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Finding a Place in the World: The Impact of a Semester Abroad on Life Calling

Emily M. Bryan

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FINDING A PLACE IN THE WORLD: THE IMPACT
OF A SEMESTER ABROAD ON LIFE CALLING

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Emily M. Bryan

May 2013

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Emily Megan Bryan

entitled

Finding a Place in the World: The Impact of a Semester Abroad on Life Calling
has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of a semester study abroad experience on students' perceptions and development of their life callings. Through phenomenological research, this study explores the individual experiences and insights of six study abroad alumni and will be guided by the following research questions:

- 1. What are the experiences of students participating in semester-long study abroad programs?*
- 2. How does participation in a semester-long study abroad program impact students' perceptions and development of their callings?*

Major findings include the participants' sense of preparedness and prior exposure to cross-cultural encounters, the influence of shared experiences and challenges faced during their semester abroad, and the personal development, namely acceptance of cultural differences, increased value of others, continued cross-cultural exposure, and future aspirations, that resulted from their time abroad. Recommendations for practice include emphasizing study abroad opportunities in cultures different from students' home cultures, providing cultural mentors for students studying abroad, stimulating independent pre-departure preparation, and, within that preparation, incorporating resources to enhance students' self-awareness in light of their callings.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In a world that is progressively shrinking due to the dramatic escalation of widespread technology, personal and professional connections, and travel simplicity, individuals have a great privilege and responsibility to become aware and engaged cross-culturally. As stated by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities:

To be an educated person in the new millennium one must have the new skills that come from exposure to other cultures and the understanding produced from the study of different societies and nations. To be employed... [and] even to function at home...in an increasingly diverse United States environment, a new sensitivity and understanding is required. (“Study Abroad...Now More Than Ever,” n.d.)

Parks (2000) further contended that as society becomes more intricate and multifaceted, an understanding of the world and one’s place in it becomes increasingly imperative for society’s effective and constructive functioning. According to Tarrant (2009), the majority of colleges and universities acknowledge that an awareness of and sensitivity toward global issues is crucial for future workers and leaders. Matters such as global environmental crises, national security, and international economic

competitiveness require individuals to be experienced in cross-cultural communication and understanding (Kehl & Morris, 2008).

Study Abroad

In light of this, research reveals that the number of college students studying abroad has increased steadily over the past 25 years (Fischer, 2010). This is predominantly due to the expanding knowledge among higher education professionals and students that studying abroad can have a positive and profound impact on a student's development (Beers, 2001; Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Doyle, 2009; Engle & Engle, 2004; Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984; Kitsantas, 2004; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

No longer seen as merely an academic venture, both educators and students acknowledge that studying abroad invokes the holistic growth of a student (Braskamp et al., 2009; Vande Berg, 2003). Intellectual, personal, professional, social, and spiritual development occurs as a result of exposure to new and unfamiliar cultures and the transformative power of transition in self-discovery (Brown & Graham, 2009; Schlossberg, 1995). Parks (2000) further asserted that time abroad "may encourage emergence of critical thought [regarding personal development] as one steps out of the context of one's own tribe and encounters the other" (p. 185). As one encounters self from a new perspective, questions about life and his or her place and purpose in it emerge more distinctly. The discovery of this purpose is revealed most clearly in one's understanding of vocation, or, as its Latin root, "vocare," suggests, one's calling.

Calling

Questions of purpose, personal meaning, and social concern shape college students' identities and are prevalent during college years (Parks, 2000), and students experiencing life in a new and different environment for a semester possess a great opportunity to gain new understanding regarding their life direction. Guinness (1998) writes, "Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves...For each of us the real purpose is personal and passionate: to know what we are here to do, and why" (p. 40-41). The development of self occurs as one discovers and pursues a personal, holistic, and progressive calling. Calling is often merely thought of as one's primary work or task in life (NCDA, 2003), but its essence goes much further. In her book, *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment*, Parks (1991) associated calling with "meaning-making" (p. 23), or a sense of connection, order, and significance between one's life decisions and values and the surrounding world. As individuals, specifically college students, engage life experiences, their ability to determine, organize, and act upon their sense of calling becomes profoundly more evident.

Purpose of Study

In order for students to be effectively engaged in coupling their international experiences with the formation of their life purposes, research must advance in the direction of discovering the significant elements related between the two processes. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore if and how a semester study abroad experience aides in the development of college students' callings at a faith-based,

liberal arts university. This exploration sought to determine if and how this development occurs and to what extent it impacts students' goals and aspirations. By delving into this particular phenomenon, higher education professionals can better understand how to facilitate students' perceptions of and responses to their life callings upon returning from a semester abroad. As such, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of students participating in semester-long study abroad programs?
2. How does participation in a semester-long study abroad program impact students' perceptions and development of their callings?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

There is a decided lack of literature concentrating on if and how students gain further insight into their callings as a result of a semester abroad. However, substantial research involving study abroad and calling development as separate entities does exist and has paved the way for the exploration of this topic. This section focuses on the trends and benefits of studying abroad, the construction of life calling, and the intersection of the two.

Study Abroad

As aforementioned, higher education institutions, as primary providers of intellectual and cultural discussion and learning, are increasingly promoting and enabling opportunities for students to engage in global exchange (Braskamp et al., 2009; Tarrant, 2009). Students, in turn, are increasingly taking advantage of these opportunities and exposing themselves to learning cross-culturally.

Pre-departure orientation and post-trip debriefing. For a study abroad experience to be truly effective, it must be conscientiously planned and substantially academic. According to Fischer (2008), if programs do not help immerse students in the culture but instead create only opportunities for interactions with other Americans, they are no more than “chaperoned field trips” (para. 34). One significant trend in enhancing

the immersion process is pre-departure orientation and post-trip debriefing. The Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) asserts that “intercultural learning is a process and that students need to work at developing their intercultural sensitivity before, during and after a study abroad experience” (Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004, p. 195). Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton, and Hubbard (2008) produced a longitudinal study examining whether there was significant long-term intercultural development in students studying abroad. In light of their findings that without proper debriefing there was not long-term development, researchers suggest that educators increase their responsibilities by engaging students in a longer learning partnership. Both a pre-departure and re-entry course, they believe, would assist students in better processing and comprehending their study abroad experiences (2008). According to Kitsantas (2004), cross-cultural training prior to the trip familiarizes students with unavoidable issues like dealing with the unknown both culturally and personally. Williams (2009), affiliated with the Center for International Studies at Texas Christian University, found that formal reflection after students’ experiences abroad enables greater understanding of international and cultural issues, increased flexibility, open-mindedness and curiosity, and enhanced critical thinking skills in students.

Diverse study abroad locations. Study abroad destinations with cultures less like the United States, such as China, South Africa, Argentina, Chile, and Peru, are noticeably gaining popularity among students and institutions, while Western European study abroad locations are decreasing (Fischer, 2010; McMurtrie, 2007). Dynamic learning and a broadening of one’s perspective are perceived to be accomplished more

easily in the former countries rather than in those with familiar customs and cultures (Annette, 2002). When students study abroad in a different culture, they are best enabled to “confront and explore their own assumptions...[as well as] grapple with the challenge of living in an unfamiliar context” (Paus & Robinson, 2008, p. 33). This confrontation and exploration, in turn, instigates growth, broadens worldviews, and reduces ethnocentrism (Annette, 2002). The more direct the encounters with different social attitudes, gender relationships, moral norms, and other cultural pieces (i.e., through homestays), the greater opportunity students have to gain cross-cultural understanding (Steinberg, 2002).

Study abroad and career development. The National Career Development Association [NCDA] (2012) defines career development as: “the total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the total lifespan of any given individual” (p. 2). Students returning from a study abroad experience report this kind of holistic development from a career standpoint. A 2009 study by Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic and Jon, surveying 6,391 study abroad students from 22 colleges and universities, found that students regarded their time abroad as having the most influential impact on their lives during college, ahead of peer interactions, academic coursework, and faculty interaction. The study further revealed that over 74% of the alumni surveyed stated that their experiences influenced their career paths, and more than 37% of the alumni’s careers have been, or currently are, globally oriented. The 50-year Alumni Survey for Institute for the International Education of Students Abroad (2005) revealed

the majority of alumni believe they gained integral skills regarding career development and that their vocational direction was impacted due to studying abroad (p. 33). These developments are predominantly due to an enhanced desire to engage in other cultures rather than be absorbed in one's own.

Student gains from studying abroad. Research reveals that students who study abroad have an advantage over those who study in their home country (Trooboff, 2007; Vande Berg & Rayman, 2007). As such, students are progressively opting to study abroad, believing their experiences will provide greater personal development, opportunities for further travel, acceptance into desirable graduate schools and job fields, and increased understanding of worldwide and cultural issues (Langley & Breese, 2005). Kitsantas (2004) found that students reported the following as chief factors in choosing to study abroad: (a) to enhance cross-cultural abilities, (b) to develop academically in a specific subject, and (c) to meet new people.

Global engagement/awareness. Global awareness, according to Chieffo and Griffiths (2004), includes intercultural awareness, personal growth and development, awareness of global interdependence, and functional knowledge of world geography and language. This awareness was found to be stronger in study abroad students than students studying at their home campuses. Findings determined that the students abroad learned more about international travel, host culture similarities and differences, foreign policy, and worldviews and were more dynamically engaged in activities to enhance their understanding.

Further research exposed the potential that study abroad experiences have to create and sustain intercultural sensitivity, which is the ability to learn about and appreciate different cultures and perspectives (Christie & Ragans, 1999; Kitsantas, 2004; Langley & Breese, 2005). According to Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005), students who study abroad mature in the following areas: foreign language skills, knowledge of host country, transformed worldviews, increased interest in interdisciplinary studies and perceptions of the costs, and benefits of globalization. A study by the Institute for the International Education of Students (2004), surveying study abroad alumni, discovered that nearly all of the individuals found that their experiences initiated greater interest in learning, participation in subsequent educational experiences, and focus on language study. The study also discovered that students comprehended cultural values and biases better and were challenged to embrace diversity (Dwyer & Peters, 2004).

Personal development. Regarding personal development, Doyle's research showed that students expressed gains in interpersonal skills such as listening, patience, mutual respect, empathy (2009, p. 151), social awareness, self-confidence, maturity, independence, and the ability to effectively negotiate nuances of relationship development (p. 153). According to Dwyer (2004), students studying abroad reported improvements in self-confidence, toleration of ambiguity, maturity, refinement and awareness of political and social views, greater participation in their communities, and a more profound understanding of their worldviews after their experiences overseas. Furthermore, while on-campus students focused on classroom learning, abroad students commented that experiencing out-of-class learning invoked greater "adaptability,

flexibility, patience, responsibility, respect for others, and appreciation for the arts” (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004, p. 173).

Summary. Again, in light of the numerous advantages that derive from studying abroad, higher education practitioners are seeking and implementing opportunities in which students can engage. Connecting study abroad experiences to calling development would further enhance the holistic growth of students during their college years.

Calling

Definition. Perhaps one of the most renowned descriptions of calling is Buechner’s (1993), who defines it as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (p. 119). Dik and Duffy (2009) define calling as “a transcendent summons...to approach a particular life role (in this case work) in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (p. 427). Their definition implies that one’s calling will benefit the common good, which can be accomplished in any number of ways, though most often thought of as through one’s career. Individuals may not be pursuing their ideal careers, but they can still structure their work and attitudes to embody what they feel are their callings (Dik & Duffy, 2009).

Brennfleck and Brennfleck (2005) advanced the idea of Parks’ “meaning-making” by labeling this concept as “calling.” They categorized callings into primary and secondary ones, affirming that a Christian’s primary calling is to be in a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Secondary callings, they wrote, include such tasks or roles as parent, spouse, worker, student, and citizen. A vocational

calling is considered one's secondary calling. Its foundation involves personal talents, interests, skills, and personality, as well as an understanding of the needs of the world. Dik and Duffy (2009) distinguished between calling and vocation by concluding that the former connotes that one is called by an external source, whereas the latter does not. Both terms indicate possessing a sense of meaning in one's work, pursuits, and lifestyle. For the purposes of this study, vocation and calling will be used interchangeably.

Secularization of calling. Historically, the term calling has been exclusively used in terms of God "calling" people to utilize their gifts and talents in their work, specifically to serve others (Buechner, 2003; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hardy, 1990; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). "To call" implies a caller, and in the Christian faith, that caller is God. More recently, the notion of being called to a higher meaning and purpose has become more accessible and applicable, not solely used in religious terms and circles (Steger et al., 2010). In higher education, the idea of life calling gained popularity in 2001 when the Lilly Endowment Inc. awarded grants totaling \$39.7 million to twenty schools with the stipulation that the institutions would apply proposed strategies for exploring vocation from a theological viewpoint. Thus, numerous life calling centers and faith and learning institutes were established to aid students in developing and understanding their respective callings. By 2002, the number of schools participating grew to 89, and the endowment totaled \$176.2 million ("Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation," n.d.). While a small number of the schools being awarded the grants were members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), most were mainline, non-religious schools. This facilitated the recent adoption of a

secularized notion of calling, which is being utilized by scholars to indicate one's personal fulfillment in work (Conklin, 2012; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Steger et al., 2010). Countless individuals are acknowledging this shift as they approach their careers as valuable and individualistic (Conklin, 2012) meaning-making endeavors (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997).

Developing a calling. Vocational Identity Achievement refers to the conscious awareness of one's occupational interests, abilities, goals, and values (Hirschi & Herrmann, 2012) and is vital in the development of one's calling. A study by Duffy et al. (2012) delves into the process of discerning one's calling and suggests that support from others, multiple career paths, self-reflection, personal struggles, and a sense of calling from a higher being aid in Vocational Identity Achievement. They further discovered that the discernment process was inevitably complex, indirect, and ongoing. Reflecting on both the internal (personal interests, goals, and talents) and the external (world news, cultural differences) was also crucial.

Gains from connecting calling to career. Research reveals that people desire to have significant jobs and to do significant work (Steger et al., 2010). An increasing number of studies indicate that work can provide individuals with a greater sense of meaning and purpose (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Steger et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003), particularly those who select their careers based on calling (Hirschi & Herrmann, 2012; Steger et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Wrzesniewski, McCauley, and Rozin (1997), as well as Hirschi and Herrmann (2012), discovered that individuals who followed their callings into specific jobs experienced greater work and life satisfaction and better job

performance, benefitting both the employees and the employers. Parks (2000) wrote that the ability to apply personal skills and talents to career leads to a deeper personal fulfillment and a greater connection with others. Lastly, high levels of passion, energy, and productivity are found in individuals pursuing their callings, according to Duffy et al. (2012).

Summary. Because these findings are continuing to surface, an increasing number of higher education practitioners, specifically those in Career Development and Life Calling departments, are implementing programs to aid students in the discovery of their callings (Steger et al., 2010).

Study Abroad and Calling

Evidence reveals that study abroad is a decidedly helpful pursuit, which aides in deepening cross-cultural understanding. Evidence also uncovers the significance of college students gaining awareness of their personal callings. The missing link is a deep exploration of the intersection of the two trends. Despite the lack of research connecting the two, Marcia's (1980) identity statuses, Super's (1982) Theory of Vocational Choice, out-of-class experiences, and shipwreck experiences can aid in understanding the relationship.

Marcia's identity statuses. According to Marcia (1980), one's identity materializes through exploration (questioning parents' values and purpose) and commitment (asserting personal values and purpose). Marcia uses the terms exploration and crisis interchangeably, as an individual faces the "crisis" of decision-making when forming and accepting personal identity. He defines four states of identity as (a)

Foreclosure, (b) Diffusion, (c) Moratorium, and (d) Achievement. During a state of Foreclosure, individuals do not question their parents' commitments, but simply conform to them. Those experiencing Diffusion exert independence from commitment completely, while individuals in the Moratorium state, though also without commitment, actively question parental values. Finally, those in a state of Achievement are seen as "strong, self-directed, and highly adaptive" (1980, p. 161). Individuals do not necessarily go through each of these stages in order and may revert back to states they have already been in depending on circumstances. Students who study abroad are faced with the crisis of the unfamiliar and are therefore given an unmistakable opportunity to journey toward a state of Identity Achievement.

Super's Theory of Vocational Choice. Super's (1982) Theory of Vocational Choice conveys that as individuals possess life experiences, their self-concepts develop and refine. These experiences are often transformed into life roles that form the essence of who a person is and attempt to accomplish or create something that fills a societal or organizational need (Dik and Duffy, 2009). Hannigan (2001) advances Super's concepts by describing the term *vocational self-concept crystallization* as "the clarity and certainty of an individual's self-perception of attitudes, values, interests, needs, and abilities for career choice" (p. 2). This crystallization can occur pronouncedly in students' lives when faced with an out-of-class experience, namely studying abroad.

Out-of-class experiences. It is generally believed that learning outside of the classroom is pivotal for students' holistic growth (Hannigan, 2001; Kuh, 1995; 1996; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999). Holistic development, as findings from both

Kuh (1996) and Terenzini et al. (1999) reveal, stems from holistic experiences. Kuh (1995) studied the results of students' out-of-class participation and discovered that the most powerful experiences were those that demanded prolonged effort to achieve a variety of tasks while interacting with different individuals and groups. Out-of-class experiences "presented students with personal and social challenges, encouraged them to develop more complicated views on personal, academic, and other matters, and provided opportunities for synthesizing and integrating material presented in the formal academic program" (Kuh, 1995, p. 146). Parks (2000) further affirmed that experiences drawing emerging adults out of their comfort zones and immersing them in new and unfamiliar situations contribute to the process of renegotiating personal meaning. As such, study abroad experiences are particularly instrumental in helping students comprehend their personal attitudes, values, and interests.

Shipwreck experiences. Again, it is generally believed that collegiate years are when young adults gain an amplified awareness of who they are and what their purposes are (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students who spend significant time abroad are exposed to feelings of being an outsider, a lack of nearby family and friends for social and emotional support, and the stress of unknown and unfamiliar contexts (Kauffmann, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992). Parks (2000) utilized the term shipwreck experiences to describe intellectual or emotional struggles in one's life. While studying abroad is generally a positive experience, the aforementioned exposures can create tension. According to Parks, shipwreck experiences help to develop a deeper sense of personal

meaning and purpose through the challenging of preconceived ideas and observation of others' experiences.

Summary. By understanding the phenomenon of if and how a semester abroad affects a student's perception and development of personal calling, higher education professionals, specifically those working in global engagement, career development, or life calling centers, will be able to institute better practices and policies enhancing this development. Qualitative investigations into this intersection will further validate the importance of cross-cultural experiences coupled with means of self-discovery and will enhance the goal of this study's liberal arts university to facilitate the holistic growth of its students.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Phenomenology

To understand the essence of how students' study abroad experiences impact their development and perception of calling, a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach was utilized. Phenomenological research involves the understanding of personal insight, and its source is the description of lived experiences. At the root of phenomenology, "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms – to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). Thorough phenomenological research seeks to discover patterns in the accounts of a small sample of individuals with similar experiences. This is most effectively accomplished by "ward[ing] off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project" (van Manen, 1990, p. 29). Van Manen illuminates the reflective nature of phenomenological research by stating that it is not introspective, but is instead retrospective. It reflects on the meaning an individual derives from a lived experience rather than merely on observable descriptions of behavior and occurrences. Because both calling and experiences abroad are personal, distinct, and diverse, the phenomenological method was the most effective approach for this research study.

Sample and Methods

During the 2010–2011 school year, nearly 500 of the approximately 1,900 students from a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution in the Midwest studied abroad for varying lengths of time, which caused this university to be ranked by *Open Doors* as one of the top ten institutions for total study abroad participants and participation percentage of graduates (Institute of International Education, 2011). This institution, with its mission centered on engaging its students in a global capacity, has been a leading proponent for study abroad for many years, causing it to be a suitable provider of participants for this study.

Engle and Engle (2004) distinguish between the types of study abroad experiences by dividing them into five levels: (a) Study Tour, (b) Short-Term Study, (c) Cross-Cultural Contact Program, (d) Cross-Cultural Encounter Program, and (e) Cross-Cultural Immersion Program. The last three levels (each lasting at least the length of an entire semester) are most effective in enhancing a student's development (Engle & Engle, 2004; Doyle, 2009, Medina-López-Portillo, 2004). The participants in this study each completed at least Level Three: Cross-Cultural Contact Program, which means they studied abroad for an entire semester.

The researcher used purposive sampling to identify potential participants, looking for those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1988 p. 150). In order to explore more long-term effects, a three to five year range between the interview process and the study abroad experience was sought. The Off-Campus Programs database was accessed in order to select participants who fit the

study's criteria. An email was sent to 276 alumni who had studied abroad for a semester between 2006 and 2010 asking if they were willing to participate, and 62 expressed interest. The researcher selected six respondents of different genders, graduation years, semester abroad years, and study abroad locations. After this selection, the researcher, who had previously attained approval to conduct the interviews from the Institutional Review Board, obtained written consent from each of the participants regarding their involvement in the study (See Appendix A).

Each of the interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences openly and honestly, eluding generalizations, simplifications, and theoretical interpretations as much as possible (van Manen, 1990). With the permission of the interviewees, the researcher audio-recorded the interviews and made clarifying notes during and immediately following the interviews, while consciously attempting to avoid any bias (Groenewald, 2004). The interviews were then transcribed, followed by an exploration of the data to obtain a general sense of the findings. The researcher then conducted a formal coding process using the Dedoose software. The data was first divided into relevant categories of information. Subsequently, the researcher labeled the categories with codes and then organized the codes into apparent themes. The results of the study were based upon the researcher's interpretation of the themes, and significant statements, meanings, and descriptions were used, endeavoring to capture the essence of the influence of participants' study abroad experiences on their perceptions and development of their life callings.

Chapter 4

Results

The results of this study highlight the significance studying abroad had on the subjects. Each volunteered to participate in the study, eager to share about the deep and personal transformation and insights that resulted from their semester abroad. Based on the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, five themes and six sub-themes emerged. The five main themes could be divided into three general categories: pre-departure, semester abroad, and post-experience. The themes appearing during the participants' pre-departure were sense of preparedness and prior exposure to cross-cultural encounters. Those found in the semester abroad included shared experiences and challenges. Living arrangements and mentors were two sub-themes under shared experiences. Reflection was a sub-theme under challenges. Personal development was a theme from post-experience, and acceptance of cultural differences, increased value of others, continued cultural exposure, and future aspirations each served as sub-themes. The results section further delves into each of these themes and sub-themes.

Pre-departure

Pre-departure, as defined by the researcher, involves the entire life of the participants until they departed for their study abroad experience. It is important to note that while protocol questions steered participants toward addressing personal experiences

and thoughts regarding their pre-departure, each noted that these experiences and thoughts were significant in shaping their semesters abroad. The two predominant pre-departure themes articulated by each of the participants included their sense of preparedness and their exposure to cross-cultural encounters prior to studying abroad.

Sense of preparedness. The participants' institution requires all students studying abroad to attend two pre-departure meetings in which travel logistics, advice, expectations, and cultural nuances are communicated by the Director of Off-Campus Programs. All six participants acknowledged this formal preparation, yet four of them only recalled the logistical information presented. The other two participants acknowledged the cultural preparation, yet neither of them felt it was in-depth or extensive. The general consensus of the participants was that the pre-departure meetings were unconstructive, merely attended because they were mandatory. Two participants mentioned talking with other students who had previously studied abroad in the same locations, yet this interaction also did not seem to have played a large role in their sense of preparedness.

While the formal pre-departure meetings did not seem to be useful, the participants did express a desire to have been more intentional in their independent preparation. Five of the participants conceded that they did not feel adequately prepared and wished they would have spent more time reading about the culture and studying the language. Two mentioned that having a firmer spiritual foundation would have been helpful. One student admitted to being:

very naïve in this experience in the sense that it didn't really hit me what I was doing until I was in the airport and on my way there. So I didn't do anything to prepare emotionally or like spiritually or even really like besides packing.

Three of the participants studied abroad two different times as university students, and they each stated their value of preparation increased prior to leaving for their second experience. According to one of them,

[Our provost shared] about some Georgetown study found this huge number – like at least 50 percent of students who studied abroad came back with no difference – like no change in their cultural awareness or sensitivity or any sort of orientation. And that was a little bit concerning in general to me with the amount of money people spend on study abroad. But it made me really value that preparation time.

Prior exposure to cross-cultural encounters. The participants possessed varying levels of exposure to cross-cultural experiences and encounters prior to studying abroad. Each of the participants talked at some length about the subject, several demonstrating significant emotion and thoughtfulness.

While in college, three of the participants completed two semesters abroad, and three participated in short-term trips abroad. The short-term experiences ranged from one week to three weeks, and two concentrated on ministry while one was academically-focused. Prior to college, only one student had been in a culture vastly different from his own, though, according to him, was too young to be fully impacted by it. The other two participants who traveled out of the United States before college recalled them as merely

vacation or tourist experiences. When discussing their prior exposure to cross-cultural encounters, the participants spoke in perspective to their first study abroad experiences.

Four of the participants labeled their hometowns as stereotypical small towns with little diversity or opportunity. Of the four, three of them had parents who had never traveled outside of the United States, yet these same parents strongly encouraged their children to spend a semester abroad in a culture and environment vastly different from their own. According to the participant whose parents did have experiences abroad: “I do remember my mom being upset that I didn’t choose a more educational place...She thought I just – I don’t know – that I was just going for fun... I don’t remember [my parents] being excited about it.”

The other two subjects, though not completely immersed in cross-cultural diversity while growing up, did have greater exposure to it. One of the participants went to a low-income, high diversity public high school. The other participant had several close friendships and encounters with individuals of different races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses.

The former participant’s parents did not express significant feelings either way, and the latter participant shared, “My parents had a lot of fear... less than two weeks before I was supposed to leave, they were like ‘Wait, wait, wait, you are really going there? – You shouldn’t go.’ They were like serious. Like they did not want me to go.”

Semester Abroad

The second category, semester abroad, is defined as the study abroad experience itself – time when the participants were abroad. Emerging themes included shared

experiences between the participants and others they encountered while abroad, as well as struggles they faced during their experiences.

Shared experiences. The first theme emerging from students' recollections regarding their semesters abroad were their shared experiences with others. Through their responses, it became apparent that others, including fellow students studying abroad, professors, program directors, host families, and locals, played significant roles in their time abroad. It is important to note again in this section that three of the participants studied abroad two separate times and thus had two separate housing experiences.

Sub-theme: Living arrangements. The participants' living arrangements afforded the students various opportunities to interact with others. Two of the participants stayed with local families the entire semester, while two others did homestays for a short span of time while abroad. Three of the four participants who did homestays spoke highly and affectionately of those experiences, affirming that they were one of the leading factors in the value of their study abroad experience, both relationally and culturally. The two who participated in homestays the entire semester have stayed in contact with their host families.

The two students whose experiences involved housing situations solely with other students from their home institution were also marked by that aspect of their time abroad. One described his time abroad as a "great vignette of community at [studied institution]. Everyone is in it together." They both acknowledged that while they enjoyed the insulation of the housing setup, their interactions with locals were severely lessened and that this accounted for reduced cultural understanding.

Sub-theme: Mentors. Two of the participants acknowledged the influential role an older individual played in their time abroad, stating that it benefitted their understanding of themselves and the culture in which they were immersed. For one, the main professor for her program was an anthropologist hugely familiar with the host culture. His passion, example, and wisdom was influential in the participant's experience and gave her "a view of Africa [as a] wild adventure – rather than this sad place." The other participant named his primary tutor as his mentor who stretched his capacity to think and communicate. Both talked fondly about these mentor figures, recognizing their semesters abroad were shaped by those influences.

Three of the other four subjects mentioned their desire to have had someone fulfill a mentoring role for them while abroad. Each of them felt unprepared and inadequate for the various challenges they faced. One was in a leadership role which he felt incapable of effectively fulfilling. Another faced a great deal of loneliness while abroad, which, according to the participant, resulted in an eating disorder. And the final participant was forced to answer deep theological questions she felt unqualified to grasp, let alone respond to.

Five of the participants also mentioned relationships established with peers that served a sort of mentoring function. Four of them gave specific examples of significant lessons they learned alongside their peers, ranging from understanding cultural differences, to effective teaching and learning methods, to grappling with deep faith issues and questions. Three of the participants mentioned how difficult it was to come home after the experience and debrief without the other students who shared the

experience. Only one participant spoke at length about the difficulties she experienced with other students during her time abroad. She wrestled extensively with loneliness and was deeply marked by her struggle:

When I first started there, I made a couple friends that were fun on the outside, but then they started wanting to go out and do things that I did not want to get involved in so I tried to avoid them. And I think I was also hurt by that and felt like no one wanted to be my friend...I definitely felt left out.

This left her more “introverted” and “insecure;” “I was just probably used to making friends so easily and then I didn’t. I think people liked me – I don’t think it was that – I just wasn’t close to anyone.” She expressed that a mentor would have been helpful in dealing with this struggle.

Challenges. The second theme prevalent during the participants’ semesters abroad included the challenges they faced. While studying abroad, the students primarily grappled with issues regarding their faith, their relationships, and their self-concepts. As evident in the interviews, reflection and dialoguing with others were the leading ways they chose to deal with the tension.

Several of the participants articulated significant and difficult questions they asked while abroad: “How do we reconcile the things we saw over there?” “How do you enter as a person and love these people but learn from these people and not bring these super dominant biases to the table and make any sort of judgment call about how they are living.” “Do I even like have the truth – and do I even believe it?” “Who am I and what – like – what is my faith about and what is my identity as a Westerner about?”

For some, seeing discrepancies between their own comfortable lives and those whose lives are stricken by poverty caused internal tension. Three of the participants, in particular, mentioned this struggle:

You just see a different level of poverty that is not experienced in the States... we don't come face to face with it nearly as often or to the same extreme – and reconciling like what is my place as an American with that, as a Christian, um and asking God like why does that exist still. Am I supposed to respond?

Each of those three participants alluded to the vast differences between the study abroad location and the United States. It became even more difficult for them the longer they stayed in their host culture due to the increasing closeness they felt to their host families. One participant stated, “It actually pushed me to resent American culture and kind of romanticize Tanzanian culture.”

For others, their experiences caused them to question their own adequacy and self-worth. Two participants mentioned increased feelings of anxiety and doubt. All six of the participants questioned what they had to offer to the world. Doubts about if they were truly able to contribute anything of value surfaced. Each of the subjects recognized their understanding of the world and its needs were incomplete and experienced varying degrees of inner turmoil as a result. Three of the participants alluded to that realization producing a greater degree of humility. Upon arrival in their study abroad location, they thought they would be the ones offering knowledge and spiritual insight to the locals, when in reality they were not as firm in their faith and abilities as they had originally thought. One participant remembered “talking and processing and writing a lot about my

relationship with my mom and how hard it was.” Her semester abroad forced her to realize the need for reconciliation and forgiveness in that relationship. Three of the participants had to come to terms with the fact that Christians worship God in different ways. According to one,

The worship was a different style – the way people connected with God. It was more lively than a lot of American churches. And not to say that is bad. I mean, I went there with kind of this thinking...[but then realized] they are free to worship as they feel.

Sub-theme: Reflection. Reflecting on these questions and issues became a healthy outlet and common trend among the participants. Four of the six participants journaled regularly. Each of them acknowledged this practice as helpful in producing clarity of thoughts and feelings.

The two participants who did not journal regularly stated that journaling would have been a helpful practice while abroad but were too busy to spend significant time doing it. They both mentioned that they utilized self-reflection and interaction with peers as ways of sorting through feelings and thoughts.

Post-Experience

The final category incorporated life after the participants’ study abroad experience. The predominant theme emerging from this time was personal development, and the following sub-themes surfaced: acceptance of cultural differences, increased value of others, continued cross-cultural exposure, and future aspirations. It is significant to note that participants are currently living in their post-experiences, and therefore, are

still in the process of evaluating, learning, and putting words and actions to thoughts and feelings.

Personal development. The majority of the participants noted the influence their study abroad experience had on aspects of their personal development, which the following sub-themes encompass: greater acceptance of cultural differences, increased value placed on others, desire for continued cross-cultural experiences, future goals, and vocational aspirations. Five of the six expressed the extent of personal growth far exceeding their expectations. Most acknowledged noticing changes throughout their time abroad, while one did not realize until after returning:

I didn't feel like I had really changed, but looking back now – I know that was the most impactful experience of my life. In regards to growing up or like I guess looking back in my life, that was the time I definitely feel like I changed the most, but I didn't realize it until a couple months later.

Sub-theme: Acceptance of cultural differences. Four of the participants noted their increased comfort and familiarity with cultural differences and attributed this growth to their semester abroad. Now, when encountering diversity, they more readily attribute initial hesitancy or discomfort to differences in upbringings or cultures, rather than something being wrong and needing correction. One participant said, “When I’m thinking though practices or ideas, it has helped me to stop and question... ‘is this just a cultural piece?’ So that was a big shift in my worldview.” Another shared a similar experience:

My perspective of the world changed and forever changed as it completely opened my mind...how there are so many ways of thinking that I had never known existed. I had like a perspective of the world that I thought was somewhat whole, and really I was only seeing a very small piece of the puzzle.

The two participants who spent semesters in countries with more similarities to the United States expressed that they did not experience an increased acceptance of cultural differences due to their time abroad, though they both recognized this acceptance is often enhanced due to a study abroad experience. One said, "I still don't think it impacted me that greatly...I think it is important to be aware of other cultures, of other world views I don't think it is really changed my life or like my day to day life a lot."

Both acknowledged the lack of a language barrier as a factor:

I think it would be so different even if it was a country that was the exact same as America, just having a different language has got to be so different. So I think – um – that impacted the lack of world view that I might have gotten. Even though...I gained a little bit of that awareness and desire for awareness, I think it definitely would have been greater elsewhere.

Sub-theme: Increased value of others. Interactions with locals were also valuable to most of the participants, expanding several of their perspectives. Five of them mentioned increased desire to spend time getting to know others different from them. One explained it as such: "You know when you get down to it, people are people and you can connect with anybody and you can learn from anybody." Another expressed it like this: "I think I'm able to talk to people of lots of different shapes, sizes, cultures,

and everything now, because of some of those experiences.” According to a third participant, “Working with the local churches down there...kind of fueled the passion I had for just knowing people and living life with them, having experiences with them, and hearing the stories.”

The sixth participant, on the other hand, said, “I don’t think it affected me in interacting with different people.” She further acknowledged,

So I was just kind of – would isolate myself. I did everything by myself. I didn’t hang out with anybody really. I went on the days off into the city by myself just to mess around...I think I just got used to kind of being by myself.

Sub-theme: Continued cross-cultural exposure. Four of the six participants expressed a desire to pursue continued cross-cultural exposure. Three of them mentioned specifically wanting to go back to the same areas where they studied. The same four also communicated a desire to continue interacting and building relationships with people from different cultures and backgrounds, bridging the gaps between them. “I have like a greater hunger to like ask questions about other cultures or traditions or like I think also not being afraid of asking some questions – like oh what is your nationality and what is your background?” one participant stated. Half of the participants also mentioned a greater awareness of and desire to be exposed to cultural, political, social occurrences in the world due to their time abroad. They specifically mentioned increased interest in social justice concerns, namely racial reconciliation, religious peace, dismantling stereotypes, and alleviating poverty.

One of the participants who did not echo this sentiment verbalized, “I don’t think it impacted me that greatly...I think it is important to be aware of other cultures, of other world views...I still don’t watch the news though. I don’t think it is really changed my life or like my day to day life a lot.”

Sub-theme: Future aspirations. Five of the participants spoke at length about their career goals, each acknowledging that their goals were significantly impacted by their time abroad. According to one participant, “[My experience abroad] makes me want to – you know – maybe take a little bit less pay and work at a non-profit and work towards something bigger than what I am.” “[It] spurred me on to pursue a career in international development – international health work,” said another. One used his experience abroad in gaining employment, saying that it solidified his desire to teach. He displayed it prominently in his resume and cover letter, and when asked about it, described it as a very positive talking point.

Three of the participants said that immediately upon returning from their semesters abroad they were certain their careers right out of college would involve the area in which they studied. Yet, only one of those individuals is currently engaged in work on the continent where she studied abroad. According to one of the other two, “Now I would say my calling is to live in Atlanta and to work among the poor here...I feel like I’m [where]...God wants [me] to be invested.” Similarly, the other participant communicated,

Some things just fell in different directions, based on circumstances, and obviously I believe the Lord’s guidance and direction, so I kind of followed the

doors he has opened for me and there are different ways for me to continue engaging with my learning from Egypt that just don't have to do with my specific job functions or job setting.

Both are content with where they are presently, but are open and excited about future possibilities to work with people and cultural issues related to where they studied abroad.

Four of the participants acknowledged that due to their time abroad, they have a desire for their future families to be culturally engaged and aware. One of them mentioned wanting to pursue international adoption, while the three others spoke of wanting to intentionally involve their children in cross-cultural issues.

Summary

Studying abroad has and continues to profoundly impact the participants' personal development, namely their acceptance of cultural differences, increased value of others, continued cultural exposure, and future aspirations. One predominant influence of this development was their pre-departure experiences of a sense of preparedness and prior exposure to cross-cultural encounters. The second influence involved vary aspects of their circumstances while abroad including shared experiences, specifically living arrangements and mentors, as well as challenges they faced and reflection in which they engaged.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Implications of Connecting the Findings to Literature

According to a 2009 study by Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, and Jon, students who study abroad regard those experiences as the most influential and significant of their college years. The same study revealed over 74 percent of those alumni specifically acknowledged their personal growth and vocational paths were greatly impacted by their time abroad. Similar findings about the positive and notable effects studying abroad has on college students' development and decisions have been revealed in other literature (Beers, 2001; Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Doyle, 2009; Engle & Engle, 2004; Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984; Kitsantas, 2004; Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005) and are supported by this research study. As such, in this discussion, the results of the study will be examined in the context of the literature reviewed regarding study abroad and the development of calling. Recommendations for practice and future research will also be provided, as well as an acknowledgement of the study's limitations.

Sense of preparedness. While each of the participants recalled a degree of formal training prior to their semesters abroad, they noted the two required meetings did not play a significant factor in the growth they experienced. Literature asserts that

intercultural sensitivity and cross-cultural training must begin prior to students' semesters abroad (Kitsantas, 2004; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Rexeisen et al., 2008). Each of these researchers also mentions the importance of coupling pre-departure preparation with formal debriefing post-experience for the most gains to occur. Yet, none of the present study's participants acknowledged a connection between their pre-departure preparation and post-trip debriefing.

Interestingly, as one participant expressed,

[The pre-departure meetings] kind of felt more lecture and I guess it helped a little bit...but like [study abroad students] are doing it of their own accord so again, I wouldn't say it is unnecessary time spent – but maybe just a little overinvolved.

While this may seem to negate the previous paragraph, there was a general consensus that more in-depth *personal* preparation would have been useful, rather than extensive formal preparation. According to one participant, "To be honest I wasn't prepared as well as I should have – like I wish I would have...been more grounded in my faith prior to having to defend [it]." Another admitted,

Culturally I don't know that I got a lot of experience or...exposure...until I got there. And part of that could be that I didn't seek it out or I don't know if it was in place and I didn't take advantage of it, but I don't think I did that very well.

Although these statements were made, the majority of the participants still demonstrated significant growth in recognizing their values and strengths and expressed desires to live according to them due to their time abroad. While no absolute statement can be made as to the role pre-departure preparation played in this development,

connecting the literature base to the participants' responses seems to indicate that the preparation may have been poorly designed and implemented. Instead of merely stating things to expect and do, it seems that students would respond better to more hands-on ways of learning, engaging, and preparing. By re-evaluating these direct applications during debriefing, participants may take even greater advantage of their experiences abroad. Because participants seemed so interested in personal preparation, it can be assumed that a focus on ascertaining one's own personal strengths, values, and interests prior to going abroad and re-evaluating them post-trip would have better engaged students in their experiences and perhaps given them an even greater understanding of their life callings.

Prior exposure to cross-cultural encounters. The participants expressed varying levels of cross-cultural exposure prior to their semesters abroad. Again, three of them studied abroad more than once, but preceding their first semesters abroad, none of them (nor the other three participants) had spent any significant time overseas or had extensive experiences with cultural diversity. It is difficult to assume whether the level of previous experience played a significant role in their calling development, and literature did not directly address the connection either.

Similarly, there does not seem to be a strong correlation between hometowns, parents' approval, and as this discussion will continue to reveal, the participants' development of their callings during their time abroad. Four of the participants had parents who supported their decisions to study abroad, while two sets of parents

expressed hesitation, fear, and disapproval. Again, very little literature discussed the connection between upbringing and personal growth resulting from studying abroad.

Shared experiences. Research clearly reveals that immersion and interaction with locals is important for study abroad experiences to be most effective in enabling development (Steinberg, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1999). The four participants who described interactions with others to the greatest extent were also those who acknowledged a significant growth in their understanding and acceptance of others. Some established lasting relationships while seeing first-hand the lives of the locals, both of which incurred a greater depth of empathy and closeness. Shared experiences with others studying abroad also served as a catalyst for growth. One participant fondly recalled, “When I spend time with my friends who have lived in sub-Saharan Africa, we slip back into that way of conversation, pace, um even enjoying...revisiting that way of interacting.”

On the other hand, the two students whose experiences abroad were in countries more similar to the United States and involved fewer interactions with locals were impacted less by shared experiences. According to the one, “I spent a lot of time by myself...I didn’t really make friends...I definitely felt left out.” The other described his experience at Oxford as “a little more cold, a little more lonely, and everyone was kind of out to survive on their own.” In turn, both of these participants acknowledged feeling less impacted culturally as a result of their time abroad.

According to these findings, the study resonates with the literature base that students derive the greatest benefit from programs where homestays are included and in

countries where interaction with locals is facilitated and encouraged. As this discussion will later reveal in greater depth, the majority of the participants viewed valuing others as an important aspect of their life calling, and therefore, setting them up to have a greater number of shared experiences with others abroad would create a clearer vision for this aspect of their calling.

Sub-theme: Living arrangements. Especially for the participants who did homestays, their experiences were notably marked by interactions with others. One recalls his experience with locals as such,

It was unique for me – um – in that I was in a place where nobody knew me...they had never been exposed to a westerner or a Caucasian or whatever you want to call it. But yet they opened their house to us and fed us and took us out for dinner. It was just a cool act by them and it was one of the things that definitely – kind of sums up that eye-opening experience.

Another participant's two-week homestay was one of the experiences that most shaped her time abroad. This is how she described it:

I got to know the mother and father and two little kids – like a four year old and a two year old – really well. We learned how to cook their traditional, everyday meals. We did laundry. We sorted beans. We climbed mountains. We sat and tried to basically play charades with them – in Swahili and Kahi, another language there... We also traveled for fun to the wilderness. We traveled to some private islands where we went snorkeling and we hunted starfish and went hiking often. We visited our neighbors quite a bit.

Their in-depth descriptions of memories and apparent admiration for the locals with whom they interacted reveal a sense of maturity and cultural competence far exceeding their counterparts who did not engage in homestays.

Sub-theme: Mentors. The desire for a mentor figure also clearly emerged from the interviews. According to one of the participants, “I probably wished I would have had...someone...who was kind of in a clear mentoring position for us that I could regularly process that stuff. I think I missed out on some of the...teachable moments.” For another, the experience abroad “was definitely more challenging...than I would have ever, ever thought,” so she also expressed her desire for a mentor.

The participants’ realizations that a mentor figure would have been beneficial in their learning process supports Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige’s (2009) findings that students who meet often with a cultural mentor demonstrate an increased intercultural learning and competency. Passarelli and Kolb (2012) even go as far as to say “the presence or absence of a well-trained cultural mentor who meets frequently with students may be the single most important intervention to improve student intercultural learning abroad” (p. 26).

Several of the participants spoke of their desires for a mentor in light of what they felt called to do. One commented, “I definitely feel a calling towards a local church and participation in leadership there,” and yet, while he was abroad in a leadership role within the local church, he did not have someone wiser and more experienced supporting him. Another articulated an increased desire for raising awareness of social issues due to her time abroad. Yet, she went on to explain,

Those types of issues were on my heart [just from a social justice perspective], rather than from a distinctly Christian perspective like flowing from my relationship with Christ. And I think now, even though those things are still um important to me, it would be um it would like flow from like an ultimate desire to administer the love of Christ.

Having the direction and guidance from a grounded mentor would have helped remind her of the foundational aspects of her calling.

Challenges. Challenges resulting from uncertainty, confusion, guilt, loneliness, and lack of confidence appeared in varying degrees during the participants' times abroad. According to Passarelli and Kolb (2012), it is no surprise that students experience tension while studying for a semester in a different country and culture, since "affective complexity arises from increasingly meaningful interactions with diverse people" (p. 14). The authors go on to state that learning – specifically about self and one's relation to the world – then arises from the resolution of this tension, which will later be addressed. This is further supported in the literature by Duffy et al. (2012) who asserted that personal struggles aid in the process of discerning calling.

Three participants were struck by the inequality they saw between their home culture and the cultures in which they studied. One recalled of his time abroad:

You see poverty everywhere. It definitely makes you ask questions about – you know – why you do the things you do and what you actually believe about these things. When you are exposed to it like in a real way that is even more real than poverty in the United States. People coming in from mountain villages and stuff

like that. It is definitely eye opening, and I think it changed you know – changes today how I look at poverty, how I look at people.

Another likewise recalled, “We would walk through the village and people would say ‘Karibu,’ which is welcome. Welcome to our home. So they would invite a stranger in to have like the only bowl of soup that they had.” Each of those three participants alluded to the vast differences between the study abroad location and the United States. It became even more difficult for them the longer they stayed in their host culture due to the increasing closeness they felt to their host families.

Other participants acknowledged personally tense and challenging aspects of their semesters abroad. According to one, “Oxford was probably the hardest, the most difficult experience I’ve ever had...It was like intellectually demanding – it was nerve-wracking, I was anxious all the time,” Another participant voiced similar reactions upon arriving in Australia. “I remember the first week I felt like, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’ – which I always thought I was really independent...That was the first time I ever felt that way.” Those feelings were amplified by uncomfortable experiences. In describing one of her classes, the participant said, “...it was awful. I hated it...for our final we had to listen to [a song] and go out into the middle of the streets...and just dance around. It was so weird – I hated it...It was odd for me. Um, very out of my comfort zone.”

Tension with regard to faith and worldview was also called in to question for some. One recalled:

I think when I picked Egypt...I was like, “Oh I’m going...it will be great. I will learn a lot and I’m going to meet all these Muslims and share Jesus with them.”

And then I went, and it was – instead of that happening, I think-my world was rocked cause I was like, “Do I even like have the truth – and do I even believe it?”

College years are generally a time when individuals begin to heavily engage in the discovery, understanding, and application of their worldviews (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). When a college student spends time abroad, they are most likely exposed to insecurity due to feeling like an outsider, a lack social and emotional support from those who know them best, and the stress of being in unknown and unfamiliar experiences (Kauffmann et al., 1992). These challenges are illuminated by Parks’ (2000) idea of shipwreck experiences, or struggles resulting from encounters with questioning what has always been simply accepted and acceptable. Exposure to cultural differences can cause individuals to experience tension as their preconceived ideas about the world are challenged and they strive to establish meaning and understanding. This study’s participants each dealt with their own shipwreck experiences as they wrestled to make sense and meaning of themselves and the world. Because this is such an integral part of studying abroad and also has the potential to instigate lasting growth and change, as revealed by literature and this study, students should continue to be encouraged to study abroad but with effective resources.

Sub-theme: Reflection. “The process of writing down my thoughts and experiences gave clarity in understanding my experience,” one participant articulated. This assertion echoes the majority of the participants’ experiences. As they grappled with challenging questions and struggled to make sense of the tension they were facing, reflection became a key support. Kolb’s Theory of Experiential Learning (1984), with its

learning cycle, reinforces the idea that reflective observation (i.e., journaling), especially when it is coupled with active experimentation (i.e., a study abroad semester), results in development in the midst of complexity and tension. According to one participant who deemed journaling as an extremely influential factor in her experience abroad:

A cross-cultural experience gives you a window into what you were feeling...Right now when I think about being in Egypt, it is hard for me to imagine feeling the way I felt, because I've changed and grown so much since then. So it is hard for me to recreate those like raw emotions or like reactions...so I have like full journals...[to] remember what I was feeling.

Kolb's (1984) theory suggests that development requires the resolution of conflicts, which is accomplished through reflection, action, feeling, and thinking. Students who spent time reflecting on their experiences (actions), feelings, and thoughts, according to Kolb, gave themselves a greater opportunity to resolve tensions. These resolved tensions, in turn, gave them greater opportunities to recognize more completely their callings, as supported by Duffy et al. (2012), who stated that self-reflection aids in the discernment of personal calling. Each of the students participated in personal reflection, and each, as the next section will reveal, developed due to their time abroad.

Personal development. Kolb (1984) describes learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 41). As such, transforming study abroad experiences are particularly instrumental in helping students comprehend their personal attitudes, values, and interests, which, combined with a greater understanding of their world and its needs, translates into life calling. This

study's participants more clearly recognized issues about which they were passionate, the importance of accepting cultural differences, as well as hopes and dreams they had for the future as a result of their time abroad. The idea of personal calling sprung forth from the realizations more clearly than from any of the other themes in this study. Some of the participants acknowledged specific pursuits to which they feel called, while others affirmed their past callings were enhanced by their experiences. The following sub-themes bring further clarity to the student's development, as well as comprehension of their callings.

Sub-theme: Acceptance of cultural differences. Christie and Ragans (1999); Dwyer and Peters (2004); Kitsantas (2004); Langley and Breese (2005); and Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005), all discovered that studying abroad positively impacted students' intercultural sensitivity, cross-cultural awareness, and expansion of worldviews. Four of the six participants strongly evidenced these particular gains. According to one, his experience "definitely helped [him] broaden [his] perspective and makes [him] laugh [at cultural differences] way more now." Another said, "Having an experience spending an extended amount of time in a non-western culture can open up your mind to really seeing how diverse perspectives of the world can be. And that maybe you are not always right about things." Two shared specific examples of paradigm shifts, as stated by one:

The value of time is so different. It is a focus much more on the present, which was a challenge to me as I like to have things scheduled, and when you are out on a coffee date with me, I'm on to the next thing. So it showed me that you can live in a more open, relaxed way that also is constructive as well.

According to the other participant, “They just do church really differently down there, and adapting western models to their church environment doesn’t always work... Understanding that a lot of my church traditions and Christian traditions are very cultural.”

The two students who studied in countries similar to the United States recognized their lack of growth in intercultural competencies. According to one, “In terms of like having a broader, bigger understanding of like cultural difference, eh didn’t really happen for me.” Both developed significantly in other areas, but because their preconceived notions about certain values were not questioned, they did not develop a deeper sense of cross-cultural competency. This, again, suggests, along with the literature, that studying abroad in a culture different from one’s home culture enables cross-cultural awareness to expand. Coupling this with the literature asserts that the acknowledgement of external issues, including cultural differences (Duffy et al., 2012), is an aspect of recognizing life calling and is demonstrated by several of the study’s participants.

Sub-theme: Increased value of others. Several participants also noted an increased value of others due to their time abroad. One participant put it this way, “It really whet my appetite for learning more about different types of people, learning more about the needs of different people across the world, especially being in a developing nation.” These values translated into specific plans of action for a few of the participants. For example, according to one:

[I wanted] to raise awareness of certain issues that maybe people don’t know very much about – I think dismantling stereotypes and that plays back into the racial

reconciliation piece. So I think that was like a big way to like translate my experience back to the states was like oh – like not all Arabs are terrorists or not all women in the Middle East are persecuted or just things like that.

This aligns with Chieffo and Griffiths' (2004) findings that students who study abroad demonstrate increased “adaptability, flexibility, patience, responsibility, respect for others” (p. 173) when compared to students who do not study abroad.

Interestingly, only the four participants who were completely immersed in an environment with locals different from them spoke extensively about learning from them, and thus valuing them. The other two each struggled with loneliness and establishing relationships. One recalled:

Not only had I gotten more introverted, but I was also just like very insecure, which is interesting. I don't really know why that happened I guess. But I think I was just probably used to making friends so easily and then I didn't. I think people liked me – I don't think it was that – I just wasn't close to anyone.

It is unclear if this is due to the individuals' personalities or the leadership of their programs, but it calls into question the importance of studying abroad in a culturally different environment for greater value of others to occur.

As revealed more clearly later, several of this study's participants voiced valuing others with different cultural backgrounds, either in individual relationships or through advocating for the least of these, as something they feel called to do with their lives, which supports the idea that studying abroad can help students perceive and develop their callings.

Sub-theme: Continued cross-cultural exposure. Dwyer and Peters (2004)

discovered that students who study abroad possess a greater interest in learning, participation in subsequent educational experiences, and focus on language study afterwards. These findings were echoed by participants in this study as they revealed that continued cross-cultural exposure was a part of what they feel called to participate in throughout their lives. “The desire for continued international experience was definitely enhanced by my study abroad experience,” affirmed one. “I would love to spend a good amount of time – maybe several years – working overseas,” said another. According to a third participant, “It has spurred me on to want to travel more...it had a very strong role...in me pursuing other international experiences – a strong role in me pursuing travel to other developing countries.” While several of the participants mentioned the language barrier and how it was helpful in their development, only one made a statement like this: “I’ve been thinking a lot more recently about wanting to pursue fluency in Arabic and like to declare that as a goal.”

Pursuing cross-cultural relationships was also an increased focus expressed by three of the participants. One acknowledged, “There are so many diverse people. Everywhere. But it helped me pursue it more. I would maybe be like oh she’s an exchange student – let me strike up a conversation.” Another revealed,

I get really excited to build relationships with other people from other cultures...I have like a greater hunger to like ask questions about other cultures or traditions or like I think also not being afraid of asking some questions – like oh what is your nationality and what is your background.

Cultural issues also were brought to the forefront of four of the six participants' minds. One said,

I read the news differently now or when I read stories it is not just – not as much of a disconnect – especially in the Middle East – when I read about a bombing in the Middle East – that was pitched in the streets and how chaotic that would be. When I read about um, water issues I can like I don't know – put more context around it. So I think it definitely has given me or made me more sensitive to those needs or made them a little bit more personal and relatable rather than like before it was easier to dismiss them like oh it doesn't really affect my life. But now I have faces behind the stories and um like I can picture that – the stories more I guess.

Another explained,

It definitely increased my interest in intercultural issues and even just kind of global needs that affect each country or population differently like poverty or even things like religion and how they affect a culture and intersect with the culture.

While each of the participants who studied abroad in cultures diverse from their own expressed a call to continue to be engaged cross-culturally, the two who studied abroad in cultures similar to their own relayed that they did not feel challenged or convicted in that area. One said,

In terms of like having a broader, bigger understanding of like cultural difference, eh didn't really happen for me... That is something that even after having studied

abroad twice in those two English Speaking countries, I still feel like I need to go elsewhere to have that experience.

This further reveals the importance of intentional involvement in a different culture when studying abroad in order to foster continued growth and acceptance of various cultures and people.

Sub-theme: Future aspirations. The importance of work or vocation providing personal and global purpose and meaning is becoming a common trend, especially among college students (Steger et al., 2010). Super's (1982) Theory of Vocational Choice conveys that as individuals possess life experiences, their self-concepts develop and are refined, and their experiences are often transformed into life roles. The connection of these two findings is illustrated in all but one of the participants' responses. According to one, "I think [my study abroad experience] changed what I value and what I look for in what I do in the long run." Another affirmed, "My experience abroad makes me want to you know maybe take a little bit less pay and work at a non-profit and work towards something bigger than what I am." Still another said, "The experience at Oxford gave me a new love and appreciation for the subject I studied, which was history. And certainly, and I've said this in interviews, that Oxford kind of solidified my desire to teach."

Four participants also described the impact of their experiences on their hopes and dreams for their families. One expressed, "As far as... my family goes, it definitely makes me more aware of how to instill some of the values that I have found into how I'm raising my child and living you know relationships like my marriage." Another communicated his desire "for [his] family and future kids to grow up having international

experiences and being aware of other cultures.” A third conveyed that she is beginning to “think through what type of environment [she] wants to live in” especially considering the fact that she lives in a city that represents a vast diversity of people and cultures.

While the literature does not directly reveal a connection between studying abroad and family values, the findings of this study allude to a correlation. The four participants who articulated their desires for family values to demonstrate cross-cultural values were the four who spent time in the most diverse cultures and were most intentional in building relationships with the locals. It seems fitting that they would want to continue building bridges between cultures.

Recommendations for Practice

First, as this study demonstrates, studying abroad in a non-westernized country increases cultural acceptance and value of others. Furthermore, Terenzini et al. (1999) and Kuh (1995) conclude that out-of-class experiences are much more formative in shaping students’ lives when the experiences afford opportunities for students to actively engage. They go on to conclude that student learning is greatly influenced when students have a variety of different experiences in a variety of different environments. The more different the environment, the more the students must wrestle. In most cases, this tension results in greater understanding, empathy, and growth. Therefore, it is important for practitioners to offer a variety of study abroad locations, predominantly in cultures different from the home culture. Offering various experiential learning opportunities, such as homestays, internships, service-learning, or field placements could further enhance cross-cultural competencies, flexibility, and acceptance of diverse others.

Second, as revealed by this study's results, a mentor figure is strongly desired by students studying abroad. More often than not, they are in new and unfamiliar contexts without trusted people who know them well. They often interact with locals with whom they cannot effectively dialogue or students who are going through similar challenging experiences and therefore may not be able to walk them through difficult questions and challenges. By emphasizing to students the importance of a mentor prior to studying abroad, students would hopefully have better resources and greater confidence to sort through the complexity of the experience. This could be accomplished through a formal partnering of students and volunteer mentors, or students could be encouraged to seek one out on their own. Resources could be provided regarding the importance of having a mentor (including testimonials), who or what types of people might be most effective as a mentor to study abroad students, how to go about asking someone to be a mentor, and how to remain in contact while abroad. These cultural mentors would encourage students to make the most of their experiences abroad through intentional relationships, experiences, and studying. They would further instruct students prior to, during, and after the study abroad experience regarding topics such as cross-cultural competencies, effective reflection, flexible communication, self-awareness, and acceptance of diversity. Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2011) suggest they could specifically advise students to continue language study, to enroll in core courses, to encourage male students, especially, to take opportunities resulting in intercultural learning, to help them make meaning of cultural differences, and to spend more time with host families and less time with peers from the United States.

Next, as aforementioned, for pre-departure to be most effective, it must be coupled with post-trip debriefing, which engages students in a longer learning partnership (Rexeisen et al., 2008). This could be done through mandatory meetings or a class setting. Cultural preparation, specifically language study, would be helpful, as well as providing information about culture shock and potential challenges the students may face. As this study specifically reveals, personal preparation should be strongly encouraged. According to Passarelli & Kolb (2012), “Learning is situated to the person’s life setting and life path” (p. 16). As such, at a faith-based institution, study abroad participants should be encouraged to spend time seeking the Lord in order to establish a firmer spiritual foundation. As challenges and tension arise in an unfamiliar place, they will better be able to remain grounded, maximizing growth and development.

Lastly, both the literature and this study reinforce the idea that studying abroad, especially when thought of as a transformative out-of-class experience producing crisis through conflict, is a crucial time for students to comprehend self-perceptions and perceptions of the world. Grasping and living according to one’s calling benefits the individual and society at large. Therefore, it seems that professionals who address this connection with students set them up for greater competency and growth. Pre-departure information could include literature, journal prompts, testimonies, and specific action steps for students to engage in this process, and debriefing could follow up, providing clarity and next steps.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should be conducted to discover the long-term effects of a study abroad experience on a participant's calling development. While this research study attempted to uncover this connection, the participants were less than six years removed from their semesters abroad. They were still considered young adults, and therefore were in the midst of establishing their lives and understanding their callings. Only two were married, and only one, a parent. As time passes, significant life experiences occur, and substantial decisions are faced, it would be interesting to see if and how development from study abroad experiences continued to play a role.

Also, conducting interviews prior to study abroad experiences would highlight growth more completely. It would also be noteworthy to determine if pre-departure preparation including specific training on calling and vocational development would produce a greater degree of growth and understanding. Calling and Career professionals could be utilized, as well as the StrengthsFinder or the Enneagram Personality Test. Resources such as these may facilitate students' understanding of themselves beforehand and cause them to view their development in light of prior personal realizations.

Research could also be conducted regarding the impact of prior exposure to experiential, relational, and academic cross-cultural encounters on one's development. This could include language study, travel, service-learning, and interactions with diversity, among others. It seems this type of exposure would play a major role in facilitating the student's growth and understanding, but it is important to study it, nonetheless, to see if that assumption is correct.

Lastly, it would be beneficial to see if and how demographics affect student gains from studying abroad, namely if race, ethnicity, age, academic year, birth order, socioeconomic status, hometown, or parental status influenced their time abroad. Again, it seems obvious that it would, but the literature base surrounding this issue is scarce, so future research on this topic is important.

Limitations

The most substantial limitation of this study is the selection bias of participants. They chose to participate in the study because they felt their study abroad experiences were significant enough to share. Perhaps those who were not as impacted by studying abroad were unwilling to participate and were, therefore, not selected.

A second limitation is the variety of study abroad locations and demographics of the participants, including academic year when they studied abroad, current age, present occupation, and life experiences. These factors may have affected their responses. For example, someone with more time between their semester abroad and the interview could have a greater depth of understanding about himself or herself and how he or she was impacted by the experience.

Thirdly, the participants were not interviewed before their semesters abroad, so there is no way of completely measuring the degree of growth that occurred. Inevitably, there are aspects of their experiences they forgot to mention or failed to describe in detail.

Finally, a limitation of qualitative research, in general, is that participants' experiences cannot be measured objectively. The researcher holds a degree of bias from

personal life experiences and perception of studying abroad. It is impossible to fully disconnect the researcher's preconceptions from the data.

Conclusion

A study abroad experience holds a great deal of promise for initiating healthy tension, challenging and changing preconceived notions and judgments, connecting diverse individuals in diverse locations, and fostering an understanding of oneself and one's place in the world, in other words, one's calling. It is vital for institutions to grasp these concepts for the holistic and profound development of their students. Yet, it is not enough for institutions to merely grasp them; they must proactively prepare their students for optimal success and growth. This is accomplished through a thorough understanding and acceptance of the importance of offering culturally diverse destinations and opportunities, effective pre-departure training and post-trip debriefing, sound mentoring, and a focus on calling development. When these areas are implemented, students are provided an opportunity for even greater determination and desire to live lives full of purpose, perspective, and compassion as they journey to find their places in the world.

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Appendix A

Research Participant Consent Form

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Emily Bryan, Masters of Arts in Higher Education graduate student from Taylor University. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the development of students who have studied abroad during college. I will be one of 8-10 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on Taylor University's campus will be told.
2. I understand that most interviewees in this study will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by Emily Bryan. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
5. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). For research problems and questions regarding the subjects, the IRB may be contacted through _____
6. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
7. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

My Signature

Date

My Printed Name

Signature of the Investigator

Appendix B

Protocol Questions

1. Please briefly tell me about your study abroad experience (i.e. where you went, what program you went with, what year you went, etc.).
2. Why were you initially interested in studying abroad?
3. Please describe your upbringing in light of cultural experiences (i.e. travel, diversity in hometown, school, family, friendships, etc.)
4. How did you parents react to your decision to study abroad?
5. What did you study abroad preparation look like formally and personally?
6. How did you unpack your experiences abroad?
7. What were your living arrangements like while studying abroad?
8. What did you interactions with others (other students, professors, locals, host families, etc.) look like?
9. How did studying abroad affect your personal development? Please provide specific examples.
10. How have your interactions with others changed as a result of your time abroad?
11. What are some of your life goals?
12. What are you most passionate about?
13. How do you define “calling” (your own and in general)?
14. How do you generally discern what or what not to do?

