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Developing Intercultural Competence Through Short-Term Study Abroad Programs: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

The globalization of business, education, and other sectors has illuminated the need for institutions of higher education to prepare students to adapt, interact, and perform in culturally diverse environments (Arnett, 2002; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Elmuti et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2017). Utilizing the conceptual framework of Deardorff's (2006) Intercultural Competence Model (ICM), this qualitative case study explored undergraduate students' development of intercultural competence (IC) resulting from their participation in two different short-term study abroad programs (STSA) while enrolled at a specific U.S.-based university. Nine themes emerged that supported and enriched Deardorff's ICM. Findings provided a more holistic comprehension of IC by capturing students' own words, oral stories, descriptions, and feelings about their shared STSA experiences. Findings further identified students' perceptions of the role that varied pedagogy played in their development of IC through STSA.

Abstract in Spanish

La globalización de los negocios, la educación y otros sectores ha puesto de relieve la necesidad de que las instituciones de educación superior preparen a los estudiantes para adaptarse, interactuar y desempeñarse en entornos culturalmente diversos (Arnett, 2002; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Elmuti et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2017). Utilizando el marco conceptual del Modelo de Competencia

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Intercultural (ICM) de Deardorff (2006), este estudio de caso cualitativo exploró el desarrollo de la competencia intercultural (CI) de estudiantes universitarios como resultado de su participación en dos programas diferentes de estudios a corto plazo en el extranjero ("short-term study abroad"; STSA) mientras estaban matriculados en una universidad específica en EE. UU. Surgieron nueve temas que apoyaron y enriquecieron el ICM de Deardorff. Los hallazgos proporcionaron una comprensión más holística de la CI al capturar las propias palabras, historias orales, descripciones y sentimientos de los estudiantes sobre sus experiencias STSA compartidas. Los hallazgos identificaron además las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre el papel que desempeñaba la pedagogía variada en su desarrollo de CI a través de STSA.

Keywords

Higher education, ICM, intercultural competence, international experiential learning pedagogy, short-term study abroad, undergraduate students

1. Background

Globalization has created a world in which individuals must collaborate and work interdependently across national borders (Friedman, 2005). The ability to successfully adapt in environments made of up different cultures and people is essential in today's complex world (Clawson, 2014; Elmuti et al., 2005). Business, education, and other sectors have recognized the need for institutions of higher education to adequately prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to adapt and interact in culturally diverse work environments through the development of intercultural competence (Arnett, 2002; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Williams et al., 2017).

Intercultural competence (IC) encompasses the attitudes, knowledge, skills, flexibility, empathy, communication, and adaptive behaviors needed to operate and perform effectively within and across intercultural environments (Deardorff, 2006; Mikhaylov, 2014;). Past scholars have explored IC within higher education, professional training, business management, and other contexts (Deardorff, 2006; Leung et al., 2014; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Studies have shown that individuals who received IC training tended to have more expertise and confidence when dealing with cultural issues (Gopal, 2011; Paige & Goode, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate students' development of IC through their participation in short-term study abroad

programs (STSA) utilizing qualitative research methodology. The Institute of International Education defines STSA as a pedagogical approach that includes up to 8 weeks of experiential learning in another country, with travel often occurring over summer, winter, or spring break (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2022). STSA has gained attention in the higher education sector as an alternative to traditional long-term study abroad programs because the shorter time frame often fits better with students' schedules, financial constraints, extracurricular activities, and/or interests (Iskhakova & Bradley, 2022; Mapp, 2012; Sjoberg & Shabalina, 2010). A systematic review of STSA research conducted by Iskhakova and Bradley (2022) found that empirical and conceptual studies have dominated STSA research, yet "only 29% of papers [from their review], appeared to have a theoretical framework to inform their empirical or conceptual research and to explain the examined relationships between constructs" (p. 403). The aim of the qualitative case study discussed in this paper was to explore undergraduate students' development of IC based on their shared STSA experiences, utilizing the conceptual framework of Deardorff's (2006) Intercultural Model (Appendix A).

1.1. Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Model (ICM)

The researcher collected and analyzed undergraduate students' self-reported examples of their diverse STSA experiences with a focus on their IC development. Deardorff's (2006) ICM identifies five dimensions of IC: requisite attitudes (RA); knowledge and comprehension (K&C); skills (S); desired internal outcomes (DIO); and desired external outcomes (DEO) (Appendix A). The first dimension of ICM indicates that individuals possess and/or acquire RA of "openness, respect, and curiosity and discovery" as they develop IC (Deardorff, 2006, p. 255). Openness and curiosity enable an individual to manage tensions within uncertain environments (Bennett, 2009). Gopal (2011) defined curiosity as being "open & having a sense of wonder beyond limits of what is accepted understanding, even if it causes feeling of being overwhelmed" (p. 375). Valuing other cultures, withholding judgment, and viewing others positively, is essential to navigating within intercultural or culturally diverse environments (Colquitt et al., 2013; Deardorff, 2006; Gopal, 2011; Hiller & Wozniak, 2009; Li et al., 2013; Pederson et al., 2006; Şahin et al., 2013).

The second dimension of ICM identifies K&C of "others' culture, cultural self-awareness, and sociolinguistic awareness" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). Recognizing and deepening one's understanding of cultural norms is important

for operating in multicultural environments. Individuals are better able to cope in unfamiliar or foreign contexts when they are open to feelings of unease and ambiguity in cross-cultural situations (Hiller & Wozniak, 2009). K&C empower individuals to feel more confident and better equipped to manage new and unknown experiences while abroad. The third dimension of ICM identifies S as being fundamental to the development and application of IC. Individuals rely on a variety of S “to listen, observe, evaluate, analyze, interpret, and relate” within and across intercultural settings (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). As individuals navigate through culturally different environments, they rely on a plethora of skills to make sense of the contexts in which they are operating and often improve their S over time.

The fourth dimension of ICM identifies DIO of “adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view, and empathy” (Deardorff, 2006). These components relate to the intangible aspects of IC and lead to an internal shift in an individual’s *informed frame of reference* (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). An individual’s readiness to interact with members of another culture is a core aspect of cross-cultural adaptability (Davis & Finney, 2006). Adaptability and flexibility in cross-cultural contexts enable individuals to assess unfamiliar situations and develop appropriate strategies for dealing with them (Li et al., 2013). The fifth and final dimension of ICM identifies DEO of “behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to achieve one’s goals to some degree” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). DEO encompasses the tangible aspects of ICM. Individuals at this stage are able to draw upon what they acquired through the other IC dimensions to develop strategies that enable them to adapt their behaviors and communication appropriately within intercultural environments.

The researcher’s intent with this qualitative study was to support and enrich ICM by gathering rich verbal descriptions of the participants’ experiences and capturing unique student quotes that would resonate with educators, practitioners, and scholars interested in the intersection of STSA and IC (Creswell, 2011; Younas et al., 2023). The researcher intentionally probed participants’ recall of their STSA for authentic examples from their shared experiences to provide a more holistic comprehension of IC. The researcher chose ICM to help conceptualize not only the multiple elements of IC inherent in STSA, but also to illuminate how those elements might interact in students’ overall development of IC within the context of higher education pedagogy. The

research questions that guided this study were:

- 1) What are students' perceptions about if and how they developed intercultural competence (IC) through their participation in two different short-term study abroad programs (STSA)?
- 2) What are students' perceptions about the role varied pedagogical elements utilized before and during STSA played in their attainment of IC?

2. Methods

The context for this qualitative case study was Bailee University (BU), an accredited, small, liberal arts university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. BU was chosen for the site of this study because of its nationally recognized record of successful facilitation of a diverse array of STSA and long-term study abroad programs. More than half of BU's undergraduate students participate in one or more STSA and/or long-term study abroad programs. The case study method was chosen to gain insight into emerging themes by studying a small number of students at a single university to provide a level of depth to the IC research (Creswell, 2011). The diversity among STSA international locations, course content, instructors, and students' academic majors provided breadth to the data (Creswell, 2011).

The researcher used purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques to invite currently enrolled, full-time BU students who completed two different STSA to participate in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Purposeful sampling ensured that the participant pool represented students pursuing a variety of academic majors who had completed two (2) STSA embedding a diversity of international travel locations, course content and instructors (McMillan & Shumacher, 2010). Inviting students who had completed more than one STSA increased the likelihood that they would be knowledgeable and informative about their development of IC, and able to provide verbally rich data of specific examples of their lived experiences (McMillan & Shumacher, 2010). Convenience sampling was possible because the researcher had full access to BU, which permitted flexibility in times and locations for conducting the individual interviews, focus group, and member checks based on the participants' availability within the proposed time frame for data collection and to ensure trustworthiness of data (Creswell, 2011). The researcher also used snowball/network sampling by asking participants to suggest classmates who they felt would be able and willing to speak and reflect authentically on their STSA experiences (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

The researcher invited current full-time BU undergraduate students who completed STSA #2 during the semester prior to the data collection to participate in this study. The selection criteria included the following:

- Participants were current full-time undergraduate students at BU who completed STSA #2 during the Spring 2019 semester. (STSA #2 was an upper-level, four-credit course that embedded 8-15 days of international travel over summer break.)
- Participants completed STSA#1 during their first year as a full-time undergraduate student at BU. (STSA#1 was a first-year, two-credit course that embedded 7 days of international travel over spring break.)
- Participants had not participated in a long-term study abroad program at BU.

Of the potential participant pool of 87 students who had recently completed STSA #2, 12 met all three of the inclusion section criteria. The researcher invited all 12 students to participate in an individual interview and a focus group (Creswell, 2011). Ten students agreed to participate. Table (1) below depicts participants' identifier, gender identity, academic major/minor, class status, STSA locations, and whether the participant took part in an individual interview, a focus group, or both.

Particip- pant	Gender	Academic Major (Minor)	Class Status	STSA #1 (Year 1)	STSA #2 (Spring, 2019)	Individual Interview	Focus Group
P1	F	Health Admin. (Spanish)	Junior	Europe	Australia	Yes	Yes
P2	F	Actuarial Science (Econom.)	Senior	Europe	Europe	Yes	Yes
P3	F	Education Studies (Sociology)	Junior	Asia	Africa	Yes	Yes
P4	M	Criminal Justice	Senior	Europe	Europe	Yes	No
P5	M	Business Admin. (Spanish)	Senior	Europe	Europe	Yes	No
P6	F	Biology	Senior	Europe	South America	Yes	Yes
P7	F	Psychology	Senior	Europe	Africa	No	Yes
P8	F	Biology (Chem.)	Senior	Europe	Europe	No	Yes

P9	F	Health Admin.	Junior	Europe	Africa	No	Yes
P10	F	Psychology	Senior	Asia	Europe	No	Yes

TABLE (1): PARTICIPANTS CHART AND STSA LOCATION

Data collection methods included in-depth individual semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a review of STSA course syllabi (Creswell, 2011; Stake, 2010). The researcher created an interview protocol to be utilized for the individual semi-structured interviews (Appendix B). The focus group was conducted after the completion of all individual interviews to reinforce, validate, and elicit additional examples from the participants' individual interview responses. Data collection and analysis took place from April 2019 through October 2019. The individual interviews and focus group were audio-recorded with permission of the participants and transcribed confidentially by a CITI-trained research assistant. Each individual interview lasted approximately 60-70 minutes and took place either on campus in the researcher's office or via video conferencing (Zoom™) using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B). The focus group meeting lasted approximately 45 minutes and took place in a classroom at BU. As depicted in Table (1), of the ten participants, four completed both an in-depth individual interview and a focus group; two completed only an in-depth individual interview (no focus group), and four completed only a focus group (no individual interview). This was due to the participants' availability at the time of data collection. The syllabi chosen for review provided a representative sample of STSA courses and included a variety of international travel locations, course topics, instructors, and a combination of first-year and upper-level STSA to ensure triangulation of data (Creswell, 2011; Stake, 2010).

Data collection included participants' oral quotes based on their recall of two different STSA and the ways in which they developed IC throughout these international learning experiences. To analyze the data, the researcher coded the participants' responses based on both ICM (Appendix A) and the research questions driving the study. Causation coding provided deeper reflection on the data's meaning by illuminating if and how the development of IC was revealed in relation to the research questions (Miles et al., 2014). The coding process allowed the researcher to categorize emerging themes across participants' responses by organizing, analyzing, constructing, and interpreting meaning based on their individual and collective words, phrases, feelings, and oral stories (Miles et al., 2014). Participants openly shared specific examples from

both of their STSA experiences, with a focus on adaptive behaviors, communication, flexibility, and empathy (Deardorff, 2006). Participants also discussed their perceptions of the role varied pedagogical elements (i.e., individual/group reflections, unstructured time, readings, cultural excursions, videos, etc.) played in their development of IC. The qualitative methodology provided a meaningful platform for participants to openly share formative experiences that permitted full engagement, sharing of ideas, and concrete examples from their STSA.

3. Findings

Nine themes and corresponding sub-themes emerged from the study to provide a more holistic comprehension of IC (see Table 2 below). The first five themes reinforced and enriched Deardorff's (2006) ICM by integrating thick, personal descriptions of participants' examples of if and how their IC developed throughout STSA using their own words (Younas et al., 2023). Four additional themes emerged to fill a gap in literature related to the intersection of STSA and IC development. The essence of IC was captured through themes that emerged across students' collective responses and oral stories about their shared lived experiences (Creswell, 2011).

Themes	Sub-themes
Attitudes of Respect and Curiosity (RA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Desired to be perceived as respectful by local inhabitants ▪ Shifted ideas of respect through withholding judgment ▪ Motivated by curiosity and need for discovery
Cultural Self-Awareness and Knowledge (K&C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased awareness of American cultural norms ▪ Desired to avoid negative stereotypes as Americans ▪ Increased knowledge of inhabitants' cultural norms
Physical Presence in Learning Space of STSA (S)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developed skills related to listening, observing, reflecting ▪ Received immediate feedback needed to adjust behaviors based on inhabitants' body language and non-verbal cues ▪ Enhanced awareness of subtle cultural differences
Internal IC Outcomes: Empathy and Flexibility (DIO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased empathy through engagement with local inhabitants, especially within indignant communities ▪ Enhanced flexibility for dealing with unexpected delays ▪ Gradually accepted slower pace of living
External IC Outcomes: Adaptive Behaviors and Communication (DEO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Actualized adaptive behaviors and communication abroad ▪ Increased confidence through successful interactions with inhabitants and in unfamiliar cultural settings ▪ Developed new strategies for adaptive behaviors following unsuccessful interactions

Peer Camaraderie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emphasized unstructured free time as critical for forming connections and spontaneous interactions with inhabitants ▪ Enabled spontaneous reflections, debriefing, and trial-and-error ▪ Provided continued support and motivation through new bonds and reflective feedback to go beyond comfort zone
Role of the Instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Alleviated students' anxieties and fears ▪ Fostered trusting and positive relationship ▪ Created safe spaces based on prior experiences in location and knowledge of course topics
Varied Pedagogical Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developed context for experiences and learning ▪ Facilitated meaningful connections between content, culture, and experiences ▪ Engaged in multicultural activities in U.S. and abroad
Short-term (7-15 days) International Travel Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provided significant opportunities for IC development ▪ Encouraged observations, reflections, and active experimentation while immersed in a culturally different international environment

TABLE (2): FINDINGS: THEMES/SUBTHEMES

3.1. Themes Aligned with ICM

The following section identifies themes that aligned closely with the dimensions of ICM: requisite attitude (RA); knowledge & comprehension (K&C); skills (S); desired internal outcomes (DIO); and desired external outcomes (DEO) (Appendix A). Select quotes were retrieved from participants' individual interviews (P#) and the focus group (FG) to support the findings.

3.1.1. Attitudes of Respect and Curiosity

Participants reported a strong desire to act respectfully toward local inhabitants and mirror the cultural norms during STSA. Findings corresponded to the RA identified in ICM. According to ICM, "respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery" form the foundation of IC (Deardorff, 2006). Participants shared several examples of their desire to be courteous towards others, despite their initial unease of being in a different cultural setting. They revealed how their respect for others and cultural differences, even prior to arriving in the country, guided their thoughts and actions throughout STSA. They stated:

(FG): I feel like we're going there so we need to show them respect. So, it's more like conforming to how they live as a culture. It was kind of like a learning thing. When you got there, you actually saw how everything was and how they lived; it was kind of like conforming to it.

(P1): Strangers would want to have their picture taken with you or hand you their child to take photo with us...it seemed strange and awkward because I didn't know about that culture at that point, but then it became a normal thing to be stopped... I felt like it would be rude to say no or walk away.

The words “respect, respectful, disrespectful, and rude” were mentioned twenty-times during the individual interviews and focus group. Participants communicated a shift in their understanding of what respect meant in intercultural spaces, particularly in relation to judging others' behaviors. This realization corresponded with ICM including “withholding judgment” as essential to being open to intercultural learning (Deardorff, 20026). Students acknowledged their discomfort in being regarded as rude or disrespectful by local residents. Participants felt such attitudes were critical for exploring and engaging in new experiences throughout STSA.

3.1.2. Cultural Self-Awareness and Knowledge

Participants reported a deeper awareness of their own cultural identity and how American culture was perceived by other cultures. Findings corresponded to the K&C dimension depicted in ICM. Participants expressed an increase in cultural self-awareness that led to a “deeper understanding and knowledge” of culture (Deardorff, 2006). Several participants reported a strong desire to avoid reinforcing negative American stereotypes of being viewed as “stereotypical loud Americans.” They felt pre-trip class discussion, videos, and readings about stereotypical American behaviors heightened their awareness of their own behaviors and prompted reflection while abroad. They stated:

(FG): Before we went to [STSA location], our professor showed us a video of how other people view Americans...I'm a very loud person, especially when I get passionate about something...I was very aware of trying not to play into that American stereotype. We are representing the U.S. and wanted to come off as a country that respects other countries.

(P2): We noticed the looks and glances of people on the metro whenever we were loud... you could tell based on the look in their eyes or their body language that it wasn't OK to be that loud at the time. We had to get used to being aware of who was around us and become more sensitive towards other people...We [adapted] by being very quiet on the metro and using hand gestures to communicate with each other to say things like ‘this is our next stop’ or ‘three stops.’

(P5): I noticed if we were to go out to a restaurant or bar at night, [local inhabitants] were not like the people here [in the U.S.] who talk pretty loudly. In the U.S., it's kind of like a competition to talk so that people can hear you. In [STSA location], it was the complete opposite. We had to adapt to that – we had to lower our voices in either restaurants or bars so people wouldn't think we were obnoxious.

Participants reported that being labeled as “stereotypical Americans” was a driving force for adapting their behaviors and communication. They expressed increased cultural self-awareness, along with increased K&C of other cultural norms, was instrumental to blending in with the local community. Participants also felt their increased awareness of self and others enabled them to model appropriate behavior for their peers.

3.1.3. Physical Presence in the Learning Space

Participants reported that being physically present in the space of a different country provided unique opportunities to develop a variety of skills fundamental to IC. Findings corresponded to the S dimension identified in ICM. Participants shared numerous examples of utilizing their “listening, observing, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, and relating” skills to navigate unfamiliar situations during STSA (Deardorff, 2006). Participants described stories of their experiences in which immediate reactions to their behavior from local inhabitants, peers, and instructors encouraged them to reflect, learn, and react in real-time (Gentry, 1990; Kolb & Kolb, 2017), by applying their evolving S. They stated:

(FG): It doesn't actually hit you until you're on the ground of that place in the environment, and you see how other people are acting, and you realize you have to adapt to someone else's home...I don't remember much from the classroom, but I remember what I saw there. The courses were really good at preparing me, but you're not exactly 100% prepared until you actually get there.

(P4): I would pick up cues from the wait staff either in their facial expressions or when they would talk and look over to a coworker.

Participants indicated that being physically present in a different country created an authentic space in which they were able to interpret the subtle nuances of the local culture. They relied on a variety of S to interpret and analyze others' body language and non-verbal cues in response to their own behaviors, and then adapt appropriately. Participants believed their S were

essential to understanding their behaviors and communication, which were enhanced by being physically present in a different cultural space (Deardorff, 2006). Their use and development of various S enabled them to manage unpredictable and intercultural situations while abroad.

3.1.4. Internal Outcomes of IC: Empathy and Flexibility

Participants reported multiple feelings of increased empathy and flexibility throughout their STSA. Findings corresponded to the DIO dimension depicted in ICM. Deardorff (2006) identified “adjustability, flexibility, ethnorelative view, and empathy” as components of DIO. These intangible forces were critical for creating an internal shift in students where they felt empowered to try different approaches for adapting within culturally different environments. The students eagerly shared stories about spending time with indigent children and refugees while abroad. Participants expressed that these situations, in particular, led to greater compassion, empathy, and openness towards the entire cultural community, and thus empowered them to act accordingly. They stated:

(P3): There was extreme poverty in the school we visited and lots of drugs. The [local] students had nothing -- no shoes, resources, nothing. Kids were asking what we have in America, and I didn't necessarily want to say what we had compared to them. They had a 'rewards closet' that contained a lot of hygiene stuff like toothbrushes, broken pencils, crayons...and they were so happy to have that. That was where I had to switch my focus... [I realized] these kids are just like us, in America. They're just caring and wanting to help others, but they just don't have certain resources.

(P5): Our teacher had told us that we were going to see a lot of refugees. We hadn't experienced that until we went to [STSA location] and ran into a lot of refugees. We played a soccer game with the refugee kids. There was this little box stand soccer court with turf on the ground and we were just playing around there, and then some refugees came up and we played a 5-on-5 game of soccer. It just sort of happened on its own. This showed us that people are the same everywhere you go. They just want to hang out, have fun, play sports, and be active.

Multiple participants expressed an enhanced acceptance and appreciation of differences in cultural beliefs and values, resulting in increased empathy during STSA (Van Dyne et al., 2008). Students shared examples of how

their interactions with local merchants and residents strengthened their empathy for others and impelled them to adjust their own attitudes and behaviors. Their increased empathy was an instrumental part of actualizing the DIO and created a shift in how they viewed and felt about others. Through their individual and collective words, feelings, and behaviors, participants demonstrated that their empathy for others continuously grew, and thus created a pathway toward flexibility while abroad.

Participants also expressed a gradual acceptance of unanticipated delays and a slower pace of local living. They stated:

(FG): Time was almost non-existent. The locals don't like to rush. They'll go through an entire day before doing something and they'll just kind of sit and relax and enjoy the weather or enjoy what they're doing and just talk. [Americans] would say they're lazy and viewed them as not having a lot of motivation, but the experience made me realize that's just the culture of not being concerned with time...The concept of just taking everything little by little was interesting to me and how we [Americans] are all rushed. Everyone took things slowly there. It just seemed like everything was laid back...it was not laziness.

(P1): As a group, we got used to living on '[STSA location]-time...For instance, in the restaurants, there was a long wait for food, and it came out at different times...the times of scheduled events kept changing with no notice. It was really frustrating because you kept being told a new time or then it would be canceled or switched with no explanation. It bothered us at first, but towards the end of the week, it was just kind of like, 'oh we accept it, that's how it is,' and we became less annoyed...Accept it for how it is and know that's how they do things.

(P4): Our group was traveling on a tour bus in a very small street in a rural area in [STSA location]. The bus couldn't fit, leading to an argument between the bus driver and a local woman – both were frustrated and agitated. I see how [the woman] feels, you know. She is having a peaceful day, there's not much going on in this town, she probably walks the street, but now there's our bus blocking it. I looked at it that way – was the giant bus 'blocking her view' or [said with emphasis] 'blocking her day?'

Through these experiences, participants were able to develop more flexibility in relation to their expectations of time. The students grew in their

understanding of how and why events happened differently in other cultural settings. This ability to grow in acceptance of unpredictable situations and different perspectives created a shift in students' internal frame of reference.

3.1.5. External Outcomes of IC: Adaptive Behaviors and Communication

Participants developed robust strategies for adapting their behaviors and communication to better mirror the local cultural communities throughout their STSA. Findings corresponded to the DEO dimension depicted in ICM. Deardorff (2006) identified "behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and abilities) to achieve one's goals to some degree" as the top dimension of ICM. Examples of DEO were embedded throughout students' recall of their lived STSA experiences, regardless of international location. Strategies included the use of body language, hand gestures, trial-and-error behaviors, group reflections, and behavior modeling as they adapted within intercultural situations. Students expressed increased feelings of maturity and confidence with each successful adaptation, which in turn, empowered them to employ these strategies to continuously demonstrate DEO throughout each of their STSAs. They stated:

(FG): I think a lot might have to do with mimicking behaviors. You're social monitoring so that you can fit in because you have that prior knowledge that we have to be respectful because we're the Americans coming into someone else's environment...The fondest memories were of stuff that went wrong. If you had told me this was going to happen before the trip, I would have thought maybe I shouldn't go...You're not expecting it to happen, so when it does, it's better because then you can just go with it and get through it.

(P5): I couldn't speak or understand the [local] language, [so] I would adapt by using my hands to try to communicate, even if it was just moving in a circular motion. There is a saying that there's common language within gestures...I would stop with my hands and look around to see if there is something to point to...they started to realize I was trying to explain something.

Participants created a pathway where they could actualize IC from a sequence of successful encounters with others while abroad. Each situation strengthened their realization that adaptability and flexibility were critical to positive and meaningful intercultural experiences. Findings reinforced the DEO

dimension of ICM as students expressed feelings of increased confidence and success in their ability to adapt their behaviors throughout their STSA.

3.2. Themes Related to the Intersection of STSA & IC

The themes discussed thus far supported each of the five dimensions of ICM and enriched ICM by incorporating participants' own oral stories and expressed feelings about their shared STSA lived experiences. Findings from this study filled a gap in literature through the emergence of four additional themes related specifically to the intersection of STSA and IC. These four themes included: peer camaraderie; role of the instructor; varied pedagogical elements; and short-term international travel period. The following section incorporates select quotes from participants' individual interviews (P#) and focus group (FG) to support these findings. Participants identified unique aspects of STSA they felt were critically instrumental in their overall development of IC.

3.2.1. Peer Camaraderie

Participants believed that experiencing STSA with their peers created an emotionally supportive environment as they collectively navigated unfamiliar cultural situations. They expressed that their relationships with peers and the dynamics of experiencing another culture in a different country as a group encouraged them to push beyond their comfort zones. They engaged in new experiences and learned collectively from their mistakes as they tested new behaviors. During the focus group session, students enthusiastically nodded, smiled, laughed, and built on each other's examples about the value of experiencing different cultural environments as a class. They stated:

(FG): I definitely felt a lot more comfortable [being] part of a class...I wouldn't have interacted as much if I were there on my own. I would have kept my head down and stayed on my own path...I was so happy to have the group because I'd be totally lost without it and it was very obvious that I was a foreigner in that country...I wouldn't have been as comfortable by myself and wouldn't have experienced the things that I wanted to experience.

(FG): I think being in a group helps you with your patience and flexibility because something is going to happen to someone in the group. You become a little family for the week, and you understand and help each other when you can...It's an anxious time for a lot of people, and you just come together and try to find a small group within your big groups....You felt more comfortable to be more

confident in these situations because you were in a group. It was kind of like a camaraderie, like ‘you’re all in this together’ kind of mentality. You’re all abroad, you’re all in a foreign place you don’t really know.

Participants expressed that unstructured time was vital for building relationships with their peers. Participants reported that informal, spontaneous conversations with their classmates at night in their rooms or during free time exploring neighborhoods provided a robust level of reflection and internalization of IC. Students’ intensity of learning and adventure increased as they moderated and supported each other through conversational spaces where they could talk about and reflect on their experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). They stated:

(FG): I think it’s good being in a group...I feel like if you’re alone, you experience all these amazing things, but you’re not sharing it with other people. You can tell people at home about it, but they don’t experience it the same way that you do because you’re just relaying it to people. We were all there, so we were aware of just how cool it was that we get to do this, instead of just having to tell it to someone else, like ‘oh I experienced this and it was just amazing.’

(P1): We would all just talk every night about our [daily] experiences. It was kind of cool because our bunks were right next to each other. I liked it because it was kind of like we’re all adults now, we should be able to take care of ourselves; we became close there. Everyone was on the same boat. When we got there, it was all of us thinking, ‘we’re here together, let’s talk.’ Even though we were not friends before [STSA], small groups would clique together, so it made it a little more comfortable because we all felt like we belonged there.

(P3): If I were scared or whatever, I would want to text someone from back home, but then realized they don’t have the perspective that you do standing on the grounds[*sic*] there. Just relying on people that I am with, rather than people who are not there. Something I really enjoyed about the trip was learning by being in the moment, and who I’m surrounded by, not necessarily my past experiences or future experiences or people who aren’t there.

Findings indicated that peer camaraderie was an essential element of IC development for all participants. Their relationships with their fellow classmates created genuine spaces for spontaneous conversations, peer support,

and laughter, which were essential to the way they reflected on, processed, and adapted to unfamiliar cultural situations.

3.2.2. Role of the Instructor

Participants reported that the instructors played a significant role in creating a supportive environment to reduce students' anxieties and fears. Participants felt the instructors' knowledge and passion for STSA locations and course content created emotionally and physically safe environments where they could openly explore new cultural entities. They stated:

(P1): We were going night snorkeling & also swimming into a swell where we were getting stung and didn't know what was happening. There was a high level of anxiety in both situations. The teacher gave us the option of not participating in anxiety-producing activities, and let students go back if they felt scared. You could tell [instructor] had done a lot of traveling so she knew exactly how to deal with it. I guess it turned a scary situation into, 'oh okay this is fine,' because she knew what was happening. It made all of us feel comfortable with what was happening...She was very calm, and that helped reduce anxiety in that situation, and built trust for future situations.

(P2): In class, we had a lot of communication. [Instructor] was very open and very passionate about what he did. He debriefed us a lot about what to expect when abroad and was very knowledgeable about where we were going. He prepared everything, all the museum visits, and he communicated with all the tour guides. It made for a much more relaxed trip than if someone hadn't prepared as well.

(P3): I was scared about how the locals were going to treat Americans. [Instructor] talked about misconceptions about how [others] view Americans before we went, so we felt safe when we were there...I was very scared going to [STSA location] because of the war. I was afraid of how they would treat Americans. Explaining these misconceptions in class made me so much more comfortable and able to go on the trip...and that's why I felt very safe when I was over there.

Findings demonstrated that trust and open communication between instructors and students were critical to alleviating the participants' anxieties and fears. Trust played an important role in students' sense of safety and willingness to embrace new experiences. As such, instructors were instrumental in creating and fostering a learning environment conducive to students' actualization of IC outcomes.

3.2.3. Varied Pedagogical Elements

Participants reported that the instructors' integration of a variety of pedagogical methods throughout the entire STSA created a meaningful context for which to develop IC. Reductions in students' anxiety, frustration, confusion, and disorientation encountered in intercultural settings occurred through proper pedagogical structure (Gopal, 2011). Examples of pedagogical elements identified by participants included readings, lectures, guest speakers, group discussions, journaling, written assignments, student presentations, individual/group reflections, and experiential cultural activities. Students expressed that participating in cultural activities prior to travel enabled them to make meaningful cultural connections during their time abroad. They stated:

(P1): During [pre-travel component of] STSA, we had to go out by ourselves and do something that is related to the culture. The teacher gave us examples of where we could go, so my friend and I went to get 'poke bowls.' I would have never gone to a poke restaurant before. We also took a hula class. I liked these activities.

(P2): [STSA#2] was about national identity, so we took a two-day trip to [U.S. city] to learn about our own national identity first.

(P3): We were able to 'step into the situation' and could see how it was in the past and how it is today. This helped build a connection in so many different ways. I felt like every student in the class was able to feel educated before going to the country. It wasn't just like sitting there lecturing us, it was hands-on communication.

Participants expressed that integrating an array of experiential and other activities before and during STSA created a deeper curiosity and need for discovery while abroad, along with increased awareness of similarities and differences between their own cultural identity and that of other cultures. While these sentiments aligned with ICM, they further demonstrated that utilizing multiple pedagogical tools before and during students' international experiences was instrumental in IC development.

3.2.4. Short-Term International Travel Period

Participants felt that the shorter time period (7-15 days) of international travel embedded in STSA provided them with enough opportunities for authentic intercultural experiences. Students found it easy to identify multiple examples of the ways in which their STSA experiences led to strong connections

with different cultural communities and had a positive effect on their overall IC. They stated:

(FG): I think just our short-term experience and being able to do multiple [STSAs] expands our adaptability and intercultural competence because you're able to immerse yourself in a culture within a week...I would say it doesn't have to be a really long trip. As soon as you get to another country, you're already immersed. And so, I think, usually if you're there for a week, something is going to happen to you at least once where you're going to have to figure out what to do in a situation.

(P4): I did develop IC and the [STSAs] helped strengthen it...[STSA#1] was my first time abroad, so I was very out of my element, but when I went on [STSA #2], obviously I was still out of my element, but I was more relaxed because I knew what to expect. I knew I was going to feel uncomfortable, and I knew to just kind of go-with- the- flow of whatever happened, and to be more adaptable.

All participants expressed that the short time period allowed for authentic engagement within different cultural contexts and felt that their individual IC increased throughout their experiences. While the shorter immersion period of STSA may not have provided full transformational learning, findings indicated that spending time as a participant in a class in another country, even if for a short period, provided enriching opportunities for students' development of IC.

5. Discussion

Findings from this study supported and extended prior research on IC (Deardorff, 2006) by integrating students' own words, feelings, oral stories, and perceptions about their shared lived STSA experiences and their individual development of IC. As STSA becomes increasingly popular in the realm of higher education, researchers and educators need to explore the ways in which STSA and related pedagogy can be utilized to develop students' IC. Undergraduate students expect institutions of higher education to adequately prepare them for future careers that meet the changing demands of the global environment. Findings from this study indicated that STSA created meaningful unique learning environments in which students were able to engage in different cultural environments with their peers and successfully adapt in diverse cultural and intercultural settings through their development of IC. The cyclical

interactions and symbiotic relationships between the individual students, their peers, and the environment provided multiple opportunities for reflective feedback and learning. Being in the physical space of another country, even if only for a short time, was critical for growth. Students' sense of adventure and engagement with their peers within the local space of another country demonstrated the importance of spontaneous conversations, trust, and camaraderie to the development of IC. Thus, STSA allowed opportunities for IC development in ways that were rich in cultural diversity and extended learning beyond traditional classroom experiences (Frye, 2003; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

The findings demonstrated that STSA provided a plethora of opportunities for students to expand their awareness, knowledge, and skills as they navigated through culturally unfamiliar situations. Unique to this study was the reciprocal and reinforcing nature of participants' external experiences and their internal learning and reflection. These enriched cultural experiences pushed students beyond their own comfort zones, while simultaneously pulling them in to process their experiences in genuine, meaningful ways. STSA created experiences in unique cultural spaces that gave opportunities for both individual and group reflection and support, which motivated students toward adaptive behaviors. These opportunities, in turn, enabled students to recognize the connection between internal forces (i.e., DIO of empathy and flexibility) and external actions (i.e., DEO of adaptive behaviors and communication) in creating authentic interactions with others through trial-and-error behaviors (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Deardorff, 2006; Frye, 2003). Recognition of these connections across time allowed students to develop "strategies for action that can be applied in their ongoing learning process" (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p. 27). Students' IC reinforced the notion that learning is "a continuous process grounded in experience" where ideas are "formed and reformed through experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 26), and created a continuous loop of learning (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Findings indicated that with each situation in which participants' adaptive behaviors resulted in positive feedback from local inhabitants, the more confident they felt in their ability to adapt to subsequent situations. The integration of a wide variety of pedagogical methods to explore culture prior to departure was also found to be critical in building a foundation for comprehension and robust appreciation of differences within cultural communities.

Findings revealed several parallels between the dimensions of ICM and students' shared experiences across diverse STSA. Findings enriched ICM by incorporating students' own words, thick descriptions, feelings, and stories to create a deeper understanding of ICM. For example, participants repeatedly reflected on, and adjusted their reactions and behaviors toward the local community in ways that demonstrated thoughtfulness, flexibility, consideration, and empathy within culturally different environments. Most participants communicated that their collective yearning to blend in with the cultural environment motivated them to quickly adapt to cultural expectations of behavior, especially within social settings, and in turn, modeled that behavior and flexibility for their peers.

Quotes from participants reflected the similar elements of ICM and illustrated how higher education pedagogy can support their development in students, particularly through STSA. Findings demonstrated that empathy was a critical component of DIO, and essential to students' development of IC. Through their own words, students expressed a continuous increase of empathy for the local community and each other, leading to a deeper and transformational experience.

Findings from this study add to the literature by providing meaningful insight into students' perceptions of the intersection of STSA and their own IC, as they situated their IC within specific elements of their STSA experiences. The data analysis led to four emerging themes: peer camaraderie; role of the instructor; varied pedagogical elements; and the short-term international travel period. Students collectively expressed that each of these themes played a critical role in their individual IC development and empowered them to successfully navigate culturally diverse and/or unfamiliar situations while in a different country. (Table 2).

Findings from this study demonstrate that STSA can create authentic intercultural experiences that form a foundation for a shift in students' internal frame of reference and successful external adaptive behaviors to effectively operate in intercultural or diverse environments (Deardorff, 2006). As one participant summarized their experiences:

[STSAs] helped build my idea of what it means to be a 'global traveler.' It is important to see another country's history and identity; how they see themselves. To be in their shoes and to view why they do this or why they see it as this, or why they talk about this over

something else. To feel like a global traveler, you need to be very open-minded, and able to say, ‘they feel this way because this happened in their past’ or ‘they see themselves along this line over how we perceive them because this happened. (P2)

6. Implications

The need for institutions of higher education to prepare students for the demands of the 21st-century global work environment requires educational leaders to provide and enhance intercultural experiential pedagogy that will develop IC (Kurpis & Hunter, 2016; Williams et al., 2017). College graduates need the skills and ability to interact effectively in diverse settings through intercultural competence whereby they “recognize another culture’s language, behaviors, values, policies, and adapt to these variations” (Aleksandrova, 2016, p. 8). STSA offers a unique experiential learning approach to higher education that empowers students to develop a deeper understanding of cultural differences that extends beyond the classroom. As the need for IC continues to be recognized as being vital for operating in global or intercultural work environments (Clawson, 2014; Crowne, 2008), institutions of higher education must consider integrating pedagogy that develops students’ IC into the curricula.

7. Limitations

The findings from this study are based on the self-reported recall of experiences and perceptions of a small number of undergraduate students who attended the same university. The case study approach allowed the researcher to gather breadth and depth in the students’ oral responses about their shared lived STSA experiences. However, the researcher only included students currently enrolled at BU who had recently completed STSA#2 during the Spring 2019 semester. Thus, there was a limited number of participants and STSA international locations included in this study. While the participants represented a variety of academic majors and there was a diverse array of STSA international travel locations, a larger sample would have provided a more robust generalization of the findings. Data collection occurred during the summer of 2019, which limited the availability of students to participate in the study. Extending the study to allow for data collection during the fall and spring semesters, when more students were on campus, may have increased the number of students interested in participating in the study.

A further limitation was that the researcher did not collect qualitative

data prior to students' STSA. The researcher wanted to conduct a qualitative case study that relied primarily on participants' novel and unique oral descriptions of their experiences. Time and availability of participants at the time of the study prevented the researcher from collecting pre-STSA data. Thus, a pre-post measurement would have enhanced the findings and more triangulation of the data (Stake, 2010).

8. Recommendations for Future Research

As more institutions of higher education recognize the importance of developing students' IC through international experiential learning programs, such as STSA, there will be a need for continued research that explores the intersection of STSA and IC. Students are key stakeholders in any educational environment, and therefore, research should incorporate their opinions and perceptions when analyzing, developing, and implementing STSA. Collecting pre-STSA qualitative data, as well as pre-post STSA quantitative data, would contribute to a more robust discussion and should be considered in future research studies.

Expanding this study to other institutions of higher education that offer STSA and/or international experiential learning programs is highly recommended. Other institutions may increase the diversity of the participant pool and STSA locations, providing more breadth and depth to the findings. Future research should also include interviews with STSA instructors to gather their perspectives on why and how they incorporate varied pedagogical elements within their STSA. The instructors may provide valuable insight into the relationship between specific experiential learning techniques and the development of students' IC.

STSA and international travel were significantly impacted during the COVID19 pandemic. Many universities suspended their offerings of STSA, limiting the opportunities for undergraduate students to travel internationally as a class. Future researchers may be interested in conducting a similar qualitative case study to explore the intersection of STSA and IC in undergraduate students post COVID19 within the context of higher education pedagogy.

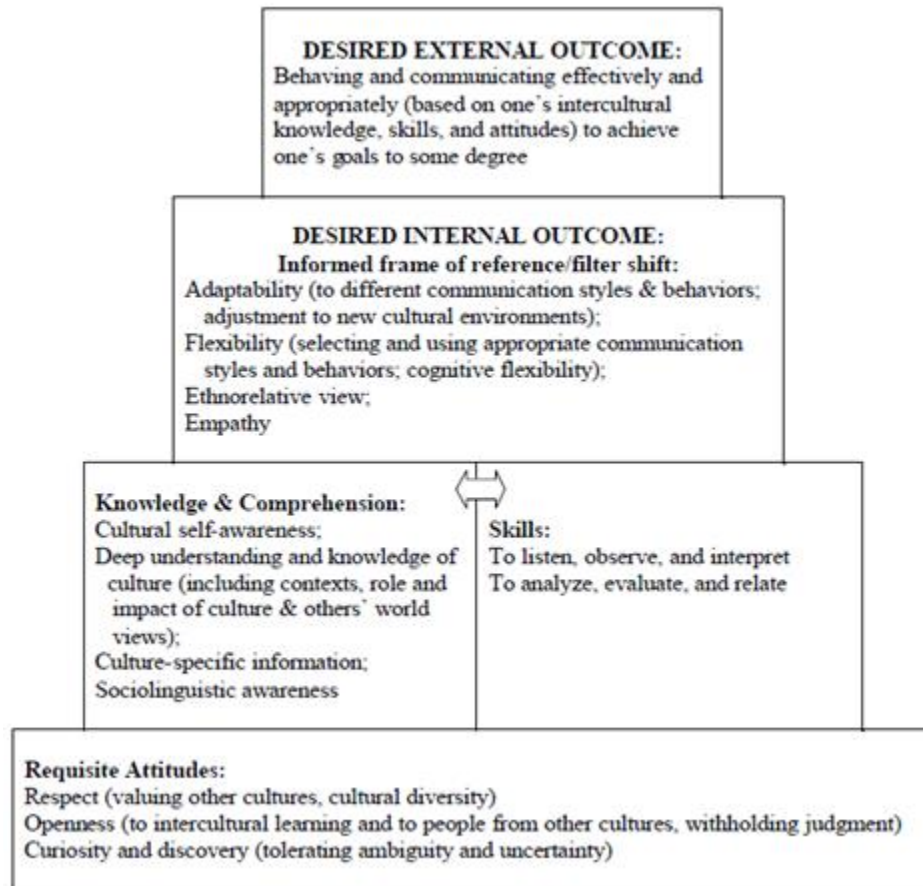
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Appendix A: Intercultural Competence Model (Deardorff, 2006)



From 'The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcomes of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States.' by Dr. Darla K. Deardorff in *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Fall, 2006, 10, p. 241-266.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol* (©Nolan, 2019)

Question 1: Can you share a few examples when you had to change your behavior to suit different cultural situations and people during the international component of your course(s)?

- Follow-up: What feedback did you receive (verbal/non-verbal) to determine if you acted appropriately given the situation? Explain.

Question 2: Can you share a few examples of times you had to accept delays without becoming upset when in different cultural situations or with culturally-different people during the international component of your course(s)?

- Follow-up: Were you anxious during these delays? How did you remain calm during situations in which you had limited control? Explain.

Question 3: What are some of the strategies you used to be flexible and adapt successfully during the international component of your course(s)?

- Follow-up: Was it harder to adapt given that you were in a culturally-different setting or with culturally different people? Explain.

Question 4: In what ways (if at all) did the activities or assignments used throughout the class help you in behaving and communicating effectively during the international component?

- Follow-up: What teaching methods (pedagogy) would have helped prepare you more?
 - What methods do you think were not very useful? Why?

Question 5: In what ways did your knowledge or attitudes about people from other cultures change through the STSA?

**Interview protocol is not to be replicated without written permission from Dr. Meg Nolan*

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