses behavioral patterns, attitudes and values, language and communication patterns, religious beliefs and rituals, tools for daily use, and often gender roles that are shared among individuals (Schall, 2010). Culture may also be tied to a particular geographical location and context among people (Schall, 2010). It is through these contextual tools and social roles that individuals make meaning of a culture. At the same time, cultures are not static; they grow as they interact with other cultures and are influenced by time and technology (Schall, 2010). Furthermore, many people participate in several cultures that vary in importance to their lives through the assorted groups with which they belong (Schall, 2010). Because culture is not an autonomous entity, people have multi-faceted relationships within each culture that they participate in as different aspects of their identity are simultaneously interacting with one another (Schall, 2010).

Cultural identity is an individual’s mental framework in which one understands his/her way of being, interprets social cues, chooses his/her behaviors, responds to his/her surroundings, and evaluates the actions of other people (Sussman, 2000). In addition, geographic location and a shared language may also be attributes utilized in the understanding of one’s cultural identity (Sussman, 2000). According to Sussman’s (2000) comprehensive research on cultural identity amongst numerous cultures, cultural identity becomes a reference for self-definition and a way of ordering social expectations and relationships. A person often identifies with multiple cultures, all practicing their own language, social norms, and behaviors (Schall, 2010). The salience of a particular culture in an individual’s life is influenced by the contexts in which they are involved (Schall, 2010; Sussman, 2000).
While cultural identities inform individuals’ interpretations of events and ultimately shape their worldviews, cultures in which a group shares a particular identity through its daily interactions often go unrecognized (Schall, 2010). Schall (2010) defines worldview as a particular understanding of the world based on one’s cultural identity and social group memberships that inform the individual of broad domains of life including human nature, interpersonal relationships, physical nature, time and one’s environment. When exhibiting social behaviors among a culture that exercises these behaviors and practices, these social expectations and actions often become normalized and considered the standard within a group, leaving less room for these commonly accepted practices to be questioned or acknowledged by the members of the cultural group (Sussman, 2000). This lack of acknowledgement can lead to ethnocentrism, when an individual perceives one’s own cultural characteristics and identities as the norm and correct way of life and the cultural characteristics and identities of others as incorrect and inferior (Schall, 2010). While ethnocentric people often share multiple cultural identities, they share them with cultures closely related to their own (Schall, 2010). Because culture and cultural identity is fundamental to an individual’s reality, it may be difficult to understand other cultures and their differences (Brandhorst, 2002). Learning and accepting various cultures is easier when the cultures are similar in social norms, while learning about cultures widely different from one’s cultural identity may take deliberate effort and a sense of open mindedness (Schall, 2010). Hence, it is important for U.S. college students studying abroad in Africa to be aware of how their conscious efforts to maintain an open mind while abroad may influence how they view their African host culture and make meaning of their experiences.

*National identity.* A nation is defined as an imagined political community whose members are limited to the physical boundaries that separate them from other nations (Anderson,
1991). It is imagined because the members of a nation will never meet a majority of the other members within that nation, thus within the minds of the individuals lies the communion of the nation’s members (Anderson, 1991). Additionally, it is an imagined community because, despite the inequalities and exploitation that occurs within the nation, this sense of membership appears as a deep, equal comradeship (Anderson, 1991). It is these elements that help to conceptualize national identity.

National identity can therefore be defined as an individual’s self-constructed understanding of his/her nation’s political and social struggles in addition to one’s shared beliefs, language, geographic location, and lifestyle within the nation (Calhoun, 1993). While national identity relates closely with cultural identity (as they both often are defined by shared aspects of an individual’s culture), the political and historical elements are associated with the former. Moreover, belonging to a nation unites both the living and dead members of the nation through the transmission of the nation’s history and ongoing teachings of significant members’ biographies (Calhoun, 1993). For instance, national identity has been found to be stronger when a nation is or has been threatened militarily (Calhoun, 1993). In addition, one’s sense of self-respect is also associated with the esteem to which one’s national group is attributed (Kymlicka, 1995). If one’s nation is not generally respected throughout the global community, one’s own dignity and identity may be threatened (Kymlicka, 1995). Finally, national identity is most often sustained through rituals of patriotism and traditions that originated from that particular nation (Dolby, 2004). Thus, when U.S. college students study abroad in Africa, they may encounter social situations with individuals who view the U.S. differently than they do. This may cause the students to critically reflect upon their own beliefs about the U.S., thereby impacting their national identity and potentially their reentry adjustment once home.
American identity. In conjunction with the previously mentioned social identities, national identity also varies in importance depending upon the individual (Phinney et al., 1997). Specifically in the U.S., national identity is not as strong when compared with other countries such as Japan or Ireland (Sussman, 2000). As the U.S. is a pluralistic nation composed of varying ethnicities, races, and cultures, the concept of an ‘American’ is not interpreted in the same way by every citizen (Phinney et al., 2007). Because of this, various perspectives and beliefs of what defines America are created (Spencer, 2011). Through these differences in perspectives and the awareness of historical contradictions, many Americans find it difficult to develop a strong attachment to their identity as an American (Spencer, 2011). This may be partly due to the fact that the U.S. is considered a loose culture (Sussman, 2000). Specifically, loose cultures often provide few guidelines for how their members are supposed to behave and place lower value on maintaining their national identity (Sussman, 2000). Because the U.S. identifies as a loose culture, its members generally place lower importance on maintaining their American identity and also show less of an awareness of their national identity (Sussman, 2000). Thus, when Americans are interviewed about their American identity, the connotations of being American are most commonly conveyed in a broader sense, claiming language and history as the most pertinent commonalities shared between citizens in the U.S. (Dolby, 2004; Kymlicka, 1995). Consequently, a shared sense of national identity as an American is maintained through rituals of patriotism and traditions referencing American history and shared values of the nation (Dolby, 2004).

Intersectionality. Social identities all differ in centrality to one’s core sense of self and achievement of one’s personal identity. In this case, one’s gender, cultural, ethnic, racial and national identities do not function independently of one another, rather they intersect (Shields &
Intersectionality is defined as the mutually constitutive relations between social identities that influence the definition of particular meanings and experiences (Shields, 2008; Warner, 2008). Dill and Zambrana (2009) discuss the concept of theoretical intervention as an avenue to better examine how one’s different social identities interact and influence one another (Torres et al., 2009). Theoretical intervention suggests that intersectionality is not a theory in itself, but an analytic lens through which theories may be viewed and which may promote a shift in frame of reference (Torres et al., 2009). Intersectionality posits that power dynamics and social structural context may greatly affect social identities’ interactions and create qualitatively different meanings of experiences and situations (Warner, 2008; Winker & Degele, 2011). Moreover, the meanings an individual places upon one’s gender may be influenced by one’s ethnic identity as these identities mutually intersect. Thus, identifying as both female and Black implies a different meaning than identifying as simply female. Additionally, individuals may claim a stronger connection to one social identity over another in relation to their core sense of self (Winker & Degele, 2011). For example, one may find his/her gender identity more personally significant than one’s ethnic identity. Conceptually, identity is complex as its elements are categorized through both group and individual lenses (Deaux, 1993; Erikson, 1959; Winker & Degele, 2011). With an established framework of how identity relates to the individual, the literature also explains identity in relation to a group or community.

**Dominant and Minority Cultures: A Change in Perspective**

Dominant culture is defined as a culture whose members share a superior social status and power position in relation to other cultures within their community or society (Lucken & Simon, 2005). These cultures often require knowledge of the social customs, standardized language, cultural history, and educational and religious values (Kymlicka, 1995). Additionally,
the number of members that make up the dominant culture does not necessarily correlate with
the amount of power and status it possesses (Lucken & Simon, 2005). Specifically in the U.S.,
participation in the dominant culture requires knowledge of American history and the American
English language, and applying this knowledge within the public sphere (Kymlicka, 1995).
Often race is associated with dominant culture as White individuals are associated with
membership in the dominant culture within the U.S. (Kymlicka, 1995; Phinney et al., 2007;
Umaña-Taylor, 2004). In a study regarding American identity, a majority of non-White
participants were found to link ‘Whiteness’ with being an American (Phinney et al., 2007).

Minority cultures are defined as cultures whose members often coexist with the dominant
culture yet share a lower social status and power position in comparison with the dominant
culture (Lucken & Simon, 2005). In addition, minority cultures often share different ethnic or
racial identities, languages, and social norms than the dominant culture and experience social
inequalities when participating in the dominant culture (Lucken & Simon, 2005; Molix &
Bettencourt, 2010). In the U.S. context, minority cultures are often devalued and experience
various forms of discrimination and stigmatization often because of racial, ethnic, and/or social
economic differences (Molix & Bettencourt, 2010). Thus, minority members frequently identify
more strongly with their ethnic identity than an American identity (Phinney et al., 2007).
Furthermore, unequal distribution of material and social advantages attributes to minority
members’ increased sense of awareness of their group membership and feelings of powerlessness
within the dominant culture (Lucken & Simon, 2005). For these reasons, examining the roles that
culture and dominance play in constructing societal norms and values is critical in understanding
individuals’ social identities (Torres et al., 2009).
As White Americans are members of the dominant culture in the U.S., they most often have not been placed in a context that provokes critical examination of their culture of origin or ethnicity (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). However, when members of the dominant culture within the U.S. are placed within a context in which they are numerically the minority, their ethnic identity becomes more salient (Phinney, 1992; Umaña-Taylor, 2004). In the same way, when individuals are members of the minority culture, they convey greater awareness and cognitive preoccupation with their group membership than dominant members when numerically in the minority (Lucken & Simon, 2005). This greater minority group awareness is not always attributed to numerical minority membership, as power relations and limited knowledge and/or access to essential dominant cultural tools influence the awareness of group boundaries as well (Lucken & Simon, 2005). Thus, the salience of one’s ethnic identity and membership to a dominant culture greatly depends upon social context (Umaña-Taylor, 2004). Similarly, because individuals’ dominant and minority cultural memberships are so fundamental to their realities, individuals may find it a greater challenge to willingly understand and examine a vastly different culture’s values and identity (Schall, 2010). Thus, it is important to examine studying abroad in a culture vastly different than one’s home culture and its influence on an individual’s identity.

**Study Abroad Experience and Identity**

As U.S. college students enter the study abroad experience, they carry the meaningful constructs they have developed through various experiences in their home culture that helped to define their identities (Jewitt, 2010). The processes and practices they used to create meaning from home aid to shape students’ perceptions of their study abroad experiences and influence the way in which students create meaning abroad (Gill, 2007; Jewitt, 2010). When college students first enter the host country, they step into a different cultural system and are introduced to new
and unfamiliar social situations out of which they must make meaning (Gill, 2007; Hunley, 2010; Jewitt, 2010; Martin, 1984; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). As a result, most students adapt to their new environment to reduce the cultural barriers and potential sociocultural difficulties they may encounter during their study abroad experience (Gill, 2007; Hunley, 2010; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Douglas and Jones-Rikkers (2001) found the greater the difference in cultural norms and values in comparison to the U.S., the greater the degree of culture shock experienced in U.S. college students studying abroad for a short-term period of time. Similarly, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) discuss that when individuals from an individualist society are placed in a collectivist society (i.e., most often non-Western societies) there is more likely to be conflict in adapting to the host culture’s way of life and social customs. Hence, as this immersion into a new culture can be stressful, successful adjustment depends on how the student chooses to manage the new environment (Gill, 2007; Hunley, 2010).

**Stress-adaptation-growth dynamic.** During the study abroad experience, it is well documented that college students often go through personal and social transformations (Gill, 2007; Hunley, 2010; Jewitt, 2010; Martin, 1984; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Szkudlarek, 2010; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). In a thorough review of the literature concerning the acculturation of the sojourner to that of the host culture in comparison to the reentry adjustment process, Martin (1984) describes how college students often absorb some of the host culture’s values resulting in personal growth and a change in identity. Similarly, Gill (2007) studied 10 Chinese graduate students studying in the United Kingdom and measured their intercultural adaptation and coping skills utilized in a new educational and cultural system. The study found that the Chinese graduate students became more independent, culturally aware, and ultimately reconstructed their sense of self. Additionally, in a phenomenological study analyzing the reentry
adjustment of eight European college students who studied in the U.S. for three to 10 years, the results illustrated the participants’ disillusionment with their home culture (Thompson & Christofi, 2006), signifying a change in their cultural identities. Thus, in order to understand the effect a study abroad experience has on an individual’s personal transformation, the process in which the transformation occurs must be explored. Consequently, Kim (2008) provides a unique model that illustrates the intercultural adaptation process any individual may go through when one relocates to a new and different cultural context for an extended period of time. Her theoretical framework stems from half a century of acculturation and deculturation studies about immigrants and temporary sojourners in the U.S., Japan, India, China, and across the world. She employs the concepts of acculturation and deculturation with the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic to describe the internal processes of an individual’s experience in a different cultural context (Kim, 2008).

Kim (2008) describes the initial stage in the adaptation process as acculturation. She defines acculturation as the voluntary structural refinement in an individual’s internal information processing ability as a result of the acquisition of new cultural practices and emotional sensibilities. Kim (2008) then defines deculturation as the unlearning of one’s old cultural elements, in that new responses are adopted in situations that would have evoked old cultural responses. Hence, the constant interplay between acculturation and deculturation reflects the psychological evolution individuals undergo through changes in expressive behaviors and potentially deeper fundamental values (see Figure 1 for Kim’s model of this interplay).
As a result of the interplay of acculturation and deculturation, each experience of adaptive change is accompanied by stress in the individual psyche (Kim, 2008). This stress is created from an internal disequilibrium or psychological state of mismatch between individual sense making and perceptions of self in context (Torres et al., 2009), a “push” and “pull” of the new and old cultural norms and values (Kim, 2008). In time, these internal conflicts stabilize as the individual embraces the new environment and participates in adaptation (Kim, 2008). Similarly, Torres et al. (2009) states that disequilibrium prompts the individual to enter a re-formation period that does not disintegrate established identity but instead reconstructs one’s identity to incorporate the meaningful constructs adopted as a result of a new experience or environment.

An example of this process of acculturation and deculturation is demonstrated when a U.S. college student first arrives in South Africa to study abroad and encounters several different cultural values. The college student is confronted with a different practice of time than he/she is used to in the U.S. In South Africa, a bus driver may tell the student that he/she will be picked up from his or her residence at 9:00 am, yet not arrive until 10:30 am with no intention of apologizing for the difference in arrival time as this, in the bus driver’s culture, is considered
acceptable. This first encounter with a different practice of time may cause the student stress as one tries to make meaning out of this cultural value and how it relates to his or her identity. The student may choose to become angry and scold the bus driver for being late, according to his/her Western definition of late, and resist adapting to the host culture’s practice of time. After encountering this same situation multiple times, the student may begin to understand that there is a cultural difference between his/herself and the host culture’s practice of time and understand that it is simply just a different way of thinking. The student may then choose to accept following this practice in the host culture, thus adapting to the host cultural environment. In this way, the U.S. college student reconstructed his/her identity to include the host culture’s practice of time in his/her psyche. Thus, Kim (2008) defines adaptation as a functional congruence between one’s internal conditions and the conditions of the new environment. Additionally, after a long-term and cumulative management of the stress-adaptation disequilibrium, an almost indiscernible psychological growth results from an increased intricacy in the individual’s internal system as he/she learns to adapt new cultural practices and unlearn old cultural norms (Kim, 2008).

The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic does not function in a steady, linear progression but in a dialectic, cyclical, and continual pattern (Kim, 2008). Initially, more drastic and larger changes between the stress-adaptation disequilibrium occur when an individual first enters a new cultural context (Kim, 2008). However, this three-pronged process continues as long as there are new environmental challenges (Kim, 2008). Hence, the three concepts of stress, adaptation, and growth work to increase the individual’s psychological ability to adapt and grow, both culturally and/or socially, in a changing or new environment (Kim, 2008). Ultimately, the prolonged period of internal change weakens the fluctuations and severity of stress and adaptation to lead to a “calming” of an individual’s internal condition (Kim, 2008). For example, after a U.S. college
student continually is required to sleep under a mosquito net in high temperatures with no fan or privacy, encountering the same stressful situation over an extended period of time eventually leads to the weakening of the individual’s resistance or stress caused by the situation and ultimately an acceptance of the situation as the new norm.

Using Kim’s (2008) model of intercultural adaptation, the study abroad experience may influence an individual’s internal structure and these effects may manifest in several ways. For instance, the interplay of acculturation and deculturation may result in identity exploration and disequilibrium. An individual may react to identity disequilibrium caused by entrance into a different cultural context by withdrawing or avoiding the new environment or hostility toward the new reality (Kim, 2008). For instance, if a U.S. college student studying abroad in Africa does not understand the collective attitude of the host culture, he/she may feel a sense of confusion about how the collective attitudes relate to his/her identity and withdraw from the host culture through a lack of participation in cultural practices. However, the individual may also adapt to the new cultural environment and adopt new cultural behaviors or values (Kim, 2008).

As a result of the study abroad experience, individuals often experience a sense of personal growth and identity transformation. The identity transformation may range from a modification of any of one’s social identities (e.g. gender, ethnic, cultural), to an addition of another social identity. These reconstructed aspects of identity may differ due to an individual’s predispositions, pre-existing needs, and interests (Kim, 2008).

**Study abroad and American identity.** As members of a dominant culture without another dominant culture for comparison, many White American college students have not encountered a context in which they critically examined their culture of origin (Phinney, 1992; Savicki & Cooley, 2011). Thus, study abroad experiences provide many American college
students their first opportunity to critically examine what it means to be American (Dolby, 2004; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Walling, Meese, Ciovica, Gorton, & Foy, 2006). In several studies of U.S. college students who studied abroad, a predominant theme found throughout was U.S. students’ newfound negative regard for their American identities (Dolby, 2004; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Walling et al., 2006; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Particularly, Dolby (2004) measured how study abroad shapes U.S. college students’ perceptions of national identity by interviewing 26 participants who had studied abroad in Australia and returned to the U.S. in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The participants reported embarrassment with being identified as American, a focus on contradictions of what being American is as defined by other countries, and shifts from passive to an active national identity when in the global context. Furthermore, when U.S. college students became the ‘Other,’ their national identity became active (Dolby, 2004). Similarly, Walling et al. (2006) used focus groups to interview 20 U.S. college students, who studied on short-term mission trips to one of 17 countries in Asia, Africa, Australia, or South America, about how their cross-cultural experiences influenced their cultural identities. These U.S. college students expressed guilt about living in the U.S. due to the country’s overbearing value on materialism, awareness of their home culture’s shortcomings, and difficulty identifying with their home culture’s values (Walling et al., 2006). Similarly, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski’s (2010) study found U.S. college students who studied abroad were significantly more apt to feel skepticism toward their home culture than college students who did not study abroad. Finally, Savicki and Cooley (2011) measured the contrasts, level, and change of American identity in 59 U.S. college students as outcomes of their three-month study abroad experience in one of the following four countries: Austria, Greece, Italy, or Spain. The researchers found that most U.S. college students spent an increased amount of time thinking
about their American identity as a result of increased contact with other cultures and that their identity was disrupted and then altered as a result of the study abroad experience (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). Thus, a majority of research studies have found that the study abroad experience does cause critical reflection of American identity in U.S. college students and continues to affect them during their reentry adjustment in the U.S.

Reentry Adjustment after Study Abroad

Adler (1981) defines readjustment or reentry adjustment as the transition back into one’s home culture after living abroad for an extended period of time. This transition back into familiar surroundings after a cross-cultural experience is a process that may contain both positive and negative elements for the returnee (Sussman, 2000; Uehara, 1986). As this process often involves the returnee’s awareness and evaluation of his/her experience abroad, reentry may be accompanied by reverse culture shock (Uehara, 1986; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Also known as reentry shock (Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1984), reverse culture shock includes the psychological and sociocultural difficulties associated with readjustment into the home culture (Uehara, 1986). Often associated with one’s adaptation into a different culture while abroad, reverse culture shock may be the result of experiences abroad that have changed the sojourner (Adler, 1981; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Martin, 1984). Gaw (2000) and Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) emphasized that individuals experience this in several ways, as some have few or no difficulties readjusting while others may experience reentry effects for a few months to over a year after they have returned.

Martin and Harrell (1996) posit that adaptation to the home culture may prove to be more difficult than culture shock because it is less expected. The literature also posits that individuals may experience larger difficulties during reentry adjustment to their home culture than upon entry to a different culture (Adler, 1981; Martin, 1984; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi,
In a study of U.S. corporate and government officials returning from working abroad in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, Adler (1981) found that companies found it difficult to convince employees to work overseas as the reentry adjustment was more difficult than the original culture shock abroad and created personnel issues due to lack of efficiency in employees’ work after returning home. Furthermore, Sussman (2000) discussed in her review of the reentry adjustment literature that an actual shift in the individual’s cultural identity as a result of the cross-cultural experience is a large factor in the greater difficulty of reentry experienced in comparison to the culture shock experienced when first abroad. In addition, Christofi and Thompson (2007) conducted a phenomenological study of the structure of eight participants from Russia, Liberia, Cyprus, and Germany who studied in the U.S. for a period of three to 10 years, returned to their home culture and lived there for a period of one to three years, and then returned to the U.S. The findings revealed that the participants chose to return to their host culture as they found it easier to adjust to than their home culture as they had become disillusioned to it. However, in general, a majority of reentry research has found that individuals with positive expectations and prior cross-cultural experience abroad have had greater ease in reentry adjustment, according to Martin and Harrell’s (1996) review of numerous studies of sojourners’ reentry adjustment. Similarly, Kim (2008) described the personal growth and identity transformation process in intercultural adaptation as often subtle; thus, individuals are made aware of these intrinsic shifts in values and beliefs upon return to their home culture (Adler, 1981; Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

**Challenges of Reentry Adjustment in Home Culture**

The challenges surrounding reentry adjustment have been well documented in its growing body of literature (e.g. Adler, 1981; Dolby, 2004; Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn,
1963; LaBrack, 1993; Martin, 1984; Martin & Harrell, 1996; Raschio, 1987; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Sussman, 2000; Szkudlarek, 2010; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; 2007; Uehara, 1986; Walling et al., 2006; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). In Martin’s (1984) review of the culture shock and reentry adjustment literature, she posited that re-enterers with a strong desire to remain abroad have a greater likelihood of experiencing stress in the reentry process as they may be closed to home country experiences. Conversely, re-enterers with a desire to return home have been found to experience less stress upon reentry (Martin, 1984). Of the challenges experienced upon reentry, psychological and sociocultural difficulties were most commonly reported due to experiences abroad that influenced the individual during reentry adjustment. Savicki (in press) distinguishes between the two by explaining psychological adjustment as the focus of affective or emotional reactions and sociocultural adaptation as external social and cultural factors influencing cognitive processes.

**Psychological challenges.** Individuals returning from studying abroad experienced reentry adjustment challenges on a spectrum in terms of levels of difficulty (Gaw, 2000). Multiple studies found that some students experienced minimal stress in readjusting, while others experienced more severe difficulties during reentry (Christofi & Thompson, 2006; 2007; Gaw, 2000; Raschio, 1987; Rogers & Ward, 1993). In contrast to many reentry studies stating expectations of reentry adjustment are related to the severity in reentry adjustment, Rogers and Ward (1993) conducted a longitudinal study that found expectations for reentry and the actual experience of reentry were not significantly related. They conducted a comparative study of expectations versus actual experiences of reentry adjustment in 20 New Zealand college students who had studied abroad in over a range of 10 countries between 10 weeks to a year (Rogers & Ward, 1993). The study found that students that expected difficulty in returning home to New
Zealand did not experience any less stress during reentry than students who had no expectations of difficulties in reentry adjustment (Rogers & Ward, 1993). Additionally, Rogers and Ward (1993) found that students who had positive expectations for reentry adjustment experienced similar psychological difficulties to students who had more realistic expectations of potential difficulties in readjustment.

Although the level of difficulty in reentry adjustment varies, problems with anxiety, loneliness, depression, and identity conflict during reentry are well-documented within the literature (Adler, 1981; Christofi & Thompson, 2006; 2007; Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Martin, 1984; Sussman, 2000; Walling et al., 2006). Christofi and Thompson (2007) discussed college students’ feelings of frustration and disappointment with their home culture upon reentry in addition to feelings of anxiety in integrating the two cultural worldviews as a part of their identity. All participants discussed the internal conflict they felt between wanting to leave their home culture and feeling obligated to stay as well as identity transformations they experienced as a result of the discontent they felt with their home culture (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). Similarly, in a survey study of the reentry adjustment difficulties of 66 U.S. college students who had, as a whole, studied abroad in over 10 different countries, Gaw (2000) found over a fifth of the participants experienced feelings of alienation, depression, difficulty studying, and anxiety over career choice.

U.S. sojourners also expressed feelings of anger and guilt toward their home culture as a result of an awareness of newly integrated cultural values from the host culture (Adler, 1981; Gaw, 2000; Raschio, 1987; Sussman, 2000; Uehara, 1986; Walling et al., 2006). Walling et al. (2006) illustrated U.S. college students’ dissatisfaction with U.S. values of materialism and capitalism and demonstrated their attempts to distance themselves from U.S. values as a result of
feelings of guilt and dissatisfaction. Students also distanced themselves from family members who shared the U.S. values that they now viewed as negative. Similarly, Christofi and Thompson (2007) discussed the irritation and annoyance European college students felt towards their home cultures after returning from studying abroad in the U.S. for an extended length of time. In a study of 669 U.S. college students comparing reentry adjustment of those who studied abroad to students who did not, focus groups were conducted to measure the differences between reentry adjustments in the two groups (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). The study found that students who had studied abroad reported a significantly larger amount of skepticism toward their home culture and a more critical view of their home government.

Students also reported value conflicts between their home culture’s value system and the newly adopted values from their host culture while abroad. Uehara (1986) discussed in a study of 58 U.S. college students being compared with 74 U.S. college students with no travel experience, that U.S. college students’ value shifts influenced their views on individualism and materialism, achievement-oriented behavior, and gender relations. Christofi and Thompson (2007) described college students’ internal conflicts in which they struggled between enjoying the cultural values of the host culture and distancing themselves from their home culture in which they did not feel comfortable. Similarly, Raschio (1987) conducted a study of the reentry adjustments of 11 U.S. college students returning from studying abroad for three months to one year in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, or Peru. Raschio (1987) found that, upon reentry, U.S. college students were made more aware of differences in societal values and lifestyles between the host and home cultures and experienced a sense of value confusion as a result.

**Sociocultural challenges.** During reentry adjustment, several college students experience psychological distress as a result of the sociocultural challenges in their home culture
(Adler, 1981; Gaw, 2000; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Martin, 1984; Raschio, 1987; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; 2007; Walling et al., 2006; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Cultural identity conflict was reported as a common challenge discovered in multiple studies (Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1984; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; 2007; Uehara, 1986). Because many students were dissatisfied with U.S. cultural practices and values, feelings of psychological distress, alienation, and depression resulted from feeling as if they did not belong in their home culture (Gaw, 2000; Raschio, 1987; Walling et al., 2006).

Studies found that interpersonal difficulties and relationships were often negatively affected during reentry adjustment. Gaw’s (2000) findings suggested that sojourners expected to find their home culture unchanged and welcoming, and often became disoriented or socially withdrawn when the home culture felt different or changed to them. Raschio (1987) and Rogers and Ward (1993) described college students’ experiences of feeling misunderstood by friends and family members during reentry when discussing their experiences abroad. Additionally, Raschio (1987) described that his U.S. college student participants would seek out emotional support from their friends and family in reaction to their new awareness of their personal growth, yet often felt misunderstood or alienated by their loved ones in doing so. As a result, a majority of the participants reported changes in friendships within their social groups as well as in the way that they interacted with others. Likewise, Uehara (1986) stated that U.S. college students described feelings of encountering difficulty communicating their experiences with friends and family as depressing and a cause for social isolation and feelings of loneliness. The participants stated that it was difficult to relate to peers and family members as they also felt that no one cared to listen to them discuss their experiences (Uehara, 1986).
Furthermore, Martin (1984) explained that family and friends of the sojourner do not expect the individual to have readjustment issues upon reentry, creating an increased stress in social interactions. In Walling et al.’s (2006) study of 20 U.S. college students returning from short-term mission trips, the researchers highlighted the struggle to accept that friends and family members were a part of a home culture with which the participants felt disenchanted and isolated. Finally, as a result of cultural identity shifts and value changes, college students explained the desire to seek out new friendships with more like-minded individuals because of the difficulty experienced in maintaining friendships established prior to studying abroad (Gaw, 2000; Sussman, 2000).

**Coping styles and reentry adjustment.** In order to assess the attitude and approach the returnee takes to readjust back into his/her home culture, Adler (1981) developed a model to describe the mode in which returnees experienced reentry adjustment. Adler (1981) explained that while returnees all experience coping differently, most returnees experience high and low points during their readjustment. Specifically, the high point of reentry is often very short, lasting for a few hours to less than month, while the lower points of reentry are most prevalent during the second and third months of readjustment. To explain the process of readjustment, Adler designated two central dimensions, the “overall” attitude and the “specific” attitude. The overall attitude measured an individual’s level of optimism or pessimism while the specific attitude described one’s attitude as either active or passive (Adler, 1981). Active re-enterers attempt to change themselves and the reentry environment in order to successfully readjust back into their home culture, while passive re-enterers do not attempt to change themselves or the reentry environment (Adler, 1981).
Using these central dimensions, Adler generated four main coping styles of re-enterers: proactive, resocialized, alienated, and rebellious. The proactive re-enterer, both optimistic and active, reflects the most growth through high external validation and awareness of change (Adler, 1981). This coping mode integrates experiences from both the host culture and home culture to effectively function in society (Adler, 1981). The resocialized re-enterer is optimistic and passive possessing high external validation but low awareness of change (Adler, 1981). This coping style conveys low recognition of cross-cultural comprehension, demonstrated positive affirmation for the home culture, and tends to remove oneself from the experience abroad (Adler, 1981). LaBrack (1993) supports this mode of coping by describing the way in which returnees store their memories of their experiences abroad away, also known as the ‘shoebox effect,’ in an attempt to fit back into the home culture. Alienated re-enterers, both pessimistic and passive, rank low in awareness of change and recognition and use of cross-cultural skills (Adler, 1981). This coping style rejects the home environment and culture but does not regularly utilize cross-cultural skills. The fourth coping style, the rebellious re-enterer, is both pessimistic and active, ranking low in external validation but high in awareness of change (Adler, 1981). This coping style rejects the home environment by strongly attempting to control it and maintaining a high recognition and moderate use of cross-cultural skills (Adler, 1981). Hence, the re-enterer can choose to reject his/her home culture, integrate both host and home cultures, or store his/her experience away in order to adjust back into the home culture. Returnees who integrate both cultures and readjust with an optimistic attitude are found to experience the most personal growth and greater sense of awareness of how their new growth contributes to the larger, global society.
The Value of Short-Term Study Abroad Experiences in Developing Countries

Within the last decade, college students have become increasingly interested in short-term study abroad programs (IIE, 2012; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). The Open Doors Report reveals an overwhelming majority of U.S. college students’ preference for short-term programs that are a maximum of eight weeks in duration (IIE, 2012). While there is debate within the literature on the impact of the length of time abroad on sojourner adjustment and readjustment (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Martin, 1984;), Walling et al. (2006) supports Uehara’s (1986) research that the length of time away from the home culture is not related to the extent of reentry shock, implying that it is possible for those who go on a short trip to experience substantial reentry distress. Many studies support that the higher the level of successful adaptation in the host culture, the greater the difficulty during reentry adjustment for sojourners in their home culture (Gaw, 2000; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; LaBrack, 1993). Thus, as U.S. college students have been found to experience substantial reverse culture shock after a four-week, short-term study abroad experience (Walling et al., 2006), the length of time suggests it is long enough for students to successfully adapt to a new culture and experience similar readjustment issues to students who go abroad for longer durations of time.

As shorter lengths of time have proven that they are adequate for cultural immersion, short-term study abroad experiences have several benefits. They provide development of knowledge, skills, and abilities for students to compete in a global economy as globalization is increasingly blurring cultural boundaries throughout the world (Sjoberg & Shabalina, 2010). Short-term programs also allow a more concentrated approach that focuses on a particular town or host university in order to enhance cultural immersion through an active interdisciplinary learning curriculum (Sjobery & Shabalina, 2010). Additionally, short-term study abroad
programs are more cost-effective, providing significantly more opportunities for students to learn abroad (Sjoberg & Shabalina, 2010). Furthermore, short-term study abroad programs decrease common biases most often associated with developing countries (Pires, 2000). Finally, as the United States is committed to promoting cultural diversity and global interdependence, short-term programs enable students to develop their intercultural development (Pires, 2000).

As of 2011, 20% of U.S. college students have increasingly chosen to study abroad in developing countries (IIE, 2012). Similarly, study abroad experiences in developing countries are beginning to gain momentum as the value of the programs are recognized (Sjoberg & Shabalina, 2010). Pires (2000) states that developing countries’ social and economic issues are often compared to standards and conditions based on industrialized nations, creating misconceptions and hindering U.S. students’ desires to participate in study abroad programs. Thus, Lowe, Dozier, Hunt-Hurst, and Smith (2008) and Pires (2000) encourage increased participation in short-term interdisciplinary study abroad programs in Africa in order to bridge knowledge and cultural gaps and raise awareness about a continent that many know little about.

**The Value of Studying Abroad in Africa**

As the public image of the African continent often viewed in the Western media broadcasts shows subsistent living, civil conflicts, and wild animals, these portrayals may make it difficult to attract students (Lowe et al., 2008). However, while these images are not always false, Africa must also be represented by its contemporary assets, such as its numerous urban metropolises, rich culture, and art. As a more balanced picture of Africa is painted, the study abroad programs being offered there are beginning to receive more attention. Study abroad programs in Africa are unique in that they offer service-learning components that promote cultural immersion and language proficiency that single discipline programs may not (Lowe et
In addition, the experiential learning model often practiced in African study abroad programs builds knowledge in the classroom and provides students with the opportunity to apply it to real life settings within the host community (Lowe et al., 2008; Pires, 2000). In this way, U.S. students are exposed to non-Western worldviews and granted a more exclusive, personal relationship with the local culture that they may not experience in European countries (Lowe et al., 2008; Pires, 2000).

In Douglas and Jones-Rikker’s (2001) study of the worldmindedness of 120 U.S. college students, 61 who did not study abroad and 59 who studied abroad in Great Britain, China, Germany, or Costa Rica, they found that the greater the difference between a student’s home culture and host culture the greater the increase in worldmindedness while abroad. Specifically, the study found that the students who had studied in Costa Rica had the highest scores of worldmindedness in comparison to those who studied in Great Britain. Thus, U.S. college students studying abroad in Africa may gain a larger degree of worldmindedness, or valuing of global perspectives often different than one’s own, as the U.S. and African cultures are very different.

In addition to students gaining a greater sense of worldmindedness, African study abroad programs have the potential to offer both a personal and professional impact on the student. In a qualitative study conducted by Hutchison and Rea (2011) about transformative learning and identity formation of five college students from the United Kingdom studying education in the African country of Gambia, the findings highlighted the value of the African study abroad experience. Hutchison and Rea (2011) found that the students all reported how profoundly affected they were, culturally, psychologically, and socially, by their experiences. The participants all described feelings of admiration and believed they had left Gambia a different
and better person. Additionally, participants discussed placing less value on material items and a larger priority on the human relationships that surround them (Hutchison & Rea, 2011). Participants also reported increased confidence, increased optimism, and a change in their career interests in terms of getting involved in international development and promoting a globalized curriculum in the classroom.

While studies have shown that high value placed on materialism negatively impacts well-being (Kasser, 2002), the African study abroad experience not only provides the student with a quality educational experience but may also provide U.S. college students with a different world perspective and the opportunity to increase their well-being should the students choose to adapt to the host culture’s way of life. In addition to the personal benefits, studying in Africa also has professional benefits as well. For example, a higher value is placed upon U.S. college graduates with unique international experiences and language skills when competing in the job market (Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001; Stroud, 2010). Finally, studying abroad in Africa has global benefits as U.S. college students have the opportunity to become an advocate for Africa and aid in breaking the common misconceptions often spread by the Western media about Africa by sharing their own experiences (Pires, 2000).

**Situating the Present Study within the Literature**

While several studies have been conducted on reentry adjustment of college students after studying abroad, fewer have conducted qualitative studies of U.S. college students. While Walling et al. (2006) and Christofi and Thompson (2006; 2007) measured aspects of identity and psychological and sociocultural factors affecting reentry adjustment, they were both missing aspects of the methodology which I aim to explore. Walling et al. (2006) provided a thorough qualitative analysis of U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment and its effect on their American
identity; however, they did not participate in a study abroad program as they were only sojourners on a short-term mission trip. Also, Christofi and Thompson (2006; 2007) conducted comprehensive phenomenological studies of reentry adjustment of college students in their home cultures; however, these participants were not citizens of the United States. Additionally, these studies do not focus on U.S. college students studying abroad in African contexts.

While Hutchison and Rea (2011) provided a qualitative analysis of the impact of studying abroad in an African setting, the participants in the study were college students from the United Kingdom. Furthermore, no studies in the literature have studied, through a phenomenological lens, the process of identity reconstruction of U.S. college students after they return from studying abroad in Africa. Thus, it was my intention to conduct a phenomenological study of U.S. college students’ psychological and sociocultural factors influencing reentry adjustment and its relationship with identity after returning from studying in Africa. This study will provide an in-depth description of the step-by-step process of identity transformation and illustrate the lived experiences of U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment. Additionally, as most reentry adjustment literature has focused on Western European nations with little qualitative research on developing countries, this study aims to contribute to the literature on the value of studying abroad in African settings, namely Burkina Faso and South Africa.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

This methodology was designed with the intention of understanding the lived experiences and meaning of reentry adjustment for six college students at one public, Midwestern American university after studying abroad in Africa. In order to effectively capture the worldviews of the individuals within this study and gather a holistic account of the reentry phenomenon, a qualitative research design was utilized (Creswell, 2007). Maxwell (2005) explains how qualitative research analyzes the process of an event or phenomenon and explores its meaning through the eyes of the participants. This application of the participant’s worldview is described as the ‘participant’s perspective’ (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) explained “this perspective is not simply their account of these events and actions, to be assessed in terms of its truth or falsity; it is part of the reality that [the researcher and audience is] trying to understand” (p. 23).

Qualitative research aims to provide participants with a voice through which the researcher may gain valuable insights into the behaviors and meanings behind particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). It is qualitative research’s preservation of the individual experience within a process and inherent flexibility of design that allows the researcher to gather rich and meaningful data and distinctively makes this research useful and appropriate for this study.

A qualitative phenomenological research methodology was used to fully understand what makes the reentry process to one’s home culture unique in the United States. This type of research methodology is used to capture the ‘essence’ of a particular phenomenon through investigating human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, phenomenological research seeks to understand several individual’s shared or common experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994). This methodology emphasizes the lived experience through analyzing the process of transitioning back into U.S. students’ home cultures and in turn provides a thorough exploration of the following proposed research questions:
1. What are the psychological and sociocultural experiences that U.S. college students face upon their return from studying abroad in an African context?

2. How are U.S. college students’ identities influenced by their African study abroad experience after they have returned to the U.S.?

3. How is the African study abroad experience valuable?

Phenomenological Framework

The term phenomenon comes from the Greek term phaino, meaning “to bring to light, to place in brightness, to show itself in itself, the totality of what lies before us in the light of day” (Heidegger, 1977, p. 74-75). Husserl (1970), credited as the father of transcendental phenomenology, explained a phenomenon to be that which appears in consciousness. He posited that “what appears in consciousness is an absolute reality while what appears in the world is a product of learning” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). This absolute reality that Husserl described is the pure essence of a phenomenon. In this way, it was Husserl’s intention to access a phenomenon, in its true form, as it is understood within a state of consciousness separate from societal interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). In order to achieve this, phenomenology attempts to capture how individuals experience a phenomenon through exploring how they “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Thus, phenomenology is not introspective but retrospective in nature, as an individual is not capable of reflecting upon an experience while he or she is experiencing it (van Manen, 1990). Through one-hour, face-to-face interviews with individuals who have directly experienced a common phenomenon, namely returning from studying abroad in Africa, the researcher aims to understand the absolute reality of the phenomenon as the individual experienced it in his or her state of consciousness.
Phenomenology also encompasses two other schools of thought in regards to the perspectives applied to data collection and analysis. While transcendental phenomenology emphasizes understanding another’s absolute reality by being aware of and separating one’s own previous understandings and biases, hermeneutic phenomenology and heuristic inquiry provide different approaches (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges the importance of understanding an individual’s perception of an experience but posits that human beings are unable to completely separate their understandings and values from the understandings of others (Heidegger, 1977; Moustakas, 1994). This approach focuses on the role of interpretation in an experience when attempting to shed all prior conceptions as one’s understandings and perspectives are utilized (Patton, 2002). Hermeneutics posits that the context surrounding the object or experience that one is trying to understand is essential to effectively comprehend the meaning and reality of an experience (Heidegger, 1977; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Thus, understanding the contexts of both the researcher and the participant are necessary in order to successfully interpret an experience (Patton, 2002).

Similarly, heuristic inquiry emphasizes the role of the researcher as a participant in a lived experience that is being investigated (Patton, 2002). It requires the researcher to have personal experience and an intense interest in the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). The researcher discovers the essence of the phenomenon through shared reflection and inquiry with the participants and more often develops a greater rapport and deeper connection with the participants when compared to other methods used in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Using this method of inquiry has both advantages and disadvantages; the researcher obtains a greater understanding and awareness of his or her own interpretation of the lived experience and also may acquire richer descriptions of the experience from the participants.
as the researcher most often has a meaningful shared connection with them (Patton, 2002). At the same time, the researcher’s own understanding of the lived experience may influence the way in which he/she believes the other participants experienced the phenomenon. In addition, the researcher may conduct data collection and analysis in a way that supports his or her assumptions of the phenomenon.

As a result, I aim to utilize aspects from each tradition to conduct a small, in-depth study employing the strengths from each. I employ transcendental phenomenology by seeking total awareness of an individual’s experience as it appears in his/her consciousness, as well as maintaining awareness of my own values and preconceptions and attempting to set them aside. Additionally, as hermeneutics postulates that an individual cannot fully understand another’s experience as he/she interprets the world because of the researcher’s own bias and way of interpreting experiences, I will consider the contexts of both the participant and myself as the researcher in the interpretation of the essence of the phenomenon. Finally, I seek to gain a deeper understanding and greater depth of awareness often achieved by the researcher in heuristic inquiry in order to maintain greater awareness of my own experiences and understanding of the transition back into one’s home culture after studying abroad in Africa.

**Bracketing.** As phenomenology is based on the philosophical foundation of truly understanding the essence of a phenomenon, researchers must seek to understand what the lived experiences of the individuals are and how they interpret the world (Patton, 2002). In order to best understand a lived experience, the researcher must experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for herself (van Manen, 1990; Patton, 2002). In order to fully understand the lived experience of the participants, researchers must engage in a “process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew
into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Husserl (1964) deemed this process bracketing. Through bracketing, the researcher becomes aware of his or her own personal interpretations and assumptions associated with the particular phenomenon and sets these understandings and experiences temporarily aside in order to engage in epoche (Moustakas, 1994). This process of setting aside the researcher’s viewpoint is essential in phenomenological investigation so that the researcher can see and understand the experience in its true form.

**Epoche.** Once researchers have attempted to set all previous understandings, values and biases of everyday knowledge aside through the bracketing process, they can begin to utilize epoche (Husserl, 1964; Moustakas, 1994). Epoche is a way of perceiving life in which one looks, notices, and becomes aware without imposing prejudgment on what one sees, thinks, imagines, or feels (Moustakas, 1994). One sees an object or experience simply as it is presented to consciousness and as a presence to be explored (Giorgi, 2009). Husserl’s (1964) goal was for an individual to temporarily suspend the use of all previous understandings and values in order to capture the essence of a phenomenon as it appears in consciousness. This ongoing process is challenging as the individual has to consciously focus on keeping an open mind and suspending all judgment and preconceived notions that interfere with a fresh vision (Moustakas, 1994). While Moustakas (1994) acknowledges the difficulty, from a philosophical standpoint, in perfectly achieving the separation of past knowledge from influencing present knowledge about a phenomenon, Giorgi (2009) posits that, psychologically, the researcher need only ensure that his or her past understandings and knowledge of the experience are not engaged during the interpretation of the present experience. In this way, the process of bracketing and epoche may overlap or occasionally appear cyclical as the researcher maintains awareness of his or her own
biases and sets them aside while attempting to capture the essence of the present phenomenon as it appears in consciousness (Giorgi, 2009).

In this manner, I employed several methods to guide me through the bracketing and epoche processes to achieve conscious awareness of my judgments and beliefs regarding reentry adjustment after studying abroad for two to six weeks in the African countries of Burkina Faso and South Africa. Prior to data collection, I personally answered both the interview and focus group questions I gave to my participants in order to bring to consciousness my own understanding and perspective of the lived experiences of reentry adjustment. Additionally, I utilized reflective journaling to gather further insights into my own predispositions and assumptions about my experience of studying abroad in Africa and returning to the United States, just as each of the participants had done. Through these reflective journals I also explored the context in which I interpreted these understandings and knowledge of my personal lived experience. I then reflected how this past knowledge and understanding of my own experiences could possibly influence my interpretation of the participants’ lived experiences. Finally, I acknowledged my reflections and clear understanding of my biases and perspectives about the phenomenon and bracketed them in order to prevent my past experiences from interfering with the content of the present experience (Giorgi, 2009). Through this process, if a participant’s answer triggered a past experience or favored understanding, I was aware of my own biases and set it aside in order to focus on observing and interpreting the true essence of the present phenomenon.

**Researcher Perspective**

I enter this research study as a 25-year old American woman from the Midwest. I have traveled to South Africa twice in my life, in 2008 and again in 2009, and as a result my interest
in this study stems from these personal experiences. Moustakas (1994) posits that in phenomenological studies it is the researcher’s curiosity and excitement for a topic that inspires the research. It is with these sentiments that I wish to explain my role and understanding of the phenomenon.

I first went abroad as an undergraduate student in the summer of 2008 to participate in a five-week service-learning study abroad program in the Western Cape region of South Africa. While there, I was enrolled with 25 U.S. and international students in history and community development classes. The service-learning component aimed to combine theory with practical applications presented in the township of Kayamandi. I worked with a group of seven students to plan and implement a week-long day camp at an after-school tutoring center for 200 children in the township. It was during this time that I came to learn about and appreciate Xhosa culture. Upon my return home to the U.S. at the end of the summer, I was excited to share my experience and newfound global perspective with friends and family. However, as hard as I tried, it seemed that no one could completely understand the experience other than the people I had traveled with. As time passed, I readjusted to my home culture but found I was drawn to issues pertaining to the African context.

In addition to my personal experience studying abroad in sub-Saharan Africa, my academic interests have also guided my interest in this study. Specifically, I earned my Bachelor’s degree in Psychology and am currently pursuing a Master’s degree in International Education. Thus, I have always been fascinated with the psychological motivations driving human behavior, and after studying abroad I also became more intrigued by other world cultures. After I began my graduate program, I became a part of a group of people who all had previous international experiences in cultures who shared vastly different values and worldviews than the
dominant culture in the U.S. The more I spoke with my colleagues about their past experiences and listened to them discuss the sociocultural and political differences between the U.S. and countries they had experienced, the more I noticed an unspoken understanding between these individuals. It was this unspoken understanding that I was drawn to. It conveyed a sense of comfort and knowing, and I was determined to explore the origins of these sentiments. These conversations between colleagues seemed to act as a tool to remain close to their own experiences while actively moving forward in their lives. It was then that I became interested in understanding how individuals are affected both psychologically and socially by new experiences abroad.

Through both my personal and academic experiences, I saw the significance in understanding the process individuals undergo when returning to U.S. society after studying and living abroad in a culture largely different than the U.S. As such, this study aimed to highlight the psychological and sociocultural factors involved in processing the African study abroad experience upon returning to the U.S. Thus, this phenomenological study allowed returned study abroad students to process their shared experiences of readjustment with the intent of trying to fully capture the essence of their experience.

**Site Selection**

During the 2010-11 academic year, as many as 54% of students chose to study abroad in Europe, while only 6% chose to study in Africa (IIE, 2012). Of the total 270,604 students that studied abroad in 2010-11, only 16,234 studied in Africa. Because so few college students were studying abroad in non-traditional countries at the time of data collection, it was also important to find an institution in the Midwest which provided study abroad programs in African contexts. Keeping these factors in mind, a public university in Northwest Ohio was chosen for this
phenomenological study. This institution had multiple exchange and faculty-led programs in Africa. As such, the opportunity of gaining access to these participants was more promising, as I had developed a professional relationship with the gatekeeper, the coordinator for the education abroad office, prior to the beginning of the study. Because of the feasibility of access and data at this institution, it was selected as the most appropriate choice for data collection (Maxwell, 2005).

**Participant Selection**

As phenomenology is centered around the idea of capturing the essence of a lived experience, it is essential that the participants be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1964; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). In addition to experiencing the phenomenon, participants must also be willing to thoroughly articulate the intensity of their experience and commit their time to capturing the essence of the lived experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). With these themes in mind, I contacted the gatekeeper to gain access to a large group of potential participants. I met personally with the gatekeeper to describe the purpose and goals of this study and answer any questions she may have had. After the study was approved, the gatekeeper then forwarded an email that I had composed, which explained the purpose, goals, and expectations of study participants, to the database of individuals who had studied abroad over the last five years at the institution. Interested individuals were instructed to contact me, the researcher, directly for further information about the study via email. Over a span of two months, from September 2011 to October 2011, five people expressed interest in participating.

Both purposeful and snowball sampling methods were employed in the participant selection process (Creswell, 2007). As phenomenology examines the shared experience of
individuals, purposeful sampling, also known as criterion sampling, aids in ensuring participants are qualified representatives of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). Thus, participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- undergraduate/graduate student attending or recently graduated from the university in Northwest Ohio (Recent graduate from college in Northwest Ohio will have graduated no more than two years prior to the beginning of the research study);
- U.S. citizenship;
- participant of a study abroad program in Africa while enrolled at the university; and
- at least 18 years of age.

After I received the five email responses from individuals who initially met the required criteria, I further employed purposeful sampling to engage in discussion with each of the potential participants via email to gain a better judgment of their interest and willingness to participate in the study and establish rapport (Creswell, 2007). Maxwell (2005) and Patton (2002) explained that one of the goals in purposeful sampling is to collect a range of representatives who exhibit the heterogeneity of the population and to thereby avoid one-sided representation of the phenomenon. Kleining and Witt (2000) describe this method best, stating that “out of complex phenomena the homogenous will be extracted…and the dissimilar paralyzed” (p. 3). Thus this unique strategy allows similarities across the diverse participants to let the essence of the phenomenon rise to the surface of the investigation (Patton, 2002). After I found that the five individuals met all criteria for the study, I inquired about additional individuals they may have studied with while abroad. It was through this snowball sampling that I found my last participant. Thus, a total of six individuals were chosen as participants in this qualitative phenomenological study, as they met all required criteria and exhibited a range of
variation, by gender, age, major, and length of time since reentry, as individuals. While the suitable number of participants in a phenomenological study depends upon the nature of the phenomenon being studied, Creswell (2007) recommends three to 10 participants. One of the goals in qualitative research is to collect extensive detail about each participant. Consequently, the smaller the sample size, the greater the depth of analysis of each participant and likelihood of reaching data saturation (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). Thus, using six participants allowed me to collect richer data and obtain a greater depth of analysis in understanding the essence of the phenomenon of U.S. returnees after studying abroad in Africa.

As hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes that a context is essential to fully understanding the meaning and essence of the lived experience (Patton, 2002), Table 1 offers to satisfy this by providing background information about the participants. It provides their pseudonyms, gender, age, ethnicity, country in which they studied abroad, length of time they studied abroad, whether they lived with a host family while abroad, and length of time that has passed since their return from Africa. The participants studied abroad in Africa for an average of three weeks in two different countries, four in Burkina Faso, located in West Africa and two in South Africa, located in Southern Africa. In addition, the length of time that had passed since their study abroad experience purposely varies in order to understand participants’ experiences of the readjustment process over differing lengths of time.
Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Study Abroad Country</th>
<th>Weeks Studied Abroad in Africa</th>
<th>Lived With Host Family</th>
<th>Time Passed Since Return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelé</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: F = Female, M= Male*

While the living situations and length of time that has passed since reentry into the U.S. varies, all participants share the experience of enrollment as undergraduate students in a short-term study abroad program in an African country as well as the experience of returning to the U.S. directly after the cessation of the abroad program.

**Ethical Considerations**

As researcher of this phenomenological study, I maintained necessary ethical standards, secured informed consent from all participants, developed a systematic protocol to preserve confidentiality, and provided full disclosure of the nature, purpose, and expectations of the study and participants, as prescribed by Moustakas (1994). All procedures used to protect the confidentiality of participants were based on protecting their safety, dignity, and privacy (Moustakas, 1994). In order to maintain confidentiality in the recording and management of
data, data from the six face-to-face interviews and one focus group were transcribed verbatim onto a password protected Microsoft Word document. In addition, the recorder and microphone were visible at all times during the interviews and focus group, and participants were free to stop the audio recording or interview at any time. The journals given to each participant did not have the participant's name or any information within it that could link it to the participant's identity, and the participant could choose not to share their journal entries at any time. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants’ identities throughout the research process as well (Creswell, 2007). To secure the confidence of participants, an interview number as opposed to the participant's name was recorded at the beginning of the interview (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the name and identifiers of the university in which the study abroad programs are associated were not disclosed in the study. Finally, to ensure full confidentiality, signed consent forms were stored separately from all digital recordings, transcripts, and journals in a secure location under lock and key. Access to this information was limited to myself. Participants were made aware of these procedures both verbally and through the written consent form before data collection.

In addition to ensuring confidentiality and putting the participants’ minds at ease, measures were taken prior to, during, and after data collection to minimize potential risks to the participants. Potential risks were minimized by securing the trust and confidence of the participants through establishing a deeper, meaningful connection as a researcher who also shared the same experience of readjusting to U.S. culture after studying abroad in Africa. As a result, all of the participants recognized the minimal risks associated with this study and did not choose to end an interview or withdraw from the study at any time.
Data Collection

Data collection began in the fall of 2011 while data analysis was completed in the spring of 2012. Qualitative data was collected in the field through the forms of observation field notes, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and journaling. The individual face-to-face, in-depth interviews were the primary source of data, as they allowed participants the opportunity to provide rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002).

As phenomenology is not primarily interested in the subjective experiences of the participants simply to report the phenomenon, it was important to focus on the driving force behind phenomenological inquiry during the data collection process (van Manen, 1990). The goal was to uncover the essence of the phenomenon as an essentially human experience through in-depth inquiry and reflection (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (2009) posited that in order to gain a deeper, self revealing experience from the participant, the researcher should spend the appropriate time developing a sense of rapport with them.

After I had initially communicated with the six participants via email, I gave each of them the opportunity to meet with me to answer any questions they had regarding the study and their role in it two weeks prior to the start of data collection. As I had previously developed a sense of rapport with each of them through several email conversations, I wanted to create an environment for the participants that would allow for a deeper connection to take place between the participants and I so they would feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with me. Four of the six participants chose to meet with me in an informal setting for coffee to discuss the research study and gain a better understanding of what was expected of them. It was during this time that I gave them the opportunity to sign the consent form after reading it with them and also distributed the journals to each of them. The journals were distributed to the participants prior to
their first interview to give them a starting point to reflect upon their experience. The journal contained a prompt telling them to describe their experience of readjustment after they had returned from studying abroad in Africa. They were instructed to describe their reactions to being home the first days, weeks, and months and to write what they were thinking and feeling during these times. All participants that met with me prior to their first interview chose to sign the consent form while meeting with me.

Upon consent form agreement, the participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured, face-to-face, audio recorded individual interview with the goal of obtaining concrete, detailed descriptions of the lived experience of reentry into the U.S. after returning from Africa. These 60 minute interviews were semi-structured with the intention of being flexible and open to new perspectives should the participant choose to explore an avenue that uncovered a richer, deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005). To fully capture the context and uncover the essence of the phenomenon, the structure of the interviews was divided into five categories of questions focusing on: (a) the study abroad experience; (b) return to the U.S; (c) identity; (d) social interactions upon return; and, (e) coping with reentry (see Appendix A). As the researcher, I engaged in the epoche process to remain in tune with capturing the essence of the phenomenon, recognized when the participant wished to elaborate on a particular experience, and provided opportunities to allow the participant to explain a concept or particular experience in further detail to understand the meaning behind it (Giorgi, 2009). Additionally, during each interview I kept observational field notes of the body language of the participants in order to better contextualize the interview. Finally, interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon location, a public library, which provided the participant with a comfortable and trusting environment in which to share his/her personal experience (Moustakas, 1994).
At the end of the face-to-face individual interviews, participants were instructed to keep their journals and write additional thoughts about their experience that may surface after the interview, as they had more time to reflect upon these experiences. Journals were to be kept and brought to the optional follow up focus group in which they would have the opportunity to share experiences from their journal with others and submit their journals at the end of the focus group. Three participants, one male and two females, attended the optional focus group and submitted their journals. The three participants who did not attend the focus group personally submitted their journals to me two months after their initial face-to-face interviews at a mutually agreed upon location.

Data Analysis

Following each interview, I utilized reflective data collection by reflecting upon the understanding and insights gained from each participant directly after the interview through my own journaling. The descriptive field notes and all audio recordings were transcribed and reviewed for emerging themes to explore in the focus group after initial data collection. With an emphasis on these themes, a focus group was conducted in November of 2011, two months after the individual interviews in September of 2011. As the follow-up semi-structured, audio recorded focus group was optional, not all participants attended. Three of the six participants participated in the 60 minute semi-structured, audio-recorded focus group session to further capture the essence of the phenomenon and emerging themes found in the initial interviews (see Appendix B). Additionally, the focus group was intended to gain descriptions of experiences that had not been thoroughly explained in the individual interviews and highlight commonalities and differences between participants and their lived experience of readjusting in the U.S. It is important to mention that, of the three participants who attended the focus group, the variation of
participants was represented in terms of gender, both African countries, different lengths of time in which they had studied abroad, as well as the length of time that had passed since they had returned to the U.S.

As phenomenology aims to reflectively clarify and make explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990), all interviews, including the focus group, were transcribed and sent to each participant for review to ensure their experiences were accurately illustrated. This method also provided them with the opportunity to clarify and correct any data they found that misrepresented their experience (Moustakas, 1994). I also used this time, during the focus group and through email, to ask for clarification on certain answers they had provided in which I believed I may have influenced their answer through body language or verbal cues. For example, after one of the participants had explained his/her immediate reaction to returning to the U.S. and paused, I was smiling and nodding knowingly. I then asked if he would conclude that he had a more negative reaction to returning in which he replied yes. Because of this, when I sent the interview transcript, I brought that particular moment to his attention and asked if I had influenced his answer and gave him the chance to answer the same question again. After review, all participants confirmed that the transcriptions accurately depicted their experiences of the phenomenon. In addition, I advised the participants to reread their journal entries to confirm the appropriate representation of their experiences before turning them in to me.

After receiving confirmation that the transcriptions accurately represented their lived experience of readjusting to Northwest Ohio after returning from Africa, I employed Moustakas’ modification of the van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis as described below (Moustakas, 1994). However, I included a step from Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen’s method as it recognizes the importance of the researcher’s understanding and experience of the phenomenon
in the analysis as well through its requirement of the transcription and analysis of the
researcher’s experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas’ modification of van
Kaam’s method of data analysis employs phenomenological reduction to extricate the relevant
themes illuminating the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This thematic analysis
refers to the process of recovering the themes that embody the meanings and experiential
structures of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological reduction then, through
Moustakas’ modification of van Kaam’s method, aims to listen and reflect with a conscious
intention of perceiving the phenomena as phenomena, in its own textures and meanings
(Moustakas, 1994). This is accomplished through Moustakas’ method of active bracketing,
horizontalization, determining of invariant constituents, clustering of relevant themes, validating
the themes, and construction of textural-structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

In order to analyze the data in a conscious mindset, I first reflected upon the transcription
of my answers to the interview (Moustakas, 1994). Through my own awareness of my
understandings and context of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009), I was able to engage in the
epoche process of understanding and analyzing the experiences of the participants as they
perceived them while setting aside and maintaining awareness of my own biases (Moustakas,
1994). During the transcription process, I had written descriptive field notes about the nonverbal
cues and moments of clarity in which the essence of the phenomenon may have been observed as
the audio files were replayed. For example, when a participant was questioned about her first
days back from Africa, through her pause and the length of time it took for her to answer that she
indeed realized that she had a significantly difficult time the first week back in Ohio, I made the
following descriptive note: “reacts surprised and defeated to the realization that she was unhappy
and out of place her first week back in the U.S.” Through this process, I was able to obtain a
visual stabilization of the raw data once the transcriptions were complete, thereby attending to Moustakas’ modification of van Kaam’s method of analysis (Giorgi, 2009).

With a conscious mindset and visual stabilization of the raw data, I first began listing every expression relevant to the experience from each transcription, journal entry, and observation note through the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). This provides each word and meaning unit with equal value in order to best uncover the profound layers illustrating the true nature of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As they were identified, they were listed into preliminary groupings. In order to determine invariant constituents, each relevant expression was tested for two requirements: (a) Did the expression contain a moment of the experience necessary for understanding the phenomenon? and (b) Was it possible to abstract the expression and label it? (Moustakas, 1994). If an expression did not meet both of these criteria it was eliminated from analysis. An example of an expression that met both of the criteria was “…oddly enough, I was ready to go home because I had been gone for so long and I was tired so I was ready to go home.” On the other hand, an example of an expression that did not meet both criteria was “Um, like the differences in values?” As this statement did not express a necessary moment of the experience for understanding the phenomenon it was eliminated. Furthermore, invariant constituents were then clustered and labeled by theme (Moustakas, 1994). These invariant constituents and accompanied themes were then compared to the participant’s complete transcription to determine whether the themes were explicitly expressed and/or compatible if not explicitly expressed (Moustakas, 1994). If these themes did not meet either of those criteria, it was not relevant to the participant’s experience and eliminated from analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

After initial validation of relevant themes, textural and structural descriptions were constructed through verbatim examples from the transcriptions to portray each participant’s lived
experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions present varying intensities and qualities within the experiential context, while structural descriptions include the factors necessary for the phenomenon to be experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Through the imaginative variation process, structural themes were formed that recognized the underlying contexts and meanings that account for the emergence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). After these descriptions were constructed separately for each participant and the researcher, textural-structural descriptions were formed to present the meanings and essences of the participant’s experiences (Moustakas, 1994). An example of a textural-structural description was, “I hate having to be on time. But it’s so engrained in our society that you can’t get away from it, even if you try.” These descriptions were meant to illustrate the themes and essence of each individual’s experience of the phenomenon. After representing each participant individually, composite descriptions of the essence of the readjustment experience were constructed from the individual textural-structural descriptions to represent the nature of the shared experience of the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

**Validity and Credibility**

Qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, often does not have the ability to anticipate potential threats to the validity and credibility of a study in advance (Maxwell, 2005). These threats are simply described as the way a researcher may be proven wrong or come to invalid conclusions (Maxwell, 2005). Thus, validity consists of the strategies a researcher uses to strengthen his or her design and rule out potential threats before and during data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) describes two broad types of threats to validity, researcher “bias” and reactivity. I will define both of these threats and describe the strategies...
used to strengthen the validity and credibility of the study, as well as the methods used to ensure a quality, phenomenological study.

Maxwell (2005) describes researcher bias as the inclusion of the subjectivity of the researcher in his or her conclusions. While it is generally understood in qualitative research, and particularly in phenomenology, that a researcher’s biases cannot be eliminated from the study, it is important for the researcher to address his/her own understandings and biases and how he/she will avoid negative consequences as a result of these biases. In this study, I incorporated the method of bracketing and answering the interview questions that were used in the study to understand my own interpretations and beliefs of the readjustment process. During data collection, I maintained an awareness of my own understandings and biases and would ask the participants to further explain themselves when one of my own understandings and preconceived themes was addressed in the interviews in order to avoid a misunderstanding of the experience being expressed because of my own assumptions. Furthermore, by using the exact same process as I used for all of the participants to transcribe and analyze my own data, I was able to gain full awareness of the context in which I experienced the phenomenon and suspend these understandings while employing Moustakas’ method of analysis. By keeping an open mind and fully exploring my own interpretation of the phenomenon, I was able to actively compensate for these preconceptions during the individual interviews and focus group. For example, one of my own understandings of the phenomenon was that it was difficult to immediately readjust to U.S. culture, hence I maintained awareness of this preconception during the interviews and if a participant discussed a positive readjustment to U.S. culture, I did not lead him/her into discussing solely negative adjustment experiences that would fit into my preconceived understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, I was also able to avoid negative consequences that
may have skewed the data by avoiding leading questions and making assumptions of a participant’s experience, and preventing my own biases from interfering with the construction of themes during data analysis.

Maxwell (2005) describes reactivity as the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied. While qualitative research acknowledges that it is impossible to eliminate the researcher’s influence from a study, it is important to recognize the affect the researcher may have on the participants and ultimately the conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2005). In a phenomenological study, the researcher is the instrument that aids in uncovering the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. Thus, I acknowledge my role in influencing the participants during data collection and used it productively. For example, in order to capture the essence of a phenomenon the participant must be willing to trust the researcher and articulate his or her experience in a concrete and meaningful way (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Through the process of informal meetings prior to the beginning of the study, I was able to establish a sense of rapport by taking the time to answer every question they had about the study and essentially remain available to them. Additionally, I shared with them that I had also studied abroad in Africa and experienced the readjustment process with the intention of gaining a deeper connection with them and providing the participant a sense of security in revealing their personal stories to me. During the individual interviews and focus group, I also maintained an awareness of my body language and verbal cues in order to prevent the participants from feeling pressured or encouraged to answer a question in a particular way. For example, during the data collection process, I made sure to maintain a neutral body position which conveyed a sense of comfort and support through steady eye contact and a warm smile to encourage them to feel more comfortable discussing their experiences. Finally, if I was
under the impression that my verbal cues or body language had influenced a particular answer, I recorded it in my field notes and asked participants to clarify their answers while they were reviewing their transcriptions for confirmation of meaningful representation of their experience.

In addition to accounting for both researcher bias and reactivity, I employed other strategies to test the validity of the study’s conclusions and ultimately rule out or account for additional threats to validity. First, the study was designed to obtain the lived experiences of the participants by gathering data through individual in-depth interviews, a focus group, descriptive field notes, and journaling. This triangulation of data sources aided in testing the consistency of the findings through multiple forms of data collection in order to reduce the risk of chance associations and one-sided analyses (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002). In this way, themes were only used when explicitly expressed or compatible within each source of data (Moustakas, 1994). Also, perspective triangulation was utilized in order to understand how different assumptions affect the findings and interpretations of a study (Patton, 2002). Particularly, I provided a philosophical framework as a foundation for the phenomenological study to better understand the goals and purpose of the phenomenology. Within this framework, I employed aspects of transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and heuristic inquiry in the design of the study to bridge the gaps within each theory and provide a collaborative, intensive phenomenological study.

As it is extremely important in phenomenology to collect extensive, concrete descriptions of a phenomenon, I conducted intensive interviews and utilized member checking to ensure the quality and depth of data (Maxwell, 2005). In order to gain rich data, I conducted 60-minute individual interviews in order to increase the opportunity for the participants to provide a full and extensive illustration of the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005). Similarly, the focus group was also
60 minutes in length to allow the participants to elaborate upon the themes found during the initial data analysis. During these interviews, I paraphrased the participant’s description of an experience and ask him or her to confirm if what I had described was what he/she was implying. To support these in-depth interviews, I wrote descriptive analyses of each interview immediately after it ended in order to capture and reflect upon the experiences expressed in each interview. Finally, I conducted member checks by sending the transcriptions of the interviews to each participant to allow him/her to validate whether the data accurately described the essence of his/her experience. It was during this time I also confirmed particular answers with any participant in which I felt that my body language or verbal cues had influenced the way in which they had answered a question. By employing these strategies, I was able to collect rich data that captured both the context and the essence of the shared experience in an accurate and complete way. Through accounting for threats to validity, triangulating data sources and perspectives, expressing and maintaining an awareness of my own biases and understanding, and actively working to avoid negative consequences because of them, the likelihood that the data collected is valid and credible is greatly increased.

**Methodological Limitations**

As this study aims to understand the readjustment of U.S. college students who studied abroad in Africa, the small number of students who currently study in Africa may have limited the countries represented in this study. While only two countries are represented, they represent different regions of Africa which allows for some variation in experience.

Additionally, as the purpose of the focus group was to follow up on initial themes found after transcribing the individual interviews, the three participants who did not attend the focus group may not have allowed for as thorough of a description of the essence of the phenomenon
as originally intended. However, the 60-minute individual interviews gave the participants the opportunity to give extensive, detailed portrayals of their experiences of readjustment in which ample themes were discovered within each interview. The use of additional data sources, such as the individual interviews and journal entries, and the fact that each participant reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of their interview and journal transcriptions suggests that even if participants did not attend the focus group, they were able to provide enough information to reach data saturation.

When exploring identity in college students, it is important to acknowledge the literature that recognizes change in identity as a typical occurrence in college students. Thus, it is possible that some of the psychological and sociocultural factors influencing the participants may not be a direct result of the study abroad experience. However, the design of this study allowed the participants to extensively describe their feelings and thought processes and directly address the underlying factors affecting their readjustment. In this way, the study aims to illustrate the unique way in which a study abroad experience in Africa may influence identity for some students.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter provides a rich description of the reentry adjustment phenomenon experienced by students after returning from study abroad in Africa. Contextual data is used to introduce each participant to examine their unique reentry adjustment experiences and to illuminate themes found during data analysis. In accordance with phenomenological methodology, the goal of this chapter is to justly and accurately capture and illustrate the participants’ lived experiences of the phenomenon, as well as bring to life the emerging themes found to be a part of the true essence of the phenomenon. Thus, participants’ voices capture their lived experiences in their own words through the presentation of lengthy quotes from individual face-to-face interviews, a focus group, and individual journals collected during the research study. The emerging themes help to answer the initial research question to identify the psychological and sociocultural experiences of U.S. college students upon their return from studying abroad in Africa and how those experiences related to identity. The chapter first introduces the participants’ individual reentry experiences, then provides the major themes found between participants by country, and finally illustrates the pertinent findings common to all participants.

Participant Profiles of the Reentry Adjustment Process

As phenomenology aims to understand a phenomenon through the lived experiences of the individual, it is important to first understand the reentry adjustment experiences of each participant. In this study, every participant was a U.S. college student who studied abroad in the African countries of Burkina Faso or South Africa. Four participants studied in the same program in Burkina Faso between 2009 and 2011, while the other two participants studied in South Africa in separate programs during the summer of 2008. Additionally, each participant
traveled directly home to the U.S. following the cessation of their study abroad program in Africa. It is in the interest of eloquently and honestly portraying each participant’s unique and valuable insights into their lived experiences that their experiences of reentry adjustment are illustrated.

**Ava.** Ava participated in a service-learning, study abroad program during the summer of 2008 for three weeks in Cape Town, South Africa. She and four other undergraduate students worked with their professor to raise money for school supplies to take over to the primary schools in South Africa in which they would work. Once there, Ava worked with the other students in her program to lead workshops for teachers and conduct art projects with children during the after-school programs in the townships. She described entering the study abroad experience as a young, naïve girl who desired to expand her cultural horizons and left with a fresh perspective and inspiration to replicate community-based after-school programs in a community within the U.S. Ava’s open mind, ambition, and playful nature color her accounts of both her study abroad and reentry adjustment experiences.

As the third week approached Ava’s service-learning experience in Cape Town, the time was nearing when she would have to return to her small hometown in Ohio. She recounted her thoughts and disappointment in leaving South Africa:

I remember thinking I didn’t want to leave. Like I said, I thought we didn’t have enough one on one experience with the kids yet. I wanted to do more with the schools but I do remember not wanting to come home.

Once she left South Africa and returned to the U.S., her initial reactions to her home culture were overwhelming and quite frustrating as she felt no one cared or understood her experience.
Right after coming back, the people in my group I went with, we stayed in really close contact for those first few days. And I remember calling them and talking to them about adjusting and talking about how people just don’t understand. I wanted to tell everyone everything about my experience and I wanted to take people there to show them, but you really have to go to the place and see how these people are living to get an understanding of it. So I remember feeling like I couldn’t explain myself especially to my parents who have never been outside of the country, my brother, like the people that I’m closest to I just remember being like, trying to explain myself but then feeling like a sense that they were bored, not really completely interested and not really understanding things. I felt isolated for a little bit.

To help cope with her difficulty in communicating her experiences to her loved ones, she continued writing in the journal she had used while in South Africa. “I think I wrote off and on for probably about four months. I feel like that really helped me just remember what happened.”

In addition to being exposed to new worldviews different than the U.S., Ava was enamored with the concept of time that she experienced while in Cape Town. It was so different than the concept from her home culture that when she returned to the U.S., her newly adopted concept of time had become a reality. The discarding of the old concept for the South African concept of time began to gain momentum when Ava was late on multiple occasions to the schools in the townships because of a delay in the arrival of her assigned ride.

I remember waiting for these people to come pick us up for the school and I’m like getting pissed because they’re late and I’m like this is gonna make me look bad and they’re not going to like me because I’m late and I’m just freaking out. When I finally got there he was just like oh hey come in and he gave me a book and he let me read to the
class and it was like no big deal at all. Why did I like it? No one cared! No one cared, that’s why it was so surprising. It just introduced me to a new way of looking at life.

Not only does the concept of African time still remain a part of her cultural schema, she expressed how her South African experience still sticks with her today.

Honestly, I don’t think I’d be the same person if I didn’t go there. Because I just… wouldn’t. It changed my outlook completely. It was just such, even going to other places, like I went to Spain and that was cool and I had fun and it affected me and I learned about a different culture and things like that, but I think Africa is just such a different place that I mean it has to have an impact, there’s no way it couldn’t.

Dwelé. Dwelé studied abroad in the summer of 2009 in Burkina Faso with six other college students for four weeks. As a first-year graduate student in the U.S., he was enrolled in classes in the capital city of Ouagadougou that explored the cultural aspects of daily life in Burkina Faso as well as French cinema. He happily recounted his experiences living with his host family and developing his French and Moré speaking skills. Furthermore, his logical, insightful, and gregarious nature is highlighted through his accounts of study abroad and readjustment to U.S. culture. While he emphatically stated that his experience changed his outlook on life, his reentry experience was rather unique in comparison to the other participants.

After leaving Burkina Faso for Spain to take advantage of a two-day layover on his way home, Dwelé found out that his father had suffered a massive stroke and was in critical condition in a hospital back home in the U.S. His urgency to get home to his father was the only thing he could think about as he returned home to Michigan. Dwelé eloquently articulated his reentry experience and how his family emergency became his priority.
It truly was like this weird post-modernist Tale of Two Cities in which it truly was the best of times and the worst of times all scrunched together. I’ve never lived anything like it. As I mentioned I had to move back home. For three months, pretty much as soon as I got home I was going into a hospital every day or rehab center and that was my life for three months. And miraculously my dad did recover but yeah it was really, really terrifying and really all of the energy that would have been expended on me readjusting kinda turned towards him. When I think of reentry I think of that, because that is what happened so it was like I wasn’t thinking like oh I’m gonna go eat this and do this…it was just really bizarre.

During those first few months at the hospital with his dad, he explained that he had a “whole long however many months of just sitting around” and that he did find himself thinking of his Burkina Faso experience at random instances. “I did think of it somewhat. I did find myself laughing at different memories that would pop in my head or thinking about the grilled fish there and thinking about my [host] family and stuff like that.”

Despite his father’s critical condition, his family and friends were still eager to hear about his experiences abroad. He described positive experiences in sharing his times in Burkina Faso with his loved ones and illustrated these sentiments when asked whether his family actively asked about his study abroad experience.

My family? Absolutely! Oh my god, I’m still getting questioned about it! Yeah I mean nobody will get it but it’s no different than if you’ve been to Australia and no one’s gonna understand. Unless you go and do that same thing you’re not gonna understand. You can apply that to travel and to so many things. I’ve talked about it several times, and I’ll probably talk about it several times more. I would love if possible to be able to share
or go back and take my mother to really have them see what I saw, like that would just be...so...magical.

Even though his immediate entry into crisis mode enabled Dwelé to skip consciously coping with his reentry, the knowledge and insight he gained in his host culture remained with him. Additionally, he articulated how this experience shaped his identity: “It showed me that if you have an open mind and an open heart, you really can connect with anybody… Cuz like I said, I didn’t speak a word of their language and we fell in love.”

Yet, because the end of the Burkina Faso experience was coupled with a terrifying, painful experience, Dwelé conveyed the conflicted emotions he felt when reflecting on the experience in a meaningful and delicate manner. “It’s just something that for me at this point it’s just a part of my...my memory bank, it’s a very special place, but it’s been compartmentalized into kind of where it is, because... in a very strange way its bittersweet.”

**Sarah.** Sarah participated in the joint France-Burkina Faso study abroad program and studied in Burkina Faso for four weeks during the summer of 2011, the year before her senior year of college. While there, she was enrolled in two classes, the ‘Daily Life of Burkina Faso’ in which she learned about the history, culture, and local languages of the country and ‘French Cinema’ in which she learned about the cultural and technical elements that influenced French films in the African context. After class, she would return home to her host family, eat dinner, and practice the local language with her host mother and sisters. Sarah was very honest and conscientious in detailing her accounts in Burkina Faso and of readjustment to the U.S.

When recounting her initial sentiments about returning to the U.S., Sarah expressed her readiness to return to the comforts of her own home. “The one thing, you know, I was sad, I didn’t want to leave them [host family]. But at the same time I was like you know, I’m good, this
was enough. I missed the comfort so I was looking forward to going home.” The day she returned to her home, she demanded her father take her to Taco Bell and then proceeded to sleep for the rest of the day. After recovering from the tiresome international flight, her initial reactions and adjustment to her home culture began to set in with feelings of guilt for being wasteful and newfound appreciation for what she had.

I had these feelings of oh my gosh why are all these people being so wasteful! You’re brushing your teeth and you just let the water run like that or you only ate half your meal and you’re throwing it out?! These people there don’t throw out stuff. They turn the water on, turn the water off, like they save their water you know?

Sarah also began noticing the differences in priorities between her host culture and the U.S.

On the plane [returning to the U.S.] it was even more awkward. I hear these girls saying ‘I bought this 200 dollar European bag’ or something or like ‘oh it’s so inconvenient that I can’t use my phone on the plane’ and I just wanted to be like shut up at least you can afford to get on a plane, you know… ungrateful (laughs). That’s how I felt!

Not only was she comparing the materialism of her home culture with the basic needs of her host culture, she was also sharing her stories and experiences with her family and friends. However, she was not sure how she could explain the stories to her loved ones in a way they would understand and found that it was easier to share her experience with her family than her friends. “Everybody wants to see my pictures and everybody was saying ‘tell me all your stories!’ (pauses) and I was like I don’t know how to tell you, I don’t know how you’re going to believe me.” She describes the difficulty in trying to talk about Burkina Faso with her friends:
I’ll be like oh I went to Burkina Faso. ‘Where’s Burkina Faso. Oh it’s in Africa! I thought Africa was a country.’ And I’ll be like oh my god (shakes head)… So you know just the fact that they don’t even know where it is I can’t really relate it to you if you can’t even relate where it’s at, I’m not going to explain it to you.

When asked what coping methods were used to help her adjust to the U.S., she describes trying to remain in touch with her host sister through Facebook and “by telling my stories, it helped me cope…if that makes sense. And showing my pictures that helped me cope with adjusting.” She also remains connected to the international community through her various roles on executive boards of cross-cultural student organizations and classes, including World Student Association, International Studies Network, and a model United Nations independent study.

Christine. Christine studied abroad as an undergraduate student in Stellenbosch, a city in the Western Cape province of South Africa for six weeks in the summer of 2008. She chose it because it was a service-learning program that specialized in community development. She was enrolled in a South African history class and then spent the rest of her time with her group in the service-learning component. She and two others in her group were chosen to teach preschool children in the townships for three weeks as part of their experiential learning. On the weekends and after the long school days were over, she would socialize with the other 40 college students in her program and participate in weekend excursions to explore the sights of South Africa. Christine’s passionate, caring, and introverted nature is exemplified through her accounts of her study abroad and readjustment experiences. During her final days abroad in South Africa, Christine was not fickle in telling her new friends her plans for leaving. She simply wasn’t.

I think I kept saying don’t make me go back. I loved it there and I never wanted to come home. I mean I missed my family and friends, but it’s such a beautiful area and
environment. I think I just enjoyed the whole study abroad experience, at least in my case, you’re with so many students from all over it was just awesome to meet everyone and I don’t think I was done getting to know people.

Even though she tried to will the day not to come, the time came when she found herself returning back to Ohio. She was sad and sorely missed the people and atmosphere of South Africa and had no interest in communicating with any of the friends and family she left behind in Ohio to tell them she had returned just yet. Instead, she kept to herself and endured an intense few days of rigorous reminiscing, comprehending, and seclusion.

Honestly if I think about it, for the first two days I came back I didn’t really want to talk to anybody, I think I just kind of stayed by myself, even though people were like ‘ooh you just got back, let’s chat, let’s go out to eat, let’s hang out, let’s do this.’ I think I just really wanted to be alone because I missed South Africa (laughs). I think at least for me when you come back from such a big trip and, in my case, I do feel like it was sort of life changing in a sense, that you just need to sit and think about it.

As Christine sat and tried to digest her experience, she reflected upon what the experience meant to her and how it influenced her identity. Christine saw her parents a week and a half after she returned home from South Africa and was prepared to be bombarded with questions about her trip. However, she never allowed herself to provide detailed answers about her experience.

I think I just acted normal with them but I don’t think I really talked about my trip, they would be like how was it and I was like oh it was awesome. I didn’t really share details, they were MY details. It was such a special experience that’s like, how do you explain everything that you went through to a person and have them give the same amount of
appreciation to it? To me it’s like… why share all these amazing experiences with you if you won’t be able to grasp it?

When explaining how the experience still affects her today, she explained she had an increased desire to live outside of the U.S.

My trip really made me realize and understand more that I want instilled in me the mindset of traveling and trying to help people where I go… and trying to get to know them and their culture, rather than being content and coming back to the States and staying in the States. I don’t want to stay here, I want to travel… I want to live abroad, I want to do something outside of the States.

**Todd.** Todd participated in the joint France-Burkina Faso study abroad program during the spring of 2010. Upon studying abroad in France for seven months, he completed his time abroad with his final two weeks in Burkina Faso studying and living with a host family. Todd is a senior undergraduate student majoring in French Education and decorated his accounts of readjustment from living abroad with subtle wit and calm exuberance. He entered Burkina Faso with a unique perspective in comparison to the other participants, as he strongly identified with the French culture. He explained, “I have spoken French long enough where I have a French me and I like to think, I even have a different voice when I speak French and it’s a very different identity. After a year in France, I was tired (laughs) so I really wasn’t sure if I wanted to go…” Despite his initial hesitation, the short time he was in Burkina Faso enabled him to gain valuable insights and experiences from living with his host family:

I remember going home my family spoke French but they also spoke these other languages that we were learning in class and I really wanted to speak it to them. And I was excited and was like oh I know this I can say this to you now! And they would help
me and teach me new expressions, so I really kind of embraced that side of it. I was really excited to be...excited to learn their culture a little bit more. After the fact I was SO happy that I had done it. It was a wonderful experience and it really taught me what was important in life and happiness, and having fun and seeing how other people lived was so important to me.

In discussing his initial thoughts about returning to the U.S. and his first days back, he found it was not what he expected.

Oddly enough, I was ready to go home because I had been gone for so long and I was tired so I was ready to go home. But when I got back I realized that I wasn’t as ready as I thought I was, so coming back was kind of hard definitely... just because I reminisced a lot about what had happened and wanted to go back.

Upon reentrance to his home culture, the differences and similarities between his host culture and home culture did not go unnoticed.

In Burkina everyone was just relaxed and goes with the flow whereas here everyone is always looking at their watches. And when I came here that was a rough adjustment. I wanted to just take my time and be kinda chill about where I was going but everyone’s like you gotta be here at this time. And then here I see people who are angry because they don’t have the best car, like they get mad at their phone because the internet is not working on their phone, (laughs briefly) just all these trivial things I realize they don’t matter. I’m always kind of comparing the cultures.

Todd provided a very open and honest account of his somewhat slow readjustment to the U.S.
I think I kept reliving everything in food, I would cook things I knew or find things of how I used to eat over there. I brought a bag of peanuts home from Africa and I like constantly ate them because …like it was…it was just something I remembered from Africa and I loved from Africa. So I coped a lot by trying to ease myself by incorporating parts of both cultures. You know I would have my American meals, American friends, and then I would also incorporate things that I would enjoy from the other culture… I let go slowly.

He admitted his most difficult part of readjusting to the U.S. was the feeling of frustration that no one would understand the experience that had a profound impact on his life.

The people I was hanging out with and talking to just didn’t understand. And you don’t want to come off as a snob who travels a lot but at the same time you want to talk about what you’ve done and what you’ve experienced, but nobody can relate to you unless they’ve done it or something similar…And I think that was really difficult because I had so many things I wanted to talk about and just couldn’t…and at the same time, so many people were asking me questions that I couldn’t…answer…(pauses). It was hard to put an experience into words, its kinda like you have to live it. And I couldn’t express everything that I learned, everything that I had fun doing. That was the biggest difficulty.

As time has passed and allowed him to better readjust, Todd reflected on how his Burkina Faso experience still influences his life today.

I really just got in touch with how to be content. Just content with what’s happening and content with myself, and I think that’s a really good lesson for me to have learned because my years since I’ve gotten back have gotten progressively more difficult and
busier, and I think I would not have been able to handle it as well as I have without that experience.

**Kim.** Kim studied abroad for four weeks in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, located in West Africa. Prior to her arrival in Burkina Faso, she had been studying in England and France for five months. She participated in the Burkina Faso study abroad program during the summer of 2009, a month before her junior year of college. She fondly discussed bonding with her host family and regularly teaching her host sister and brother American dances and games during the times she was not in the city for classes. Her endless sense of wonder and compassionate, genuine nature is illuminated throughout her accounts of her study abroad and reentry experiences.

Kim expressed her mixed feelings of going home, stating that she felt guilty for leaving her host family but excited to be home. Once home, she took advantage of her first day back to do things she had not had the opportunity to do while abroad, including wearing high heels and eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. After the excitement of being home wore off the first day she was in the U.S., she wanted to go back; however, this was not an option as she had to return to work her second day home.

I only had one day to transition to six months of being abroad and then had to go back to work. And I did that to myself, I didn’t realize it would be bad, but I worked for three straight weeks before coming back to school and those three weeks were awful. I just resented the U.S. and I just resented being back I guess, it was hard because I didn’t give myself time to adjust.

Trying to catch up with friends and family by attempting to provide them with fascinating accounts of her experiences and the impact that it had on her world outlook proved rather
challenging. She illustrated the frustration and disappointment she felt when she was unable to communicate with her friends and family what she had experienced in Burkina Faso.

It’s really hard because you couldn’t share these stories and have people understand exactly because they weren’t there. Just like with any story, but especially in different countries, it’s hard to envision things and it was almost resentful, unfairly resentful because they weren’t there, but they couldn’t help that they weren’t there. They didn’t understand, they didn’t ask questions, they didn’t know what to ask. It was just really hard catching up. That was the hard part for me was catching up with people. Knowing how to respond, how was it? It was great! You can say that but what does it mean? It was awful, I can’t explain anything, let alone a whole six months in especially Burkina, because it was so different than most other experiences.

Not only was she having difficulty catching up and sharing her experience with her loved ones, but after working three weeks straight immediately following reentry she had little time to process her adjustment before returning to school for the fall semester. When asked to describe the most difficult part about being home she expressed the detachment she felt from the U.S. education system.

College just seems so pointless, well when I work, everything just seems so meaningless, pointless. Like, why am I doing this, is this even making the world better? Like why am I, you know, spending all this money to sit in this class that I hate and I don’t know, it was a rough semester because you just rethink education and I just valued my experiences. I mean we had classes when we were abroad, but really? (pauses) that’s not what we learned. We learned so many life things about people and it just felt like, uh, we’re just put in this little box again.
While Kim’s readjustment period lasted for a few months, she explained feeling motivated to share her new perspective through her teaching style. She fervently explained that the experience in Burkina Faso changed her and pointed her in a new direction:

As a teacher my whole philosophy has changed. I think about the purpose and context of things much more. I just see all of these problems in education, yeah you have to make it meaningful to students but education is still making it so centered around their lives. I so want to open them up to the world, like not only relate it to their lives but to the lives of others all over the world. I want to do something that matters or that I feel is more meaningful and what aligns with my philosophy.

**Difference in Experiences between Burkina Faso and South Africa**

Interviews, a focus group, and journals were used in an attempt to fully grasp the most complete understanding of the essence of reentry adjustment after returning from Africa. With a better understanding of each participant’s personal reentry adjustment experience, this study also illustrates the readjustment process of the participants by the country, Burkina Faso or South Africa, in which they studied. While the participants shared more similarities than differences between countries, the interviews did illuminate differences in the readjustment process between participants returning from Burkina Faso and South Africa. The main differences in the students’ reentry adjustment involved their initial thoughts of returning to the U.S. and the unique element of living with a host family for the students who studied in Burkina Faso.

**Length of time abroad.** During the individual interviews, all of the participants who studied in Burkina Faso demonstrated a desire to return home to the U.S. Kim described wanting to come home to the U.S.:
Honestly at that point, after being gone for six months, I was just so ready to be home. Because, well being sick didn’t help, but I was ready to see my family and enjoy plumbing again. I was excited to get home, but then I felt bad for being excited because I knew that these people [host family] would miss me and I would miss them.

While all of the participants in Burkina Faso wanted to return home, the participants who studied in South Africa both expressed a desire to stay longer when reflecting upon their initial thoughts of returning home to the U.S. Ava explained how she did not want to leave because she wanted more time to help at the schools while Christine felt no urgency or desire to return home:

I remember never wanting to come home. I feel like I had such an overall good experience that it wasn’t, I wasn’t needing to get back to something. I wasn’t like oooh I just need some McDonalds or ugh, I just need to lay in my bed. I kept saying don’t make me go back.

As the students who studied in Burkina Faso had all been abroad for at least two months and the participants from South Africa had only been abroad for three and six weeks, the length of time abroad was longer for the Burkina Faso students than the students who had studied in South Africa.

**Impact of living with a host family.** The individuals studying in Burkina Faso were all placed with a host family for the duration of their time there, enabling them to live amidst the local culture while the participants in South Africa stayed in more Westernized living conditions. Thus, each student who studied in Burkina Faso spoke happily about their host family, the significant differences in living conditions, and expressed the difficulty in leaving them and how they still think about them to this day. Dwelé expressed how they became a part of his family:
You come from your biological family and you also come from, if you can choose this for yourself, you have a human family. And I identify with them in that they truly are a part of my human family. I mean I love them, just, I fell in love when I went over there, truly fell in love with them.

While all the participants who lived with a host family formed special bonds with them, they all mentioned the significant changes in living conditions with which they had to become accustomed. Sarah explained sleeping under mosquito nets on a cot and adjusting to the different bathing conditions:

I knew I was going to have to sleep under a mosquito net on a cot but to get into it every night and tuck in the thing you know, it’s just really annoying and obnoxious. In Burkina, they use a bucket to clean themselves and don’t use toilet paper so my program bought the toilet paper for us. I was just ready for like, a really nice shower and its weird they washed my clothes but it didn’t feel like they were washed.

Because the living conditions were so different for the participants in Burkina Faso and not for the individuals in South Africa, this may have impacted their desires to return home. However, the relationship that the participants developed with their host families in Burkina Faso was indeed special, and a majority of them stated that they continue to remain in contact with their host families. Kim described how hard it was to leave them and how she remains in contact with them today:

But it was hard leaving them because...they...they grew so attached to me, that sounds weird but they did and leaving them behind….I felt very…I felt bad going back to what I have in the States. But I sent my host family handwritten letters when I got home and I
keep in contact with my host sister through Facebook even though she can only get on it once or twice a month.

**Interview Findings: The Essence of the Lived Experience**

As the basis of this phenomenological research study is to capture the essence of the lived experience of reentry adjustment of U.S. college students after studying abroad in Africa, the data compiled from the participant’s individual interviews, focus group and individual journal entries revealed seven essential themes, illustrating the essence of the phenomenon of the group’s experience of reentry adjustment. In this section, the emergent themes are all demonstrated through the excerpts provided from the individual interviews. It is with the hope of capturing the true essence of the reentry adjustment process that the reader is taken through the process of reentry adjustment in a chronological presentation of the themes as they were experienced by the participants. The seven themes include:

1. Embracing the host culture;
2. Experiencing mixed emotions during initial reentry to home culture;
3. Reentry causes critical comparison of the U.S. and the African host country;
4. Challenges of communicating experience and feeling understood;
5. Reconstructing identity after the African study abroad experience;
6. Remaining connected to the African experience; and
7. African study abroad experience causes positive changes in one’s personal life.

**Embracing the Host Culture**

As the participants were telling their stories of their study abroad experiences, they all discussed entering the host culture with an open mind and willingness to try new things. Kim shared her willingness to embrace the new culture:
I was ready to embrace it. Like when we flew in to the hotel the, um, the airport was just this building with dirt floors and no air conditioning or system, they just threw your luggage in huge piles and it was absolutely crazy and you felt gross but I was just embracing the African experience (laughs). I wanted to try new things and I was open to being…dirty and gross (laughs)…and all of that and just trying out their culture and seeing what it was like.

Not only were they open to the difference in social norms, the participants also wanted to learn the local language as well. Todd expressed his excitement at learning Moré, the local indigenous language his Burkina Faso host family spoke:

I was definitely a lot more open than some of my classmates were. We had opportunities to learn their language and I remember going home, my family spoke French but they also spoke these other languages that we were learning in class and I really wanted to speak it to them. And I was excited and was like oh I know this I can say this to you now! And they would help me and teach me new expressions, so I really kind of embraced that side of it. I was really excited to be, excited to learn their culture a little bit more.

**Experiencing Mixed Emotions towards Home Culture during Reentry**

While most of the participants anticipated having to adjust to their host culture, they found their reentry to the U.S. colored with unexpected emotions and difficulties. At the same time, participants found themselves grateful for the comforts and resources available to them in the States. Dwelé articulated this sentiment well as he explained how fortunate he is to be an American.

We always say in a very superficial way…yeah there’s a lot to be thankful for but when you look at the sort of things that they don’t have access to that I do as an American it
just lets me know how blessed I really am to be over here. Just being able to finish high school is free. That is something in that country they have to pay for. So they literally have to choose is my kid gonna get an education. Even then the educational system still isn’t where it ought to be, a lot of stuff like that. Just, like, the things we take for granted SO much; it really makes you feel grateful for those things.

Sarah echoed these feelings stating she began wondering, “Why did God pick me to be American? Like what are the chances that I would be American? And what are the chances that I’m white?” While the participants were experiencing feelings of gratitude and appreciation for the resources available to them, they were also confronted with unexpected difficulties in adjusting to their home culture. Kim explained that:

I remember being like so, identity crisis, I’m supposed to like this but I don’t. I want to be back there but I know I should be enjoying this here and guilty feelings and not knowing what to do and just like going crazy. Like driving myself nuts because I didn’t know what I should be thinking and all of that.

Christine explained, “I had a more difficult time coming home than I did adjusting in South Africa.” Likewise, Todd stated:

When I got back I realized that I wasn’t as ready as I thought I was because I was here in Ohio and I’m like there’s nothing to do here, it’s so much different than what I’m used to now.

As a result of the unexpected process of reentry adjustment, some of the participants felt isolated from the rest of their home culture and chose to seclude themselves during their readjustment period. Ava reflected upon her reentry experience of returning to her small home town and stated, “I remember feeling weird and isolated for a bit because I felt no one
understood, and I didn’t belong.” Kim echoed this: “Like adjusting back, I remember feeling like a complete misfit. These people [Americans] didn’t know any of this stuff existed and it bothered me.”

Similarly, Christine expressed her desire to be alone her first week back in the U.S.

I do think that I was kind of withdrawn when I came back. I just needed to sit and take it all in, because it was such an amazing experience, I wasn’t ready to be back so I didn’t want to open up to people around me. I was just thinking I’m not ready to be here I don’t want to talk to you.

In addition to the mixed feelings of gratitude, isolation, and being misunderstood, the participants expressed strong feelings of guilt about material items. As Kim was unpacking from her study abroad experience, she saw the abundance of clothes and items she had brought home with her and kept thinking, “I don’t need this, I don’t want this, I feel guilty.” Likewise, Sarah began feeling guilty about wasting resources such as food and water:

I had these feelings of oh my gosh why are all these people being so wasteful! You’re brushing your teeth and you just let the water run like that or you only ate half your meal and you’re throwing it out! One of my advisors at an event told me to just throw away my hamburger and that I could get another one later! And I was thinking no! I feel horrible about that; I don’t want to throw this food away.

Thus, after the participants returned home, they began feeling isolated, lonely, and resentful toward the U.S.

**Reentry Causes Critical Comparison of U.S. and Host Culture**

After the initial shock of being back in the U.S., the participants began critically comparing U.S. cultural values and social norms to those of Burkina Faso and South Africa.
They expressed significant differences in the philosophies and priorities between the cultures, specifically emphasizing a heartfelt appreciation for the African people. Additionally, their increased global awareness caused them to view the U.S. media, capitalism, and materialism more negatively.

When questioned about what stuck out the most about the culture and social norms in Africa, all of the participants were quick to say the people of Burkina Faso and South Africa. Christine expressed her deep appreciation for the Xhosa people in South Africa:

It’s a whole different mindset. They’re so open and happy and want to get to know you and want to know about your life and where you’re from. When you are there you see people’s openness and their real genuine desire to get to know you. I see it as less superficial like on a deeper level, you just recognized everyone as being connected in some way, whereas here in the U.S. people don’t want to get to know you. I really valued that in their culture.

Sarah echoed this deep appreciation for the Mossi people:

The people were the best part about Burkina. They’re so open and so welcoming, even though they have nothing I feel like they would give their last shirt or last piece of bread for me and that’s not something you see in the U.S.…you know, for people to help you.

Dwelé emphasized the simplicity and contentedness he observed from the people of Burkina Faso:

The simplicity with which they lived. They were happy as clams and they had very little. But what they did have they were very willing to share with us and the happiness and the warmth that they exuded and how generous in spirit, such beautiful people. I just feel like
something, if every American, for maybe even a day or two could just live their lives like that. A lot of minds and attitudes would change... I really do think.

While the participants’ reentry to the U.S. magnified their appreciation for the people of Burkina Faso and South Africa, it also caused them to criticize U.S. values and social norms, particularly the U.S. media and the values their home culture places on of material items. Todd expressed his observation of Americans upon his return from Burkina Faso in the following way:

I don’t want to generalize, but I think a lot of people are materialistic and I’ve noticed even my best friend wants to get …a MacBook for example, even though there a lot of less expensive computers that will do the job that he wants it to do. And I think people are so …you know...concentrated on that status symbol, you know Macs are cool, Macs are interesting, and they don’t understand what’s truly necessary.

Ava emphasized the value of the individual versus the community:

A lot of Americans don’t understand the whole being a part of something mentality because it’s just such a different idea of community, they’re still a community but it’s still like ok we’re gonna have a community festival but then we’re all going to go home and be by ourselves and go back to our individual lifestyles. Whereas in Africa we walked into the guy’s house that showed us around and there’s like tons of people living there of all different age levels and people constantly walking in like, it’s just like neighbors, it’s just an open, everybody is there together.

Similarly, all of the participants mentioned the large difference in cultural interpretations of time between the U.S. and Africa. Kim explained becoming used to African time:
It’s weird because I’m always wearing a watch, always looking at it. I had to learn to not look at it because they didn’t care. It was like when the sun came up til the sun went down you just got whatever done and enjoyed life that day.

Todd illustrated the cultural differences in time as well:

Time is a huge difference because, like I said, we’re [America] so preoccupied with it here in this country. And like they say, time is money and everything like that. And over in Burkina, it’s just a lot more relaxed. Not just go go go.

Christine found that she judged the U.S. especially harshly after her return from Africa:

I just think of the power hungry nation that we [U.S.] are and how much we take for granted and just throw things away, you don’t really appreciate the beautiful place that you live in. I feel as Americans we just take things for granted. But I still was raised here and I still think I do take things for granted and I still can’t help but think, damn you America. Why did you do this to me?

In addition to the critical observations of materialism in the U.S., Dwelé articulated the participants’ sentiments on the U.S. media’s portrayal of Africa. He explained:

It wasn’t a Save the Children commercial. And I think that just goes to show how manipulative the American media can be sometimes. It just wasn’t this big, sad impoverished picture that America is constantly sold about Africa.

Similarly, Ava reflected upon the common misconceptions most Americans believe about people from Africa based on the information portrayed by the U.S. media.

The idea that people have a general misunderstanding about Africa and the people. I think that they believe that everyone just lives in little tiny shacks and that they don’t, kind of like the idea that they are below us, that they know less than us, they’re not a
developed country so they aren’t as advanced…when really, they just do things in a
different way.

Reentry to the U.S. resulted in the participants’ critical comparisons of their host cultures
with U.S. culture. They felt appreciation for the worldviews of their host cultures and increased
resentment toward values of materialism and consumerism. Because of these new insights the
participants were now aware of, they encountered challenges in communicating their experience
with others.

**Challenges of Communicating Experience and Feeling Understood**

In addition to critically comparing the U.S. with Burkina Faso and South Africa, the
group of participants found the greatest challenge of their reentry adjustment in their social
interactions with family and friends. When they first returned home, they wanted to share their
meaningful experiences with the people they cared about, yet encountered difficulty and
disappointment when trying to express themselves. Todd openly admitted that the biggest
difficulty in his readjustment was trying to help his loved ones understand his experience abroad.

You don’t want to come off as a snob, a snob who travels a lot but at the same time you
want to talk about what you’ve done and what you’ve experienced but nobody can relate
to you unless they’ve done it or something similar. And I think that was really difficult
because I had so many things I wanted to talk about and just couldn’t…and at the same
time, so many people who were asking me questions that I couldn’t…answer. Because it’s
kinda like you have to live it. And I couldn’t express everything that I learned, everything
that I had fun doing. I just couldn’t EXPRESS myself either, that was the biggest
difficulty.
Christine explained feeling protective of her experience as she felt no one would understand what the experience meant to her.

I really had trouble opening up and talking to people about my trip because it was such a personal thing. It was mine and why would I tell you about it you’re not gonna understand it, you weren’t there. I think that was hard. I don’t think, actually, my parents even still understand all of the things that I did, what went on, what I experienced because those are my experiences which I hold so dear, so I don’t want to share them. It was such a special experience that’s like how do you explain everything that you went through with a person and have them give the same amount of appreciation to it.

Ava expressed her disappointment and frustration in wanting to share her experience with her family but instead felt alone and discouraged.

I remember feeling like I just had this huge life changing experience and I wanted the people that were closest to me to understand, but then I just felt like they couldn’t understand. I remember wanting to tell everyone everything about my experience and like I wanted to take people there to show them, because I can tell you these things but it doesn’t even matter. Even if I show you pictures you’re not going to fully understand unless you go to Africa and meet these people.

Thus, all of the participants found difficulty describing their experiences to their loved ones and feeling as if they were understood. Because of these communication difficulties, they began to feel alienated from their friends and family and distanced themselves temporarily while they adjusted to U.S. culture. The participants needed to process how they would cope with experiencing new changes in their identity.
Reconstructing Identity after the African Study Abroad Experience

While in Africa, the participants were immersing themselves in a new culture and experimenting with the host culture’s values and social norms. It was not until they returned to their home culture and began the reentry adjustment process that they became aware of the differences within themselves. They found it surprising that it was more difficult to readjust than originally expected because, along their journey, a part of their identity had changed. Some of the participants shed some of their American values and adopted African values while others exercised a larger worldview.

Christine illustrated her new awareness of her American identity and that she felt more disconnected from it after returning from South Africa.

I don’t think I’m tied to it [America]). I don’t want to live here. I feel like when you go somewhere you feel ashamed saying I’m American. I don’t think I had that feeling before I went to South Africa. It was a very mind opening experience and you see all these different places. You’re like...ugh…America sucks. I’m American, I’m American yes I get it, but I don’t want to be.

Kim shared a similar experience of not possessing a strong American identity.

On the 4th of July, people were mad at me this year because I wore my France shirt, my England bandana, something Burkina, and then my American boxers, but they were like, really you can’t just wear American stuff? I’m like I love all countries! I’m just not strongly attached to America.

While participants were more aware of how they related to their American identity, some adopted African values upon their return home to the U.S. Ava explained how she adopted the African view of time and was having difficulty utilizing it within the U.S. culture:
I brought back the idea of African time with me. I mean but you can’t, you can’t apply that concept here, you can’t just be late and be on African time in America, right? Like there’s many times when I almost got reamed out because I was five minutes late. And when I was going to this meeting I had to contemplate telling someone to tell them I was going to be late. Even though I was going to be there in five minutes but I knew if I didn’t contact them I would’ve been in trouble.

In addition to changes in values, the participants also discussed an awareness of a change in their worldview. Todd explained how his philosophy on happiness changed:

I think the biggest thing that I took from Burkina when I came back here is just how happy they [the people of Burkina] were and just realizing how lucky we are and how little we really need to be happy. For instance, when people come to me with a problem, I kind of take that whole ‘it’s not that big of a deal’ approach to it and try to get them to think a little bit more clearly, because life is way too much fun. And in Burkina they know that. And I want to incorporate that into my life here. I don’t let them [Todd’s friends] stress me out as much and if they’re stressed out, I don’t really want to talk to them that much.

Kim explained how it completely changed her thoughts on the U.S. education system and her teaching philosophy.

I am just more aware of issues around the world, global issues, social justice issues, and all of that. It’s completely changed my teaching focus and my style. I so want to open them [students] up to the world, like not only relate it to their lives but to the lives of others all over the world, because I went throughout my education not knowing anything about the world.
The study abroad experience caused various changes in identity, from changes in their cultural schemas to how the participants related with their American identity. As a result, some of these newly adopted values and changes in identity have remained with the participants months and years after their African study abroad experiences.

**Remaining Connected to the African Experience**

As the participants described their process of reentry adjustment, a telling commonality among them was that they all illustrated how they remain connected to their African study abroad experience months or years after their return to the U.S. Some participants remain connected through the organizations that they choose to be a part of, continuing to discuss their experiences, and/or through their career interests.

Sarah explained that she was currently the president of the International Studies Network at her university and also explained how she stayed connected through looking at her pictures and telling people about her unique experience. She stated, “I look at pictures usually and I like telling people about my experience in Burkina Faso because it’s like it’s still alive and a part of me then.” Similarly, Kim discussed participating in international organizations on campus and her desire to work abroad.

It changed my life. I was so sure…that…when I graduated college I would go straight into teaching, in North or South Carolina, and teach and now that doesn’t even sound appealing. I just want to do something abroad. I don’t even know if that will be teaching abroad, I have no idea what I want to do, but I’m like, I need to go travel everywhere now!

Finally, all of the participants wistfully expressed their desires to return to Burkina Faso and South Africa. Dwelé expressed his desire to return to Burkina Faso to visit his host family:
I would love to go back in a heartbeat if I could somehow. Interestingly, I actually got invited to go back for my host cousin’s wedding … I think maybe in 2013. So I can’t say that I wouldn’t go if I had the opportunity. But that’s my family over there, I care about them. If they ever came over here they’d be coming to stay with me, hands down. They’re my human family for life.

**Summary of Interview Findings**

As a result of the individual, 60-minute interviews, the essence of the phenomenon of reentry adjustment after studying abroad in Africa was captured and illustrated through seven major findings. From the moment they entered their experience, the participants were open to experiencing a new culture despite the significant change in what they were used to in their own home culture. Additionally, when they returned to the U.S., the participants found that they unexpectedly began experiencing mixed emotions about their reentry to the U.S. During this process, the participants began critically comparing the host culture to their home culture. At the same time, participants found it quite challenging to sufficiently explain their study abroad experience to their friends and families in a way that they felt their loved ones understood them. Because the participants were facing these difficulties, they began to realize that the African study abroad experience had changed parts of their identity and attempted to incorporate their new worldviews or values into their life. Finally, the interviews found that all of the participants actively attempted to remain connected to their unique study abroad experience. In the following section, the findings from the focus group interview will support the aforementioned findings and also provide new findings to capture a more complete picture of the essence of the phenomenon.
Focus Group Findings

In this research study, the hour-long focus group allowed the participants to share sentiments about their study abroad experience in Africa and provided in-depth responses to follow-up questions after the initial individual interviews. The focus group supported the participants’ experiences of reentry adjustment expressed in their interviews and also provided new insights concerning the reentry adjustment process. The focus group demonstrated the participants’ experiences of mixed emotions toward their home culture during reentry, explored the definition of a shared American identity, and emphasized how their study abroad experience created positive changes in their personal lives that continue to influence them today.

Experiencing Mixed Emotions towards Home Culture during Reentry Adjustment

Upon the participants’ return to the U.S., they explained feeling mixed emotions about being in their home culture. They felt appreciative of the excess of items available to them that they did not have while in Africa, yet also felt guilty about the amount of material items they possessed and overwhelmed by the choices at home.

Ava expressed “having appreciation for the luxuries” while Dwelé echoed her remark with his appreciation for the resources available in the U.S.

It definitely increased my appreciation for what I do have and what is available to me being an American. But I think at the same time, you know, appreciate other people for what they have and what they value, because it doesn’t mean that they have less.

However, this newfound appreciation for material items was also coupled with an overwhelming sense of guilt and feeling of owning too many items. Kim illustrated this paradox:

It was the conflict of emotion. I was really excited to have all these conveniences and everything at my fingertips, but then I felt guilty for being happy about that because
people were so happy there [Burkina Faso] without anything...they were just really happy. And people here were just unhappy with all this stuff...and not satisfied...so it was just like these daily conflicts.

Similarly, the participants all agreed about feeling as if they wanted to purge many of their material items after they returned to the U.S. Ava described her feelings of guilt and her reaction to them:

Bringing up the whole feeling guilty...like coming back and having everything. After I came back I had so much junk around and I had this feeling that I just wanted to purge and get rid of everything. I realized that I can get around with so much less and wanted to get rid of my clothes because I felt like that stuff was just…weighing me down.

Upon hearing this remark, Kim responded that she did purge once she returned home and used trash bags to collect her possessions and throw them away.

In addition to the guilt the participants felt about owning too many possessions, they also agreed on the fact that they were overwhelmed by the amount of choices they were faced with in the U.S. Kim explained: “I felt overwhelmed by choices…like in grocery stores. Why are there so many choices? This makes it difficult. Why do I need to pick between fifteen bottles of shampoo?”

Because of these new feelings the participants were experiencing, they explained feeling different after their return to the U.S. Ava explained feeling different and wanting to express it:

I just feel different than what I used to and it’s just hard to really convey everything, all the emotion, the changes you went through is hard to convey to people. I guess just because I felt different I had to express that in some way. I’m going to make a change…I’m gonna cut my hair, get rid of some of my clothes. I felt disconnected…it’s
hard to sum up an experience and share it with the people that you’re so closed to because they weren’t there and don’t understand.

Kim echoed the sentiment of feeling different and also stated she felt alone in her classes at her university:

Adjusting back to being on campus and everything, because I’m an education major, I was just so angry and rebellious with my education classes, like this is stupid! Why are we teaching our kids this, why do these standards matter, who makes up this crap. My whole philosophy on education completely changed and I felt alone.

Participants experienced both positive and negative emotions in the focus group, highlighting the appreciation for their host cultures and guilt for having too many material items. They stated the amount of material items they owned was not related to their level of happiness and satisfaction and purged some of their clothes and belongings. In adopting a different perspective on materialism, the meaning with which their American identity defined them changed.

**Exploring American Identity**

During the individual interviews, participants found it difficult to describe their American identity. Thus, the focus group was used as a platform to further explore what it meant to the participants to be an American. Through these conversations, participants discussed the diversity of the U.S. and how their study abroad experience caused them to ponder what being an American meant to other countries.

When first asked whether they believed Americans had a shared identity, all of the participants in the focus group kept silent as they were unsure of the answer and had never
thought of what a shared American identity was. After a few moments of pondering, they began to create a loose definition of what every American shared as a part of their ‘American identity.’ Dwelé offered the idea of being a part of an imagined community:

When I think of a shared identity, there’s this book that Anderson wrote called ‘Imagined Communities’ and basically it just talks about how you have these connections but they’re imagined… That you know, you psychologically set yourself up to have this closeness between people but it’s still essentially imagined. And thinking about that in terms of nationality, I would say we have certain connections in that we use the same money, we all have the same president and same governing officials.

Kim then explained how it’s difficult to understand what Americans have in common, yet when one goes abroad, Americans have a shared understanding.

I think it’s really interesting because it’s like, what do you have in common, because we go abroad and everyone’s like oh American...it’s like one thing… you are able to easily identify with them when you’re abroad. Like…people in my group would complain about missing home and so everyone would end up talking about their favorite candy bars and songs that they missed.

Ava explained that the similarities that unite Americans may be identifying with pop culture references and a shared political structure which becomes emphasized while abroad.

Pop culture and the president is always the main topic of conversation it seems. They [people from countries outside of the U.S.] ask about the famous people, they think they are just walking around amongst us and that we have actual relationships with them. And America is so huge…and so vastly different from state to state I mean even the north and
the south you know, there’s just so many differences it’s kinda hard to point your finger on what we share other than knowing about pop culture and political stuff.

Through the participants’ encounters with the host cultures of Burkina Faso and South Africa, it caused them to reflect on what it meant to be an American from an outsider’s perspective.

There is nothing like going abroad and hearing about people talk about you as an American, for better or worse. I was in a restaurant in Burkina and I asked for my French fries to be reheated. She [waitress] did it but she understood that I was being very American, she didn’t really want to help me, and I really didn’t get that I was being difficult. I was just thinking, I paid for this food I want this hot, so it’s just hilarious to think with national identity, something that seems so obvious to me here, like you know, you go in a restaurant here you would never have food served to you lukewarm, that’s just not acceptable. And there that’s normal. Unless you go abroad and experience that…like this is why people have problems with us as Americans.

During the focus group, the participants worked to describe a loose definition of what defined Americans as Americans and found it difficult. However, they did find less difficulty explaining how they had been positively impacted by their African study abroad experience.

**Positive Changes in Personal Life after Reentry**

Throughout the focus group, the participants eagerly explained how their study abroad experience in Africa had made a positive impact on their lives. The experience affected them psychologically, socially, and professionally by offering some of them career direction. Kim discussed her constant desire to seek out international students and continue learning about other cultures.
I feel like I’ve just…I’ve always been interested and curious about the world which is why I went abroad, but now coming back…I seek out international students and make friends with them. And I don’t know why I’m so interested, but I always want to learn from them and show them things here, too.

Dwelé recognized that the knowledge he had gained in Burkina Faso was valuable and important to share with others. He stated, “I guess I’ve just learned to be more open about my experience, I have learned that there really is a benefit to sharing what I’ve seen.” Ava explained that sharing about their experiences could help break stereotypes and misconceptions of Africa.

I think it’s important to continue remembering this experience and to continue learning from it and to be open and share it. Because, specifically speaking about Africa, that’s the only way we’re gonna break people’s misconceptions about what’s going on there is if we talk about it and let people know what we experienced.

In addition to appreciating the value of their experience and how it has the potential to impact other’s belief systems, the participants also discussed the psychological and social impacts their experiences had on them. Specifically, all of the participants discussed how they learned to develop more patience for individuals that they travelled with. Ava described her lesson on patience:

I wrote lessons that I learned from this experience, about having patience when you are traveling. That is a big thing with the group that you’re with. I wrote about that a lot, about everybody complaining about whatever their issues were when I wanted everyone to be appreciating the experience in the here and now. This experience definitely has made me more patient with others.
The participants also discussed how their experiences had prompted personal growth through increased independence and confidence. Dwelé explained how his experience helped him to realize what he was really capable of:

But seriously, I just feel like I felt so capable in ways that… who ever thought I was gonna feel capable or be capable with those things? Until you’re faced with those challenges you don’t know what your capabilities are.

Ava echoed his thoughts:

It challenges you, it makes you step outside of your comfort zone and shows you things about yourself that you never could have imagined. I wrote in my journal about having to stand in front of a classroom and read a book to children who didn’t understand English and I was like…so awkward and I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing…so I think…it just made realize if I could do that, I can do a lot.

Finally, studying abroad in Africa also influenced some of the participants’ career choices and sparked a desire, particularly between the two education majors, to change their teaching philosophies. Ava explained how what she saw in the schools in South Africa influenced her philosophy on education:

It made me rethink my whole philosophy on education and made me want to teach and be part of a multicultural classroom…like even now... I teach an after school art program where all the kids are little white kids. I still try to do little activities with them to teach them about the world. The kids usually get really excited about it.

Kim expressed how Burkina Faso had ignited a passion for learning about other cultures and completely changed her plan in life:
I just…going to Burkina, it changed my heart and direction in life. I don’t know why, I just feel so attached and drawn to the whole continent of Africa. I mean, I’m applying to student teach in different countries instead of here. I don’t want to student teach here...as far as my plans for the future, I want to work outside of the U.S.

The African study abroad experience sparked some participants’ interests in learning about other cultures, increased many of their confidence and sense of independence as well as offered career direction. In the next section, a summary of the focus group findings is provided.

**Summary of Focus Group Findings**

While the focus group supported previous findings stated in the individual interviews, it also provided new insights as to how the African study abroad experience influenced the participants’ readjustment and impacted their life. The focus group findings supported the interview findings in that the participants spoke about experiencing mixed emotions upon their reentry to the U.S. but also provided new ways of how they lived these emotions. For example, the participants all spoke of wanting to purge or rid themselves of extraneous material items and clothing once home. Additionally, the focus group provided new insight into how the study abroad experience affected how they viewed themselves as Americans and how they defined American identity. Finally, the focus group supported the interview findings by providing positive changes that had been made in the participants’ lives as a result of their experience. In the next section, the findings from the participant journals will be discussed.

**Participant Journal Findings**

In addition to individual interviews and a focus group, participant journals were also used to collect data. The journals added an authentic personal dimension to understanding the essence of the participants’ reentry adjustment as they openly illustrated psychological reactions to the
difficulties and experiences they encountered while readjusting to the U.S. Participants were more willing to convey the array of emotions they experienced during their readjustment process, including guilt, frustration, anger, sadness, loneliness, compassion, and appreciation.

**Experiencing Mixed Emotions towards Home Culture during Reentry Adjustment**

As each participant submitted his/her journal, the participants were found to focus on their emotional responses to returning to the U.S. After arriving home, they reflected the differences between the host culture and their home culture and provided deeper insight into the difficulties they were experiencing.

Christine wrote about feeling alone after she returned and not wanting to talk to anyone until she was ready.

I spent a lot of time at my house and no one was really there, so I just went outside and sat in the backyard for hours on end. I would just sit out there and then go for walks. I didn’t write things down. I would just think it through in my head a million times and that was enough. I would go through it over and over, until I was completely overanalyzing. I was analyzing my trip and myself and where I was now and what I wanted to do because of this trip. I was processing it and wanted to be left alone.

Sarah described the feelings of guilt, frustration, and anger she felt about materialism and seeing Americans waste resources.

I feel more guilty about the way people are wasteful because it’s not something that I can control. I can only inform people about it and people really don’t care because they are self-centered. I feel like they should know they should not be so obsessed with consuming items.
Ava discussed how she returned and felt overwhelmed and emotional because she did not feel she could share her experience with her family.

I couldn’t organize my thoughts because I was so emotional. I was too tired and wanted to write about all of my experiences and I didn’t know what to say. I found myself reaching out to one girl that was in my group that I really connected with. We would call each other and just talk about how no one understood. I felt like I needed her because if I wouldn’t have had her, I would have felt even more isolated. It was nice to have someone who could actually understand because they went through the same thing. I don’t know, maybe that’s an important part of the readjustment, staying connected with the people you made connections with there, right?

The participants shared negative emotions in their journals; however they also shared positive emotions. They expressed several positive emotions focusing on the appreciation and admiration for the African people and gratitude for the ease with which necessary resources were available to them.

Sarah explained how Burkina Faso was a humbling experience that motivated her to sponsor a child from Burkina Faso to study in the U.S.

I have a strong urge to travel back to Burkina Faso but my ultimate goal is to help people like those in Burkina Faso. I want to sponsor children to come to the United States and become educated. I want to help merge the two cultures so that they understand each other better. Overall, the experience has humbled me and has made me appreciative of what I have.

Kim offered a profound excerpt from her journal of what she learned from being abroad:
If I had to sum up what I’ve learned from being abroad in one simple, all encompassing sentence, it would be this: People are beautiful, amazing beings. Earth-shattering right? In all seriousness, I have come across a plethora of people from all over the world, literally, and one thing is for sure…they are all beautiful. What a blessing it has been to meet people from all different walks of life, diverse cultures, and varying lifestyles. People make this world and life so rich and worthwhile.

The journals provided the participants with a more intimate way of sharing their experiences and also allowed them more time to reflect on their reentry experiences. In this way, they were able to provide the impact the experience personally had on them and highlighted how the journal’s findings were similar to the findings found in the interviews and focus group.

Summary of Shared Findings across Interviews, Focus Group, and Participant Journals

The main goal of a phenomenological study is to capture the true essence of a phenomenon. Through the use of the three data sources (individual interviews, focus group, and participant journals) the true essence of U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment experience after studying abroad in Africa was revealed. Furthermore, the findings shared between the three data sources exemplified the significant steps in the process of reentry. The interviews, focus group, and participant journals all illustrated the unexpected difficulties in readjusting to the U.S. after studying abroad in Africa. Also, the data sources all demonstrated the participants’ mixed emotions upon their initial return to the U.S. In addition, the data illustrated the challenges of meaningfully explaining the participants’ experiences to their friends and family in a way that they felt understood as well as demonstrating a critical comparison between their host cultures and U.S. culture that lead to a more negative view of the U.S. cultural values of consumerism, time, and the U.S. media. Finally, all of the data sources revealed that the African study abroad
experience had a significant impact on all of the participant’s lives that has remained with them to the present day. In the following chapter, the findings of this study are discussed within the context of the literature of identity, study abroad, and reentry adjustment.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings identified in Chapter IV will be further discussed and analyzed within the context of the literature. As this study aims to understand the true essence of reentry adjustment and its relationship with identity after U.S. college students return from studying abroad in Africa, this chapter discusses the influence of the African study abroad experience on reentry adjustment. Similarly, the initial research questions will be addressed and reflected upon as well:

1. What are the psychological and sociocultural experiences that U.S. college students face upon their return from studying abroad in an African context?
2. How are U.S. college students’ identities influenced by their African study abroad experience after they have returned to the U.S.?
3. How is the African study abroad experience valuable?

Challenges during Reentry Adjustment

During data collection, the participants openly discussed their experiences of reentry adjustment. Throughout all of the interviews, the participants consistently agreed that they experienced psychological and/or sociocultural difficulties during and after reentry. As Gaw (2000) and Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) proposed that some individuals have few or no difficulties readjusting while others experience reentry effects for a few months to over a year after they have returned, the findings in this study found that five of the six participants experienced reentry adjustment difficulties for a period of at least four months after reentry. Dwelé was the participant who did not experience significant difficulty during initial reentry like the others because of the unusual circumstances surrounding his reentry. As his father was in critical condition in the hospital for an extended period of time, his priorities and thoughts were on his family. However, he discussed thinking about his experiences in Burkina Faso the first
months back and how, even today, he still feels the need to rid himself of his material items. Dwelé stated when discussing what had affected him from his experience abroad, “My view totally just shifted and I get mad at myself sometimes. Even now I think, looking in my apartment, why did I feel all of this was a necessity? It’s been reinforced that less truly is more.” Thus, even though he did not experience the initial psychological distress that the others did, he still exhibited signs months after his reentry that he experienced sociocultural conflict as a result of his experience.

All of the participants stated they were not expecting to have to readjust to U.S. culture upon their return home. These findings suggest that because they had no expectations of possible difficulties they may encounter upon their return, the reentry adjustment may have proved more difficult (Martin & Harrell, 1996). Additionally, the findings support the literature which states that most often the reentry adjustment process is more difficult for the re-enterer than the original culture shock while abroad, as a result of experiences abroad that may have changed the individual’s identity (Adler, 1981; Martin, 1984, Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006). Thus, as individuals may not be aware of the sometimes subtle changes that occur within them while abroad (Kim, 2008), they most likely would have no expectations of experiencing difficulty during reentry to the U.S. Kim exemplified the collective thoughts of the group regarding the unexpected reentry adjustment they faced by describing how she returned and gave herself one day of rest before returning to work.

I started working the second day I was back so it was like I only had one day to transition to six months of being abroad and then having to go back to work. And I did that to myself, I didn’t realize it would be bad, but those first three weeks were awful. It was hard because I didn’t give myself time to adjust.
It is important to emphasize that although the participants were only abroad for two to six weeks, this length of time was enough to socioculturally and psychologically affect the participants’ reentry adjustment. The participant who studied abroad in Africa for two weeks exhibited the same degree of difficulties as one who studied in Africa for six weeks. Moreover, when the participants returned to the U.S., the subtle and in some cases, larger changes that occurred within them began to cause conflict as they tried to become accustomed to living in their home culture again.

**Sociocultural difficulties.** The students in this study consistently reported experiencing sociocultural difficulties immediately after returning to the U.S. Participants stated that they began to critically compare their host cultures to the U.S. during reentry and became aware of their critical view of the U.S. The U.S. and host cultures were compared in terms of cultural values and social norms. For example, the participants all reported appreciating the host culture’s value for material items as the host cultures had few in comparison with the U.S. Additionally, the participants all discussed the difference in which value is placed on the concept of time. Because of the knowledge they had gained while abroad and the critical comparison constantly occurring in the participants’ thoughts, they discussed feeling guilty for the amount of material items that they owned. Kim felt guilty for the ease at which resources were available when she stated “everything is at our fingertips here.” The participants explained feeling guilty and more critical of the U.S. because they had experienced a culture in which low value was placed upon material items and a higher value was placed upon the human relationships between one another. These findings of guilt for material items and emphasis on consumerism in the U.S. support previous studies’ findings of the sojourner’s same feelings of guilt for the value placed on materialism in the U.S. (Adler, 1981; Gaw, 2000; Raschio, 1987; Walling et al., 2006).
In addition to the guilt that occurred as a result of comparing the participants’ home culture to their host culture, they also developed a negative view of some U.S. cultural values and lifestyles. Sarah explained that “Americans are greedy and self-centered,” illustrating the negative view the participants shared. Supported by Wielkiewicz and Turkowski’s (2010) findings, participants also reported experiencing skepticism toward U.S. media in their perspectives on Africa and what they choose to report to U.S. citizens. Dwelé further illustrated this point when he explained, “It just wasn’t this big, sad impoverished picture that America is constantly sold about Africa… and I think that just goes to show how manipulative the American media can be sometimes.” Thus, upon returning to the U.S. the participants began to critically view U.S. culture and media from a different perspective that was creating difficulties for them as they were trying to readjust to the same culture that they were criticizing.

As the participants became aware of their newfound critical view of U.S. culture, they also reported wanting to share their valuable African study abroad experiences with their loved ones. In doing so, each participant reported that trying to communicate the value and depth of the experience to their friends and family was the most difficult part of readjustment. Ava illustrated the difficulty in discussing her experiences,

I felt isolated for a little bit. I remember feeling like I couldn’t explain myself especially to my parents who have never been outside of the country, my brother, like the people that I’m closest to. I just remember being like, it doesn’t even matter even if I show you pictures you’re not gonna fully understand unless you go to Africa.

Because the participants felt as if they were misunderstood in their experience, many participants explained that they either distanced themselves from friends or family that they felt did not understand their experience or completely ceased discussing their experience with others.
who had not been in Africa with them. Martin (1984) explained that oftentimes, friends and family of the sojourner do not expect the individual to have reentry adjustment difficulties increasing the stress in social interactions between them. Thus, as the participants were trying to explain their study abroad experience and new perspective of the U.S. to their friends and family, they felt misunderstood and isolated when their loved ones did not understand the concepts or ideas they were expressing. These findings support previous studies highlighting the interpersonal difficulties faced during reentry adjustment of feeling misunderstood and alienated (Adler, 1981; Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1984; Raschio, 1987; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Walling et al., 2006; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010).

**Psychological difficulties.** During reentry adjustment, the sociocultural difficulties experienced by the re-enterers are the catalysts for the psychological distresses they experience (Adler, 1981; Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1984; Raschio, 1987; Walling et al., 2006). While all of the participants reported sociocultural difficulties at some point during or after reentry, five of the six participants reported experiencing psychological difficulties during reentry. Of the participants who experienced psychological difficulty during reentry, they all discussed feeling a sense of identity conflict upon their return to the U.S. As they were becoming aware of the changes that occurred within them, the participants explained that they felt frustrated trying to understand how they fit into U.S. culture after returning and felt conflicted between enjoying U.S. material items and employing the host culture’s mentality of ‘less is more’. This finding supports the literature expressing college students’ internal identity conflict as a result of struggling between two worldviews (Gaw, 2000; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Uehara, 1986).
Furthermore, participants reported feeling isolated and lonely after they returned because, as Kim (2008) explained, they were trying to find a way to fit the new constructs of meaning they created while abroad into their home culture. Similarly, many reported actively attempting to isolate themselves from others for the first week or two after returning. Christine described the desire to be alone when she said, “I didn’t really want to talk to anybody, I just kind of stayed by myself. I just needed to sit and really take it all in before I could really go back to socializing or going to a restaurant.” While many of the participants expressed this desire to be alone for the first weeks, many could only explain it was due to feeling alienated from their home culture or because of a desire to return to Africa. However, as Raschio (1987) and Christofi and Thompson (2007) explained, reentry is often the time when students first become aware of the psychological or sociocultural changes in themselves as a result of the study abroad experience. Because of this, reentry adjustment may be the reaction to individuals recognizing the changes within themselves and how they make meaning of their newfound awareness. Thus, the participants’ immediate guilt and desires to return to Africa and be alone for various lengths of time may be coping mechanisms for how they chose to deal with these changes while attempting to find a place for themselves in U.S. society.

Coping styles. In Adler’s (1981) study of coping styles of U.S. corporate and government officials, she posited that there were four main types of coping styles during reentry adjustment which measured individuals based on their overall levels of optimism or pessimism and specific attitudes as either active or passive (see Table 2).
Table 2

Adler’s Coping Styles

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<td>Optimism</td>
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<td>Resocialized Re-enterer</td>
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<td>Pessimism</td>
<td>Rebellious Re-enterer</td>
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In this study, participants used all four types of coping styles after reentry to the U.S. Both Todd and Ava were identified as proactive re-enterers, as they were both optimistic and active in their reentry adjustment by integrating experiences from both host and home cultures into their daily lives. While they both experienced psychological and sociocultural difficulties during reentry adjustment initially, as they adjusted they chose to participate in U.S. culture as well as include parts of the host culture in their lives. For example, Todd described how he did this through food.

I coped a lot by trying to incorporate parts of both cultures. I kept reliving everything in food, you know, I would have my American meals, American friends and whatnot, and then I would cook things I knew or find things of how I used to eat over there. I brought a bag of peanuts home from Africa and I like constantly ate them. I found a recipe about how to make them, they were so good!

Similarly, Ava discussed how she wanted to apply one of the teaching philosophies she adopted while in South Africa to the classroom in the U.S.

It completely changed my outlook. It wasn’t like you walk somewhere and you saw them tutoring kids alone, they were all doing something together, collectively as a community because they are community-based programs. So all these kids from the township came to these after school programs, ever since then, it’s been a reoccurring thing in my head that I want to create here.
As a result of Ava and Todd incorporating both cultures into their lives, Adler (1981) described the proactive re-enterers as most often reflecting the most personal growth because of their study abroad experience and positive attitude during reentry adjustment.

Dwelé and Sarah were found to identify with the resocialized re-enterer as they were optimistic yet passive in their style of coping during reentry adjustment. Because of the unusual circumstances Dwelé was confronted with upon reentry, he demonstrated positive affirmation for both the home and host cultures, yet tended to remove himself from the experience when discussing it. LaBrack (1993) describes this mode of coping as the ‘shoebox effect’ in which re-enterers store their memories away in order to adapt back into their home culture. Dwelé illustrated this concept when he stated:

It’s just something that for me at this point it’s just a part of my memory bank, it’s a very special place, but it’s been compartmentalized into kind of where it is, because in a very strange way it’s bittersweet.

Sarah expressed her optimism during her reentry adjustment through expressing her gratitude and appreciation for being a citizen of the U.S. When asked whether she expressed her views to Americans she believed were being wasteful, including friends or family, she stated, “I don’t think I’ve actually really told them. I don’t feel, like, I wouldn’t tell them oh my gosh you’re being really wasteful right now, it’s more like an internal thing.” Thus, while both Dwelé and Sarah acknowledged that they appreciated some of the host culture’s practices, they were more passive in how they coped with those feelings. They viewed it as more of a compartmentalized experience in which the lessons they learned, they kept to themselves.

Conversely, Kim is associated with the rebellious re-enterer coping style. She was pessimistic in her attitude toward the U.S. and actively rejected U.S. culture by trying to control
it, as well as incorporating values and attitudes of the host culture upon her return. For example, when she was explaining about her outfit for the fourth of July after she returned from Burkina Faso, she wore her France shirt, England bandana, something from Burkina, and American boxers, she claimed because “we have to wear boxers or athletic shorts underneath our costumes.” Additionally, she stated that her costume on America’s independence day angered some of her friends because she would not conform to wearing the expected patriotic colors of the U.S. Thus, this was a key example of how she tried to control her home environment. Finally, she illustrated how she wants to live abroad and has no attachment to the U.S.: “I’m not strongly attached to America. I could live abroad, like live in another country and yeah I’d miss home because of the people here not because it’s the United States.”

Finally, Christine was identified as an alienated re-enterer as she maintained a pessimistic and passive attitude toward her home culture. While she rejected U.S. culture, this coping style does not work to control the environment as the rebellious re-enterer does. Christine gained valuable lessons and great admiration for the host culture; however, she did not actively express it to many. Similarly, her coping style reflected her passive nature by distancing herself from identifying as American and strongly disliking the U.S., yet remaining within the culture without acting upon her feelings. She stated not feeling tied to the U.S., “I don’t think I’m tied to it (laughs.) I don’t wanna live here. I feel like when you go somewhere you feel ashamed saying I’m American.” All of the participants utilized different styles and attitudes to cope during the reentry process. Because of this, it is significant to note that each of Adler’s coping styles was utilized by the participants and proved applicable to this study. Thus, the way in which the participants chose to cope speaks to the degree of influence the study abroad experience had on their identity.
Reconstructing Identity

While the degree to which personal growth and identity transformations occur varies depending on an individual’s predisposition, pre-existing needs, and interests (Kim, 2008), all of the participants in this study reported a shift in at least one aspect of their personal identity. While the participants found it difficult to articulate the specifics of their identity prior to their study abroad experience, they were able to express how they felt they were different as a result of the experience. Although unclarified by Kim in terms of the length of time required to experience a full cycle in her model (2008), in this study two weeks proved long enough to see instances of the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic model. These instances illustrated the deculturation and acculturation that affected aspects of the participants’ identities and their ability to express feeling different once home. Similarly, this supports identity literature on the complexity of the concept and the need for social context in order to make sense of one’s personal identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Deaux, 1993; Erikson, 1959; 1994; Frey & Tropp, 2006). Thus, while participants’ social identities normally remain stable for a long duration of time, Deaux’s (1993) findings support that they were modified as a result of significant changes in their internal priorities and/or external environment. Although gender identity was not a common finding discussed among the participants, one participant stated her observation of the largely male-dominant culture as well as her surprise of how submissive the women were to men compared to women in the U.S. However, as she briefly mentioned this observation, gender identity was not affected as a result of the experience. As such, the participant’s ethnic, cultural, and national identities were influenced as a result of their study abroad experience.

Ethnic identity. When questioned about their ethnic identity, the participants reported uncommitted attitudes toward the ethnic groups with which they were connected. As five of the
six were White Americans, they were considered a part of the ethnic majority, while Dwelé was Black American and considered part of the ethnic minority. Phinney et al. (1997) and Umaña-Taylor (2004) posited that ethnic identity becomes more salient when groups are in the minority. Thus, one would expect all of the participants as Americans in African countries to gain a stronger ethnic identity while studying in Africa as they were the ethnic minority. However, while the participants reported having a greater sense of ethnic identity as an American in Africa, this stronger commitment to their ethnic group did not come back to the U.S. with them. Thus, the findings would suggest that, during the same period of time that their ethnic identity increased in Africa, other social identities were also being reconfigured and were placed as a higher priority within the individuals’ identities. For example, the participant’s disapproval for U.S. values of consumerism and materialism may have caused their commitment to their ethnic group to deflate, causing the negative shift in the participant’s views of their ethnic group’s values and attitudes. Similarly, even as Dwelé’s ethnic self-label is Black American, while in Africa he spoke to identifying ethnically with both the White Americans, as Americans, and Africans. Thus, upon his return, he explained that his commitment to the American ethnic group changed as he became more critical of the U.S. media.

Cultural identity. The participants all reported the greatest change in their identities was with their cultural identities. In accordance with Schall’s (2010) findings that explained that learning about cultures widely different from one’s own culture may often take deliberate effort and open mindedness, the participants all reported remaining open minded in trying new cultural practices and accepting cultural differences while abroad. Additionally, the participants all reported the ways in which they became accustomed to their host culture and participated in cultural practices including the host culture’s definition of time, utilization of free time, low
value placed on materialism, and higher value placed on human relationships. By participating in the culture and making meaning of the way in which the host culture fit into their mental frameworks, the participants created new cultural identities that became a reference for how they identified within the host culture.

As it is common for individuals to participate in multiple cultures (Schall, 2010), when the participants returned to the U.S. they described experiencing psychological and sociocultural difficulties that indicated signs of cultural identity conflict. As cultural identities often shape one’s worldview, the participants experienced conflict when they returned to the U.S. with a new cultural identity from a cultural group that shares a collective worldview as opposed to the participant’s individualist worldview practiced in the U.S. The participants had to consider how they were going to apply the worldviews from both cultures into their mental framework. Thus, this cultural identity conflict reported may have been a type of value confusion as reentry caused the participants to become aware of the stark differences in cultural values and worldviews. In support of previous studies’ findings (Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1984; Raschio, 1987; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; 2007; Uehara, 1986), the participants reported a cultural internal conflict in which they struggled with appreciating their home culture and distancing themselves from the U.S. because they felt they did not belong in U.S. culture. This feeling of not belonging in the U.S. culture can be explained by Kim’s (2008) concepts of deculturation, or the unlearning of old cultural values or norms, and acculturation, acquiring new cultural values due to emotional sensibilities, while abroad. They became aware of these internal changes when they returned to the U.S. and realized they did not think or interpret meaning the same way they did prior to their study abroad experience. Thus, many integrated the cultural values of time and a smaller
emphasis on materialism from the host cultural identity they had established to create a modified version of their home cultural identity that included values they believed more salient.

**American identity.** Similarly to the reconstruction of many of the participants’ cultural identities, the African study abroad experience found all of the participants had reconstructed their national identity as well. Participants explained that they critically analyzed U.S. values and how the U.S. is viewed from other culture’s perspectives. Additionally, the participants reported a shift in how they related to the U.S. as part of their national identity. While research states that study abroad experiences provide many U.S. college students their first opportunity to critically examine what it means to be American (Dolby, 2004; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Walling et al., 2006), many of the participants had been abroad before and still significantly shifted their American identity after studying abroad in Africa. Thus, as all of the participants’ previous travel experiences had been in Europe, experiencing a collectivist society instead of another individualist society may have initiated the critical view of the U.S. and individualism. Furthermore, while in Africa, many participated in political discussions with members of the host culture and were often asked about the president of the U.S. When the participants returned, they all discussed how the U.S. media did not always accurately portray other nations’ cultures or political conflicts. Thus, Kymlicka (1995) explained that often one’s sense of self-respect and dignity is associated with the esteem to which one’s national group is attributed and respected within the global community. As a result, when the participants experienced other cultural group’s views of the U.S. that did not always paint it in such a positive light, many of them may have distanced themselves from this identity to subconsciously protect their own sense of dignity.
While the significant changes in identity reported by the participants were ethnic, cultural, and American, gender identity was not significantly affected as a result of the African study abroad experience. Gender identity may not have been affected as its meanings in the host culture may not have been as strikingly different to the participants as the ethnic or cultural constructs. In this way, priority was placed upon making meaning of how the participants identified with differing cultural practices and interpreted their own relationship with their American identity.

**African Experience Made a Positive Impact on the Students’ Lives**

As a part of the reentry adjustment process, the participants all adamantly reported several ways in which the African study abroad experience had made a positive impact on their lives. A majority of the participants discussed the increased confidence they gained as a result of the experience. Todd explained that “I’m more confident in what I can do; it helped me know what I was capable of.” Additionally, in conjunction with Douglas and Jones-Rikkers’ (2001) study of worldmindedness, the participants often used their primary reference group as humankind, rather than a specific ethnic group, as well as expressed the value of global perspectives on various issues and recognized and appreciated cultural differences. Dwelé illustrated his global view of humankind when he stated:

> So much of it was similar they [host family] were kind of, at the root of who they were, all human beings feel the same way. You, in certain terms, you have the same pains and the same joys in that nature, certain things get emphasized more what causes your joy and pain may be different but you still feel the joy and the pain none the less.
Similarly, the participants’ newfound sense of worldmindedness also increased their global awareness. Kim illustrated her increased sense of global awareness as well as its influence on her interests in other cultures:

The first thing I did was buy a map and I hung it up in my room and I’ll catch myself looking at it and I’m like, I didn’t even know that country existed! Like you don’t hear about these things in America, my view of the news has changed just what we hear and what we don’t. I feel like I just have this whole different perspective on it [Africa] and just learning about it, and I’m interested in international things now.

While the African experience influenced the participants’ global awareness and increased their self-confidence, it also directly influenced Kim and Ava’s career interests. When they both travelled to Africa, they were education majors; however, their teaching philosophies were greatly impacted by their experiences abroad in Africa as they both were inspired to integrate a global perspective into their teaching methods. Thus, these findings support Hutchison and Rea’s (2011) study in which they found United Kingdom college student’s experiences in Africa had increased their self-confidence, increased their value of human relationships, and shaped the career interests of the education majors in incorporating a global curriculum. Additionally, Hutchison and Rea’s study found that their students wanted to become more involved in international development and helping to empower children in Africa. Similarly, Sarah expressed her desire to sponsor a child to study in the U.S.:

Something I have been recently thinking about is when I do get a good job, I could support someone, I think, I will try to see if I could sponsor my host brother coming to the U. S. I don’t know if I’ll get to do it, but it’s something I want to do and I feel like I could make a difference.
Thus, as the participants studied abroad in a culture vastly different than the U.S., the amount of personal growth experienced may be more than U.S. students who choose to study in cultures similar to their own as they are not introduced to significantly different worldviews or cultural practices.

**Appreciation for the People of Burkina Faso and South Africa**

In discussing their experiences abroad and how it’s affected them, all of the participants strongly agreed on what has stayed with them the most as a result of their experience, the people. The attitudes and worldviews of the host cultures have remained with all of the participants.

Todd demonstrated these sentiments:

I think the biggest thing that I take from Burkina is just how happy they were. Because like, they were just jovial people, they were excited about the technology that was coming out here [U.S.] even if they couldn’t afford it themselves. They were so excited to hear about it and they just really enjoyed life. And I just realized how little we really need to be happy.

Each of the participants discussed how materialism was not important in the host cultures because many of the families could not afford many items that were not considered necessities. Because this was such a large contrast to U.S. culture, it greatly changed the participants’ outlook and definition of poverty as well. Kim described her changed outlook on poverty in the following manner:

I knew it was really one of the poor countries in the world but it was a different type of poverty, like they were fine with it, it’s just all they’ve known. They were content and happy with what they had, so I just changed my whole view on poverty. Like to us, it’s very sad and heartbreaking and yes in some cases over there when people did have food
like my family, we would call them poverty-stricken but they had food, they were able to survive, so they were happy. It’s just a whole different view and it’s...very, simple.

As a result of the relationships developed between the host cultures and the participants, they were able to rethink the definition of poverty as well as understand a more collective worldview which places precedence on how individuals work as part of a community unlike the emphasis on the individual in the U.S. In line with Lowe et al.’s (2008) review of African study abroad programs, the participants gained cross-cultural literacy and a greater appreciation for diversity and the African people. So much so that, as the findings have illustrated, the participants adopted some of the outlooks of the people of Burkina Faso and South Africa, as these outlooks made more sense to the participants and helped reposition their personal identities into something they felt connected them with the lessons learned from their experiences.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that while reentry adjustment may prove to be difficult, it is not necessarily negative. The reentry process can be an opportunity for individuals to grow, both personally and professionally, as a result of their study abroad experience. In addition, the findings highlight the potential that collective societies have to greatly impact individuals from individualist societies. This was particularly expressed by the participants who lived with host families and how strongly they were impacted by their unique experiences. Thus, the findings suggest that living with a host family greatly magnifies one’s immersion into the host culture and provides greater insight into the host and home cultures when compared with individuals who did not live with a host family.

**Limitations of the Study**

As this was a phenomenological study focused on discovering the true essence of the phenomenon of the six participants’ reentry adjustment, this study’s findings from one
Midwestern public university are not intended to be generalized throughout the entire U.S. college student population nor the population of U.S. college students who study abroad in Africa. These individuals’ experiences are unique to them, as they are a culmination of their personal experiences within the U.S., Africa, and Europe.

It is important to note that the participants who studied in Burkina Faso came directly from studying abroad in France for various lengths of time which may have had the potential to influence their perceptions of their African experience more than if they had travelled directly from the U.S. to Africa. However, as France is a part of Western culture, similar to the U.S., the participants still adapted from living in a Western society to a non-Western society in Burkina Faso. Additionally, as they did not participate in an experiential learning program offering the opportunity to live with a host family in France, their experiences may have been more limited as they were experiencing a culture with similar cultural norms and values to the U.S. in comparison to Burkina Faso. Ultimately, their experiences in reentry adjustment and their evaluation of the African study abroad experience were no different than those of the two participants who had studied abroad in South Africa without studying in France first.

Additionally, it is important to highlight the fact that only two countries from Africa were present in this study, and there is no intention of generalizing the findings from Burkina Faso and South Africa with the remaining countries in Africa. While the intention of this study was to further explore the impact that study abroad in Africa had on U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment, one must recognize that just as the countries making up the Western industrialized nations are similar, they do have their cultural differences and these must be acknowledged when discussing a region or continent’s cultural values and beliefs. While these findings can be generalized to include Burkina Faso and South Africa as collective societies, it is important to
reiterate that the Mossi and Xhosa cultural practices and values are not representative of all African cultural practices and values.
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

As many quantitative research studies have sufficiently discovered the key difficulties that exist during reentry, few qualitative studies have been done to describe the experience (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Rogers & Ward, 1993; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991). In recent years, phenomenological studies have been conducted and have successfully captured the essence of the reentry adjustment process. However, few, if any have provided a comprehensive illustration of identity transformation during the reentry process. Additionally, while few qualitative studies of reentry adjustment in U.S. college students have been conducted, none of them focus solely on reentry adjustment after studying abroad in Africa. Thus, this phenomenological study aimed to address the gaps in the literature by providing insights into the lived experiences of six U.S. college students’ reentry adjustment and identity transformations upon return to a Midwestern public university after studying abroad in Africa.

Consistent with previous literature on reentry adjustment, this study found that all of the participants experienced various forms of difficulty for an extended period of time upon reentry to the U.S. after returning from Africa. While all of the participants experienced sociocultural difficulties, only five of the six experienced psychological challenges due to the extenuating circumstances surrounding one of the participant’s arrival to the U.S. In addition, all of the participants experienced a significant change in their identity as a result of the African study abroad experience. Consequently, all of the participants discussed activities, cultural values, and world outlooks that continued to keep them connected to their experience in the present. Finally, the participants emphasized the most important part of the entire experience abroad was gaining a new perspective from the Mossi and Xhosa people of Burkina Faso and South Africa regarding what was ultimately important in life.
First, the newly adopted cultural values and world outlooks, critical views of the U.S., and difficulty in communicating the experience to friends and family were significant in the psychological and sociocultural factors that affected the reentry adjustment process. It was found that reentry sparked an awareness of the internal changes that occurred within the participants as a result of the African study abroad experience. As a result, the difficulties they experienced suggested that they were a reaction to the participants’ newfound awareness that they had changed in some way. In addition, feelings of alienation and a desire for isolation were experienced when the participants tried to reach out to their friends and family to explain the value of their experience and identity changes that occurred yet felt that they were not understood. Similarly, the participants experienced difficulty in finding like-minded people outside of their study abroad group that understood their critical views of U.S. values of materialism, capitalism, and consumerism. Furthermore, the underlying factor that caused these psychological and sociocultural difficulties was the individual’s newly reconstructed identity and the individual’s attempts to reposition his/her place in U.S. society.

This study also illustrated how each participant endured varying degrees of personal growth and identity transformation as a result of his/her study abroad experience in Africa. Specifically, cultural, ethnic, and national identities were explored and modified as a result of the participants’ experiences. As each participant acculturated to his/her host culture, by adapting to differing cultural values of time and the amount of value placed on human relationships and materialism, and deculturated, by unlearning some of his/her old cultural values of time, materialism, and capitalism, the participant explored his/her identity and experienced a sense of personal growth. In this way, reentry captures the period of time when the individual has to make meaning of his/her personal growth and the implications it has on his/her social and cultural
relationships. The participants chose to understand the relationship between their identity transformations and home culture by incorporating various coping styles. While two chose to keep their personal growth to themselves and compartmentalize the African experience to feel more comfortable in their home culture, others integrated cultural values from both cultures into their daily lives acknowledging the influence the African experience had on their identities.

Participants also attempted to distance themselves from their American identity. After experiencing what countries outside of the U.S. believed about its culture, the participants were greatly influenced by how they viewed the U.S. and how prevalent the U.S. presence was in other countries. Studying in two African contexts gave participants the opportunity to view U.S. politics and popular culture, in particular, from an outsider’s perspective. While participants reported an increased appreciation and gratitude for the items and resources that they had, they became more skeptical of the way the U.S. media frames global issues and viewed U.S. values of materialism and consumerism as negative. Thus, studying in Africa and experiencing how happy the participants’ host cultures were with much less and how America was seemingly portrayed in their host cultures, caused the participants to change their view of the U.S. and modify how they related with their American identity.

When questioned whether the African study abroad experience had an impact on the participants’ lives, they all enthusiastically listed several differences in themselves that reflected the value of their experience. Studying abroad in Africa increased the self-confidence in all of the participants as well as gave them opportunities to be introduced to social practices and worldviews they did not know existed. With this, came an increased global awareness and appreciation for differing cultural perspectives. In addition to the increased self-confidence and global awareness, participants also found that the experience had impacted their career interests.
The experience caused them to be open to working abroad and motivated them to become advocates for Africa and developing countries around the world. Additionally, it greatly impacted the teaching philosophies of the two participants who were education majors to include a global perspective and community-based format to their teaching styles.

All of the participants were largely affected by the value placed upon human relationships in Burkina Faso and South Africa. For instance, all of the participants who lived with a host family in Burkina Faso explained how they still communicated with them months and years after living with them and consider them a part of their family. This way of thinking of them as a part of the participant’s family reflects how the African experience changed the way they value human relationships. For example, in the U.S. if a student stays with a family for a period of two weeks to a month, a family in the U.S. would not consider that student staying with them a part of their family. Similarly, as a result of their experience, the participants learned how to become more content in their lives and appreciate simplicities that they had previously taken for granted. The admiration and deep appreciation for the Mossi and Xhosa people giving them the opportunity to view life differently was evident through the participants’ stories and accounts of their lived experiences.

Finally, the methodology chosen to understand the phenomenon in this study proved very valuable in its findings and design. Through the phenomenological process, participants were provided a forum via interview and focus group to reflect upon their experiences aloud. As the participants reflected aloud, this sparked further reflection as many were speaking at length about their experiences for the first time. Additionally, this methodology vividly illustrated how the participants openly expressed reliving their experiences in Africa in their mind as a result of the feelings of alienation and misunderstanding experienced after their return home. Thus, this
methodology allowed for detailed descriptions of the thought processes and steps in the reentry process as well as an opportunity for the participants to gain a greater understanding of how their experiences abroad affected them.

**Implications of Research**

These conclusions offer significant contributions to the study abroad field as they provide evidence of its value and a better understanding of the culmination of psychological and sociocultural factors affecting individuals’ experiences during reentry. While the research supported previous studies of sociocultural and psychological difficulties (Adler, 1981; Gaw, 2000; Martin, 1984; Raschio, 1987; Sussman, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006; Uehara, 1983; Walling et al., 2006; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010), it also added to the literature by demonstrating that the reentry adjustment difficulties of U.S. college students returning from studying abroad in Africa were not different than previous studies of college students returning from Europe or Asia. However, in terms of personal growth and identity transformation, this study contributes to the literature the greater likelihood that U.S. college students will experience a larger amount of personal growth and identity exploration as a result of studying abroad in a significantly different culture.

This study also presents to the literature a unique view into the lived experiences and thoughts of the participant’s reentry adjustment and identity reconstruction. While few previous qualitative studies have extensively focused on identity during reentry adjustment, no study provides a snapshot of the period in time during reentry when the individuals become aware of their personal growth and attempt to make meaning of it by modifying their identities once home. The phenomenological lens used in this study provides a detailed description of the experience of reconstructing one’s identity and the individual’s thoughts throughout the process.
Finally, this study supports Pires (2000) and Lowe et al.’s (2008) research emphasizing the value of experiential study abroad programs in Africa and provides additional evidence to the literature of the value of the African study abroad experience. While not originally a focus of the study, the U.S. college students repeatedly praised the Mossi people of Burkina Faso and Xhosa people of South Africa and described them as the best part of their overall experience. Thus, it is important to illustrate what the students believed as the most valuable part of the African experience, the deep human relationships and collective worldview impressed upon them that remained with them for months and years after their return to the U.S. In addition, the participants all adopted a more realistic view of Africa and gave up trust in the accuracy of the U.S. media’s portrayal of the world. Finally, they became motivated to discuss with others their experiences in Africa with the intention of breaking common misconceptions and informing others about a continent that is currently not well understood in the U.S.

As a result of the deep admiration for the collective worldview and human relationships experienced in Burkina Faso and South Africa, educational institutions may find that including a host family and/or service-learning component into a study abroad program results in greater opportunities for personal growth and an expanded worldview. Thus, in order to gain the greatest value out of the experience, study abroad programs may need to integrate more host family components into the curriculum and provide supportive reentry services for students after they return from studying abroad.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study provided insight into the sociocultural difficulties experienced by the re-enterer and how it affected the individual’s feelings toward communicating one’s experience with family and friends. As the U.S. college students described feeling as if their families and
friends did not care or did not possess the capacity to understand the experience and how it affected them, few studies have shown this conflict from the perspective of the re-enterer’s family and friends. Understanding what the expectations and psychosocial reactions are of the friends and family upon their loved one’s return home may provide a better understanding of the factors involved that may cause the re-enterer to feel misunderstood and isolated. Hence, future research in this area may help to bridge the communication gaps between the re-enterer and his/her friends and family and alleviate the psychological difficulties caused from feeling alienated and misunderstood.

As previously discussed in the literature, Kasser (2002) has done extensive work in collaboration with UNICEF on the negative effect materialism has on well-being. Further research may warrant an examination of this relationship and its application in the study abroad context. For instance, after the U.S. college students studied abroad in Africa and experienced a non-Western worldview, they returned and announced their rejection of the high value placed on materialism in the U.S. and began to resent Americans who continued to significantly value material items. Thus, it is possible that as a result of the U.S. college students experiencing the happiness and increased sense of well-being and inner peace among the people of Burkina Faso and South Africa, they returned to the U.S. and sensed Americans did not possess the same level of well-being. Consequently, the participants rejected the values of U.S. society of whom they may have blamed for the lower level of well-being, satisfaction, and contentment among a majority of the U.S. population scoring higher on increased amounts of value placed on material items.

As a common theme found in this study was the admiration for the Xhosa and Mossi cultures’ contentment with few material items and the collective worldview, research may
provide a different lens to the study abroad experience by studying the relationship between the study abroad student’s socioeconomic status and his/her interpretation of African cultures. As most U.S. students who study abroad are considered to be middle to upper class, further research may benefit from measuring how students from a lower socioeconomic status may interpret their experience of studying abroad in Africa. Because the majority of reentry adjustment literature does not discuss the influence of socioeconomic status on the study abroad experience, research may find that the experience may affect a student of lower socioeconomic status’ identity and values differently.

Finally, as identity reconstruction and the reentry adjustment experience were central to this study, comparison studies of U.S. college students’ experiences in other developing countries may provide more insight into the value and difference between studying in a Western or non-Western country. For example, previous research has shown that the greater the difference in home and host cultures, the larger amount of personal growth one may experience as a result of his/her study abroad experience (Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001). Thus, future studies may find that study abroad experiences in South America and Africa, collective societies, are similar in terms of what U.S. students and students from Western societies find influential upon their identity and cultural values.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Questions

I. Study Abroad Experience

1. Describe your study abroad experience while in Africa.
   (Prompts: a. Which African country were you in? b. What did you do there? c. How long were you there for?)

2. Have you ever been abroad for an extended period of time before? If so, when and what did you do there?

3. Why did you choose to study abroad in (insert specific African country)?

4. While in Africa, how did the experience meet your expectations or how was it different than what you expected?

5. Describe your experience of adapting to the new environment and/or culture.

6. Would you consider your adaptation to the new culture successful? Explain why or why not?

II. Return to the U.S.

1. Explain how you felt about returning to the U.S. at the end of your stay in Africa.

2. What were your initial reactions and attitude your first days back in the U.S.?

3. Explain what stuck out the most to you about the differences or similarities in cultural norms and values between the U.S. and the African country you were in.

4. Describe what you were the happiest about returning to the U.S.

5. Describe what you found the most difficult about readjusting to U.S. culture.

III. Identity

1. How would you describe your personal and cultural identity prior to studying abroad in (African country)? (cultural identity - the identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture) (personal identity - an umbrella term used throughout the social sciences for an individual's comprehension of him or herself as a discrete, separate entity)

2. Explain how your values or personal identity changed, if at all, while you were in Africa.

3. Describe any value conflicts you may have experienced after you returned to the U.S.
4. Explain how you identify, culturally and/or personally, with both the U.S. and the African country you lived in.

5. Describe how your experience abroad has shaped your identity.

6. Upon your return to the U.S., describe what perspectives (world outlook) of yours changed and which stayed the same.

**IV. Social Interactions**

1. Upon your return from Africa, explain any challenges communicating with others that you believe resulted because of your study abroad experience.

2. When you first returned from Africa, describe your social behavior and communication with your peers.

3. Describe your social behavior and communication with close family members after your return.

4. How do you perceive other people in your home (U.S.) culture upon your return from Africa?

5. Explain any changes in social interactions you have made because of these perceptions.

**V. Coping with Reentry**

1. Describe the thought processes you went through upon the first month back that influenced your readjustment.

2. Describe methods you used to cope with the change in environment and culture once you returned from Africa.

3. Describe activities or organizations you are involved in that keep you connected to your experience.

4. How would you describe the impact the study abroad experience in Africa has had on your life?
APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Questions

1. Would anyone like to share an entry or thought from their journal?

2. How did the interview affect you?

3. What part of the interview, if any, caused further reflection of your experience?

4. Are there any topics from the interview you would like to discuss further with one another?

5. Did you feel as if you were more of a representative of the U.S. than an individual when in your host culture? More aware of your American or ethnic identity? Before/after

6. How would you describe your experience of reentry adjustment?

7. How do you identify with the U.S. after your return from Africa? Explain the thought process you went through when confronted with understanding your American identity, put me in your shoes.

8. What are the largest changes that have occurred in your social and personal life as a result of the study abroad experience?

9. What advice would you give someone who just returned from studying abroad in Africa and was beginning to readjust to the U.S. culture?
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT JOURNAL PROTOCOL

Prompt: The purpose of this study is to be able to describe the experience of returning home from Africa and what you were thinking and feeling at that time. Please reflect back to when first returned and write down your reactions to coming home including what you were thinking and feeling during those first days, weeks and/or months and how they affected your readjustment to the U.S.
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

Letter of Informed Consent

Title: Reconstructing Identity: Sociocultural and Psychological Factors Affecting U.S. College Students’ Reentry Adjustment after Studying Abroad in Africa

Purpose: Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. You are being asked to participate by Ms. Amanda Sipes, a Master’s student in the Cross-Cultural and International Education program at Bowling Green State University. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experience of sociocultural and psychological adjustment of U.S. college students’ to their home country upon return from studying abroad in an African context.

Procedure: In this study, each participant will be asked to participate in a 30-45 minute voluntary interview reflecting upon their study abroad experience. In addition, the researcher would like to conduct a 30-45 minute focus group in which all participants voluntarily discuss their experiences with one another. Upon securing consent to both the interview and focus group, the participants will be given a hard copy journal to reflect upon their abroad experience. The purpose of the journal is to better prepare them for their interview. The researcher, upon the participant’s consent, will collect the journals for data collection purposes and return the original journals to the participants once data collection is complete. Writing in their journals is completely voluntary and is in no way required. The researcher also wishes to audio record the interviews and focus group with each participant’s permission. Overall, participation in this study may take up to two hours of each participant’s time over a one month duration. One interview and one focus group will take place in a mutually agreed upon location.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in one interview and one focus group is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions (or not do a particular task) or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your grades or class standing or your relationship with Bowling Green State University.

Confidentiality: The information you provide in the interview, focus group, and journal will not be linked to your name in the reporting of the data. All transcripts of audio tapes made during the interviews and focus group along with entries in each journal will:
• Use a number as opposed to a name for classification purposes.
• Use a pseudonym (a false name) to protect your identity.
• Ensure that any possible identifiers will not be used to maintain anonymity during the reporting of the data.

The audio tapes and transcripts from the interviews and focus group, along with each participant’s journal, will be kept under lock and key in a secure location in Amanda Sipes’ office, and will be available to no one except herself. Recorded data and journal entries will be transcribed verbatim onto password protected computer files. The hard copy journals given to each participant will be assigned a number and will not have the participant's name or any information within it that could link it to the participant's identity and the participant may choose not to share specific or any journal entries at any time. To secure the confidence of participants, an interview number as opposed to the participant's name will be recorded at the beginning of the interview. Once the study is completed, the audio recordings of the interviews and focus group and the researcher’s copies of the journals will be destroyed.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you by participating in this study, other than the opportunity to reflect in a more formal way, through journal, interview, and focus group, on your study abroad experience. However, your participation in the research study will be contributing to research concerning U.S. college students’ study abroad experiences, identity, and reentry adjustment in general, and research concerning participation in study abroad and/or service learning programs in the African context in particular. This work in turn may be used to improve educational policy and programming as well as spread awareness about issues affecting study abroad students upon their return home.

Risks of Participation: There are no physical or mental health risks to participating in this study that are greater than the ones encountered in daily life. Some participants however may feel uneasy about sharing their information with an unfamiliar person. The following are steps taken to minimize any discomforts:

• The interview and focus group will be conducted in a location and environment that the participant feels safe and comfortable in.
• If at any time during the interview and focus group the participant becomes uncomfortable or wants to stop, notify Amanda Sipes and she will stop the interview or you may dismiss yourself from the focus group immediately.
• Upon request, helpful information about support services may be provided if needed.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns pertaining to the research or your participation in the research, please feel free to contact the researcher or her advisor.
• Amanda Sipes (419-356-1259, asipes@bgsu.edu), Researcher, MACIE Master’s Student
• Dr. Patricia Kubow (Professor, Educational Foundations, Leadership and Policy, College of Education and Human Development, 419-372-7380, pkubow@bgsu.edu), Advisor
• You may also contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716, hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research.

Agreement

• Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had the opportunity to ask any questions you have about this study.
• Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you may change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time.
• You have been told that by signing this agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.
• You have been given a copy of this agreement.

__________________________            __________________________
Signature (Participant)            Date

__________________________            __________________________
Researcher            Date
APPENDIX E: HSRB APPROVAL FORM

BGSU
Bowling Green State University
Office of Research Compliance

DATE: May 24, 2012
TO: Amanda Sipes
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [34125-1] Reconstructing Identity: Sociocultural and Psychological Factors Affecting U.S. College Students’ Reentry Adjustment after Studying Abroad in Africa
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: June 8, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: June 7, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on June 7, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board’s records.