

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

Volume 32, Issue 2, pp. 120-144

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DOI 10.36366/frontiers.v32i2.470

THE
FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ABROAD

Academics as Arbiters: Promoting Equity and Cultural Responsibility in Group-based Study Abroad

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Abstract

Study abroad is a high impact practice, touted as a tool for developing global and intercultural awareness. In 2017/18, of the nearly 350,000 U.S. students who studied abroad, sixty-five percent participated in “short-term” programs (IIE, 2018). Short-term programs are often administered as group opportunities, in which students undertake experiential education activities with fellow classmates in a host country. In this study, students from populations that have been historically under-represented in study abroad reflected on their experiences within group programs by centering their unique identities and analyzing how particular identities influenced their experiences within the group and host country. Experiences ranged from agentic and empowering to prejudicial and isolating. For example, some students relied on faculty members to mediate interactions among and between the group and host society. In some cases, instructors provided supportive facilitation while, in others, instructors avoided challenging confrontations and difficult conversations. The group itself, and the group leader, are critical units of analysis for understanding the educational and cross-cultural dimensions of study abroad.

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Abstract in Spanish

El estudio en el extranjero se define como una actividad de alto impacto y se promueve como herramienta para desarrollar tanto la conciencia global como intercultural. En el año 2017/2018, el sesenta y cinco por ciento de los 350.000 estudiantes estadounidenses que estudiaron en el extranjero participaron en programas de “estadía corta” (IIE 2018). Los programas de estadía corta son desarrollados como oportunidades para interactuar en grupo donde cada estudiante vive experiencias educativas junto a sus compañeros en un país anfitrión. En este estudio, se pidió que estudiantes provenientes de poblaciones que, históricamente, no han estudiado en el extranjero reflexionaran sobre sus experiencias en programas grupales de estadía corta. La reflexión se hizo desde sus propias identidades y el análisis de cómo sus identidades influenciaron las experiencias dentro del grupo y en el país anfitrión. Los estudiantes reportaron experiencias que les dieron agencia y empoderamiento y otras que fueron perjudiciales o provocaron sentimientos de aislamiento. Por ejemplo, algunos estudiantes esperaban que sus profesores mediaran las interacciones entre el grupo y con el país anfitrión. En algunos casos los instructores proveyeron ayuda que facilitó dichas interacciones. En otros casos, los instructores evitaron tener conversaciones difíciles. Tanto el grupo como el líder del grupo son unidades de análisis que se deben incluir para entender las dimensiones educativas e interculturales del estudio en el extranjero.

Keywords:

Study abroad, Diversity, Short-term study abroad, Identity, Inclusion

Introduction

Study abroad in the U.S. context has long been considered a “high impact” practice in higher education (Brownell & Swainer, 2009). On average, students who study abroad are more persistent (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010); attain higher grade point averages; and report higher levels of student-faculty interaction, higher levels of critical thinking, and appreciation for diversity than students who do not study abroad (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). Jones and Abes (2013) additionally noted that, for undergraduate students, border crossing and interaction with people different from oneself may contribute to identity development.

To assist students with access to programming and to receive the full benefits of study abroad, universities across the U.S. have invested tremendous

resources into creating a menu of approaches. While investment in resources and a variety of programs have opened possibilities for students, many institutions have neglected to consider the implications of identity development and equity in the context of group study abroad opportunities. An unexamined assumption is that all students will experience and benefit from the programs' intended educational outcomes in similar ways.

The convenience and perceived security of group-based, short-term opportunities have made such programs ubiquitous in the U.S. higher education landscape. Although deployed in a group format, there is still an expectation that individual students will develop intercultural sensitivity or communicative competence on programs (Lorenz, White, & Anderson, 2012). In the paragraphs below we review literature on study abroad as it relates to intercultural development as well as literature on how historically under-represented students may experience higher education and study abroad. Following the literature review, we outline findings from a focus-group study that investigated how students navigate their own identities in the face of the normative expectations of group study abroad.

Literature Review

Study Abroad and Intercultural Development.

The development of intercultural competence is often cited as a rationale for study abroad programs. However, recent evidence suggests that an international experience alone may not be a sufficient predictor of students' intercultural development (Beelen & de Wit, 2012; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012) because the sole act of traveling to a location is insufficient for developing students' cultural and intercultural capacities (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). Rather than exclusively focusing on the act of journeying to an unfamiliar land and experiencing new environments, some scholars suggest that these experiences must be accompanied by frequent self-reflection on one's own biases, assumptions, and learning (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). Faculty-led group programs offer such opportunities for student participants. Ideally, faculty-led experiences feature skilled cultural facilitation and mentorship, which has been associated with the development of student intercultural learning because faculty provide safe and guided opportunities for students to self-reflect (Anderson, 2016; Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012).

Reflection is a relatively common practice in study abroad that has been supported in the literature overall. Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009), for example, argued that guided reflection in study abroad can further lead to the 'holistic' development of undergraduate students. Nguyen (2017) found that

guided reflection helped students to develop self-perceived intercultural competence and sustain such competence over time. Nguyen, however, acknowledged that her study used self-report measures, so further study may be needed to validate students' self-claims, but the role of reflection in perceived intercultural development was at least present in a meaningful way.

Conversely, the risk of ignoring intercultural reflection is well-documented in the literature. Jones and Abes (2013) argue that neglecting important pedagogical and programmatic considerations may even be detrimental to students' cognitive and affective development. Johnstone, Soria, Bittencourt, and Adjei (2018), drawing upon Feller's (2015) work, further noted that "the risks of unstructured intercultural experiences are evidenced amply in the scholarly literature and include cultural backlash, developmental regression, entrenchment of hegemonic and imperialist attitudes, and economic instrumentalism" (p. 2).

In addition to studies that support and ignore the concept of reflection for intercultural development, studies have further argued that *how* reflection is facilitated matters (Niehaus, Reading, Nelson, Wegener, & Arthur, 2018). In a study that examined the ways in which faculty members engaged in cultural mentoring during short-term study abroad courses, the authors attempted to measure how cultural mentoring was included in reflection sessions of short-term study abroad. They identified

"four core types of interrelated cultural mentoring behaviors that align with the theoretical literature on cultural mentoring (e.g., Paige & Goode, 2009): helping students set expectations for their study abroad experience, explaining aspects of the host culture to students, helping students explore their own selves in relation to the host culture, and facilitating connections between and among different experiences students are having before and during their study abroad experience" (p. 87).

Studies such as Niehaus et al.'s, that examine faculty facilitation through strategies to enhance student experiences through reflection, focus explicitly on the dynamics between faculty and individual students. Not only is the expected role of faculty to prepare students for the travel experience, encounters within the host country, and differences within cultural norms, but also to engage in training about how to effectively do so (Niehaus, et al. 2018). Studies about faculty facilitation of intra-group dynamics are less common but are instructive. Anderson (2016), for example, studied 12 short-term study abroad programs. She found that only one of the programs she studied had an explicit focus on the dynamics of the group itself. In the particular program with such a focus, the "instructor used a high level of facilitation of critical incidents. It is the only program where students brought up the creation of a safe space for debriefing."

Anderson further found that the instructor “highly valued a solid group dynamic and reported holding sessions with the students to achieve a ‘community.’ (p. 172). According to Anderson, the most effective instructors for facilitating intercultural development were those who used “frequent and spontaneous” (p. iii) discussions, interventions, etc.

Building on a previous study about supports and interventions toward the development of students’ intercultural gains (Anderson, 2016), Anderson, Lorenz, and White (2016) further concluded that frequent and spontaneous facilitation was the most important variable in addition to the need for facilitators to possess a philosophical belief about the importance and value of intercultural learning. For example, faculty and students discussed delaying the study of content in order to process experiences on site because they felt it crucial to address group and host country tensions before delving into academic content. Anderson et al.’s study confirmed that “as students’ perspectives widen regarding their own value systems and assumptions; they were better able to comprehend course content topics with more sophistication and often from multiple perspectives” (p. 12).

Higher Education, Equity and Inclusion, and Study Abroad

This study builds on Anderson’s (2016) conceptualization of “influence” by instructors, but in this case, we explicitly focus on inclusion and identity-related features within study abroad groups. Literature on inclusiveness and equity in study abroad has historically focused on participation rates, access to study abroad, and program experiences for students who are underrepresented in programs (López-McGee, Comp, & Contreras, 2018). Barriers to study abroad include financial concerns, difficulty with transferring credits (thereby extending time in college), fear of prejudice, a lack of faculty or programs that honor the non-majority experience, differences in cultural capital, lack of familial support, or familial responsibilities that preclude students from being away (Soria & Troisi, 2014; Stroud, 2010, Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). These barriers may affect any prospective study abroad participant but especially perpetuate inequality of participation of low-income or first-generation students and students of color (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012).

In addition to scholarly focus on access, several recent studies have also examined the experiences of underrepresented study abroad participants *within* programs. We argue that, despite recent trends, studies about faculty-led programming mainly focus on ‘improving’ intercultural competence in students. One potential limitation of such studies is the implicit assumption that host communities are homogeneous and that student groups are homogeneous. The intercultural literature, by focusing on host-sojourner interactions and defining each as monolithic “cultures” may miss important aspects of diversity within groups of undergraduate students who study abroad.

For example, Green (2017) examined how African American women explored their womanhood, managed trigger events (such as confrontational racism and racist microaggressions) and negotiated their intersectional identities during study abroad. Cook-Anderson (2018) further identified how students encountered difficult questions about their own intersectional identities while abroad, and Faucher, Johnson, and Nguyen (2018) examined sexual identities and services in non-European settings for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The focus on intersectional identities and “moments” of potential trauma or exclusion in recent research introduces new directions into study abroad literature because it challenges the monolithic assumptions by focusing on identity-related features of students and how such identities influence/impact their study abroad experiences. Much of the contemporary scholarship cited above builds upon the early work of Yosso (2005), who identified first-generation university students as having a particular kind of “community cultural wealth” that may be unrecognized or characterized as deficits by university personnel.

The complexity of student intersectional identities within groups challenges scholars in the field to reconsider their understandings of intercultural development. Historically, intercultural communicative development has been framed in linear or accumulative ways. Through cognition, strategy, and personal effort, students are expected to develop new competencies or cultural intelligences (Earley & Ang, 2003) that can be measured by a variety of instruments. According to these theories, students who exerted intelligent effort or reflected on developmental experiences (Bennett, 2017) in the host country environment could expect intercultural sensitivity to develop. Such development, however, may occur in diverse ways.

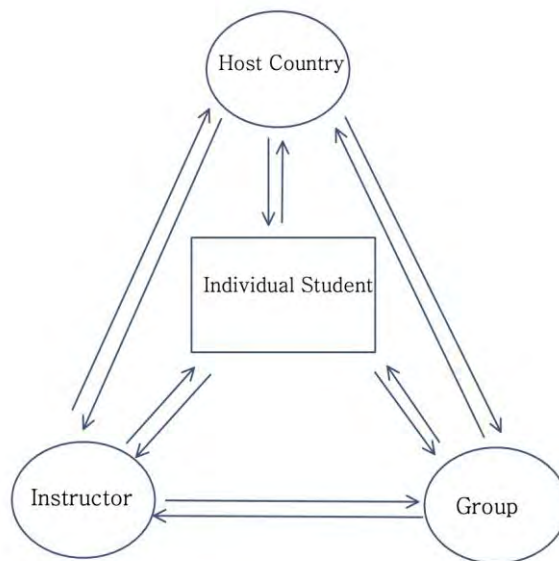
The confluence of short programs, group experiences on such programs, a wider range of study abroad destinations, and a growing expectation that all postsecondary students should participate, has created a need to examine study abroad more holistically. More information is needed about how purported high impact practices, such as short-term study abroad group programs, impact students. A holistic approach calls for more studies from the narrative perspectives of students, as they experience their own identities and belongingness in their study abroad peer groups and the host country. To this end, this article reports on under-represented student narratives of their group study experiences, set within the context of a majority-white, private liberal arts college in the U.S. with substantial study abroad opportunities and participation and a strategic plan to achieve equity of participation of all student cohorts.¹

¹ Northern College renewed the campus strategic plan in 2015. Formerly, the college had the goal to increase overall participation in study abroad. The updated plan seeks to achieve equity of participation for under-represented study abroad students so that “participants are reflective of the [Northern College] student body as a whole.” Since 2015, data has been

Group Experiences in Study Abroad at Northern College²: A Focus Group Study

To understand student experiences in group study abroad, an exploration of the understanding of the phenomenon of group-based study abroad is essential. Rather than aligning with understandings of development as linear and predictable, the influences on the potential study abroad experience in group settings are layered and complex. These influences may help explain how students engage across cultures (group culture and host culture) and may also explain difficulties students face feeling a sense of belongingness in the experience itself. Figure 1 provides an overview of the various interactions a student on a group study abroad course might experience.

FIGURE 1. VARIOUS INTERACTIONS ON GROUP STUDY ABROAD



collected to measure the gaps in participation of low income, first generation students, students of color, international students, and male participants, by comparing these groups' representation in study abroad to their representation in the student body.

² A generic pseudonym has replaced the actual name of the research site.

Group Study Abroad

Overview

This focus group study was undertaken as part of a broader inclusiveness initiative at Northern College, with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The practical intent of the study was to better understand the experiences of students who participate in study abroad at Northern College and to identify ways of better supporting underrepresented students in study abroad through program and faculty development. However, findings from the study were informative of the broader conceptual literature on study abroad and its implications for diverse students. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the identity experiences of students who are traditionally underrepresented in study abroad?
2. In what ways have group study abroad identity experiences (including host country, group, and instructor interactions) mediated the experiences of students?

In this study, we operationalize “identity experiences” as curricular, intercultural, or intra-group communication elements of programs that are experienced through the lens of students’ self-described identities. Specifically, each student in a study abroad program will filter each communicative and educational event through a particular lens of experiences and values. We aimed to understand the stories of students whose identities may be overlooked in study abroad because they are fewer in number on programs, yet whose perspectives are essential to creating inclusive programming.

Sample

The sample consisted of students who were identified as underrepresented in study abroad opportunities by the Northern College administrators. Consent was obtained and the appropriate institutional review board approved the protocol. The terminology used to describe these students is used by the U.S. census and based on enrollment in college programs. Census terminology is often disputed for its overreliance on race and lack of focus on intersectionality, but terms were used because they match the terminology used for admissions at Northern College. Student demographic groups with at least two students per group were chosen for interviews.

A central office recruited 37 students who fit into one or more of the categories of under-represented students who are underrepresented in study abroad at Northern College and recently engaged in a group, short-term study abroad program (Asian, Latinx, African/African American, Native American

ethnicity; first generation college students; gender non-conforming; Pell Grant eligible students). In the U.S. context, Pell Grant eligible students are those who meet national eligibility guidelines for government-sponsored or supported higher education by family income guidelines; Pell-grant eligibility was used to identify low-income students. The vast majority of students participated in study abroad programs, but one student participated in a geological site-based program in the U.S. All students in this study participated in January term (one-month, group-oriented) experiences in 2017 or 2018. All programs were faculty-led, generally by a faculty member with area knowledge. Sites included international destinations in Asia, Europe, Africa, Central America, South America, and Australia. Domestic sites included states in the US south. Students were only allowed to participate in one focus group. Table 1 provides an overview of the student groups who were interviewed.

TABLE 1. FOCUS GROUPS

Group	Number of Students	Female	Male
Latinx	4	4	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	4	0
Pell Grant Recipients	3	3	0
African/African American	2	1	1
First Generation Students	2	2	0

Procedures

The procedures for this study drew upon Krueger and Casey's (2000) focus group methodology. The purpose of focus group interviews is to gain in-depth insights on the focal phenomenon (group dynamics within study abroad experiences) by allowing participants to share stories, build upon others' comments, or refute commentary on experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The average time of each focus group interview was 73 minutes. The shortest interview lasted just under one hour (54 minutes) and the longest interview continued for one hour and 33 minutes (93 minutes).

Each interview followed the same protocol. First, students introduced themselves and shared a brief overview of their study abroad program. These "warm up" questions focused on students' majors and education abroad or national immersion experience. After introductions, students were asked to map out their own identities. The purpose of identity mapping was to acknowledge the multiple identities of students beyond the demographic indicator for which they were invited to participate. For example, one Latinx student identified as woman, sister, Catholic, and musician. Then, they were

asked a series of questions about their experiences. One of the core emphases of this project was to examine how experiences in study abroad valued or devalued student identities that were listed above. Because students all reported complex identities, conversations about program components and identities were rich and detailed. Each interview concluded by asking students if there was anything that was not covered by interview questions. Participant quotations regarding their experiences are found in the Findings section below. Focus group questions are listed in the Appendix of this article.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed in three stages. The first, informal stage occurred during the study itself. This stage of analysis entailed analytic reflections on interview responses and sharing of analytic memos detailing observations from interviews by the first two authors, who later compared notes to ensure alignment. The second stage of coding employed a point-by-point, inductive approach. In this stage, the first two authors developed a shared codebook that was used to analyze themes present in data. The codebook was shared electronically, and codes were compared by authors to ensure aligned analyses. As themes became clear in the data, we named and defined the themes so that coding of data would be transparent.

Two of the authors of this paper coded all transcripts. The purpose of the codebook and second round of axial coding was to sort through the most salient codes related to study abroad experiences. This type of coding “specifies the dimensions of a category” (Saldaña 2015, p. 244). For example, an original code of “short program” was described as “programs that lasted a few weeks, generally during the January term.” Once the codebook was developed, codes were then used deductively to organize student experience comments. During this phase, all transcripts were read again to ensure student statements aligned with the codebook. Once authors completed the second round of coding with the shared codebook, they met to discuss overarching findings and ensure agreement on analysis. This meeting constituted a third round of coding to ensure that interpretations were trustworthy and defensible (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

The most prevalent and cross-cutting theme that emerged from this study is that group study abroad is a relational experience. Students who participated entered into Northern College communities first (as a member of a group), then host communities. A complex ecosystem emerges as students interact with their instructors, their peers, and host country nationals. For all students, the experience of being abroad was filtered through the lens of group behavior and

personal identities. For most students, the experience was further filtered through interactions with their instructors.

Most evident in interviews with students was that models of cultural engagement present in the field for decades (e.g., intercultural sensitivity, cultural competence, cultural intelligence, etc.) assume a 1:1 interaction between students and host country nationals. However, these students reported that interactions with host country nationals were almost always in the company of fellow university students – either in small or large groups. All of these interactions likely influence student learning outcomes, program satisfaction, and understanding of their own identities in relation to others. In the paragraphs below, we report on student reflections about the interactional nature of group-based study abroad. These interactions align with the model found in Figure 1. We have organized each interaction as follows: interactions between student and group, between student and faculty, and between host national context and students.

Interactions between student and group

We define interactions between the student and the group as instances when a student described an interaction between the individual student and their peers in the group. Within these interactions, the student impacted or was impacted by the student group. For example, Gabriella³ participated in an off-campus experience in a Latin American country that she calls home. She explained,

“I kind of felt some responsibility to help the other people in my program to connect to the [host country] people. So I was there to always translate and joke around, kind of introduce people to people and make their experience better. I felt like I was the host and so I had to do that. And I think it was a really good experience, but I cannot be for sure.”

For this student, her identity was an asset during her off-campus experience. She became a bridge for her group and assisted with facilitating interactions between the group and the host country. She perceived her interaction with the group as a “sense of responsibility” because the group was visiting her home country. Her interactions with the group impacted other group members because she possessed skills in the local language and understanding of the culture, which other members of the group did not. She intended to “make their experiences better” which led her to feel she was a “host” for the other students.

Another example came from a student who participated in an off-campus language-focused program. She mentioned knowing the host country as

³ A pseudonym has replaced the name of each study participant.

a child but realized how much it had changed when she visited through a study abroad program. She shared,

“And also more so with like language skills... oh yeah, I can order food and help out people and take people around in [host city], great, and like getting a subway car and things like that. So being able to grow and affirm independence. Especially with walking with big groups when you’re in a huge city by yourself and you don’t know what you’re doing. So I think more so with me, a dependence part, as well as like a language.”

In both cases above, students’ experiences were shaped by their cultural and linguistic knowledge about the host site. Students’ identities and backgrounds allowed them a degree of expertise on site within their groups. The second student explained that she was “able to grow and affirm independence” particularly due to the “dependence” from her group members.

The group experience, however, was not empowering for all students. For example, Maria described feeling left out and isolated from the group due to certain parts of her identity. She shared,

“I was the only person of color, which on the path to being a (language) major, there’s not many people of color in that major at all. I expected to be the only person of color and the distinction of being low income, I was a lot more aware of how to spend my money more than my peers. There were times where I really knew I couldn’t be spending as much money as them so I felt a little left out when there were activities that I couldn’t participate in that they planned. So definitely felt a little bit of isolation there and the fact that most of them had things in common and I was just like, you know, there. Still participating in the conversation but not really being included, I guess.”

Maria’s personal reflection on her identity led her to believe that being a student of color and being low income prevented her from making stronger connections with the group. In this situation, Maria’s individual experience was impacted by group norms of whiteness and capacity to spend money freely in the host country. For Maria, being a student of color and lower-income student created a social gap between the larger group and her. Despite a sense of affinity that she felt with host nationals, she experienced social segregation from her group.

Monica shared a similar experience to Maria’s within her group. She described her experience as socially awkward.

“I feel like I had a similar experience of visibility versus invisibility, nobody ever talked to me, the other students didn’t really talk to me unless we were all out. And one time we went zip lining and we didn’t

have the professors with us and so it was just lots of students and they're not very good at communicating. In a sense they weren't very good communicating in [host country language] all the time and so they were trying to ask a question but they didn't know how to say it, and so when they didn't know how to say something that they wanted, they would look at me to talk to them. And it was because they knew that I had some family experience with [host country language] and so it was, I was only there for when they wanted me to, yeah, help them find a word. They would look at me and say, 'how do you say this?' and 'how do you say that' and it's like, I don't know everything but it's this. [Laughter]. So it was just like yeah, that was hyper-visibility."

Monica felt as if her group members only relied on her when they needed her language and cultural skills. For the group, Monica's presence was helpful for them for interacting with host country nationals in order to communicate what was needed. The experience was not empowering for Monica, however, because when she wasn't needed, "nobody ever talked to me." Monica's bilingualism placed her in a precarious position. Like Maria, she often felt at odds with the majority of white students in the group and did not have the economic resources of her fellow students. However, in times of need, the group looked to Monica for linguistic help. Monica quickly recognized that she only became visible to the group to meet the group's needs.

Finally, Eva noted that disrespectful conversations often occurred during the out-of-class portions of her program. These discussions exemplified the unique nature of group-to-student interactions that occur in short term study abroad courses, which are not often described in study abroad literature. Eva noted that there were "a group of guys who were white, male, and straight who spoke disrespectfully" to females and students of color on the trip. The challenge of the trip, according to this student, was that there were frequently "politically charged" conversations that happened outside of the formal programming but impacted the experience of the program. In this case, the group-to-student interactions negatively influenced the experience of women, and women of color specifically, because the in-country experience was filtered through group norms and processed in unstructured ways by students.

Interactions between students and faculty

For group study abroad programs, a home campus faculty member typically facilitates the experience, and this was true of all of the programs in this study. This section outlines how interactions between student and faculty intersected with student identities to shape the study abroad experience. According to students, the amount of interaction students had with instructors varied widely. Some students described faculty as being "present" and some

described faculty as being largely “absent.” In each circumstance, the experience of the student was impacted. For example, Monica mentioned,

“My professor was amazing because when I did have concerns about the way other students were acting with their families or how they were disrespectful in public or if they would say something that she didn’t automatically see, I would confide in her with my experiences and she was really quick to take action on those things. And from the beginning, she was really good with recognizing my identity and saying and just like talking to me in a way that she recognized it.”

Monica viewed the role of the faculty member as an asset for her experience. When she disagreed with the interactions and behavior of the group, she confided in her professor. Recognizing that her professor valued her identity, Monica saw the professor as a resource who allowed her to discuss the interactions in the group which negatively impacted her experience. Informing the professor allowed Monica to seek assistance with confronting the ways in which the group members behaved in the country and toward their host families. Her experience was positively impacted by her support from her professor.

Unlike Monica, May did not feel she could count on her instructor. In her interview, she described the challenges of being in a host community without the guidance needed to navigate challenging interactions with host communities. According to May, these interactions were gendered and racialized, and her instructor was not able to adequately manage the dynamics.

“I think a main one was the lack of cultural competency that we as a group had. Especially going to [host country]. I know you were talking about knowing the language, we didn’t know any of the languages and so I think that was really problematic that we didn’t even know how to say ‘thank you’ or ‘please.’ Just basic phrases that would convey respect. And then I think, also in [host country] there is a lot of women’s issues and feminist issues and I think us not having a good idea of how we as women, western women, were supposed to act in this other context that was respectful and nonjudgmental, I think that was also a problem. And I think race was also a huge deal because I definitely got the ‘where are you from?’ question especially since I was one of the very few people of color on the trip. So even if I was with the white group people would [ask], ‘oh, where are you from?’ I’d be like, ‘oh I’m with this group.’ And then I got a lot of locals saying like ‘really, are you really from America?’ So I think that was a big barrier and I think our professor was ill-equipped to deal with that. Because a group of us tried to bring it up in conversation and she just kind of destroyed the conversation.”

May added that the other group members and she attempted to bring up issues to the instructor, but were rebuffed in their attempts.

“We tried and she basically kind of just said ‘get over it’ and ‘they didn’t mean harm.’ Which you know, it could be very well that they didn’t mean harm but it’s also important to address how we were feeling and validate and affirm how we were feeling and she didn’t do that.”

Students were most critical of instructors who did not help to manage group and host country dynamics. There were no complaints from students about outright racism or sexism by instructors, but situations like May’s were shared several times by students. In each instance, students felt that the absence or failure to intervene by faculty members (whether intentionally designed or not) created situations in which hostile or uncomfortable conversations impacted the student experience. In all cases similar to the ones that May described, students were not looking to avoid uncomfortable confrontations or cultural learning but sought support in understanding and mediating experiences.

Jordan described a scenario in which she felt racial identity within her host country was overlooked. She saw this as a missed opportunity for the group. Similar to May’s experience, Jordan noted that the day-to-day experience in study abroad is chock-full of opportunities for reflection on the host country and the home country. Jordan reflected on a moment when her group met an individual from a historically subjugated group in the host country, but who had global notoriety as a musician. She enjoyed the experience, but also noted there was a missing conversation.

“So because of his identity I think that it was easy for people to only focus on him. Then in hindsight, looking back at the experience and saying ‘oh well did you have any interactions with somebody of [particular ethnic] descent?’ And they could say, ‘oh yeah, he was actually great and somebody that had a shop that we went to, to look at his instruments and he played for us and it was great.’ So it was easy to focus on him and not have to come to terms with the other stuff that we saw.

Jordan was excited to meet the musician, but as a music major who studied the history of the country she studied abroad to, she also had a desire to discuss the inequalities that existed in the country and how such inequalities compared to her U.S. experience. She was disappointed that these issues were not a core part of the program and felt there were missed opportunities for reflection on social justice issues from the perspective of her host nation.

Monica’s, May’s, and Jordan’s experiences all pointed to a desire by students for faculty members to be present and supportive in navigating intragroup and host country interactions. In all cases, students expected instructors to support this navigation. This role may be different from what is

generally expected of faculty members on campus, but in many cases instructors' actions or inaction influenced student experiences in their programs.

According to students, a lengthy and dedicated pre-departure curriculum helped mediate some of the issues that arose on site. For example, Alex described how her professor organized pre-departure sessions for preparation. She shared,

“She [the instructor] had one of the [language] professors here organize two sessions a week and she and [the study abroad instructor] really encouraged us to go there. So that started like half-way through the semester before we went [abroad]. And in that class, we learned how to say hello, goodbye, thank you, the culture. Just like how do you eat, how do you sit, what side of the street do you walk on, where do you stand. And I think because of that overall, the students in my group, at least from what I saw, because I'm not saying like it didn't happen, it was just based on what I saw. They were really receptive with everything.”

Alex's instructor created opportunities for the students to engage in interactions with host nationals living in the U.S. before they departed for their program. They were provided with information from an instructor who was knowledgeable about the cultural context of the country. This gave students a chance for advance interaction instead of having their first exposure to the culture in-country. Alex described the payoff from her group as being “receptive” to interactions in the host country because the pre-departure preparation impacted how the students behaved on site.

“I mean obviously when you hear about something and then you actually go there and do it, you get completely different experiences and that was really the case for me because the professor... she wasn't necessarily my professor for my class but she was the professor for the other class and she is a very knowledgeable person. She lived in [the host country] for quite a few years. She's fluent in [the host language]. She's done this program multiple times, so she was really our main resource.”

Maria also believed that the time her instructor invested in pre-departure meetings helped alleviate some of the potential cultural clashes that might have arisen on site.

“[B]efore [the program] she definitely prepped us to what we were going into. She tried to paint a picture of what to expect as a culture. How we should act, how we should dress, how the public sphere works in [the host country] and she also talked about the role of a woman visiting an

Islamic country. Which kind of was like a taboo with things to look out for, just to keep an eye out. To be aware that there's a lot of social differences between here and there and while we were there she wanted us to talk to our host family about politics about social life about how they think society has progressed and how things have been changing. And she definitely wanted us to talk about the role of [host country colonial language], like how [this language] played a role in their life because my host dad only spoke [regional language] and my host mother spoke [regional language] and [colonial language]. So [colonial language] in [host country] is a kind of, depending on where you're from, is kind of like a symbol of education."

In summary, a relatively under-studied phenomenon of short-term study abroad is the interpersonal interactions among group members. Focus group reflections indicated that the students at Northern College craved faculty support and facilitation to help mediate the interactions between students. While students reported a range of faculty involvement, consistent in all cases, was that home campus marginalization may be reproduced within a study abroad setting. In this case, intercultural and study abroad studies have not yet adequately addressed dynamics between 'sojourners' or the faculty that facilitate programs.

Interactions between the group and the host national context

Students interviewed for this study identified numerous incidents in which the presence of a group appeared to have a negative impact on day-to-day interactions with host country nationals. Within these interactions, groups were impacted by the expectations of the host national context and the outward behavior of students within a group. Such interactions then impacted the experience of the individual student. For example, Maria shared an experience about a group member's lack of understanding of the cultural context in her host country. She shared,

"We were visiting a mosque and it was a very traditional mosque, women weren't allowed inside and you had, well women were allowed to be inside with their husband but they had to have their hair wrapped and they couldn't wear shoes. And we were just looking at it from the outside. But there was a group of girls who just wandered all the way inside and for everyone it was a really, really big deal. People stopped walking in the streets and everyone turned and looked. The people in the inside were freaking out. They were like 'there's a couple of blonde girls in the mosque in their shoes' and it was just chaotic. I was embarrassed, I am embarrassed. I felt almost ashamed to be there because you know, we're visiting someone else's home and we were disrespecting it so harshly like that. Especially religion is very important in that country

and it was a terrifying moment. It was just very shameful and apologies, it was just a little too late.”

In this excerpt, Maria referred to a group of Northern College students and their interaction within the country. Because Maria was a member of the group, her individual experience was impacted by the decision that her fellow students made. Although she did not personally go into the mosque, her affiliation with the students who did so made her “feel ashamed” to be in country with them.

While Maria possessed a basic understanding of cultural norms and how to convey respect, May spoke of feeling unequipped and as if the group’s presence itself was exploitative to the host community.

“(J)ust like the idea of taking and not giving. I think that was a lot of our experiences as this like privileged college group going into all these different areas. I don’t know we felt, I don’t want to say we, I felt, at times, intrusive because we didn’t give anything back to the community.”

Jordan also recalled a time when her group acted in a way that she felt was disrespectful of her host community. Jordan acknowledged that such actions were likely the result of stress on the group, but still felt the actions of others in her group had a negative influence on her experience in country.

“I just remember having that talk with my group when we were gone because I think that when you’re traveling it’s easy, especially once you’re a little ways in, and everyone is a little homesick and you’ve been on a bus for eight hours that it’s easy to take for granted all of the things that you’re allowed to do as an American citizen because you’re put on this high pedestal and then that can be anything from like the thing that ticked me off was the complaining of how hot the weather was.”

Seemingly minor acts like publicly complaining about weather acted as triggers for students like Jordan to reflect on the privileged status of a group of U.S. students traveling abroad for the sake of learning. Monica also spoke about a time when she separated herself from the group because of group behaviors she described as “disrespectful.” When she spoke about the interactions between the group and host families, for example, she shared,

“And even my family would say that the other students were really rude and didn’t treat their families right. Yea, their host families and just everybody, basically the whole country [laughter]. Just like walking on the streets just being very disrespectful. I mean when they were walking in the streets as groups they were being very disrespectful.”

As noted above, culturally disrespectful, privileged, or exploitative behaviors of the group — descriptors which derived from student statements about perceptions of group dynamics — could be assuaged when instructors took

proactive roles in addressing how students engaged with one another and with local realities. Local realities might include dynamics with local families or interactions with local political activities. For example, Jordan described a time when the group debriefed an event that occurred in the host country.

“We were in [host city] at the time on [host country independence day] and tens of thousands of people just like around the [waterfront area]. Flags of the [host country] were being handed out but there were also [Indigenous] flags being handed out and other things in attempt...to bring up conversation....So we got to talk about it as international students...So I feel like the most we could do was inform ourselves of what was going on and include the whole picture in the conversation. After that it was a lot of little things that I feel make a big difference. Like talking about it at dinner conversations and before you go to bed reflect on it. A lot of that was happening, just within our own group. It was also facilitated by [the instructor] and [program assistant] who was the head of our trip. Other things like reading the newspaper everyday because they came to our hostel and just things like informing ourselves about the local mentality so that we weren’t blindsided by misinformation.”

Finally, Alex reflected on a time when she felt the group was acting in a culturally inappropriate manner. Although Alex did not feel comfortable confronting the group, she was relieved when the instructor proactively addressed students’ behavior in country.

“I was just very appreciative of how she was like, ‘you guys need to act a certain way.’ And she did it in a way that didn’t sound authoritarian or anything. It was just like, ‘you just have to put yourself in the [host country] people’s shoes when they see you. And because they’re going to think of you a certain way because you’re American and just kind of see where that comes from.’ She gave us a mini-history lesson of like what that was.”

Conclusions and Way Forward: Toward a More Inclusive Group Experience in Study Abroad

The purpose of this study was to identify the unique, identity-related features of group study abroad experiences for underrepresented students. Assuming the trend of students traveling together will continue, the broader social agenda of the study was to understand how institutions might enhance inclusiveness in study abroad programming and faculty development efforts. Such an agenda will highlight the ways in which inequities on campus may be

reproduced abroad, but with the additional mediating factor of group interactions with host communities.

There are two significant dangers to unmediated group-based study abroad. The first danger is that individual students may be marginalized as a result of group norms that are defined by the privileged majority within a group. The second danger is the stereotyping and culturally disrespectful behavior toward host nationals, which can be reinforced by groups if left unchallenged by instructors.

Understanding the experiences of students in study abroad settings in this study helped to identify that students who enter group experiences have diverse and unique identities. Interviews with 15 students illuminated that, despite the fact that students enter into host countries in groups, membership in the group is heterogeneous. The picture of study abroad, because of this, becomes more complex than professionals or study abroad literature has previously acknowledged.

In order for students and host communities to benefit from study abroad group models, the authors suggest three components for consideration: (1) cultivating respectful, inclusive, and tolerant engagements among students within study abroad groups; (2) recruiting faculty leaders who are attentive and additionally have developed identity and culturally sensitivity practices to facilitate student interactions and engagements; and (3) fostering an awareness of group presence within countries. In many ways, this discovery challenges the field of intercultural development to consider new units of analysis in relation to desired learning outcomes for students. Group study abroad program evaluations that focus on effectiveness necessitate that a unit of analysis must be the group itself, including the group leader. Intra-group analysis of group cohesion and respect for plural identities must be examined as students journey abroad as well. Such analysis must then be critical, examining both interpersonal communication and the heterogeneity within the group. Similarly, program managers must critically analyze group interactions, as disrespectful or ill-informed interactions impact both community members and individual students in negative ways.

The role of academic staff is central to these processes. Faculty-led programs that feature *frequent and spontaneous* instructor facilitation on intercultural learning can produce positive intercultural outcomes for students (Anderson, 2016; Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016). Building on the perspectives of students in this study, however, it appears that instructor facilitation is more complex and warrants further investigation. For example, rather than academic staff solely playing the on-campus role of content expert, students noted that while abroad, instructors additionally played the role of facilitator, referee, mentor, and cultural mirror for students in groups. Students not only relied on

instructors for cultural interpretation but also expected that they were cognizant of local cultural norms, which relates to the high expectation some students mentioned having for faculty. Students further expected academic staff members to be present, willing to engage in challenging conversations, and able to deter individuals and groups from acting inappropriately in host settings.

The emerging nature of group-based, short-term study abroad requires new analysis and a rethinking of what is defined as a “cultural experience” for students in general, but specifically for students who have been historically underrepresented in study abroad. Niehaus et al. (2018) and Anderson, et al. (2016) both called for greater engagement by instructors who lead such programs. Niehaus et al.’s (2018) conceptualization of cultural mentoring and Anderson et al.’s (2016) ‘instructor influence’ both demonstrate that instructor facilitation, leadership, and mentoring can support students when entering new environments. This study reinforces these findings, through the lens of students who participated in post-program reflections, but also takes an analytical turn by focusing on identity related features amongst study group membership. Moreover, by highlighting that instructor mentoring and influence appear to be important indicators for cultivating and fostering engagement with differences *within* group dynamics, this study also contributes to the conceptualization of inclusion in study abroad. In order to reduce further marginalization while abroad, specifically for students who may already be marginalized on campus, this study provides evidence that facilitation of inclusive and respectful engagement is needed in group-based study abroad, both within groups and between groups and international communities. Practices such as debriefing social justice issues in countries that extend beyond everyday ‘cultural encounters’ is necessary and ideally will improve positive and equitable learning outcomes for study abroad participants.

Acknowledgments

This article was prepared based on research generously sponsored through the project *To Include is to Excel*, with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The authors wish to thank the administration of Northern College and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for support. We also wish to acknowledge the courageous students of Northern College who shared their stories with researchers in an effort to improve policy and practice in their home institution. This work would not be possible without them. We also wish to thank Maggie Broner, Associate Professor of Romance Languages – Spanish, at St. Olaf College, for providing the Spanish language abstract. Finally, we

wish to thank the anonymous reviewers who provided helpful insights and structure into the early version of this manuscript.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

Introduction:

Greetings, my name is (researcher). As you know from the recruitment information for this study, Northern College is interested in hearing more about your experiences with off-campus study. The main objective is to create program offerings, faculty development opportunities, and policies that honor the experiences and identities of all Northern College students. To this end, we have a few questions for today. We'll ask the questions in focus group format, allowing for individual responses and conversation as appropriate. I may ask you to say more if a response isn't clear and may ask others to contribute more if I feel I have clearly understood your response. The session today will last about an hour. I encourage you to be comfortable, help yourself to (eats and drinks) and speak honestly. I am the only person who will know your identity. All responses will be aggregated into a final report, so please be as honest as you can be without having any fear of reprisal from the college.

1. Please tell me your first name and where you did your off-campus study.
2. Tell us about the nature of the program (prompts: what was the curriculum, was it classroom-based, etc.).
3. Next, I would like you to create a chart of you. I am passing around examples. Once you have had a chance to look at it, please create your own chart. There is no right or wrong answer for this activity, but we'll use it for follow-up questions.
4. Now tell us a little about your chart.
5. Now relate your off-campus study experience to the chart. What elements of your experience do you feel honored parts of your identity?

Prompt: Could be interactions with peers, interactions with faculty, interactions with local community members, class readings, academic assignments, site visits, etc.

6. Now tell me about a negative experience. What elements of your off-campus experience do you feel were an affront to your identity?

7. How did you respond to the scenario you just described?

8. Now think ahead a few years. You all reported both enriching and disheartening experiences in your study away programs. If you could give advice to the Off-Campus Study office for creating more inclusive and identity-affirming programs over the course of the next few years, what would you tell them?

9. Today I heard you say X, Y, and Z. Was there anything we didn't talk about today that you'd like to say?