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## Challenges Experienced by Students during Study Abroad: Implications for Family Science Faculty

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**ABSTRACT.** Family science literature has documented the benefits of studying abroad on students' overall development. However, research has focused less on the challenges that students experience while studying abroad. This study aimed to explore the challenges family science students experienced in a semester-long study abroad program. Qualitative data were collected from 80 students participating in the Semester at Sea study abroad program. Participants responded to an open-ended survey question. Researchers used qualitative content analysis techniques to analyze data and identify common themes. Six major themes emerged from the data. Students experienced: 1) cognitive challenges; 2) social challenges; 3) academic challenges; 4) cultural challenges; 5) logistical challenges, and 6) emotional challenges. Students reported challenges across a variety of domains during the study abroad voyage. Understanding these challenges experienced by students may help family science faculty know where study abroad students can be further supported. Faculty should emphasize students' cognitive preparations and support students in processing their experiences throughout their study abroad program. Faculty should also prepare students to return home and manage the guilt they may experience.

*Keywords:* family life education, family science, faculty, preparing professionals, study abroad

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### **Challenges Experienced by Students during Study Abroad: Implications for Family Science Faculty**

Graduates of family science programs are expected to be global-minded and accepting of cultural diversity (Ballard & Taylor, 2012). Family science programs also acknowledge the importance of their graduates learning to recognize family strengths in diverse groups, appreciate cultural differences as opportunities for productivity, and understand the interconnectedness of global family challenges (Hamon & Fernsler, 2006; Hamon & Smith, 2014; Yazedijan & Kramer, 2006). This training prepares family science professionals to help families from diverse backgrounds build skills and identify resources they need to survive and thrive.

Therefore, global and cultural competence are themes that intersect all ten content areas for the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR)'s Certified Family Life Education program, the major professional designation for family science professionals (Desai et al., 2020; NCFR, 2015). NCFR contends that family science students should be exposed to a cross-cultural and diverse curriculum, which presents faculty with the responsibility of developing learning opportunities for students to reflect on and transform their perspectives to work with diverse communities (Ballard & Taylor, 2012; NCFR, 2015). Family science scholars confirm that graduates with global and cultural competence are more likely to work effectively with the diverse families and communities they serve (Darling, 2007).

One teaching method used in family science programs to help students develop global and cultural competence is study abroad programs (Hamon & Fernsler, 2006). Study abroad is considered a high-impact practice that supports students' development of global and cultural competencies (e.g., Kuh, 2008). This study aims to explore challenges experienced by family science students during a study abroad program to inform future study abroad efforts in family science programs and further prepare students to work effectively with families from diverse backgrounds.

#### **Study Abroad in Family Science**

The benefits of study abroad experiences have been extensively documented in the literature. For instance, students return from study abroad programs with enhanced global competency, cultural sensitivity, and openness to diversity (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2016). Students also demonstrate personal growth, improved communication skills, cognitive benefits, and increased skills related to career pursuits (Dwyer, 2004; Paige et al., 2009). Research findings reveal that short-term and long-term study abroad programs positively impact students. For instance, Medora et al. (2020a) reported that family science students who participated in a one-month, short-term study abroad program in New Zealand and Australia significantly increased their cultural sensitivity and positive attitude towards cultural diversity.

Similarly, increases in students' cultural sensitivity and global-mindedness were found after a longer-term, Semester-at-Sea study abroad program that included visits to twelve countries around the globe (Medora et al., 2020b). Consequently, the number of students from the United States participating in study abroad programs has tripled over the last few decades and is at a record high. Specifically, the Institute of International Education (2020) reports that 347,099 students from the United States studied abroad during the 2018-2019 academic year.

Study abroad programs have many implications for family science faculty (Goen, 2015; Hamon & Fernsler, 2006). NCFR encourages faculty to globalize their curricula and promote international experiences that intersect FLE content (Long et al., 2018). Hamon and Fernsler (2006) confirm that study abroad courses are an effective experiential learning method for exposing students to multiple NCFR content areas for Certified Family Life Educator designation. Students can learn about families in different societal contexts and how these families experience different institutions, such as schools,

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religion, and government. Students may also have the opportunity to learn how other families communicate, establish roles, manage crises, and parent children (Hamon & Fernsler, 2006; NCFR, 2015). Furthermore, Long et al. (2018) argue that study abroad provides family science students an avenue to further develop their skills for CFLE designation and gain hands-on experience working with diverse groups.

As demonstrated by the research discussed above, family science scholars have historically focused on the importance and benefits of study abroad programs for students (e.g., Medora et al., 2020a). However, there is a need to also recognize the challenges experienced by study abroad students. Understanding students' challenges may provide important insight for family science faculty in developing and implementing future study abroad programs that bring cultural elements to the family science curriculum and prepare students for these global experiences. Though family science emphasizes a strengths-based perspective, understanding challenges may further support student development; findings may help faculty in supporting students to utilize their strengths when challenges arise and to help foster students' knowledge development and shifts in attitudes that can address potential challenges.

### **Experiential Learning Theory & Study Abroad**

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is often used to inform the development and delivery of study abroad programs (Strange & Gibson, 2017). ELT places experience at the center of human learning and development. Most study abroad programs emphasize experience within the host country and include activities with non-governmental organizations, museums, schools, cultural events, service learning projects, and local guest presenters (Long et al., 2018; Medora & Roy, 2017). However, learning is a process that extends beyond mere experience. Drawing from prominent scholars in human development and learning (i.e., Jean Piaget, Carl Jung, John Dewey), ELT posits that learning is achieved by 1) having a concrete experience; 2) reflecting on the new experience; 3) abstract conceptualization, where reflection leads to new ideas or conceptualizations; and 4) active experimentation, where learners apply their new ideas to the world around them (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Additional scholars further highlight the important role that feedback from others serves during the learning process in ELT (Kim & Kim, 2021; Strange & Gibson, 2017). Altogether, ELT posits that knowledge results when humans take in information and then have the opportunity to interpret and act on that information with feedback from others (Kolb, 1984).

Though study abroad programming is considered a high-impact practice, many study abroad programs do not provide opportunities for critical reflection, faculty-student engagement, and group dialogue (McKeown, 2009). As Pipitone (2018) explains, it is important to recognize that learning and global-mindedness is not guaranteed merely by visiting another country. Student development requires intentional and critical time for reflection, dialogue, and interaction with others (Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Therefore, ELT suggests that faculty play an important role in facilitating and supporting students during their study abroad experiences, whether during program highlights or challenges. When experiential learning methods are intentionally used, short-term and long-term study abroad programs positively impact students' development (Antonakopoulou, 2013). Examining challenges provides critical insight into the factors that may stifle the goals of high-impact practices and ELT and may enable students to receive the maximum benefits from study abroad experiences.

### **Current Study and Purpose**

A limited number of studies have investigated challenges students encounter when they visit international countries or participate in a study abroad program. These studies have focused more on challenges with international fieldwork placements (Matthew & Lough, 2017) or challenges that

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international students experience while attending school in their new host country (Milian et al., 2015). Our study aims to expand research on study abroad challenges within the family science study abroad literature. Overall, this study addresses the following research question: What challenges do students experience on a semester-long study abroad program? Guided by the Experiential Learning Theory, we present recommendations for family science faculty in developing and implementing study abroad programs.

## Methods

### Participants and the Semester at Sea Study Abroad Program

Participants for this study included 80 students in the Spring 2017 *Semester at Sea* (SAS) study abroad program. The 80 participants in this study were between 18 and 23 years old ( $M = 20.23$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), and the majority were female ( $n = 63$ , 87%). Most participants were White ( $n = 52$ , 71%), followed by Latine (11%) and Asian (8%). In addition, two students stated that they were African-American and one identified as Pacific Islander. The remaining participants belonged to two or more races ( $n = 5$ , 7%). Though student participants were from various countries, over half (60%) were born in the United States. All participants had previous travel experience abroad and English language proficiency.

The SAS study abroad program is conducted on a cruise ship that serves as a home and university to over 600 undergraduate students worldwide. Over an academic semester, the program provides cultural immersion and experiential learning in 10 countries throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and North America. Since the program's start in 1963, over 73,000 students from 1,700 universities have participated in the SAS program (Institute for Shipboard Education, 2022).

SAS students attend classes on the cruise ship while sailing from country to country. Each class has a day-long field component where students apply their content knowledge to local activities and organizations within the country where the ship docks. Students also complete a Global Studies course throughout the program that provides an introduction to each country they will visit, such as each country's historical context, political systems, traditions, and customs. This course aims to prepare students for the field component and within-country independent exploration and SAS program-sponsored excursions. Additionally, the SAS program emphasizes experiential learning and learning through peer interactions. Throughout the academic semester, students live with one another, eat together in the ship's commons area, study together, and explore cultural sites together.

### Data Collection

This qualitative study used convenience sampling, where students in seven family science and other social science courses were recruited to complete a paper questionnaire after the SAS program. Before distributing the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was explained to students, and they were assured anonymity and confidentiality. Students were asked to answer an open-ended survey question: *What were the challenges you experienced during the study abroad experience?* The survey also included demographic questions regarding sex, race/ethnicity, and age, as well as questions on prior international travel experiences.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study used inductive qualitative content analysis techniques (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Inductive data analysis aims to identify relevant text segments with codes and then merge the codes into broader themes for an interconnected understanding (Chinn & Kramer, 1999). Three researchers analyzed students' responses. First, the researchers independently reviewed the responses and open-coded the data. Open coding refers to "breaking data apart and delineating concepts

to stand for blocks of raw data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). Every written response was assigned a code (i.e., label) based on dominant messages in students’ writing (Eisner, 1998). Multiple codes were assigned to a segment of text when a student conveyed more than one idea.

Next, once all researchers were finished assigning codes to the text, they met to compare their coding. Each researcher explained how and why they coded the data as they did. When the researchers had different interpretations of students’ responses, a discussion was held, and all researchers provided explanations until a consensus was reached. Then, a list of all codes and code descriptions was assembled, and the researchers went back through the data using the agreed upon codes. They met again to discuss, compare, and come to a consensus on coding and interpretation. Finally, similar codes were grouped together under broader categories. Similar codes were combined together to develop themes to answer the research question (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

### Results

Six major themes emerged from the data for the question, *What were the challenges that you experienced during the study abroad experience?* These themes included: (a) cognitive challenges, (b) social challenges, (c) academic challenges, (d) cultural challenges, (e) logistical challenges, and (f) emotional challenges.

#### Cognitive Challenges

The most common theme detailed by students pertained to *cognitive challenges* they experienced during the study abroad program. This theme was mentioned by 22% of participants. Results in this theme relate to challenges students experienced with reasoning and being intellectually prepared for the study abroad program. Some students discussed challenges related to not feeling cognitively prepared for the program and having feelings of uncertainty, such as “Not enough preparation or patience” for the study abroad experiences and “Uncertainty about places, experiences, people. Fears about stereotypes.”

Other students reported challenges of being a traveler in a new setting and reflecting on the experience of traveling. For instance, one student explained:

There were some instances where I put myself in a dangerous position without realizing it. My biggest challenge was realizing I wasn’t as competent of a traveler as I thought I was and doing everything in my power to become the traveler I wanted to be.

Another student mentioned, “The biggest challenge was deciding how to effectively use my time in ports.” This student experienced the challenge of navigating the various self-guided learning opportunities that were available on-site in the different countries.

#### Social Challenges

Second, 16% of participants reported *social challenges*, which related to challenges that students had encountering new people with diverse communication styles and developing relationships with others in the program. For instance, one student explained that a challenge for them was: “Finding people who had traveled before, people with the same mentality that were open to travel locally without fear. Overall finding your clique and a group, which you truly fit in with, was difficult.” Similarly, another student noted the challenge of having conversations with new people: “Moving from ‘small talks’ to ‘deep conversations.’ I wanted to start deep conversations at the very beginning but most people cannot get to that stage [with] a stranger.” Another student commented that navigating a new environment was made more complex since they were with new people. This student noted, “There were many high stress situations right off the bat that were hard to handle when you are with a new group of people [and] are not sure how they might react.”



### Academic Challenges

Third, 16% of participants reported *academic challenges*. Responses in this theme relate to challenges students had completing coursework while in the study abroad program and adapting to professors' various teaching styles. Some students noted the challenge of balancing their time in their host countries with obligations to complete their schoolwork, such as "I found it challenging to balance school work and country time, especially as I would come back from most countries exhausted and unable to focus." Similarly, another student noted,

Challenges included studies. Mostly professors who treated *Semester at Sea* classes like they would treat a home university which isn't the way it is supposed to be. A lot of professors were competent enough to see the differences and made changes that benefited their students tremendously...Some professors on board gave take home exams and used things on board to teach.

This idea was summed up by other students reporting, "It's hard to concentrate on school when you travel around the world," and "Traveling is stressful, school work immediately following."

Other students noted challenges with their academic progress through their home university. Specifically, one student in this study noted, "Trying to communicate with my home university about registration and keeping up with school work." Similarly, other students noted the challenge of adaptation on the side of professors. For instance, one student described the challenge of teaching style while on the study abroad program: "Disconnected with teachers not understanding this is a different type of schooling, so being open-minded to new teaching styles that would benefit students."

### Cultural Challenges

Fourth, 13% of participants reported *cultural challenges*. These challenges pertain to experiencing new living conditions and language barriers. One student mentioned that a challenge for them was "adjusting to different cultures and their lifestyles and ways of living. Also, seeing their living conditions compared to mine." Another student mentioned, "Language barrier, coping with immense poverty, and knowing I could not help make a large difference right away." These comments suggest students had challenges reckoning with their more privileged position in comparison to adverse conditions they witnessed in some countries.

Other students mentioned challenges related to cultural norms. One student noted their challenge as "figuring out what is appropriate in each culture. Learning how to get around in each country. Learning that being uncomfortable is okay." Similarly, another student mentioned, "I was constantly being touched or asked to take pictures with locals." These comments are related to adjusting to new cultural norms. On the other hand, other comments related to students thinking ahead about returning home and the challenge of readjusting. Some students noted guilt and challenges they may face at that time, such as "I'm going to have reentry shock when I get home."

### Logistical Challenges

Fifth, 13% of participants reported *logistical challenges* during the study abroad program. These comments largely related to challenges with food and the ship. One student mentioned their dietary restrictions were a challenge: "Sometimes it was difficult to eat because I am vegetarian, but I know it's my choice and I make it work." Likewise, another student mentioned food options and the nature of transport: "Food on the trip gets boring. The rocking of the ship can make you very sleepy."

### Emotional Challenges

Finally, 9% of participants mentioned *emotional challenges*. The fewest number of students in this study mentioned emotional challenges. Students' comments related to challenges they experienced

while internally processing experiences of meeting new people and personal growth through the trip, such as “Travelers’ guilt was my biggest enemy on this trip” and “Learning to trust.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study expands research on challenges that family science students experience during study abroad. Most study abroad research, particularly in family science, has focused on short-term programs (e.g., 3-4 weeks; Long et al., 2018; Medora & Roy, 2017). A strength of this study was the length of the SAS program and the vast locations around the world that students visited. The program's lengthier and more immersive nature provided a setting to further assess factors that contribute to or impede students' global and cultural learning. Findings reveal important implications for family science faculty to support students' development of cultural competence and skills to work effectively with families from diverse backgrounds. We present implications rooted in experiential learning theory (ELT) that highlight how faculty can support students' reflections during study abroad experiences in ways that broaden learning for themselves and others.

Many participants from this study expressed challenges with being cognitively unprepared to immerse themselves in new experiences and to critically reflect on these encounters. Long et al. (2018) also noted that their family science students experienced cognitive challenges and were overwhelmed with the “stark poverty that contrasted their own lives” (p. 13). These findings on cognitive challenges suggest that faculty leaders should underscore students' cognitive preparations for experiencing new environments and people. Family science faculty who lead study abroad programs should focus on the processes that facilitate shifts in one's values, conditioned responses, and frames of reference about the world in which they live. These preparations should occur during pre-departure orientation meetings and throughout the study abroad program. Fostering students' attitudes related to open-mindedness, flexibility, and acceptance would help address many of the challenges reported by students in this study. For example, the faculty leader could:

- 1) Assign pre-departure readings or videos that highlight differences in the environment or people that students may experience.
- 2) Offer pre-departure discussion opportunities for students to compare and contrast their own experiences and backgrounds with their classmates. For instance, faculty could pose the discussion question, “Discuss the significance of gender roles, family structure, or religion for your family” and then have students reflect on similarities and differences with others in small groups.

These shifts in perspective may occur during interactions with other students in the program and with local families in host countries. Increased open-mindedness, flexibility, and acceptance can be directly applied to enhance study abroad experiences, but are also necessary skills and attitudes for family science practitioners and Certified Family Life Educators in their work with diverse families (Ballard & Taylor, 2012).

In addition, faculty have a role in helping students process their study abroad experiences, which may positively impact students' global competence and attitudes towards tolerance (Kolb, 1984). Students' responses suggest that support with processing and preparation for study abroad should not merely occur during pre-departure meetings but should be intentionally integrated throughout the program. For instance, when the study abroad group encounters social or cultural norms that are different from their own, the faculty leader has a role in helping students process these experiences. The faculty leader could:

- 1) engage students in dialogue at the end of the day by asking questions that tap into thoughts and feelings that they encountered.

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- 2) ask students to compare and contrast norms between their country of origin and the host country with a partner.
- 3) have students contribute to a reflective blog or journal and then lead a group discussion on key points noted in the blog or journal.

The opportunity to process, reflect on, and discuss family life, parenting, and child development across cultures supports the preparation of future CFLEs to work with diverse families (e.g., Hamon & Fernsler, 2006; Long et al., 2018). Moreover, as ELT suggests, the faculty leader's role extends beyond merely offering these reflection opportunities to providing students feedback as they process and reflect on these questions (Kim & Kim, 2021). This feedback should be presented at students' intercultural development level to help them make sense of these cross-cultural encounters (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012).

In addition, dialogue and intentional time for reflection may further help students develop competence and positive attitudes around different groups, living conditions, and settings compared to their own life experiences. Faculty should facilitate and guide debriefing sessions for students after program activities. For instance, faculty can guide students in processing the day's events on the drive back to their housing or in a quiet space once the group returns for the evening. These efforts may also support students in processing similar emotions in their future roles as family science practitioners working with diverse populations. Learning how to process these emotions with others is critical to maintaining one's effectiveness as a family science professional.

Furthermore, some students noted the challenge of feeling guilty while on the trip. Some students may have reported guilt while recognizing their position of privilege compared to families they interacted with or observed in port. Other students may have reported guilt for being geographically away from their families or missing family events while on the SAS voyage. Faculty should prepare students to return home and manage the guilt they may experience back in their country of origin. Many students commented that they anticipated feelings of guilt and challenges returning to their regular daily living. Faculty should help students process their feelings upon re-entry and why they may have these feelings. Previous study abroad students can provide examples of how they handled feelings and emotions upon returning home. Research has found that guilt can transpire for those working in the family science profession when confronted with inequities (Baum, 2013). Thus, learning to recognize and process guilt will be a transferable asset for family science students in their future professions.

Findings regarding social challenges suggest that faculty may want to give additional attention to fostering stronger relational connections among students in the program. Experiential learning theory suggests the importance of purposeful dialogue and interactions with others for students' growth and development (Kolb, 1984). Faculty can take a preventative approach to social challenges by holding pre-departure meetings where students build connections with their classmates prior to travel. Likewise, students' peer connections could be encouraged and supported by integrating more collaborative projects and team building exercises at the beginning of the study abroad trip, such as planning small-group service projects or local scavenger hunts for partner groups to complete together within the host country. In addition to the benefits of peer relationships for students' learning (Kolb, 1984), the development of interpersonal skills is an important asset for students entering the family science field and intersects the CFLE Interpersonal Relationships content area (NCFR, 2015). It should also be noted that homesickness was not reported as a challenge by many students. Due to modern societal advancements, families can maintain interconnectedness, even while geographically distant. Additionally, some long-term study abroad programs, like SAS, may encourage parents to visit their



children at a designated port during the voyage. Thus, faculty should focus more on fostering interconnectedness among students within the program.

Likewise, findings reveal that faculty should be cognizant of supporting students with their work-life balance while abroad. Some students commented that faculty on the study abroad program taught as if their course was traditional. Faculty leaders may need to:

- 1) expand their pedagogical approach to be holistic and one that considers all aspects of students' growth and development.
- 2) demonstrate flexibility and adjust their expectations and course assignments when needed.
- 3) be transparent with students on their reasoning for adapting expectations in new environments and convey that adaptability is an important professional consideration for the family science field.
- 4) help their colleagues understand that study abroad students may need more flexibility from their home university. Time changes, nontraditional learning schedules, and geographic distance may present unique challenges for students still trying to navigate their degree or university requirements.

Finally, an important implication is that few students in this study reported challenges related to a lack of financial resources. The absence of this challenge was rather surprising, given cost-related barriers to studying abroad (Medora et al., 2020a). However, this finding is consistent with previous research that suggests students with financial means are more likely to participate in study abroad programs (Murray Brux & Fry, 2010). This finding has direct implications for study abroad recruitment. Family scientists underscore diverse and inclusive practices, which seems to be an unaddressed opportunity for study abroad participation. A diverse group of students studying abroad expands students' learning and growth by allowing students to process experiences from different perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). Therefore, family science faculty must address the lack of study abroad participation from underserved audiences and intentionally adopt recruitment practices targeting students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

Although this study contributes to family science research on study abroad programs, some limitations should be noted. First, the participants in this study were predominantly White, female, and from middle or upper SES backgrounds. This challenge is common in study abroad research, as most study abroad participants are White and from higher SES backgrounds (e.g., Lewis & Gould, 2016). In addition, although open-ended questions allow participants to respond freely on a topic, many students' written responses to the open-ended question lacked detail. Data collection methods did not assess the intensity or persistence of the challenges experienced by students. There were also no opportunities for the researchers to confirm interpretations of the data with participants. Future research on challenges during study abroad should utilize interviews or focus groups and examine how intense and persistent the different challenges are for students.

Overall, students reported challenges across a variety of domains during study abroad. These challenges suggest important insights for study abroad curriculum and delivery methods in family science. Understanding these challenges experienced by students may help family science faculty better understand how to support students in order to maximize the benefits and opportunities of studying abroad.

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