

PERCEPTIONS OF SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES ON  
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE  
STUDENTS

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By

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PERCEPTIONS OF SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES ON  
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## ABSTRACT

### PERCEPTIONS OF SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCES ON INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENTS

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Intercultural competence is an emerging topic of interest in service-based professions, including school psychology. The National Association of School Psychologists has long asserted the importance of interculturally competent practices in schools in the form of ethical and unbiased assessments and interventions, collaboration with families, and overall justice and advocacy for all students. Research indicates that participating in a study abroad experience during an undergraduate or graduate program of study is one option for future professionals in schools to gain intercultural competence. Previous research examined the impact of study abroad experiences on future teachers and school counselors, but little research exists on the impact of study abroad on school psychologists, who serve diverse student groups. This qualitative project examined the unique experiences and perceived intercultural competence growth of school psychology graduate students who participated in study abroad experiences, as well as how their

experiences prepared them to serve diverse populations in schools. Implications regarding future research and practice are provided.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Intercultural competence is an emerging topic of interest in service-based professions, including school psychology. The National Association of School Psychologists (2016) has long asserted the importance of intercultural competence in schools in the form of ethical and unbiased assessments and interventions, collaboration with families, and overall justice and advocacy for all students. The American Psychological Association (2013) has similar guidelines for professionals in the field of psychology, which includes the recommendation that students engage in experiential learning experiences, such as study abroad, in order to increase their ability and confidence to assist individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Intercultural competence is a complex set of skills that facilitates effective communication with individuals from different cultures (Fantini & Aqueel, 2006). It is typically viewed as existing on a continuum (Hammer, 2012), as a set of skills that individuals develop over time through experiences (Diller, 2011), or as specific models that are developed through empirical evidence and theory (Czerwionka, Artamonova, & Barbosa, 2015). One aspect all of these frameworks have in common is the shift from an ethnocentric view (that one's own culture is the center of all cultures), to a more global viewpoint (that cultures interact and influence each other).

Intercultural competence can be strengthened in a variety of ways. Study abroad experiences are popular at universities and may increase cultural awareness in students, even after a short period of time (Goldoni, 2013). Service-learning experiences within the United States are another way to increase intercultural competence, and are often more feasible for students who cannot afford the costs of traveling abroad (Housman, Meaney, Wilcox, & Cavazos, 2012). Intercultural competence can also be achieved in the classroom, through on-campus and online courses focused on cultural diversity.

Research has shown that students feel they benefit greatly from study abroad experiences. A study conducted by Franklin (2010) found that, even 10 years after graduation, students found that studying abroad positively affected them professionally. These students reported increased confidence when interacting with individuals from different cultures and that their global perspective allowed them to be more ethical in their work. Cordero and Rodriguez (2009) also found that students reported an increase in self-awareness and empathy even after returning from a short trip to Costa Rica.

Similarly, a literature review conducted by Canfield, Low, and Hovestadt (2009) examined the utilization of cultural immersion experiences for on-campus, online, and study abroad graduate counseling courses, which have been developed and revised over the course of 12 years. Although each course varied slightly in content, they all shared a common “cultural immersion experience” project as a core component of the students’ grades. The experiences were examined through observations and student feedback. Students reported increased cultural awareness and sensitivity after their cultural

immersion experiences. Similarly, Canfield et al. (2009) found that students were better able to recognize their economic privilege, and thus reflect and utilize what they learned abroad when returning to the United States.

Little research exists on short-term study abroad experiences, specifically on their impact on the intercultural competence in school psychology graduate students. This is especially important given the increasing diversity in K-12 United States schools. The purpose of the present study was to examine the perceived effects of short-term study abroad experiences on intercultural competence in school psychology graduate students. Specifically, this project focused on students' experiences while abroad during their undergraduate or graduate course of study, and how such experiences prepared them to work with students and families from diverse cultures post-graduation.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review has four sections. The first section describes intercultural competence, the methods and theories behind it, and its importance in school settings. The second section discusses different ways to develop intercultural competence, as well as factors that influence intercultural competency gains. The third section outlines the importance of study abroad in general and the factors that influence study abroad experiences. The final section discusses the effects of study abroad experiences on intercultural competence in students and specifically in school psychology graduate students.

#### **Theories of Intercultural Competence**

Fantini and Aqueel (2006) describe intercultural competence as a complex set of abilities that facilitate effective communication with individuals from different backgrounds or cultures. It is necessary for interculturally competent professionals to use their skills in a variety of ways in order to meet the needs of the diverse populations they serve (Diller, 2011). Intercultural competence is a complex concept inadequately explored in the literature, but of increasing importance as the population in the United States becomes more diverse.

Researchers have posed different theories of intercultural competence and its development. Specific models explain the intricacies of intercultural competence.

**Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model.** Czerwionka et al. (2015) define intercultural competence as using what one knows about other cultures in order to interact with individuals who are different from oneself, as well as adapt to any situation. Intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes serve as the main pillars that support the Intercultural Communicative Competence model. The idea of knowledge, skills, and attitudes come from experiencing a variety of intercultural situations including being knowledgeable about different countries' historical, social, and political statuses, norms and traditions and being able to compare that knowledge to one's host country.

**Intercultural competence as a continuum.** Intercultural competence can also be seen as a continuum, meaning that individuals can move forwards or backwards in their competency gains at any time. Hammer's (2012) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity states that individuals begin by having basic thoughts, perceptions, and stereotypes about a group and based on these perceptions, they will act a certain way. However, individuals can improve by comparing the similarities and differences between a host culture and their own culture. Using these critical thinking skills, one can eventually shift their mindset based on with whom they are interacting. Similarly, an individual may regress on the continuum if they have negative intercultural experiences or re-develop an ethnocentric viewpoint once returning from a trip abroad.

**Intercultural competence as specific skill areas.** Intercultural competence is also seen as a specific set of skills that individuals develop over time with experience. Diller (2011) theorized that interculturally competent practitioners gain a variety of skills

including awareness and acceptance of individual differences, awareness of one's own culture, the ability to adapt their communication skills when speaking with individuals from other cultures, and knowledge of their clients' unique culture and norms. In this instance, it is important for the individual to seek activities and experiences which help to develop these skills.

### **Intercultural Competence in Schools**

As schools grow in diversity, it is important to have interculturally competent practitioners who can effectively reach out to students. In a study by Li and Li (2015), students from Chinese-American and immigrant homes attributed much of their stress to the cultural misunderstanding and isolation they felt in school. Similarly, Li, Ni and Stoianov's (2015) results suggest that intercultural competence training extends to the culture and established norms of schools in the United States, as opposed to addressing superficial issues. This ensures that practitioners are prepared to meet the needs of all students, regardless of whether they fit the typical description of an American student.

The need for intercultural competence in schools stems from a long history of diversity gaps and the underrepresentation of minorities in the field of education. According to the Center for American Progress (2014), almost every state in the United States has a significant gap in diversity between students and educators. Students of color, or from different cultures comprise over half of public school populations, yet educators of color comprise only 18 percent of public school populations. Davies, Bernstein, and Lewis (2015) noted that the field of school psychology, in particular, is



also predominantly Caucasian and female, with a severely underrepresentation of minority practitioners in the field.

**Professional standards.** Professional educator standards (i.e., for school psychologists) have long asserted the importance of intercultural competence in school-based practice. For example, according to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2016), practitioners should seek to promote intercultural competence through professional development, providing resources to school personnel and families, and being an advocate for students of diverse cultures in the school setting. In addition, NASP seeks to recruit future school psychologists from diverse backgrounds in order to better meet the needs of the diverse student populations they will serve. Lastly, NASP's Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists (2010) promotes respect for human diversity and encourages implementation of culturally competent practices for all families.

The American Psychological Association (2013) publishes similar guidelines for interculturally competent practice, including the recommendation that psychologists utilize experiential learning experiences, such as study abroad, to promote psychological applications in a variety of settings. It is clear that intercultural competence is a topic of importance for school-based professionals working with diverse populations.

### **Achieving Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence can be developed in a variety of ways, including curriculum-based learning, service-learning, and study abroad experiences. Curriculum-

based learning is when an individual enrolls in on-campus or online courses which teach the foundations of intercultural competence. Service-learning projects allow individuals to interact with diverse groups in their own community (Housman, Meaney, Wilcox & Cavazos, 2012). Lastly, individuals may participate in study abroad experience and fully immerse themselves in a different culture.

**Traditional on-campus learning.** Intercultural competence development can be achieved through curricula, both for on-campus and online courses. According to Canfield et al. (2009), many students, especially those studying part-time or raising families, found that studying abroad for the purpose of gaining intercultural competence was not feasible. This was due to their circumstances with family and work, as well as the general costs of studying abroad. A variety of undergraduate and graduate programs are working to create a curriculum centered on developing intercultural competence, and applied skills in serving students and families of diverse backgrounds (Davies et al., 2015).

**Service learning.** Service learning is another way that intercultural competence can be achieved without traveling abroad. Service learning activities, also known as community engaged learning (Davies et al., 2015) involve participants' completion of community service projects as part of their curriculum. The purpose of service learning is to benefit both the student and the community the student is serving, which can be either local or international. An example of service learning aimed at increasing intercultural competence might be tutoring non-English speaking students at a local school.

Research has indicated that the benefits to completing a service-learning project may be comparable to that of studying abroad. A study by Housman et al. (2012) sought

to determine the effects of a service-learning project on intercultural competence in health education students. The students completed the Cultural Competence Assessment (CCA) survey before participating in a three-week service-learning project aimed to serve a low-income community. The participants then repeated the CCA, and the results were compared to determine intercultural competence growth. Additionally, the participants wrote weekly reflections about their experiences. Overall, this study found that this service-learning project increased interculturally competent behavior and therefore may be an effective way to achieve intercultural competence.

**Immersion experiences.** Immersion experiences include both short- and long-term study abroad programs, in which students travel to a different country and engage in the host culture for a certain period of time. Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2015) state that immersion experiences offer students opportunities to complete courses in their program of study while adapting themselves to a different culture, as well as interacting with professors and students in the host country.

When deciding to study abroad, students may choose between a short- or long-term study abroad program. Short-term study abroad programs, which are typically less than 8 weeks on average, have higher participation rates than long-term programs due to the costs associated with long-term programs (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015). Both short- and long-term study abroad programs incorporate activities, excursions, and tasks for students to complete in order to gain important skills and insights during their experiences.

***Activities while abroad.*** Universities vary greatly in the activities they choose to include in their study abroad programs, which can impact gains in intercultural

competence (Earnest, Rosenbusch, Wallace-Williams, & Keim, 2015). Study abroad activities may include day excursions to nearby towns, formal class sessions, and both structured and informal opportunities to converse with locals in the host country. There is still research needed on what specific activities are most beneficial for students participating in immersion programs.

In a qualitative study, Goldoni (2013) sought to identify the ways in which students immersed themselves while studying abroad, and how they affected their overall experiences in the host country. This study examined the experiences of undergraduate students who participated in study abroad programs in Spain during the 2007, 2008, and 2009 calendar years. The methodology included semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, observations, and analyses of journals, e-mail exchanges, and Facebook posts. One of Goldoni's (2013) most important findings was that it was of the utmost importance for students to turn everyday experiences, even those that were negative, into opportunities to learn, reflect, and grow.

According to Goldoni (2013), there are several contributing factors to successful integration into a host country, which include pursuing hobbies and interests abroad, living with a host family, and seeking international communication experiences. Pursuing hobbies and interests abroad allows individuals to practice their language skills, gain confidence in adapting to the new culture, and create a stronger tie to the host country. Individuals who live with a host family while abroad felt more confident navigating their new surroundings because their host family members were an available resource for language learning, support, and security. Lastly, individuals benefit from international communication experiences because they are able to utilize their existing language skills

outside of the classroom and discover similarities between themselves and individuals in the host culture. Goldoni's (2013) study found that these factors were essential to the development of intercultural competence in the students who participated in his study.

***Pre- and post-departure meetings.*** Pre- and post-departure meetings are common for groups traveling abroad together. These meetings serve a variety of functions, which include discussing logistics and expectations for the trip, learning about the various aspects of the host country's culture, social norms, and political stance, as well as giving the group a chance to meet and interact before departing (Barden & Cashwell, 2013; Highum, 2014). Goldoni (2013) found that activities such as role-playing can help students prepare for the various situations and obstacles they may face while abroad.

According to Barden and Cashwell (2013), post-departure "debriefing activities" can be a good way to take what students learn abroad and apply it to their everyday life in the United States. Debriefing activities include sharing experiences with others in a structured forum, completing assessments that contribute to intercultural competency research, or taking part in evaluations, which assist program directors in ensuring that the study abroad trip is improved in the future.

### **Importance of Study Abroad Experiences**

Universities are finding that study abroad experiences are beneficial to students and future professionals serving diverse populations. According to Goldoni (2013), studying abroad offers learning opportunities to gain important skills, many of which cannot be replicated in the home country. Similarly, Canfield et al. (2009) conducted a literature review, which examined the utility of three instructional methods for teaching intercultural competence: Study abroad program courses, traditional on-campus courses,

and online courses. Those who chose either the on-campus or online option were required to fulfill a cultural immersion project in their course, which would be chosen by the individual student and pre-approved by the faculty. Examples of acceptable cultural immersion projects included living with a family of a different race or cultural group, attending events of a different religious group over a period of several months, or participating in events in the LGBTQ community.

Overall, the researchers found that cultural immersion experiences can increase empathy and cultural sensitivity in students, as well as increase awareness of cultural differences and similarities between home and foreign countries. Similar results were found with students who participated in cultural immersion projects for their on-campus or online course.

**Perceived benefits to studying abroad.** There are numerous benefits that students report when returning from a study abroad experience. These may include opportunities to speak and learn a new language, gaining a greater sense of self, and gaining a greater appreciation for other cultures (Goldoni, 2013). A study by Cordero and Rodriguez (2009) found that students reported an increase in self-awareness and the belief that study abroad experiences help to increase intercultural competence in students. Similarly, Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2015) found that students experienced growth, both personally and in intercultural awareness. Students compared their culture to other cultures as well as learned problem-solving skills that could be used in unfamiliar situations.

A qualitative study conducted by Franklin (2010) sought to determine the effect that study abroad had on individuals' professional careers. This study utilized in-depth

interviews to examine the experiences of individuals 10 years after graduating from college or university. From this study, students reported that studying abroad contributed to their professional success, as well as created a heightened sense of ethics and justice in their practice. Lastly, students felt a sense of “privilege” being American and were able to use that privilege to learn skills in empathy and understanding. Tolerance and patience are not easily taught in the classroom (Canfield et al., 2009; Czerwionka et al., 2015).

**Perceived drawbacks to studying abroad.** Along with benefits, there are also perceived drawbacks to studying abroad. For example, Barden and Cashwell (2013) noted that feeling safe, both in terms of public safety and emotional safety, is something to address as the stress of traveling impact students. Leaving friends and family and traveling to a country whose residents do not speak English as a first language may also be a disadvantage that impacts the decision to study abroad (Doyle, Gendall, Hoek, Tait, McKenzie, & Looiparg, 2009). Additionally, students may expect the host culture to be just like their home culture or they may possess an ethnocentric view of their travels that allows them to make presumptions when traveling (Earnest et al., 2015).

It is also important to note that short-term study abroad embodies its own set of obstacles. Davies et al. (2015) compared intercultural competence gains between school psychology graduate students enrolled in an on-campus cultural diversity course and school psychology graduate students who participated in a short-term study abroad program in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Findings revealed that, although students found their short-term study abroad experience to be beneficial overall, there was no statistical difference in intercultural competence between the study abroad and on-campus group.

This could be due to several factors including prior intercultural experiences and the voluntary nature of study abroad programs.

Lastly, a study conducted by Harris, Kumuran, Harris, Moen, and Visconti (2018) examined the intercultural competence of students who participated in five-week-long study abroad experiences. The results of this study indicated that students found themselves in either an “observer” or “active participant” role while studying abroad. Those who were primarily “observers” during their experiences abroad were more likely to return to their home country with unintended biases and prejudices towards their host country. This could be due to a lack of understanding and perspective-taking that can only be experienced if one takes an active role in their study abroad program.

### **Critical Factors in Cultural Immersion**

Several critical factors contribute to whether a student benefits from a study abroad program. A literature review conducted by Barden and Cashwell (2013) noted that there are both structural and process factors that influence a student’s subjective experience while studying abroad.

**Structural factors.** Structural factors are those that either cannot be changed by the participant, or that influence the participant’s immediate experience while abroad (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). Structural factors include duration and location of the trip, language barriers, and cross-cultural interactions.

***Duration and location of trip.*** The duration of a study abroad trip can influence whether students gain intercultural competence and sustain it over time. According to Clarke and Clarke (2011), study abroad programs need to be long enough for participants to process culture shock as well as cope with the implications that come with it. Thus, a



two-week study abroad program may not be long enough to impact intercultural competence (Goldoni, 2013). However, significant growth in intercultural competence is achievable through a two-week study abroad program if the experience focuses on activities aimed at cultural awareness and intercultural competence growth (Krishnan, Masters, Holgate, Wang, & Calahan, 2017).

Additionally, the location of the program may influence the overall expectations for the trip. According to Goldoni (2013), students are often attracted to locations considered vacation destinations. Similarly, student responses from a study conducted by Doyle et al. (2009) found that participants favor English-speaking destinations for study abroad experiences, such as the United Kingdom and Australia.

***Language barriers.*** Language barriers are a common reason for culture shock when students enter a new country for the first time. However, Goldoni (2013) emphasizes that language barriers are best viewed as an opportunity to learn and problem-solve. Doyle et al. (2009) sees communicating in another language as a way to engage others and to increase empathy and understanding in English-speaking students. Similarly, a literature review conducted by Barden and Cashwell (2013) found that participants who were able to overcome language barriers with locals in the host country found a deep sense of satisfaction, self-awareness, and self-efficacy which extended several months after returning home.

***Cross-cultural interactions.*** Cross-cultural interactions are purposeful opportunities to communicate and connect with locals from the host country (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). These opportunities include formal interactions, such as planned visits to universities or historical sites in the area, and informal interactions, such as freely

meeting individuals in restaurants or participating in recreational activities in which one is likely to meet new people.

A literature review by Barden and Cashwell (2013) found that students generally wished they had more free time to interact with individuals in a more informal setting, particularly if their program included mostly formal interactions. Similarly, Dekaney (2008) found that short-term study abroad programs benefit greatly from encouraging students to engage in informal cross-cultural interactions in the host country. A balance between formal and informal interactions is recommended in short-term study abroad programs.

**Process factors.** Process factors arise after the trip concludes and influence how participants perceive their experiences abroad (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). Process factors include faculty support, reflection of experiences, expectations of experiences, and personality characteristics.

**Faculty support.** Faculty support is an important factor for students studying abroad, especially if it is their first time traveling outside of the country. Barden and Cashwell (2013) found that most of participants' negative experiences abroad related to inter-group dynamics within the program; therefore, it is important for group facilitators and faculty to be supportive, open-minded, and engaging as the stresses of travel begin to affect their students.

Part of this process is ensuring that faculty members are well-prepared to lead the group abroad. Group facilitators should have had prior experiences abroad and have the confidence to problem-solve any obstacles that occur. Faculty members should lead students by example and exhibit qualities such as open-mindedness and willingness to try

new things (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). Additionally, it is ideal for faculty members to have had preparation for the study abroad experience in the form of pre-service, in-service, and continual training on interculturally competent practices with students (Barrett, 2018).

***Reflection of experiences.*** An important aspect of traveling is the ability to reflect on the abroad experiences and take what was learned into everyday interactions with others. A study conducted by Canfield et al. (2009) found that students who critically reflected on their study abroad experiences built a solid foundation to become a more culturally competent practitioner in their field.

Hosting debriefing sessions throughout the course of a study abroad program is an effective way to facilitate reflective thinking in students (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). Giving students several opportunities for to process their thoughts, feelings, and experiences will not only increase their sensitivity to other cultures, but also allow them to discuss their self-growth in a safe and encouraging environment. Faculty are especially important in this process as they can facilitate discussion and remind students of the goals they hope to achieve while participating in the study abroad experience (Highum, 2014).

***Expectations of experiences.*** Students' expectations of what their experience will be like abroad can influence their perceptions, positive or negative, when they arrive home. According to a study conducted by Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2015), most students have specific expectations about the benefits they will receive abroad, such as exposure to different languages and cultures, professional development, and personal growth. Students also often expect to meet interesting people and to see many beautiful

sights. Having a strong belief that they will benefit from the program positively influences both participation and emotional investment in studying abroad.

***Personality characteristics.*** Lastly, students' personal characteristics can affect their thoughts, perceptions and beliefs about studying abroad. It is important to view experiences, both positive and negative, as an opportunity to learn something new, otherwise students are likely to internally "check-out" from the experience and limit their interactions to short conversations or day-to-day interactions that cannot be avoided (Goldoni, 2013). Similarly, a student's ability or inability to be open to new experiences and adapt to the culture can influence the study abroad experience (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). Having specific attitudes may influence how an individual perceives a certain country or culture. For example, a sense of homesickness may cause individuals to resent their host country and feel a reluctance to immerse fully in the culture.

### **Study Abroad and Intercultural Competence in Service-Based Professionals**

Studying abroad is of special relevance to service-based professions, as these individuals are likely to come into contact with children, adults, and families from different cultures. The counseling field was quick to notice this shift in demographics, and has moved from teaching intercultural competence as a theory to modeling and teaching intercultural competence as a set of skills and practice (Barden & Cashwell, 2013). The need for more interculturally competent practitioners is partly due to the fact that the majority of service-based professionals are Caucasian (Canfield et al., 2009). Therefore, the need for intercultural competence is important when the client is a member of a minority cultural group.

## **Intercultural Competence in School Psychology Graduate Students**

Intercultural competence is vital in the field of school psychology. School psychologists play an important role in increasing intercultural competence in schools (Li et al., 2015). A study conducted by Lanfranci (2014) examined the role of the school psychologist as it pertains to the over-referral of migrant students in special education. This study compared teachers' and school psychologists' responses to a hypothetical case of a boy with academic and behavioral problems. Each individual received an identical case, aside from the boy's name, which was changed to reflect either a European or foreign individual.

The results of Lanfranci's (2014) study found that, compared to teachers, school psychologists were less likely to exhibit cultural bias when choosing assessments and interventions for minority students. Additionally, this study found that school psychologists play a unique role in ensuring that school practices are equal and inclusive for all students and families.

**Effects of studying abroad on school psychology graduate students.** Cultural immersion activities are an effective complement to traditional classroom activities in school psychology graduate programs (Earnest et al., 2015). However, there is limited research on the effectiveness of study abroad programs on intercultural competence and cross-cultural communication in school psychology graduate students.

A study conducted by Davies et al. (2015) examined the impact of a private university's short-term study abroad program on intercultural competence in a small group of school psychology graduate students compared to a traditional on-campus course that teaches skills in cultural diversity. Although students in the study abroad

group reported perceived gains in intercultural competence, there were no significant differences between the study abroad group and the on-campus group when it came to intercultural competence gains. Part of the reason for this lack of significance may have been due, in part, to the measure selected, which was likely not sensitive enough to measure changes in intercultural competency after a short-term program.

### **The Present Study**

Studying abroad is one potential way to improve intercultural competence and confidence in working with diverse groups. The present study examined how school psychology graduate students perceive benefits from short-term study abroad programs, using semi-structured interviews. In addition, this study aimed to determine whether short-term study abroad programs help school psychology graduate students feel better prepared to serve diverse student populations.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

#### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of school psychology graduate students who participated in a short-term study abroad program. The present study examined the following research questions: 1) *what are the experiences of school psychology graduate students who participate in short-term study abroad programs, and* 2) *what are the perceived benefits of study abroad programs in helping prepare school psychologists to serve students and families from diverse cultures?*

#### **Research Design**

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative design with in-person or phone interviews as the data collection method. This methodology was selected because it allowed participants to engage in an open dialogue about their own unique study abroad experiences. Additionally, the phenomenological approach ascribed to in the present study allows for “minimum structure and maximum depth” during interviews (Lester, 1999, p. 2).

#### **Participants and Setting**

The participants in this study included (n = 10) school psychology graduate students. A purposive sampling method was used, as the participants needed to meet a

certain criteria in order to be part of the study. The criteria include that the participant is a current school psychology graduate student who participated in a short-term study abroad experience during their undergraduate or school psychology graduate program. Each participant selected a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. There were no exclusionary factors. Each participant is described below using her chosen pseudonym.

**Emily.** “Emily” is a second year graduate student pursuing her educational specialist degree in School Psychology at a religious-based university in the southern United States. She traveled to Costa Rica for two weeks through her school psychology graduate program. Emily completed coursework during the study abroad experience, and the program mostly consisted of structured, faculty-led activities. Emily is originally from Texas, and she identifies as Caucasian. The researcher did not determine whether or not she had traveled abroad prior to this experience.

**Sarah.** “Sarah” is a second year graduate student pursuing her educational specialist degree in School Psychology at a religious-based university in the United States. She traveled to Costa Rica for two weeks through her school psychology graduate program. Sarah completed coursework during the study abroad experience, and the program mostly consisted of structured, faculty-led activities. Sarah is originally from New Jersey, and she identifies as Caucasian. The researcher did not determine whether or not she had traveled abroad prior to this experience.



**Leigh.** “Leigh” is a first year graduate student pursuing her educational specialist degree in School Psychology at a religious-based university in the Midwestern United States. She traveled to several countries in Europe including France, Bosnia, and Italy for two weeks through her undergraduate program. Leigh did not complete coursework during this study abroad experience, and the program mostly consisted of structured, faculty-led activities. Leigh is originally from Ohio, and she identifies as Caucasian. Leigh stated that she had not traveled abroad prior to this experience.

**Maria.** “Maria” is a first year graduate student pursuing her educational specialist degree in School Psychologist at a religious-based university in the Midwestern United States. She traveled to Argentina for eight weeks through her undergraduate program. Maria completed coursework during the study abroad experience, and the program consisted of a mix of structured, faculty-led activities and unstructured time for students to explore independently. Maria is originally from Ohio, and she identifies as Caucasian. Maria stated that she traveled abroad once prior to this experience.

**Hazel.** “Hazel” is a second year graduate student pursuing her doctorate in School Psychology at a university in the Midwestern United States. She traveled to Chile for eight weeks through her undergraduate program. Hazel completed coursework during the study abroad experience, and the program mostly consisted of unstructured time in which she explored independently. Hazel is originally from Michigan, and she identifies as

African American. Hazel stated that she had traveled abroad four times prior to this experience.

**Chloe.** “Chloe” is a second year graduate student pursuing her educational specialist degree in School Psychology at a university in the western United States. She traveled to Jordan for eight weeks through her undergraduate program. Chloe completed coursework during the study abroad experience, and the program mostly consisted of structured, faculty-led activities and coursework with little unstructured time for students to explore independently. Chloe is originally from Connecticut, and she identifies as Caucasian. Chloe stated that she had traveled abroad three times prior to this experience.

**Jackie.** “Jackie” is a third year graduate student pursuing her educational specialist degree in School Psychology at a university in the western United States. She traveled to China for eight weeks through her undergraduate program. Jackie did not complete coursework during this study abroad experience, and the program consisted of structured tasks and activities to complete as a mental health teacher, as well as unstructured time to explore independently. Jackie is originally from Colorado, and she identifies as biracial. Jackie stated that she had not traveled abroad prior to this experience.

**Elyse.** “Elyse” is a second year graduate student pursuing her doctorate in School Psychology at a university in the Midwestern United States. She traveled to Switzerland for two weeks through her undergraduate program. Elyse completed coursework during

this study abroad experience, and the program consisted of mostly structured, faculty-led activities with little unstructured time for students to explore independently. Elyse is originally from Ohio, and she identifies as Caucasian. Elyse stated that she had not traveled abroad prior to this experience.

**Erin.** “Erin” is a second year graduate student pursuing her doctorate in School Psychology at a university in the Midwestern United States. She traveled to England for six weeks through her undergraduate program. Erin completed coursework during this study abroad experience, and the program consisted of a mix of structured, faculty-led activities and unstructured time to explore independently. Erin is originally from Ohio, and she identifies as Caucasian. Erin stated that she had not traveled abroad prior to this experience.

**Robin.** “Robin” is a second year graduate student pursuing her educational specialist degree in School Psychology at a university in the Midwestern United States. She traveled to England for six weeks through her undergraduate program. Robin completed coursework during this study abroad experience, and the program consisted of a mix of structured academic activities along with unstructured time to explore independently. Robin is originally from Ohio, and she identifies as Caucasian. Robin stated that she had not traveled abroad prior to this experience.

## **Materials**

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview form (see Appendix A), which was created by the researcher for the purpose of this study. The questions were based on research in the current literature review regarding factors that suggest study abroad effectiveness. The interview included 11 open-ended questions about participant experiences during their short-term study abroad program. Clarification and follow-up questions were asked to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. The content and format of the interview questions were piloted with a group ( $n=7$ ) of school psychology graduate students. Additionally, the interview questions and process were piloted through a practice interview with a second year school psychology graduate student who participated in a short-term study abroad experience during the summer of 2016. During the practice interview, the researcher used a timer to gain an idea of how long a typical interview would be. Additionally, the researcher asked the student for feedback regarding the clarity of questions. The researcher then used the feedback to revise the interview questions prior to administration in this study.

## **Procedures**

The present study was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained verbal consent from all participants to participate per the procedures outlined in the IRB application. A written invitation was also provided to the participants prior to the

interview, which outlined the objective of the study as well as information about informed consent and participation. All participants were asked to choose their own pseudonym for confidentiality purposes.

The researcher selected a convenient date and time to meet with the participant for the interview. Interviews took place in a quiet location, such as a coffee shop or a library. If the interview occurred over the phone, both the researcher and the participant found a quiet place to speak. The interviews were 25-35 minutes in length and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The researcher obtained permission to audio record sessions prior to the interview. The data were collected between February and May 2017. Finally, interview recordings were transcribed in order to conduct data analysis and identify themes.

### **Data Analysis**

The research questions were analyzed using transcription, coding, and thematic analysis. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to create written transcripts of the participants' narratives. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach to qualitative research allows the researcher to examine the unique perspectives of participants in order to inform, support, or even challenge normative or structural assumptions (Lester, 1999). Each line of the interviews was transcribed, re-read, and coded for themes relating to intercultural competence growth. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the

researcher reduced the data collected by exploring and “memoing” the data to select parts for coding (Mertens, 2010). Thematic analysis of the narratives were then used to identify themes, codes, groupings, or categories of reports (Turner et al., 2010). Finally, the data were reviewed for inter-rater reliability using a colleague familiar with qualitative methodology.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Experiences of School Psychology Graduate Students who Study Abroad**

Upon reviewing and coding the transcribed interview protocols, four major themes regarding the experiences of school psychology graduate students who participated in short-term study abroad programs emerged from the data, including: (1) Richer experiences through language and cultural immersion, (2) Homesickness, (3) The recognition of privilege, and (4) Culture shock.

**Richer experiences through language and cultural immersion.** Each participant participated in a variety of experiences while abroad. Their experiences were both structured and unstructured in nature, and varied upon different factors such as the location of their host country, their living arrangements, and the amount of pre-planned experiences versus experiences that students had to seek out on their own.

Hazel described her experience studying abroad through her undergraduate program of study and the differences from traveling abroad as a tourist:

I feel like this experience, you're actually living and working and studying in the culture. [It was] so different from visiting as a tourist because you really get to know the processes of what it takes to take a taxi to school every day, find your lunch space, just all the daily processes of living your life ... but being there for a

longer time, you are more conscious and more informed about where you are and how you're stacked in that place.

Similarly, Robin made the decision to study abroad in a smaller town in England instead of her original plan to study in London, which is a popular destination for tourists. She expressed her satisfaction with the decision:

Winchester is like your typical British town, so it was really - like at first I really wanted to study in London. That's where I wanted my school to be. But when I decided to go to Winchester because it was cheaper, I was really glad I made that choice because I got to get a real feel of what a real British town would be like, whereas London is really "tourist-y" so I don't think I would have gotten that experience.

Maria is a graduate student who studied abroad in Argentina during her undergraduate program of study. She, along with other several other participants, stayed with host families during their study abroad experience. She and Hazel, who studied abroad in Chile during their undergraduate program of study, described their experiences with their host families:

*Maria:* Because we were also with host families, rather than just in a hotel or something, we still got that really rich cultural experience of immersing ourselves, being with the locals, acting like a local, [and] doing things with the locals.



*Hazel:* I primarily spoke Spanish to [my host family] because they didn't speak English. I had taken Spanish classes since I was 12 at that point, and so I was fluid at that time, but honestly, the Chilean dialect was really difficult ... I had the basis of knowledge, I was proficient but I had a lot to learn while I was there.

Participants engaged in a variety of experiences abroad. Erin, who studied abroad in England during her undergraduate program of study, stayed primarily with her own group and focused her time visiting tourist attractions:

We would really just hit all the hot spots where we were, so we traveled as a group ... a big thing they did in Oxford is go to pubs, so we went as a group and our professor who went with us lived in London for a big part of her life ... so we would sometimes have our classes in pubs. That was fun, just trying to eat at the good restaurants and hit all of the tourist spots.

In contrast, several participants used their current skills to gain hands-on experiences teaching or volunteering at different agencies and organizations in their host countries. For example, Jackie spoke about her experience teaching students at a local school in China with another peer in her program:

We acted as one of the mental health teachers at a middle and high school ... we would go into classrooms and talk about anxiety and present about it. We had some counseling groups ... we did a lot of presentations on anxiety and

mindfulness, and then we taught them tension reduction activities where they squeeze their fists and stuff.

Hazel also had a unique opportunity to volunteer during her stay in Chile, remarking:

I went and volunteered at an orphanage ... I was there for a short time ... but that's actually what got me interested in working with students that might need additional supports, just because their environment growing up was very rough and they were all competing for attention, but not in a very good way ... I know that many of them struggled academically, a lot of them had very adult experiences so, yeah I would say that was the biggest thing that impacted me.

**Homesickness.** A majority of participants stated that they felt homesick during their short-term study abroad experience, and all of the participants who reported homesickness also recognized the impact it had on their ability to immerse themselves fully in the host culture. Hazel, a school psychology doctoral student who studied abroad in Chile during her undergraduate program of study, reflected on how her homesickness prevented her from seeking out new experiences in her host country:

I remember being really homesick actually, for the majority of [the study abroad program] ... so I think that to some degree that homesickness kind of held me back from doing things that I probably would have been brave enough to do today. I think emotionally that was the most - it took me a lot to settle, I suppose.



Because it was a completely new space, more different than what I've ever [experienced].

In contrast, Maria, a school psychology graduate student who studied abroad in Argentina, acknowledged her own feelings of homesickness and utilized self-monitoring strategies to ensure that it did not hinder her experiences abroad:

I had a boyfriend at the time, at home, and I just missed him a lot, and I remember having times where I kind of rushed my experience because I wanted to get home to my boyfriend, and I hated it then and I hate it now, you know? And looking back, I don't feel like I did really not appreciate my experience, but I remember being like, "This is a once in a lifetime experience, don't be wishing it away." So, having those feelings was not ideal, but yeah.

Chloe, a school psychology doctoral student who traveled to Jordan during her undergraduate program of study, experienced homesickness due to the dramatic differences between her host culture and her home culture. She described her feelings pertaining to the lack of freedom she experienced as a woman in a Middle Eastern country and how it affected her:

So at the time I think I was a little disappointed because I wasn't as happy being free - you know, free-spirited as I thought my first study abroad experience would be ... I think overall I wasn't really happy with it at the time, but looking back it

was an important experience to have that kind of different study abroad experience.

**Recognition of privilege.** A prominent theme that occurred was participants' recognition of privilege as a result of their study abroad experiences. Several participants attribute this to specific instances abroad, as well as realizations that occurred as a result of their own reflection of their experiences. Elyse, who had a unique experience studying abroad in Switzerland during her undergraduate degree program to learn about countries with accessibility for people with disabilities, reflected on her feelings of privilege as an able-bodied individual:

I went in with the expectation that - let me think, I was probably 20 then, and I was really excited for this trip, and I ended up having a lot of responsibility for helping make sure that people who were not able-bodied got to experience [the trip] in the same way that I did, which was fine, but it was such a curveball. I wasn't [prepared] for how much work it would be when you're with someone that is legally blind to walk with them through the park and explain what we're seeing ... it opened my eyes to how I should be thankful for the fact that I have my vision, and I wanted her to experience it in the best possible way and give her all these details. I didn't realize how much extra work that could be and how challenging that can be.

Hazel expressed how her experience abroad allowed her to realize the impact that environment plays in the development of children and how practitioners in schools perceive behaviors in United States schools:

I think that experience opened my eyes to advantages that we had and how we attribute behaviors to themselves rather than their situation ... I think we become very self-centered and self-centric and we're very unaware of what's happening in other people's' lives and other people's countries.

Unfortunately, we have the notions that problems don't exist within our own space, they exist elsewhere, and I think I fell into that category at that time. I've thought much differently since, and so I think that's the experience that's continued to influence me.

Lastly, Emily discussed her experiences speaking with local students from Costa Rica and the impact that politics and United States affects locals in other countries:

I think it impacted me a lot about how much the people in Costa Rica seem to know about us and all the political things going on in the U.S., different policies going on in the U.S., and how little I know about other countries.

**Culture shock.** Every participant reported a certain level of cultural shock when arriving in their study abroad destination for the first time. However, the intensity of culture shock varied between individuals, as well as the way in which each individual coped with adjusting to their new environment. One type of culture shock several participants experienced involved the language barriers they faced in their host country. Elyse, Jackie, and Maria all discussed the struggles they faced as they adjusted to their inability to communicate with the locals:

*Elyse:* We learned a little bit of German before going [to Switzerland], just the basics, and I felt like I was in a good place. I was like, "I think I'm gonna be okay," but when we got there, oh my gosh. It was like - my German was not

good, and I was thinking that this was really hard. So the language barrier was definitely difficult.

*Jackie:* I was expecting a culture shock. I didn't think it was going to be as bad as it was. I was expecting some people to speak English, like everyone that I've talked to who studied abroad said, "Oh yeah, everyone always knows English," but in China that was not the case. Nobody knew English, and so that was surprising. Their signage for directions was in English luckily, but no one spoke it. Maybe like five percent of their entire population, so that was something I was expecting but then I realized it wasn't going to happen.

*Maria:* I remember day one and talking to my host mom, and barely being able to talk back to her, even though I had studied Spanish for like eight years at the point, only within the school setting. But, eight years - I should have been able to communicate better than I had.

Some participants had differences related to cultural norms in their host culture. For example, Leigh found the laid-back nature of Uruguayan culture to be especially difficult to adapt to:

I'm a very on-time person and on both trips no one was on time, and time was very relative. And so ten minutes meant, oh, two hours later! And siestas - oh, I can't stand siestas. Everything is closed in Europe for lunch, but you know, you get used to it.

Similarly, Chloe expressed unique difficulties when studying abroad in the Middle Eastern country of Jordan. Particularly, she struggled adapting to cultural norms surrounding etiquette for women as it pertains to proper dress:

I wasn't expecting how much effort it would take to conform to the culture there as a female. I'm a little bit more curvaceous, I would say, than the average female, so dressing modestly seemed to be an impossible mission. I got critiqued by my program directors on it in a way that I don't really think was constructive, so that made me a little angry. And it was hot there too, it went against your instincts. So I think conforming to the modest expectations of the culture there was a challenge. And just, I'm used to being really independent in the states and I was living with a host family there. They're lovely, they're awesome. But then when I would go out- first of all, it's kind of frowned upon to go out alone as



woman, even though I felt perfectly fine and safe most of the time. But I was followed a lot, which, that was kind of interesting to adjust to.

Chloe also experienced cultural differences when interacting with men:

I really liked living with [my host family] but we had a couple of awkward moments. One time the dad had some male guests over and I have to be in the living room working on homework and stuff like that ... I stayed there and talked with the men about - I think it was American culture or something relevant to me. And then later my host mom was just like, “Your shirt was a little bit too low cut to be talking to those men, and that was inappropriate,” and that was just kind of a weird cultural awkward moment.

Although culture shock was a universal theme across all of the interviews, the intensity and type of culture shock varied based on individual experiences, as well as the host culture. For example, the culture shock experienced by participants who visited English-speaking countries differed from those who visited non-English-speaking countries. Erin, who studied abroad in England during her undergraduate, found that language barriers included differences in semantics and slang:

I expected [the United Kingdom] to be a lot like America. I’m not really sure what the differences were. I had a little bit of culture shock when interacting with people from the UK, like they call “change” “pence” and they laughed at me when I called it a “sucker” because they call it a “lollipop,” just little things like

that. I guess there was more culture shock going into a country that didn't speak English, like Spain and France and Italy, but I don't know.

In contrast, Robin's culture shock came from her own identity as an American. During her experience studying abroad in England during her undergraduate, she had the unique opportunity to examine her own cultural norms and how they are perceived by individuals from other countries:

The funniest thing I remember is - I think the topic was something about nationalism in America ... and they were talking about how we always sing the National Anthem and we always say the Pledge of Allegiance in school every day and during sporting events, and they don't do that [in England] ... but the professor had [on the board] the Pledge of Allegiance and he's like, "Now everybody stand up and I want you to recite the Pledge of Allegiance," so he had everybody in the class except for me do the Pledge of Allegiance, and it was so funny because ... everybody just looked around at each other, they had no idea.

Many participants described their ability to immerse themselves fully in their host culture once overcoming their feelings of culture shock. Maria, who studied abroad in Argentina, discussed an experience she had with her host family where she felt that she had overcome culture shock:

I do remember one night that my host parents and I ordered sushi and we opened up a really nice Argentinian wine and we just - I started feeling so much more

comfortable in my Spanish-speaking abilities and I think they could tell, and I could tell, and I had probably the realest and most effective conversation that we'd had since I'd been there ... we were laughing and we were telling stories all night ... I remember that night very well because of how I felt much more established in my ability to communicate with them. Plus, I felt like we bonded so much that night, so in terms of personal connection I think that was one of my favorite experiences.

### **Perceived Preparedness to Serve Students of Diverse Cultures**

Upon reviewing and coding the transcribed interview protocols, three major themes regarding school psychology graduate students' perceived benefits of studying abroad and perceived preparedness to serve students of diverse cultures emerged from the data: (1) Development of empathy, (2) Awareness of cultural differences, and (3) Individualization of services.

**Development of empathy.** Upon reflecting on their experiences abroad, several participants reported developing increased empathy for students of different cultures. Chloe reflected on her “fish out of water” experiences while studying abroad in the Middle Eastern country of Jordan:

On a personal note, I empathize a little more for people I meet who are not part of the mainstream culture. I can physically remember that feeling of feeling like an outsider and feeling like I didn't really understand the norms. You know, I was

kind of getting backlash for not conforming to the norms as strictly as I should have. So, I think I have a little bit more natural empathy with more diverse families and students now... the overall experience helps me feel more empathetic and able to relate more to people.

Elyse, who studied abroad in Switzerland to experience a handicap-accessible country, discussed her experience supporting students with physical handicapps and how it shaped her future practice:

It just gave me a really unique perspective on how their lives ... what they may face in their life and how I can be an advocate and supportive and without minimizing or making them feel less than because they have a physical handicap.

Hazel also reflected on internal biases she previously held against people and how studying abroad has changed her perceptions of prejudice:

Just being aware of the little judgments we make about somebody. We need to keep questioning, you know, why are people doing this and is it cultural? And, you know, almost everything is cultural.

**Awareness of cultural differences.** Participants also returned from their study abroad experiences with a new lens on culture and the implications regarding students' perceptions of the educational setting and their unique needs. Maria specifically discussed how studying abroad, as opposed to traveling for leisure, shaped her perceptions of other cultures:

I feel like just traveling in general can make people have more cultural awareness, but especially living in another country for an extended period of time, living with natives of that country ... makes you realize what differences ... I might have from someone else in another country or in another situation, and to respect those differences and acclimate to those differences as opposed to resisting that change.

Maria further noted:

I think awareness is the biggest thing that I think is necessary for people in sensitive social service jobs like school psychology. It's just being aware of people's differences, especially their cultural differences, being able to treat everyone with the same dignity and the same respect and understanding and being able to adjust based on what their needs may be, which could differ across cultures.

Jackie commented on how the vast cultural differences she experienced while studying abroad in China gave her a new perspective on mental health in other countries:

I think it made me more aware of mental health in a country like China, and how underdeveloped it truly is, and to keep that into consideration when working with families from that descent or that area ... it's just helped me to keep an open mind that nobody is ever going to understand someone's full culture in their entirety ... to us, [behaviors] might look like anxiety ... to us it looks like they're presenting these symptoms, it might literally just be their norm ... just taking into

consideration the whole mental health aspect being frowned upon, especially in the Chinese culture, and I'm sure it's not just Chinese culture, so just taking the time with the student you're working with and their family to learn about their background.

Elyse, who studied abroad in Switzerland, discussed her unique experience with individuals who were physically handicapped:

I learned what it means to be able-bodied and what it means to not be able-bodied. It was so incredibly eye-opening. It just showed me the importance of appreciating everybody and their differences, and how everybody is different and embracing those differences ... I learned that everybody's needs are different. Like, yes, we have two individuals in wheelchairs, but they both have very different wants and needs; they're very different people ... it just gave me a really unique perspective on how their lives - what they may face in their life and how I can be an advocate and supportive and without minimizing or making them feel less than because they have a physical handicap.

**Shaping of professional practice.** Results from the interviews suggested that the impact of study abroad experiences extended past participants' immediate school setting. Several participants reflected on how their experiences shape their own practice as a school psychologist. Erin, who studied abroad in England, reflected on this:

Just coming from a multicultural lens, it's important to realize that there isn't one treatment that works best for everyone ... you really have to individualize treatments and a lot of that comes from looking through a cultural lens. By studying abroad, I realize the types of differences I should be looking for and the differences I should be aware of when I'm building treatments and helping students.

Sarah, who studied abroad in Costa Rica during her graduate program, reflected on how she will carry a more individualistic mindset going into her future career as a school psychologist:

It's important just to treat [students] as an individual and not so much coming in with assumptions about their culture ... I've been using that in my practicum and kind of thinking about my internship and going forward ... taking that individualistic mindset and not really putting that much emphasis on larger culture because there are cultures within that culture, but to know to respect it altogether and not assume anything.

Hazel, who studied abroad in Chile, had never been asked to reflect personally on her experiences abroad until she was interviewed for this study. She discussed the impact her travels had on her decision to serve underprivileged students in the school setting:

I'll just say that I think sometimes the impact of studying abroad doesn't hit you until later in life. So as I said, I wasn't aware of the impact of studying and

working at the orphanage or volunteering ... it ended up being something fairly huge and influential ... I will say now, working with children, I will always consider their background and their culture and their struggles because of some of these experiences I had while studying abroad.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### **Review of Purpose and Major Findings**

Interculturally competent practitioners in schools are essential to serve diverse students in the educational setting. A study abroad experience is one way future educational professionals can gain intercultural competence. Previous research examined the impact of study abroad experiences on future teachers and school counselors, but few studies have explored the impact of study abroad on school psychologists, who serve diverse student groups.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perceived effects of short-term study abroad experiences on intercultural competence in school psychology graduate students. This project focused specifically on students' experiences while abroad and how such experiences prepared them to serve students and families from diverse cultures. The study was conducted using a qualitative phenomenological approach and addressed six themes related to the research questions: (1) Richer experiences through language and cultural immersion, (2) Homesickness, (3) Recognition of privilege, (4) Culture shock, (5) Development of empathy, (6) Awareness of cultural differences, and (7) Shaping of professional practice.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

**Richer experiences through language and cultural immersion.** The participants in this study described a variety of experiences abroad, including visiting tourist attractions, visiting schools and other formal institutions, planning independent weekend trips, and participating in volunteer work. Several participants, such as Maria and Hazel, lived with host families, which forced them to utilize the host culture's language and norms in their daily interactions. This study indicated that participants either strictly followed the program's structured, faculty-led itinerary, or participants sought more immersion experiences.

All of the participants reported some engagement in unstructured experiences, but those who actively sought out experiences that created cross-cultural connections reported an increased appreciation for the host culture and perceived intercultural competence. This supports Goldoni's (2013) qualitative research, which suggests that a variety of immersion experiences are beneficial in integrating individuals into their host country. However, several participants who had never traveled abroad prior to their study abroad experience reported satisfaction and comfort with a structured itinerary, mostly due to feelings of culture shock, cultural barriers, and fear associated with traveling abroad for the first time.

Data from this research also point to differences between participants who traveled to English-speaking countries and participants who traveled to non-English speaking countries. Those who chose to visit an English-speaking country for their study abroad experience used language geared heavily toward tourism and leisurely travel. Additionally, although individuals who study abroad in English-speaking countries are

likely to experience less culture shock than individuals who study abroad in non-English speaking countries (Clark & Clark, 2010), participants in the current study who studied abroad in English-speaking countries expressed less regarding the impact their experience had on intercultural competence growth and preparedness to serve diverse populations.

**Homesickness and culture shock.** Participants reported several barriers to immersion, two that included culture shock and homesickness. Most participants reported barriers to immersion, which may have affected their intercultural competence growth while abroad. This supports Barden and Cashwell's (2013) research, which indicated that structural factors such as culture shock, language barriers, and location have a direct influence on participants' immediate experiences abroad.

The current study suggested that participants utilized one of two approaches when confronted with these barriers to immersion. Some participants adjusted their mindset and continued to seek immersion experiences in order to increase their comfortability in the host culture and further expand their intercultural competence. Other participants made the decision to remain in the safety and comfortability of their English-speaking group and structured itinerary. Those who chose to seek opportunities for immersion outside of their program of study expressed more success in regards to overcoming the barriers to immersion. This is consistent with Goldoni's (2013) findings, which suggested that pursuing hobbies and interests abroad, living with a host family, and pursuing international experiences all contribute to successful integration into a new country.

**Recognition of privilege.** Most participants reported feelings of privilege while in their host country. Specifically, participants discussed the ignorance that citizens of the United States have regarding the oppression and hardships occurring in other countries.

Additionally, participants discussed the role of the United States in global politics, and how the decisions of the United States affect other countries around the world.

Participants specifically discussed privilege in regards to logistical factors such as transportation, living situations, and access to healthcare and mental health services.

These reflections were primarily gained through meaningful conversations with local residents in the host country, as well as in their own reflections of their experiences. Several participants discussed how they shifted their mindset regarding serving diverse populations upon returning to the United States. This supports research conducted by Canfield et al. (2015), which suggested that students who studied abroad were better able to recognize their privilege upon reflecting on their experiences. Data from the current study suggest that experiences resulting in recognition of privilege are essential to intercultural competence growth.

**Development of empathy.** Several participants reported a greater sense of empathy and understanding of individuals from different cultures as a result of their study abroad experience. This supports research conducted by Canfield et al. (2015), who found that study abroad experiences were beneficial in teaching participants a variety of “soft skills” such as patience, empathy, and tolerance, which are not easily taught in a classroom setting. Many participants in the present study discussed difficult or adverse experiences while abroad, which led them to a greater sense of empathy for individuals of diverse cultures.

Chloe, who studied abroad in Jordan, struggled in adapting to the cultural norms of the Middle East regarding gender roles. From this experience, she developed a larger appreciation and empathetic orientation toward those who do not fit into American

norms. Elyse, who studied abroad in Switzerland, experienced the difficulties that people with disabilities experience on a daily basis when completing everyday tasks. This not only gave her a deep appreciation for being able-bodied, but it allowed her to reflect on how she can best serve this population in schools. Hazel, who studied abroad in Chile, held implicit cultural biases prior to studying abroad. Through her experiences, she learned the importance of being nonjudgmental and taking into account culture and background when evaluating students' strengths and weaknesses.

**Awareness of cultural differences.** Most participants were aware of the cultural differences between their home culture and the host culture they visited. However, the results of the current study suggest that awareness of cultural differences may be an important component in participants' perceived ability to better serve diverse populations. Experiencing the vast cultural differences while abroad allowed participants to see how culture affects peoples' perceptions toward different aspects of daily living, education, politics, and social interactions.

Czerwionka et al. (2015) defined intercultural competence as using what one knows about other cultures in order to effectively interact with and adapt to that culture. Several participants in the current study discussed how acknowledging cultural differences and accepting them were essential to successful integration into the country and overcoming cultural barriers. Several participants discussed the impact of cultural differences as it pertains to preparedness to serve diverse populations. Jackie, who studied abroad in China, was not aware of the lack of mental health awareness and services in China until she had the opportunity to teach in a school there. There, she learned about the culture's values regarding education and how symptoms related to

social anxiety are seen as the norm in that culture. She is now more mindful of culture when serving families from diverse groups as a result of this unique experience.

**Shaping of professional practice.** Lastly, when examining the effects of short-term study abroad experiences on perceived intercultural competence and preparedness to serve students of diverse cultures, results from the current study suggest that participants openly took the perspective of the host culture they visited and successfully linked their experiences to the importance of intercultural competence in the school setting. Specifically, participants successfully discussed how their experiences abroad enabled them to be better practitioners in the field and advocates for children in the future. Participants expressed the necessity of interculturally competent practices in the field of school psychology, such as the utilization of multiple sources of data, understanding the unique cultural nuances of students and their families, individualization of services, and empathy. Additionally, several participants commented on the importance of a positive strengths-based school culture in order to convey a sense of welcome for culturally diverse students and their families.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this research are in regards to the nature of this study, the participants, examiner bias, and member checking for data validity. First, this research project did not include a quantitative measure to determine whether or not short-term study abroad experiences were truly an effective means of gaining intercultural competence for these participants; rather, the design allowed for the examination of perceptions of growth. While self-evaluation can yield important data, it may not be accurate in regards to statistical significance. Second, the sampling method was

purposive and the sample size was small ( $n=10$ ) and therefore may not be representative of all—or even most—school psychologists. Additionally, the sample was comprised of all female participants, which indicates that this sample was not representative of the general school psychology graduate student population and their experiences studying abroad.

The study may have also been affected by experimenter bias. The experimenter had previously participated in a short-term study abroad experience, which had a positive impact on her own perceived preparedness to serve students of diverse cultures. Therefore, the experimenter's positive experiences may have affected the interpretation of the interview data. Additionally, a positive professional relationship built between the experimenter and the participants may have affected their responses or the nature in which the experimenter coded and interpreted the data. Lastly, there were limitations in terms of the validity of the data. The researcher did not utilize any type of member checking technique to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, which may have included providing a summary of the data to participants in order to ensure that the interpretation of their experiences was accurate.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future qualitative research might examine the effects of study abroad experiences on school psychologists at different phases of their careers. Second, future research might compare study abroad programs that have a service-learning component to those that focus on tourism and leisure. Future research may benefit from looking at abroad experiences in one's formative years, such as individuals who grew up in military families or attended international schools. It is recommended that future research include

a quantitative measure and control group to determine whether short-term study abroad programs increase intercultural competence in school psychologists compared to individuals who do not study abroad. Lastly, future research may benefit from extended response questions regarding individuals' unique background and life experiences that may contribute to their overall perceived intercultural competence growth.

### **Implications for Practice**

The current study may yield practical implications in regards to study abroad experiences through school psychology graduate programs. School psychology faculty may benefit from modifying study abroad experiences for students to reflect specific objectives related to intercultural competence growth and increased confidence in serving diverse populations in schools. Additionally, future study abroad experiences may benefit from meaningful activities that allow participants to immerse in the host culture, as well as opportunities for unstructured activities. Finally, future study abroad experiences may benefit from structured time to reflect and debrief from activities during and immediately following the trip.

### **Conclusion**

The current research provided a snapshot of school psychology graduate students' experiences studying abroad and discussed implications for intercultural competence in school settings. Research projects such as this one can help improve the richness of study abroad experiences. Additionally, such studies might spark a dialogue at the national level of how to better educate and train school psychologists to serve students of diverse cultures and backgrounds.



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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

1. Open with general rapport-building questions (e.g., How are you? How is your week? Where are you from?)
2. Tell me about your study abroad experience (*Prompt for location, duration, course of study, number of participants*)
3. How did you decide to study abroad? (*Prompt for factors that led them to want to study abroad*)
4. Tell me about the activities you participated in while studying abroad? (*Prompt for both structured experiences—likely faculty-led, and unstructured—optional or student-choice. Prompt for both what they did and their perceptions of them.*)
5. What was the best part about your experience? What was the worst?
6. What were your expectations about the study abroad experience prior to arriving? Were those expectations met? How did reality differ from your expectations?
7. How did this experience impact you?
8. What did you learn about other cultures during this study abroad experience?
9. How has studying abroad benefited you as you prepare to enter the field of school psychology?
10. If you could change one thing about the experience you had, what would it be?
11. Is there anything else about your experience studying abroad that you would like to add that we didn't capture during the interview today?