



Transformative Learning Experiences of Students from an Accredited U.S. Institution Participating in Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

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Abstract

Few studies have explored whether any student transformative learning experiences occurred or may occur during short-term study abroad programs. Some scholars have even challenged the academic meaningfulness of U.S. short-term study abroad programs despite growing interest in such programs for the past decades. This study aimed to investigate the transformative learning experiences of traditional-age students from an accredited U.S. institution participating in short-term study abroad programs. The sample included traditional-age students selected on a voluntary basis from the four colleges (Business, Education and Human Services, Letters and Science, and Nursing) of a comprehensive university in northeast Wisconsin, U.S. All participants were interviewed before traveling for a faculty-led short-term study abroad program and after they returned. Reflective journals and a focus group complemented the data obtained from the individual interviews. Content analysis and constant comparison were used to conduct the analysis based on a transformative learning framework. Emerging themes and implications for international education in postsecondary institutions are discussed.

Keywords: Transformative Learning, Short-Term Study Abroad Programs, Accredited U.S. Institution, Traditional-Age Students, Content Analysis

Introduction

For nearly two decades, there has been an increase in the number of study abroad students through an accredited U.S. institution. From about 60,000 students during the academic year 1989-90, the number jumped to more than 914,095 students for the 2020-21 academic year (IIE, 2022). The percentage of students opting for short-term study abroad programs has increased from 63% in 2015-16 to 64.6 in 2016-17 (IIE, 2018), but declined by 46.8% in 2019-20 (IIE, 2022). This decrease in study abroad programs may be the reflection of the impact of the novel corona virus (Covid-19) global pandemic on higher education in the U.S. However, it is still important to stress that prior to the Covid-19 global

pandemic many U.S. campuses had started to integrate global competence through international experience into their core educational mission (IIE, 2005). Consequently, several studies have investigated perceptions of study abroad programs by higher education administrators, faculty, and students (Jean-Francois, 2014; Stuart, 2007). Some studies have also explored the impact of study abroad on global mindedness, and intercultural communication skills of students (Walton, 2002).

However, few studies have explored whether traditional-age undergraduate students experience transformative learning during short-term study abroad programs. In fact, some scholars have questioned the academic value of short-term study abroad programs (Gibson, 1991; Smith, 1984). Also, many students are still concerned about the academic value of short-term study abroad programs and the risk that it may delay the time it takes them to graduate (Bollag, 2004; Marcum & Roochnik, 2001). Given the fact that more than 50 % of the U.S. students studying abroad participate in a short-term study program, it is important to conduct more studies exploring the academic meaningfulness of such programs. The proposed study aimed to investigate the transformative learning experiences of traditional-age undergraduate students from an accredited U.S. institution participating in short-term study abroad programs. The term traditional-age student refers to college students aged 24 or younger, financially dependent on their parents, who have enrolled in a postsecondary institution (technical college, college, or university) immediately after successful graduation from their high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Although study abroad programs differ in format, most of them aim to help students develop knowledge and understanding of the host country or culture. The majority of participants in study abroad programs are traditional-age students (IIE, 2018a). Consequently, research on study abroad programs tend to investigate the impacts of such programs on traditional-age college students (Orndorf, 1998). Also, very little research has been conducted on the meaning of intercultural experience for traditional-age college students (Orndorf, 1998). Some studies had questioned the ability of short-term study abroad programs to make any significant contributions in the lives of the participants. Smith (1984) suggested that short-term study abroad programs provide a superficial knowledge to participants and may negatively affect their perception of the host culture. Gibson (1991) asserted that short-term programs allow students the possibility to embellish the reading of the host culture. However, recent studies argue that study abroad in itself provides students with intercultural experiences, which contribute to reduce domestic prejudice (Pettigrew, 2001), develop cross-cultural empathy (Cushner & Mahon, 2002), foster global mindedness and intercultural development of participants in cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains (Cushner, 2007).

Also, Cushner and Karin (2004) noticed that study abroad programs contribute to challenge students' perceptions of selves and others. Zhai (2000) found that students who studied abroad have a higher level of cross-cultural curiosity and interest. Jean-Francois (2012) found that culture and context can contribute to transformative learning experience. These studies clearly suggest the potential for study abroad to foster transformative learning experiences.

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the assumption that short-term study abroad programs provide traditional-age students with opportunities for intercultural interactions that may trigger transformative learning experiences. Therefore, the conceptual framework of the proposed study involved: (a) short-term study abroad, (b) intercultural interactions, (c) and transformative learning.

Short-term study abroad. Study abroad has been encouraged by U.S. higher education institutions to foster 21st century skills and expand career possibilities (IIE, 2017), as well as to support improved graduation rates and employability (IIE, 2018b). Study abroad programs encompass various structured and non-traditionally structured formats, including, but are not limited to for credit programs of study, internship abroad, work-abroad, volunteer or service abroad, and teach abroad (Dwyer, 2004; Rai, 2004, IIE, 2018a). The term study abroad in the proposed study refers to a structured learning experience led by a faculty member in which student participants have to live and learn in a foreign country for a long or a short period of time. Long-term study abroad programs typically last one semester or more. Short-term study abroad programs, generally conducted over summer semester, vary from one week to eight weeks, but less than a semester long (IIE, 2018a). The proposed study concerns traditional-age students participating in short-term study abroad programs. Research in international education have extensively documented that study abroad programs provide students with unique opportunities for intercultural interactions (Green et al., 2008), which may eventually contribute to a transformative learning experience.

Intercultural interactions. In this study, the term intercultural interactions refers to intercultural contacts and communications that occur between or among individuals from different cultural or/and national backgrounds (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Lustig & Koester, 1999). Many scholars in the field of international education assert that intercultural interactions can lead to the development of intercultural competence, which is "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247-248). According to Hunter (2004), intercultural or global competence involves an intercultural awareness, respect and appreciation of diverse cultures, and the ability to compete globally. In other words, intercultural interactions provide an opportunity for students to move beyond comfort zones and develop a multiple perspective of the world through self-reflection (Brasskamp, 2009), which may potentially lead to a transformative learning experience.

Transformative learning. The concept transformative learning was introduced in the literature of adult education by Mezirow (1991), referring to a process:

[Whereby] we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open [changeable], and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 5-8)

Mezirow (1991) previously indicated that critical reflection of personal experience can change “the beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions” (p.167) of the learner. Mezirow (2000) asserted that transformative learning occurs through 10 phases. It starts with a (1) disorienting dilemma (internal or external personal crises). Then, it evolves through (2) self-examination (feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame), (3) critical assessment of assumptions, (4) recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared, (5) exploration of alternatives (options for new roles, relationships, and actions), (6) course of action planning, (7) acquisition of new knowledge, (8) trying of new roles, (9) competence building and self-confidence, and (10) reintegration. Feinstein (2004) argued that reflexive discourse and critical reflection are two major catalysts of the transformative learning experience. It is important to underscore that transformative learning has evolved beyond Mezirow’s conceptual framework (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 2007). For example, King (2005) introduced the transformative learning opportunities model, which provides a non-western based perspective of one’s transformative learning experience through life-changing events. Duffy (2006) found that some instructional strategies (group discussion, role-playing, journaling) foster transformative learning. Freire (2000) has developed a socio-cultural perspective of transformative learning. According to Freire (2000), transformative learning is a process of empowerment and social transformation. Rather than using the concept of critical reflection suggested by Mezirow (2000), Freire (2000) referred to that conscientization as a catalyst for transformational learning. The reality is, that both critical reflection and conscientization involve problem posing and dialogue with others as part of the process that helps an individual or a learner develop an awareness of long-held assumptions, beliefs, and values. This increased awareness leads to a transformational experience (Freire, 2000; Mezirow, 2000). In that context, Taylor (2000) presented the transformational learning experience as a developmental process in five dimensions, encompassing (1) knowing as a dialogical process, (2) dialogical relationship with one-self, (3) continuing learning, (4) self-agency and authorship, (5) and connections with others. Merriam et al. (2007) have summarized transformative learning in three broad phases: (1) experience, (2) critical reflection, and (3) development. This broad summary was used for the thematic analysis in the study. This summary framework was deemed appropriate because Mezirow’s 10 steps of transformative learning are included in the three broad phases: (1) Experience (disorienting

dilemma), (2) critical reflection (self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared, exploration of alternatives), and (3) development (course of action planning, acquisition of new knowledge, trying of new roles, competence building and self-confidence, and reintegration).

Transformative learning is an adult education theory developed by Mezirow (1978) based on a study of returning women college students. Transformative learning attempts to explain the process of change in adult worldview when they are confronting with a disorienting dilemma. As mentioned earlier, Mezirow (1978) suggested 10 steps of a transformative learning process. He cautioned that all steps are not required for one's to experience transformative learning (Mezirow, 1994, 2000). Subsequent research found that transformative learning includes emotional and affective dimensions (Erickson, 2007; Taylor, 2007). King (2004) indicated that life change events such as immigration, change in job or place of residence can facilitate transformative learning. In other words, there is a sociocultural dimension of transformative learning (Cranton, 2006). Jean-Francois (2012) found that traumatic events in relation to context and culture can foster transformative learning experiences. The aforementioned studies seem indicate a possible relationship between transformative learning and intercultural interactions. Such possible relationship points to the scholarly significance of this study which aims to explore the transformative learning experience of traditional-age undergraduate college students in short-term study abroad programs, using a theory developed and implemented through research on non-traditional age college students.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2012). This methodology was appropriate, because a qualitative approach allows to capture human perspective and interpretation regarding a given phenomenon (Patton, 2002). In the context of this study, we explore the human perspective of undergraduate students at a U.S. university about participation in short-term study abroad programs. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the assumptions of traditional-age undergraduate students in the U.S. participating in short-term study abroad programs?
2. How do the students interpret the meaning of their short-term experience living abroad?
3. How do the students reflect on their intercultural experience while living abroad?
4. How do the students believe their short-term intercultural experience might have contributed to change the assumptions held before going abroad?

Participants

The sample consisted of students who were participating in faculty-led study abroad programs at a university in the mid-west of the United States of America. The sample included 40 traditional-age students, which coincided to the period when we felt like we reach saturation (recurrence of common themes in pre-travel interviews, reflective journals, and post-travel interviews). The sample size was based on the number of participants needed for qualitative saturation of common themes while having a sufficient number to look at possible interdisciplinary trends. Sample size for qualitative research can vary from 6 participants (Morse, 1994) to 15-20 participants or more (Creswell, 2012). The authors sought and obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval. Each participant signed a written informed consent. A purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was used to recruit participants from four different colleges of the targeted University through the office of international education.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Potential participants were contacted via an email to request their voluntary participation in the study. The email contained information about the purpose of the study, the different phases (pre-interview, reflective journal, post-interview, and focus group), guarantee of confidentiality, and the opportunity for the participants to withdraw at any time during the study. Consenting participants were screened for their eligibility and were asked to use a pseudonym to preserve their identity. The data were collected over the course of 4 academic years, from 2012-13 through 2015-16. Participation was voluntary. Therefore, we had only a handful of students each academic year. The participants were interviewed in-person by the principal investigator (PI) at either the researcher's office or a quiet library room. The PI read aloud the interview questions. Each interview was audio taped. If two consenting participants living in the same household were eligible (i.e., brother and sister, sisters, brothers, roommates), each member was interviewed separately and in different locations. The second interview was scheduled for 30 minutes after the first interview. The data collection process for the study involved the following:

Baseline survey: The purpose of the baseline survey was to collect demographic information about the participants, and their level of readiness for intercultural interactions, and frame the thematic analysis of the data in the context of the profile of the participants. The baseline survey enabled to create a file for each participant, thus providing a framework to track pre- and post-interview per participant. A demographic questionnaire was used to collect data related to the baseline survey.

Demographic questionnaire: The demographic questionnaire included questions on reported gender, age group, college, major or program of study, being born in a rural or urban/sub-urban area, being first-generation college student or not, and other similar

questions that can help capture the profile of the participants.

Pre-departure interview. The pre-departure interview aimed to explore possible assumptions of the students about their country of destination for short-term study abroad. Some examples of questions were (a) What motivates you to participate in a short-term study abroad in the host country? (b) What do you think the beliefs and values in the host country are? (c) How do you think people in the host country will interact with you? (d) What are some examples of your assumptions about the host country? (e) What are some of your major concerns about staying in the host country? Follow-up questions were asked to obtain information about what sources informed their assumptions about the country of destination. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Reflective journal. Each participant was given a journal (a notebook) to record their interactions with students and inhabitants of the host country. The journal helped capture part of the lived experiences of the students while being in a short-term study abroad program. Duff (2006) cited journaling as one of the activities that foster transformative learning experience. A guideline inspired from the Merriam et al. (2007) transformative learning process was provided to each participant. The reflective journal guidelines asked the participants to describe the events that occurred by answering to the full extent possible the questions: What? When? Where? Who? How? and Why? Participants were asked to write their personal thought about the events and explain any impact that such events might have on some of their beliefs, values, or assumptions.

Post-study abroad interview. The post-study abroad interview explored possible transformative learning experiences of the students resulting from their intercultural interactions during their short-term study abroad program. The transformative learning process summarized by Merriam et al. (2007) informed the questions. Post interviews were tape-recorded. Some examples of the questions that were asked to participants during the post-study abroad interview included: (a) How would you describe your study abroad experience in the host country?, (b) What does that study abroad experience mean to you?, (c) Are there personal assumptions, beliefs and values about the host country or foreign countries that your study abroad experience helped you reveal to yourself (if yes, explain!)?, (d) Are there any areas in your personal or academic life that your study abroad experience made you ask tough questions about (if yes, explain!), (e) Was there a specific information or moment during your experience abroad when you started to ask difficult questions to yourself (explain!)?, (f) From the time you started your study abroad experience to date, did you find yourself reflecting on any long-held assumptions, ideas or beliefs (explain!)?, (g) Do you believe that you have assumptions, beliefs or ideas that have changed as a result of your study abroad experience (explain!)?, (h) How do you plan to integrate your study abroad experience into your personal, academic or professional life?. Additional questions for clarification were asked during the interview. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Focus group. A focus group was conducted in lieu of member checking. A random sample of 12 participants selected from the larger sample of 40 interviewees were invited to the focus group session. The focus group interview lasted 90 minutes. The questions from the pre-departures and post-study abroad questionnaires were used to conduct the focus group session.

Data Analysis

The data from the baseline demographic questionnaire was screened for missing data. A priori codes developed from the research questions, the conceptual framework, and codes generated from emerging themes were used to create the study codebook. The PI individually coded each transcript. The pre-and post-interviews were transcribed verbatim into individual electronic documents, one per participant. This enabled to keep track of the data per participant and compare the answers to explore key patterns and themes. The pre-and post-travel interviews, contents of the journals, and the data from the focus group, including a pseudonym for each participant were transcribed into a word document. Then, the data were transported into Atlas.ti, a software for analysis of qualitative data. The study codebook, random selection of individual transcripts, and the coding results were provided for peer-review to three scholars with qualitative research experience to ensure inter-rater reliability coding agreement. Cohen's Kappa was calculated, using the SPSS software package. The Cohen's kappa value was 0.82, which indicates almost perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012). The overall data analysis involved a combination of content analysis and constant comparison method (Neuman, 1997). The analysis of emergent themes was based on the broad phases of transformative learning process summarized by Merriam et al. (2007).

Findings

As previously indicated, the study was conducted during several semesters. A total of 40 students participated in the pre-travel interviews, completed the reflective journals, and post-travel interviews. As Table 1 indicates, the participants were male and female students from business, education and human services, letters and science, and nursing. They attended short-term study abroad programs in Africa, Asia, Central America, The Caribbeans, South America, and Oceania. There was also a mix of students originating from urban and rural areas. Further, some were first generation college students.

Table 1: Summarized profile of study participants

| College/Major | Self-reported gender | | Urbanicity | | Generation | |
|------------------------------|----------------------|--------|------------|-------|------------------|------------------------------|
| | Male | Female | Urban | Rural | First generation | Second generation and beyond |
| Business | 5 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 7 | 1 |
| Education and Human services | 10 | 2 | 3 | 9 | 7 | 5 |
| Letters and science | 9 | 4 | 4 | 9 | 5 | 8 |
| Nursing | 7 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 4 |

During the coding process, there were emerging phrases that eventually led to the development of the study themes. These phrases included, but are not limited to:

- For pre-conceived assumptions and anxiety: Before I traveled I assumed that... Before I traveled I was told... I heard somebody said about people from [country X] ...My mom told me people from [country x] are... My dad said I should be worried about...in [country x] ... My parents were talking about... [in country x];
- For curiosity and exploration: I was curious to find out if... I was checking to see if... I was asking questions about... I was exploring
- For critical reflection: Then, I began to ask myself... I reflected more and more on... The more I thought about...I began to realize that... I felt I was misled to think that...
- New perspectives: Now I understand that...Before coming home, I decided that I am going to... I plan to...I already decided to...

Data analysis of the pre-and post-travel interviews, contents of the journals, and the focus group revealed that nearly all the students who participated in the study had reported and showed transformative learning experience resulting from their short-term study abroad through four main phases: (1) pre-conceived assumptions and anxiety, (2) curiosity and exploration, (3) critical reflection, and (4) new perspectives.

Phase 1: Pre-conceived Assumptions and Anxiety (Disorienting Dilemma)

Cultural assumptions and overseas travel anxiety and anxiety about the unknown served as the disorienting dilemma in the context of this study.

Overseas Travel Anxiety and Anxiety about the Unknown

The pre-travel interviews, reflective journals, and post-travel interviews reflect a

recurrent theme of anxiety about traveling to a foreign country, and the fear of the unknown. Not only the students were anxious, but also their parents and friends had mixed feelings about what could go wrong, based on some anecdotal issues regarding students who died during a study abroad program. Lori, a third year Human Services White female student wrote in her journal

My parents were concerned about my adjustment. I was anxious about my personal safety. I was concerned whether I would get sick. I was not sure whether I would be able to have meaningful interactions with people because of language barriers.

In addition to personal anxiety, some students were reflecting during their first days about their sense of loss and separation, the stress that they felt on their body, and the possibility of unforeseen events. Jonathan, a White male Business major student wrote in his journal,

This is the first time I feel that I am really separated from my mom. In [on campus], I had a sense of security, because I know my mom can be at my door in about 3 hours, or I can be home in about 3 hours.... What if something happens to me? What if something happens to her? I am so far away.... I miss you, mom!

The feeling of anxiety was expressed by students across major and discipline of study. All participants in the study were on their first trip to a foreign country, and some of them had never traveled outside of their State. So, they not only had anxiety about traveling, but also thinking constantly about the cultural assumptions that they grew up with.

Cultural Assumptions

Most of the participants either wrote in their reflective journals or admitted during pre- and post-travel interviews that they had a few cultural assumptions in their mind before they traveled to their study abroad destinations. Some said that they were surprised to see things like city life, university campuses, busy traffic, and other indicators of modern civilization, which they did not expect to encounter.

Anti-Americanism

Some of the pre-travel cultural assumptions of the participants were related to anti-American sentiments that they anticipated to experience overseas. Linda, a second-year female student in Biology, said, "I don't know how I will take it if I feel that people don't like me just because I am an American....". This sentiment was sometimes expressed directly by the students. Other times, students mentioned this concern as something expressed by their family members or their friends.

Questionable Cultural Standards

Some students were talking about cultural standards that are lower in foreign countries, thus were concerned whether they will be able to adjust to what some students referred as “poor health conditions”, “difficult ways of living”. Cindy who was majoring in Nursing said,

I went to [country] with the assumptions that people have bad eating habits, the water is not drinkable, people are in poor health conditions, there are people everywhere trying to steal your purse, people lack basic knowledge, and so on and so forth...

Another student, Peter, wrote in his journal, “I was told that the [country] people are lazy, they don’t like to work, and they don’t show up on time...”. He then continued to express that he was going to waste a lot of time. Other students shared that their fear about questionable cultural standards in other countries were based on information that they learned from a parent or a friend.

Phase 2: Curiosity and Exploration

Almost of the participants interpreted the meaning of their short-term experience living abroad as a period of curiosity, an opportunity for intercultural interactions, and a rare occasion to experience being a stranger in a foreign country.

Curiosity

Several participants talked extensively about their effort to confirm their pre-conceived assumptions through observations and interactions with people. Some students saw their study abroad program as an opportunity to further their curiosity about “what other cultures look like”, “what type of lifestyles exist in foreign countries”, what are the ingredients of day-to-day life” as some wrote in their reflective journal. There was a tendency to attempt to confirm broad assumptions made in movies about the host country. Stacie, a female White pre-service teacher summed it up this way,

The assumptions that I had in my mind were playing 24/7 during the first days. I was trying to verify I was told. Frequently, I found myself wanting to confirm what I assumed before I traveled. I was very curious to observe that firsthand...

Exploration

Some students seized their time abroad to engage in some sort of exploration about the nature of cultural identity in the host country, through genuine personal connections with people and other forms of cultural interactions (e.g., spiritual, artistic interactions).

One of the participants, Marlene, said,

The more I interacted with people on a personal level the more I was distancing myself from my assumptions before coming to [country]. It was quite an adventure for me to go through such experience....

The Stranger Experience

Another recurrent theme related to the meaning of the short-term study abroad stay was a taste of the stranger experience. Many students wrote in their journal how they managed to use their stay abroad as a way to test what it's like to be a foreigner in another country. Peter, a White male student in Economics said,

I have learned to live under different rules and clanged on my minority rights for the first time in my life. At first, I was annoyed by it, it was hard. As I developed personal connections with new people, I enjoyed every moment of that experience.... I learned from that....

Phase 3: Critical Reflection

Students were asked to describe an incident, issue, or event that can be considered as a key critical reflection or self-reflection starting point while being abroad or after their study abroad experience. They were also asked to explain how they carried the reflective process. The intent was to capture critical incidents related to their critical reflection. According to Fitzgerald (2001), a critical incident is "... a story with a climax, dilemma or issue to be addressed, but no clear resolution, and when the incident is finished being told, there is still a need to ascribe some meaning to the incident before it can be resolved in the mind of the teller" (p. 151).

Jenna who was majoring in Special education explained how the process was like for her,

I was in [country]. We met these girls who were hanging out with us. I thought it might be a good thing to interview her for my assignment. I said to her, 'You look like a typical [country]. I would like to interview you for my assignment'. She talked in [foreign language] with her friends, and they left without answering my question. I was very annoyed by that. I thought she was very rude. It was until a few days after that I learned she felt offended, because I called her 'typical [country]'. I felt troubled by that. I went to my room and started to reflect on that throughout the night.... I was wondering to myself, 'How would I feel if somebody who wants me to help her called me a typical American?'

Students' reflective journals, as well as, post-travel interviews showed that most of the participants were engaging in a process of rethinking some of the assumptions that they had about the host country before they traveled overseas. Some students were asking

themselves questions such as, “What if I was born in a country other than the United States?”, “What would life be for me if I was living in these conditions?” Angela who is a second-generation American student wrote,

At first, I believed they were effectively lazy, and they did not care about punctuality. Then, I observed the people. I asked them questions about how they see the value of work. I analyzed their answers. I realized they set their priority in a different order. For them, family and happiness come first. They always managed to accomplish what they plan to do...

However, a few students engaged in critical reflection, and developed defense mechanisms, thus reinforcing their assumptions about the host country or culture. Overall, the majority of them reported that they developed new perspectives as a result of their participation in a study abroad program.

Phase 4: New Perspectives

The participants in the study showed and reported the development of new perspectives in their reflective journals, during the post-study abroad interviews and the focus group.

Value The Contextual Nature of Customs and Habits

Most of the participating students said that they have learned to respect the value of customs and habits of people in foreign countries. Jimmy, a White male student majoring in Biology, who confessed that he had strong assumptions before he traveled, said “I learned that only the context can help make a good judgment about other’s customs and habits...”

Value Cross-Cultural Experience for Personal Growth

Almost all the participants believed that the cross-cultural experience they gained during their study abroad has already contributed to their personal growth. They compared their study abroad experience to an informal classroom that helped them improve their critical thinking abilities and change their perspective about themselves. During the focus group, a student participant who wanted to echo what most of her colleagues expressed summarized,

Me too, my trip abroad changed me completely. The experience I had in [country] helped me grow personally. My parents and my sisters told me how I completely changed since I came from my study abroad....

Plan International Involvement After Graduation

Many students argued that their study abroad experiences contributed to change their perspective about the world. Consequently, they have already made plan to get involved in a program outside of the United States. Abby, a White female student majoring in Human Services had already made a plan to work with a charitable organization overseas and have her work applied toward experiential learning. During the post-travel interview, she said, “I plan to travel with religious organizations to Liberia for 9 months.... I received approval from my program to earn credits from it....”. Shirley, who is White female student majoring in Business shared that she plans to apply to become a Peace Corps volunteer. Beth, who is a White male student majoring in English had already made arrangement with an agency to go through an intensive certification training to become a certified teacher in English for Speaker of Other Language (ESOL), which will enable him to teach English overseas.

Tolerance for Ambiguity

Linda who was in her final year majoring in Environmental Studies described in her journal how she questioned her western-centric outlook that influenced her overall perceptions about people in the host country. She explained how she became more tolerant for ambiguous ideas or practices. She wrote,

As we visited the villages, I noticed how people will kiss their friends in both cheeks. I was shocked! Later, I realized there was nothing sexual in nature, but just an expression of friendship.... Although I was confused, I have learned to accept it as their way of greeting. Then, I found myself doing it too...

Greater Appreciation for One’s Own Culture

Many participating students explained how their observations and reflection about the host country helped them better appreciate their American culture with a spirit of gratitude, and for some even pride. Mariana, a female student whose parents are first generation immigrants in the US shared the following:

I went to a health care center and was shocked to see the horrible conditions under which nurses are working...They were making their own alcohol swab and had basically no supplies. Then, I realized how fortunate we are in the United States. I have better appreciation for my country, for my culture....

Adaptability to New Environments

John described in his journal how he traveled with doubts about his ability to deal

with new people, especially strangers. He later continued to explain that he felt embarrassed by his blind mistrust of people in foreign countries, given the level of respectful hospitality that he received. He referred to his ability to adapt to new environments as a victory. He wrote,

My parents doubted that I could adapt to a foreign environment. To their surprise, I did it. It was not without a lot of struggles, but I am grateful that this study abroad experience helped reshaped my views of other cultures, other people...

This sentiment was shared almost consistently by the participants in both the pre-travel interviews and the focus group. Some had also expressed that in their reflective journals in short-term study abroad programs. Overall, the data revealed the assumptions of traditional-age undergraduate students in the U.S. participating in short-term study abroad programs (Research question 1), describe how the students interpret the meaning of their short-term experience living abroad (Research question 2), how they reflect on their intercultural experience while living abroad (Research question 3), and their understanding of how short-term intercultural experience might have contributed to change the assumptions held before going abroad (Research question 4).

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

As the data showed, students who decide to participate in a study abroad program may experience a disorienting dilemma (Brock et al., 2012; Stone et al, 2017). This is in alignment with other studies, which confirmed that students went through periods of confusion and dilemma and the feelings of being strangers, and eventually began to understand and appreciate the ways of life in their host country. Mezirow (1991) explained that disorienting dilemma is a key factor in an individual process of experiencing transformative learning. The participants in the study experienced their disorienting dilemma through the anxiety of their overseas travels, their cultural assumptions before going abroad, and their anxiety about the unknown.

All participants in the study shared that they have experienced some form of perspective change. Students explained that once they were abroad, they started to engage and interact with people from cultural backgrounds different from theirs. They engaged and interacted through their curiosity and sense of exploration. This enabled them to confront their own pre-travel assumptions and develop personal experiences regarding the complexity of cultural differences.

The findings provided evidence that some students experienced perspective changes after their study abroad. For example,

- Their perspectives changed on how they contextualize the nature of customs and habits;

- They developed an appreciation for cross-cultural interactions;
- They made plans to be involved in international related activities after their graduation;
- They have developed tolerance for ambiguity, a greater appreciation for their own culture, and an ability to adapt to new environments.

Further, a taste of the stranger experience helped students live through the challenges associated with being a minority in a different cultural environment. When curiosity is combined with reflective observations and an experience of the feeling of being unique in a culturally different milieu it may help individuals revisit prior cultural assumptions. This may also help them challenge potential long-held beliefs about otherness and the meaning of cultural experiences that are different from theirs. Furthermore, the study revealed that reflections on critical incidents can help students interpret their experiences in a concrete way, using existing conceptual frameworks related to intercultural interactions.

Contrary to some scholars who argued that longer immersion is needed for transformative learning (Dwyer, 2004), this study suggests that students may experience perspective changes in short-term study abroad programs. All in all, the study confirmed that students who participated in short-term study abroad may have a transformative learning experience. Narratives from reflective journals show reports of transformative learning that has led to positive changes in their personality and their social networking abilities after their return from overseas. This transformative experience provided them with a better capacity to adapt to new environments and interact with students who come from outside their own subculture. The post-travel interviews revealed that most of the respondents felt more confident about themselves and their ability to deal with ambiguity, as well as to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds in comparison to before their travel abroad days. Similar results have been reported in other study abroad programs. In fact, Stone, et al (2017) had conducted a qualitative study, and found that over 58% of students who engaged in a short-term study abroad program experienced some form of transformative learning compared to students who did not. This also aligns with Donnelly-Smith (2009) who previously argued that the intentional programming of faculty-led short-term study abroad programs often tend to facilitate the chances for transformative learning for the students.

The pre-and post-travel interviews and journal entries showed that the study abroad experience facilitated the participants in our study to feel vulnerable, many for the first time in their life, as they dealt with suddenly being minorities in the country hosting them. Some of them in their post-travel reflections noted how such experience helped them understand at a personal level how ethnically minority Americans may feel about the use of certain words, phrases or situations. These personal experiences may have provided

them with new realistic perspectives into situations they may have deemed ordinary prior to their travel abroad experiences. This new perspective may well help the students become more introspective, and perhaps forge better relationships and understanding with international students on campus, as well as other minority groups in their university and surrounding communities.

Further, the study abroad experiences prepare the students to be better interculturally equipped for a globally diverse work environment. The ability to adapt well in a diverse workforce should enhance students' level of employability. In his study, Di Pietro (2015) found that students who engage in study abroad programs had a higher probability of being employed within three years after graduation relative to those that did not engage in such programs, especially if such students came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, Shiveley and Misco (2015) found that Teacher Education students who participated in a study abroad program and who listed the travel abroad experience as an item in their resume were employed soon after graduation. The students observed that the line item in their resume seems to have sparked off keen interest on the part of their interviewers, noting that it was a major talking point in their job interviews after graduation.

Overall, this study provides confirmation for existing literature regarding the influence of study abroad on cultural empathy (Cushner & Mahon, 2002), the ability to challenge perceptions of selves and others (Cusher & Karin, 2004), increased interest on global issues (Hadis, 2005), increased pride in American identity (Souders, 2006), and transformative learning experience (Brock et al., 2012; Stone et al, 2017). In a nutshell, the study confirmed, but amplified Merriam et al. (2007) summarization of transformative learning in three broad phases: (1) experience, (2) critical reflection, and (3) development. The findings from this study carry the limitations associated with any qualitative research study. It is relevant only in context and cannot be used to generalize about the potential transformative learning experience of students in short-term study abroad programs. Further, there was no comparison among the various study abroad destinations, to explore whether some destinations might have provided opportunities for cultural interactions that are not likely to foster transformative learning, in comparison to other destinations. Future studies might use cluster comparison to look into destination-specific differences.

This study has several implications that could serve as recommendations for faculty-led study abroad programs. For example, it is clear from the findings that reflective journal enhances the critical thinking (reflection on self and others) of students participating in study abroad programs. It helps turn assumptions into reflections that are purposeful and relevant for selves. In light of the findings, faculty leading study abroad programs should make it compulsory for students to develop a daily reflective journal and summarize such daily journal into a reflective paper to be submitted at the end of the program. Faculty leaders may provide students with cultural cues and reflective questions

to guide their daily observations and explorations. This will more likely contribute to increase their curiosity and critical thinking through reflective observations. They may also facilitate conversations that can help students' reflection on how their negative cultural assumptions and long-held beliefs about other societies might have affected their attitudes and interactions with people from such societies. Study abroad programs should always include service-learning activities to foster the transformative learning experiences of students. This involves designing assignments requiring students to describe their critical incidents, and reflect on them, using one or several conceptual frameworks to reflect on their observations and experiences. Foreign language initiation should be part of the design of any short-term study abroad program, even if it is at the basic level. This could be either as a pre-requisite or a core component during pre-travel orientation. Director of study abroad programs should require participating students to develop a cross-cultural e-portfolio, which could be a photo or video memoir of their experience, using a narrative based on a conceptual framework. This would enable students to have a scholar-practitioner perspective about their experience abroad. Finally, the integration of overseas partners in pre-departure orientation may contribute to calm the anxiety of students before they travel to a foreign country. With the support of online technologies, program directors can use web-applications or a social media platform to bring their overseas partners into their pre-departure orientation.

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