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The “Authentic” Me: New Understandings of Self and the World as a Result of Global Learning Experiences

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, 26 university students reflected on their experiences in domestic or international study away programs. Utilizing a sociocultural developmental framework, we examined perceived changes in identity in relation to salient aspects of the sociocultural context and social interactions during and after study away. Students reported developing an enhanced understanding of who they really are. Their experiences navigating new environments served as a catalyst for personal growth, and, for some, participating in study away ignited new professional pathways and plans. Encountering different perspectives on policies and issues facing the United States (US) afforded opportunities to co-construct new understandings of national identities. Reentry posed particular challenges in communicating with family and friends, and some found it hard to communicate unique personal experiences within an institutional context in which the majority of students study away. The process of reflecting on questions related to identity and reentry in the focus groups was reportedly a unique and valuable intervention. The findings support the need for enhanced opportunities for guided reflection experiences before, during, and after study away.

KEYWORDS

global engagement, identity, global education, reentry, sociocultural development

INTRODUCTION

I thought of myself as compassionate and open to new things, and all this stuff. Then, I almost felt like India just, like, punched me in the face and was like, “You think you’re a . . . kind of person, but look at these completely selfless people that are giving you everything when they have nothing.” Just the way my understanding of my own identity was directly confronted with the most idealized versions of those aspects of myself that I was seeing in other people there was really difficult for me to confront, because then I was like, “Okay, what am I if I can’t fully see myself as these things anymore?” (Beth)

I identify as Jewish, which actually isn’t one of the six religions [in Indonesia], so I couldn’t tell people I was Jewish. I mean, I could have, but it just was a very confusing thing for people because Judaism is not recognized as a religion. Coming back and holding that identity a little closer in very small ways,

mostly just going to more Hillel events, and even this package that I brought in is a menorah. I never have celebrated Hanukkah on campus, but this year I was like, "I'll light a menorah." I got a menorah.
(Molly)

Through participation in global learning experiences, students may gain a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to others. These quotes illustrate the powerful influence of engaging with others in culturally different communities on young adults' developing understanding of their own identities and positionalities. Beth, navigating questions such as "Who am I, really?" and Molly, exploring "What does it mean to be Jewish abroad, or at home?" discovered different versions of themselves through new perspectives they attributed to living and studying in an unfamiliar sociocultural context. Although global education is certainly not necessary for deep reflection on self-in-context, and indeed, does not guarantee intercultural learning, students' experiences of disorientation and discomfort during off-campus educational experiences can result in transformative learning about themselves and the world, particularly when accompanied by skillful, guided reflection (Berdrow et al. 2020, 67; Carpenter, Kaufman, and Torp 2019, 2; Kortegast and Boisfontaine 2015; Savicki and Price 2015).

The quotes also illustrate the dynamic nature of identity development as the young adults co-create meaning and understandings of themselves through learning experiences in diverse contexts. A sociocultural approach to identity development considers "sociocultural processes and individual functioning as interacting moments in human action," rather than static, isolated processes (Penuel and Wertsch 1995, 84). In a sociocultural developmental framework, the roles of the individual and the social environment are interrelated, and learning encompasses complex interactions with others during intentional participation in authentic, collaborative activities (Rogoff et al. 2016; Vandermaas-Peeler, Westerberg, and Fleischman 2019). In this framework, learning is a social and cultural process influenced by who participates, the structure and nature of the activities, and their connections to institutional and societal traditions and values (Hedegaard 2009; Rogoff et al. 2016). Lifespan theories describe identity development as a dynamic search for self-realization and self-discovery influenced by characteristics of the social environment such as political and religious orientations, language, culture, and ethnicity (e.g., Erikson 1968; Shealy 2016). Adolescence and young adulthood are pivotal years for identity exploration. Arnett (2011, 256–57) proposed "emerging adulthood" as a new life stage between adolescence and young adulthood characterized by identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, a feeling of being "in-between" developmental stages, and a belief in future possibilities. However, cultural beliefs, practices, and values influence identity exploration, and emerging adulthood does not necessarily characterize the experience of youth in societies focused on social and familial obligations to others (Arnett 2011, 272).

The present study was an investigation of university students' reflections on their identities after participating in one or more global educational experiences, encompassing off-campus domestic and international programs, and thus labeled "study away" for the purposes of this research. Utilizing a sociocultural developmental framework, we examined perceived changes in identity after study away experiences; salient aspects of the sociocultural context; understanding of self, others and the world, and in particular, the ways students experience their national identities; and communication with family and friends upon reentry.

Global education and transformative learning

Diversity/global learning has been recognized as a high-impact educational practice with the potential for significant educational benefits to students (Kuh, O’Donnell, and Reed 2013). The Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University defined global learning as “a lifelong developmental process in which the learner engages with difference and similarity and develops capabilities to interact equitably in a complex world” (Center for Engaged Learning 2017). Considering the wide array of educational experiences composing global learning, the Association of American Colleges and Universities emphasized key components for curricular design, including gaining knowledge about diversity, considering issues within local and global communities, and collaborating to solve problems (Hovland 2014). Global engagement involves the intentional incorporation of three overlapping domains of global learning/knowledge, skills/behaviors, and attitudes/dispositions, supported by skilled teaching and mentoring (Vandermaas-Peeler, Ruelle, and Peeples 2020).

Participation in off-campus domestic and international study away programs has increased steadily in the United States over the last few decades as students prepare to enter a diverse, global workforce with enhanced understanding and skills (Dolby 2007, 141; Hovland 2014, 3). Findings from a survey of approximately 4,500 alumni by the Institute of International Education suggest studying abroad positively impacts a range of skills relevant for employment and career development, including intercultural skills, curiosity, adaptability, confidence, and self-awareness (Farrugia and Sanger 2017). A significant body of research lends support to the conclusion that participation in study away fosters greater intercultural understanding, cultural humility, and global citizenship (e.g., Hartman et al. 2020; Namaste and Sturgill 2020; Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou 2012). However, the outcomes of global education are not always positive; the significant variability in the nature of the experiences and the ways individual students navigate them must be considered in research on global learning (Namaste and Sturgill 2020, 1–5; Paras and Michell 2020, 96–97).

Study away experiences are often assumed to be “transformative,” resulting in potentially dramatic changes, such that students no longer understand themselves, others, or the world as they did before their global engagement (Wandschneider et al. 2015). The phenomenon of transformative learning has gained significant attention in higher education, perhaps because it aligns with the mission of many institutions to prepare students to become global leaders. However, the term has been used in such a ubiquitous manner that it is no longer characterized by a common definition or typology (Hoggan 2016, 58). Based on the results of a complex meta-analysis of over 200 published articles, Hoggan (2016) offered a new definition of transformative learning as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world” (71). His analysis resulted in six broad categories of transformative learning outcomes, including worldview, self, epistemology, ontology, behavior, and capacity. In the present study, we focus on two categories of outcomes, including self, referring to the many ways learners experience significant shifts in their sense of self, and worldview, referring to substantial changes in how the learner understands others, and the world and how it works. Of particular interest is how students’ perceptions of self and others may interact with elements of the sociocultural context in which they studied.

Identity development and global engagement

Students participating in study away bring diverse experiences, demographics, and understandings of themselves in relation to others, all of which influences the ways they engage in pre-departure preparations, the study away experiences, and reentry (Berdrow et al. 2020; Wandschneider et al. 2015). Moreover, the sociocultural context of the study away program can influence individual and national identity development. As students who are US citizens travel abroad, they navigate new understandings of their national identities through encounters with others in diverse sociocultural contexts. In “critical moments,” they examine practices and beliefs that were previously tacit assumptions, and now are challenged by interactions with others who think, believe, and/or act differently (Gieser 2015). Dolby (2007) found students who returned from study abroad were more adept at articulating aspects of their role as American citizens abroad from perspectives “largely unavailable to them from their vantage point inside the United States” (152). They reflected critically on certain American stereotypes (e.g., the “ugly” American traveler) and foreign policy (in a post-September 11 world), working to reconstruct aspects of their national identities rather than rejecting them altogether. Gieser (2015) also found students’ perceptions of their national identities emerged as a highly salient theme in post-study abroad interviews (640). The emotional valence and connectedness to their “American self” depended on their encounters with others—for some, the stereotypes held in the host community led to negative interactions, whereas others were able to navigate their own racial, ethnic, and national identities more easily in the host community. Regardless, students were forced to reconsider their own assumptions about what it means to be an American through their study abroad experiences (Gieser 2015). In her study of sojourner re-entry, Pitts (2016) found that students’ sense of self was deeply influenced by the contrast in the host and home environments (430). Once they returned home, students reported their changed mindset made it hard for them to fit in with friends and family and perceived mainstream US cultural values (e.g., excess materialism).

The current study

We utilized a qualitative research design to explore students’ perceptions of their identities after they returned from a study away experience. The research questions included the following:

- 1) Do students perceive changes in their identities in relation to their study away experiences?
- 2) What aspects of the sociocultural context and/or the study away program are particularly salient with regards to perceived changes in identity?
- 3) How do students understand themselves in relation to others and the world as a result of their study away experience? In particular, how do students navigate their national identities during and after study away?
- 4) How do students talk about their identities in the context of interactions with family and friends upon reentry?

METHODS

All participants attended a private, mid-sized university (approximately 6,000 undergraduates) in the southeastern United States. A convenience sample was chosen with students who had studied away in university or affiliated programs, including both domestic and/or international study away, and had been nominated by faculty for their high critical reflection skills during an off-campus experience. In

total, 26 students (24 female-identified) participated across eight focus groups. Ten students reported one study away experience and 16 students reported multiple study away experiences. Some were entirely abroad, while others had a mix of abroad and off-campus domestic study. Using a process approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board, students were contacted via email and offered times to sign up for focus group participation. Participation was incentivized with a \$5 gift card to a local coffee shop. Students signed an informed consent upon arrival in a small university conference room used as the focus group location. Two researchers attended each focus group session, with one asking questions from the list and the other listening, taking notes, and probing for follow-up as appropriate. Questions associated with this study are in appendix A. Each focus group was audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

ANALYSES

All authors participated in multiple rounds of transcript coding to generate relevant codes, develop a coding manual, and establish reliability. First, authors individually participated in open coding to identify broad themes. These were then discussed as a group in the context of Hoggan’s (2016) model of transformative learning and used to guide the analysis process. Two broad categories, *self* and *worldview*, emerged as most reliable and relevant for our data. We also utilized in-vivo coding processes, using students’ own words to develop two additional categories of codes (Saldaña 2016, 8). These included *culture*, students’ descriptions of their experiences in one or more different cultures, and *reentry*, how they reflected on these experiences upon return. Axial coding and verification were used to generate tentative coder agreement on sub-codes for each major category. In this iterative process, all authors coded individually and then compared codes with each other, revising codes that emerged as unreliable (e.g., coders were not consistent in applying them to the data). At least two authors then re-coded each focus group transcript using the revised coding manual. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion with the larger group. The frequency of codes for each focus group are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of codes for each focus group

Focus group	Self	Worldview	Culture	Re-entry	Row count
1	26 (28.6 percent)	10 (11.0 percent)	27 (29.7 percent)	28 (30.8 percent)	91
2	19 (29.2 percent)	10 (15.4 percent)	22 (33.8 percent)	14 (21.5 percent)	65
3	18 (41.9 percent)	6 (14.0 percent)	4 (9.3 percent)	15 (34.9 percent)	43
4	22 (27.2 percent)	4 (4.9 percent)	21 (25.9 percent)	34 (42.0 percent)	81
5	9 (16.1 percent)	7 (12.5 percent)	11 (19.6 percent)	29 (51.8 percent)	56
6	20 (31.3 percent)	4 (6.3 percent)	11 (17.2 percent)	29 (45.3 percent)	64
7	29 (30.5 percent)	24 (25.3 percent)	27 (28.4 percent)	15 (15.8 percent)	95
8	9 (20.5 percent)	3 (6.8 percent)	11 (25.0 percent)	21 (47.7 percent)	44

Note: Percentages for each group are provided in parentheses.

As seen in table 1, the number of codes per group varied from 43 to 95. This variability may be partially explained by the length of time spent in the focus group. The focus groups lasted 51 minutes on average, ranging from 31 to 61 minutes. However, one focus group lasting 47 minutes yielded 95 codes, whereas another lasting 47 minutes yielded only 44 codes. Thus, time alone cannot explain the

variability. Additional factors influencing the number of codes per focus group may include the number of participating students in each group (ranging from two to four) and the degree to which they elaborated on responses to the questions, as well as tangential conversations and in-depth stories that may have veered off track. In five of the eight focus groups the *reentry* code was used most frequently. The most prevalent code in two focus groups was *self*, and *culture* had the highest incidence in one group.

The research team then used the coded transcripts from each focus group to identify cross-cutting, salient themes for each research question (e.g., Miles and Huberman 1994; Saldaña 2016). Analyses for each research question are presented below, with selected comments from the focus group transcripts chosen to elucidate the themes. All names were changed to ensure confidentiality.

1) Do students perceive changes in their identity in relation to their study away experiences?

Most participants described an enhanced understanding of some aspect of their identities because of their study away experiences, although a minority claimed they had not changed. Three dominant themes emerged in the analyses, including finding your authentic self, augmenting personal growth through new experiences, and developing a professional identity.

Finding your authentic self

An interesting pattern emerged when students responded to the question, “Do you feel like you have changed during your time away?” Rather than agreeing that they changed significantly, students often described experiencing an enhanced understanding of who they *really* are. They identified changes in thoughts, actions, and feelings, but also expressed a strong belief in a core sense of self that did not change, as seen below.

I think, wow, that's a loaded question—“How do I feel like I've changed?” I don't think it's that I radically changed, and I was one Molly before I went, and I came back just [a] super different Molly. I think it was more that the experience was this accelerated coming into myself. It was just this rapid, here are things that are authentically you; here are things that are not. Only do the things that are authentic to who you are and who you want to be. (Molly, Focus Group [FG] 1)

... we don't think it [study abroad] changed us, we just think it showed us who we are. If that makes any sense. It didn't, like make us be a different person or feel a different way about things, it just made it clearer who we are, where we come from. (Anna, FG 6)

The tensions between imagining identity as both an unwavering, central core and a socially constructed, malleable construct surfaced in nearly every focus group. Students affirmed they felt like the same person, but their reflections indicated they experienced and embraced significant changes in some aspects of their identities. The quote below exemplifies one student's resistance to imagining a significant change in sense of self.

I wouldn't say I changed all that much, to be honest . . . In general, most of my opinions and stuff stayed the same. But, my perspective on different societies has changed a little bit. I mean, I love America, but it was cool to experience a culture where other things are prioritized compared to things that are prioritized here in America. (Joe, FG 8)

Augmenting personal growth and responsibility through new experiences

Students often described changes in the ways they navigated new environments, such as public transportation, language differences, and new living arrangements, as a catalyst for personal growth. They experienced increased confidence and independence due to their experiences, as seen in the following quotes.

I was really nervous going because I'm not the best with directions and I was scared. "How am I going to find my way around a place where I might not be able to ask for directions? I have no idea where I am." Using public transportation 90 percent of the time, but since I eventually found my destination in every place, I slowly realized I can do this. So, it made me more confident in myself. (Justine, FG 2)

I think I gained a lot more patience, patience with myself and learning a different language, and not getting so frustrated if I couldn't get exactly what I wanted across. Also, patience with other people in general, traveling, learning how to deal with other people's idiosyncrasies, and stuff like that. That was good. (Tracy, FG 6)

Reported gains in confidence and independence like those above were among the most cited changes across all focus groups.

Developing a professional identity

Students often linked their identity development to new or more clearly delineated perspectives on current and future pathways. This professional growth ranged from affirming a current course of study to changing majors, adding minors, and pursuing new graduate paths, fellowships and/or professional opportunities, as seen in the examples below.

I do think I changed a lot. Not necessarily like a whole new person, but I definitely feel more focused and more interested in what I'm studying, specifically because I was able to get some really interesting perspectives. I study international relations, and so the academic part was interesting. (Katrina, FG 8)

I mean, I did my practicum there. And before doing that, I really thought I wanted to go to physician assistant (PA) school. I was so set on the individual treatment care option. But after learning about population-based health and whatnot, now I'm not even considering PA school. Now I just want to learn more about community work and sustainable community development. (Lila, FG 4)

In the quote above, Lila describes how participating in a three-week intensive practicum in India influenced her graduate school plans. Engaging in a high-impact practice, such as doing a practicum,

internship, or undergraduate research during the study away program, was associated with broader perspective-taking and professional identity development, as seen in the next quote.

I think especially the internship aspect helped me to be more confident . . . I was able to make connections and network, and I feel pretty confident about getting a job. So that was a positive way that I changed, and I think that just also it changed . . . my perspective on the entertainment industry because there are a lot of opportunities being a journalism major. (Meredith, FG 3)

The above quote from a student studying in Los Angeles indicates shifting perspectives were not limited to students who studied in international contexts.

2) What aspects of the sociocultural context and/or the study away program are particularly salient with regards to perceived changes in identity?

Students in most focus groups identified connections between identity shifts and specific aspects of their study away program. Given the vastly different programs and geographic regions represented, we analyzed features of the sociocultural context using the students' descriptions of their experiences rather than a priori categories such as duration or location of the program. Of the 26 participants, 16 reported multiple study away experiences, including a combination of short-term (i.e., a three-week winter term and/or a summer program) and semester programs. Of the 10 students who participated in only one study away program, nine studied abroad for a semester. Thus, all but one of the participants studied off campus for at least four months, if not longer, and over half of them reflected on their experiences in two or more programs. The two primary themes that emerged across focus groups were a shifting understanding of self and others due to experiencing a high degree of contrast between host and home cultures, and deeper contact with the host community resulting from being one of only a few students from the US and/or the home institution in the program.

Experiencing a high degree of contrast between host and home cultures

The degree of difference between the host and home communities emerged as the predominant factor influencing a shifting sense of self. As one student who studied abroad in Argentina noted, "For me, every single day was like a constant reminder that I was not in a comfortable zone like I am in the US." This is also exemplified in Beth's comment about her experiences in a short-term program in India.

I probably learned more in three weeks than I've learned in any other experience. Just trying to take in all of this information was definitely an interesting approach, but I learned so much, and saw so many differences, and just the hospitality of people . . . just walking down the street and people are inviting you for tea and they want you to meet their family. We stayed in a village for two nights, and I woke up at like 2 a.m. hearing the sounds of chopping in the kitchen, because all the local villagers were already up cooking us breakfast. I was like, there's no way I can just lay here and sleep when they're working the entire night to feed us. I would challenge myself to go into those spaces, even though none of them can speak English, just trying to help in any way I can and trying to break that cultural barrier a little bit. That, for me, laying there, I was like, "No, I'm not just gonna be someone that's gonna take from this culture and not give anything in return." (Beth, FG 1)

The students who reported experiencing a high degree of contrast between host and home cultures were more likely to identify and elaborate on changes in their own identities because of these encounters with difference. Other students struggled to identify ways they changed as a function of their experiences and a few maintained they did not change, as noted above.

Although the focus groups were organized randomly with students signing up for time slots that fit their schedules, they became an interesting unit of analysis. In focus groups with participants who described significant encounters with cultural difference, there was more in-depth discussion of identity in relation to the sociocultural context. In FG 1, for example, the four participants each had multiple study away experiences. They studied in India, Indonesia, and Morocco, and talked in depth about how their experiences in these communities influenced their identities. As seen in the transcript examples at the beginning of this paper and above, Beth reflected critically on previously held assumptions about herself in light of her experiences and challenged herself to grow. Molly, also quoted at the beginning of this paper, talked about her experiences in Indonesia and the work of becoming comfortable with discomfort.

Everything about the culture was different for me. We didn't really have running water the whole semester . . . for the most part [we] would bathe in the river. Our bathrooms were holes in the ground. We were in really, really rural parts of Indonesia, of Bali, and Java specifically. I think immediately going to my home stay, I think the difference was just visual. I think I got so comfortable with the discomfort almost, and I loved it, and it gave me so much energy. Every day I was like, "My phone isn't gonna really work, so I'm going to get lost, and I'm going to be uncomfortable in these situations."
(Molly, FG 1)

In FG 5, however, each of the four students participated in one semester abroad in England, Spain, or Italy, often with a large number of US university students in the program. The conversation was much more focused on how Americans are perceived abroad than on personal identity shifts in relation to specific study away experiences. However, one student in this group described her attempt to immerse herself in the culture by spending more time alone and away from large groups of American students.

Being one of only a few other students from the US and/or home institution

In some of the focus groups, students talked extensively about breaking away from the campus “bubble” by participating in programs in which they were the only or one of a few student(s) from the US and/or their home institution. This facilitated opportunities for social interactions with peers from the host country and sometimes fostered linguistic proficiency, as illustrated in the quote below.

Also, just in terms of confidence levels and independence, my program was extremely small. There were only seven of us, and I was only really good friends with one of the other girls. And so, I was forced to go out and meet locals. I ended up spending a lot of time either by myself or with my local Argentine friends . . . obviously, I was only communicating in Spanish with them and was having to adapt every day to the things that they were doing and talking about. (Katrina, FG 8)

3) How do students understand themselves in relation to others and the world as a result of their study away experience? How do students experience their national identity in the context of study away?

The participants reflected on ways their study away experiences encouraged them to understand themselves and others in the world differently than they had before. The main themes included shifting perspectives related to power and privilege, and navigating their own national identities during and after the study away experiences.

Shifting perspectives related to power and privilege

Students who studied abroad in places with a high degree of cultural distance from the United States often acknowledged how their experiences pushed them to question their own assumptions about the world. The quote below demonstrates a student's significant shift in worldview.

... there were a lot of different times that I was feeling that I wasn't at home in India, but one way I... was confronted with how we think differently is the culture around marriage and arranged marriage. It's still very popular there. You can open up the newspaper and find marriage ads and it'll say, "Hi I'm Diane, I have a BA in international studies and drama and theater studies. [...] Marriage there is not just an individual getting with an individual, it's two families coming together. It's much more of a, it's a lot bigger. It has to do with a lot more than just two people in love. So there's a lot more thought put into it and people trust their parents to pick the right person for them. So, we really had to like, flip. It's not like, "they're selling their daughters to people, this is so archaic." People don't think of it that way. So, we talked to a lot of people and one thing I really loved about the course is people came and they talked to us and we were able to ask them very personal questions about their arranged marriage and them arranging marriages for their children, and it's still really popular. People really like it. So, it's something I really had to flip my Western, individualist thinking on. (Diane, FG 2)

Diane's recognition that she needed to "flip" her worldview demonstrates a clear shift in her perspective and ability to consider the validity of the practices of another culture. She also recognized that her own initial perception of arranged marriages was constructed by her "Western, individualist thinking."

Some students explicitly stated how their shifting understanding of the world in the study away context had an impact on their understanding of home as well, as illustrated in the example below.

And then staying embedded in a rural area for all of our time in India I think has allowed me to be a lot more compassionate in terms of how I view rural areas back home. Cause I like, I'm from [a city] and when I drive to [the university] I take [the interstate] the whole way and there's always traffic [...]. There's just always traffic. And so sometimes the GPS will like to reroute me off and I'll just you know drive off the highway and get back on eventually. And I always viewed it as a detour, and it was this place that I said was the middle of nowhere. There are no people here. There are signs for political candidates that I probably wouldn't vote for. You know all these different things, and then I would say this is the middle of nowhere, but then being embedded in this rural area... for a month, I

was like this is someone’s everywhere. And perhaps they have not had the opportunities as I have had to engage in various political or social topics or experiences or education. And so that’s a long way of saying that I think it sort of reflected to me my own cultural biases about urban and rural life and what I perceive as dichotomies of that in the United States and hopefully allowing me to expand and [offer] more compassion towards rural, all kinds of life in the United States, in my public health and personal life. (Helen, FG 6)

Helen’s recognition of her own assumptions about urban and rural life in the United States was a direct result of her global learning experience in a rural environment.

Navigating national identities

Inherent in many students’ comments related to shifting worldviews was a new understanding of their identities as US citizens because of conversations with others in the host community, often focused on the 2016 presidential election. Participants mentioned being questioned about their votes and their opinions on issues such as gun control and racism. They discussed how contact with international news media made them cognizant that their perspectives on American culture had been culturally determined in one way, whereas cultures around the world may represent the United States in entirely different ways. Some students came to question the construction of their ideas about America in ways that had an impact on their behavior and thinking upon their return. The quote below illustrates this theme.

I don’t say the Pledge of Allegiance anymore. Specifically, because of, just like, when you’re in America and you get all caught up in the red, white, and blue, you know . . . we bleed American. And then you leave, and you see how America actually treats other countries and how they’re actually viewed by these other countries, and it kinda blows the top off of everything and it’s kinda hard to stay brainwashed when you’re not being brainwashed actively. [. . .] It’s really difficult for me to sing the national anthem, to pledge allegiance, because I just, I don’t think we’re doing great. And I kinda resent that we pretend like we are. (Maggie, FG 2)

Participants also mentioned that encountering (and sometimes adopting) other cultural norms made them question the cultural norms of American culture. These moments were sometimes related to interpersonal communication (e.g., feeling frustrated and surprised when a server came to their table to take a drink order before everyone was fully seated after a semester in Florence) or to more complex elements of cultural infrastructure (e.g., why the US doesn’t have more bike lanes or better sustainability practices).

4) How do students reflect on their identities in the context of interactions with family and friends upon reentry?

As the students reflected on how their study away experiences influenced their understanding of themselves and others, they were also co-constructing their identities in the context of reintegration into the home and campus environments. The students raised a large number of communication challenges that were categorized into three areas, including personal relationships, the institutional context, and behavioral changes.

Personal relationships

Difficulties in communicating with family and friends upon return were mentioned by nearly every participant. When they talked about personal growth and change in the context of returning from study away, the students frequently expressed difficulties in communicating these changes with friends and family who had not shared and therefore did not understand their experiences. The first student quoted below articulated the stark contrast between her home in New York and her study away experience in India, and her frustrations with her family's inability to understand the deeper experiences behind the photographs. The second student talked about her unanticipated struggles with reentry and challenges communicating with her family who had never traveled abroad.

I think the challenges are actually more coming home first, before coming back to [the university] . . . New York is great, but it's very different, Manhattan, from rural India. And so, there were just a lot of stark visual contrasts. It was also cold, whereas it was really warm in India . . . But I think for them our living conditions were not a five star [hotel] . . . and I'm glad that we were living in conditions that were much more similar to those of the surrounding community. But some people would see pictures and they'd be turned off. And they're like, "Wow, that looks horrible," . . . I mean, was it the best part of the experience? No. But it's a worthy part of the experience . . . and part of the larger collective experience and I don't wanna just stop [talking about] it just because they don't have western style toilets . . . And so I think people might pick up on those visual markers or emblems of a culture and be like, that's different. I don't wanna talk about that. And I think that's what I experienced a lot with my family. (Helen, FG 6)

No one talks about the differences that you encounter, or the even larger culture shock that you have when you come back to America. For me, I was expecting such a large culture shock coming from America to Italy, and I didn't really have a huge culture shock, and adjusted way better than I thought I was going to. I came back to America, and it was completely different. I'm a first-generation college student, so I couldn't really talk to my family about it because none of them had ever been abroad. (Tiffany, FG5)

Institutional context

The university emphasis on global engagement was a salient factor in the students' reflections. Nearly 85 percent of students at the institution participate in one or more study away programs. Global engagement is considered part of the university "brand." There were two themes that emerged related to students' desires to process and communicate their experiences with others in the institutional context. First, they said it was hard to talk about study away in meaningful ways because it is considered a normal part of the university experience. In the quote below, Natasha articulated this challenge.

I think [what's] also really hard, is that everyone has the stereotype of "you're gonna talk about it all the time and say that it changed you." And everyone has the same experience, so your "I changed abroad" really is insignificant because "yeah, so did I when I went abroad." But it's hard because you feel like your experience is so unique to you and how you've grown through it. But no one is seeing that

because they're just putting you in a box with everyone else who says they changed abroad. I think that also makes it hard to come back and try to deal with that change of yourself and growth. (Natasha, FG 4)

The second theme related to the institutional context was the discord between expectations about what study away “should be” and the realities that many students faced. In almost every focus group, students highlighted a university culture that perpetuates the unreasonable and unattainable expectation that “studying away will be the best experience of your life.” Interestingly, however, descriptions of negative experiences were usually attributed to their friends’ and not their own experiences, as seen in the following quote.

I guess just my thing is that everyone comes back with many different feelings and even though I came back feeling great and loving my experience, a lot of the people I know came back and hated their experience. And I feel like there's an expectation that a lot of people have the most amazing time abroad and being abroad is going to be the best time of their life. But for some people it's not going to be the best time of their life, maybe it's an experience that they need and it'll challenge them, but maybe it wasn't the happiest of times and stuff like that. (Deidra, FG 3)

Behavioral changes

Many students discussed their struggle to retain some elements of their “study away” selves upon return to the busy campus culture. They referenced changes in behavior related to the social climate of the institution (e.g., going out with friends or not, sorority/fraternity life and its meaning upon return, the rural context of the institution, etc.). As seen in the first quote below, sometimes the shifts were in the academic realm, such as changing majors or minors.

And if I can't change the culture because I feel like that would just be so much work, I can at least change how I approach my life. I can at least change how I . . . I can drop two of my minors and still be fine. (Maggie, FG 2)

We were both really dedicated to journaling while we were there, and that was one way that we remembered. I was actually just looking at my journal the other day. It was sad, but it's important to remember and to reflect, “Okay. Have I changed? Am I different than I was when I wrote that? And why?” (Tina, FG 7)

The second student quoted above talked about how behavioral changes aligned with her personal growth (e.g., feeling confident about riding her bike after returning from Copenhagen). She used writing as a tool for remembering and reflecting on changes she experienced during study away.

DISCUSSION

We utilized a sociocultural developmental framework to examine perceived changes in identity in relation to study away experiences. In nearly every focus group there were tensions between students’ perceptions of identity as a stable construct, and yet also socially co-constructed in relation to study

away experiences. Although many participants did not perceive holistic changes in their identity, their reflections often depicted shifts in their ways of thinking and acting during and after their study away experiences. Thus, like Pitts (2016, 429), we found students believed they found their “authentic selves” because of their global experiences. They described increased confidence and responsibility as a result of navigating new environments and cultures, and in some cases, they significantly revised their academic and professional plans upon reentry. Students who engaged in multiple study away experiences, particularly with a high degree of contrast between the home and host environments, were most likely to link changes in their own identities with the sociocultural context of their programs. Studying away without a large group of friends or others from the United States was also salient for personal growth.

Students demonstrated shifts in thinking about others, and the ways others perceive them, particularly when they engaged a high degree of cultural difference during study away. They reflected critically on their own cultural biases on complex issues such as health care, education, and marriage practices. The focus group interviews took place after the divisive 2016 presidential election, and many participants reported being questioned by others in the host community about their views on gun control, race, and religion, among other topics frequently represented in the international media. For some students, these social interactions facilitated in-depth critical analyses of US policies, cultural norms, and their own national identities (Dolby 2007; Geiser 2015). As one student noted, being asked to justify her position on polarizing topics alongside her own reservations about her national identity as an American, “really did bring a sense of vulnerability to the conversation on both ends, because I was asking them to be vulnerable, but I was willing to share my own story and be vulnerable with them as well.”

How do students in emerging adulthood navigate identity shifts in the context of reintegration into the home culture? The students noted challenges in communicating with family and friends who had not shared similar experiences and expressed frustration with superficial conversations. The institutional context, in which nearly 85 percent of students have one or more study away experiences, emerged as a salient factor. As one student explained, if everyone else studies away too, your own experiences are not particularly interesting or special topics of conversation. Not only did students struggle to talk about their positive experiences, but they also noted the lack of opportunities to process negative ones. For some, the institutional ethos of study away as a life-changing and transformative experience inflated expectations and prevented honest communication about negative experiences. This issue sparked animated conversations in many focus groups. These findings suggest a need for shifting the mindset from participation in study away as part of an unexamined “status quo” to highlighting the importance of reflection on before, during, and after global engagement experiences. As one example of pre-departure preparation, at our institution students who enroll in a global winter term (three-week) course are required to take a one-semester hour preparatory course taught by the faculty member(s) in the preceding fall semester. This affords opportunities for academic and cultural knowledge development, as well as reflections on personal goals and expectations. Additionally, students in some majors, such as world languages and cultures, are required to do a three-semester course sequence in which they take a pre-departure seminar, an online course while abroad, and a post-semester abroad course upon their return. However, most students who enroll in a semester abroad program do not have the same opportunities for in-depth pre-departure preparation. Given that students feel they are asked to represent their American identities abroad, it seems beneficial to include perspective-taking on salient

issues in pre-departure sessions. Preparation for study away experiences should also include information about the potential for negative experiences with strategies for coping and problem solving.

Interestingly, participating in the focus groups seemed to act as a unique catalyst for students to process and reflect on their experiences. Students often remarked they had not experienced other opportunities for in-depth discussion of their experiences. Reflective thinking is a critical but understudied aspect of study away, and students need more guidance negotiating the meaning of their experiences (Kortegast and Boisfontaine 2015; Savicki and Price 2015). More opportunities for critical reflection should be studied and implemented. As noted by some students in our focus groups, having a diverse set of re-entry engagement opportunities would be appealing. In addition to specific courses, for example, there could be co-curricular programs designed with intentionality to incorporate students’ reflections on study away, such as conversations before or after globally focused speakers or events. Global ambassador programs also provide opportunities for students who studied away to connect with others and share their experiences.

The study findings are limited by the small, homogeneous sample of participants in an institutional context in which global learning is part of the culture. The students in our sample may have been particularly impacted by their study away experiences and eager to discuss them. Thus, they may be a unique subset of the larger sample who study away at our institution; their interest in additional opportunities to reflect on study away experiences may not be representative of all students in our institutional context, or applicable to other institutional contexts. Increased diversity in the sample is also needed in future research, particularly with regard to gender and race.

Nevertheless, in conclusion, students identified cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes associated with their study away experiences. Many participants believed they came to know an enhanced version of themselves through encounters with difference. Co-constructing identity is a critical component of adolescent and young adult development, and study away has the potential to be a powerful and transformative influence on identity. However, a priori expectations that it will be an entirely positive, life-changing experience can weigh heavily on students struggling to make meaning of negative experiences. The process of reflecting with others on questions related to identity and reentry in the focus groups was reportedly a unique and valuable opportunity. It suggests the need for enhanced interventions and programming related to reflection and reintegration into the home campus, as students need more skilled, guided reflection opportunities before, during, and after study away (Carpenter, Kaufman, and Torp 2019; Namaste and Sturgill 2020).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Colonial Academic Alliance for funding through the IN/CO grant program, and especially Lindsey Interlante for her encouragement throughout the research process. We are grateful to the Elon University administration for financial support provided through matching funds, and particularly to Tim Peebles for unwavering support of faculty scholarship. It has been a pleasure to work with Jennifer Wiley and Vesna Hart, our collaborators at James Madison University, on the larger multi-institutional project. Lastly, we thank our focus group participants for their time and candor.

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APPENDIX

Focus group questions

1. Introductions

- a) Please state your first name and what study away program(s) you participated in and when.
- b) Describe a time when you realized this experience was very different from home or when you realized that people in that place see the world in a fundamentally different way.

2. Can you describe a time when you were confronted with your nationality or country of origin identity? Describe your reactions to this experience.

3. Do you feel like you changed during your time away? If yes, how so? Did the change come from positive or negative experiences?

4. How have any changes during study away had an impact on your life back at college? Socially, academically, or in your extra-curricular and co-curricular activities?

5. Do you think participating in one or more study away programs will change things for you after college? If so, how?



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