Research Article

Steps Towards Decolonizing Study Abroad: Host Communities' Perceptions of Change, Benefits, and Harms from Study Abroad

Heather Haeger[1], John E. Banks[2], Roman Christiaens[1], Lily Amador[1]

Abstract

Educational travel, and in particular study abroad programs, are generally beneficial to students, but less is known about impacts on the communities in which they are located. This study explores such impacts for a small rural community in Costa Rica that has hosted dozens of ecotourism and study abroad programs. Sixteen interviews were conducted in the community to explore the social and cultural rewards and costs of these programs, including cultural changes such as increases in community members speaking English, availability of drugs and alcohol, appreciation of nature, and adoption of sustainable living practices. We analyze these impacts by examining common programmatic assumptions about study abroad and borrowing biological constructs of symbiosis to diagram the potential trade-offs and costs for the local community – as the basis for developing more mutualistic, decolonized programs in the future.

Keywords:

Central America, community impact, cultural change, decolonizing approaches, intercultural exchange, study abroad, sustainability, symbiosis

1 University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, United States of America
2 California State University, Monterey Bay, CA, United States of America

Corresponding author: Heather Haeger, heather3@arizona.edu

Introduction

Educational travel, and in particular study abroad, is generally accepted as beneficial to students, increasing their awareness of and engagement with geopolitical, racial, ethnic and cultural differences (Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh, 2008; Sutton & Rubin, 2004, Tarrant et al. 2014). Less is known, however, about the impact on the communities where study abroad occurs (Galiardi & Koehn, 2011; Habashy & Webster, 2022). The vast majority of research on educational travel and international study experiences has focused on student outcomes, and more research is needed that takes into account the perspective of host community members (Schroeder et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2012). While recent research has highlighted the experiences of local community members who host study abroad students in their home (Doughty, 2022; Toms Smedley, 2016; Wairungu et al., 2022), there remain very limited investigations examining the perspectives of local community members who interact with visiting students and how they experience and perceive the impacts of the programs on the community as a whole (Habashy & Webster, 2022; Hartman et al., 2018;). This study also heeds recent calls to explore and implement decolonizing approaches to study abroad programs, including re-examining how those programs impact host communities and building reciprocal relationships with local community members (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Arvanitakis & Ogden, 2021; Hartman et al, 2020; Moreno, 2019). As universities work to provide high-impact practices for students to prepare them for the global workplace, they have typically focused on short-term benefits to students, and less frequently the effects their programs have on local communities. Yet the legacy of sustained global learning programs is often decades of exposure from visiting groups on a local community, with few exploring the real, often nuanced, neocolonial long-term impact these programs have on that community.

Costa Rica is home to several well-known exemplars of ecotourism schemes, both study abroad and otherwise, that employ and engage residents in conservation/education programs, with economic benefits accruing to local communities (e.g., Hunt et al., 2015; Toms Smedley, 2016; Troëng & Drews, 2004). Few studies have explored the full effects of these programs, particularly on small, remote rural communities. To address this gap, we focus here on a village that has hosted dozens of study abroad and ecotourism programs in the last two decades. A total of 16 ethnographic and targeted follow-up interviews were

conducted to explore how the introduction of ecotourism and study abroad groups has influenced the community socially and culturally.

Cultural Symbiosis

The host community in this study is a small agrarian village (population < 150 people) located in the province of San Jose, Costa Rica. The town features several family "*fincas*" or farms, where a number of sustainability-centered projects and study abroad programs focusing on ecology have developed during the past two decades. This town is unique in that it has rapidly transitioned from relatively isolated local agricultural production to hosting international groups that bring in ecotourists and undergraduate students over the last 16 years.

In exploring these changes, we use a model of cultural symbiosis adapted from theories of biological symbiosis (Sapp, 2004). We define cultural symbiosis as an intimate interaction between two or more cultural groups, which may or may not be beneficial to individuals from either culture. Previous studies of student-community interaction have utilized theories of intercultural exchange (Niendorf & Alberts, 2017), cross-cultural competencies (Engle & Engle, 2003), and intercultural and global learning (Nyunt et al., 2023) to assess student development. While focusing on the exchanges between individuals from different communities is a crucial part of understanding the impact of study abroad programs, we also argue that understanding exchanges on a social level is equally as important. We have therefore chosen to use a model of interaction that focusses on the impacts on the communities involved, not on specific individuals. Ecological theories of symbiotic relationships among plants and animals that were often discussed in the environmental programs offered to students provide a good model for exploring such impacts. Symbiosis provides a means of characterizing relationships among closely related parties, typically ranging across harmful, beneficial, and neutral interactions and impacts. We employ this framework to define the ways that host communities (the residents of the village) and study abroad communities (students, faculty and staff associated with the study abroad program) negotiate their relationships with respect to associated benefits, costs, and tradeoffs (see Figure 1; see Figure 3 for the adaptation of this model for use in this study).
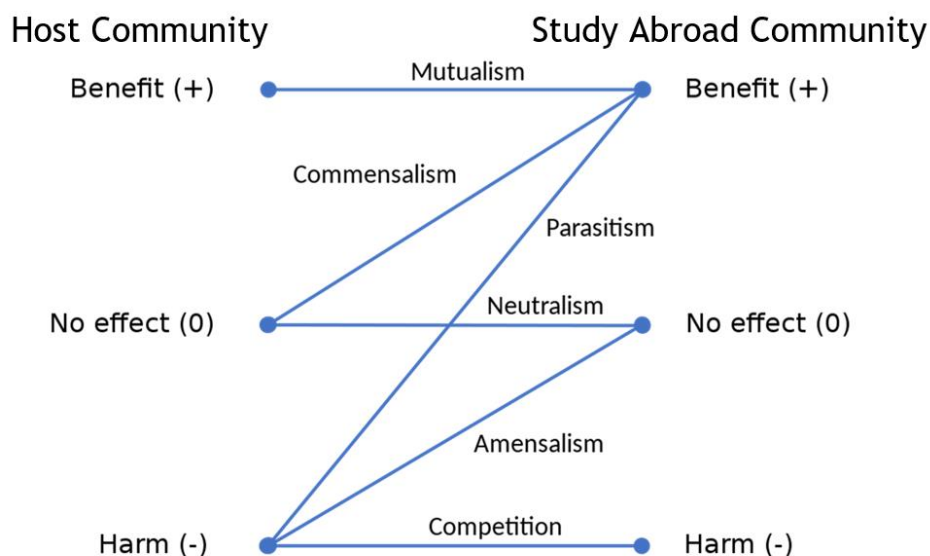
FIGURE (1): BIOLOGICAL OR ENVIRONMENTAL SYMBIOSIS

A mutualistic relationship means that the relationship is mutually beneficial for both communities in equitable ways. Prior research on ecotourism programs has shown that locals report positive community perceptions of programs that create jobs and income after the introduction of community-based-tourism, but this question has not been addressed for study abroad programs (Lopez-Guzman et. al., 2011). The ecotourism model is unique in that it emphasizes that the relationship between visitor and local environment should be a symbiotic relationship that is mutually beneficial to visitors, the environment, and local communities (Honey, 2008). Study abroad programs often also aim for a cultural exchange that benefits students as well as host collaborators (Hawthorne et al., 2012). Much research has demonstrated positive impacts on the student side of this equation (broadening their perspectives (Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh, 2008; Sutton & Rubin, 2004), creating cross-cultural communities and international understandings (Jones, 2014), and improving graduation rates (O'Rear et al., 2012) and intellectual development (McKeown, 2009). The present study examines the equation's other side more fully, the relationship between host and study abroad communities, to see if the relationship lives up to the ideal of mutually beneficial symbiosis.

Such an investigation of host community impacts is all the more important because focusing study abroad research so narrowly on student benefits represents a neocolonial ideology of "Othering' the host culture while

also devaluing the knowledge and experiences of the 'Other'" (Moreno, 2019, p. 74). Such a focus positions the host community as a place to be consumed or discovered by the student for personal benefit. Such perspectives automatically move toward what is called, under the cultural symbiosis model, a parasitic relationship because study abroad communities benefit but host communities are harmed (although one could perhaps argue that leading students to think in this one-sided way is also harmful to the students). Study abroad programs that do not explore the costs that their programs exact on host communities (Crabtree, 2013; Habashy & Webster, 2022; Schroeder et al., 2009) certainly tilt in this direction, simply by their lack of interest. Even many service learning-based programs that focus on local communities are often not aware of, and do not investigate the negative impacts they may have on their host communities (Doughty, 2022; Hartman et al., 2018; Toms Smedley, 2016; Wood et al., 2012).

Beyond the opposites of totally mutually beneficial and totally parasitic relationships, there are other possibilities in cultural symbiotic relationships. While lack of interest in impacts on host communities certainly counts as harmful by demeaning, there may nevertheless still be counterbalancing ways in which the host communities benefit. Ecological symbiotic models offer the possibility that a community could experience no effects (see above). In cultural symbiosis, however, we believe each community always experiences some effects from the interaction, so we have replaced the middle ground of "no effect" with a middle ground of "mixed effects," for situations in which a community experiences both benefits and costs (see Figure 3). In this light, for example, it is possible for study abroad communities to benefit while host communities have mixed effects, resulting in commensalism.

Decolonizing Study Abroad and Host Community Experiences and Impacts

As already mentioned, study abroad programs are enmeshed in discourses around study abroad as a high impact practice (Kuh, 2008) that aids students in developing global citizenship and gaining cultural competency skills. The scholars who have begun to critique this singular focus now call for decolonizing approaches to education abroad (e.g., Arvanitakis & Ogden, 2021; Hartman et al., 2020; Moreno, 2019), which Adkins and Messerly (2019) see as shifting from a one-sided and simplistic understanding of the relationship between programs and host communities towards a reciprocal, critically self-reflexive and deepened relationship-building approach that acknowledges the

profound complexities of local institutions, cultures and individual hosts. This approach moves towards "integrating diverse ways of knowing and being, especially from host communities" (Bryan et al., 2022, p. 52) and encourages continual and consistent engagement and self-reflection on the part of institutions and study abroad administrators in their work with host communities. Adkins and Messerly (2019) provide three primary suggestions for a decolonizing approach to host community engagement: shared ownership of programs, intentionality when selecting local partners, and a plan for reciprocity.

The existing research on the impact of study abroad and international service-learning programs on host communities has largely focused on local community members who serve as hosts and provide homestays for visiting students. This research has centered the experiences of local hosts with students, explored how their motivation and engagement with students is informed by cultural values, and highlighting why study abroad programs need to recognize the importance and role of local knowledges in student learning (Doughty, 2020; Ficarra, 2019; Wairungu et al., 2022). These studies have explored host understandings of programs and participants as bringing economic contributions, social/cultural benefits and professional or work assistance/support to their local community (Habashy & Webster, 2022; Sherraden et al., 2013; Toms Smedley, 2016). In a study of community members engaged with a field research program in Costa Rica, Habashy and Webster (2022) also found negative perceptions related to the transactional nature of relationships with students due to rigid program schedules and the locus of control by program administrators. Their study emphasized the disconnect that community members often felt between the community and the program (students and staff) and provided recommendations to center community voices and enhance benefits for the local community.

This study builds on these insights by exploring impacts on the community as a whole and offering a conceptual model of two-way cultural symbiosis that moves beyond a simplistic rendering of host communities merely as receptacles for the impact of study abroad programs. Hence, our exploration of the cultural costs, benefits, and tradeoffs of hosting study abroad programs for a small, rural village in Costa Rica.

Methods

For this research, we conducted an ethnographic study to explore how the introduction of ecotourism and study abroad programs in a rural Latin American village 16 years ago has influenced the local community socially and culturally (Gubrium et al., 2012). Our study took advantage of the fact that no tourism facilities were present in the village until late 2001, when foreigners purchased property and opened a sustainable ecotourism center; several other learning centers subsequently opened, focusing on various aspects of sustainability (including agricultural production and the conservation of biological diversity) and primarily owned and run by local residents. Through an ethnographic approach, we not only conducted interviews, but stayed in the local community to observe intercommunity interactions, participate in local and student community activities, and conduct interviews (Whitehead, 2005). Members of the research team spent approximately two weeks in the community each of two years (2016 & 2017), staying with one of the study abroad programs. They observed community interactions during program events and day-to day life, and participated in these events including meals, tours of local farms, and educational events about conservation efforts. Participants in the study born in Costa Rica referred to themselves as Ticos (male) or Ticas (female), and we thus refer to all participants born in Costa Rica as Tico/as. We conducted interviews with Tico/as in a location of their choosing and in the language they were most comfortable speaking (English or Spanish). We also interviewed foreign residents in the town (see Table 1).

Pseudonym	Type of Interview (s)	Language	Connection to Town
Larry	Life-long	English	Resident
Victor	Life-long	English	Resident
Michael	Life-long and targeted	Spanish	Tico
Monica	Life-long and targeted	Spanish	Tico
Sophia	Targeted	Spanish	Tico (from nearby city)
Bobby	Life-long and targeted	Spanish	Tico
Isaac	Targeted	English	Visitor
Xavier	Life-long	Spanish	Tico
Alejandro	Life-long	Spanish	Tico
Oswaldo	Life-long and targeted	Spanish	Tico
Cata	Life-long	Spanish	Tico
Gabriel	Life-long	Spanish	Tico

TABLE (1): INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION (*N*=16)

*Tico= permanent resident and originally from the town unless otherwise specified, Resident= permanent resident of the town but not from Costa Rica, or Visitor=temporary visitor, not from Costa Rica such as a study abroad staff member.

Community observations were used to build rapport, recruit interview participants, and inform the interview structure and protocol. We decided on in-depth interviews with fewer participants to be able to focus on their stories and therefore recognize the limits of generalizing beyond this sample (Jones et al., 2013). We recruited participants who were directly associated with programs as well as other unaffiliated individuals to increase the breadth of perspectives. We conducted life-long, ethnographic interviews in which participants were invited to talk about life growing up and living in the community, and then to reflect on their present-day life and interactions (Jones et al., 2013). Ten life-long interviews were conducted in Costa Rica in 2016-2017. For these interviews, participants were asked to introduce themselves and tell us about their backgrounds (Gubrium et al., 2012). Interviewers then followed up on topics that participants had brought up organically (Jones et al., 2013).

Additional targeted, follow-up interviews guided by an interview protocol focusing on cultural and social changes in the town were also conducted. Preliminary analysis of the life-long interviews informed the protocol for more targeted follow-up interviews which focused on ecotourism, study abroad groups, social norms, and culture (N=6). All interview protocol questions were reviewed by two native Spanish speakers before being used. Interviews varied in length with the life-long interviews lasting longer and targeted interviews lasting approximately an hour and a half.

Data Analysis

Intellectual memos were created by interviewers and the lead researcher to process initial interpretations of the interviews (Birks et al., 2008). Intellectual memoing is a grounded-theory technique that assists the researcher in making conceptual leaps from raw data to explanatory abstractions (Birks et al., 2008). Intellectual memoing is a grounded-theory technique that assists the researcher in making conceptual leaps from raw data to explanatory abstractions (Birks et al., 2008). Initial analysis was conducted in Spanish. Common themes were identified in the first round of coding which was done on the audio files in NVivo. A summary of each interview was also created in

Spanish and translated to English. Interviews were transcribed in Spanish and translated into English as well. Interviews were conducted by two American undergraduate researchers who learned Spanish from their parents. Two additional, native Spanish-speaking, researchers reviewed the translation and identified areas of miscommunication due to language differences between the interviewers and the participants. For instance, the interviewers were both bilingual, but lived in the United States, speaking primarily English, so they made grammatical errors including the misuse of cognates or mixing of the two languages (see Table 2 for identification of language-based miscommunication in the interviews).

Problem	Example (Spanish)	Literal Translation to English	Clarification
The use of cognates (literal use of English words that are similar in Spanish)	"¿Usted cree que la comunidad *soporta* los extranjeros?"	"Do you think the community *puts up with* the foreigners?"	"Do you think the community *supports* the foreigners?"
Misunderstandings due to lack of clarification of the questions	"Que costumbres ha mirado como para el cambio de la vida de ser de la comunidad?"	"What habits have you looked for as a change of life to be from the community?"	"What characteristics of the way of living in the community have changed?"
The use of slang and regionalisms	"¿Usted cree que los extranjeros *le dan mucha lata* a los locales?	"Do you think foreigners *give too much can to the* locals?"	"Do you think foreigners bother the locals too much?"
Conjugation of words whether in past, present or future tense	"Entonces *las personas de antes cosechan más comida* que lo que siembran hoy?"	"So, *people from before harves*t more food than what they harvest today?"	"So, people from before used to harvest more food than what they harvest today?"

TABLE (2): IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL ERRORS OR MISUNDERSTANDING IN INTERVIEWS

These miscommunications were taken into account when interpreting and coding the interviews. As we created intellectual memos, a number of larger themes and subthemes emerged. A team of researchers (one bilingual, one native Spanish speaker, and two English speakers) coded the translated interviews with the following coding structure (see Figure 1 for coding structure) and checked the coding against the original Spanish interviews.
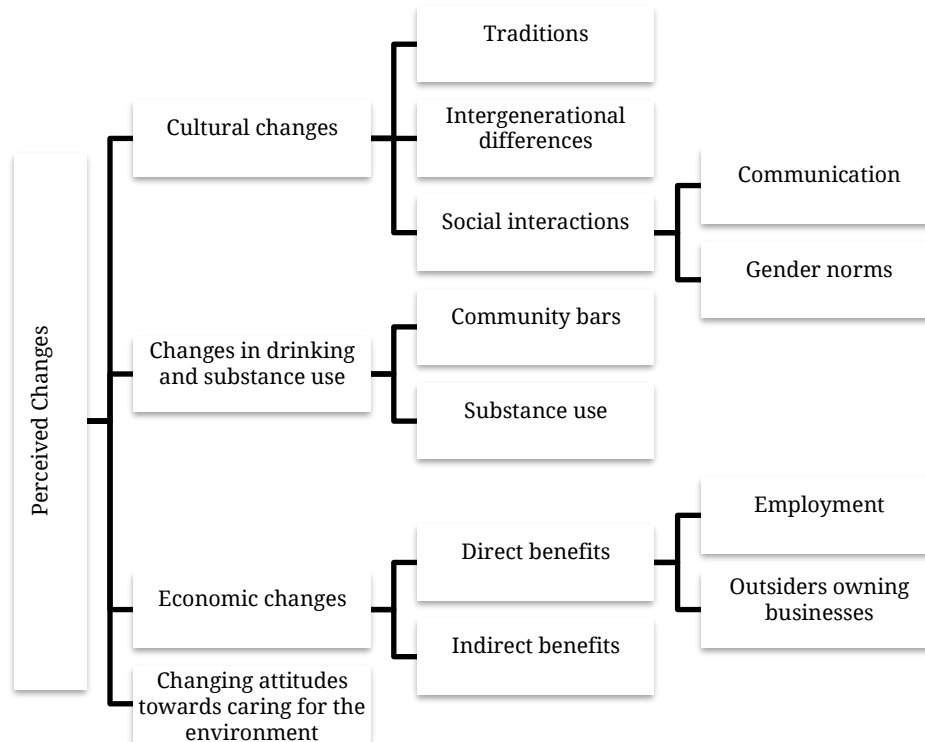
FIGURE (2): INTERVIEW CODING STRUCTURE

Positionality

Our position as researchers from a U.S. institution that runs one of the study abroad programs under examination influences our experiences in this Costa Rican host community. The research team includes a lead researcher who is not affiliated with the study abroad program but is affiliated with some of the faculty who take students to this Costa Rican town; a faculty member who takes students to study and do research in Costa Rica; and a research team of undergraduate and graduate students. We are cognizant of the power differential, both within our team and when entering the Costa Rican community. To address the latter differential, especially as visitors affiliated with a source of revenue for some of the participants (e.g., community members who make a living housing students or leading field research trips), we took the following steps. The undergraduate researchers conducted the interviews. They spent time in the town getting familiar with the community before inviting anyone to participate in interviews. Subjects invited to participate were clearly informed that declining to participate would in no way impact their business with any of these programs. Interviews were conducted at the place and in the language of the participant's choosing. Initial interviews were open, and

participants directed the topics of these interviews. Follow-up interviews only addressed topics that had organically come up in previous interviews. Participants all agreed to use their names and had the opportunity to redact any or all of the interview if they did not want that information shared with the research team or published. We have chosen to not use the name of the village and to use pseudonyms in this paper as an extra step to protect participants' privacy.

It is also important to situate this research within a history of colonization including Spanish and North American colonization of indigenous people and land to current neocolonialism in which global forces apply economic pressures on Central America. As is the case in this host community, Costa Rica has shifted from a largely agricultural economy to an economy based on technology production for international corporations and tourism, particularly ecotourism (Weaver, 1999). It is estimated that over a quarter of Costa Rica's revenue is from tourism and that the extent of ecotourism is even greater in rural areas (Braun et al., 2015; Valverde Sanchez, 2018). The programs which bring students and ecotourists to Costa Rica are embedded in the context of Costa Rica's colonial history and neocolonial present. Our position as outsiders to this local community, who are affiliated with a U.S. university, cannot be disentangled from this context. To the extent possible, however, we sought a decolonizing approach to understanding study abroad by engaging with community members to share their perspectives. We also attempted to honor the disparate voices of community members who experience the influence of these programs differently because of their economic relationship to them, gender, age, or social standing. As such, we recognize the power dynamic of our position in relation to the community within the colonial system of Western higher education and its neocolonial effects (Stein & De Oliveira Andreotti, 2016).

Findings

In the life-long interviews, participants frequently brought up social and cultural changes since the introduction of study abroad and ecotourism programs 16 years ago, including cultural changes, changes in substance use, economic changes, and shifting attitudes about the environment. Their accounts revealed a complex interplay of cultures in the local and visiting communities. Key themes that emerged were: differences in experiences of cultural change by

generational status and economic proximity to the program; access to alcohol and drugs along with changes in norms around alcohol consumption and social gatherings; and increased knowledge and engagement in sustainable practices.

In interpreting the results, it is important to note that participants did not distinguish between the various programs that brought visitors and referred to them generally as *"grupos"*, a term we also use when talking about the ecotourism and study abroad programs and their associated students. For that reason, this analysis cannot disentangle the impact of a specific program from the impact of the *grupos* in general.

Perception of Changes

Participants generally spoke positively of the economic benefits of the *grupos*, though the degree to which they benefited directly varied. Many participants worked directly with the programs (e.g., providing food, housing, or services) and thus received direct economic benefits. Others benefited indirectly via increased economic activity in the town. Oswaldo, a local rancher, noted:

> Most people feel good because, as I already mentioned, they are benefiting directly or indirectly. Some with the homestay, others sell eggs or cheese, and in this way some among others benefit. The people who see them different are the people who live near the bar because they are usually very noisy places.

Participants who benefited directly also discussed more direct cultural interchanges. For instance, Cata, who regularly had students stay in her house, notes:

> It's a benefit because they would pay me, and I could learn because there are people who come to exchange ideas and their culture. [My child] has the opportunity to socialize with strangers, it's very nice and it happens in different families. If it is a very large group there may be up to five families that have someone staying at their house.

The perception of cultural changes also varied by generational status. Participants who became adults before the *grupos* came perceived the greatest changes. Gabriel describes how they have seen this dynamic change happen.

> I would say in the last 15 years, for a community so small of 120 habitants ... the amount of visitors can sometimes come to be the

same number as the locals. Then, yes, the people see themselves exposed to different cultures and some take a part in that culture and/or some activities start to become formalized and form part of a new culture that is rising I would say.

Older participants noted the cultural changes were caused by the following: the introduction of English and the fact that most young Tico\as in the village are bilingual, the shift away from being a "horse culture" due to the introduction of cars and motorcycles, and the introduction of new holidays like Halloween or sports like basketball or activities like bingo. Changes in sports and recreation are spaces of cultural exchange that can be enjoyable for community members and visitors. Michael, a Tico who runs a *finca* and hosts visiting students, notes that:

> Sometimes when there are soccer games, foreigners also join these games. No matter who is playing. They also play frisbee and in the same way, they also invite people to play with them. Also when foreigners come, many bingo games are held. In general, they all sit at different tables but it is only to generate interaction among all...I think it's very good because most of them are looking to socialize and have an exchange of culture.

Environmental Value

In a more positive exchange, many participants mentioned the benefits that the value that the *grupos* placed on nature and preserving natural resources has brought. Many programs that come to the town are focused on sustainable living, farming, or ecotourism. Cata describes the influence of these programs and their associated values.

> It's very nice, I like it. Tourists always want nature and recycling is promoted a lot. They also like the biodiversity, if they see a sparrow pass it surprises them and make them say "wow", they give a huge value to the small things. Since I live here, I see these things every day but many tourists comment about the beauty of the place things like 'those trees near the library are amazing' or maybe a toucan passes by and they say 'all we have here is a blessing.' We, the locals, started to notice all these things and that they are right.

She laughs at how they are also shocked when they experience things that they had only previously seen in library books like the rainforest or a

toucan overhead. This excitement has helped her see the natural surroundings as a "blessing" and something to be preserved. She notes:

> In other places, there are no trees a lot fewer birds and we started to create that, to give value to what we have that has happened here. People no longer want to pollute the rivers, now if someone sees a bird they say "how cute" at least they give it a little more importance, not like they did before and they did not even notice it. They have educated us about the environment to give value to what we have.

Gabriel also notes that:

> A lot of people are now making more conscious efforts about the protection of the environment as well as of health ... Organic farms and other farms too that have emerged to provide services to the people who want to visit...

These programs and cultural shifts leading to value preservation of natural resources have bolstered awareness of the need to reduce pollution, protect biodiversity, and create more sustainable farming practices.

Discussion

The impact of these programs is not felt homogeneously by all, and opinions of the benefits of having such programs vary by an individual's relationship with the programs (e.g., benefiting directly due to employment/business dealings with programs). Individuals in the community that directly and economically benefit from the program saw the impact as more positive than those that experienced the cultural changes without direct economic benefits. This may be due to the actual economic benefits, but community members directly connected to the program also noted more cultural exchanges because of their close contact with the *grupos* which also increased their knowledge about other cultures and ability to learn English. The fact that these programs started becoming prevalent in the area 16 years prior meant that older residents have seen dramatic changes; whereas, these programs and their cultural influences have been present for much of younger residents' lives. Participants noted the social and cultural rewards and costs of these programs including cultural changes like more community members speaking English, increased availability of alcohol, and changes to social norms around gender and drinking. Additionally, participants talked about the

programs increasing their appreciation of nature and adoption of sustainable living habits.

In looking at cultural symbiosis as interaction between two or more cultural groups, which may or may not be beneficial to individuals from either group, we see evidence of both benefits and tradeoffs for the host community. Ideally, study abroad programs should aim for cultural exchange that benefits both students and host collaborators (Hawthorne et al., 2014). Previous research has made clear that study abroad is generally beneficial for students, even if the degree to which individual students benefits may vary (Dwyer, 2004; Pedersen, 2010; Trooboff et al., 2008). For that reason, the diagram of cultural symbiosis for study abroad programs and host communities in Figure (3) assumes benefit for the study abroad community, leading to three possible options for their relationship to their host communities.
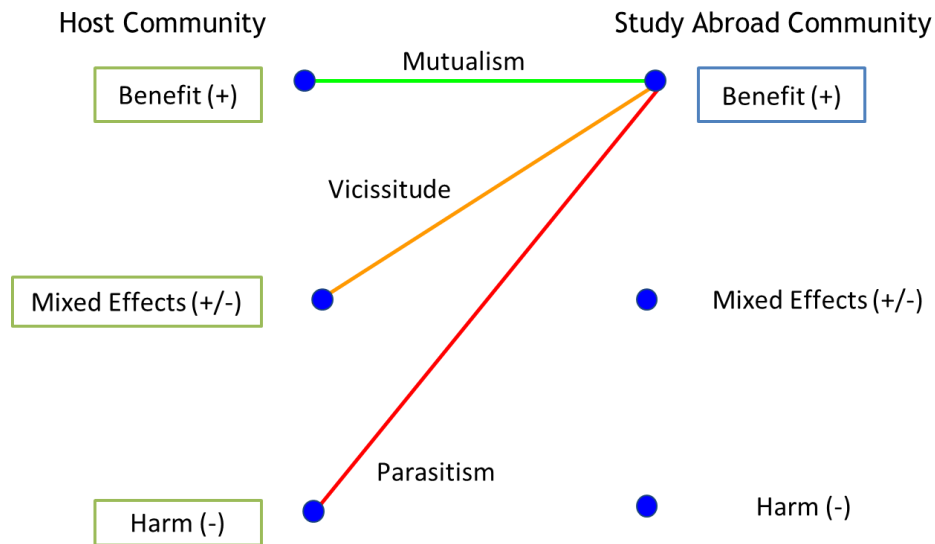

FIGURE (3): CULTURAL SYMBIOSIS

Study abroad programs at their best strive for a mutualistic relationship between both communities benefiting, but at their worst can lead to a parasitic relationship where the study abroad community benefits at the expense of the host community. Our study found the relationship between the *grupos* and the host Costa Rican community to be somewhere in between. Whereas the biological model of symbiosis refers to this in-between space as commensalism (where one community benefits and the other is neither harmed nor benefited), we feel different terms and concepts are needed for cultural symbiosis. As argued above, cultural symbiosis always carries impact for both sides. There is

no possibility of one community being neither harmed nor benefited. The in-between space on the model refers, therefore, to a community receiving both benefit and harm – in other words, "mixed effect." And a relationship in which one community receives benefits and the other receives mixed effects can be termed "vicissitude." Vicissitude is a negotiated state of change over the course of the relationship. One side, study abroad, clearly benefits and the other side, the host community, negotiates a state of change with both benefits and harms. We found a number of cultural changes within the host community, some of which were losses of cultural knowledge and tradition with greater foreign influence along with changes of social norms that have created social issues in the community. Despite this, we also found that participants generally talked favorably about the *grupos*, especially in terms of economic development and environmentalism. Hosting ecotourism and study abroad programs may be something of a Faustian bargain where an item of great moral worth is exchanged for material goods. In this case, study abroad may create a situation where small communities are indelibly changed by outside neocolonial influences in exchange for economic opportunities. This effect is also magnified by the size and location of the community. There is likely a greater impact for small, rural communities that host study abroad and ecotourism programs because they are more likely to be changed by outside visitors. Programs should consider the saturation of foreign visitors and how that creates a greater state of vicissitude and risk of parasitism for the host community.

In addition to the importance of taking the size and location of host communities into account when designing international education programs, it is also important to understand the historical context and how it shapes this negotiated relationship. As seen in this agrarian village host community, a benefit of the visiting *grupos* has been a renewed appreciation for the environment and sustainable practices. Though the community members all saw this as a positive, it is also important to remember that this negotiated relationship is situated in a history of colonization, and that colonizers were the ones to introduce farming and industrial practices that caused the environmental problems. Most of the study abroad and ecotourism programs come from countries that have been colonial powers and continue to exert a neocolonial influence (Moreno, 2019). Study abroad and ecotourism programs should be cognizant of the historical context in which they are situated and grapple with how to create mutually beneficial relationships out of historically exploitative ones. This, in and of itself, could be an opportunity for students to learn about the broader social and

cultural context of the place they are studying and about indigenous cultures and practices. For example, some of the programs that visit this village work with a native healer to learn about medicinal plants and indigenous culture. Partnerships with the local indigenous community could be expanded to learn about traditional agricultural practices and the ways those traditional practices align or diverge from the sustainable framing practices that the external groups are learning about.

Implications

Our findings reveal the complicated effects of a study abroad program and its participants on a host community. It suggests that such programs need to be cognizant of their location, their size relative to the local population, and the historical, sociocultural context of the location's external relationships in order to negotiate relationships that mutually benefit visitors as well as locals.

This study was conducted before the global, COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The village had already experienced a large shift from an agricultural economy to a study abroad and ecotourism-based economy. When the latter largely shutdown during the pandemic, the dramatic impact that study abroad programs can have on their local communities became even clearer. Further research should explore the impacts these programs have when disrupted by unforeseen events like the pandemic, or simply when study abroad programs end or change locations.

The calls to consider the location, proportional size of programs, and the historical, sociocultural context in which they are situated align with calls from critical scholars for study abroad educators and administrators to engage in decolonizing approaches to study abroad. Their call for a reciprocal, shared and intentional approach to host community engagement (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Hartman et al., 2018) are quite relevant to our study's findings. It is important that individuals who oversee study abroad programs are "adapting program structure and curricula to better support a more equitable global exchange and to challenge dominant neoliberal and neocolonial discourses that U.S. students may bring with them as they travel abroad" (Moreno, 2019, p. 105). One key consideration in these approaches is to center the voices, knowledge, and experiences of local community members in the development, implementation, and evaluation of study abroad programs – precisely what we have attempted to do with this study.

Research demonstrating that study abroad programs frequently are often not cognizant of their impact on their host communities has also found that when prompted to think about these influences, program faculty and staff are able to identify several steps to mitigate negative influences (Wood et al., 2012). This suggests that even simply raising awareness of the perspective of local communities could create more mutually beneficial relationships. Beyond this, it is essential to engage with community members in meaningful ways to shift power away from foreign, economic influences, and enable local communities to make decisions for themselves. Challenging ingrained structures of neocolonialism within higher education is an arduous, but necessary, process (Stein & De Oliveira Andreotti, 2016).

Galiard and Koehn (2011) provide concrete steps to create more mutualistic study abroad programs before, during and after an international experience. They suggest that individual and group development with students before they leave can better prepare students to learn and engage in meaningful intercultural experiences. During the study abroad experience, students should participate in reflective activities with community members and facilitate dialogs about equitable international relationship. Finally, they suggest that students continue engaging with the host community even after they return home.

Future research should focus on how local community members would define a mutually beneficial relationship with study abroad and ecotourism programs and how programs can implement changes to that effect. Research should also develop a model for community-centered planning and implementation of programs that can be enacted in different host communities. This is also an opportunity for faculty involved in study abroad programs to engage in participatory action research about the impact of their programs on local communities. This work could create a more mutualistic symbiosis model of ecotourism and global learning which could markedly benefit the design and implementation of study abroad programs, especially for programs that enter into small communities, as their impacts may be especially severe.

Acknowledgement

of Karina Ruiz and Flor Gomez who collected data for this project, and Logan Pender who assisted with reviewing prior literature.

References

Adkins, R. & Messerly, B. (2019). Toward decolonizing education abroad. In E. Brewer & A. C. Ogden (Eds.), *Education abroad and the undergraduate experience* (pp. 73-91). Stylus Publishing, Sterling, VA.

Arvanitakis, J. & Ogden, A. C. (2021). Decolonizing education abroad: From safe spaces to brave spaces. *CAPA: The Global Education Network Occasional Publication Series, 9*, 43-55.

Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 13*(1), 68–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107081254

Braun, Y. A., Dreiling, M. C., Eddy, M. P., & Dominguez, D. M. (2015). Up against the wall: Ecotourism, development, and social justice in Costa Rica. *Journal of Global Ethics*, *11*(3), 351–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2015.1100653

Bryan, D., Viteri, C., Murphy Hatz, C., Csoman, K., Pilaquinga, E. M., & McGrath, E. (2022). Reimagining risk management: Decolonzing crisis response through holistic partnership building in education abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 34*(3), 44-72. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v34i3.672

Crabtree, R. D. (2013). The intended and unintended consequences of international service-learning. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, *17*(2), 43-66. https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/communications-facultypubs/20

Doughty, J. R. (2020). A narrative study of South African community members' experiences with an international service-learning program. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement, 8*(1), Article 16. https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.12661

Dwyer, M. M. (2004). More is better: The impact of study abroad program duration. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 10*, 151–163. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v10i1.139

Engle, L., & Engle, J. (2003). Study Abroad Levels: Toward a Classification of Program Types. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 9*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v9i1.113

Ficarra, J. (2019). *Producing the global classroom: Exploring the impact of US study abroad on host communities in San Jose, Cost Rica and Florence, Italy* (Publication No. 1041) [Doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University]. Dissertations – ALL.

Galiardi, S., & Koehn, J. (2011). Strategies to mitigate the negative and accentuate the positive impacts of international service-learning on host communities. *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*, *2*(1). Retrieved from http://libjournal.uncg.edu/prt/article/view/431

Gubrium, J. F., Holstein, J. A., Marvasti, A. B., & McKinney, K. D. (2012). *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*. SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452218403

Habashy, N. & Webster, N. (2022). The power of listening: Host community members' perspectives of a field research education abroad program in Costa Rica. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 34*(3), 168-202. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v34i3.673

Hartman, E., Ferrarini, C., Messmore, N., Evans, S., Al-Ebrahim, B., & Brown, J.M. (2020). Coloniality-Decoloniality and Critical Global Citizenship: Identity, Belonging, and Study Abroad. *Frontiers* 32(1), 33-59. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v32i1.433

Hartman, E., Kiely, R.C., Friedrichs, J., & Boettcher, C. (2018). *Community-Based Global Learning: The Theory and Practice of Ethical Engagement at Home and Abroad.* Stylus Publishing.

Hawthorne, T. L., Atchison, C., & LangBruttig, A. (2014). Community geography as a model for international research experiences in study abroad programs. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 38*(2), 219-237. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2014.908351

Honey, M. (2008) *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Second Edition. Island Press, Washington, D.C. 568pp.

Hunt, C.A., Durham, W.H., Driscoll, L., & Honey, M. (2015). Can ecotourism deliver real economic, social, and environmental benefits? A study of the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 23(3):* 339-357. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2014.965176

Jones, C. W. (2014). Exploring the microfoundations of international community: Toward a theory of enlightened nationalism. *International Studies Quarterly*, *58*(4), 682–705. https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12115

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., Arminio, J., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2013). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203123836

Kinzie, J., Gonyea, R., Shoup, R., & Kuh, G. D. (2008). Promoting persistence and success of underrepresented students: Lessons for teaching and learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *2008*(115), 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.323

Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter.* Washington, D.C.: AAC&U.

Lopez-Guzman, T., Sanchez-Canizares, S., & Pavon, V. (2011, Spring). Community-based tourism in Developing Countries: A Case Study. *Journal of Tourism, 6*, 69-84. https://doi.org/10.26215/tourismos.v6i1.196

McKeown, J. S. (2009). *The First Time Effect: The Impact of Study Abroad on College Student Intellectual Development*. SUNY Press, New York, NY.

Moreno, R. (2021). Disrupting neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies in U.S. study abroad: From discourse to intervention. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 33*(2), 93-109. https://doig.org/10.36366/frontiers.v33i2.529

Niendorf, B., & Alberts, H. (2017). Student Cultural Interaction in a Short-Term Study Abroad Program. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, *28*(1), 64–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/08975930.2017.1316224

Nyunt, G., Niehaus, E., Light, A., Boryca, A., & Bryan, A. (2023). Online + International: Utilizing Theory to Maximize Intercultural Learning in Virtual Exchange Courses. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, *35*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v35i1.789

O'Rear, I., Sutton, R. L., & Rubin, D. L. (2012). The effect of Study abroad on college completion in a state university system. *Glossari Project, 18*(53). Retrieved from http://glossari.uga.edu/wpcontent/uploads/downloads/2012/01/GLOSSARI-Grad-Rate-Logistic-Regressions-040111.pdf

Pedersen, P. J. (2010). Assessing intercultural effectiveness outcomes in a year-long study abroad program. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *34*(1), 70–80. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.09.003

Sapp, J. (2004). The Dynamics of Symbiosis: An Historical Overview. *Canadian Journal of Botany,* 82, 1046-1056. https://doi.org/10.1139/b04-055

Schroeder, K., Wood, C., Galiardi, S., & Koehn, J. (2009). First, do no harm: Ideas for mitigating negative community impacts of short-term study abroad. *Journal of Geography*, *108*(3), 141–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221340903120866

Sherraden, M. S., Bopp, A., & Lough, B. J. (2013). Students serving abroad: A framework for inquiry. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 17*(2), 7–42. ISSN-1534-6102

Stein, S., & De Oliveira Andreotti, V. (2016). Decolonization and higher education. In: Peters M. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Springer, Singapore https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_479-1

Tarrant, M.A., Lyons, K., Stoner, L., Kyle, G.T., Wearing, S., & Poudyal, N. (2014). Global citizenry, educational travel and sustainable tourism: evidence from Australia and New Zealand, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 22(3)*, 403-420. https://doig.org/10.1080/09669582.2013.815763

Toms Smedley, C. (2016). The economic circle: Impacts of volunteerism and service learning on three rural communities in Costa Rica. In M. A. Larsen (Ed.), *International service learning: Engaging host communities* (pp. 65-79). Routledge, Philadelphia, PA.

Troëng, S., & Drews C. (2004). Money talks: Economic aspects of marine turtle use and conservation. WWF-International, Gland, Switzerland www.panda.org

Trooboff, S., Vande Berg, M., & Rayman, J. (2008). Employer attitudes toward study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 15*(1), 17-34. https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v15i1.214

Valverde Sanchez, R. (2018). Conservation strategies, protected areas, and ecotourism in Costa Rica. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 36*(3), 115–128. https://doi.org/10.18666/JPRA-2018-V36-I3-8355

Wairungu, M., Carotenuto, M. & Kibochi, N. (2022). African homestays and community engagement: A case study on recirprocity and neocolonialism. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 34*(3), 141-167. https://doi.org/1.36366/frontiers.v34i3.679.

Weaver, D. B. (1999). Magnitude of ecotourism in Costa Rica and Kenya. *Annals of Tourism Research, 26*(4), 792–816. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(99)00044-4

Whitehead, T. L. (2005). Basic classical ethnographic research methods. *Cultural ecology of health and change, 1*, 1-29.

Wood, C. A., Banks, S., Galiardi, S., Koehn, J., & Schroeder, K. (2012). Community impacts of international service-learning and study abroad: An analysis of focus groups with program leaders. *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2*(1), 1-23. ISSN: 1944-1061.

Author Biography

Heather Haeger is the Research Director of the STEM Learning Center and Assistant Professor, Educational Policy Studies and Practice at the University of Arizona. Dr. Haeger's research is focused on equity in educational practices and barriers to full participation in STEM education. Her research is used to inform programmatic interventions aimed at engaging students that have been traditionally marginalized in higher education and creating more inclusive and culturally responsive STEM learning environments. She is the PI on the NSF funded Research on Educational Equity & Diversity Postdoctoral Fellowship program at the University of Arizona.

John E. Banks is the Director of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Center at California State University, Monterey Bay. Dr. Banks is director of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Center at California State University,

Monterey Bay. He earned an MS in applied mathematics at the University of Southern California and a PhD in zoology at the University of Washington, Seattle. For 16 years, he was faculty at the Tacoma campus of the University of Washington, where he was professor of environmental science and served as director of international programs and director of undergraduate education.

Roman Christiaens, Graduate Assistant, Educational Policy Studies and Practice, University of Arizona. Roman Christiaens is a doctoral student in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona. Their research interests focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in higher education by utilizing frameworks around critical whiteness and transfeminism. Roman received their M.Ed. in Higher Education and Student Affairs from the University of Vermont and their B.A. in English with a focus in Creative Writing from Seattle University.

Lily Amador, Graduate Assistant, Educational Policy Studies and Practice, University of Arizona. Lily Amador is a graduate student at the University of Arizona studying Higher Education. Lily's research assesses undergraduate research (UR) opportunities and the benefits associated with UR. She researched undergraduate experiences in distance learning and how to transition to equitable learning during COVID-19. As a Ronald E. McNair scholar, she has researched high school students enrolled in new ethnic studies courses in Northern California.