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# A qualitative approach to understanding the study abroad experience

Charlotte Cuss

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**A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING  
THE STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE**

by  
Charlotte Cuss

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Educational Services, Administration, and  
Higher Education  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
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at  
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Thesis Chair: Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D.

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## **ABSTRACT**

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A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING  
THE STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE  
2011/12  
Burton R. Sisco, Ed.D  
Master of the Arts in Higher Education Administration

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of the study abroad experience on selected students, using a qualitative approach. The participants in this study consisted of six full-time Rowan University students, during the spring 2012 semester. All six students had studied abroad for a full academic semester, within the last calendar year. Three separate interviews were conducted to examine students' goals and motives, cultural learning, transformational learning, and alcohol use and risky behavior, in regards to study abroad. The interviews were transcribed and content analysis was used to analyze the data. The study found that all students gained cultural learning and transformation learning, but to varying extents. This learning was often prompted by one, or multiple experiences, where the students were faced with a dilemma that caused them to reassess their assumptions. Alcohol use and risky behavior was found to increase during the study abroad experience.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I sit down to write this, it has become abundantly clear to me, how many truly amazing and supportive people I have in my life. I could not choose just one person to dedicate this thesis to, so I have decided to dedicate it to all the people who have helped me to reach this point in my life. Firstly, I wanted to dedicate this thesis to Granny Webster, my grandmother, whose passing earlier this year, has turned my life upside down but has ultimately shown me how many people in my life truly care about me and are willing to help me in my time of need. The support and understanding I received from Dr. Sisco and Dr. “MaryBeth” Walpole was the reason I was able to, not only, successfully complete this thesis but to graduate this year. They inspired me to strive for excellence and have molded me, not only into a well-prepared new professional, but into a better person in general. I will always value the insight and support they gave me and through their direction I have grown and developed more than I ever thought possible. They are like the Aunt and Uncle that I never really had and they mean so much to me.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Creating “global citizens,” who are more culturally sensitive, has moved to a high rank on America’s agenda, especially after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Study abroad has been deemed, by many, as an important collegiate vehicle by which to create global citizens (Johnson & Mulhollan, 2006). Study abroad has been found in some studies to have a positive effect on students’ cultural learning and personal development (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Dwyer, 2004; Hadis, 2005). However, only about one percent of the total college student population have studied abroad (NAFSA, “Trends in U.S. Study Abroad,” 2010).

Making the assumption that all students who study abroad return with increased cultural learning and personal development is problematic. Not only is the research on the impact of study abroad limited, but some studies have not found a positive impact on cultural learning and personal development (Engle & Engle, 2004; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). The goals and motives that students have for studying abroad mediate the cultural learning that they gain from the experience (Kitsantis, 2004). This is a possible explanation for inconsistent findings in cultural learning during study abroad, yet, has hardly been studied. Three often overlooked areas of research, within the study abroad experience, are a qualitative approach to understanding cultural learning, the meaning

that students assign to their experience, and also whether transformational learning occurs as a result of studying abroad. Another area that lacks a research base, but has started to gain attention in the study abroad literature, is increased alcohol use while abroad.

According to Pedersen, Larimer, and Lee (2010) alcohol consumption more than doubled while students studied abroad and even when they returned to their American college, their drinking level was still increased. There is a great paucity of research on risky behaviors, including risky sexual behaviors, during the study abroad experience.

### **Significance of the Study**

Research on the study abroad experience is severely lacking and the existing research is inconsistent. This study seeks to close the gaps in the knowledge base and provide a qualitative approach to understanding the impact of a semester long study abroad experience on selected students. A qualitative approach is important because it can address limitations of quantitative research by providing a holistic understanding of the study abroad experience. The findings of this study may provide insight for the enhancement of pre-departure orientations to become more intentional in promoting cultural learning while abroad and to obtain other desired outcomes and goals through the study abroad experience. In addition, the findings may provide insight into designing pre-departure orientations to provide more education about, and prevention for, possible increases in alcohol use and other risky behaviors while abroad.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to add to the knowledge base and to fill the gaps left by limited research on study abroad. The study took a qualitative approach to understanding the impact of the study abroad experience on selected students. Topics of

particular interest in this study, in regards to the study abroad experience, were goals and motives for studying abroad, cultural learning, transformation learning, and alcohol use and risky behavior. The study was a partial replication of Gemignani's (2009) study abroad research on cultural learning and Warner's (2009) study on transformational learning as a result of the study abroad experience.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

The scope of this study was limited to a small number of Rowan University study abroad alumni. Only those who responded to the e-mail, asking for volunteers to be interviewed, participated in the study. It was assumed that students had exposure to the areas being studied. It was also assumed that participants could remember their experiences accurately and felt comfortable enough to be truthful and honest. The extended time that had elapsed since their return from studying abroad was a limitation because their experiences were not fresh in their mind and may have become romanticized. The sampling used was somewhat limited because purposive sampling could only be applied to the students who responded to the e-mail and agreed to be interviewed. Another limitation is that all of the students who participated in the study, studied abroad in Western Europe. The fact that the students were volunteers may have skewed the results, especially in the area of risky behaviors, because of the unique characteristics of volunteers. Researcher perspectives may have presented potential bias in the findings.

### **Operational Definitions of Important Terms**

1. Alcohol: All intoxicating beverages including, but not limited to: beer, wine, and hard liquor.

2. Alcohol Use: For this study, alcohol use is the consumption of alcohol, or the act of drinking alcohol.
3. Cultural Learning/Culture Learning: “Term used in this study to refer to all that can be learned regarding culture and cultures in the modern world. No distinction is made in terms of cognitive, affective, or behavioral learning dimensions, and all are referenced by this term in this study” (Gemignani, 2009, p.11).
4. Culture: “The ‘set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs’ (UNESCO)” (Peterson et al., 2007, as cited in Gemignani, 2009, p. 13).
5. Ethnocentrism: “The natural tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one’s own culture and to evaluate all other groups from that viewpoint. People tend to use their own verbal and non-verbal codes, their own assumptions and rules to evaluate others. Many claim that ethnocentrism occurs in every society; ironically, ethnocentrism may be something that all cultures have in common” (Peterson et al., 2007, as cited in Gemignani, 2009, p. 13).
6. Ethnorelativism: Realization and acceptance of cultural differences.
7. Learning and Positive Outcomes: Learning that includes, but is not limited to, cultural learning and transformational learning. Positive outcomes refer to personal development, including, but not limited to, increased independence, confidence, self-assurance, maturity, and becoming more outgoing.
8. Risky Behavior: Taking sexual risks such as not using a condom or participating in sexual acts in a casual manner with individuals that the students had just met or

did not know very well. Also includes taking drugs, walking alone at night, or putting trust in strangers such as accepting a drink or going to the stranger's residence.

9. Risky Sexual Behavior: Any sexual act that puts an individual in direct or indirect harm. This includes, but is not limited to, having sex without a condom, going home with a stranger, engaging in a sexual act with a stranger, or putting oneself in a situation where sexual assault is more likely.
10. Students: Alumni of Rowan University's study abroad program who had studied abroad for a semester before spring 2012.
11. Study Abroad/ Study Abroad Experience/ Study Abroad Program: For a semester, American college students taking academic classes at a host college and residing in the area located in a country other than the United States of America, the country in which the students permanently reside and attend college.
12. Transformational Learning: "Learning that causes a profound change or shift in the learner's thoughts, actions, or frames of reference" (Warner, 2009, p. 7).

### **Research Questions**

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What were students' motives and goals for studying abroad?
2. How do students view their own cultural learning as a result of their study abroad experience?
3. To what extent, if any, did students experience transformational learning? What experiences prompted this learning?

4. What is the impact of alcohol use and risky behavior for students who study abroad?

### **Overview of the Study**

Chapter II provides a review of the scholarly literature pertinent to this study. This section includes a brief overview of the current status of study abroad in America, as well as the theoretical base that supports this study. In addition, research on cultural learning and personal development is communicated in this section. Research pertaining to goals and motives for studying abroad, as well as research on increased alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors during study abroad are also conveyed. The foundational studies on cultural learning and transformational learning are also addressed in this section.

Chapter III describes the procedures and methodologies employed in this study. Included in this description are: the context of the study, the population, sample selection, and demographics, the data collection instruments, the data collection process, and the analysis of the data.

Chapter IV presents the findings of this study. The research questions presented in the introduction are addressed and the data in this section are summarized using content analysis.

Chapter V summarizes and discusses the major findings of the study and how they compare to the results of the foundational studies, of which this study is a partial replication. Conclusions and recommendations for practice and further research are also included in this section.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Current Status of Study Abroad in America**

On September 11, 2001, America's ignorance towards the importance of being culturally sensitive to other countries around the world became abundantly clear (Johnson & Mulholland, 2006). Focus on the importance of study abroad experiences for college students has greatly increased within the last decade as a way to make more globally competent graduates. Creating "global citizens" through study abroad is considered a service to United States National Security, foreign policy, and global leadership (Johnson & Mulholland, 2006). Study abroad experiences also provide students with opportunities to "develop practical skills that complement classroom learning, including foreign language fluency, improved problem solving, analytical skills, tolerance for ambiguity, and cross-cultural competence" (NAFSA, "Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act," 2011, para. 4).

Although the numbers of college students, whom have studied abroad, have more than doubled in the last decade (IIE, "Open Doors 2010 Fast Facts," 2010), these students only account for about one percent of the total population of college students (NAFSA, "Trends in U.S. Study Abroad," 2010). According to the annual national survey, *Open Doors Report* by the Institute of International Education (IIE; 2010), in the 2008/2009 academic year 260, 327 students studied abroad, which was a slight decline from the



previous year; the first time in 25 years that the numbers had not increased. However, in fall 2010, IIE, along with collaboration from the Forum on Education Abroad, conducted a smaller online study to ascertain whether this downward trend was continuing. The survey found that that the numbers of students studying abroad was increasing again (Institute of International Education, 2010). A positive trend that has begun is students have started to study in less traditional countries and there have been decreasing numbers of students choosing the top four countries, all of which are in Western Europe. Out of the top 25 countries, 15 were outside of Western Europe and 19 countries, out of the top 25, had a primary language other than English (Institute of International Education, 2010). This has positive implications for increasing cultural sensitivity and relationships with countries that are more pressing to U.S. national security and diplomacy.

There is a large and unfortunate disparity between the number of students who desire and intend to study abroad and those that actually do. According to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) 2010 national freshmen survey, 31.5% of freshmen reported that there was a “very good chance” that they would study abroad (Pryor et al., 2010). Two large barriers, that could explain this disparity, are the actual or perceived financial burden of studying abroad and strict curriculum requirements that do not allow for alternative classes (NAFSA, 2003).

Recent legislation has been created to try to promote and increase opportunities for college students to study abroad. The recommendations made by the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program and the vision of the late Senator Paul Simon were the building blocks and inspiration for the proposed Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act (NAFSA, “Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad

Act,” 2011). This bill introduces a program that uses a model of competitive grants that would encourage higher education institutions to create and maintain a culture on campus that supports the importance of study abroad and considers it a necessary aspect of a college education. The goals of the program are to have one million students study abroad annually in 10 years time, diversify the student study abroad population and host countries-especially developing countries, and to encourage higher education institutions to increase opportunities for students to study abroad. This bill has received much bipartisan support but has not yet been passed (NAFSA, “Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act,” 2011).

### **Theoretical Base**

Students who study abroad will encounter a new culture in their host country. An important aspect of study abroad research is having an understanding of theory behind culture learning. According to seminal work by Spradley (1972), the learned cultural knowledge by members of a society is in part what leads to customs of that society. People in each society designate symbols which allow individuals to connect and communicate with each other. These symbols can be arranged in many different ways to construct symbolic worlds. However, this process would not be possible without rules that lead to consistent behavior. The rules of every society are learned at varying levels, which has an effect on behaviors. These levels of cultural learning apply to individuals in their native land but also individuals who arrive in a new cultural environment that differs from their native culture (Spradley, 1972).

Spiro’s (1966) five levels of learning ideological concepts model was applied by Spradley (1972) to cultural learning. At the first level, the individual would have merely

“*learned about*” (Spradley, 1972, p. 23) the rule from minimal knowledge. This is often seen in newcomers to a culture and this would have little to no effect on the individual’s behavior. Individuals at the second level would have “*understood the meaning*” (Spradley, 1972, p. 23) of the rule but it would most likely have no influence on their behavior because they may not feel it is applicable to them. Third, some individuals would have “*believed this rule to be true...and right*” (Spradley, 1972, p. 23) and attest that it should be adhered to. However, this does not necessarily mean that it would in fact influence behavior, but cognitively the individual would believe in it. At the fourth level, the rule is salient to the individual who would consistently use it to organize or explain their behavior. An individual at the fifth level would have “*internalized*” (Spradley, 1972, p. 23) the rule. Some at this stage would still follow the rule even if the rule was no longer considered part of the culture. This process of cultural learning is important to know in terms of study abroad programs so that movement to higher levels can be promoted to increase understanding of the host culture.

Movement to a greater understanding and acceptance of another culture is important yet complicated, and should be approached with extreme care (Bennett, 1986). Bennett’s (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity is foundational work that provides a clear example of how this development occurs. A key concept of intercultural sensitivity development is the realization of the fundamental differences in worldviews amongst varying cultures. Development, then, in this model, is measured in sensitivity towards these differences. In the model, the individual moves through stages of ethnocentrism towards more realization and acceptance of cultural difference, referred

to as ethnorelativism. The process of development goes through cycles of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Bennett, 1986).

According to Bennett's (1986) Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, the first three main stages, each with substages, occur under the umbrella state of ethnocentrism. The first main stage is "denial" where an individual does not recognize cultural differences. This could be because of the first substage of "isolation," where an individual does not recognize cultural difference because they are completely isolated from it. In the event that an individual in this stage is exposed to a cultural difference they most likely do not even notice it. This stage is rare in the United States because hardly any places are completely isolated. However, the second stage within "denial," called "separation," is a lot more common. In this stage, barriers are put up to keep out cultural differences, in order to uphold a status of denial. Although this state would not lead to intentional discriminatory behaviors, it may cause individuals to see others as mere environmental objects and could cause these others to be considered subhuman (Bennett, 1986). According to Bennett, the best way to promote development for individuals at this stage is to facilitate acknowledgement of cultural differences through some kind of cultural awareness event or education.

According to Bennett's (1986) Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, the second main stage is "defense." In this stage the individual notices specific cultural differences and is threatened by them, and so comes up with defense mechanisms to try to preserve their own culture's worldview. "Denigration," the first substage, is a common way to defend against difference. Negative stereotypes or beliefs are often formed. The second substage, "superiority," is when an individual believes that their culture is better than others but

does not necessarily have to denigrate other cultures. A possible substage is “reversal,” where a person in a new culture will start to believe that the new culture is superior to their native culture. In the third main stage of ethnocentrism, called “minimization,” culture difference is overtly recognized but trivialized under the premise of the greater levels of similarities. Two substages are “physical universalism”- all people have universal physical similarities, and “transcendent universalism”- all people live under one God, for example (Bennett, 1986).

In Bennett’s (1986) Intercultural Sensitivity Model, understanding cultures in relation to each other and seeing cultural differences as neither good nor bad represents a movement into the ethnorelative stages. Cultural differences are no longer seen as threatening but have gained new meaning and become molded into new ways of understanding the world. In the first stage of “acceptance,” the individual builds a framework for valuing cultural differences and progresses through the two substages of respecting cultural differences in behaviors and values. In this stage, it is important that if the individuals disagree with a cultural value, that they see the value as the way that culture “organizes reality, rather than a distasteful trait” (Bennett, 1986, p. 51). In “adaption,” the second main stage, new skills are added to better relate to others and to “[shift] one’s cultural frame of reference for the purpose of communication” (Bennett, 1986, p. 52). In the first substage of “empathy,” a change in an individual’s cultural frame of reference is intentional to understand the perspectives of people from another culture, however it is only temporary. In “pluralism,” the second substage, the individual develops several cultural frames of reference that have become internalized and permanent. These individuals are sensitive to a multiplicity of cultures and often have

lived in a culture different from their native culture for extended periods of time (Bennett, 1986).

In the last main stage of Bennett's (1986) Intercultural Sensitivity Model, called "integration," one is truly multicultural and is not only culturally sensitive to multiple cultures but "has incorporated difference into the 'meaning of life' and is thus capable of acting as a whole, functioning individual outside the constraints of any particular culture. In this stage, difference in general becomes integral to identity" (Bennett, 1986, p. 58). In the first substage, individuals use "contextual evaluation" using varying cultural perspectives and can then make a choice. In the final substage, individuals have reached "constructive marginality" where they are so much of a multicultural person that they no longer have a native cultural identity. As long as this status is part of previous ethnorelative development and previously enhanced skills are used, it will not lead to distress that would arise from not having a native cultural identity. A person in this stage becomes the creator of their own reality (Bennett, 1986). Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity can be used as a helpful tool to explain and promote the process of understanding and accepting other cultures during a study abroad experience.

Another theory that can be applied to the study abroad experience is Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. According to Mezirow (2000), his theory had several influences, including the work of psychiatrist Roger Gould (1978), Jurgen Habermas (1984), and Paulo Freire. Mezirow first introduced this theory of adult learning in a 1978 national study, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The study focused on "consciousness raising" as a way to explain the large numbers of women re-entering higher education in the United States (Mezirow, 1978). The study was conducted on

women in 12 varying community college programs. Based on the results of this study, 10 phases of transformative learning were developed:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building a competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19)

Often this process of transformative learning occurs in other contexts with some variation (Mezirow, 2009). For instance, the transformational learning process initiated through a mentoring relationship or through a leadership development class would vary slightly in these two contexts because of the differing approaches by either the mentor or instructor to promote the transformational learning.

Transformative learning is the process of changing problematic frames of reference from ones that are assimilated without critique from others and making these frames of reference "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more

true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8). Frames of reference are the assumption structures that one uses to understand one’s experiences and provides the context of making meaning of these experiences. Frames of reference include conative, cognitive, and emotional aspects and are arranged in two dimensions: a habit of mind which leads to points of view.

A habit of mind is a set of assumptions- broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experiences...A point of view comprises clusters of meaning schemes- sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments- that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 17-18)

Individuals are often unaware of these meaning schemes and it leads to actions that are done automatically, unless an individual critically reflects on it. Ethnocentrism is an example of a habit of mind which would lead to points of view- feelings, attitudes, beliefs towards a certain individual or group (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow (2000) refers to the work of Habermas (1984) in explaining two important domains of learning. Instrumental learning is learning how to take the environment or other people and influencing and controlling them. Communicative learning is finding the meaning in others speech during communication. Communicative learning requires that one critically reflects on the assumptions of the person speaking. Discourse, in Transformation Learning Theory, is a dialogue used to assess an interpretation or belief’s justification (Mezirow, 2000). Assumptions are critically assessed in reflective discourse and alternative perspectives are studied. When an



individual critically reflects on the assumptions on which their habits of mind, points of view, interpretations, or beliefs are based, transformation of frames of reference occur (Mezirow, 1997). This transformation can result from a “sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21) that causes transformation of a habit of mind or through accumulation of multiple transformations of points of view leading to a transformation in habit of mind. Instrumental and communicative learning promotes critical reflection of assumptions and thus transformation of frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997). Objective and subjective reframing are how transformations can occur. “Objective reframing involves critical reflection on the assumptions of others encountered in a narrative or in task-oriented problem solving... Subjective reframing involved critical self-reflection of one’s own assumptions” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 23). Transformation learning is an important theory to consider in study abroad research because often being immersed in a new culture causes a “disorienting dilemma” (phase one of Mezirow’s phases of transformation). Being surrounded by a different culture, traditions, and people can cause students to notice a problematic frame of reference and to critically reflect on the assumptions of others or themselves.

### **Cultural Learning and Personal Development**

Studies of the impacts of study abroad on cultural learning and personal development are not extensive and are concentrated within the last two decades. In a study by Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) significant differences were found on both intercultural awareness and personal development amongst college students who studied abroad and students who did not. Several of the items measured both intercultural awareness and personal growth. In general, the students who studied abroad more readily

recognized that different countries and cultures have perspectives that may differ from that of Americans and study abroad students more often thought about why these differences in perspectives occur than their counterparts who did not study abroad. An item that measured both personal development and intercultural awareness, and was significantly greater for study abroad students, was being “patient with those who don’t speak English well” (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004, p. 170). Acknowledgment and respect for languages other than one’s native language is a sign of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986).

Hadis (2005) used a unique methodology to measure world-mindedness and personal development. As a pre-test/post-test design would be best but was not feasible, Hadis created a section on the survey asking students who had studied abroad to think retrospectively to before they studied abroad as a substitute of the pre-test. Through criterion and construct validation, Hadis found this method to be acceptable. Hadis (2005) found that students who studied abroad:

returned more worldly than before, are more interested in international affairs, read newspapers more often than before going abroad, increase their fluency in other languages, acquire a more solid knowledge about their host countries' societies and cultural manifestations, and also show definite signs of personal development: they are more independent, more outgoing, more friendly toward people from other countries, more self-assured and uninhibited about traveling to countries where English is not the first language. (p. 16)

This study supports the positive impact of study abroad on cultural learning and personal development. However, using retrospective questions instead of a pre-test could be considered a limitation in this study (Hadis, 2005).

An important large-scale study was conducted by the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) in 2002 on study abroad alumni (Dwyer, 2004). The 3,723 study abroad alumni who returned the survey were found, by statistical analysis, to be representative of the 14,800 alumni who were sent the survey, with a confidence level of 95%. Although the survey was sent to study abroad alumni from the academic years between 1950/1951 and 1999/2000, 81% of the returned surveys were from alumni in the 1980s and 1990s. Although this study is important because of the large sample size it also has methodological limitations, in that the study depended on self-report, which cannot measure causation, and also there was no control group (Dwyer, 2004). Important findings are that study abroad experiences have long lasting positive effects on intercultural development. The findings support that study abroad has greatly affected intercultural development by “achieving greater understanding of one’s own cultural values and biases, continuing to be influenced in one’s interactions with people from different cultures, and developing a more sophisticated way of looking at the world” (Dwyer, 2004, p. 158) with 98%, 94%, 84% of participants, respectively, for each item. Ninety percent of subjects said that studying abroad has influenced their desire to actively increase the diversity of their friends. A majority of respondents (60%) found that studying abroad sparked an interest to study yet another country or language (Dwyer, 2004).

The IES study also found that study abroad had long term positive effects on personal development (Dwyer, 2004). Participants felt that study abroad improved their self-confidence (96%), increased their ability to stand ambiguity (89%), and increased their maturity (97%; Dwyer, 2004). Participants also felt that study abroad “continues to influence [their] political and social awareness,...participation in community organizations,...[and] the choices made in family life” (88%, 66%, and 73% respectively; Dwyer, 2004, p. 160). Ninety-five percent of respondents felt that study abroad had a lasting effect on their worldview (Dwyer, 2004). This study has important implications, that not only does study abroad have a strong positive impact on both intercultural and personal development, but that these impacts are long-lasting and affect many aspects of life.

Although there is support in the literature for the positive impacts of study abroad on cultural learning, not every study has found an increase for all participants. The Engle and Engle (2004) study was conducted over eight semesters at The American University Center of Provence (AUCP), a semester or full-year study abroad program for students who speak intermediate/advanced French. In an attempt to increase French language acquisition and promote intercultural sensitivity and skills development, AUCP incorporated strategies, both learning and experiential. These strategies included taking a required cultural learning class and participating in service learning abroad. To measure intercultural sensitivity, the *Intercultural Development Inventory* (IDI) was administered twice for the 187 semester students in this study. The average achievable progress on the IDI, over six semesters, was 33% with a range of 20% to 39% per year. Although 52% of

the students' achievable progress was between 30% and 100% on the IDI, 14% of students actually declined on their cross-cultural competence (Engle & Engle, 2004).

Engle and Engle (2004) provide a possible explanation for this decline, using Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), upon which the IDI is based. As previously mentioned, intercultural sensitivity development comes from realizing that varying cultures have different worldviews and respecting, accepting, and adapting to these differences (Bennett, 1986). According to Engle and Engle (2004):

Often American students come abroad secure in their cross-cultural skills because they have been culturally conditioned to accept a world of ethnic and racial diversity. The problem arises abroad when the domestically conceived superficial differences of race and ethnic origin have been mistaken for genuine cultural difference. Thus, when abroad, and in contact with true cultural differences, some as simple as "excessive" displays of emotion or a relaxed attitude toward work, some students will judge the action as shocking or backward or inappropriate. Any such tendency to judge other cultures according to a culturally pre-conditioned set of values and assumptions will activate the "us"- "them" polarization which is typical of the less-evolved, ethnocentric Defense stage as defined by the DMIS. (p. 231)

If students function in a bubble while abroad or make the personal decision not to focus on cultural differences, then students will not come out of their comfort-zones. These students will thwart their intercultural sensitivity development because they will be merely reinforcing their worldview of ethnocentricity (Engle & Engle, 2004).

Another example of research, without clear increases in cultural learning and personal development, is a study by Ingraham and Peterson (2004) of 1,104 study abroad participants at Michigan State University. Although the post-test scores on Personal Growth, Professional Development, Intercultural Awareness, and Academic Performance were high, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre and post tests, with the pre-test being marginally higher. Because the difference was so small it could be determined that there was no difference in scores after studying abroad. The researchers posit several explanations for this, one being that students were over confident in their abilities before they left, later realized this, and subsequently changed their score on the post-test (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004).

### **Alcohol Use and Risky Behavior**

A large void remains in the knowledge base about alcohol use and risky behaviors of students while studying abroad. However, Pedersen, Larimer, and Lee (2010) sought to fill this gap with their study on the drinking behavior of 177 college study abroad students. They surveyed students one month before their departure and one month after their return from studying abroad. They found that participants' alcohol use more than doubled during their study abroad trip and for the heavier drinkers, after they returned, their drinking level was still significantly elevated. Several factors led to an increase in alcohol use at a greater extent for the students meeting these factors: "participants studying abroad in Europe (e.g. Italy, France) and Oceania (e.g. Australia, New Zealand), those under the age of 21, those with higher intentions of drinking while abroad, and those with higher drinking perceptions of other study abroad students in their host country" (Pedersen, Larimer, & Lee, 2010, p. 535). Students meeting these criteria

increased their drinking use at a greater extent than students who did not meet these criteria. The increased intention to drink heavily while abroad led the researchers to posit that study abroad participants may be self-selecting heavy drinkers.

This concept, that study abroad participants may be self-selecting heavy drinkers, was explored in a study by Pedersen, LaBrie, Hummer, Larimer, and Lee (2010). A total of 2,144 students were surveyed, including students who did not intend to study abroad, students who did intend to study abroad, and those who had previously studied abroad. Results indicated that students who did not intend to study abroad drank less and had less negative consequence due to drinking than students who intended to study abroad. Students who had previously studied abroad not only drank more than students who did not intend to study abroad, but also reported more dangerous alcohol use (Pederson et al., 2010). More research needs to be conducted to ascertain whether intention to drink heavily is a motive for some students to study abroad.

Although there is a paucity of research on alcohol use while abroad, the limited research available indicates that alcohol use does increase significantly. Another behavior that has not been studied extensively, but has been shown by research to increase, is risky sexual behavior. Young travelers have been found to engage in riskier sexual behaviors, such as decreased condom use, when on vacation than when at home (Maticka-Tyndale & Herold, 1999 as cited in Smith, 2009). A study by Smith (2009) focuses on risky sexual behaviors of study abroad students. Risky sexual behavior in this study included oral, vaginal, or anal sex without a condom, under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs, or with an individual that the student had only known for a short amount of time. Results indicate that there was an increase in risky sexual behavior while students studied abroad

because there was a decrease in condom use from 34% for males and 29% in females prior to studying abroad to 27% of males and 14% in females while studying abroad. “Findings support research that suggests alcohol and drug use exacerbates the individual’s intentions to engage in sex, inhibiting individuals to take necessary precautionary steps to protect from negative consequences” (Smith, 2009, p. 30). When these findings are combined with the results of the Pedersen et al. (2010) study on increased alcohol use while abroad, a possible connection can be made to increased risky sexual behavior due to increased alcohol use while abroad.

### **Goals**

Students’ goals for study abroad and the subsequent impact those goals have on learning outcomes from the experience, has not been a major focus of study abroad research. There is more research on goals in other areas of study. Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1999) found that teaching learners to set specific goals throughout the learning process resulted in the learners performing better, having greater self-efficacy, being more satisfied with their performance, and being more interested in the task than learners who did not set these goals (as cited in Kitsantas, 2004).

Kitsantas (2004) found that students’ cross cultural skills and global understanding increased through their study abroad experience. However, the students’ goals for study abroad influenced the extent of these increases. The three main goals for studying abroad were found to be “(1) to enhance their cross-cultural skills, (2) to become more proficient in the subject matter and (3) to socialize” (Kitsantas, 2004, p. 441). There were moderate to strong correlations between the first two goals and the students’ score on the measure of cross-cultural skills and global understanding.



However, there was no correlation between the goal to socialize and the students' score on the measure of cross-cultural skills and global understanding.

### **Foundational Studies**

Limitations of much of the research on culture learning and personal development from study abroad experiences are that they have little insight into students' perceptions about their learning and experience in general (Gemignani, 2009). In a dissertation qualitative research study, Gemignani (2009) addressed these limitations by focusing on students' perceptions of their culture learning as it fits into their overall learning from studying abroad. This broad view allows for understanding of the meaning that the experience has for students. Although the original purpose of the study was on culture learning, Gemignani found that the most interesting and new focus became the meaning of the experience for the students.

In the Gemignani (2009) study, 13 undergraduate students, who studied abroad in a variety of programs, were interviewed. The findings are arranged into two parts. Part one includes six student case vignettes, which allows for an overall understanding of the experience and the meaning that students interpret for the experience. These vignettes show how individualized the study abroad experience really is and how unexpected and happenstance events can have a great impact on the experience. The second part of the findings section is the results of a comparative analysis using nine themes to analyze all 13 students' experiences (Gemignani, 2009).

Gemignani (2009) found that in terms of culture learning, the students, even when asked directly about this learning, referred to perspectives and not "specific cultural facts or cultural knowledge" (p. 170). Culture learning led the students to become more open-

minded and direct experience was the catalyst for this learning. The students “recognized a world of differing perspectives, they questioned their own perspectives or perspectives of their culture, and they felt that their perspectives changed as a result of their experiences abroad” (Gemignani, 2009, p. 170). Even students who had more limited interaction with the host culture because of their residence, host college, and living in an English-speaking country, still had more culture learning than might be anticipated. Students who attended a service-learning program abroad had more interaction with the local people because of the nature of the program and because they lived with a local family. They perceived their culture learning happening primarily in the context of these interactions. In general, “culture learning was more prominent in students who had developed a personal connection with people of the host culture. When a connection to people was established, the entire study abroad experience of the student was enhanced” (Gemignani, 2009, p. 167) and became more profound. Several students revealed that they had only scratched the surface of learning about their host country and identified their limitations in culture learning.

According to Gemignani (2009) nine out of the 13 students felt that personal development was a key result of studying abroad. Many felt they had learned how to become more “independent, patient, confident, adaptable, and outgoing” (Gemignani, 2009, p. 134) through their experience abroad. A few of the students saw the experience as an opportunity to overcome a challenge. One of the students, Abby, described the experience as completely life-changing which enabled her to become more independent and outgoing. Travel experiences while abroad were mentioned by students as times

when they accomplished a good portion of their personal development (Gemignani, 2009).

Gemignani (2009) found that each student's experience was unique and these distinctive features were where the students derived the meaning of the experience. The meaning of the experience for each student was constructed from how they integrated the experience into their lives. Their identity, past experiences, and the perspectives that they carried with them into studying abroad, impacted how they incorporated the experience into their lives. Many of the unique and influential events that happened on the trip were unpredictable and happened totally by chance, yet they had a strong impact on how the students made sense and meaning of the experience. The meaning that each student gave to the experience framed how they understood their culture learning. Therefore the meaning of the experience and how it is incorporated into the greater context of the students' lives is a necessary component of understanding culture learning in this study (Gemignani, 2009).

Another foundational study is a doctoral dissertation by Warner (2009) which focused on understanding the transformative experiences of adult students who studied abroad in a short-term summer program to Beijing, China. Warner used Transformational Learning Theory as one of the theoretical constructs on which she based her study. She conducted two in-depth interviews, one during the students' study abroad experience in Beijing, and the second, two to three months after the students' return to America. Twelve adult students, 23 years of age or older, were chosen for the study. The study was conducted using a phenomenological methodology.

One of Warner's (2009) focuses in the study was to ascertain what transformational learning experiences the students had. She defines transformational learning experiences as "those that cause the learner to change the way in which he or she thinks, reacts, behaves, or otherwise understands a certain phenomenon" (Warner, 2009, p. 95). Warner found that transformational learning experiences could be categorized into three main types of occurrences. The first type of occurrence was when the students were not in class or accompanied by a teacher and were on their own time. Many of the students found that these experiences were "eye opening" and "thought provoking." The second type was interactions with other people where students were given opportunities to learn about, and better understand another person, group, or culture or change assumptions about others through these interactions. The third type was "experiences that built upon prior knowledge in order to create new meaning" (Warner, 2009, p. 95). Transformational learning occurred through students observing and then reflecting on the observations to better understand the meaning and impact of these experiences.

Each student in Warner's (2009) study recounted experiences that left an impression on them and they described their learning from these experiences as either positive or negative. Participants spoke of meaningful and impactful experiences that were supported by their prior knowledge and assumptions. However, these experiences did not necessarily change how students thought about, or understood the incident. Therefore, an important finding is that meaningful and impactful experiences did not necessarily mean transformational learning through perspective transformation (Warner, 2009).

Warner (2009) measured students' transformational learning through their perceptions and understanding of globalization. She found three themes which can be viewed as progressing tiers of transformational learning. Not every participant mentioned all three themes.

In the first tier, participants used their experience to reinforce their prior knowledge, demonstrating minimal change in thoughts and perceptions. In the second tier, participants adapted their assumptions or changed their perceptions to hold a more global view. In the third and final tier, some participants incorporated their learning experiences into their lives and made changes as a result of their experiences. (Warner, 2009, p. x-xi)

For some participants their perspective transformations were on more than just globalization. These participants felt that their thinking and perceptions had changed in general. The students in the third tier made behavioral changes because of the perspective transformations they experienced through their study abroad experience (e.g. starting to use public transportation after their change in attitudes about resources; Warner, 2009).

Warner (2009) found that when students had prior knowledge about what they were observing, they could more easily make meaning of the experience. Participants who could not use prior knowledge to build upon, often felt frustration and could not make sense of, or understand what they were experiencing. Reflection was an important way for participants to understand and make meaning of their experiences. Goals and expectations for the study abroad experience were found to affect the learning process of the participants.

## **Summary of the Literature Review**

Study abroad has been deemed to be a vastly important tool in creating globally competent, American college graduates. Creating global citizens is seen as a service to national security, foreign policy, and global leadership. However, only one percent of college students actually study abroad. Legislation has been created to try to increase the opportunities for students to study abroad, to diversify the students who study abroad, and to encourage students to choose more non-traditional or developing countries.

Learning about other cultures and growing to accept and respect differences is a part of intercultural sensitivity development. This is an important aspect of the study abroad experience. Transformational learning, through perspective transformation, is a theory that can be used to support and explain potential learning and growth gained through study abroad. Although mostly positive, there have been mixed findings in the research base, supporting cultural learning and personal development as outcomes of study abroad. However, this research has many limitations in providing insight into this learning and development and also what the experience means in the larger context of students' lives.

Alcohol use and risky sexual behavior have been found to increase during study abroad programs. The goals that students have for studying abroad have been found to influence the extent to which their learning in cross-cultural skills and global understanding increases. There is a great paucity of research in these areas within the study abroad field.

One study took into account the limitations of previous research on positive learning outcomes and looked at the whole study abroad experience from the perspective

of the student. In this study, students' cultural learning was intertwined with the meaning they attributed to the student abroad experience. The study found that the study abroad experience was highly individualized and each student's identity, past experiences, and perspectives that they carried with them into the experience affected how they incorporated the experience into their lives and gave it meaning. Unexpected events during the study abroad experience had a strong impact of students' experiences and often were the basis of the meaning they gave to the whole experience.

Another foundational study focused on transformational learning in adult students during a short-term study abroad experience. Transformational learning experiences were categorized into three main types of occurrences. Transformational learning occurred through students' reflections on their observations to better understand the meaning and impact of these experiences. Students had experiences that were meaningful and impactful but were not necessarily transformative. The study also described three tiers of transformational learning in regards to globalization, but these tiers can also be generalized to include general learning. The study abroad experience did not lead to transformational learning for every participant.

As the first mentioned foundational study is the only study that takes this unique form of assessment of the study abroad experience, a gap in the knowledge base exists on whether these results are specific for these particular students and if a replication study in a different population of students would find similar results or not. Also, since the latter mentioned foundational study only studied students over the age of 23 and during a short-term study abroad duration, a gap remains in whether transformational learning would be achieved for traditionally-aged undergraduate students in a semester-long program. As

the research on transformational learning during study abroad is limited, more research needs to be conducted on this topic to see if similar results are found. Furthermore as there is very limited research on alcohol use and risky sexual behavior while studying abroad, more information is needed to determine whether these two behaviors do in fact increase. More research is also needed on other risky behaviors apart from sexual behavior during the study abroad experience, as no research could be found on this topic. Also, the significant lack of research on the goals of a study abroad program warrants additional research to ascertain whether these results will be supported.



## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Context of the Study**

The study was conducted at Rowan University, a selective, middle-sized public institution in Glassboro, NJ, located 20 minutes south-east of Philadelphia, PA. Rowan consists of approximately 10,000 undergraduate and 1,400 graduate students from the Mid-Atlantic States and 30 foreign countries (“Rowan Fast Facts,” 2010). Rowan’s International Center, opened on campus in 2004 and sends about 20 students abroad per semester. Rowan has affiliations with 200 programs in 30 countries and sends most students abroad through three private study abroad partners. Students can also enroll directly at the host country’s university and bypass application through Rowan’s International Center. However, students are encouraged to apply to study abroad through Rowan’s International Center to receive support with important documents and procedures and to ensure that their credits abroad will transfer seamlessly to Rowan. If students apply to study abroad through Rowan they will also be enrolled in a placeholder course and will not have to take a leave of absence for their semester abroad (“Study Abroad,” 2011).

The basic requirements needed to study abroad are: 3.0 GPA, good judicial standing, completed 30 credits, 500 word essay, and two references. Students who are interested in studying abroad must fill out an interest form and then must meet with the

study abroad coordinator to discuss study abroad goals and the application process.

Students must meet with their academic advisor to choose classes abroad that will count towards their Rowan degree (“Study Abroad,” 2011). After completing the application process, students must attend a pre-departure orientation that covers many issues including, but not limited to: how to conduct oneself as an American, educating oneself on host country’s political and economic environment, packing, travel safety, procedures to take in an emergency, money, and culture shock (L. Pfeifer, personal communication, October 25, 2011).

### **Population and Sample Selection**

The target population for this study was Rowan University students who had returned from study abroad. These students were accessed through an e-mail distribution list of Rowan students who were currently studying abroad or had previously studied abroad, compiled by the International Center Director. The Study Abroad Coordinator sent out the e-mail asking for participants, first, to the 17 students who had just returned from studying abroad in the fall of 2011, and then to the students who had studied abroad in the spring of 2011. Students were incentivized to participate in the study with the promise of a gift card upon completion of the interviews. Purposive sampling was used, on the students who volunteered to be interviewed, to select students who had studied abroad for a full academic semester in a variety of different countries and cities. More females than males were selected to correlate to the actual male to female ratio of American study abroad students.

## **Instrumentation**

The interview protocol, to assess students' study abroad experience, was adapted from the interview questions used in two dissertations, Gemignani (2009) and Warner (2009), of which this study is a partial replication. Gemignani's (2009) dissertation focused on cultural learning during study abroad and Warner's (2009) dissertation studied transformation learning as a result of study abroad. Gemignani (2009) and Warner (2009) both used semi-structured and open-ended interview questions.

Gemignani's (2009) 10 interview questions were carefully designed as "presupposition questions" (Patton, [2002], p. 396)... These kinds of questions make certain assumptions about the participant's experience and proceed to eliciting a description of perceptions or perspectives" (p. 55). These are effective questions because they promote descriptive information, rather than a mere a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Warner (2009) created 10 interview questions for the first interview and seven follow-up questions for the second interview, three months after the students' return. Warner (2009) designed her interview protocol with open-ended questions in order to encourage the participants to "reconstruct his or her experiences...[and] allowed for adaption of the protocol in order to capture the essence of the experience of the participant" (p. 65). Warner reports that the semi-structured design of the interview protocol ensured consistency and reliability. Both Gemignani and Warner designed their interview protocol based on best practices and previous research in order to elicit the best responses. However, they did not mention how validity of the interview protocol was ensured, and could not speak to this topic upon further questioning.

The instrumentation for this study is comprised of a brief demographics form

(Appendix D) and three interview protocols on four different topics (Appendix E). The demographics form was used to determine information such as study abroad location and whether the students studied abroad with friends. The first, 12 question, interview protocol is focused on cultural learning and also motives and goals for the study abroad experience. Some of the cultural learning questions were taken verbatim from Gemignani's (2009) study and others were created or adapted from her study. One created question is based on Bennett's (1986) Model of Intercultural Sensitivity Development. The two questions on the motives and goals of the study abroad experience were created by me. The eight question protocol for the second interview focused on transformational learning as a result of study abroad. Many of the questions about transformation learning were adapted from Warner's (2009) interview protocol. Some of the other questions were adapted from Gemignani's (2009) interview questions. The protocol for the third interview, comprised of eight questions, focused on risky behavior, including alcohol use and sexual behavior. These questions were created using the same structure as the interview protocols in the Gemignani (2009) and Warner (2009) dissertations.

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Rowan University (Appendix A), a pilot test of the interview protocol was conducted. Three study abroad alumni, plus Rowan's Study Abroad Coordinator were interviewed using the protocol to measure its validity and reliability. The participants of the pilot test reported that the questions were clear and easy to understand and they attested that there were no foreseeable problems with the interview protocol.

## **Data Collection**

Permission was granted by the Study Abroad Coordinator at Rowan University to conduct the study on alumni of Rowan's study abroad program (Appendix B). The Study Abroad Coordinator, Laura Pfeifer, sent out the e-mail, asking for participation in the study, to all 17 students that had just completed a study abroad program in fall 2011, and then to the students who had studied abroad in spring 2011. The students, who agreed to be interviewed, contacted me, via e-mail. After further screening, to meet the criteria set forth for the study, only six of the volunteers were chosen to participate in the study. The interviews took place in late January and early February of 2012. The six students who agreed to all three interviews, were asked to sign an informed consent form, agreeing to the terms of the study and giving permission to be audio taped (Appendix C). Strict confidentiality of their responses, both in audio and written form, was stressed and specific measures to ensure this confidentiality were explained. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, in the following chapters, to ensure confidentiality.

## **Data Analysis**

The transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed using content analysis (Sisco, 1981; Appendix F). The data were analyzed to determine differences and similarities within a phrase or clause, which were then organized into common and relevant categories. Once initial coding was complete, these categories were collapsed into broad themes. The frequency and rank of each theme was determined and direct quotes were used to help illustrate the themes.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Profile of the Sample**

The participants in this study were selected through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling from a distribution list of study abroad alumni maintained through the Study Abroad Office at Rowan University. Three interviews were conducted with each of the six participants during the months of January and February of 2012. Five participants were 21 years of age and only one participant was 20 years of age, making the mean age of participants 20.83 years. Four females (67%) and two males (33%) participated in the study. Five participants self-identified as White (Non-Hispanic) and one participant self-identified as both White (Non-Hispanic) and Other, specifying as Puerto Rican. Each student had a unique educational major, including: Physics, Public Relations, Psychology, Fine Arts and Education, Marketing, and Business. Four of the participants were seniors and two were juniors. At the time of the interview, two of the participants lived on campus, one participant lived in an off-campus apartment, and three participants commuted from their family home.

Five of the students had studied abroad a year before the study in the spring 2011 semester, four when they were juniors and one when she was a sophomore. One participant studied abroad in the semester before the study; in fall 2011 as a junior. All participants studied abroad for one semester, ranging from 4 to 6 months in duration of stay. The students studied abroad in a variety of cities and countries in Western Europe

including: Paris, France; Nice, France; Rome, Italy; Florence, Italy; Kingston, England; and Barcelona, Spain. Four of the participants lived in an apartment abroad with other study abroad students and two participants lived with a host family. Five of the participants were born in the United States and one participant was born and lived in a Middle Eastern country until coming to America with her family before starting college. Two students had never left the country before studying abroad and apart from the student who was not born in America, the time that the remaining three students had been out of the country ranged from one to three weeks.

A biography of each of the six participants of the study is listed below:

Dave is a senior, Physics major at Rowan University who studied abroad in Paris, France for 6 months. He lived in an apartment with two friends from home. He was born in the United States and had never left the country prior to studying abroad. He studied abroad in the spring 2011 semester as a junior. Dave had studied French in high school and college and spoke the language almost fluently. Dave traveled throughout France and also to Germany. He self-identified as a White (Non-Hispanic) male. He commuted to school from his family home.

Grant, a White (Non-Hispanic) male, born in the United States, studied abroad in Kingston, England for a semester. He is a senior Psychology major at Rowan University and lived in an off-campus apartment. He did not study abroad with any friends and lived with a host family- a priest, her husband, and their children. Grant studied abroad as junior in the spring 2011 semester and had never left the country prior to his semester abroad. He traveled quite extensively within Western Europe to countries including: Ireland, Italy, Greece, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Gina, a senior majoring in Public Relations at Rowan University, studied abroad in Rome, Italy as a junior for the four months of the spring 2011 semester. Gina, a White (Non-Hispanic) female, had visited Italy quite frequently before studying abroad to spend time with her extended family, the majority of whom still live in Italy. Gina had also visited London prior to studying abroad with the longest duration of her visits abroad being three weeks. Gina speaks fluent Italian and is a Global Ambassador for the study abroad provider, International Studies Abroad (ISA), participating in such events as presenting on the benefits of study abroad to high school students. She worked hard in high school to be eligible for a scholarship to attend community college for two years in order to save enough money to study abroad in her junior year. She stayed in an apartment with other study abroad students, none of whom she knew before studying abroad. Gina spent time with her extended family while in Italy and also traveled to Spain, France, Germany, and Czech Republic. She was born in the United States and lived at home with her family and commuted to school.

Bri is a Fine Arts and Art Education dual major in her senior year at Rowan University who self-identified as both Caucasian and Puerto Rican. She studied abroad as a junior for four months, after winning a full scholarship to study abroad in Florence, Italy during the spring 2011 semester. Bri was born in the United States and prior to studying abroad had only left the country for two weeks for a mission trip to Honduras. While studying abroad she lived in an apartment with other study abroad students. Bri traveled extensively throughout Italy and also to Scotland to visit extended family. She did not know any Italian before studying abroad.



Mona, a White (Non-Hispanic) female, was born in a Middle Eastern country and moved to America, with her family, a few years prior to starting college. Before coming to America, she attended a French Catholic school, resulting in French becoming her second language and English, her third language (Arabic is her first language). Mona learned about the French culture from an early age. At Rowan University she is a junior Marketing major and she studied abroad in Nice, France for five months during the spring 2011 semester of her sophomore year. She lived in an apartment with other study abroad students. While studying abroad, Mona traveled to Monaco, Switzerland, Spain, and Italy. She lived on campus and was a student worker at a Rowan University office and a tutor at Rowan's tutoring center.

Carey, a junior Business major at Rowan University, studied abroad in the fall 2011 semester to Barcelona, Spain. She stayed with a host family and her friend from Rowan University for her four months abroad. Carey self-identified as a White (Non-Hispanic) female and was born in America. Prior to studying abroad, her trips abroad to Spain, France, and the Caribbean were each one week in duration. Carey did not speak Spanish or Catalan (the language spoken in Barcelona which is a mixture of Spanish and French) prior to studying abroad. While abroad she traveled to France, Morocco, England, Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy. She lived on campus at Rowan.

### **Analysis of the Data**

Research Question 1: What were students' motives and goals for studying abroad?

“Why did you want to study abroad?”

Content analysis was used to determine students' motives for studying abroad

(Table 4.1). Travel was a theme that emerged amongst three of the participants. Grant said, “I had never been off the East Coast and I really, really wanted to travel around Europe.” Three of the students mentioned experiences as a motive for studying abroad. Specifically, Gina spoke of wanting to have a unique college experience, Carey mentioned wanting new experiences, while Bri described wanting to gain a broader experience. Meeting new people was a motive for two of the participants. Gina described how studying abroad had been her dream for many years, while Mona spoke of how studying in France had always been her dream because she had been learning about the country and language in her French Catholic school, since she was very young. One of Bri’s motivations to study abroad was because she loves art, especially as an art educator. Dave’s sole motivation for studying abroad was because he wanted to learn the language, as he had been studying French since high school.

Table 4.1

*Students' Motives for Studying Abroad (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Travel		3	1
Experiences	Unique College New Broader	3	1
Meet New People		2	2
Dream For Many Years		2	2
Love Art		1	3
Learn Language		1	3
Total Frequency		12	

“What were your goals for the experience?”

Content analysis was used to ascertain students' goals for their study abroad experience (Table 4.2). Four of the students mentioned that learning or improving their skills with the language of their host country was their first goal. Meeting new people was a goal of three of the participants, while three students also mentioned gaining independence or developing personally as a goal. Three of the students mentioned that one of their goals was to learn about different cultures, in general and/or specifically in terms of their host country's culture. Other less consistent goals, which were each mentioned by only one participant, were: traveling, “seeing as many art works as possible,” spending time with family, and gaining knowledge to help get into the international field as a career.

Table 4.2

*Students' Goals for the Study Abroad Experience (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Language	Improve Learn	4	1
Meet New People		3	2
Gain Independence/ Personal Development		3	2
Learn About Culture		3	2
Travel		1	3
Seeing Many Art Works		1	3
Time with Family		1	3
Career Development		1	3
Total Frequency		17	

Research Question 2: How do students view their own cultural learning as a result of their study abroad experience?

“Why did you choose your study abroad city and country?”

Content analysis was used to determine the reasons participants had for choosing their study abroad city and country. Participants had many varying reasons for their location choice but five reasons were each mentioned by two participants: practicing language of host country, weather, city environment, specific program details, and ability to speak English. However, Grant and Mona had a very different reason for choosing a location; namely one that would allow them to speak English. Grant chose England because the national language was English, yet, Mona chose an English speaking

university within Nice, France, to be able to practice both English and French, as English is her third and most recently learned language.

“What were the highlights of your study abroad experience?”

Through the use of content analysis, the highlights of students’ study abroad experience were found (Table 4.3). Throughout the interviews the two most commonly stated highlights, which were each mentioned by five out of the six participants, were: making friends and traveling. Carey described one of her biggest highlights, traveling to Morocco, which was also one of the biggest differences that she experienced:

I went to Morocco so that was probably the biggest highlight and the biggest change. It was completely different; nothing like I’d ever experienced before. The language barrier was really hard to overcome; not many people speak English there. The foods were different...Just the environment was completely different. They barter there, they don’t have prices.

Interactions with the nationals of the countries, in which they lived or traveled to, were highlights of three of the participants. Gina spoke of the impact of helping a local Italian woman:

I helped some woman, she was walking in front of me and a bird pooped on her head and she felt it and I saw her and the look on her face and my face they matched, just like horror and I just jumped to help her. I didn’t want to just leave her so I asked, “Do you have a tissue? Let me help you.” And she could tell I was American because I wasn’t speaking totally in Italian but I helped her out and that was honestly a highlight. That was a good day.

Three of the students also said that the difference in the foreign cuisine was a big highlight. Personal growth and development was a benefit stated by three of the participants. More specifically, Bri felt growing in her art, improving her art skills, and positively changing the way she looked at things were all highlights of her study abroad experience. Gina realized she had held a mistaken, negative stereotype about the French which changed when she visited Paris: both the trip and the lesson she learned being highlights of the experience. Dave and Mona both found that being forced to assimilate with the local populace and use the language in stressful and, in Dave’s situation, emergency situation was actually beneficial. For example, Dave had to have an emergency appendectomy and was forced to speak French in order to receive appropriate treatment and actually to survive. Independence was an impactful experience mentioned by two of the students. Also close proximity and being able to walk to places, was a highlight of two participants.

Table 4.3

*Highlights of Study Abroad Experience (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Making Friends	5	1
Traveling	5	1
Interactions with Nationals	3	2
Food	3	2
Personal Growth/Development	3	2
Independence	2	3
Close Proximity	2	3
Total Frequency	23	

“Did you learn about the culture of your host country? If so, what did you learn?”

Content analysis indicated what, if anything, students learned about the culture of

their host country. Every participant had a unique set of examples of their insights into the culture of their host country. Four of the participants expressed that they had definitely learned or learned a lot about the culture of their host country and one participant did not specify but listed several examples of learning. In contrast Carey stated, "I learned a little bit I guess." Four participants stated that day-to-day cultural habits were something that they learned about their host country. More specifically, in terms of cultural habits, Dave noted how eating while walking is frowned upon and also that cashiers in France put the change on the counter rather than handing it to the customer. Mona described the cultural habit she learned in France:

When you're walking, don't smile and say "Hi" to everybody; that's bad. That means you're a bad girl...Don't do that. Apparently my friend learned it the hard way. She had people who followed her or something because they were like "Oh she wants us" or something and she didn't even know and she was from England too.

Food was mentioned, by four students, as something they had learned about the culture of their host country. Bri and Mona both stated that even within their host country, the culture is very different and varies by area. Yet, Bri went on to say that each town in Italy is also the same. Dave and Grant mentioned that they found that their host country was more open-minded than America, both citing the acceptance of young people drinking. Gina's examples of her cultural learning about Italy were more intellectual, and were in addition to her mention of the local cuisine. For example, she was very interested in the archeology of Rome, Italian literature, ancient history, and the current politics of Italy. However, she also spoke of her learning about modern culture in

Italy, how schools are set up, and the slower and more relaxed pace of life which Bri and Mona also mentioned.

“How did you learn about culture and from whom?”

How and from whom students learned about culture was found using content analysis (Table 4.4). Four of the six participants stated that they had learned about culture through their classes while abroad. Mona also commented that she had previously learned from her classes while growing up in her French Catholic school in the Middle East. Four of the students indicated that they learned through interactions with the nationals of the country. Notably those four participants all spoke the language of their host country. However, because Grant was in England, when he learned about culture through interactions with people from other countries outside of the United Kingdom, they used English to communicate. Dave, Grant, and Gina all sought out opportunities to converse with nationals to learn. For example, when describing where he learned about culture and the French language, Dave stated:

It was through day-to-day interactions and just going out and buying things and food shopping and going to restaurants. But the most I learned was from my friends. We would normally just go for a walk and talk. I mean we would sometimes have one of those deep moments if we had something serious to talk about...I would just give somebody a call and say, “Hey do you want to meet and just go for a walk and talk about things?” And that was where I learned the most.

Gina also sought out interactions through bimonthly meetings with a 28 year old Roman woman in a language exchange program, as well as spending time with her cousins.



Bri felt that she learned about culture through experiencing everything around her:

Actually going there and seeing the way they worked, their life around, and their belief system, and the way they spoke their language, the way they interacted with their hands...their body language, the way they made food. That is when I really found what the true meaning of what culture is.

Gina stated that she also learned through going on tours and excursions.

Table 4.4

*How and From Whom Students Learned About Culture (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Classes	4	1
Interactions with Nationals	4	1
Tours and Excursions	1	2
All Surroundings	1	2
Total Frequency	10	

“What was the nature of your interactions with the locals of your host country?”

Content analysis was used to ascertain the nature of the interactions that students had with the nationals of their host country (Table 4.5). All six participants indicated that they had necessary day-to-day interactions with the nationals when buying food or metro tickets or at restaurants. Four of the six students spoke of seeking out interactions with strangers which in turn had a positive impact on them. Mona described an interaction with an elderly French woman after she had asked her for directions to the nearest supermarket:

She was like, “There’s one right there but it’s actually really expensive” and then she started talking to me...then she’s starting telling me her life story and I was

like “Oh my gosh that’s awesome!” And then after that she was like “Okay but I could actually show you another one and it’s a cheaper one” and I’m like, “Oh my god thank you that’s so great!” And then she’s like “I’ll walk with you”...And we started walking together and it was just great. She was awesome.

Gina formed friendships with several of the local shop owners that she came in contact with on a regular basis. Specifically, Gina mentioned that every Tuesday night after her night class she would stop at the local small bar and converse with the owner over a free sandwich that he would make for her. Dave spent a lot of time with nationals, whom he met through school and with whom he soon became close friends.

Carey and Bri, conversely, had very minimal interactions with the nationals of their host country. Bri struggled greatly with the language barrier so she asked, in Italian, if they spoke English, used her roommate to translate, or used hand signs and what little Italian she knew to get by. However, she formed an apprentice-type relationship with her Italian art professors, which she greatly valued and benefitted from. Carey’s interactions with nationals merely consisted of necessary day-to-day interactions, minimal contact with her host family, and spending some time with her friend from Barcelona. She stated, “We didn’t really interact with many Spanish people.” She later went on to explain that this was partially because she felt that the Spanish nationals did not necessarily want to interact with her and her American friends. Two participants mentioned that they interacted with nationals at bars and two stated they interacted with nationals at their school. Although almost all of their interactions were positive, Gina and Mona mentioned some negative interactions with nationals on a few occasions. They both felt that negative reactions from nationals are more likely to occur if a language barrier exists.

Table 4.5

*Nature of Interactions with Nationals of Students' Host Country (N=6)*

Category	Frequency	Rank
Day-to-Day Interactions	6	1
Sought out Interactions	4	2
Local Bars	2	3
School	2	3
Sometimes Negative	2	3
Total Frequency	16	

“Describe the people of your host country.”

A description of the people of the students' host country was determined using content analysis. Each participant had a different description of the people of their host country. All participants had some positive things to say about the people of their host country, while only Grant had nothing negative to say at all. All participants used the word “friendly” or a word very similar to describe, at least most, age groups within the nationals of their host country. However, Gina and Carey said that many of the men were sexually aggressive, which they did not appreciate, resulting in them usually trying to avoid many interactions with the men of their host countries. Bri also mentioned that Italians were funny and upon further probing said, with a laugh, that her two teachers, Mario and Luigi, were the perfect inspiration for the Nintendo video game characters: Mario and Luigi. Mona commented on the fashion sense and elegance of the French people and that they spend a lot of time and effort on their appearance. She also stated that she had noticed it was natural and commonplace for French and Italian people to be very blunt and frank with people, without having a malicious intent.

“What are some cultural similarities and differences between your host country and America? How did/do you feel about these cultural differences? How did you react to these cultural differences?”

Content analysis was used to determine what students felt were the cultural differences (Table 4.6) and similarities between their host country and America, as well as, how students felt and reacted to these differences. All six participants listed one or more cultural differences in social norms between their host country and America. Four of the students specifically mentioned the difference in social norms in terms of attire and how it is frowned upon in Europe to wear sweatpants. Cultural differences in terms of food and drink were mentioned by five of the students. The difference in the drinking culture was specifically mentioned by three of the five students. Leisure time was a theme of cultural differences mentioned by five of the participants. Grant spoke of the strong clubbing culture in England, while Carey described the bullfights and Castellars (human pyramids) in Barcelona. Four students indicated cultural differences in personal interactions, such as having to have blinders when walking down the street because smiling and making eye contact can be misinterpreted.

In terms of cultural similarities, between their host country and America, the students spoke most about how the people of the countries themselves are most similar. Four students spoke specifically about the similarities in the people, with one student speaking about the similarities in the closeness to family. Dave took a broad view of the similarities of the people of different cultures by stating that:

You can tell there's definitely some people that are very ignorant of other cultures and your own culture and when you go to another culture there are very much

people that are ignorant of your culture...So yeah that ignorance is universal...Sometimes you hear ridiculous things here but you hear ridiculous things there. We are all very similar in that aspect.

Dave shared some stereotypes he had heard about the French before going abroad and also, the stereotypes about Americans that he tried to correct while he was in France. Bri spoke of the cultural similarities of financial problems, bad economies, and a shared fondness for art and restoration in both America and Italy. Mona did not have specific cultural similarities, between France and America, but said that she did not see many differences in the first place.

The students all mentioned mixed emotions when describing how they felt about the cultural differences. Dave saw it as a fun game to play and really liked learning about cultural differences, yet, he felt being constantly cognizant of his actions got very tiring after a while. When speaking of how she felt about the cultural differences between America and Italy, Gina said:

It is what it is...If it's going on that long, like a lot of things, it's not going to change. And that's what makes each country special, the differences. And you learn to appreciate what you have at home versus what you had abroad. So it's not like I didn't like any of the differences, I'm just a very easy going person. So it's like, whatever, it's cool...it's their life, and this is my life.

Carey described the Castellars, which are human pyramids comprised of young children, which can get up to seven stories high. She felt it was "scary and not right" and that the parents of these children did not "have good judgment" because it was extremely dangerous since the child would be killed if he fell. However, she also spoke about how

for the Spanish it was a great status symbol and highly respected to have a child who was a Castellar.

For the most part the students indicated that they reacted to these cultural differences by changing their behaviors to assimilate into the cultural norms. For instance, three of the students spoke specifically about making the change from wearing sweatpants in America to wearing nice clothes in public while they were abroad. Dave described how sometimes he felt embarrassed if he inadvertently failed to fit into a cultural norm but he qualified that by saying that he usually had the mindset of: “Okay, that’s the way it’s done here. That’s fun. So let’s talk about it later.” Dave said generally that there were differences between cultures but they are not necessarily better or worse.

Table 4.6

*Students' Thoughts on Cultural Differences Between Host Country and America (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Social Norms	Attire	6	1
	Tipping		
	Conservation		
	Use of Public Space		
	Hygiene		
	Work Ethic		
	Time		
	Slower Pace of Life		
Food and Drink	Drinking Culture	5	2
	Fresh Foods		
	No "To Go" Culture		
	Take Time To Enjoy		
Leisure Time	Holidays	5	2
	Clubbing Culture		
	Bullfights		
	Castellars		
	Costumes for Birthdays		
Personal Interactions	Blinders While Walking	4	3
	Quiet on Pub Transport		
	Men Very Forward		
Total Frequency		20	

*Pub Transport = Public Transportation*

“What do you think it means to learn another culture?”

Content analysis was used to ascertain what students thought it means to learn another culture (Table 4.7). All of the participants indicated that to learn a culture, one must physically live in it or amongst it, while three students specifically mentioned a necessary component was the interaction with people of that culture (clearly this was implied for the other three students). All six students also stated that in order to learn

another culture you must be educated in it. Cultural differences was a theme that four of the participants spoke about, yet each student had a different view of cultural differences, in terms of learning a culture. Gina specified that, “You don’t necessarily have to like it, you just have to appreciate it for what it is.” Bri had a similar feeling, and stated that in order to respect cultural differences, people “must meet at the neutral line and...stay there.” Carey felt that part of being able to accept cultural differences, is being able to accept change. Dave brought up a unique point on cultural difference by stating, “So it’s recognizing that you have a culture, because it’s normal but it’s not the norm.” Keeping an open mind was a necessary factor to learning a culture for three of the students. While Gina felt that to learn another culture one must assimilate, not conform, Mona stated that “You have to blend in. I don’t think that you’re supposed to be different.”

Table 4.7

*Students’ Thoughts on What It Means to Learn Another Culture (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Live In It/ Amongst It	Interactions	6	1
Educated In It	Differences Language Habits Customs	6	1
Cultural Differences	Understand Accept Appreciate Respect	4	2
Open Mind		3	3
Assimilate/Blend In		2	4
Total Frequency		21	



“How do you think the experience affected your thinking about other cultures?”

Content analysis was used to determine how students thought their study abroad experience affected their thinking about other cultures. Each student gave a unique interpretation of this question and their answers varied. Four of the students stated that the experience had made them more accepting of different cultures and people in general. Two students specifically mentioned Islam, and how the experience had made them more open to learning about this religion and more accepting of Muslims. Dave described how he had been exposed to a skewed view of Islam until he met some friends in France who were Muslims:

He practiced [Islam] and he was just such a nice guy and we differed on a lot of views but just like if there was a Christian that had differing views and it was more or less the same kind of conversation...It's just like most of the other big religions, like Christianity, like Judaism. And my one friend, Lynda, I didn't even know she was Muslim; she was just a regular girl. She wasn't wearing a veil or anything, like you see on TV. She wasn't from Algeria, she wasn't from the Middle East; she was just a regular girl. It was just like a regular Christian girl here.

Carey's new openness and becoming more accepting of other cultures came from her travels, where she started to think about other cultures and their way of life, but also from the realization about her own culture: that, “not everyone has to act the way we do, or how we act may not necessarily be correct.”

Three of the students said that the experience made them a lot more open-minded.

Gina spoke about how this new open-mindedness made her more open to learning about all kinds of different people:

[My boyfriend] is Indian...I was more open to learning about India and his culture because I was more open to learning about European culture and Italian culture. And then when I got home, and he has a lot of Pakistani and Indian friends, and I was more open to learning about Islam and Hinduism and everything like that.

Bri and Carey mentioned that the experience had shown them that people and cultures are unique and different, while Grant said that he learned that different cultures are actually more similar than he had previously thought. Dave's view encompassed both of the aforementioned ideas, "I basically learned that even though people are vastly different, the driving forces behind their differences are the same." Through Mona's immersion in three very different cultures: Middle Eastern, American, and French, and her work with International students, she came to feel that: "I have three cultures inside of me...I'm just a mix of everything now."

"Could you have learned what you learned without going abroad?"

The answers to the aforementioned questions were determined using content analysis. Five of the six participants felt strongly that they could not have learned what they learned, had they not studied abroad, while the remaining participant had mixed feelings. The students relayed varying lessons that they learned, but throughout all the interviews the two main themes that students spoke about were cultural learning and personal development/growth. In terms of learning to be open-minded through her experiences with other cultures, Carey stated, "You can't really be open-minded if you haven't experienced anything before. If you've only stayed in New Jersey, you can't even

be open-minded about other states or other cultures.” Dave said that only through his study abroad experience was he able to learn the actual cultural differences in the French culture and be able to squash the stereotypes that he had heard about the French prior to his stay abroad.

Gina and Bri spoke about their personal development in terms that only could have resulted from their study abroad experience. Gina and Bri both touched upon a newfound confidence in themselves and Bri stated that the experience had allowed her to establish herself. Gina commented that her independence, while abroad, had led her to stand up for herself more, to care less about what people think, and to speak her mind, which she said, with a laugh, was both good and bad.

Research Question 3: To what extent, if any, did students experience transformational learning? What experiences prompted this learning?

“Tell me about some of your more meaningful or memorable experiences while abroad? What experiences have you felt were particularly useful, relevant, or enlightening during your study abroad experience?”

Content analysis was used to determine the themes from the answers to the aforementioned questions. Throughout the interviews, meaningful and memorable experiences that were noted by five of the students, was meeting people. Each of these five students recounted a specific person or persons, that they met while abroad, who were especially meaningful or memorable. Three of the students spoke of a particular event where they met people who made that event meaningful and memorable. For instance, Mona spoke extensively, on several occasions, throughout all the interviews,

about a night in Venice, Italy, while traveling with her friends, where she had a very meaningful and memorable experience at an Italian restaurant:

It was very positive because the people there were so nice, the waiters, they were so nice to us. They actually gave us a free appetizer...and a free desert and we took pictures with them...and they didn't even tell us to leave or anything...We talked to the owner and we talked to the waiter and we just had a great time. They said their...life story. People were waiting outside for our table because it was a small restaurant...I would never forget how nice those Italian people were, they were so so nice. We had a great time that night.

Gina and Bri spoke about how making a particular friend, while abroad, was especially memorable and meaningful. Gina became good friends with her roommate, who she said was the complete opposite of her; while Bri's whole experience was transformed, for the better, after meeting her, now, close friend from Korea. Two students also mentioned a particular trip that was meaningful and memorable: Grant spoke often about his hike through the Alps in Germany and Carey recounted her camping trip in the Sahara Desert.

In terms of the experiences that were useful, relevant, or enlightening each student had their own unique stories. Three of the students spoke of their extreme independence while abroad and how that was useful and/or enlightening for them. It was an enlightening experience for Mona, being so independent and doing everything on her own, because she realized that not only could she do it but she was very successful at it, even when dealing with the many issues she had to overcome. Four of the participants mentioned having enlightening experiences, for instance, Carey's trip to a German concentration camp and Dave's interactions with his new Muslim friends. Gina

mentioned how her interactions with some “creepy men...taught [her] to be more aware” and gave her the “sixth sense from being abroad” which has allowed her to be cognizant of her surroundings, now that she is home, and to move away from something if she feels uncomfortable.

“What experiences have been unexpected during your study abroad experience?”

Content analysis was used to determine what experiences students felt were unexpected during their time abroad. Each student had a very unique experience and so their answers varied widely. Two participants mentioned the language. Dave did not expect how hard it would be for him to get people to speak French to him, often because they wanted to practice their English. Gina mentioned language in terms of how unexpected it was to find Italians who were welcoming and receptive to Americans and that:

They were really interested in our culture and our language because I had heard that a lot of people don't appreciate Americans in their home country if they're not totally assimilated. And I wasn't totally assimilated but the fact that I spoke the language helped.

Dave was not expecting how comfortable he would feel to just walk in the general direction of his apartment with no worries and with no directions. Bri spoke of how the whole experience was unexpected, that she was physically there, meeting people, and seeing art pieces that she had only dreamt of before. Carey did not expect to make such close life-long friends in such a short time, while Mona did not expect that she would have had such a “bad experience with bad people” in terms of attending an

unprofessional school and dealing with a dishonest realty agency. However, she was quick to point out, with a laugh, that she “dealt with it so it wasn’t that bad.”

“While abroad did you have an experience that caught you off guard? How did you react to this experience?”

The aforementioned questions were analyzed using content analysis. Each of the participants had unique experiences but five of the six participants recounted an experience that was directly or indirectly related to the specific culture of the country in which they were located at the time. Carey spoke about how the whole experience in Africa caught her off guard because there were no prices on anything for sale, so all purchasing had to be done through bartering or haggling. She had no idea what anything cost at first and even without speaking the language, over time she learned how to fit into the culture and used a combination of pointing and any commonly known words from a mixture of broken English, Spanish, and French. Bri recounted a specific experience where she was completely caught off guard:

An experience that just made me lose my breath was when I saw Ravenna San Vitale. That was it...that was just breath takingly beautiful...We went just in time for the light hitting the tiles and that was...it was like this glorious moment between me and this church and I never thought that I would experience it.

All participants mentioned a positive reaction to the experience or at least a reaction that made the best of the situation.

“Have you noticed changes in yourself as a result of your study abroad experience, such as perceptions or behaviors? If so, what are they and what prompted you to change.”

Content analysis was used to find themes in the changes that the students felt they had experienced as a result of studying abroad. Two main themes emerged throughout the interviews: culture and personal development. Five of the six participants mentioned a change in a perception because of some aspect of a different culture that they experienced while abroad. Four of those students had a change in their perception about culture or people in general. This change led them to have a new mindset in looking at things but did not lead directly to a behavior change. Dave stated that now he is “less tolerant to people making overarching generalizations of people” and it actually angers him. He mentioned that he has thought about trying to educate people when he sees this but does not want to come off as a “jerk” and appear to be standing on a soap box. Gina said that she has become a lot more open-minded and open to meeting and learning about people from different cultures after, “being around a bunch of different people with different views and seeing that they’re not bad people, they are good people, they have good intentions.” Mona has changed her mindset and is now “more open to learning new stuff and seeing new perspectives...seeing other people’s views and understanding them and appreciating them for what they are.” All four of the students who spoke of a change in their perception about culture were promoted to change through the totality of their experiences within that culture, but not necessarily one specific event.

For the five students who changed their behaviors, as a result of their study abroad experience, it was in terms of personal development. Bri was the only student that mentioned a specific cultural difference that led to a change in her perception leading to a change in her behavior. Bri spoke of how she noticed the confidence and power that Italian women had, even when they were having a bad day, which led her to change her

perception of her own identity and she started to imitate the Italian women, specifically how they always walked with their head up. Bri also mentioned how living in a city and traveling have led her to change her perception of some key life goals and habits, and now this has changed her behaviors in terms of being more conservative. Now she plans to move to a city eventually and travel extensively, something she was against before studying abroad. All the participants, except for Dave, spoke specifically about how they have become more confident and have changed their behaviors. Gina stands up for herself more and Bri mentioned that she has transformed from a quiet person into a very talkative and confident individual. Only Bri spoke about a specific perception change that led to this behavior change but it can be implied from the consistency of the responses from the other participants. For the students who have become more confident, they mentioned that being independent and living and making decisions on their own prompted them to change.

“Do you feel you held misconceptions or false assumptions about your host country or its culture? If so, has your experience changed your perceptions?”

Any misconceptions that students held about their host country or its culture were determined using content analysis. Four of the six participants mentioned a general cultural misconception that was corrected through their study abroad experience, while one student listed two specific cultural misconceptions. Dave and Grant had the opposite misconceptions about their host countries. Dave thought France would be “America, but they speak French” but found that it was considerably more different than he had anticipated and that it was more difficult to blend in as easily as he had initially thought. However, he did reintegrate his previously mentioned belief that the people in general are



similar but just in a different culture. Conversely, Grant felt that he had the misconception that England would be more different, but realized that it was actually a “tiny America and they love everything American.” He said there were minor differences but for the most part found them to be very similar. Gina mentioned a pre-existing negative stereotype about the French, that several of the participants also mentioned, and she said that once she visited Paris and met some of the nationals, she realized that her negative assumptions were false. Bri found that her assumption that the Italian men would shout at her in the street and would party all the time was actually proven to be false when she actually lived there. Carey, felt that she held no misconceptions about the Spanish before studying abroad.

Research Question 4: What is the impact of alcohol use and risky behavior for students who study abroad?

“What was a typical week like for you while studying abroad? A typical weekend?”

A typical week and weekend for students was ascertained using content analysis (Table 4.8). All six participants spoke about going to class, grocery shopping every day, and hanging out with friends every day. Five of the six participants spoke about going out to the bar at least one night per week while three of the participants indicated that they went to the bar every night. However, two of the three participants, who went out to the bar every night, specified that they did not get drunk every night. Four of the participants mentioned that they did a cultural activity at least once a week. Dave was unique in that he “would really try to center everything around practicing French, whether it was with friends or alone.” Bri visited a museum every Tuesday, her day off from classes, and

completed a whole handbook of museums. Three of the participants spoke about taking Saturday trips to cities in their host country, frequently, if not every weekend. Only two participants indicated that they did any studying outside of school.

Table 4.8

*What a Typical Week and Weekend Was for Students While Studying Abroad (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Class		6	1
Hanging Out with Friends		6	1
Grocery Shopping		6	1
Out to Bar $\geq$ Once Per Week		5	2
Cultural Activity	Museums Day Trips to Cities Explore Practice Language	4	3
Out to Bar Every Night		3	4
Total Frequency		30	

“What was your alcohol use before studying abroad? What was a typical drinking night like?”

The alcohol use of the students prior to studying abroad, including what a typical drinking night was like, was determined using content analysis (Table 4.9). The alcohol use of three of the six students, prior to studying abroad, could be categorized as infrequent. However, when these students did drink, their alcohol use was excessive and could be categorized as binge drinking (4 or more drinks for women and 5 or more drinks for men). Carey said that prior to studying abroad she drank one to three nights, over a

weekend, and she “drank a significant amount, but not to the point that [she would] black out.” Before studying abroad, Mona had only had small amounts of alcohol at family dinners, while Bri had never tried alcohol before.

Table 4.9

*Alcohol Use of Students Prior to Studying Abroad (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Binge Drinking	10 Drinks	4	1
	5-8 Beers		
	4-5 Drinks		
	1 Bottle of Wine		
Drank Infrequently/Rarely	Once per Month	3	2
	2-3 Times per Month		
	On Occasion		
Small Amount with Family		1	3
Never Tried Alcohol		1	3
Total Frequency		9	

“What was your alcohol use during your study abroad experience? What was a typical drinking night like?”

Content analysis was used to ascertain what students’ alcohol use was while they studied abroad (Table 4.10). For five of the students the frequency of their alcohol use increased. Dave stated, “Instead of [drinking] a couple times a month, it turned into a couple times a week. [My drinking] definitely increased when I was there.” Two of the students, whose frequency of alcohol use increased, specified that the amount of alcohol they consumed in one sitting did not increase, however. An increase in the amount of

alcohol consumed in one sitting was a theme for three students. Carey spoke about a typical drinking night, which was every night for her while abroad:

Me and my roommate would start off by...each getting a bottle of wine, and drinking that while we were getting ready. Then we would go to the bar to pre-game...We went there every night they were open...Then we just went to the clubs and we made friends with a lot of rich people at the tables and we just had [free] bottle service every night...We would start off with two bottles, there was usually three or four of us at a table, so we would finish that and they would bring out another one and another one until we were done.

Carey mentioned that her drinking increased from four to five drinks in one sitting, to seven to 10 drinks. She also increased her frequency of drinking from one to three nights per week to seven nights per week. Mona increased on frequency and amount but mostly because she hardly ever drank before studying abroad. She mentioned how her friends had competitions to try to get her drunk while abroad, but she is adamantly against getting drunk for several reasons, including a desire to always be aware of her surroundings. She would only have a small glass of wine with her friends to not “be the lame one not drinking.”

Four of the students spoke about drinking large quantities of cheap wine, especially while “pre-gaming.” Pre-gaming can be defined as drinking before the main event, such as going to a club or bar. Controlling their drinking was a theme that three students mentioned. Two of those three students indicated that they controlled their drinking, partially or totally, because they had to be the “Mom” of the group in order to

ensure both the safety of their highly intoxicated roommates and their own safety. Gina spoke about controlling her drinking to watch out for her friends:

I really didn't trust them, my girlfriends, to be totally drunk on their own; so I would stay sober-ish for them, which is fine because I wanted them to be safe, and I knew if I were really drunk I wouldn't be safe either. But on nights when I knew someone was going to be the designated whatever, like they weren't drinking a lot, I would just get two bottles of wine and just drink them...both. So I would drink one in the apartment and then drink another on the way to wherever we were going.

Dave spoke about not letting his drinking get out of control, in a general sense, and partially specifically for health reasons. The extent of Bri's alcohol use was a few sips of alcohol on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Table 4.10

*Alcohol Use of Students During Their Study Abroad Experience (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Increased Frequency	2-3x/Mo → 2x/Wk* 1x/Mo → 1x/Wk 1-3x/Wk → 7x/Wk Rarely → Often Rarely → Occasionally	5	1
Large Quantities of Cheap Wine		4	2
Increased Amount	4-5 Dk → 7-10 Dk* 1 BOW → 2 BOW* Minimal → GOW*	3	3
Controlled Drinking	Be Group “Mom” Health Concerns	3	4
Same Amount/More Frequent		2	5
Never (Apart from Sips on 21 <sup>st</sup> Birthday)		1	6
Total Frequency		18	

*x/Mo = Time Per Month; x/Wk = Times Per Week; → = Increased To; Dk = Drinks Per Sitting; BOW = Bottle of Wine; GOW = Glass of Wine*

“What was your alcohol use now that you have returned? What was a typical drinking night like?”

The alcohol use of students, now that they have returned from studying abroad, was determined using content analysis. Four of the students remarked that their alcohol use was substantially less but for varying reasons. Dave still drinks the same amount in one sitting but drinks far less frequently. However, he qualified that by saying it is more a function of a busy school year with more responsibilities. Three of the students who

indicated that their alcohol use was substantially less, specified that this was both in quantity and frequency, and they each gave different reasoning for this decrease. Gina remarked that her boyfriend's father is an alcoholic so he has chosen not to drink, therefore she does not either. Carey says the extent of her alcohol consumption is a glass of wine with dinner or while watching television. She stated her reasoning for this drastic decrease: "I think it's because I drank a lot there and nothing appeals to me anymore. I don't want to go to a house party...[and] stand in someone's house and drink...Nothing is really as fun as there. I think I'm like moping; I'm in a bad mood." While Mona still drinks the same amount as she did there, the amount has always been minimal. Bri still never drinks alcohol because she does not find it fun and instead mentions that her idea of fun is going to a museum.

"Please tell me about any specific events that happened to you, while studying abroad, that you would now consider risky behavior?"

Events that occurred while students studied abroad that they would now consider risky behavior were determined using content analysis (Table 4.11). Five of the participants mentioned that they participated in a least one form of risky behavior at night. To qualify that statement, three of the students felt that they did not take many risks, and the only risky behavior they partook in was, on occasion, walking home alone at night. Specifically, Gina said that she walked at a little distance behind her group of friends, as the caboose, in order to "see everything that might put [her and her friends] at risk." Bri mentioned that she walked home alone from a class only until she found a classmate to walk with and Mona described only one occasion where she walked a small distance alone to her apartment. An example of taking risks at night, which emerged

during the interviews, was Dave's experiences running, sometimes on highways. Dave and Carey mentioned taking risks at night by walking when they were very drunk and as Dave put it, "not really able to defend ourselves against anyone who may have wanted to cause us some harm." Dave also spoke about his unhealthy lifestyle-not eating enough healthy foods, or food in general, and working out too much-which he indicated may have been the reason he got appendicitis and had to be hospitalized.

Carey's experience, while abroad, was different from the other five participants, in terms of the large quantity and frequency of risky behaviors that she participated in. Carey mentioned that her alcohol use and "going out all the time" were big risks. She commented on the great risks she took when she often accepted drinks from strange men and dressed in risqué attire. Carey spoke about how she often blacked out and had to piece together the night by looking at the pictures they took:

We would always have to look at the camera the next day, or we would wake up and look at each other (her roommate/friend from home) and say, 'Do you know? I don't know what happened.' She broke her finger one night and we have no idea how. She was covered in blood from head to toe, scraped everywhere, broken finger. We believe we were together all night but...I think we were just drunk. I believe we had gotten drugged a couple of times though, just from my experiences...We got uncontrollably sick and had no idea what was going on, had no idea. We looked at our camera the next day and me and my roommate were sitting on people's motorcycles and had no recollection of being on a motorcycle or anything.

Although Grant was the only student who felt he did not take any risks (because he felt



England was very safe), Gina, Mona, and Bri stressed the fact that they really did not take risks while abroad. Gina explained that she was very responsible while abroad because she was conscious of the negative experience of her Mother, who took many risks while studying abroad in college and ended up being sexual assaulted.

Table 4.11

*Behaviors That Students Would Now Consider Risky (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Taking Risks at Night	Walking Alone	5	1
	Walking Drunk		
	Jogging		
Consciously Made Safe Decisions		3	2
Unhealthy Lifestyle		1	3
Blacking Out		1	3
Accepting Drinks From Strangers		1	3
Risqué Attire		1	3
Total Frequency		12	

“Tell me about any specific events that occurred during your study abroad experience that you would not have normally done in America.”

The answers to the aforementioned question on events that occurred while abroad that students would not normally have done in America, was ascertained using content analysis. Four of the students specifically indicated that they did not do anything, or only one minor thing, that they would not normally have done in America. Dave mentioned doing something he called “Metroracing” which he described as a competition where he and his friends would get off the Metro at a stop and sprint as far down the platform as

possible to get back on the train before the doors closed again. He qualified that statement by saying, “But everything else I would do. I was pretty much the same: I have the same level of good and bad decision making here and there.” He indicated that he only did that in France because he “felt there were less repercussions legally, for your actions there.” Bri said that she attended her first concert, during a Korean film festival, and would not have normally done that in America.

Three students specifically mentioned aspects of their alcohol use while abroad, that they normally would not have done in America. However, it can be inferred that the other two students, who only increased their alcohol use while abroad, would not have normally done that in America, because it only increased while they were abroad. For Mona, she felt that her alcohol use and trips out to the bar increased while abroad because she enjoys the atmosphere more in Europe. She said this was because, “they know how to control themselves...compared to American people who get wasted and do the stupidest crazy things.”

Carey was the only participant who listed more than one thing that she would not have normally done in America. The examples of risky behaviors she would not normally have done in America were accepting drinks from strangers, getting in taxis with strangers, taking a taxi alone at night to her house, and hanging out with certain people. She mentioned certain aspects about the study abroad environment that allowed and encouraged her to live this lifestyle:

I got like that there because I could and because my classes weren't that serious and I didn't have a job or responsibilities. [I felt that] now is the time to do it, now is the time to have fun...I kind of feel like I felt invincible in a way: Oh nothing

can stop me, nothing can hurt me. I did it the night before, so why can't I do it again tonight, and the next night. Just keep going.

“Research shows that risky sexual behaviors increase when students study abroad. How does this research relate to your experience while abroad?”

Increases in students' risky sexual behaviors while abroad were determined using content analysis (Table 4.12). Four of the students indicated that they did not participate in any sexual behaviors while abroad. Three of these four students said the main reason was because they had a significant other back home while one student said it was because she is a virgin and would “never even think of doing something like that.” Two of the students, with significant others, also stated that their intense fear of contracting a sexual transmitted infection (STI) would deter them from any sexual behavior, even if they did not have a significant other. The two remaining students said they participated in sexual behaviors that they would not normally have done in America. Specifically, Grant said that he had two one night stands while Mona recounted an experience, which she now regrets and is embarrassed about, where she allowed a boy to walk her home with his arm around her waist. She stated that she felt it was risky because she led him on.

Four of the students recounted specific stories about their friends, where their risky sexual behavior increased. Carey described her roommate and close friend's increase in risky sexual behavior while studying abroad:

I think she went a little crazy while being there, especially while being in Europe...That's why I usually walked home at night by myself, because she went out at night and didn't come home. I know she had sex without a condom and she would never do anything like that here... She was particularly drunk but I think

she said she was just bored and she just wanted to. She wasn't thinking about it at the time...She now later regrets it. She would go off with him and do things that she doesn't even tell me about.

Mona recalled her friend making a statement on their trip to Italy that she vowed to “make-out in every single city we go to” and she did in fact stick to that. She said this same friend would sometimes “make-out” with four men in one night and would never do that at her home college because there she needed to worry about her reputation. Dave spoke of a mild risky sexual behavior that his friend and many others participated in while abroad- “The Bar Bathroom Hand Job (The BBHJ).” He went on to describe the mindset of study abroad students, “There is an atmosphere, more sexual atmosphere. It just felt that way, people just have the attitude, ‘Okay I’m over here, I’m going to have a lot of fun.’”

Table 4.12

*Risky Sexual Behaviors While Abroad (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
No Sexual Behavior	Signif. Other at Home* Against Values Fear of STI*	4	1
Friends' RSB Increased*	Sex w/ Stranger* Sex w/o Condom* Going Home w/ Stranger Kissing Several Men Per Night	3	2
Personally Increased	2 One-Night Stands Cuddled While Walking	2	3
Total Frequency		9	

*Signif.* = Significant; *STI* = Sexually Transmitted Infections; *RSB* = Risky Sexual Behaviors; *w/* = with; *w/o* = without

“Why do you think risky behavior tends to increase when students study abroad?”

Students' reasons for why they think risky behaviors tend to increase during study abroad were ascertained using content analysis (Table 4.13). The students gave their reasons from a general standpoint of all study abroad students and did not necessarily apply to them personally. The phrase that five out of the six students mentioned as a reason for why risky behaviors tend to increase while abroad was “I will never see these people again.” Within that theme several of the participants made a comment about not having to worry about a reputation because that is not where they live permanently. Gina mentioned that some students have the mindset of “I'll do it and then forget about it” because they never have to worry about meeting those people again in their normal lives. Grant brought up the reason that study abroad students are “so far away from people that would normally rein them in.”

Three students mentioned the feeling of being invincible or at least of being less inhibited. Carey explained her own feeling of invincibility and unrealistic feeling of safety:

I'm studying abroad, nothing bad can happen to you when you are studying abroad...I would joke, if I was "taken" [referring to the movie: Taken] I'm never coming back.. [my dad's] not Liam Neeson. But I never took it seriously, but I probably should have.

Two students mentioned the image of study abroad being "one big party," that it is the norm, and that is what they are supposed to do. Gina, specifically mentioned the company in Europe called Bus To Alps, which caters solely to study abroad students, and spreads the image of the "big party" through their advertising and the trips themselves. Alcohol use and good stories for friends back home were two reasons each given by two students.

Table 4.13

*Reasons Why Risky Behaviors Tend to Increase While Studying Abroad (N=6)*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Rank
Never See People Again	No Reputation at Stake Not Where Live Do and Forget No One to Rein In	5	1
Feeling of Invincibility/ Less Inhibited		3	2
One Big Party/ Norm		2	3
Alcohol Use		2	3
Good Stories for Home		2	3
Total Frequency		14	

## **Chapter V**

### **Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

#### **Summary of the Study**

The study investigated the impact of the study abroad experience on selected Rowan University students. The study was designed to determine students' motives and goals for their study abroad experience, as well as how students view their own cultural learning, as a result of studying abroad. Additionally, the extent to which students experienced transformational learning, and the experiences that prompted this learning, were also studied. Finally, the study aimed to determine the incidence and impact of alcohol use and risky behavior for students who study abroad. The six students, who participated in the study, were selected through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling after meeting the necessary criteria. Each student studied abroad for a full academic semester within the last calendar year (either spring 2011 or fall 2011).

Three separate interviews were conducted for each of the six participants, during the spring 2012 semester. The first interview addressed students' goals and motives for their study abroad experience, as well as exploring cultural learning. The second interview focused on transformation learning while abroad, while the third interview covered alcohol use and risky behavior during the study abroad experience. Each interview was tape recorded and later transcribed, allowing for appropriate qualitative analysis of the data. Content analysis was used on the transcriptions to determine themes,



which were organized into table format. Direct quotes were used to further support and illustrate the main themes that emerged.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Research Question 1: What are students' motives and goals for studying abroad?

In the current study, most students either mentioned traveling or acquiring new experiences as their main motivations for studying abroad. Two of the students mentioned that going to a specific country was their motivation, but for varying reasons. Mastering the language was the sole motivation for Dave. There were four main goals that students had for their study abroad experience. Improving or learning a foreign language was mentioned by most students. This supports Kitsantas's (2004) finding that one of the three main goals for studying abroad is to "become more proficient in the subject matter" (p. 441) which she categorizes language as falling under. Half of the students mentioned meeting people as an important goal. This also supports Kitsanta's (2004) third goal, namely to socialize. Three students mentioned that a goal was to learn about culture. This finding does not necessarily support Kitsanta's (2004) goal "to enhance cross-cultural skills" (p. 441) because in the current study the students do not specify that they wanted to use this cultural knowledge to enhance their skills, pertaining to culture. Another important goal, mentioned by three students, was to gain more independence and to enhance their personal development. This was not mentioned as a goal by Kitsantas (2004).

Research Question 2: How do students view their own cultural learning as a result of their study abroad experience?

Most of the students in the current study indicated that they had definitely learned,

or learned a lot, about their host country's culture. Only one student mentioned that she had perhaps only learned a little. When asked directly about what they learned about their host country's culture, most students mentioned cultural norms and local cuisine. However, in term of students' culture learning in general, most students spoke about how their perspectives had changed to become more accepting of different cultures and/or more open-minded. These findings support research by Gemignani (2009) who found that students saw their cultural learning in terms of perspectives and a significant number of their comments about their learning revolved around them being "open." The students felt that they had learned to recognize, "a world of differing perspectives, they questioned their own perspectives or perspectives of their culture, and they felt their perspectives changed as a result of their experiences abroad" (Gemignani, 2009, p. 170).

All of the students, in the current study, mentioned the importance of living in or amongst the culture and interactions with nationals in order to learn about a culture in general. Gemignani (2009) also found the importance of "being there" in terms of cultural learning. In the present study, when asked directly about how they learned about their host country, most students mentioned interactions with nationals, as well as their classes, as the sources of this learning. The four students, who said they learned through their interactions with nationals, spoke the language of their host country. This supports Gemignani's (2009) findings that students perceived their cultural learning as being a result of their interactions with the nationals of their host country. In both studies, many of the interactions they had with the nationals were happenstance, but had a positive effect on how they viewed the people of their host country and their experience in general. For half of the students, in the present study, these interactions with nationals

was one of the highlights of the experience. Gemignani (2009) stresses the impact of happenstance events on the whole study abroad experience and also found that, “when students were able to form a personal connection to an individual or individuals of the host culture, it transformed the experience. These students perceived culture learning differently than students who did not form a connection” (p. 133). A perfect example of this in the current study, is the differences in experiences and thus cultural learning of Dave and Carey. Dave had many interactions with French nationals, who became his close friends, and he showed both significant learning about the culture of his host country and intercultural sensitivity development. However, Carey had very minimal interactions with the people of her host country, which she attributed in part, to the fact that she believed they did not want to interact with her. She felt many of her limitations stemmed from not being able to speak the language or communicate effectively, which did not allow her to be immersed in the culture, in turn leading to only a surface level of culture learning. This is supported by Gemignani’s (2009) findings that several students felt they “just barely tapped the surface of learning about the culture that they lived in while abroad” (p. 161)

According to foundational research by Bennett (1986), intercultural sensitivity development comes from realizing that varying cultures have different worldviews and from respecting, accepting, and adapting to these cultural differences. Most of the students in the current study mentioned respecting and accepting cultural differences and adapting their behaviors to fit into the culture. However, among the students in the study, there were varying degrees of intercultural sensitivity development. The depth of questioning does not allow for a complete analysis and determination of the individual

stage of development for each student, but certain examples of development stages are clearer than others. Certain experiences, recounted by Dave, show support for his development within the ethnorelative stages of Bennett's (1986) Intercultural Sensitivity Development Model. Dave's acceptance of cultural differences as neither good nor bad, and his intentionality in trying to understand and adapt to cultural differences, leading to a new cultural frame of reference, are all descriptive of the ethnorelative stages and substages. Dave's great respect for, and desire to practice, and master the French language, illustrate his intercultural sensitivity development. This finding is supported by Bennett (1986) who found that acknowledgment and respect of another language is a sign of intercultural sensitivity.

Research Question 3: To what extent, if any, did students experience transformational learning? What experiences prompted this learning?

Students in the current study experienced transformational learning to varying degrees, as a result of the study abroad experience. All of the students noticed a change in their perceptions, and for most, a change in their behaviors, as a result of their study abroad experience. Most students could not think of a specific event where they had a sudden insightful moment which forced them to reassess their assumptions. They felt, however, that it was the totality of their experiences that led them to change their perspectives. This supports Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformational learning which says that transformation can come either as a result of a "sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight" (p. 21) that changes a habit of mind or through multiple transformations of points of view that lead to a change in a habit of mind. However, several students mentioned specific stories, throughout the interviews, that can be interpreted as transformational

learning experiences. Carey's trip to Africa was a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 2009) for her because it was so completely different from what she was used to and can be interpreted as a big factor in her change of perspective about culture and cultural differences. This finding supports Warner's (2009) research which found that one kind of transformational learning experience, that students had while abroad, was one that students found to be "eye opening" and "thought provoking." Several students mentioned how interactions with other people, who differed from them, whether it be culturally or religiously, led to a change in their mindset in terms of acceptance of and open-mindedness to different cultures and people. Dave spoke specifically about how his interactions with Muslim friends totally transformed his perception of Islam and people in general. Warner (2009) found that another form of transformational learning experiences come through opportunities to learn about, and better understand another person, group, or culture or change assumptions about others through this interaction, thus supporting the findings in the current research. Most students found that their study abroad experience allowed them to correct a pre-existing misconception that they had about their host country or a country that they visited. Although most did not have a specific event that caused them to change their perspective, a combination of many experiences allowed them to realize that their assumptions had been incorrect. This supports Warner's (2009) final type of transformation learning experience- one that builds "upon prior knowledge in order to create new meaning" (p. 95).

All of the students in this study show some form of transformational learning in terms of their perspectives about cultures or people in general. These students would be classified in Warner's (2009) second tier of transformation learning which includes an

adaption of assumptions or change in perceptions. Most of the students experienced transformational learning in terms of personal development, such as becoming more outgoing and independent. Through their experience of being totally independent, while abroad, the students changed their assumptions about their own capabilities and potential, leading to a change in their behavior. This is illustrative of Warner's (2009) third and final tier of transformational learning which is described as integrating the learning into their lives through changes in behavior. Although each student displayed different levels of transformational learning, in terms of broad cultural learning and personal development, it does not seem that any of the students would fit into Warner's (2009) first tier where they experienced minimal change in their perceptions. Although Warner (2009) was specifically referring to globalization, when describing the tiers, it can be generalized to fit the parameters of this study.

The experiences that students mentioned as being meaningful may not have directly led to a change in their perceptions, but it was part of the totality of experiences that did lead to transformational learning. This finding may not necessarily support Warner's (2009) discovery that meaningful experiences did not always lead to transformational learning. The difference in results comes from the interpretation in the current study, supported by Mezirow's (2000) theory, that transformation learning does not necessarily result from one particularly insightful event that suddenly leads to a perspective transformation, but it can be the combination of several events. Reflection is mentioned by both Mezirow (2000) and Warner (2009) as an important factor that leads to transformational learning. However, students did not specifically mention self-reflection in the current study. Gemignani (2009) also reported that self-reflection was

not found as a necessary factor, in terms of cultural learning, but she considered interactions with others as a form of reflection. This can also be applied to the current study.

Research Question 4: What is the impact of alcohol use and risky behavior for students who study abroad?

Alcohol use, during study abroad, increased for all but one student, who is adamantly against drinking in general. For all of the students, whose alcohol use increased, there was an increase in frequency, but only three of the five increased in the quantity of alcohol. For some students it was impossible to quantitate an exact increase, but for those who gave exact numbers, their alcohol use at least doubled. In terms of an increase in quantity, students' alcohol use approximately doubled, but in terms of frequency, students' alcohol use either tripled or quadrupled. Although the design of the studies is very different, this finding supports Pedersen, Larimer, and Lee (2010) who found that alcohol use more than doubled while students studied abroad. However, for most of the students in the current study, upon their return from studying abroad, their alcohol use, in both frequency and quantity, is below what it was prior to leaving for their semester abroad. This does not support previous research by Pedersen, Larimer, and Lee (2010) that for the heavier drinkers, their alcohol use was still elevated upon their return to America. The current research does not support the position of Pedersen et al. (2010)- that study abroad participants may be self-selecting heavy drinkers because the study found that they had increased intentions to drink heavily while abroad. That finding was not supported in the current research but a direct question about the students' intentions to drink abroad was not asked.

In terms of risky behaviors, most of the students mentioned engaging in one or more risky behaviors and almost all of these risky behaviors happened during the nighttime. Most of these risky behaviors involved walking alone at night, which was the sole risky behavior, of that type, that three of the students identified that they engaged in. One student took part in many risky behaviors such as blacking out, taking drinks from strangers, sharing taxis with strangers, and wearing risqué attire. In regards to risky sexual behavior, four of the six participants did not personally engage in any sexual behaviors at all, three of whom, said because they had a significant relationship back home in America. Most of these students also mentioned that participating in risky sexual behaviors was not in their personality and half of them mentioned that they had a significant concern about contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) which would have been a barrier for them to engage in sexual activity had they been single. All but one student spoke about a personal episode of increased risky sexual behavior or recounted instances of friends who engaged in riskier sexual behavior than they would in America. Two students felt that their risky sexual behavior increased, and in a way that they would not normally have done in America. Although in the current study, risky sexual behavior included all sexual acts, the results can still be compared to Smith (2009) study where she classified risky sexual behaviors only in terms of oral, vaginal, or anal sex. The general increase in risky sexual behavior in this study supports Smith's (2009) findings and the example of decreased condom use in the current study, supports Smith's (2009) research specifically. All of the students, who indicated an increase in risky sexual behaviors, either personally or by their friends, mentioned that alcohol consumption was an involved factor. This was also a finding in Smith's (2009) research that alcohol use increases



intentions to engage in sexual behaviors and inhibits their ability to take safety precautions. Alcohol use was often a factor in risky sexual behavior but causation cannot be determined. Most of the students in this study, who drank heavily, did not engage in any sexual behaviors, let alone risky sexual behaviors.

Most of the students indicated that they thought risky behaviors tend to increase when students study abroad because of the mindset that they will never see these people again. Students feel that they do not have a reputation to worry about and often feel that they can do whatever they want and then just forget about it because there is no one from home to hold them accountable. Several students mentioned a feeling of invincibility or of fewer inhibitions because there was a denial of dangers. Some students also mentioned the image of study abroad as “one big party” where drinking and partying is the norm.

## **Conclusions**

The research suggests that cultural learning does in fact occur from the study abroad experience, yet to varying degrees, which supports Gemignani’s (2009) research. Interactions with nationals was an important factor of this learning, so speaking the language was often the mediator to the cultural learning. These students tended to learn more about their host country because they could speak the language. For the student who had minimal interactions with the nationals of her host country, and even self-reported that she felt she did not learn much about the culture of her host country, it appears that her travels, especially to Africa, allowed her to gain cultural learning in general. This is an important finding because not knowing the language, or not interacting with nationals, does not necessarily mean that cultural learning will not take place. However, the caveat, at least for this particular student, is that the student needed

to face a culture that was totally different, such as Africa, to cause a transformational learning experience, through a disorienting dilemma, in turn leading to a reassessment of assumptions and ultimate change in perspective. The student who attended a college in England felt, after the experience, that people within cultures are more similar than he had imagined and mentioned more cultural similarities than differences. The data collected do not allow for placement at an exact stage on Bennett's (1986) Intercultural Sensitivity Development Model so the following conclusions are pure interpretation of the data. The data suggest that because he lived in a culture abroad, that he perceived to be so similar to America, and did not recount any experiences where he left his comfort zone or noticed any cultural difference that made him 'think twice' about his own assumptions, it seems that he experienced only minimal development. The experience did cause a change in his perspective on culture, but it is unclear, without more data, whether this change was in a positive direction. The broad conclusion, from these findings, is that students must experience some kind of challenge to a mindset while abroad, to lead to the most development. This challenge is more likely to be present in a culture that is substantially different than what a student is used to.

The previously mentioned findings on cultural learning are intertwined with many of the findings on transformational learning. Another aspect of transformational learning, which was found in this study, was in terms of personal development. This was the only form of transformational learning that lead directly to behavior changes. The data suggest that the study abroad experience is a good opportunity for students to realize how capable they are and many times can be a totally transformational experience in terms of developing confidence. In some cases, studying abroad can be completely life changing.

Cultural learning is of course an important aspect of study abroad, but personal development should also be considered as equally important.

The findings, in terms of students' goals for their study abroad experience, suggest that students met their goals. However, these goals were asked in retrospect, so students may have given goals that they felt they had already achieved. However, the student who gave the goal of learning about the culture of her host country, later expressed that she felt she had not really met this goal. Yet, through interpretation it seems she did in fact learn about cultures in general and developed in terms of intercultural sensitivity. This is important because students may have learned more than they realize but have not been given the opportunity to reflect and make this realization.

A limitation of this study, and a possible skew of the data in the risky behavior section, could be in terms of the characteristics of the participants themselves. The fact that the participants volunteered to participate in three, one hour interviews, may mean that they are more responsible, and thus, less likely to engage in risky behavior. Because of this limitation, examples of risky behaviors that friends of the participants engaged in, were also included. That being said, the study still found that alcohol use does increase, quite dramatically when students (even responsible ones) study abroad, which supports previous research (Pedersen, Larimer, & Lee, 2010). All students mentioned that they engaged in at least one risky behavior that they would have avoided at home in America, but these behaviors varied in degree of risk. All but one student either personally engaged in or spoke of friends who engaged in increased risky sexual behavior. The fact that increased alcohol use did not necessarily lead to increased risky sexual behavior is an important finding.

The most telling finding of this study, in terms of risky behaviors, was the reasons why students feel that risky behaviors tend to increase while abroad. The fact that each student recounted many of the same reasons, suggests that there is a common mindset amongst many study abroad students, which focuses around the image of study abroad as “one big party.” A combination of Carey and her roommate’s experiences, are a perfect example of the increases in risky behavior that are often part of the study abroad experience. The finding is important, in that, even if students did not directly engage in a particular risky behavior, they could recount an experience of a friend who had, in fact, engaged in that behavior. This indicates the impact of risky behavior on study abroad students as being very strong, either directly or indirectly. For some students, the impact of risky behavior and the influence of the norm- that study abroad is “one big party”- could actually take precedence over, and prevent cultural learning or any form of transformational learning or development to occur through the experience.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the findings of the current study, the following recommendations can be made for practice in the study abroad field:

Study abroad offices, on college campuses, must take a more intentional approach to the study abroad experience, to try to promote learning from the experience. Therefore, the pre-departure orientation should be better utilized. As understanding and accepting cultural differences is necessary to intercultural sensitivity development, pre-departure orientations should have a section on realizing that cultures do indeed have differences because noticing these differences is the first step to learning to respect and accept cultural differences, and thus develop. Pre-departure orientations should also stress the

importance of students taking opportunities to leave their comfort zone and try new experiences that may initially make them uncomfortable, but with some discussion of sensible boundaries and avoidance of risky behaviors. This leads to the recommendation, that because students should be introduced to these topics, one, short, pre-departure orientation is probably not appropriate. These topics need to be the sole focus of at least one pre-departure orientation and should not be a side bar to a presentation on what clothes to bring, for instance. Group or individual exercises should be included so students can have a chance to better understand and practice topics or skills addressed, but because of the distinct differences between trips to different parts of the world, some degree of customization could be useful.

At least part of a pre-departure orientation should be with students only and not with parents. This is important because it offers an opportunity to directly address risky behaviors and to correct the image that study abroad is just “one big party.” Skills training can be included on how to make smart decisions and avoid getting into risky situations. It is important that parents are not present at this part of the meeting because reference to risky behavior, and particularly discussion of specific examples, may cause them to have second thoughts about allowing their charges to study abroad.

This study implied that there could be significant benefits to having a post-return meeting because it became apparent that the students benefitted from talking about their experiences, refining their insights, and realizing and making sense of their learning. The students of the study mentioned many times how much they enjoyed being given the opportunity to talk about their study abroad experience with someone who knew exactly what they had gone through. At first it seems that it might be hard to get students together

again, after they have returned, but stressing the importance and opportunity to talk about their experience with other study abroad alumni, would be a strong selling point. There also could be value in starting a study abroad alumni student group, where students could not only share experiences, but promote study abroad to high school and college students. Several of the students mentioned that they already do this.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Based upon the findings of this study, recommendations have been made to fill the gaps in the knowledge base with future research on study abroad.

1. Future studies should be conducted on alcohol use and risky behaviors with larger populations.
2. A longitudinal study should be conducted to determine the exact extent to which cultural learning, transformational learning, alcohol use, and risky behaviors occur.
3. Future studies should be conducted using a control group of students who did not study abroad.
4. A study should be conducted to try to determine whether a relationship exists between cultural learning and risk-taking in general, not just in terms of risky behavior.
5. Research should be done to ascertain whether a relationship exists between students' geographical upbringing (i.e. their pre-existing exposure to diverse cultural influences) and their learning as a result of study abroad.
6. Future studies should try to determine whether gender has an effect on risky behavior while abroad.

7. Research should be conducted to determine whether having a more intentional pre-departure orientation and post-return meeting has an effect on students' learning abroad.

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**APPENDIX A**

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



December 14, 2011

Charlotte Cuss  
315 S. Delsea Drive, apt. D-10  
Clayton, NJ 08032

Dear Charlotte Cuss:

In accordance with the University's IRB policies and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to inform you that the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your project:

IRB application number: 2012-129

Project Title: A Qualitative Approach to Understanding the Study Abroad Experience

In accordance with federal law, this approval is effective for one calendar year from the date of this letter. If your research project extends beyond that date or if you need to make significant modifications to your study, you must notify the IRB immediately. Please reference the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Please retain copies of consent forms for this research for three years after completion of the research.

If, during your research, you encounter any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, you must report this immediately to Dr. Harriet Hartman ([hartman@rowan.edu](mailto:hartman@rowan.edu) or call 856-256-4500, ext. 3787) or contact Dr. Shreekanth Mandayam, Associate Provost for Research ([shreek@rowan.edu](mailto:shreek@rowan.edu) or call 856-256-5150).

If you have any administrative questions, please contact Karen Heiser ([heiser@rowan.edu](mailto:heiser@rowan.edu) or 856-256-5150).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Harriet Hartman".

Harriet Hartman, Ph.D.  
Chair, Rowan University IRB

c: Burton Sisco, Educational Services, Administration and Higher Education, Education Hall

Office of Research  
Bole Hall  
201 Mullica Hill Road  
Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701

856-256-5150  
856-256-4425 fax

## **APPENDIX B**

Approval Letter from Study Abroad Coordinator



International Center

To Whom It May Concern,

Charlotte Cuss will be working alongside of me to gain the information needed for her thesis. Please accept this letter as my confirmation that I acknowledge my cooperation with Charlotte as she conducts her research for her thesis.

Feel free to contact me should you have any questions or need further information.

All my best,

Laura Pfeifer  
Study Abroad Coordinator  
Rowan University-Robinson 117  
201 Mullica Hill Rd  
Glassboro, NJ 08028

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Informed Consent**



## Informed Consent

I agree to participate in this research entitled: "A qualitative approach to understanding the study abroad experience." This research is being conducted by Charlotte Cuss, a Higher Education Administration master's student at Rowan University.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better and more holistic understanding of the study abroad experience of college students.

I understand that I will be interviewed a total of three times, twice during February and once in March of 2012. Each interview will last about one hour.

I understand that all precautions will be made to keep my identity confidential and that no personally identifiable information will be reported. If I consent to my interviews being tape recorded, I understand that my name will not be mentioned on the recording and the audio interview will be labeled using coding so that no personally identifiable information will be attached to the recording. The recordings will be kept in a secure folder on a desktop computer in the researcher's residence and will be erased from the portable tape recorder.

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and I may withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. I understand that there are no risks of psychological or physical harm by participating in this study.

I understand that I will be awarded a \$50 Visa gift card upon completion of all three interviews as compensation for my time.

If I have any problems or concerns I can contact Charlotte Cuss at (856) 256-6860 or her faculty advisor, Dr. Burton Sisco at (856) 256-4500, ext 3717.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

---

Signature of Participant  
(I consent to audio recordings)

---

Date

---

Signature of Participant  
(I do not consent to audio recordings)

---

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

---

Date

**APPENDIX D**

Demographics Form

## Demographics Form

1. What is your year in school?

1. Freshman
2. Sophomore
3. Junior
4. Senior
5. College Graduate
6. Other

2. What is your gender?

1. Female
2. Male
3. Transgender

3. How do you identify yourself?

1. African American/ Black
2. American Indian/Alaska Native
3. Asian/ Pacific Islander
4. Biracial or Multiracial
5. Latino/ Hispanic
6. Middle Eastern
7. Other
8. White (Non-Hispanic)

4. How old are you?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Were you born in the United States?

1. Yes
2. No

6. Had you ever left the country before studying abroad? If so, where did you go and what was the length of your longest trip?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Where did you study abroad?

\_\_\_\_\_

8. What university did you study at?

\_\_\_\_\_

9. How long did you study abroad for?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. Did you study abroad with friends? If so how many?

\_\_\_\_\_

11. Where did you live? (dorm, apartment, host family, etc)

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Who did you live with? (Friends, other study abroad students, host family, etc)

\_\_\_\_\_

13. Please list the countries you traveled to while studying abroad:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E**

### Interview Protocol

## Culture Learning Interview

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study! This is the first interview out of three interviews to better understand your study abroad experience. This first interview will be about culture learning during your study abroad experience. This interview will take about an hour. At this point I would like to ask your permission to audio tape this interview and I want to assure you that your responses will be kept strictly confidential.

Fill out demographics form

1. Why did you want to study abroad?
2. What were your goals for the experience?
3. Why did you choose your study abroad city and country?
4. What were the highlights of your study abroad experience?
5. Did you learn about the culture of your host country?  
If so what did you learn?
6. How did you learn about culture and from whom?
7. What was the nature of your interactions with the nationals of your host country?
8. Describe the people of your host country.
9. What are some cultural similarities and differences between your host country and America?  
How did/do you feel about these cultural differences? How did you react to these cultural differences?
10. What do you think it means to learn another culture?
11. How do you think the experience affected your thinking about other cultures?
12. Could you have learned what you learned without going abroad?

## Transformational Learning Interview

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this second interview for my research on the study abroad experience. Last month we spoke about culture learning and in this interview I will be asking you questions about transformation learning, learning that changes how you think or act. This interview will last about an hour. I would like to ask your permission to audio tape this interview and again I would like to assure you that your responses will be kept completely confidential.

1. Tell me about some of your more meaningful or memorable experiences while abroad?  
-If not helpful response: What experiences have you felt were particularly useful, relevant, or enlightening during your study abroad experience?
2. What experiences have been unexpected during your study abroad experience?
3. While abroad did you have an experience that caught you off guard? How did you react to this experience?
4. Have you noticed any changes in yourself as a result of your study abroad experience? (perceptions, behaviors?) -If so what are they and what prompted you to change?
5. Do you feel you held misconceptions or incorrect assumptions about your host country or its culture? -If so has your experienced changed your perceptions?
6. How have you integrated your study abroad experience into your life?
7. Why should college students study abroad?
8. What was the best part about studying abroad?

## Risk Interview

Introduction: This interview will be about risky behaviors during your study abroad experience. Oftentimes part of the study abroad experience is taking risks, risks which put students in harm's way, making them vulnerable. I want to remind you that your responses to these questions will stay strictly confidential and no personally identifiable information will be reported. The research on this topic is severely lacking so your responses are greatly appreciated because they will help fill the gap in the knowledge base. Again I would like to ask your permission to audio tape this interview.

1. What was a typical week like for you while studying abroad? A typical weekend?
2. What was your alcohol use before studying abroad? What was a typical drinking night like?
3. What was your alcohol use during your study abroad program? What was a typical drinking night like?
4. What is your alcohol use now that you have returned? What is a typical drinking night like?
5. Please tell me about any specific events that happened to you, while studying abroad, that you would now consider risky behavior? (such as getting in a car with a stranger, walking alone at night in a strange place)
6. Tell me about specific events that occurred during your study abroad experience that you would not have normally done in America?
7. Research shows that risky sexual behaviors increase when students study abroad. How does this research relate to your experience while abroad?
8. Why do you think risky behavior tends to increase when students study abroad?

## **APPENDIX F**

### Rules and Procedures for Content Analysis



## RULES AND PROCEDURES FOR LOGICAL ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN DATA

The following decisions were made regarding what was to be the unit of data analysis (Sisco, 1981):

1. A phrase or clause will be the basic unit of analysis.
2. Verbiage not considered essential to the phrase or clause will be edited out --e.g., articles of speech, possessives, some adjectives, elaborate examples.
3. Where there is a violation of conventional syntax in the data, it will be corrected.
4. Where there are compound thoughts in a phrase or clause, each unit of thought will be represented separately (unless one was an elaboration of the other).
5. Where information seems important to add to the statement in order to clarify it in a context, this information will be added to the unit by parentheses.

The following decisions were made regarding the procedures for categorization of content units:

1. After several units are listed on a sheet of paper, they will be scanned in order to determine differences and similarities.
2. From this tentative analysis, logical categories will be derived for the units.
3. When additional units of data suggest further categories, they will be added to the classification scheme.
4. After all the units from a particular question's responses are thus classified, the categories are further reduced to broader clusters (collapsing of categories).
5. Frequencies of units in each cluster category are determined and further analysis steps are taken, depending on the nature of the data-- i.e. ranking of categories with verbatim quotes which represent the range of ideas or opinions. (p.177).

Sisco, B. R. (1981). *A study of the attitudes of selected academics and selected decision-makers toward adult learners*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.