Student Identity Sense-Making and the Study Abroad Experience

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Abstract

Student experiences have long been discussed within the field of international education. Most studies focus on the overwhelming positive benefits students may have before, during, and after the study abroad experience. Not surprisingly, the percentage of undergraduate students who study abroad continues to increase. While there are certainly benefits to studying abroad, few studies have emerged that highlight potential destabilizing outcomes of the study abroad experience. This study focuses on the potential adversity the study abroad experience may have on students, specifically in terms of identity-sense making prior to, during, and after their study abroad programs. This study argues that by focusing on adversity within the study abroad experience, institutions can best prepare students for the potentially identity-affirming or destabilizing outcomes that can occur with international education. The results of this study suggest that, with more resources that engage in identity sense-making, students will have the tools to mitigate all outcomes from their international experiences.

Keywords:

Identity development, international experiences, meaning-making, pre-departure, sensemaking, student advising, study abroad

Introduction

Year over year, an increasing number of undergraduate students study abroad outside of the United States (Institute of International Education [IIE]

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Open Doors Report, 2020). In the 2018/2019 academic year alone, 306,141 undergraduate students studied abroad, a 1.6% increase from the previous academic year (IIE Open Doors Report, 2020). Higher education institutions host a number of workshops, information sessions, pre-departure orientations, student conferences, in order to prepare students for the experience and support them upon return. Pre-departure meetings commonly highlight program and country logistics, however, fewer pre-departure resources than desired emphasize the importance of identity formation or identity in the context of a new culture. Holmes et al. (2015) write: "It is in intercultural encounters that identities are contested, negotiated and (re)constructed" (p.3). Holmes et al. (2015) highlight the fluid nature of intersecting identities, where the construction of such identities can be contested or negotiated within an international context.

The focus tends to be on the overwhelming positive outcomes of study abroad, but adversity can shake students' sense-making, identity, academic success, and mental health, ranging from mild feelings of discomfort to moderate culture shock and trauma (Wielkiewicz, 2010). While adversity isn't necessarily a negative outcome of the study abroad experience, without adequate tools to handle difficult experiences, adversity can increase stress, anxiety, and depression for college students and can have long term impacts (Pedrelli et al., 2015). When identities are often contested, negotiated, and reconstructed within intercultural encounters, how can institutions afford to not prepare their students for these situations abroad? However, there is little research that focuses on how students can better prepare for a study abroad experience to help mitigate the mild to moderate effects of study abroad, specifically by unpacking and making sense of their own identities prior to departure.

There is no place in the world free of adversity, but providing students with tools prior to an international educational experience would enable them to go into these contexts more prepared and better equipped to face the challenges that may arise before, during, and after a study abroad experience. If students are able to effectively engage with their identities prior to studying abroad, they may have better tools to mitigate culture shock abroad and upon reentry back home. With these issues in mind, this qualitative case study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How can student identity reflection prior to study abroad help ease reverse culture shock upon reentry after an international experience?
2. In what ways do students unpack their identities before and after the study abroad experience?

Acculturation Theory, Identity, and the Self

Sussman (2000) used a social psychological perspective to "explore the psychological functions of culture and evaluation of the self" (p. 357). Leading acculturation theorists Berry (1990) and Graves (1967) highlighted how attitudes, behaviors, and cultural identity are formed in direct correlation to context (see also Lee & Negrelli, 2018; Tarchi et al., 2019). When acculturation theory is considered in the context of study abroad, it is important to note that many undergraduate students are also emerging adults (ages 18-25) who may be continuously shaping their own identity, let alone considering the consequences of their identity in cultural contexts. Sussman (2000, p. 356) writes:

> One's culture imperceptibly forms a mental framework through which individuals define their ontology, motivate and select their behaviors, and judge and evaluate the actions of others. In daily interactions with culturally similar others, cultural identity remains unformed or unrecognized. Nevertheless, cultural scripts regarding the self and interpersonal behavior are active and become the normative and expected standard. Formal education systems and diverse media reinforce these shared meanings, symbols, and values.

By Sussman's definition, identity is directly informed by culture. When students displace themselves from their dominant culture by studying abroad, what they know to be true about themselves can become destabilized or unknown as they navigate an unfamiliar culture. At times, this discomfort can go beyond culture shock and into anxiety-induced terror management. Sussman (2000, p. 356) suggests that the "psychological functions of culture and evaluation of the self is that proffered by terror management (Solomon et al., 1991)". Culture, then, exists to mitigate terror associated with

> our uncontrollable demise by creating order and stability and by describing the parameters of the 'good and valuable' self. Furthermore, terror management theory hypothesizes that threats to one's cultural worldview, perhaps as a consequence of cultural sojourns, result in increased anxiety (Sussman, 2000, p. 356).

When displaced from their own culture where their entire identity was constructed, study abroad participants may experience heightened anxiety (or feelings of terror) when exposed to an unfamiliar culture abroad. This can be particularly destabilizing for students who are not equipped to sit with such high levels of discomfort, especially in the context of making sense of who they are. While it is not uncommon for discomfort or uncertainty to occur while abroad, if ill-equipped, the cultural transition can prove to be anxiety-inducing and potentially harmful for students. However, this can be mitigated if students have a strong sense of their own fluid dynamic identity and are prepared for the discomfort and destabilization that occurs in different cultural contexts.

For many students, study abroad can be seen as a 'rite of passage' to learn more about themselves (Bagnolie, 2009; Beames, 2004; King, 2011; Starr-Glass, 2016). Gabowski et al. (2017, p. 3) writes: "… it is experiential learning that goes beyond passive acquisition that is transformative". The study abroad experience becomes transformational when students are invited to engage in reflective learning, yet this transformation is unlikely to occur on its own accord (Holmes et al., 2015; Vande Berg et al., 2012). In order to better understand why students should engage with identity reflection in the study abroad process, it is first important to understand how identity fits in the context of culture and intercultural competence.

Culture is an important reference for self-definition (Sussman, 2000). Casmir (1984) defines cultural identity as "the image of the self and the culture intertwined in the individual's total conception of reality" (p. 2). While culture's effect on behavior is a well-documented phenomenon, its effects on the self is less widely understood (Marsella, 1985). Culture and the self are two intertwined concepts in the study abroad experience. Students must learn to navigate the different contexts in which they are transitioning (i.e., from their home culture to a new culture abroad, and back again) and this experience may not be linear. Students will interact and engage in these new cultural contexts, and in turn, their self-opposition to the culture can often initiate a change of the self or personal growth. It is in this opposition to another culture that the construction of the self occurs (Rohner, 1984); this meaning-making process occurs in the context of a cultural worldview (Sussman, 2000). Additionally, many studies have found that the study abroad experience goes beyond a greater understanding of the global, where much of their identity was constructed fosters a greater understanding of the self (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay,

2015; Carpenter et al., 2019; Dolby, 2007; Hadis, 2005). The importance of understanding oneself in the context of another culture is emphasized by social psychologists, highlighting that identity formation typically occurs within intercultural encounters (Holmes et al., 2015). While intercultural outcomes are consistently a part of the mainstream narrative for study abroad, students require layers of support before, during, and after these international experiences occur in order to reap the benefits (Carpenter et al., 2019; Vande Berg et al., 2012). If this is true, then students participating in a study abroad experience should be prepared to reflect on, navigate, and unpack their identities when these intercultural encounters occur, yet most are not equipped to engage in identity work on their own.

Effects of Study Abroad

The benefits of study abroad are well documented (Borland, 1999; Cummings, 2001; Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018; Grey et al., 2002; Juhasz & Walker, 1987; Kaufman, 1992; Ogden et al., 2023; Paras et al., 2019; Rabinowitz, 1994; Sowa, 2002) but less is known about the discomfort study abroad can cause students. The student experience is dynamic and unique; therefore, it is unreasonable to expect that all students have an overwhelmingly positive study abroad experience with the absence of any adversity. It is often in adversity that students experience the most personal growth, but not all students are prepared to endure high levels of discomfort. While there are a number of organizations who provide additional resources for students and professionals such as Diversity Abroad, The Forum on Education Abroad, and NAFSA: Association of International Educators, institutions who support students pursuing international education experiences are often the first point of contact during the study abroad process. Thus, it is important for institutions to prepare students for all aspects of studying abroad by promoting identity exploration in all phases of the study abroad process.

Self-reflection of the entire study abroad experience often occurs once students re-enter their dominant culture (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Christofi & Thompson, 2007). Some students can respond severely to the reentry process (Raschio, 1987). Wielkiewicz et al. (2010) writes: "just as adapting to a new environment away from home causes emotional stress and anxiety, so can re-adapting to one's own home culture after an extended period in another country" (pp. 650). Previous studies have analyzed reentry difficulties by students including cultural identity conflict (Cox, 2004), psychological and

academic adjustment (Sahin, 1990), social difficulty (Rogers & Ward, 1993), mental health issues (Furukawa, 1997), and grief (Chamove & Soeterik, 2006). Additionally, Gaw (2000) and Wielkiewicz et al. (2010) found that returning students returnees may also experience alienation, disorientation, stress, value confusion, anger, fear, helplessness, isolation, alienation, disenchantment, and discrimination. Wielkiewicz emphasized the importance of addressing such student challenges, specifically for the reentry process, after the study abroad experience. However, it would be beneficial to provide students with more resources and to expose them to these potential challenges before their study abroad experience, such as offering study abroad pre-departure programming that addresses identity reflection and dissonance to better equip students before these situations arise.

Method

This paper relies on a qualitative case study to include the perspectives between advisors and study abroad returnees. The data for this paper come from four months of interviews regarding how undergraduate students at a private institution make sense of their identities while preparing for a study experience prior to, during, and upon their return from study abroad. The larger study from which these data are drawn examined the commonalities and differences between student returnee identity reflection post-study abroad experience and perceptions of undergraduate identity sense-making by study abroad advisors. The purpose of this paper is to examine student experiences that contribute to student identity sense-making during the pre-departure, abroad, and return from the study abroad experience to better inform the resources made available to prepare students for these experiences to offer support when potential culture shock and traumatic responses occur.

Setting and Participants

This study took place in the 2021 academic year at a private higher education institution. According to school demographics, there were more than 5,000 undergraduate students enrolled, of which about 40% were students of color. This institution had 80% of students studying abroad at least once prior to graduation (IIE Open Doors Report, 2020). At the time that data was collected for this paper, there were far fewer students actively abroad due to COVID-19. For this reason, interviews were conducted with students who studied abroad between the 2019-2020 academic term. Detailed information about each student

is provided as each is introduced in the findings section. These students were selected based on the term they studied abroad and their availability to interview.

Two study abroad advisors from the same institution were also interviewed. Advisor 1 had worked in the Study Abroad Office for three years and Advisor 2 was in their first year.

Data Collection and Analysis

As a practitioner with experience in the field of international education, my perspective as a study abroad advisor was critical in understanding and unpacking the interview responses from each participant. Using Otter.ai transcription software, interviews were recorded and auto-transcribed. No handwritten notes were taken, but instead post-interview memos were created where observations were recorded with some analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Throughout the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both study abroad returnees and advisors. Depending on the proximity of those being interviewed, some interviews were virtual on Zoom and others were in-person. All audio-recorded data and transcriptions were revised to ensure audio accuracy.

Interviews with students served to capture the returnee student experience post study abroad reflection and covered the holistic study abroad experience from a reflective vantage point. Interviews with advisors were conducted in order to determine if advisor assumptions of whether or not students think about their identities before the study abroad experience were consistent with students' experiences. The data collected from returnee interviews with students reflecting on their past study abroad experiences, and advisor interviews who have experience supporting students at all phases of the study broad process, assisted with validity of the data and themes that were present (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). All interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour. Additionally, data was analyzed through coding methods (Charmaz, 2017; Saldaña, 2013) using NVivo software. Transcriptions were uploaded to NVivo to code all the study abroad advisor and returnee participant interviews and analysis. Qualitative analysis was used after the coding was completed to find relevant themes throughout the participant interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Findings

In all of the participant interviews, the following themes emerged: First, students generally did not reflect on their identity prior to study abroad; Second, some students experienced identity affirmation while abroad more so than at their home institution; and Third, students experienced reverse culture shock and a dissonance upon returning to their home country. Both the participants and advisors agreed that identity reflection did not occur prior to the study abroad experience but is needed to readily engage with feelings of culture shock abroad and reverse culture shock at home. Some students felt "more at home" abroad than in their home country and university. All students experienced various levels of reverse culture shock that caused some identity dissonance or feelings of being misunderstood post-experience. It is important for international educators to note the opportunities in each of these student testimonies where identity interventions could have taken place to ease feelings of culture-shock and dissonance during the study abroad experience.

Absence of Pre-Abroad Student Identity Reflection

Both Advisors and students agreed that little to no student interpersonal identity reflection occurred prior to the international experiences examined in this study. Instead, pre-abroad anxieties include more logistical items needed to prepare to live abroad such as packing, purchasing flights, learning a language, assimilating, etc. There was discussion of students having a desire to belong abroad, but this was not fully considered prior to the abroad experience and more often discovered while abroad.

When asked about how students may think about, reflect on, or consider their identities pre study abroad experience, Advisors did not think students did any identity work prior to their experience. Instead, they reported that students tend to focus on other logistical pieces that do not include any intrinsic reflection. Advisor 1 noted that this could be due to their lack of independent travel experiences, and that it's difficult to anticipate identity change prior to experience it:

> Especially with a semester long program, I don't think many of them really understand or wrap their head around the kind of transformational experience that [it] will be for them and how it was really the first time outside of their comfort zone, to really re-evaluate their own [identities]...I think it's hard for the mind to really grasp or predict the kind of the kind of experience or the

kind of stimuli they will receive while they are abroad to really understand how much they will be challenged on a personal level.

For students who have had little experience engaging with cultural differences, it can be difficult to anticipate experiences they may encounter while abroad. For this reason, it is up to institutions and the administrators who are supporting students pursuing study abroad experiences to assist them in self-reflection and pre-departure preparation. Typical pre-departure preparation (international cell phone plans, how much money to bring in which currency, what to pack, where they are living, etc) that focus on the tourist level experience of study abroad do not readily engage students with the type of adversity, discomfort, or destabilizing experiences they may have while abroad.

Additionally, students may consider their identities in a more reactive way—i.e., wondering and anticipating what the experience will be like for them abroad, but interpersonal identity reflection might not be part of the anticipated experience. Advisor 2 posited that a part of the culture shock that students may experience abroad is due to the lack of interpersonal reflection conducted prior to the experience, for example, when students are confronted with cultural differences pertaining to their own identity:

> [Referring to what students think about prior to departure] [They may say] 'Okay, I can't wait to go here and experience something new.' But [they] don't really have [an] idea of what that actually means for them, which I think contributes to a lot of the culture shock that they experience when they first get abroad because it's not just [about] being [in] a new culture. It's that they have to do their own identity work and figure out, 'oh my gosh, who am I? I didn't even think about what that meant.' So I think there's a lot of students who just haven't even thought about that yet...I think that they are thinking about what their identity looks like in the context of abroad, but probably more in a concerned reactive way, like, what's it going to be like?...But otherwise, I don't think the average student is really thinking much about their identity and what that looks like in that context abroad.

Both advisors and returnee students agreed that identity reflection did not occur in a meaningful way prior to the study abroad experience. However, Advisor 2 acknowledged that students must "do their own identity work and figure out 'who am I?,'" but with the support of advisors and administrators the identity journey does not have to be a solo one. When returnee students were asked if

they had any anxiety leading up to their study abroad experience, none mentioned any anxiety related to their identities, how their identities would be perceived abroad, or how they would navigate their identities abroad. As one student stated:

> Just getting into the country at first because I've never traveled alone before. And then also, I think not making any meaningful connections. Or friends because what kind of people I was going to meet, like was I gonna make any friends or even Italian friends. But yeah, that's like that kind of social anxiety. [It] kicked in before I went abroad.

Likewise, a second student noted: "Honestly, my only concerns revolved around the [academic] workload. But in terms of actually going abroad, I was mainly just excited and confident that I would make friends." Student three indicated similarly: "I think I was concerned about being able to fit in and be independent in a new country." Last, a fourth student provided this insight: "I think I was worried about financial stuff, I really wanted to be able to have a full experience, but I was super worried about being able to pay for trips and stuff."

In most cases, students were most concerned with academics, making friends, or finances, but none discussed concerns or anxiety about how their identities may be perceived abroad or what type of identity negotiation may take place in the country abroad. Overall, both advisors and returnees agreed that identity reflection generally did not occur for students prior to the study abroad experience, as they were more concerned and preoccupied with other logistics.

Identity Affirmation Abroad

Although students did not tend to think about or consider their identities prior to their study abroad experience, all of the students discussed a form of identity affirmation while studying abroad. Despite not having done deep identity reflection prior to traveling abroad, all students had experiences that affirmed at least one or more of their identities in various ways. As one student claimed:

> The fact that different people from across the world were going to the same school as I was. The best friend I made there, she is from Puerto Rico and so we related on that Hispanic side. We wanted to go to clubs and bars that had reggaeton, like Hispanic music. So we can like, feel at home but at the same time, being not

at home. When you encounter people or [people] similar [to] your culture or from your culture, you become attached to them just to have some sense of familiarity, I guess. So yeah, in that sense I realized identities are important.

This student is Mexican and found their Mexican-American identity very important to them, yet did not consider these identities important in the context of studying abroad. However, upon making a friend from Puerto Rico, this student was reminded of their Latin roots and found comfort in making a friend from a Latin country. Their experiences seeking out Latin music both affirmed their identity and was a way to mitigate homesickness. It was only then that this student realized how important their Mexican-American identity was to them. Additionally, this student felt more accepted abroad with their Mexican identity, compared to their American nationality due to negative perceptions of Americans abroad, noting:

> There's this negative perception of Americans being so loud or not respectful, and Mexicans being, like, lively, but we also have a lot of respect for family and such, which is kind of similar to Italian culture. So in my journey, my Mexican identity was important.

Additionally, this student felt that their Mexican culture was more widely accepted abroad due to cultural similarities. For this reason, this student's Mexican identity was more salient abroad than their American nationality, as they tried to avoid presenting as American to avoid any negative stereotypes. When asked if this student was given the opportunity to share these reflections upon their return to their home institution, they confirmed this was the first time they shared this information during the interview for this study. Aftercare for study abroad students, while many resources do exist, aren't emphasized as heavily as pre-departure programming. Given several prompting questions, this student was able to articulate the dynamic and changing importance of their identities based on cultural context.

A second student also had experiences of identity affirmation while in the UK, specifically with feeling more at home in England than in their home country:

> And I think being in the UK made me realize I don't have to be that Southern California girl stereotype. Just because I'm white and blonde and a woman, I can still dress how I want to. And I

think that led me in being more confident in how I dress and
trying to bring some of the confidence from the UK back to the US
in terms of my identity.

This student was not the only participant who felt like they were more "at home"
abroad than in their home country. It was this displacement from their home
country to their host country that prompted a deeper understanding of self-
confidence and self-presentation, which this student chose to continue upon
returning to their home country.

A third student felt similarly, in the sense that their study abroad
experience affirmed many of their important identities. Their home institution,
as a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), had less diversity than their host
institution abroad. As a student of color, they felt encouraged to see so many
different cultures represented abroad:

I just felt really comfortable in who I was in every identity that I
aligned with. I didn't feel like I was going to be judged for who I
was. And it really built that confidence. I think the thing about
[my US university] specifically is it is a predominantly white
institution, and that's great and has a lot of opportunities and it's
awesome, but being in a space where I got to experience so many
different cultures, and how people ask questions not about just
American culture, but Pakistani culture too was really fun
engaging...I think the Pakistani bisexual just being a woman part
was very much okay and affirmed and strengthened, but then the
whole socio economic class part made me look at the world a little
differently.

Similarly as the first student did, this student experienced a dynamic shift in the
importance of their identities (increase in affirmation of being a bisexual
Pakistani woman and destabilization of socioeconomic identity). The increase
in diversity abroad compared to their home institution prompted this student
to engage with all aspects of their identity in a way that did not occur prior to
their abroad experience and expanded their worldview.

Like the first student, the fourth student also had a sense of identity and
language affirmation while living abroad. This was reflected more in the
dissonance they felt upon returning to their home country, and not feeling
understood:

> But there's a theory that language changes the way that you think, and I almost felt [that]when I am here. I think and act a little bit differently. Like my Spanish-speaking persona is different from my [American] persona. My persona back in the US - my English speaking persona with my family [was misunderstood], and I almost felt frustrated because I associated that Spanish speaking persona with a really confident, independent young woman.

This student felt more confident in their Spanish speaking identity while abroad and felt they had to discard this "persona" upon returning home, as no one understood their experiences abroad. What Student 4 pointed out was a lack of community and belonging upon their return home – they felt like they had to revert to an identity they had prior to experiencing change while abroad, a different "persona".

Reverse Culture Shock and Identity Dissonance at Home

While many students experienced identity affirmation abroad, their return to their home country included feelings of reverse culture shock, sadness, and nostalgia for their study abroad experience. All participants had a sense of disillusionment returning home. As one student shared:

> Going from one part of the world through another there's like a sort of adjustment, which takes a couple of days but then you get to remember how it felt being at home. And, and then I felt okay after a couple of days. But yeah, it's just an odd adjustment for the beginning. And then feeling like that trip never happened. And then sometimes like too, like miss being abroad and such but yeah, it's such a transition.

This student felt as though their study abroad experience was like a dream, something that had never happened. This disassociation from their study abroad experience transitioning back home compartmentalizes their experiences as separate from. If students have transformational experiences abroad, one would hope those would become a salient part of their identity moving forward, instead of appearing as an apparition, a dream-like memory that is distant from who they are upon returning home. This student also had similar feelings of nostalgia and a sense that their study abroad experience was isolated in the past:

> Because I arrived back like early July, and then I still had a couple months before school started again. And when you're used to

> being constantly surrounded by friends who you can just like, go to a pub with or like go on a little adventure with and then having that crash and realizing like I can't just walk everywhere. I can't just go knock on my friend's door. That was very sobering for me...It's like going back to that same place and realizing like, Oh, like this experience was so transient, and it's never going to happen again. No matter how many times I go back to that same city I won't have the same people there and we won't be the same age. Just realizing how short lived the best experience of my life was. That was very upsetting. But I was able to move past that eventually, once I was busier again, but there's definitely a lot of processing that took place.

There was a realization that the study abroad experiences students had been unique one-time occurrences. This was sobering for the students as they returned home, where they realized that the experiences they had abroad were specific to the space and time when they occurred and could not be replicated. The process of returning home required returnees to unpack these experiences and come to the realization that their study abroad experiences were isolated to the past. Most students, however, must process and unpack these experiences alone if they do not have a community who shares the same experiences. Some students even faced feelings of sadness:

> This was a very rough time for me. Everyone that knows me, knows how much I love Spain and Madrid. And that's why I'm back. But when I came home, I went to celebrate the holidays with my family. And it was really fun. And I was so happy to see them. But once I went home back to California and started to settle back into the routine, I actually did feel really sad. I felt that I missed a lot of the things that I would do in Spain. I missed the pace of life. I really don't [like] being constantly on the go and feel[ing] like you don't really have any time to stop and enjoy life.

The reverse culture shock that students experienced often included feelings of being misunderstood by their friends or family back home. While students spent a temporary amount of time abroad, returning home caused feelings of reverse culture shock in that they missed the culture they lived in abroad. Despite having spent most of their lives in their home country, students were not prepared for the reverse culture shock, feelings of sadness, and homesickness for their study abroad country. While feelings of sadness are not uncommon, they can often be eased with a sense of community or shared experiences – these

spaces can be curated by international educators to help foster a great sense of self and belonging to create a processing space for students.

For many of the participants, returning home also caused varying levels of identity dissonance post study abroad experience as one student averred:

> You've been with your parents your whole life, then you know what home is like. You know how your room is throughout your whole life. And then you become independent and you're not [in] another part of the world, like by yourself, and it's such a different experience. And for me, it was just three months, but it felt like it felt like a lot more and then you come back again to that place that you always had to since childhood. And then those three months [were] like a dream, because it was short. And it's so different from what you used to know.

A second student agreed with the first:

> I think I felt almost a little frustrated that when I would talk with my family about things that I experienced or things that I did, no one could really understand it. Except for the people that had been there with me.

Students described returning home as a dream-like state, something that didn't occur in reality. This points towards the students not feeling as though their experiences abroad were real, which perhaps alludes to why they felt their families and friends had a difficult time relating to their experiences abroad. This also suggests that the dream-like study abroad experience could only be "seen" by the students themselves, rooted in their own personal reality and experiences. Instead, students were withholding processing their experiences, despite feeling "different" and having had transformative experiences abroad. Students also felt a sense of identity dissonance upon returning home, especially if they had identity affirming experiences while abroad as noted by one student:

> I think I kind of had a very different experience at [my home university] too because I honestly did not like it [t]here at all the first two years, because I felt like I had to pretend those identities didn't really exist and it wasn't something that I wanted to acknowledge or align with...So those identities were kind of closeted, for lack of a better term, and I wanted to pretend that they weren't there because I wanted to blend in with everyone. So they were important pieces of who I was, but I didn't know that

> at the time and I would have rather that they weren't there and
> that I could blend in with everyone as much as possible.

This student felt more like their self and more comfortable with their identities abroad than being back at home. They described their identities back home as being "closeted" where they tried to assimilate and fit in, so they did not acknowledge all parts of their identity (Pakistani, bisexual, etc). Their priority at their home institution was to "blend in," but while they were abroad they felt more confident in who they are abroad. Returning home after their abroad experience made them feel more confident in those identities they were able to freely explore without fear of judgment while they were abroad. Ideally, students who participate in study abroad experiences do not equate their home country and host country and separate experiences displaced by time and space and instead; view them as fluid experiences that transition from one point to another to form one individual journey instead of separate ones.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore how study abroad students consider and reflect on their salient identities pre, during, and post study abroad experience from both participant and study abroad program advisor perspectives. It sought to answer the following two questions: how can students be better prepared for identity reflection prior to abroad and in what ways do students unpack their identities pre, during, and post study abroad experience? Findings revealed that students tend not to think about their identities prior to studying abroad but can experience identity affirmation while abroad followed by culture shock and identity dissonance upon returning home.

Most significant was that all returnee participants experienced various levels of identity affirmation abroad versus at their home institution. Assumptions made by study abroad advisors also confirmed that students were not prepared for identity transformation prior to their study abroad experience, confirming that transformative experiences occurred, sometimes unexpectedly, during and after the study abroad experience. Many of the participants felt free to be more themselves while abroad versus at home, contributing to the affirmation of some of the identities they did not feel were salient in their home environment. All returnee participants felt various levels of reverse culture shock or identity dissonance upon returning home, as they compartmentalized their study abroad experience and felt misunderstood. In these findings,

returnee participants had difficulty translating and transitioning their identity-affirming experiences back to their home country and institution. What could have been different for these students if they had been prepared for identity affirming experiences abroad to help mitigate the identity dissonance and reverse culture shock they experience upon returning home? One suggestion includes identity reflection and processing prior to international student experiences to mitigate the negative reentry experience many of the participants had. While it is understood that reentry programming is beneficial, it can be difficult to recruit student participation as attendance is often low. Despite challenges facing reentry programming, programs that include processing spaces for students to share all aspects of their study abroad journey in a community of other students with similar experiences can foster sense-making up on their return.

As experienced practitioners, study abroad advisors and institution administrators are equipped with more foresight than first-time study abroad students. While students are often concerned about logistics (academics, finances, friendships), advisors understand the type of adversity students may face. Advisors are an integral part to assist students to anticipate all types of experiences that may occur abroad. By centralizing the meaning-making experience for students prior to their international experience, students can begin to consider their upcoming abroad journey in the context of personal growth and the adverse, uncomfortable, destabilizing experiences that may arise.

Limitations and Future Research

Similar research should be conducted with more diverse student populations to include more voices of students of color. This research was conducted at a PWI where nearly 70% of the student population is white. This is also reflected in the study abroad participation rates for white students versus students of color. It would be interesting to conduct this study at a more diverse institution to see if students experienced similar identity affirmation.

Future research could benefit from hearing from advisors, study abroad returnees, and prospective students' pre-experience. This triangulation of research methods would strengthen the findings and capture a variety of student perspectives pre, during, and post study abroad experience. Additionally, advisor interview scripts could be edited to parallel the questions

with the study abroad returnee interview script to compare student and advisor perspectives.

Better understanding how students process their identities during their study abroad journey can better prepare students to anticipate these various types of experiences both before and after the study abroad experience. Study abroad promotion and preparation tend to focus solely on the positive benefits of the study abroad experience, but often does not adequately prepare students for the potential adversity they may experience. Only promoting the positive outcomes of study abroad does not acknowledge the reality of the whole student experience. Essentially, this does students a disservice to not accurately prepare them for all types of situations and experiences that may arise while they are abroad. Moving forward, it is important to consider that students' holistic, pre-departure, and reentry needs are met in order to ease the potentially traumatic and anxiety-inducing experiences that go beyond discomfort that they may face upon returning to their home campus.

In the future, practitioners and institutions could benefit from conducting in-depth interviews with their own study abroad students to understand how they reflect on their identities prior to studying abroad. Pre-departure programming could also place a heavier emphasis on student identities within a cultural context, the dynamic and changing importance of those identities, as well as skills to ease high levels of discomfort to respond to culture shock. Reentry programs are vital to allow students processing spaces to validate and affirm their unique international experiences. Institutions and practitioners who invest in assisting students in processing their identities in the context of study abroad can better equip students with the tools they need to engage in identity work and have a transformational outcome to their experience.

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