*Research Article*

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

Volume 36, Issue 3, pp. 178-203
DOI : 10.36366/frontiers.v36i3.917
www.frontiersjournal.org

# Sex, Love, and Study Abroad: The Impact of Intimate Relationships in Study Abroad Outcomes

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## Abstract

This article makes a case for analysis of romantic relationships during international education programs. Study abroad programs promise cultural immersion and place students in settings where romantic relationships may be the most accessible way to achieve this immersion. Yet programs may fail to prepare students to navigate dating and romance during study abroad. We draw on participant observation and interviews with former study abroad participants, program staff, and host community members in Dakar, Senegal to examine how cross-cultural romances emerge in the study abroad setting. We argue that study abroad programs would benefit from explicit and sustained attention to gender relations, love, and intimacy in pre-departure orientations, upon arrival in host settings, and throughout the duration of the programs. We also contend that romantic relationships during study abroad merit sustained ethnographic inquiry to better understand how and why these relationships take place, how they afford opportunities for student learning, and how they shape perceptions of study abroad learners by the host community.

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Date of Acceptance: May 13th, 2024

## Abstract in French

Cet article encourage l'analyse critique des relations amoureuses qui surviennent pendant les programmes d'études à l'étranger. Ces programmes promettent une immersion culturelle et placent des étudiants dans des conditions dans lesquelles les rapports amoureux sont parfois la méthode la plus facile d'accéder à cette immersion. Pourtant, ces programmes risquent de ne pas réussir à préparer les étudiants à naviguer ces rapports de couples pendant leurs études à l'étranger. Ici nous nous appuyons sur l'observation participante et les entretiens avec d'anciens participants aux programmes, le personnel ancien et actuel des programmes, et les membres de la communauté d'accueil à Dakar, au Sénégal, pour examiner comment les liaisons amoureuses interculturelles émergent dans le cadre des études à l'étranger. Nous soutenons que les programmes d'études à l'étranger bénéficieraient d'une attention explicite et soutenue aux relations de genre, à l'amour et à l'intimité dans les orientations préalables au départ, à l'arrivée dans le contexte d'accueil et tout au long de la durée des programmes. Nous soutenons également que les relations amoureuses au cours des études à l'étranger méritent une enquête ethnographique soutenue pour mieux comprendre comment et pourquoi ces relations ont lieu, comment elles offrent des opportunités d'apprentissage aux étudiants et comment elles façonnent les perceptions des étudiants par la communauté d'accueil.



## Keywords

Africa; education abroad; gender; race; religion


# 1. Introduction

The study abroad literature has only begun to explore the slippery terrain of sexuality and romantic liaisons abroad. To date, most analyses have focused on sexuality as a health and safety risk. Since Kimble and Burbridge's (2013) landmark study documenting a frequency of sexual assault experienced by American students on study abroad that is parallel to the elevated frequency of sexual assault on American college campuses, other studies have begun to explore this danger (Pedersen et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2017). Researchers frequently identify "sexual risk-taking" alongside binge drinking as potentially unsafe behaviors students engage in while abroad (cf. Marcantonio et al. 2016, Marcantonio et al. 2019a, Martins et al. 2022, Pedersen et al. 2020) and they contend that universities and programs underprepare students on these fronts

(Marcantonio et al., 2019b, 2020; Smucker et al., 2019). The extension of Title IX–the legal framework that prohibits sex discrimination in education settings–to U.S. overseas programs has increased the urgency of these considerations from a legal and risk management standpoint. In this piece, we redirect the focus away from risk and crisis management on study abroad to examine more commonplace experiences of dating and romance.

Few studies, to date, examine romantic relationships forged during study abroad outside of the context of health and safety, and when the topic is broached, it is largely in vague terms or lacks a critical theoretical framework (Baldt & Sirsch, 2020; Doerr & Taïeb, 2017). Researchers have yet to address students' intimate study abroad relationships in more nuanced terms, probing how romantic entanglements shape not only student experiences and learning, but also program implementation and reception of students by host communities. The dearth of literature on love, sex, and intimacy during study abroad stands in stark contrast to the frequency with which these relationships take place. American university students in their late teens and early twenties are commonly engaged in dating and romantic relationships on campus, and this naturally extends to their time overseas. In our decades-long observation of study abroad programs as participants, administrators, faculty advisors, and program staff, we have witnessed a tremendous number of romances during study abroad.

This article seeks to catalyze a discussion of students' romantic relationships as part of study abroad program planning and implementation. Our objective is twofold. First, we make the case that romantic relationships often form a central yet informal element of many students' cultural immersion and experiential learning. We offer an account of one study abroad site, Dakar, Senegal, and examine the social and cultural dynamics that make heterosexual romantic relationships attractive and a frequent occurrence for female U.S. students studying there. Second, study abroad romance typically remains "backstage" or beyond the scope of academic inquiry and reflection during study abroad, and we argue that this lack of attention means that program staff, student participants, and host communities are underprepared for the likelihood of these relationships and their potential benefits and risks. We suggest that more direct attention to romantic relationships in the academic literature on study abroad will encourage study abroad programs to address this crucial issue and therefore better prepare everyone involved in study

abroad, from students to staff to homestay families, to navigate these relationships with greater care and attention.

To launch this discussion, we draw upon our experiences as study abroad program participants in Dakar, Senegal, our ethnographic work as anthropologists of Senegal, and in one case as a study abroad coordinator based in Dakar, as well as the preliminary findings of our current ethnographic research on study abroad marriages. Our firsthand observations and our interview data reveal that romantic pairings between visiting students and residents of Dakar are quite common. A significant number of these relationships lead to formal engagements and sometimes to religious and civil marriages between American students and members of the Senegalese host community. The findings presented here explain how these relationships emerge organically from the study abroad encounter and illustrate the need for more sustained attention to these relationships as part of pre-departure orientations, on-site programming, guidelines for program staff, and orientation for host families.

## 2. Methods

Each author participated in a study abroad program in Dakar, Senegal (1992 and 2003) as an undergraduate, earned a Ph.D. in anthropology with Senegal as the main site of field research (2002 and 2014), and has continued to conduct post-Ph.D. field research in Senegal. Hannaford also worked as study abroad staff for a local language school and study abroad provider in Dakar from 2005-2007. Our current research on study abroad builds on this thirty-year foundation of participant observation as American students and researchers living in Dakar. In 2021, we began a formal study of the history and evolution of study abroad in Senegal with a particular focus on gender relations, love and romance, and marriage between study abroad participants and host community members. We believe that ethnographic methodologies are key to eliciting the kind of nuanced dynamics of the study abroad encounter (see also Jordan, 2002; Jurasek et al., 1996; Ogden 2006). Here we draw from ethnographic interviews conducted in 2021-2024 with program staff, former students, and host families about romantic pairings between American students and local host community members. We have conducted 15 interviews with American and Senegalese study abroad program staff and 12 former participants of study abroad in Senegal, as well as four host family members. We received Institutional Review

Board clearance for these interviews from our respective universities. All names of research participants have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

## 3. Study in Senegal: The Evolution of Study Abroad in a Cosmopolitan City

The earliest study abroad programs in the United States took shape in the period following World War I, with the first official program launched at the University of Delaware in 1923. While the first generation of study abroad programs focused on sending American students to Europe, the end of colonization in most African countries in the 1960s and the launch of the Peace Corps in 1961 set the stage for increased interest in Africa and growing opportunities to study there. Ethiopia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone were popular destinations for American students in the 1970s, while the earliest study abroad programs in Senegal were created in the 1980s (Metzler, 2002). By 2001, there were over 22 study abroad programs operating in Senegal (Metzler, 2002). Although only a tiny fraction of study abroad students study in Africa (see Lloyd, 2000), prior to the interruption in study abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic, Senegal was one of the top ten African destinations for American students.

For the relatively small percentage of study abroad students who choose programs in Africa, Senegal offers a highly desirable site for American students. Often advertised by study abroad programs as a bridge between the West and Africa, Senegal's stable democracy, its compelling cultural and intellectual heritage, well-regarded universities, temperate climate, urban amenities, and location on the westernmost point of the continent have made it an attractive destination. Students who study abroad in Senegal have the opportunity to improve their fluency in French and to learn one or more national languages. Intensive language courses in Wolof (the primary *lingua franca*) are a mainstay of most programs. Studying abroad in Senegal also means living in a secular democracy with an overwhelmingly Muslim population (upwards of 97%). This unique compromise between a secular state and a Muslim citizenry affords American students the opportunity to experience Islam as a primarily cultural and social experience without living under strict religious rules. Undergraduate students majoring in disciplines as varied as French, anthropology, history, development studies, religion, political science, fine arts, and music find Senegal a compelling location to engage in immersive learning.

The demographics of study abroad to Senegal match those of study abroad more generally; the vast majority of students are "white, female, young, single, financially comfortable, and without disability" (Stallman et al., 2010; see also Di Pietro, 2022). Over the past two decades program staff have noted an increase in Black students studying abroad in Senegal, including first or second generation Senegalese-Americans who are studying at U.S. universities (cf. Bush et al., 2022). While U.S. study abroad programs to Senegal took off in the late 1980s, the successive generations of Senegalese students who pursued education abroad from the 1960s on were more likely to go to francophone universities in France or Canada than to the US. Following broader migration trends, the United States became a more attractive destination as routes to legal migration to Europe narrowed considerably in the late 1980s and 90s.

While Senegal remains a popular study abroad destination, there have been significant shifts in the programs themselves over the past 30 years. Two of these changes have had a major influence on the study abroad experience for American students. First, "direct enroll" programs, in which students matriculate in a Senegalese university have proven to be challenging in light of frequent student and faculty strikes and the mismatch between the U.S. and Senegalese academic calendar. As early as 1992, months-long student strikes at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar resulted in an *année blanche* (blank year) in which no students took classes or received academic credit. American students studying at UCAD for a partial or full academic year risked returning home having earned no credits toward their undergraduate degree. To compensate, study abroad programs began crafting their own academic courses by hiring local faculty to provide guest lectures and oversee student projects. This solution resolves the academic credit issue, but at the price of isolating American students from their Senegalese peers. Many American study abroad students now take courses (often in English) alongside fellow Americans in seminar rooms located in the buildings of their study abroad program hosts. They may have little cause or opportunity to visit university campuses and interact with local students. A key site of intellectual and cross-cultural exchange–local colleges and universities–has been eliminated from study abroad programs.

On the other hand, the earliest iterations of study abroad programs in Dakar housed students in large, rented villas where they lived together as a cohort for the duration of their program. These residences were referred to by

students, program staff, and host community members by their sending university or college. Study abroad students from the 1990s remember the "Kalamazoo house", the "Mount Holyoke house," and the "Fulbright house" where a rotating cast of recent American graduates, Ph.D. students and faculty stayed. While housing students together in rented residential units was efficient, it also meant that students did not have a window into Senegalese family life and domestic routines. By the 2000s, most study abroad programs had transitioned to home stays. Placing students with Senegalese host families facilitates language learning, cross-cultural exchanges, and the kinds of informal, immersive experiences that are the hallmark of study abroad. In the absence of regular interaction with student peers in a university setting, the homestay experience became the primary entry point for most U.S. students into Senegalese society and the source of their main relationships during their time in Senegal. Our interviews suggest that for many students who participate in homestays, this space of interaction more than any other on study abroad is the site where learning happens.

Dakar is a cosmopolitan capital city that has also experienced significant change over the past 30 years. In 1992, the year that Foley studied abroad, Dakar had a population just shy of 1.4 million. By 2003, the year Hannaford studied there, Dakar's population was over two million. At the time of writing the population is around 3.4 million. This growth in population size has been accompanied by major infrastructure and construction projects including a major arterial expressway (the Voie Direction Nord or VDN) and toll highways, major challenges to the provision of electricity and water, serious traffic congestion, and the decentralization of many goods and services. If 30 years ago all of Senegal's banks and most commercial enterprises, like grocery stores, were centralized on the downtown Plateau, today nearly every neighborhood has multiple bank branches, supermarkets, fast food restaurants, and other services. Because of the expense of public transportation and the significant time it takes to travel to the city center, study abroad programs place students in homestays in close geographic proximity to the university and study abroad program offices. In practice that means that a few middle-class neighborhoods (Karak, Mermoz, Sacre Coeur, the Sicaps, and Ouakam) host almost all U.S. students studying in Dakar. It is therefore within these neighborhoods that students spend the majority of their time as they shuttle on foot between their homestays, the locations of their classes, their internships, and venues for

leisure and recreation (fast food restaurants, sports fields, corner stores, etc.). College-age Americans have become a fixture of these neighborhoods and many residents are accustomed to observing the comings and goings of visiting students as study abroad programs begin and end.

Despite the urban growth and expansion of Dakar's footprint, economically speaking many Senegalese households face a skyrocketing cost of living, rising housing costs due to real estate speculation, food insecurity, and general precarity. The past two decades have seen countless headlines about young Senegalese, particularly young men, facing great peril as they attempt to migrate to Europe clandestinely on artisanal fishing boats. The most recent wave of clandestine migration in 2023 has prompted the Senegalese government to take additional steps to circumvent emigration (Africa News, 2023). Migration to the U.S. and Europe is central to many young people's life ambitions, and nearly every urban Senegalese household relies to some extent on remittances from overseas family members (Hannaford, 2017; Orozco et al., 2010). The numerous advantages of travel, and the longing for economic opportunity in the U.S. and Europe, provide the context within which young Senegalese encounter their American counterparts, who are comparatively wealthy, and upwardly mobile. For Senegalese young men, friendship and romantic relationships with young Americans offer emotional intimacy, links to the world beyond Senegal, and perks stemming from the considerable freedom of movement and purchasing power of college-age Americans when compared to their Senegalese peers. For their part, American students who elect to study abroad are eager to enter Senegalese society and to forge relationships with members of the host society. Romantic relationships fulfill both the desire to interact with Senegalese peers and to have access to Senegalese social life.

# 4. Dating in Dakar: An Enabling Social Context

Each of the fifteen program staff interviewed for this project, who represent four distinct study abroad host organizations and span three decades of programming, easily recounted stories of short and long-term dating relationships, engagements, and religious and civil marriages between American students and young local men. (For a variety of reasons that go beyond the scope of this article, dating between American men and young Senegalese women is exceedingly rare.) No one was surprised by our intention to study these cross-cultural student romances; all were quite familiar with their dynamics and frequency. Former students on these programs noticed the trend

as well. When we asked Sarah, who studied in Senegal in 2008 and now lives in Minnesota with her Senegalese husband and their young son, if other students on her program were dating, besides herself, she laughed. “I think everyone,” she answered. “I think all of them did.” Coleman and Chafer (2010, p. 164) note in their study about telecommunications and study abroad that nine of 45 respondents who had studied in Senegal began dating a local partner. It is clear from our own experiences, the recollections of study abroad staff, and the accounts of study abroad alumni that dating is quite commonplace.

Why are romantic relationships between U.S. women and Senegalese men such a common phenomenon in these programs? We argue that the phenomenon of study abroad itself encourages the pairings. Students engaging in study abroad are explicitly encouraged to immerse themselves in the host culture and to live within the rhythms of local life. Scholars of study abroad celebrate this kind of immersion as the ideal experience both for language acquisition and identity transformation, in contrast to remaining isolated among fellow American students (Goodwin & Nacht, 1998; Kinginger, 2010) or retaining a tourist gaze (Urry, 2002). Just as in all other settings, in Senegal, locally specific factors about the organization of social life shape the particular romantic experiences of student learners in this context. In particular, the dynamics of space and gender play a determining role in facilitating romantic relationships between visiting students and nationals.

While a detailed ethnography of Senegal is beyond the scope of this article, U.S. students who study in Senegal enter a socio-cultural context in which age, gender, and generation position visiting students in particular ways. It is not unusual for Senegalese parents to expect minors, particularly unmarried daughters, to spend their unstructured time in the household under the supervision of responsible elders. Although families tend to gather together at mealtimes, much of daily life takes place in spaces that are gendered and separated by age: men are more likely to work or study outside the home, while women and girls are more likely to spend their day engaged in domestic tasks. For young girls, outings in their neighborhood are often brief and task-oriented. Young men living in close proximity to one another may frequent quasi-public spaces where they can socialize, drink tea, and play cards, usually in full view of neighborhood elders. Young Senegalese women have less access to these spaces of socializing and recreation and are often limited to socializing in the home with family members. The more limited mobility and autonomy of young,

unmarried Senegalese stands in stark contrast to the experiences of American college students, many of whom have been living away from home for several years, have access to a vehicle, have a degree of financial autonomy and disposable income, and are no longer accustomed to seeking permission to leave their home or informing a parental figure of their whereabouts.

When U.S. students circulate in public spaces in Dakar they inevitably attract (typically unwanted) attention and frequent social interactions. American students, regardless of race or gender, tend to be readily identifiable by their dress, body language, their tendency to circulate in groups (particularly shortly after arrival in Dakar), and their use of American English when speaking to each other. These attributes are read by many Senegalese as implying wealth, mobility, and a lack of linguistic and cultural fluency in the local setting. Prior to gaining their Dakar street smarts, students encounter advances that range from the benign (street vendors selling wares, public transportation drivers offering rides) to more threatening and aggressive (groping on public transport, scammers, pickpockets, stalking, verbal harassment). This attention has gendered dimensions: young American women often receive declarations of love, marriage proposals, requests to be taken to the US, and invitations to date that are challenging to interpret within American cultural frameworks about gender, sexuality, and dating.

For female college students in particular, living in Dakar presents key challenges to their gender identities. In domestic spaces, they are often expected to conform to gender norms that can feel infantilizing and sexist. Yet in public spaces, where they are accustomed to having great degrees of autonomy and largely unrestricted mobility, they can experience an unfamiliar and disorienting vulnerability as they receive romantic overtures. These challenges, combined with students' tremendous curiosity and desire to explore a wide range of experiences in Dakar, are a source of great frustration. For many women studying abroad in Dakar, a male Senegalese companion offers an inevitably attractive solution to these problems. Because young Senegalese women have relatively little freedom of movement and are tethered to home by domestic responsibility and respectability concerns, they are usually unavailable to serve as cultural brokers or ambulatory guides. Young American women wishing to explore their new environs therefore turn to young men who can easily serve as informal tour guides and act as a buffer between the student and the general public.

Female students quickly recognize the advantages of a Senegalese male companion as having a male escort reduces unwanted attention from other men considerably. Thus, American students frequently find themselves in the company of young men who become their informal language tutors, cultural interpreters, security guards, and tour guides during the initial months of adjusting to a new city, culture, and language. In the neighborhoods where students reside, young men's high unemployment make them generally available for outings and idle conversation that led to emotional closeness. As Vanessa, a former study abroad staff member for two study abroad programs, put it,

> They [young men] have all the time in the world. They will give you attention, they will teach you with your horrible Wolof and French, they have the time to sit there and hold your hand and walk you through it. And so, there's that gravitational pull to begin with, if you will.

She elaborated,

> It's these men who, socially, they have the time, they reach out to them [the female students], they're hitting on them in most cases, they are taking them places, they are showing them Senegal, they're teaching them the language. And so, for a lot of these women, it's kind of this connection that happens pretty quickly.

Study abroad promotional literature and the guiding research on the benefits of study abroad all emphasize the value of "cultural immersion." They underline the importance of interaction with local people and getting out of one's "comfort zone" (Doerr 2018, p. 95). Many of the former students we interviewed who had romantic relationships with Senegalese described linguistic and cultural immersion as the central goal of their time in Senegal. They distinguished themselves from other students on study abroad who were content to spend the majority of their unscheduled time with other Americans. Yet in the absence of home stays, in the context of homestays in households without children, or in homestays with host siblings who were disinterested or unavailable, the availability of immediate integration through a romantic relationship was highly desirable.

Sybil, who studied abroad in 2008, says she knew that she wanted full immersion when she decided to come to Senegal. Though the other Americans in her program may have spent time together and relied on one another, she was focused on integrating into the community, which she did with help from

her internship at a local NGO, where she began dating a Senegalese colleague who quickly invited her into his family home. She recalls,

> I really spent the vast majority of time in town with new friends and colleagues. I would say most of the time was with this one family… I really wanted an experience that wasn't American in Senegal. I wanted a Senegalese experience, and this was an entrée into that world. So I really made a commitment to spend most of my time there [in her boyfriend's family's home], to the extent that people were kind of upset, other Americans at the university were like 'Why aren't you ever around? We want to hang out with you?' and I was like, 'Sorry, that's not why I'm here.'

Sybil recounted that though the relationship with the boyfriend was not a long or serious one, the connection it facilitated between herself and his family endured, "I was just looking for this culturally immersive experience."

Study abroad staff member Sierra remembers this convergence of romantic relationships and a sense of being integrated into Senegalese society being common among the students she supervised over her seven years as a program assistant in Dakar. Sometimes she perceived that there was a special romantic connection between a student and a specific man, but students were often equally smitten with a sense of belonging in a new social unit, what Sierra called "the context of being with the Senegalese community and feeling the sense of community that exists within a family". She explained that the appeal of romantic relationships was often grounded in the ways that the student was incorporated into the family with a recognizable social role as honorary daughter, niece, or sister: "I'm with the son, but have a really good relationship with the sister or the mother…," she explained.

For Carrie, a Senegalese boyfriend offered not just an entrée into a family and a group of Senegalese friends, but a means to deepen her understanding of Senegalese culture at an accelerated pace. Her boyfriend became her personal interpreter and a cultural guide, answering her myriad questions about the new context she was there to experience and understand. She remembers,

> He didn't put it in my words, but he could put it in his words which were very Senegalese. He wasn't translating it so much, but he could put it in words I understood. And I could read it back to him and he could explain things to me and was always willing to do that. And spend the time doing it.

This access to a font of information about the subject she was most curious about profoundly enhanced Carrie's learning and relationship to Senegal.

Kelly, who dated her host brother in her family homestay, felt that her intimate relationship with him was tangled up in her burgeoning infatuation with Senegal itself. Kelly explained,

> There wasn't quite that sense of a romantic connection that I was trying to pursue, more just this sense of excitement and awakening that I felt in Senegal as a student that I just hadn't felt anywhere before. I felt alive in a different way. I felt free. And I think it was just really trying to keep that connection, you know?

Even now that she is married to another Senegalese man she met during that study abroad year, she insists, "Senegal was my first love, period. It wasn't a guy." Although Kelly insists that her first love was Senegal itself, for many study abroad participants who dated during study abroad and/or married afterwards, their infatuation with Senegal as a place and their infatuation with a particular person were difficult to disentangle. In many cases, the study abroad boyfriend comes to represent everything that is novel, exciting, energizing, and life changing about the study abroad experience.

Of course, this desire for cultural immersion and the accompanying frustration when immersion proves to be somewhat complicated is actively produced by the study abroad apparatus. The study abroad industry insists that cultural immersion and forging authentic relations with local people is one of the main benefits of study abroad and a source of enrichment for students, particularly in light of the varying academic rigor of study abroad programs. Zemach-Bersin (2007) argues that study abroad's approach is imperialist, presenting the world as open for consumption by American students; country sites of study abroad are presented as passive and open to discovery and exploration, where students can extract resources such as "global citizenship" that will prepare them for advantageous careers and social advancement. For U.S. students, then, the attractions of a Senegalese partner are, as in most scenarios, multiple and overlapping.

For young Senegalese men, the attractions of an American partner are also multiple and overlapping. American female students offer a number of appealing qualities that include relative freedom of movement, few responsibilities to a household, minimal supervision by adults, general

availability and leisure time, and a curiosity about the very subject of their expertise, Senegalese language and culture. Lamine, a Senegalese man who was a "host brother" to American students in his family home, characterized that curiosity as mutual, indicating that young Senegalese men themselves find the engaged discussions with visiting students stimulating and a refreshing contrast to the style of courtship they engage in with Senegalese women. He said, "Often here, young people go out with Senegalese girls but it's just about beauty, the aesthetic. But for guys who want to talk with women, have a discussion, be curious, they don't find those things."

On the whole, American women also have fewer moral and cultural objections to pre-marital sexual relations than do their Senegalese counterparts. American students represent a potential bridge to the United States in a locale where international mobility is imbued with prestige and serves as a strategy for economic survival. Interrupted pathways to financial security and adult status due to the fallout of structural adjustment policies and other neoliberal policies push Senegalese men and women to look outside of Senegal for opportunities to build successful social lives. Senegal's "culture of migration" has troubled earlier conceptions of class, desirability, and masculinity within Senegal, creating a desire for emigration from Senegal, but also shaping the everyday behavior of those who never leave (see Hannaford, 2017). The increasingly restricted legal pathways of migration out of Senegal, particularly to the West, make marriage to someone with a foreign passport one of the remaining reliable conduits of legal emigration. As in other cross-cultural scenarios of romance, these relationships are "always ambiguous, intertwining, as they do, opportunity and gain with genuine affection and care" (Cabezas, 2006, p. 518).

## 5. Meeting the Challenge of Frequent Romantic Relationships: Ad-Hoc Study Abroad Solutions

The previous section argued that there are a number of enabling conditions that render romantic relationships as likely to develop on study abroad as at home. In this section we highlight how study abroad staff understand and to some extent attempt to manage these relationships, albeit typically in very ad-hoc ways. Study abroad programs range in the extent to which they attempt to prepare students for romance and dating on study abroad and the degree to which they take a laissez-faire approach once students begin

dating. While strategies and approaches varied, one commonality was that local staff were given minimal to moderate amounts of guidance from sending universities about expectations or legal requirements. With increasing awareness of how Title IX regulations apply to overseas programs, there has been somewhat more attention given to mandatory reporting, ensuring access to psychological support after incidents of sexual harassment or assault, and complying with other legal requirements. Nonetheless, there remains very little guidance about how to attend to the more mundane challenges of romantic entanglements that do not violate any Title IX policies.

Study abroad staff identified three key sources of friction where they wished that they had more effective means of communicating with students in terms of providing friendly advice and even potentially issuing stronger warnings. These points of tension include 1) the challenge of conveying strict social and cultural expectations about gendered behavior, particularly concerning premarital sex and alcohol consumption; 2) educating students about the layered social and economic reasons that they are considered desirable romantic partners, particularly when students are considering marriage; and 3) weighing in on the suitability or likely intentions of particular boyfriends. To complicate matters, most study abroad staff experienced uncertainty and ambivalence about their professional responsibility in each of these areas.

Saliou, a Senegalese program director, felt he was powerless to prevent romantic liaisons and engagements. Rather than discourage or prevent these relationships, he thought his role was to help students understand how they were being perceived as desirable partners by young Senegalese. He stressed the underlying factors of gender, mobility, and class that would shape their friendships and potential romantic relationships. His approach was to use humor to allude to the potential for very serious relationships to develop. In the first week of the program, in principle before most of the students had even met potential romantic partners, he would joke, “I used to kid the students– ‘it’s okay to get married but get your degree first. Graduate.’”

For study abroad program staff in Senegal, helping students navigate gender relations and gender norms is complicated. Program staff articulated competing desires to ensure student safety and peaceful integration with families, but also to treat students as adults who were able to make their own

choices. In a context where universities and by extension study abroad programs are expected to increasingly play an *in loco parentis* role (Bolen, 2001; Geesa et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2017), attending to student safety outside the classroom is expected. That role can conflict with programs' responsibilities to push students to explore, experiment, and even make minor missteps in their new cultural context. Sierra, the American program assistant, remembered trying to find this balance,

> I think we walked a fine line between scaring them, or having them be paranoid, but also telling them, you're not in Kansas anymore. You need to adjust your gender expectations and you're going to have to, at least at the beginning, rely on others to protect you, and keep you safe, and keep you smart and wise.

Particularly in homestays, complying with cultural expectations and social norms was a means of conveying respectability that in turn would produce a sense of protectiveness and care from the host family members. Some program staff would remind students that if they treated their host families and neighbors respectfully (engaging in proper greetings, using deferential terms of address, etc.) those individuals would keep a watchful eye over them as they circulated through the neighborhood.

Aminata, an experienced Senegalese coordinator of family homestays for a language school and study abroad program, took a more direct approach to counseling students about their gendered behavior. She warned families who hosted students about the independent spirit of U.S. and European students who are used to making their own choices and see themselves as "free agents". She also advised female students to behave like proper Senegalese daughters and emulate their host sisters. Aminata stressed that they would be perceived negatively if they went out frequently, had boyfriends, and came and went at all hours. Behaviors that might feel innocuous to the students, like spending time in a bar, could make them appear to be a sex worker or a "loose woman" to those around them.

For their part, students recalled negative or soured relationships with their host families as a result of their romantic relationships. One former study abroad participant recounted that her host mother did not approve of her dating a man from the neighborhood and complained to her and to program staff that she was spending too much time outside of the house. At one point, when the student was feeling unwell, the host mother made an inappropriate joke in front

of a house full of relatives and neighbors that the student might be pregnant. This comment humiliated the student, who by this point knew the taboo nature of speaking of such things publicly, and from that point forward she felt disrespected and uncomfortable in the home.

Program staff faced challenges conveying to students how to interpret the sometimes aggressive and often persistent romantic and sexual overtures they receive while in Senegal. Twombly (2015) found street harassment of female study abroad students in Costa Rica interrupted students' immersion experience, leaving students feeling alienated by the host culture. Leslie, an American woman who was a program assistant for study abroad in Senegal only two years after her own study abroad experience, recalled addressing this dynamic with students early in the program. She tried to share strategies with young women to rebuff these overtures and to feel less threatened by seemingly constant harassment. Leslie relayed,

> It was definitely something we talked about, the multiple [marriage] proposals. I had stock answers I shared with students, like 'yeah I have 5 husbands,' or something. Just to be a little bit jokey, I thought, was always helpful in diffusing those situations.

Given the cultural appreciation for witty banter and quick repartee in Senegal, Leslie's invitation to use humor as a defense offered students a means of engaging with male attention while also making it clear when they were not interested in reciprocating.

Program staff wanted to help students analyze why they were receiving so much amorous attention and they were reluctant to paint Senegalese men as predatory or venal. Saliou, the Senegalese program director, acknowledged that for some Senegalese men, migration aspirations were a motivation to seek romance with young American women. He tried to explain this to his students in a compassionate way that acknowledged the global structural constraints that Senegalese operate within. He explained,

> I always tell students, 'Listen, we talk about being in a free world, but the world is not so free for so many people. Because what happens here, you should not underestimate the privilege of the passport you hold… The simple fact of traveling here is a huge privilege. The fact that we talk about the world being this and that, it's not true. It's open for some, but certainly not for others.'

By alluding to these vast differences in mobility and life chances, Saliou hoped to provide students with a better sense of how they and their Senegalese counterparts were positioned very differently in the global economy.

Saliou has compassion for young Senegalese men, particularly university students, who pursue American students romantically for the opportunity to advance socially and increase their chances for economic and geographic mobility. He said,

> In the end I totally understand, even though I do not necessarily endorse, I totally understand [Senegalese] students that want a way out of the predicament they are in. And sometimes it becomes genuine and sincere. Many times it's just a way out, to have access to other opportunities.

As in other landscapes of cross-cultural sexual and romantic interaction, "globalized hierarchies of race, class, gender, citizenship, and mobility create undeniable power differentials between the actors in these geographic spaces, which, in turn, give them unequal opportunities" (Brennan, 2008, 206). Study abroad staff are therefore in the challenging position of recognizing these structural factors and having great empathy for the severe constraints and limited life chances of Senegalese, while also feeling protective of the individual American students who were participating in their programs. All study abroad staff and many of our study abroad participants acknowledged the long-term, happy marriages that also resulted from study abroad romances between their students and local community members. Some of the former study abroad participants we interviewed recounted experiences of authentic love and genuine, lasting connections with their Senegalese romantic partners that included marriage, relocation back to the US, and raising bi-cultural children. What can be challenging for study abroad staff is that it can be difficult to assess both the intentions of male suitors and the maturity of young American women during the study abroad period when these relationships debut.

Many young American students confront their own racial, economic, academic, and geographic privileges for the first time on study abroad. Their very personal interactions with individuals with considerably fewer social and economic advantages often induced a feeling of guilt and a growing sense of outrage at the injustices of these gaping inequalities. Leslie recalls being galvanized by the experience,

> Because there were a lot of [Senegalese] folks who I was meeting, who were like 'I'd love to go to Europe, I'd love to go to the United States' for all the reasons my ancestors went to these places, right? And they couldn't because, literally, of our visa laws. And all I knew was that that didn't seem fair.

This deepening appreciation of injustice was transformative for many students– Leslie eventually became an immigration lawyer in the US. For some students in relationships with Senegalese men, the near impossibility of international travel for Senegalese passport holders prompted them to consider marriage on an accelerated timeline.

Preparing students to navigate many different types of relationships was a key part of study abroad orientation, particularly because there are comparatively rigid social scripts that underlie social interactions between elders and young people, parents and children, vendors and customers, peers and neighbors, etc. While study abroad programs did their best to orient students to the norms of dating and romantic relationships, sometimes the students' choice of romantic partner raised additional concerns. When students were in romantic relationships that program staff felt were inappropriate or even posed a risk to the student, it was not always easy to intervene. In the Senegalese social hierarchy, university students are still considered minors who require guidance and counsel from responsible adults, yet staff members understood from their long-term experience with young Americans that warnings about particular love interests were not likely to be well-received. One particular source of concern was the frequent pairings between American students and men from extremely poor backgrounds. Whereas in the United States it is unusual for university students to consider poor, unemployed men with an elementary or middle school education as desirable romantic partners, there are such vast socio-cultural differences between Americans and Senegalese that differences in class background and educational attainment are less obvious.

Saliou recalled watching a student whom he described as "brilliant" start to skip classes and eventually drop out of the study abroad program. Her host family reported that she was not spending nights in her family homestay. When he finally tracked her down, she confessed that she was in a relationship with a Senegalese man and brought him to meet Saliou. Saliou was dismayed to see that the boyfriend was from a maligned social and religious group called the

Baay Fall. While some Baay Fall are faithful adherents to the teachings of their founder Cheikh Ibra Fall (a disciple of Cheikh Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Murid Sufi order), Baay Fall in urban areas are more often associated with communal living, heavy cannabis use, and aggressive panhandling. Motivated by his sense that this boyfriend was not an honest or respectable partner, he wished to intervene, yet he opted not to talk to the student about his concerns as he felt she was unlikely to react well to her professor meddling in her love life. Instead, he took the boyfriend aside to speak to him. As he recalled, "I said to the guy, 'You know this girl came here to study. Please let her study. Because her family has invested so much in her and it would be unfortunate for her not to finish her studies.'"

Saliou may have been right to question whether or not he could get through to the student directly. Aminata, a homestay coordinator, remembered a student who reacted negatively when an American staff member questioned her plan to marry her Senegalese boyfriend. The student dismissed the staff member for being old and unmarried, and she declared that she was not going to take relationship advice from him. Beyond assessing the likelihood that warnings about potentially exploitative boyfriends will be heeded, program staff report ambivalence about whether issuing such advice or warnings was indeed part of their job. As one long-time staff member reflected, young people need to be allowed to live their lives and to make their own choices, even when those choices seem rash or foolhardy. On the other hand, some study abroad staff felt a great responsibility to point out cultural blind spots and to equip students to assess the intentions and sincerity of the wide variety of people with whom they interact while on study abroad. In the absence of clear guidelines and more explicit acknowledgement of romantic relationships on study abroad, both staff and students are left to improvise.

One program director with nearly two decades of program experience related an incident in 2014 where a student got married during a semester-long program. He recalled,

> When the semester was over, a fellow student came to me, a friend of hers and said, 'Did you know that so and so got married?' I said 'When did she get married?' The student had barely spent one month here and got married.

Hannaford, who ran American study abroad programs in Dakar for a local language school in the mid-2000s, also remembers a study abroad student getting married while on the program, in this case to a member of her own host family. The student's host family had discovered that the student and a host brother were sleeping together and pressured them to marry. The other students on the program participated in the wedding celebration, despite their conviction that their classmate was making a reckless mistake. These examples highlight the dilemma for study abroad program staff–while dating and romance can be a somewhat routine and expected part of study abroad, marriages brokered while students are far away from their parents, families, social networks, and other academic obligations create other challenges. At the same time, the difference in U.S. and Senegalese religious and cultural ideas about premarital sexual activity also creates dilemmas and a great degree of discomfort for host families who suspect that their student visitors are engaging in intimate relationships with their own children, their children's friends, or other young people in the neighborhood.

Incidents of students getting married while on the study abroad program were outliers, yet all program staff we interviewed knew of U.S. students who married their Senegalese boyfriends in the years following study abroad. Two program staff estimated that there was an engagement every 1-2 years. Program staff had stories of U.S. students coming back several years after their program to introduce their Senegalese husband and sometimes their children. Many staff were connected to former students on social media and learned of their marriages and the migration of their Senegalese spouses to the U.S. through that channel. This outcome highlights the transformative impact that romance in study abroad can have not only on students' romantic lives, but on migration flows and other inter-country dynamics.

# 6. Conclusion

As health and security measures continue to be a significant source of attention in the administration of and research on study abroad (Creighton, 2020; Gibbs, 2022; Ogden & Brewer, 2019), it is clear that study abroad programs are expected to care not just for students' minds but for their physical safety and well-being. As yet, however, the expectation to care for their hearts is ambiguous. We concur with Twombly (2015) that there is a need for more research on gender in study abroad in general, but we go further to stress the importance of love and romance and their interplay with study abroad. The

Senegal case study we present suggests that romance is integral to many students' experiences and has great significance for learning, mobility, and the long-term impact of the study abroad experience in students' and host communities' lives. We have also demonstrated the extent to which study abroad staff are left to their own devices to anticipate and respond to romantic pairings and their consequences for students and hosts. These patterns begin to convey the numerous complexities of romance and study abroad.

A focus on love and romance allows researchers to explore study abroad on a spectrum that includes other kinds of sexual and romantic interactions like sex tourism, to see how they differ and overlap (see Bodinger de Uriate & Di Giovine, 2021). Transnational romantic and sexual encounters have been the focus of an array of important feminist scholarship in the past two decades (cf. Berman, 2017; Brennan, 2004; Cole, 2010; Constable, 2003; Fernandez, 2010; Hannaford, 2017; Johnson, 2007; Kim et al., 2022; Lapanun, 2019; Padilla, 2007; Williams, 2013, 2018) Whether studies of sex tourism or marriage migration, or those that take a historical view on transnational colonial sexuality (Arondekar, 2009; Jean-Baptiste, 2014; Ray, 2015; Stoler, 2002), these studies shed light on the nexus between mobility, space, and desire. Study abroad is another international site of sex and romance that could productively be explored for insight into issues of gender, power, and intercultural exchange. These kinds of analysis are the stuff of academic research, but they also have very real implications for the planning and implementation of study abroad programs. A new spate of research on "critical study abroad" (Reilly & Senders, 2009) takes seriously the responsibility and potential for study abroad to examine power relations. (Moreno, 2021; Roshanravan, 2012; Rotabi et al., 2006; Zemach-Bersin, 2007). We support this direction and contend that any attempt to do so must include desire and romantic and sexual attachment as part of the analysis.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all of our interlocuters for their time and participation in this study. We would also like to thank Rama Ndao and Ned Winn-Dix and the Niang family for their hospitality. This article is dedicated to the memory of Gary Engelberg.

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