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# The Power of Discomfort in Learning Abroad

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**Terminology and Abbreviations**

The Experiment in International Living  (EIL)

Central College Abroad (CCA)

Central College (CC)

Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC)

International Education (IE)

**Abstract**

Currently, the majority of students who study abroad do so through short-term programs. In fact, in 2015 over 60% of students who studied abroad chose short-term programs lasting eight weeks or less (IIE, 2016). It has long been the belief that study abroad has the potential to be a life-changing and transformative experience, not just academically but also for personal growth and development. Many professionals agree that the students who go abroad on short-term study abroad programs are significantly less likely to experience meaningful learning outside of the subject matter they are studying, and are less likely to experience personal growth (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010). This Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC) paper examines the relationship between short-term study abroad programs and student personal growth and learning through the experiences of eight Experiment in International Living (herein referred to as "The Experiment") alumni. Evidence from this study indicates that the key to growth and learning is *discomfort,* and that while the word often has negative connotations in our society, the potential results derived from moments of discomfort are largely positive and meaningful. The research of this paper is rooted in experiential education, transformational education, psychosocial development, identity theory, and narrative inquiry. This project aims to shed light on the potential for short-term study abroad to still be an experience of personal growth in spite of the program's duration, and what we as practitioners can do to encourage moments of learning.

**Introduction**

Currently, the majority of students who study abroad do so through short-term programs. In fact, in 2015 over 60% of students who studied abroad chose short-term programs lasting eight weeks or less (IIE, 2016). It has long been the belief that study abroad has the potential to be a life-changing and transformative experience, not just academically but also for personal growth and development. Many professionals agree that the students who go abroad on short-term study abroad programs are significantly less likely to experience meaningful learning outside of the subject matter they are studying, and are less likely to experience personal growth (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010). During my nine-month practicum at Central College, I saw the desire of the current administration to shift focus away from semester-long programs abroad to short-term programs abroad, in the hopes that this shift would be more financially beneficial for the college. I also saw the International Education professionals in my office express concern at the potential loss of programmatic quality that might come with this shift. In light of this information, I wanted to research if students were experiencing personal growth on their short-term study abroad programs. This Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC) paper examines the relationship between short-term study abroad programs and student personal growth and learning through the experiences of eight Experiment in International Living (herein referred to as "The Experiment") alumni.

The international education literature confirms that one of the most significant developments in education abroad is the rise in the number of short-term education abroad programs being offered by U.S. colleges and universities (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010; Nafsa

2014-2015; IIE, 2016). This can be explained in part because while the field of study abroad

continues to grow as part of a student's higher education experience, it still remains

overwhelmingly exclusive, cost-prohibitive, and dominated by white participants. According to

the Institute of International Education's Open Doors report between 2014 and 2015, U.S.

students studying abroad for credit totaled at 313,415 students. That's still only 1.5% of the total

population of U.S. undergraduate college students. (NAFSA, 2014-2015). The reality is that

while semester and year-long study abroad programs are an amazing opportunity, a majority of

students simply cannot partake in it. According to survey data at the University of Minnesota,

students face five barriers, labelled the five Fs of study abroad, when deciding whether or not to

study abroad. The five F's are: Finances, Fit (academic career), Faculty and Adviser Support,

Fear, and Friends & Family (Malmgren & Galvin, 2006). Even if finances are not an immediate

deterrent, there are few programs abroad, even with scholarships, that do not take a certain

amount of financial planning and maneuvering. Many parents have the belief that the sacrifice is

high for what they see as a potential low-return on investment. Short-term programs abroad

actually increase the rate of students to participate in study abroad, because the relatively

low-cost and high support models are something that addresses many of the five F obstacles.

Both academic advisors and family members see inherent academic value in focusing on one

class that has direct relevance to the student's career path in an international context. Think

studying conservation in the Amazon Rainforest or fashion merchandising in Paris; not only are

these programs relevant, they can in fact give students an advantageous edge in a competitive

workforce. So where previously students who were unable to participate in semester or year-long

programs simply did not go abroad, faculty-led programs "create opportunities for a greater

range of students to leave their homes to access other cultures and explore alternate ways of learning" (Spencer & Tuma, 2007, p. *ix*)

Spencer and Tuma, the authors of *The Guide to Successful short-term Programs Abroad* (2007) also maintain that institutions of higher education are increasingly turning to faculty-led programs to address a number of issues, stating:

> More and more institutions have joined the short-term bandwagon and come to realize the potential value of these programs in helping to internationalize their campuses, to give unique opportunities to students and faculty, to do it in a fiscally conservative way and-let's face it- to increase their numbers (p. 1).

It is becoming increasingly apparent that while many professionals in the field of IE are concerned about the massive shift toward short-term study abroad programs due to "limited language exposure and lack of cultural depth" (Hoffa & DePaul, 2010, p.4), the dominance of this program model is here to stay. Therefore,this study seeks to answer the following research question: *what perceived impact (if any) does short-term study abroad have on personal learning and identity?*

Because students who come back from study abroad often call the experience "life changing" and will use different descriptors to define themselves, such as "I am a traveler now," my initial hypothesis was that an experience abroad, even short-term, could impact their personal growth and identity. This hypothesis led me to look at identity theory, and how study abroad could potentially have a role in affecting personal identity growth. I describe this search and theoretical findings in the next section.

**Theoretical Framework**

There are a few theories that are key to understanding the relationship between identity, personal learning, and study abroad, and that provide essential framing for this study. These concepts are transformational learning, and the identity theories of dramaturgy and narrative, which I describe in depth below. I began my research by searching through various academic articles on identity theory and reading those theories with the frame of study abroad in mind. I also used Google Scholar and the SIT Capstone Collection archives, and searched with keywords such as "identity and study abroad," and "personal impact of study abroad." This search led to many articles and studies that sought to measure the success of study abroad programs and the cultural understanding and skill acquisition of students, (Dwyer, 2004; Preston, 2012; Sutton and Rubbin, 2010). However, I was unable to find many articles that focused on identity change or development in the context of study abroad. Those that did discuss identity in depth mainly focused on the identity of students of color and LGBTQ students, and how to better support these students during their time abroad. Identity change, or the impact study abroad could have on identity, was not a subject I was able to find in my search. Therefore, I sought to add to the field of International Education by exploring a topic that has either not been explored, or is under-researched.

To understand how identity can be changed or impacted during a student's time abroad, one must first understand what identity is. Identity is a surprisingly difficult and complex concept to define and understand. As humans, as social living creatures made up of families and communities, we spend a lot of time thinking about what differentiates us from the rest. Rene

Descartes believed personhood depended on thought; Sigmund Freud believed it depended on inner desire; and since then philosophers and psychologists alike have been debating the idea of personhood (Dittmer, 2010).

For the purposes of this paper I will be defining identity as a construct that is partially formed and defined internally, and is also partially constructed by the interactions, circumstances, and events that happen around, and to, us. Burke and Stets (2000) define this by saying

> the self is reflexive in that it looks back on itself as an object and categorizes, classifies or names itself in particular ways that contrasts itself with other social categories or classifications. This is the process of self-categorization (p. 9).

Similarly, Erving Goffman takes the concept of self-categorization and applies it to everyday human interactions and behaviors. Goffman (1959) specifically discusses human existence and social interaction through the lens of a theater; the world is a stage and we its social actors. Of course on every stage there is a setting to create the proper mood: "there is the 'setting', involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action" (p. 124). People utilize their surroundings as a stage and culture as scripts; which can be defined as all the tools they use to navigate social interactions successfully. Accordingly, "when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (Goffman, p. 125). How we present ourselves and our roles is strongly tied to gender, age, race, and social class. How the culture we live in views these categories is equally as important. While there are certainly overlaps in various cultures (for example the wealthy elite

tend to be regarded more highly in most cultures), there are differences both minor and major that affect one's ability to successfully perform when they travel to another country. Like any play, the script, the setting, the costumes, the roles and so forth must all match so that the production can make sense; if something were out of place the show would not work. Therefore, if we were to suddenly shift sets, or in this context, shift cultures, we may not be able to successfully perform the roles expected of us if we stick to the scripts of our previous roles and culture. The changing of a person's role, and shifting how they engage with and present to others, could very well have an impact on how they then view themselves and self identify. This in turn, could lead to the change or growth of their very identity.

**The link between identity and study abroad**

In situations where role performance and negotiation can become unknown, such as navigating different cultures through study abroad, scripts become useless, as the stage and the props are unfamiliar. An example would be like an actor showing up to perform My Fair Lady in the costume of, and with the script of, Hamlet. Suddenly, the actor finds themselves in a situation of uncertainty, with all eyes on him, feeling like the only one who does not know what to expect.

As Goffman (1959) explains, "the social interaction, treated here as a dialogue between two teams may come to an embarrassed and confused halt; the situation may cease to be defined" (pp. 126-127). These confusing and unfamiliar interactions are at the root of many of the more challenging phases of culture shock (Oberg, 1960). In more extreme cases it can leave the student studying abroad overwhelmed and shut down. At the very least, and in best-case

scenarios, it causes students to take a step back and re-evaluate both themselves, their environments, and their interplay.

Although we choose and define our own identities, we cannot do this without the feedback of others. Society, friends, family, and the media—all of these things create the context in which we define ourselves and others. Therefore, when the situational context changes, like it does when studying abroad, it pushes students to both adapt to the change in environment and script, and to introspectively reflect upon themselves. Additionally, situational context refers to the indicators in our environment that dictate appropriate behavior in any given situation (Boyd, 2002). These indicators include the location, time, particular occasions, and the general politics and values of the society; for example, knowing it is appropriate to laugh at a comedy show but not at a funeral. Interpersonal contextual information allows the observer to determine what the appropriate roles for a given environment, the types of social identities that are acceptable, and whether or not individuals will find commonalities with others. Not only does one evaluate the type of people around, but also each individual's presentation (Boyd, 2002). While this is clearly a beneficial evolutionary skill that saves people time and enhances communal living (and in some cases can be the difference of life and death, or belonging and banishment in a community), when the cultural backdrop changes this knowledge-base can actually set people back in navigating new norms. Their old scripts and mental models no longer serve them and they need to re-evaluate.

Encountering other cultures and re-evaluating one's role in relation to others is especially crucial at the developmental stage the students who study abroad with the Experiment in

International Living are in. The Experiment provides study abroad opportunities to students in high school, typically between the ages of 14-18.

It is in late adolescence and young adulthood that people first confront the problem of identity versus role confusion. In other words, of either having a strong sense of self and identity, or feeling lost and confused about one's beliefs and place in the world (Mcadams, 2001; Erikson,1963). It is during this developmental period that people first seek to integrate their disparate roles, beliefs, desires, motivations, and behaviors into a cohesive pattern of thought and activity that provides life with a unified sense of purpose, and ties together both thought and action. This is what puts them on the "developmental journey toward self-authorship" (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011, p. 211). At this stage, youths are moving away from a state of dependence and reliance on others (particularly authority figures), towards a clearer understanding and articulation of their own values, beliefs, and social identity. King and Baxter Magolda (2011) state that when students encounter situations, thoughts, and behaviors that diverge from belief systems they've taken on from authority figures, they enter a crossroads. This phase is a time of uncertainty where they slowly move toward a place of self-authorship in which they are able to construct their own belief system, values, and interdependent relationships. Therefore, it is not a stretch to assume that studying abroad and experiencing different cultures and situational contexts can push students into a crossroads and have a direct impact on their identity formation. The aim of this IPIC is to investigate what that impact may be and how it is manifested through the years following participation.

**Narratives**

This study sought to better understand the experience and impact of studying abroad on a select group of individuals who have studied with the Experiment as high school students. These experiences and reflections were conveyed through narrative interviews and are fixed within a sub-field of qualitative research called narrative inquiry. I will provide more details about the actual method below. Before doing so, I wish to underline that such narrative interviews address two different phenomena: the influence of narratives on shaping individuals' perspectives and behaviors, and the process of narrative as a form of self-expression and identity. Phenomenology, dramaturgy, and the use of narrative all serve as theoretical approaches to research for exploring individual-level accounts of social reality and considering their direct relationship to short-term study abroad experiences. Dramaturgy considers the impact of scripts on behavior, and views social activity as performance, with the performing of roles as a means of meeting the expectations of others (Goffman, 1959). In a similar vein, phenomenology considers the relationship between perception, consciousness and lived experience, as they are shaped by social phenomena (Hermans, 2012). Both of these interpretive approaches to research factor the individual-level experience into characterizing social reality and identity (Hermans, 2012).

Narrative comes into play by expressing how this all comes together for individuals. Given the relevance of narratives to personal experiences, I will be using narrative inquiry as both a theoretical framework and as a methodology. Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology (meaning the study of a person's relationship with his/her world and his/her thoughts and feelings) that was developed by Clandinin in the 90's in order to study teachers'

experiential knowledge. She built on Dewey's (1938) theory of experience and used his ideas to portray and study teacher knowledge as knowledge that was personal, practical, shaped by, and expressed in, practice (Clandinin, 2013). Dewey's theory of experience (1997) is largely considered the philosophical root of narrative inquiry.

Dewey's two criteria of experience, interaction and continuity, provide the key to a narrative conception of experience. Continuity is the idea that the experience a person has will influence his or her future. Interaction refers to the interaction between one's past experiences and the present situation. A narrative, or story, with a beginning, middle, and end, take the ideas of continuity and interaction, and apply them to a methodology in which one can understand and inquire into experience (Clandinin, 2013). According to Clandinin (2013)

it is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told (p. 10).

McAdams (2001) claims that identity itself takes on the form of a story. Personal narratives are psychosocial constructions, coauthored by the person him-or-herself and that the cultural context within which that person's life is embedded and given meaning. Therefore in order to understand a person's identity, one must hear and interpret their story. Since Clandinin first introduced narrative inquiry in the 90's, the field of qualitative research has used narratives as data in knowledge translation in health science, education, and other professional disciplines (Clandinin, 2013).

**Discomfort**

Through people's stories we can understand their views and how experiences have shaped those views. The focus of this study is on the identity of participants, shared through the narratives each participant tells. Narrative inquiry is the base for analyzing the participant's authored stories about their study abroad experiences and the relationship of those experiences to their identities. Here I believe it is important to note that, as I discuss in further detail in the findings section of this paper, the results of my research ultimately led me away from the focus of identity, and toward a different theme that emerged in the data. The power of discomfort and its role in learning. There are many examples in the literature that discuss the ties between discomfort and learning. First, I believe it is important to describe comfort in order to better understand what it is not. I used Robin Anderson, Brooke Envick, and Prasad Padmanabhan's (2012) definition

> A comfort zone is defined as an environment in which students feel at ease, secure, and content. They are subject to almost no risk and are not pushed beyond any areas in which they are very familiar and comfortable (p.66)

Paulo Freire (2015) argues that to properly learn, is an inherently uncomfortable task. He believes in multiple types of education, with most being ineffective and oppressive. He calls this inefficient method of learning banking education. This alludes to the image of depositing information into a student's head as one would deposit money into a bank. There is no engagement, there is no reflection, only the expectation to store the information one has been given. In true education, what he calls *transformational* education, students will face problems

"relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (Freire, Paulo, Kindle Locations 1138-1142). The word challenge here is key. To be challenged is to to test one's abilities and push the limits of mind and body, which is an inherently uncomfortable act. Often rewarding, but never comfortable.

Transformational learning also acknowledges that people are never complete and are ever dynamic, growing and learning as they encounter and engage. Because of this, true education is never ending (Freire, 2015). The discomfort of acknowledging that we are never complete and thus, ever changing, reminds me of a small story I heard many years ago. A man begins describing the anatomy of a lobster. Although what we normally envision when we think of a lobster is a hard-bodied sea dwelling creature with claws, that image is not in fact true. That is simply his outer shell, something that is grown to protect the true lobster, which is really soft and squishy. However, the shell is a dead thing that cannot grow. Therefore, when a lobster grows, it's squishy body gets bigger and bigger, until it is smooshed up against its rigid shell. At this point, the lobster sheds its shell and grows another, more spacious one. The stimulus that triggers the shedding of the shell, which enables the lobster to grow, is the discomfort it feels when its shell becomes tight and oppressive. The moral of this tale is that if the lobster were to never feel discomfort, it would never shed its shell; it would never grow. We as people are like lobsters in this sense, though our growing is much more than just a physical one.

bell hooks states in Teaching to Transgress (1994), that to learn new ideas that are outside or at odds with the ideas learned at home is to place oneself at risk, and therefore in a place of discomfort. Though hooks was not removed from the desire to have students like her and be joyful in learning, she found that her classrooms often had a tense environment. She states:

I have found through the years that many of my students who bitch endlessly while they are taking my classes contact me at a later date to talk about how much that experience meant to them, how much they learned" (hooks, 41-42).

Although moments of growth and discomfort might not always feel pleasant in the moment, it is often these very moments that people push away from at first, that end up being their fondest and most meaningful moments. The key lies in how we encourage students (and ourselves as life-long learners) to approach learning: "rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth" (hooks, 113).

This is reinforced by Robin Anderson, Brooke Envick, and Prasad Padmanabhan's (2012) Learning Zone Model. In their academic paper discussing experiential entrepreneurship education, three distinct zones are described. These zones are the comfort zone, the learning zone, and the panic zone. Only the learning zone, which is outside of a student's comfort level, can a student find their optimal learning. Even the crossroads of self-authorship that advisors in study abroad and higher ed strive to successfully move students through on their journey to self-authorship is described using the words "tension," "uncertainty," "struggle," "pressures," and "reconstruct."

Like the lobster, we need to embrace discomfort as simply a part of learning, growth, and ultimately life, instead of something to be avoided. Because to avoid discomfort is to never grow; a fate far worse. I will return to the role discomfort played in the participants learning and growth in the findings section. Below I discuss the research design that I used that ultimately shifted my focus from identity development in short-term study abroad, to the role of discomfort as a catalyst for growth in short-term study abroad.

**Research Design**

My study relies on the data I collected through qualitative interviews with eight alumni of the Experiment in International Living. The Experiment is a summer study abroad organization for high school students that has been sending students abroad for 85 years. None of the Experiment's programs are longer than a month and a half. This gave me a large population to work with and the ability to look at participants' experiences over a thirty-year time span which I felt was important so any one experience couldn't be definitively attributed to a change in curriculum or design implemented in a given year. A typical program includes approximately 10-15 students, between the ages 15-19, from a variety of different backgrounds, and hailing from over 37 states (The Experiment, 2017a). Almost all Experiment programs follow a comprehensive model designed to engage students in cross-cultural experiences and maximize the cohesion and well-being of the group. The four-part program structure includes the orientation, homestay, thematic focus, and reflection at the end (The Experiment 2017b). I also chose the Experiment to collect my data both because I served as a group leader for the Experiment the summer of 2016 and was intimately familiar with the organization, and because the Experiment granted me permission to contact participants, whereas my practicum site would not.

In order to select my participants, I sent an email explaining my study and request for participation, along with a consent form to be signed electronically to the Alumni Engagement Fellow. The Fellow then sent the email out to anyone who studied abroad with the Experiment in 1985, 1995, 2005, and 2015, who hadn't opted out of email communication, and who had a

working email address. I selected two people from each decade to sign up in an attempt to diversify data and account for various experiences, based on who responded. An additional two people from each decade were also selected in the event that a participant dropped out of the study. Only one waitlisted participant was utilized after communication fizzled out with one of the initial participants.

The sample used was a convenience sample because it was based on who was available, and who was willing to participate (Biber & Nagy, 2017). The research design had two distinct phases. The first phase was narrative interviews with each of the eight participants and the second phase was data analysis. The interview phase was operated primarily through phone calls with one interview conducted through skype. Each interview lasted on average one hour, with the shortest lasting 43 minutes in length and the longest lasting almost 2 hours (the call was dropped a couple of times as it was with a participant currently living in China). The emphasis for me as an interviewer was to not have any preconceived notions of what I planned to hear from the alumni I interviewed and so I that I wouldn't lead the interview in any particular direction. I did this by keeping my questions broad enough to let participants take ownership of what memories they chose to share for each question and of how much they wanted to delve into each story. I also made a point to keep my follow up questions as neutral as possible so that any statements participants made were their own, without influence from me. For example, I would ask "and how did that make you feel" instead of "wow that must have made you feel really angry" or "Is there anything else you would like to say on this topic" instead of "tell me more about this topic." Therefore, the stories the participants told were able to develop organically.

My goal was to investigate what I could learn from their stories about their life before, during, and after study abroad, and how their experiences may have impacted their perceived identity. I chose to look at a thirty-year time period because I wanted to see how experiences changed or stayed the same throughout the years and if there were any themes or patterns that emerged over that length of time. I also wanted to get the stories of participants who had their experiences fresh in their mind, and also hear from participants whose experiences abroad were a recalled memory to see if the significance of study abroad seemed to diminish with time, or if there were long standing effects of studying abroad on participant identity. Ideally, I would have been able to follow a group of participants as they aged, checking in with them every couple of years. However, for the purposes of this capstone, a comparison between ages was the only viable option.

Once I had the eight participants selected for the interview phase, I coordinated with them via email to set up in-depth interviews. In depth interviews are important to qualitative research because they foster a meaning-making process that identifies individuals as the focal point of the research process recognizing they have unique and important knowledge to contribute (Biber and Nagy, 2017).  The questions were semi-structured and therefore were a consistent set of questions that guided the conversation to remain more or less on those questions. However, semi-structured questioning also allows individual participants some leeway to talk about what is of interest or importance to them  (Biber and Nagy, 2017). The ability for the participants to construct and tell their stories organically was something I felt was crucial to the process as both stories and identity are formed internally, and then presented to social others. This is why I ultimately decided to use in-depth interviewing as my means to gather data;

because of its ties to narration. According to Clandinin (2013), the most frequently used method used in narrative inquiry is the telling of stories, usually "through conversations, or interviews as conversations" (p. 45). I designed the interviews around the following themes: (a) Experiment alumni autobiographical narratives, (b) their stories of study abroad, and (c) stories of life after study abroad. The participants told "mini stories" pertaining to each theme or phase in the hour time frame we had together. These stories were then transcribed, coded, reviewed, and then compared to the narratives of the other participants.

Given the choice of narrative interviews as my main approach my main intention was to be flexible throughout the data collection process. While there was obvious structure to the interview process, I also wanted the participants to own and craft their narratives as much as possible with as little direction from me as possible. This was to both lessen any bias that I may have inadvertently steered into the conversation and to also let the participants choose what they felt was important to focus on. Each interview felt unique in the sense that follow up questions and clarifications were very individualized based on what I heard the participant saying. I recorded all interviews on a password protected device. I later transcribed and coded for any themes that emerged. Keeping with my intention to be flexible in the collection of data, none of the themes were pre-established. I simply looked for patterns and similarities that organically developed.  I then entered the entire transcript into a qualitative data management program called NVivo and coded each paragraph into themes using the participant's own language wherever possible

**Limitations**

Like with all studies, there were obvious limits to my research. The first is that this was a qualitative study rather than an experimental design, which does not allow finsdings to be generalized. Unlike an experimental quantitative study, this qualitative study lacked a control group and therefore, the results of the study remain correlation and cannot demonstrate causation (Biber and Nagy, 2017). Also data derived from self-reporting and the responses are by their very nature subjective. Also, as previously mentioned, this study relies on a convenience sample and participants are therefore self-selected. The type of people who are interested and able to respond to an email inquiry potentially have common interests or motives which might foster bias.

The sample size of the study is also limited to alumni of the Experiment in International Living which is one particular program among many short-term programs that exist. This limits the scope and potential diversity of the participants interviewed. Time is also a limitation of the study. Because I only interviewed each participant for about an hour, I cannot get as deep an understanding of the participant's identity or experiences as I would have liked. In addition, the inability to interview the participants in person in many of the cases meant I did not have their gestures or facial expressions to interpret. Even on the skype interview, there were moments in which video lagged and the video image of the participant froze. This meant that I was left only with the words and tone of the participant to interpret.

Optimally, I would have been able to have multiple interviews over an extended period of time, however for the purposes of this study that would not have been realistic. Therefore,

another limitation is that while the older participants add the value of seeing the meaning they attributed to their study abroad experience years later, memories can also change and be distorted with time, potentially becoming less accurate and reliable.

Also due to the small sample size, the information generated from this study will not be generalizable. That being said, the stories and perceptions of the participants will still introduce new and valuable information to the field of study abroad. I discuss this emergent information and what I believe it means for the field of international education in the sections below.

**Findings**

Initially, finding emergent themes or patterns in the data was difficult. While there were many instances in the participants' narratives that fit with the literature on social identity and how important expectations and roles are in the perception of self, many of the participants felt that their identities did not change much as a result of their study abroad experience, though they found the experience as a whole very valuable. What was interesting, though, was the consistent theme of discomfort that did emerge from the data.

The eight participants that I interviewed seemed to lack commonality in terms of background and the level of change they attributed to their study abroad experiences. There were five women and three men between the ages of 18 and 50. They were white, hispanic, multi-racial, and came from both rural areas and urban cities (with most participants growing up in urban cities in the East Coast). Most of the participants identified as upper class or middle class, while two participants identified as low-income. There was also quite a range of impact that participants felt that study abroad had on their identities and how they've grown as people.

Three participants said that study abroad made no real change; that who they felt they were before going abroad remained pretty consistent with how they identified after. Four participants said that study abroad had a direct impact on their identity and that they wouldn't be who they were without it. One participant said that her experience abroad was deeply impactful and added to her growth, but that she felt that her identity started changing long before her study abroad program, and that her experience abroad only served to reinforce and continue that shift. The participants studied abroad in Mexico, Argentina, China, South Africa, Amsterdam, France, Ireland and Costa Rica respectively.

I began each interview with an introduction of myself and my research. I then asked them to tell me about their past, including what their family was like, fond memories they had growing up, what they remembered about their neighborhoods and friends. Their responses to these questions were both informational for me to get a sense of where the participants came from and what they were like. Such questions also served to prime participants to be in the narrative mindset. Through talking about themselves in that way, participants also got to feel relaxed and a level of trust was established between myself and them so that when I asked them about their programs abroad they really opened up with me and each shared topics that were vulnerable. As it turns out, asking people to reflect on who they are is in of itself a vulnerable request. I thoroughly enjoyed getting the level of insight I did into their lives and experiences.

After I finished recording all of my interviews, I transcribed and searched for thematic commonalities. However, finding themes proved difficult. Other than the general feeling that participants were happy that they went on their program and felt it beneficial, nothing else seemed to have any meaningful consistency. After realizing that change to identity was not a

consistent theme, I tried looking in other directions. I explored relationships developed with group leaders, other participants, and host family. I even explored how participants felt about the host country as a whole. I looked at perceived lessons learned, cultural intelligence, understanding of host country, self-reflection, and difficulty levels in returning home to the U.S. Still, there didn't seem to be any meaningful patterns or themes that emerged. I struggled with how to complete the study with any meaningful contribution to the field of study abroad. It wasn't until I was reading through Brene Brown's *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* a few weeks later, that I was inspired to revisit the data and find a meaningful way forward. Brene Brown is a researcher and professor of social work at the University of Houston. For the past two decades she has been researching courage, vulnerability, empathy and shame (Brown, 2017a). In her chapter Minding the Gap with Feedback, Brene speaks at length about discomfort as a learning opportunity, and after closely comparing the data, I realized discomfort was a common theme that consistently emerged in the research. Every participant that I interviewed wrestled in some way with a situation that forced them outside of their comfort zone and taught them something. Some moments certainly seemed to hold more impact than others, and what pushed some participants outside of their comfort zones would not have been a moment of discomfort for others. However, moments of discomfort, regardless of how they emerged and how impactful they seemed at the time, were present throughout.

This revelation wasn't particularly surprising to me. Indeed, the Experiment makes it a mission to push students to learn and engage. While it isn't necessarily the goal to create moments of discomfort, the group leaders that facilitate the programs are trained to guide

students through these feelings instead of simply recoiling from them. As a past group leader myself, the phrase "is it unsafe? Or simply uncomfortable" springs to mind. Many students in their exposure to newness can feel uncomfortable, especially to cultures that are very different to their own. The example that was used in the Experiment's training that I was a part of was of a student who was horrified to find that her host family kept raw chicken feet and other butchered parts hanging in the kitchen area to be prepared for meals later that day. She immediately contacted her group leaders to complain that this was unsanitary and that she wanted to be moved. It was here that the famous phrase came out: "are you unsafe? Or simply uncomfortable?" After being talked through the situation the student acquiesced that it was indeed not an unsafe situation and to move forward with an open mind. She ended up loving her home-stay the most out of her whole experience abroad.

This story served as a great example for group leaders because it was a tangible example that had a clear resolution. What was not mentioned in that particular instance, is that a rumble with discomfort does not always have a clear resolution; that just because an experience does not have a quick or clear resolution does not necessarily mean that it was a "bad" experience. In fact, I learned that discomfort lives on a spectrum, and can present itself in many forms. These moments can feel large or small, accompany feelings of happiness and satisfaction, accompany feelings of regret. Some have definitive beginnings middles and ends, while others continue to be something people struggle with and reflect on for years. All are potential moments of learning.

One of the participants, Mya, grew up in a progressive community in Washington DC in a middle- upper class family and neighborhood in the 70's. Mya and her sister were adopted from different families, both different races from her adoptive parents. Her sister is half Chinese

American and white and she is Spanish and Black. She describes her family dynamics as atypical, very multicultural and very open. Her family was very social justice minded and very artistic and credits this as being her motivation to pursue a career as a therapist that incorporates art in sessions to heal. The participant went on the Experiment when she was fourteen years old. Mya decided on Mexico as her program for a number of reasons

> I was in a smallish city in Mexico at the time. The city was smallish, now I think it's become a big city, [but] when I had just finished junior high and was about to go to a different high school, there were a few things that inspired me to go on the Experiment. One thing, probably the key thing, [was] I always knew i was adopted and I always knew I had some Spanish heritage and I think that if nothing else I felt like it would be cool to really speak Spanish to really be immersed, to be forced to speak Spanish. I don't really remember exactly why I chose Mexico. At the time I had a friend who was from Mexico, her mom was a diplomat from Mexico and it ended up that I did spend time with them and that was cool. I don't know 100 percent if my biological mother is Mexican or Spanish from Spain or Puerto Rico and so I probably thought that Mexico isn't that far away but still different (Mya, Interview).

She describes her time in Mexico with a pleasant comfortableness, saying that she had a decent relationship with her host family, but that it was nothing remarkable. She was raised rather independently and so she didn't remember feeling too anxious at the start of her program.

Her moment of discomfort came when she got her period for the first time and had to seek out help from her host mother in a different language. She said,

That was somewhat uncomfortable, it was a little embarrassing. I got my period for the first time which was interesting because my [adopted] mom was older so like no one had told me what to do and it was kind of cool actually cuz on the one hand it was a shock and embarrassing and on the other it was this kind of bonding experience that I got from having to deal with this (Participant 1, Interview).

From this experience, Mya learned in a new, personalized way, the importance of language and communication, from the discomfort of having to negotiate a vulnerable moment without the ability to communicate with ease. She went on,

I very much value knowing even a little bit of another language and having a real sincere interest in other people's languages and I think that people who haven't had exposure with other cultures you miss out on how much language says about or how language is such an important way that people communicate and express themselves and that was made apparent to me when i was younger (Mya, Interview).

Another participant, Amber, grew up in a very wealthy and affluent community in Greenwich Connecticut. She describes her childhood as being charmed with vacation houses and lots of travel, the best schools and tutors, and parents who encouraged her desire to travel. Her parents went through a long divorce her sophomore year, and to keep her away from the drama, they suggested she spend part of her summer studying abroad with the Experiment. She chose to go on the China program.

Amber was deeply impacted by the moments where the Experiment pushed her out of her comfort zone. As Amber described,

one of the values that the Experiment instills is a you can do it mentality. My favorite

example was the scavenger hunt where they blindfold you and drop you off in the city to

find these things and find your way back and you can figure it out (Amber, Interview).

This experience of 'being able to figure it out' gave the participant a feeling of self-assurance

and confidence, especially at a point in her life when she felt like a lot was out of her control.

Her experience abroad tackling ambiguity and uncertain situations in a microcosm, was able to

give her the tools and coping strategies that would aid her when she returned home. She

continued:

 I do see the whole travelling [experience] as tied with me growing up, and growing up

requires a level of distance and a level of hating where you're from and slowly learning to

deal with that mutual, simultaneous love and hate of where you're from and the people

you love (Participant 2, Interview).

Amber, through learning how to navigate uncertain situations on the Experiment, which

is uncomfortable, learned how to navigate *feelings* of uncertainty, especially in regards to her

feelings of her home and community. Learning how to embrace the complication and ambiguity

of both loving your family and community, but also of hating the unfairness of privilege and

hating the pain and drama of divorce that is tied to that same family. To acknowledge and accept

that situations are imperfect and not always comfortable but to know that she could still "figure it

out" was an incredibly important lesson for Amber.

In addition, she also directly ties this moment to feeling high levels of confidence later in

life and giving her both the curiosity to pursue interests in a Fulbright scholarship to return to

China while pursuing a PhD, and also the confidence that she could achieve it. Amber commented that,

> Independence and strength and toughness are things I really value in the sense that you can do what you set your mind to and you don't need to be afraid and you can take care of yourself and be self reliant and know that people will help you if you need it.

She goes on to say

> nothing betters a person more than getting out of your comfort zone and experiencing a whole other way of life whether that has to be through going to another country is debatable but I'd say it's the easiest way to do it the most effective it's imperative that kids go abroad and see that their world is just one bubble out of millions of bubbles (Amber, Interview).

As I mentioned above, discomfort is something that is fairly subjective. To quote Morticia Addams from the show The Addams family "what is normal to the spider is chaos to the fly." I was particularly struck by the growth of participant 3 over a seemingly small moment in her time abroad. I turn to this example.

Hannah grew up in a large suburb outside the city in the Bay area. She grew up in a pretty low-income family, and would alternate between living with her parents and her grandmother depending on finances. She remembers always being high performing growing up. She received good grades and helped take care of her younger siblings. Her household was strict but also very supportive of everything she wanted to try her hand at as long as finances agreed. She also describes herself and being incredibly shy and having a hard time in social situations due to

anxiety. Her moment of discomfort was having to face the prospect of utilizing public transportation on her own

> One [situation] that really made me anxious was biking in Amsterdam and taking public transport. I get anxious when[ever] I take public transport for the first time, so when my host mother first showed me this we were coming back from the SIT headquarters and were going back to our house and just going through numbers in my head like i'm like ok I gotta take this and then transfer to that and then I gotta walk there. And then once I transferred to the first train I was like oh my god I did it and that first time I felt so accomplished and I felt so incredible and couldn't believe I got too anxious and everyday we had to meet at SIT headquarters for like a month and then it became commonplace and now it's like nothing and I felt like a local, and like I was truly living there (Hannah, Interview).

> Similarly to Amber, this ability to successfully navigate an anxious uncomfortable situation led to increased confidence that she could navigate similarly uncomfortable situations in the future because she could *trust* herself to get through it and that being in situations of discomfort are not necessarily indicative of a lack of capability, they just are. As she described, this one experience was the start of self-reflection that continued throughout the rest of the program.

> Whereas Amber was given the skills to navigate a tense situation at home and it affected her professional decision later on, Hannah said she noticed changes to her personality:

> I think it helped me speak out more and not be afraid to voice my experiences and talk about what's important to me and it helped me socially in terms of growth. I don't get

anxious in a big group of people and I think that's really important and I learned a lot

about myself and just the types of lifestyles people go through. Like some people

experience this, and some people experience that, and looking at the intersection of where

i fit into that and that's a really good part of growing up and realizing how I'm

contributing to others and my own blind spots and how I impact the world and people

around me (Hannah, Interview).

This experience also changed her relationship with her mother going forward and allowed her to

open up and be more vulnerable in expressing who she is

I got more open with telling my mom about things going on in my life. I'm actually in a

relationship right now and my partner is trans and so when my mom met my partner they

weren't out yet and then I had to tell her "hey so and so is transgender and she wants to be

called this now" and she was like, "whoa what's that." It was weird too, because of the

intersections of religion and sexuality and ethnicity but I think because of, like, I was

surrounded by so many different people in the last two years and communicating with

different backgrounds I felt confident to have that conversation and come out to my

mother and I just knew ok ya I'm ready to talk to my mom about this. I think it's a period

of growth. I'm still transitioning but it's also just knowing when is right. You just know

when you're ready to share and present that knowledge to others  (Hannah, Interview).


Another example I wish to highlight is a participant that still struggles with her

discomfort, and believes her discomfort continues to make her grow. Tiffany grew up in

Manhattan in a very wealthy family. She states that she has always been aware of her wealth and

that this was a privilege not afforded to everyone. She studied abroad in South Africa, and describes the whole program as one where she felt discomfort throughout.

> I was very uncomfortable a lot of the time during this trip because I felt like a tourist and I felt a disconnect and I also felt embarrassed to be with the people I was with on the trip like loud teenagers, like i didn't want to be associated with them. I would have wanted to be seen as more humble and gracious and respectful and I wanted to be seen as more of an adult and a person who wanted to learn (Participant 4, April 18, 2017.)

The discomfort that Tiffany struggled with was the discomfort of privilege and access. She had a really hard time seeing life in the townships and feeling like she was coming into their world with everything she had that she didn't earn, but was simply born into. She struggled with the idea that she was learning from their experiences and that she would get to return to her life gaining more, without any benefit to those communities. She also really struggled with the other participants who she viewed as immature and who didn't grasp the gravity of the situation or handle it with the respect it deserved. She explained,

> I remember saying that to myself, "I'm not a colonizer," which is ridiculous because we all live in a colonizing system but as a teenager you think there might be an out and I thought there was an out and I wanted to figure that out more and I think I still want to figure a way out but with the realization that the out isn't the way I thought it was as a teenager. I would say that's directly why I'm getting my Masters in public policy focusing on how institutions of power can reexamine their power and redistribute their wealth to People of Color. I would say my passion is around structural issues surrounding racism and how to be a White person that is involved in those issues. That is

academically and professionally and spiritually very much where I'm at at this point in

my life. (Tiffany, Interview).

Tiffany has been grappling with the discomfort of inequality and her role in it for many years,

and is still currently grappling with. While this discomfort continues to linger, it also continues

to push her, to have her periodically check in with herself and reflect on her place in the world

and what her role can be shifted to be. Though the sense I got from her wasn't one of happiness

per se, I did feel a large sense of appreciation; that while the journey is hard, it's worthwhile.

That she is overall grateful for the role these moments of discomfort have had in shaping who

she is and the path she has chosen to pursue.

The last example I wish to share is from Aiden. He was the youngest participant that I

interviewed and he is also the participant who looks upon his feelings of discomfort with the

most joy. Aiden was born in the Bronx and has spent his whole life in New York City. He is

Puerto Rican and Indian and grew up in a single parent household, never meeting his father. He

has always had an interest in visiting a different country and seeing other cultures. He applied his

junior year of high school to the Experiment program in Argentina and received a scholarship to

attend the summer before his senior year.  This was Aiden's first time away from his family and

the idea of living with a host family made him nervous. However, that time spent with his host

family and acclimating to a new family structure helped him ease into himself as he never had

before. He shared,

The homestay, I really felt like I was part of the family and I just connected really well

with the family, I feel as if that component of it made it what it was, and it was a space

for me to figure myself out and feel like I could do it. That trip inspired me to think of

myself away from my family and inspired me to slay [embrace myself and my interests fully] my senior year and then senior year of highschool I finally decided to come out to my family and friends. My family is still a little annoyed, they've accepted that I'm gay but [participant 8 does drag] they don't really understand, they think it's like a trans thing and it's like, I know gender is like a construct so I can do whatever I want like I'm going to slay [dress in drag] but my family doesn't really talk about it. I care a lot about social justice and inclusion and diversity in workplaces and power in general in mainstream media and I want more people of color to have opportunities and also LGBTQ, I started considering this important towards the beginning of my high school career and then after I came back from the Experiment like I was inspired to be whoever I wanted to be and not care what people thought because I lived by myself for two months, well not by myself, but without my family (Aiden, Interview).

Aiden's ability to get out of his comfort zone gave him the courage to come out to a family who he knew might not support his decision, which is an incredible difficult thing to do. He is still negotiating the difficulty that his family doesn't really understand him at this point in his life, and while they accept it, they still do not support it. Aiden looks at this transition and this discomfort with a lot of joy however, because it gave him the push to embrace himself fully and live authentically; not always an easy or comfortable prospect.

**Conclusion**

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study, and ultimately the answer to my initial research question of " what perceived impact (if any) does short-term study abroad have

on personal learning and identity" is two-tiered. The first main conclusion is that discomfort is inherently tied to true, transformational learning. The second, is that study abroad, even on short-term programs, provide ample opportunity for students to encounter moments of discomfort that lead to learning; learning that has the potential to be so impactful that while a student's identity might not be completely changed by the experience, it could certainly be influenced and expanded by it. I believe what this information means for us as International Education practitioners, is that we need to be priming students before they go abroad, to not just tolerate discomfort and ride it out, but to actually seek it out and lean into it. In order to keep students in the learning zone (Anderson, Envick, & Padmanabhan, 2012) while they are abroad, it would also serve to mentor students and guide them through moments of discomfort as well.

However, this also poses a challenge. As I mentioned above, discomfort is incredibly subjective. What is uncomfortable to one person may not be considered uncomfortable by someone else. Much of what a person finds challenging has to do with their personality and lived experiences; essentially it is tied to who they are and what they bring to the table. Therefore, in order to best support a student's journey through discomfort abroad, and to make sure they remain in the learning zone (Anderson, Envick, & Padmanabhan, 2012), Intercultural Educators would do best to take the time to understand their participants on an individual level, in order to have a better sense of how far each participant should be pushed. This can be hard to do in a group of a dozen or more students, which is usually the minimum number of students needed to fund a short-term program.

Furthermore, short-term programs that are led by third party providers often have Group Leaders and Program Directors that are trained in intercultural communication or intercultural

education as part of the requirements of their position. However, on faculty led programs, it is rare for faculty to have any training outside of their specialty, and what to do in the event of a crisis abroad. Many do not focus on, or have time in their program dedicated to, successfully navigating a different culture. With limited time and funding (and quite frankly interest from faculty) the ability for faculty to have the skills to successfully guide students through discomfort and transformational education remains a prospect that is concerning.

What International Educators and Study Abroad providers, both in institutions and universities can do is prime students in pre-departure orientations, and through continued support abroad that not only is discomfort not a feeling to avoid, but is in fact a feeling that students should be seeking out in their time abroad if they truly wish to learn. They can also incorporate activities that are dedicated to self-reflection and coping skills so that students can be better equipped to guide themselves through moments of discomfort and transformational education. International Educators and Study Abroad providers can also hold Re-Entry Orientations that incorporate reflection on students' experiences. This way, even if a moment of discomfort was disregarded as a teaching moment by a participant in the moment, there is the potential that a student can look back on a moment of discomfort and assign meaning to it and learn from it in a way that might have been lost without the proper guidance.

This study can also add to the field of study abroad by helping universities, institutions, and advisors to market the study abroad experience by providing them with the verbiage to discuss how a study-abroad program is so called "life-changing." Instead of simply stating that study abroad is experiential, and walking stake-holders through Kolb's Experiential Learning

Cycle[1], International Educators can talk about transformational education and its ties to

discomfort. That optimal learning zone in between comfort and panic, is actually hard to find in

daily routine of everyday life; and discomfort in the classroom is not usually something that is

encouraged, and therefore not often found. Study-abroad is an optimal way for students to

encounter moments of discomfort and transformational learning, in a way that sets them apart

from the majority of the population that does not study abroad.

As International Education practitioners, we not only help students learn information

gained in courses, but also how to grow as people. I hope that this research can help add to the

knowledge that exists on how to best help students learn and grow.

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[1] a cycle that, as many of these same stake-holders have pointed out can occur anywhere and therefore not worth the cost of the study abroad program

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