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AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN STUDY ABROAD  
AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business  
Department of Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Madeline Trudeau

May 2017

Madeline Trudeau 2017

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

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Madeline Nancy Trudeau

entitled

An Exploration of the Intersections Between Study Abroad  
and Attachment Theory

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 was to explore the possible connections between a student studying abroad and his or her attachment style. The research focused on students from a single university who participated in full semester study abroad experiences. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. Is there a correlation between studying abroad and a student having a secure attachment style?
2. Are there elements of a study abroad program correlated with a secure attachment style?
3. How do students with different attachment styles reflect upon their study abroad experience?

The main results from this study indicated that students who study abroad tend to have a secure attachment style. Additionally, students with a secure attachment style were able to reflect more in depth upon their experience and exhibited greater overall gains from their semester abroad.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*“Always in the big woods when you leave the familiar ground and step off alone into a new place there will be, along with the feelings of curiosity and excitement a little nagging of dread. It is the ancient fear of the Unknown, and it is your first bond with wilderness you are going into.”*  
(Berry, 1971, p. 34)

An individual’s life is marked by a series of transitions and changes, some more difficult than others. From the first day of preschool to the day of retirement, one’s life is unpredictable at best and is characterized with the passage from one stage of life to another. One of the most significant transitions faced by a large number of Americans is graduation from college. During the 2015-2016 school year alone, American colleges and universities awarded over 1.8 million bachelor’s degrees along with a high number of associate’s and master’s degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). College graduates are faced with transitioning from the world of academia into the outside world where very real challenges and uncertainties await (Conn, 2010). Therefore, colleges and universities must do their best to prepare students for this transition. Such preparation happens through a number of ways, including vocational preparation, general education classes designed to prepare students for adulthood, and general programming and interactions with other students. One specific avenue for preparing students for life after graduation is to help them form a secure attachment style. Research has shown that

seniors with secure attachment styles transition out of college significantly better than do their anxious or avoidant attached peers (Lane, 2014).

Attachment theory describes one's ability to form and maintain relationships with others, specifically with the most important figures in one's life (Bowlby, 1982). There are three commonly accepted attachment styles—secure, anxious, and avoidant—determined by an individual's positive or negative view of self and other people in with whom he or she is in relationship. A secure attachment is characterized by a positive view of both oneself and the other person in a relationship and is linked to many benefits, including increased social competency (Mallinckrodt, 2000), greater independence (Simpson, 1990), and enhanced perspective-taking (Mallinckrodt, 2000). It is easy to see how all of these abilities could positively contribute to a senior's transition out of college and into life after graduation. Changes in attachment style happen during times of transition and challenge, both of which are part of the college experience (Hunter, Keup, Kinzie, & Maietta, 2012). Indeed, for most college students, the four or more years of college constitute the most significant period of upheaval they have faced up to that point in their lives, where their beliefs, ideas and values are first significantly challenged and must be re-examined and evaluated (Baxter Magolda, 2003). Many possible factors lie imbedded within the college experience that could contribute to a sense of disequilibrium and a shift in attachment style. One such possible influence is studying abroad.

Study abroad is an increasingly popular choice for American college students. As of 2013, over 280,000 U.S. students per year were reported to have studied abroad during their college experience. These trips last anywhere from less than eight weeks to over a year and are located in countries all around the world (Institute of International Education,

2013). Two of the most important benefits from studying abroad are an increased appreciation of oneself and an enhanced ability for communication with others (Potts & Sisson, 2012; Simmons, 2014). Therefore, studying abroad not only represents a significant time of change and upheaval, but it also provides opportunities for students to develop both interpersonally and intrapersonally—thereby enhancing their view of themselves and others, the two key components of a secure attachment style. With the current number of students studying abroad increasing, it is important to make sure this experience contributes positively to their overall educational experience at college.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersections and possible correlations between study abroad and attachment style, specifically a secure attachment style. Additionally, this study probed for linkages between a student's attachment style and their ability to reflect upon their study abroad experience.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following main research questions:

- Is there a correlation between studying abroad and a student having a secure attachment style?
- Are there elements of a study abroad program correlated with a secure attachment style?
- How do students with different attachment styles reflect upon their study abroad experience?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Since the purpose of this study was to research the intersections between study abroad and attachment theory, it is necessary to have general knowledge of both topics in order to interpret the findings better. An understanding of the different components involved in forming and comprehending attachment styles can be found through a review of the literature. Additionally, an examination of research concerning study abroad allows for a more complete picture of how the two phenomena may intersect and relate to each other. Finally, utilizing developmental and educational theories enables an understanding of not only how these two topics relate but also the importance of this research within the greater realm of college student development.

### **Attachment Theory**

First articulated by John Bowlby in the 1960s and further developed by Mary Ainsworth, attachment theory is a way of characterizing the ability of an individual to form strong relationships with others (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1982). Originally referring to the security of relationships between infants and their mothers, this theory has expanded to include the ability of adults to form relationships with their peers (Hazan, Hutt, Sturgeon, & Bricker, 1991). Bowlby's original thesis described an infant's attachment as an adaptive reaction to the instinctive need for survival. Ainsworth took

things further and developed the “Strange Situation” experiment through which she devised three main attachment styles (Ainsworth, 1973).

For an individual to be identified as an attachment figure, he or she must be (a) “used as a target of proximity maintenance, and separations . . . are temporary;” (b) “used as a safe haven during times of illness, danger, or threat;” (c) “relied on as a secure base for exploration” (Fraley & Shaver, 2000, p. 138). Traditionally, there are three commonly accepted attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant (Ainsworth, 1973). Attachment styles are determined by an individual’s view of self—either positive or negative—and view of the other person in the relationship—either positive or negative (Bowlby, 1982; Lane, 2014). A person’s attachment style is usually indicative of his or her level of social competency (Mallinckrodt, 2000) and life satisfaction (Lane, 2014).

**Positive attachments.** The positive and ideal attachment style is one in which individuals have a positive view of both themselves and others, known as a secure attachment (Lane, 2014; Simpson, 1990). Secure attachment styles have been positively linked to higher social competencies (Mallinckrodt, 2000), life satisfaction (Lane, 2014), and the ability to navigate stressful situations (Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005). Additionally, individuals with a secure attachment style tend to experience greater independence, commitment, and trust in their relationships (Simpson, 1990). O’Connell-Corcoran and Mallinckrodt (2000) also linked secure attachment styles to increased self-efficacy, enhanced perspective taking, and positive conflict resolution.

**Negative attachments.** There are two less desirable attachment styles. Anxious individuals have a positive view of others but a negative view of themselves; avoidant individuals have a negative view of others and a positive view of themselves (Bowlby,

1982; Lane, 2014). In their 2001 study, Lopez, Mauricio, Gormley, Simko, and Berger found, “. . . insecure attachment orientations may dispose the individual to use less adaptive forms of affect regulation and problem coping, which in turn increases the level of transient distress in the person’s life” (p. 463). Furthermore, Mallinckrodt and Wei (2005) identified negative attachment styles as contributing to maladaptive functioning, psychological distress, and a decrease in perceived social support.

***Anxious attachment.*** Individuals with an anxious attachment style tend to have a negative view of themselves (Bowlby, 1982; Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998; Lane 2014). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found anxious individuals tend to be insecure, particularly when it comes to their expectations for support from other people. An anxious attachment style is associated with rejection sensitivity, defined as the expectations and perceptions an individual has for support from significant others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Kim, 2013). Kim’s 2013 study found, “Rejection-sensitive individuals anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection” (para. 5). Furthermore, Mallinckrodt and Wei (2005) found:

Persons high in attachment anxiety tend not to have a nuanced awareness of their own feelings . . . [our findings show] that the intensified expression of distress, fears of abandonment, and attempts to solicit comfort that are part of attachment hyperactivation do not require a differentiated awareness of feelings and that persons high in attachment anxiety tend to rate themselves low in both the ability to differentiate strong negative affect and the ability to effectively communicate these feelings to others. (p. 365)

Anxiously attached persons tend to fixate on stressful situations, live in constant fear of abandonment, cling to attachment figures, and are unaware of how to cope with their own feelings and emotions (Fraley et al., 1998; Lopez et al., 2001; Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005).

***Avoidant attachment.*** Conversely, avoidant individuals have a positive view of themselves but negative views of other people (Bowlby, 1982; Fraley et al., 1998; Lane 2014). While anxious individuals tend to fixate on stress-related stimuli, avoidant individuals tend to try to ignore them (Fraley et al., 1998; Lopez et al., 2001). An avoidant attachment style is associated with emotion suppression and social isolation (Lane, 2014; Lopez et al., 2001). Furthermore, Mallinckrodt and Wei (2005) found, “Persons with high avoidance, like those high in anxiety, also appear to experience themselves as relatively helpless to form new friendships or to take affirmative steps to improve their social networks” (p. 365). Both anxious and avoidant attachments styles are characterized by limited social competency and lower life satisfaction (Lane, 2014; Mallinckrodt, 2000).

***Changing attachment styles.*** While many people, including the founders of attachment theory Ainsworth and Bowlby, thought that one’s attachment style was formed in infancy and set for life, more recent studies have shown that one’s attachment style can change. Fraley (2010) found that adult attachment styles and those formed in childhood were only “moderately related at best” (para. 25). Additionally, Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) conducted a four-year longitudinal study of people’s attachment styles and found that, while 70% of participants maintained the same style the entire time, the remaining participants underwent a change in their attachment style. Finally, in 1997, Davila, Burge, and Hammen found the more one is open and susceptible to change in one’s life, the more



likely one's attachment style might change, and, more specifically, a major life-altering event could be a significant factor in an attachment style changing.

**Impact on college students.** The impact of attachment style on students' college experiences is widespread. Attachments tend to form during times of significant transition and challenge, both of which occur during college (Baxter-Magolda, 2003; Hunter et al., 2012; Lane, 2014). Baxter Magolda (2003) noted college as one of the most significant instances of disequilibrium in the life of a young adult. However, as Bennett (2008) and Joyce (1984) both note, disequilibrium does not necessarily lead to disaster and, in fact, allows students to open their minds and examine the world more closely. During these times, young adults usually begin to shift their identification of attachment figures from parents to peers (Hazan et al., 1991). Students' attachment styles are linked to both their engagement during college and their ability to transition out of college (Lane, 2014).

Potts and Sisson (2012) noted a student's ability to socialize is related to his or her persistence in and enjoyment of college. A secure attachment style is also associated with decreased levels of homesickness, higher retention rates, and higher academic performance (Kurland, 2012; Shal, Sharbar, Abdekhodae, Masoleh, & Salehi, 2011). The opposite is true with anxious and avoidant attachment styles: these individuals experience higher levels of homesickness, lower retention rates, and poorer academic performances. A secure attachment style has also been linked with an increased ability to navigate the transition out of college (Hunter et al., 2012; Lane, 2014). Cassidy and Shaver (2008) found attachment theory to be significantly related to a student's overall success during college. While the importance of a secure attachment style during college

has been heavily documented, little attention has been given to identifying factors during college that help to foster positive attachment styles.

### **Study Abroad**

The NAFSA Association of International Educators defined study abroad programs as “all educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the country of origin” (as cited in Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001, p. 3). As of 2013, 289,408 U.S. students travel abroad every year as part of their college education. Short-term trips, lasting less than 8 weeks, make up the majority of trips at 60% , followed by semester-long trips at 37% , and finally trips lasting a year or more make up 3% of current programs (Institute of International Education, 2013). The majority of students study in Europe, Latin America, and Asia with smaller percentages studying in less developed countries (Institute of International Education, 2014).

**Current imperative.** As the world becomes increasingly globalized, the demand for globally minded graduates has increased (Altbach, 2013; Soneson & Cordano, 2009). In today’s world, “University and college presidents are increasingly establishing internationalization as a central component of their institutional mission and publicly stipulating that a significantly higher percentage of students should have an international experience as part of their undergraduate program” (Soneson & Cordano, 2009, p. 269). The current imperative is to increase the number of students studying abroad to one million each year, so that one out of every two college graduates will have a study abroad experience (Witherell, 2015).

**Overall benefits.** The overall benefits for students studying abroad have been fairly well documented. Effects include increased appreciation for other cultures,

increased understanding of one's own culture, a growth in confidence, and increased self-reliance (Anderson & Lawton, 2012; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Savicki, 2013). Furthermore, a study abroad experience has been correlated with a positive increase in GPA, academic ability, fluency in a second language, and overall engagement in learning (Gonyea, 2008; Kegan, 1994; Lincoln Commission, 2005; Steinberg, 2002). A true study abroad experience goes beyond simply placing students in another country and culturally immerses them through experiential learning, enhancing intercultural competence and promoting personal development and maturity (Koskinen & Tossavainen, 2004). Two major areas of student growth promoted by studying abroad are interpersonal and intrapersonal development.

**Interpersonal development.** According to Simmons (2014), "Interpersonal relationships relate to the quality of interaction with others" (p. 19). This ability to view others in a positive light is also one of the main components of a secure attachment style (Bowlby, 1982; Lane, 2014). Studying abroad has been shown to increase students' social competencies, stimulate social growth, and enhance their ability to deal with rejection (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Kim, 2013). Being exposed to different cultures helps students learn how to interact with people different from themselves (Kim, 2013; Simmons, 2014; Stebleton, Soria, & Cherney, 2013). Simmons (2014) noted studying abroad helps students to become more perceptive and receptive of other peoples' thoughts and emotions. The ability to respect other people and engage in mutually beneficial relationships is essential to interpersonal development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Potts and Sisson (2012) noted:

The experience of traveling, studying, and living with the same group of students was seen as a positive experience . . . improving their interpersonal relationships with other students. . . . Several of the participants expressed greater confidence in their ability to interact with their peers. (p. 15)

Studying abroad helps students to increase their social competency and enhance their ability to form relationships with their peers (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Potts & Sisson, 2012).

**Intrapersonal development.** Study abroad experiences have also been linked to positive intrapersonal development, which Simmons (2014) described as “. . . related to those characteristics that are part of the inner self . . . [specifically] self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-reliance” (p. 19). The ability to view oneself in a positive light is the second main component of a secure attachment style (Bowlby, 1982; Lane, 2014).

Anderson and Lawton (2012) noted, “The personal growth that occurs as a consequence of a study abroad experience is, by definition, a uniquely individual experience. . . . How each student internalizes their intercultural experiences is moderated by their prior experiences, both international and domestic” (pp. 96–97). Students who study abroad show an increase in self-confidence and reliance as they learn to face new situations without the built-in support of family (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Pyle, 1981; Steinberg, 2002). Both Simmons’ (2014) and Braskamp et al.’s (2009) studies showed an enhanced ability for students to identify themselves as “unique individuals” (Braskamp et al., 2009, p. 107). Furthermore, students who study abroad had reduced rejection sensitivity and enhanced coping abilities (Kim, 2013; Simmons, 2014). Overall, studying abroad has been linked to an enhanced sense of self, higher self-confidence, increased

self-reliance, and lower levels of stress (Anderson & Lawton, 2012; Braskamp et al., 2009; Kim, 2013; Simmons, 2014).

### **Relevant Developmental Theories**

The proposed importance of attachment style and study abroad for a student's college experience is supported by several theories of college student development, including Astin's Involvement Theory, Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory, Chickering's Identity Development Theory, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, and Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Involvement, according to Astin (1999), is the amount of physical and mental energy that students invest in their experience (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Astin's theory indicates that the more involved a college student is, the greater his or her learning and development will be. Having a secure attachment style increases a student's ability and desire to actively participate in the college experience (Lane, 2014; Simpson, 1990).

Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship describes a young adult's move from external to internal self-definition (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Du, 2007). Study abroad experiences have been shown to increase a student's ability to articulate his or her own identity (Braskamp et al., 2009). Studying abroad and a secure attachment style have also proven to increase students' ability to manage emotions, move towards independence, develop mature relationships, and establish identity (Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005; Simmons, 2014; Simpson, 1990). These concepts are all part of one or more of the vectors involved in Chickering's Identity Development theory (Evans et al., 2010). Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning states, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results for the

combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). By studying abroad, students are fully immersed in a transformative experience that enhances their learning and sense of self (Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Gonyea, 2008; Kegan, 1994). Finally, Schlossberg’s (1981) transition theory puts the college experience and study abroad experience into the context of transitions that majorly affect a student’s life. In these major transitions, students begin to form relationships and identify attachment figures.

The final main theory relating to this research is the educational idea that true learning comes from reflecting on an experience rather than just from the experience itself. The roots of this theory are generally attributed to John Dewey and his book, *Experience and Education*, wherein he expounds upon the process of learning as a product of reflection: “To reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences” (Dewey, 1998, p. 110). Costa and Kallick (2008) noted that the process of reflection contributes to an increased ability to gain and learn from an experience. A student’s ability to process an experience, such as studying abroad, could be greatly affected by his or her attachment style due to its role in perspective taking and ability to cope with stressful situations (O’Connell-Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000). Helping students to reflect well on their experience is critical, since reflection is considered “the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind” (Dewey, 1998, p. 110).

### **Summary**

Attachment theory describes the relationship between two individuals (Bowlby, 1982). Secure attachments have been linked to students’ ability to successfully navigate

their experiences both during and after college (Mallinckrodt, 2000; Potts & Sisson, 2012; Shal et al., 2011; Simpson, 1990), while anxious and avoidant attachments lead to higher levels of stress and lower levels of academic performance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Fraley et al., 1998; Lopez et al., 2001; Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005). Individuals' attachment styles are determined by their ability to see themselves and others in a positive light (Lane, 2014). Studying abroad has been shown to encourage students' development both interpersonally (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Kim, 2013; Potts & Sisson, 2012; Simmons, 2014; Stebleton et al., 2013) and intrapersonally (Anderson & Lawton, 2012; Braskamp et al., 2009; Pyle, 1981; Simmons, 2014). Furthermore, the importance of both attachment styles and studying abroad for a college student is supported by a myriad of current college student development theories (Astin, 1999; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Du, 2007; Evans et al., 2010; Kolb, 1984; Schlossberg, 1981). It seems reasonable to postulate a possible relationship between a study abroad experience and a student's ability to form secure attachments.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Design of Study**

A convergent parallel mixed methods design was used, consisting of a quantitative survey and a qualitative phenomenological study. A convergent parallel design was chosen so that “[o]ne data collection form supplies strengths to offset the weakness of the other form, and [because] a more complete understanding of a research problem results from collecting both quantitative and qualitative data” (Creswell, 2008, p. 540). In this study, the quantitative data was used to identify and verify general trends in the larger population, and the qualitative data explored these trends more in-depth. The two data sets were collected separately, with the quantitative section used only to identify possible participants for the qualitative study. The survey data was analyzed to determine if a relationship existed between studying abroad and attachment style, while the phenomenological data explored how attachment style might affect a student’s ability to reflect on his or her experience and how the experience might, in turn, affect that student’s attachment style. Collecting qualitative data alone would not have allowed for a description of the larger population, and only collecting quantitative data would have kept the researcher from exploring the connections in depth. However, collecting both data sets separately and converging them to compare and contrast allowed the researcher to develop a more complete answer to the research questions.



**Institution.** This research was conducted at a small, religiously affiliated liberal arts university in the Midwest. The undergraduate student enrollment is approximately 2,000, with 55% female and 45% male. The majority of students are traditional aged (18-25 years old) and live on campus in residence halls. Eighty percent of students participate in an overseas experience during their undergraduate years. The university offers a variety of programs, including week-, month-, and semester-long programs and both academic trips and service learning experiences.

**Participants.** Participants were selected from the population of undergraduate students who have participated in an international academic study abroad trip lasting longer than six weeks. Six weeks was chosen because many students at the institution have participated in month-long or week-long international trips, but the researcher limited the research to semester-long trips since those have been shown to be the most beneficial to participants (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Only participants who completed their program and were back on campus were included in the study. Students' names and emails were obtained through the university's Center for Off-Campus Programs, and an email was sent out containing a link to the survey (see Appendix A). The only criteria for participating in this study were as follows: (a) the student completed an international experience, (b) the experience lasted longer than six weeks, and (c) the experience was primarily academic in nature. Participants for the quantitative study were those who filled out the survey and met all the criteria. Participants for the qualitative research were selected from those who indicated on the initial survey their willingness to participate further in the study.

## Survey Study Procedures

The researcher conducted a survey study to gather the appropriate data. This survey included three sections: the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form (ECR-S) (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007), Program Characteristics and Demographics, and Experience Reflection (see Appendix A). The researcher conducted a pilot study to assess the clarity and time requirement of the survey. Participants for the pilot study consisted of acquaintances of the researcher who attended the institution being studied and participated in an international academic trip during their undergraduate experience. Feedback from the pilot study informed the survey questions but was not included in the final data analysis and assessment of this study. At the end of the survey, a statement asked the participants if they were willing to participate in the qualitative portion of this research. Participants were asked to supply their email if they were willing, and it was made clear that further participation is completely voluntary.

**ECR-S.** The Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form (ECR-S) was used to assess participants' attachment style (Wei et al., 2007). This is a 12-item adaption of the original 36-item Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The short version of the ECR was developed by Wei et al. (2007) through a six-test study using confirmatory factor analyses to determine the internal consistency and test-retest reliabilities for the ECR-S. The ECR-S consists of 12 items: 6 relating to an avoidant attachment (alpha coefficient: .78 to .88) and 6 correlating with an anxious attachment (alpha coefficient: .77 to .86). Participants were asked to rate themselves on a scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly); the two sets of items were then compiled separately to analyze the anxious and avoidant dimensions of a participant's

attachment style. Some of the questions are negatively worded and were reverse-scored before being analyzed. Participants were assigned scores of both anxiety and avoidance. If both scores were low, it indicated the participant has a secure attachment style; if one or both scores were significantly higher, it indicated a non-secure attachment style (Fraley, 2012). The ECR-S focuses on romantic relationships, but, because this study examined relationships in general, questions were adapted to reflect this change in focus. This was accomplished by replacing the ECR-S phrase “romantic partner” with more general wording (e.g., “those closest to me”). The researcher obtained permission from the lead author to utilize the ECR-S and adapt it to this study’s particular needs (Wei et al., 2007).

**Program characteristics and demographics.** This survey section was a set of questions the researcher developed to collect relevant data related to the participants and the program in which they participated. Specifically, data was collected concerning the academic year during which they participated in the experience, their current academic year, their gender, and factors related to their engagement with the local culture during the international experience. These factors were tabulated and analyzed in relation to participants’ scores on the ECR-S to see if any statistically significant factors emerged related to a secure attachment style.

**Experience reflection.** The final section consisted of a series of scaled questions asking the participants to reflect on their international experience. These questions were assessed using a Likert-scale and required participants to rate themselves from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In particular, this section focused on the two aspects of attachment style—the view of one’s self and the view of others—by analyzing the impact of studying abroad on interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. These questions

were analyzed to see if any general trends emerged in how students with different attachment styles reflect on their experience and how their study abroad experience affected their interpersonal and intrapersonal capabilities.

**Statistical analysis.** Appropriate statistical analysis was used throughout this study. First, an analysis of the ECR-S determined each individual's attachment style, which was then used for further analysis. Second, statistical analysis determined whether a relationship existed between secure attachment style and studying abroad as well as if significant demographic and/or program characteristics affected attachment style. Finally, statistical analysis was utilized to determine any trends in how students reflect on their experience; this section was greatly enhanced by the qualitative data collected through the phenomenological study. The main statistical technique used was cross-tabulations.

### **Phenomenological Study Procedures**

**Rationale.** The researcher selected a phenomenological methodology in order to describe the phenomenon of studying abroad through the reported experiences of the individual participants (Creswell, 2003). Patton (2001) described phenomenological research as "exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness" (p. 104). Since the researcher desired to explore how attachment styles might affect a participant's reflection on his or her study abroad experience, an empirical, transcendental phenomenological study was deemed appropriate (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher understood that the experience of each individual is unique but sought to use the participants' different perspectives to describe the larger phenomenon of studying abroad through the lens of attachment style (Creswell, 2003). The work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered particularly

important to phenomenological research. Husserl's principle of *epoche*, or bracketing, required the researcher to put aside personal lived experience to examine the phenomenon as fairly as possible through the experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). In accordance with the procedures Moustakas outlined, the researcher sought to use qualitative interviews to derive an account of what the participants experienced, followed by an explanation of how they experienced, culminating in description of the overall essence of the phenomenon of studying abroad through the lens of attachment style. Furthermore, the researcher strove to "bracket" out personal experience with the subject matter in order to evaluate the experiences of the participants in an unbiased manner. The researcher employed transcendental phenomenology, which means "everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (p. 34). By bracketing out personal experience, the researcher sought to take an "eyes-wide open," fresh perspective towards the phenomena of studying abroad.

**Participants.** Participants for the qualitative research were selected from those who indicated on the initial survey their willingness to participate further in the study. Participants were assured that further participation was not required and that, if they choose not to participate further, it would not negatively affect them or their participation in the quantitative portion of the study. The only quantitative data that informed the phenomenological research was the attachment style as determined by the ECR-S. Because of the researcher's desire to examine the phenomenon of studying abroad from both positive and negative attachment styles, the quantitative data helped to ensure equal representation of both in the participants interviewed. Four individuals with a secure

attachment style and four individuals with an anxious or avoidant attachment style were selected from those who indicated their willingness to participate in the study.

**Methods.** The researcher conducted a series of individual interviews with the selected participants. Semi-structured questions (see Appendix B) were used to invite the unique reflections of each individual participant. The researcher conducted a pilot interview using one of the participants who indicated their willingness to participate in an interview. Feedback from the pilot interview was used to determine the estimated time required for each interview, the clarity of the interview questions, and whether any additional questions should be added for the subsequent interviews. Since the pilot interview yielded good data and did not indicate any major issues with the protocol, data from the pilot interview was included in the final analysis. Interviewees signed an additional consent form, and the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and were then transcribed. In total, the researcher conducted 8 interviews that averaged 35 minutes, with the shortest lasting 20 minutes and the longest lasting 50 minutes. The transcriptions were sorted into two subsets representing the positive and negative attachment styles of the participants. Subsequently, the researcher reviewed each interview and generated a list of significant phrases and quotations, followed by a general coding of the transcriptions for each subset. Coding consisted of dividing the data into different groups or themes, which were then used to generate a general essence of the study abroad experience through the lens of attachment style. The overall goal was to see if participants with different attachment styles reflected differently on their experience as well as if the participants' study abroad experience seemed to have affected their attachment style.

### **Combining the Data Sets**

In keeping with the convergent parallel design, the final analysis merged the results from the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of how studying abroad and attachment style intersect. In particular, the analysis focused on determining if the qualitative data—how participants with different attachment styles reflect on their experience—was reflected in the quantitative data collected in the “Experience Reflection” section and vice versa. Additionally, the qualitative data helped to show more in-depth how studying abroad does or does not contribute to the relationship found in the quantitative portion of the study. Overall, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods and data sets allowed the researcher to explore and analyze the intersection between studying abroad and attachment style more thoroughly than by solely using either method by itself.

### **Benefits**

There are several ways in which this research could potentially benefit the participants, the institution, and higher education practitioners in general. For participants, the very act of participating in this study could help them to reflect more deeply on their experience, possibly in ways they had not before. Whether through the self-evaluation of the quantitative portion or the more complex interview questions, this study could potentially stimulate students’ reflections in regards to their experience and, therefore, their learning from that experience (Dewey, 1998). Institutionally, this study could provide some observations of the university’s different programs, particularly how the different characteristics of various programs effect students’ development. The study could potentially provide some suggestions on how to best structure programs to promote

participants' growth and development. Finally, for higher education practitioners, this study could provide some insight into one of the possible factors affecting a student's attachment style during college. This is important because attachment style has been shown to be a signifier of a student's success both during and after college (Lane, 2014). For practitioners, a better understanding of different factors affecting attachment style could lead to an enhanced perception of how to help students develop healthy attachments and successfully transition out of college.



## Chapter 4

### Results

The findings and results from this study includes interview responses from 8 students who had studied abroad during college and a total of 68 survey responses, also from students who had studied abroad. The mixed methods design was chosen to provide deeper analysis of the data than either approach could have done alone. Because the method was convergent parallel, the two data sets were analyzed separately.

#### Quantitative Findings

The purpose of the survey portion of this study was to explore the first two research questions: “Is there a correlation between studying abroad and a student having a secure attachment style?” and “Are there elements of a study abroad program correlated with a secure attachment style?” A series of analyses addressed these questions.

**Participants.** The survey was sent to 142 students, ranging from sophomores to seniors . Each student had studied abroad for a full semester at the institution. Additionally, the students varied in where they studied abroad and how much time had passed since they studied abroad. In total, 68 students responded for a response rate of 48%. Out of these 68, 15 (22%) were male, and 53 (78%) were female.

**Question 1: How many respondents had a secure, anxious, or avoidant attachment style?** The first 12 questions of the survey were a modified version of the ECR-S. Six of the questions, when scored, yielded an anxiety score, and the other six

related to an avoidance score. If one score was higher than 4 (on a scale of 7), that respondent was labeled correspondently as either “anxious” or “avoidant.” If both scores were below 4, the respondent was labeled as “secure.” Table 1 shows the number of respondents who were placed into each category.

Table 1

*Attachment Styles of Respondents*

<u>Attachment Style</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>Percentage of Total Respondents</u>
Secure	48	71%
Anxious	17	25%
Avoidant	3	4%

**Question 2: Are there factors of a study abroad experience that correlate with a secure attachment style?** This second question explored the additional data collected through the survey. In particular, it looked at the “Program Characteristics and Demographics” portion in relation to the attachment style scores to identify any correlations. The factors explored were whom a respondent lived with, where a respondent studied abroad, what year or semester a student studied abroad, and how long ago a student studied abroad. Cross-tabulations were used to determine if any of these factors demonstrated a significant frequency in relation to participants’ attachment styles.

**Factor 1: Whom a respondent lived with.** The first factor explored was whether or not a participant’s attachment score was related to who he or she stayed with while abroad. Table 2 shows the results of the cross-tabulation. Of the participants, the majority (56%) stayed with a North American Roommate, the next largest group (28%)

stayed with a host family, and the rest stayed either by themselves (3%) or with a local roommate (13%). The most notable result from this table is the frequency of participants who stayed with a North American Roommates who were identified as having a secure attachment style. This percentage (76%) is slightly above the overall participant pool average (71%).

Table 2

*Who Participants Lived with and Participants' Attachment Styles*

	<u>Anxious</u>	<u>Avoidant</u>	<u>Secure</u>	<u>Total</u>
Host Family	5	1	13	19
Local Roommate	2	1	6	9
Myself	2	0	0	2
North American Roommate	8	1	29	38
Total	17	3	48	68

**Factor 2: Where a participant studied abroad.** Secondly, a cross-tabulation was used to examine the relationship between where a student studied abroad and her reported attachment style. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 3 below. Of the participants, the majority (69%) studied abroad in Europe, (28%) were in South America, and the rest studied in either Australia (1%) or Asia (1%). No particularly notable results emerged from this analysis, as most of the frequencies aligned with what was noted in the participant pool as a whole.

Table 3

*Where Participants Studied and Participants' Attachment Styles*

	<u>Anxious</u>	<u>Avoidant</u>	<u>Secure</u>	<u>Total</u>
Asia	0	0	1	1
Australia	1	0	0	1
Europe	11	2	34	47
South America	5	1	13	19
Total	17	3	48	68

**Factor 3: What semester a student studied abroad.** The third factor explored was whether or not a participant's attachment score was related to the semester during which he or she studied abroad. Table 4 shows the results of the cross-tabulation. The vast majority of participants (82%) studied abroad in their first four semesters of college. The two semesters with the highest number of participants were first (35%) and fourth (40%); this finding correlates with the institution's two most prominent study abroad programs. Of note is the 83.3% secure participants who studied abroad in their first semester, which is significantly higher than the average of the total participant pool. Reversely, the 59.26% secure who studied abroad in their fourth semester is significantly lower than the percentage of those with secure attachment styles in the total participant pool.

Table 4

*Semester Participants Studied Abroad and Participants' Attachment Styles*

	<u>Anxious</u>	<u>Avoidant</u>	<u>Secure</u>	<u>Total</u>
Zero	4	0	20	24
First	0	0	0	0
Second	1	1	3	5
Third	1	0	0	1
Fourth	9	2	16	27
Fifth	0	0	3	3
Sixth	3	0	5	8
Seventh	0	0	1	1
Total	17	3	48	68

**Factor 4: How long ago a student studied abroad.** The final factor was whether or not a participant's attachment score was related to how long ago he or she had studied abroad. Table 5 shows the results of the cross-tabulation. Unlike with the other cross-tabulations, no clear majority of participants fell under any number of semesters since studying abroad. Significant frequencies include three that are higher than the total participant pool: three semesters (100% secure), five semesters (80% secure), and seven semesters (80% secure). On the other side, three semesters showed significantly lower numbers of secure students than the total participant pool: zero (62.5%), one (63.64%), and four (54%).

Table 5

*Semesters since Participants Studied Abroad and Participants' Attachment Styles*

	<u>Anxious</u>	<u>Avoidant</u>	<u>Secure</u>	<u>Total</u>
Zero	3	0	5	8
One	3	1	7	11
Two	4	0	9	13
Three	0	0	7	7
Four	4	2	7	13
Five	1	0	4	5
Six	0	0	1	1
Seven	2	0	8	10
Total	17	3	48	68

**Question 3: Is there a correlation between a respondent's attachment style and their experience reflection score?** The final 14 questions of the survey asked respondents to reflect on their international experience and its effect on their interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. Again, a cross-tabulation was used to compare a participants experience reflection score (ERS) with their reported attachment style, which is summarized in Table 6. The scores varied from 3.1 to 7, with the majority (65%) scoring 6 or higher, and only 2 participants scoring lower than 5.

Table 6

*Participants ERS and Participants' Attachment Styles*

<u>ERS</u>	<u>Anxious</u>	<u>Avoidant</u>	<u>Secure</u>	<u>Total</u>
3.1	1	0	0	1
4.8	0	0	1	1
5.1	0	0	1	1
5.3	0	0	2	2
5.4	0	0	2	2
5.6	1	0	5	6
5.7	1	0	1	2
5.8	1	0	0	1
5.9	2	0	3	5
6	1	0	1	2
6.1	3	0	9	12
6.2	0	0	1	1
6.3	0	0	2	2
6.4	2	1	3	6
6.5	1	0	1	2
6.6	1	0	2	3
6.7	0	0	2	2
6.8	0	2	2	4
6.9	0	0	2	2
7	3	0	8	11
Total	17	3	48	68

## Qualitative Findings

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to examine the effects of a study abroad experience on a student's ability to form secure attachments. In particular, the qualitative portion of this study was focused on the third research question: "Does studying abroad appear to have an effect on a student's attachment style?" More specifically, the two sub-questions—"Did the student's view of themselves change?" and "Did the student's view of others change?"—were explored through the interview questions. For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on the two elements of attachment style: a person's view of self and a person's view of others.

Eight interviews were conducted, averaging 30 minutes each. The participants were identified from those who expressed their willingness to participate further at the end of the survey. Twenty survey respondents expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews, and, from those, 8 were chosen: 4 who were identified as having a secure attachment style and 4 who were identified as having a non-secure attachment style. All interview participants were female. From the verbatim transcripts of these interviews, significant statements were coded into themes that were categorized as either a major theme or a subtheme depending on the number of participants who contributed a significant statement. Three major themes were identified, each with two to four subthemes. The names of the participants were changed to preserve anonymity.

**Major theme 1: Relationships with others.** All eight participants mentioned relationships with others as a major theme of their study abroad experience. The experience affected both the relationships they formed while abroad as well as relationships with friends and family from home. Participants talked in depth about how



important some of these relationships were during their study abroad experience and how relationships have changed since returning to the United States. In particular, participants talked about how their relationships with other students from their home universities, their relationships with their parents, their relationships with friends, and their relationships with their host family were significant elements of their study abroad experience.

***Subtheme 1: Relationships with other students from the home university.*** Seven participants mentioned relationship to other students from their home university as not only important but a critical element to their study abroad experience as a whole. Students noted the importance of having other students as a support structure during their time abroad, since they went through the same adjustments to culture and, in some cases, language differences. Six participants also mentioned how these other students have become a permanent part of their friend group. For example, Participant 1 stated:

I felt like our team, we got to be really close to each other and that's like one of the reasons I'm so thankful for my semester in Ecuador because I still have those friends that I can rely on and we still hang out together so it was really good.

***Subtheme 2: Relationships with parents.*** Four participants described how their study abroad experience had affected their relationship with their families, specifically their parents. These students described a significant shift in the way they interacted with their parents from before studying abroad to after the experience. Two students had parents come visit them overseas and found it interesting to see a "role reversal," as parents now relied on the students to navigate in a foreign country. Additionally, three participants mentioned how their personal growth during their time abroad strained their relationship with their parents when they returned home: "So when I came back it was

initially very hard . . . because I was so different and they had to learn to cope with . . . this new side of me that I hadn't really been around them before" (Participant 3).

***Subtheme 3: Relationships with friends.*** Of the eight participants, six mentioned how their relationships with friends from their home university had changed since their study abroad experience. The students particularly noted how the time away had helped them to see which friends they were actually close to and which friends were more of acquaintances. Participant 2 stated:

I very much value some of the friendships that I had before. But I'm definitely not quite as close to some of those people because of who I have become the person I've become that started with my study abroad um and like I as much so like to maintain those friendships in the same way they were before I would never trade that for the growth I have done and who am I becoming.

Additionally, participants mentioned the friendships they maintained have only become deeper since their time abroad due to their personal growth, as discussed below.

***Subtheme 4: Relationships with host family.*** Only four participants identified the relationship with their host family as critical in their study abroad experience. However, these four participants were the only participants who had stayed with a host family. The other participants either stayed with other students from their host university or in a dorm setting with other college-aged students. Students described how their host family became as close to them as their actual family in the US. Three participants noted how language was an initial barrier that they quickly overcame by learning new ways of communicating (as described below). Participant 5 said, "Just studying abroad puts you in this place where the best and the worst parts of who you are come out overall and you have to rely

on these people because they are your family during that time.” Students mentioned the importance of having people who supported them throughout their time in such ways as culture and language adjustments, hospital visits, and inclusion in family activities.

**Major theme 2: Personal growth.** Seven participants mentioned their personal growth as a result of their study abroad experience. The one participant who did not mention it stated that, since she had studied abroad three years earlier, it was hard to determine what personal growth was a result of studying abroad specifically. Participant 6 identified studying abroad as one of the most significant factors of her college experience: “It’s so beneficial in so many ways . . . to understanding yourself and growing into your identity . . . studying abroad pushes you and gives you that extra boost that I needed.” In particular, students mentioned they were more accepting of others, more confident and independent, more likely to seek out new friendships, and more comfortable with being uncomfortable since their time abroad.

**Subtheme 1: More accepting of others.** Seven participants said their study abroad experience had made them more accepting of other people. The students described their willingness to look past first impressions, listen more, and seek out the meaning behind the actions of others that they do not understand at first. Participant 4 stated:

Yeah, it taught me more about respecting how people say stuff or the weird quirky things they do. I love the weird quirky things they do. Like when I see someone doing something weird most people are like ‘ha-ha you do stuff weird,’ I’m like ‘oh, why do you do that?’ I think more in ‘why?’ instead of ‘oh you do that,’ more like, what shaped you to do that? Is it from your family members or just from where you are from or what?’

Additionally, students mentioned how their study abroad experience has taught them to engage people who are different from them in conversation rather than in arguments.

***Subtheme 2: Confidence and independence.*** Five participants mentioned an increase in their confidence and independence since studying abroad. Students stated that having to learn new ways of doing things, be more responsible for themselves, and, in some cases, stand up for their beliefs gave them a new found sense of self-assurance. One participant who took classes with students from another faith tradition stated:

I guess I gained a lot of confidence to and wasn't timid to bluntly state my opinion, which I never really did that before I was very passive just like I'll go along with everyone I want to please everyone make everyone happy and then study abroad just totally changed that. Where I wanted to be my own person and I wanted to make my opinions known and be unique and like all of that stuff (Participant 3).

Two students mentioned how this willingness to state their opinions more openly is what lead to some of their conflict with their parents.

***Subtheme 3: Seeking out new friendships.*** Four students described how their study abroad experience has caused them to seek out new and diverse friendships since they have returned home. Of those four, three stated that their experience had generally inspired them to be more confident in seeking out friendships. Additionally, the four participants also mentioned that their study abroad experience had instilled in them a desire to create more friendships with people of other ethnicities and faith traditions. Students cited both a desire to understand other cultures better as well as a desire to expand their own knowledge base and mindset as reasons for their willingness to engage other people in deep relationships.

***Subtheme 4: Comfortability and uncomfortability.*** Five participants particularly mentioned becoming comfortable with discomfort as a major area of growth resulting from their study abroad experience. Students described how their international experience pushed them out of their comfort zone and lead to them doing things they never thought they would have done: “Before if someone had said, ‘Hey you’re going to have to figure out how to get from point a to point b and speak to people who don’t know your language,’ I would have said I can’t handle it” (Participant 7). However, since returning from studying abroad, students said they more willingly seek out situations outside their “comfort zone” to continue growing in “self-assurance and confidence” (Participant 3).

**Major theme 3: Spiritual growth.** All eight participants specifically mentioned spiritual growth during their time abroad, making it a noteworthy theme of their experience. Students mentioned how their semester abroad provided new insights into God himself and helped them to see other people “the way God sees them” (Participant 8).

***Subtheme 1: New insights into God and His creation.*** Six students mentioned how their study abroad experience lead them into relying more on God: “It helped me to trust God a lot more with everything. . . . I was always able to fall back on God” (Participant 1). Additionally, students mentioned how studying abroad helped them to see new aspects of God, specifically how He works in other cultures and not just their own. Finally, three participants described how their study abroad experience helped them to appreciate how the Christian church is international and to value new aspects of worship not present in their home church.

***Subtheme 2: Seeing others “the way God sees them.”*** Four participants attributed their willingness to be more accepting of others to their new ability to see others “the way God sees them.” Participant 2 stated:

Yeah that probably is why my view of other people has become more positive.

Not just because I’ve been exposed to other people which certainly helps but because God is changing that view because I see him more clearly for who he is.

And when you see that you can’t help but see the people he created for who they are.

Students described how getting to know people from other cultures helped them to understand how to see past cultural differences and see “their hearts first, like God does” (Participant 7).

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### Discussion

According to Bowlby (1982), the two main factors determining one's attachment style are his or her view of self and view of other people in relationships, specifically one's closest, deepest relationships. The findings and results of this study, when combined with the existing literature, provide insight into how a study abroad experience can interact with a student's attachment style. In particular, the survey indicated whether or not a secure attachment style was correlated with the study abroad experience, while the interviews detailed how participants described their growth in both their view of others and their view of themselves.

**Relationships between study abroad and attachment theory.** Existing literature indicates that the expected percentage of attachment styles in the general population is 58% secure and 42% either avoidant or anxious (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, 2009). This study found 71% of respondents indicated a secure attachment style and 29% a non-secure attachment style. These numbers appear to indicate a correlation between studying abroad and having a secure attachment style. Whether this is because students with a secure attachment style are more likely to study abroad or because a study abroad experience influences a student's attachment style is difficult to say, but the interviews provided additional insights, as discussed below.

*Semester a student studied abroad.* Through the cross-tabulations, certain categories were noted as being of interest when comparing a secure attachment style with some of the researched independent variables. The most noteworthy factor was the semester a student studied abroad. While 83.3% of students who studied abroad in their first semester were classified as secure, only 59.26% of those who studied abroad in their fourth semester were identified as secure. Since these were the two semesters with vastly higher numbers of participants—the next largest had 8—and together represented 75% of the participants, this indicates a notable result: students who study abroad earlier in their college career are more likely to develop a secure attachment style. This could be due to a couple of reasons. First, attachment styles most often change during a time of transition (Lane, 2014). Students in their first few semesters of college are still experiencing not only the transition of studying abroad but the transition into college as well. Conversely, students who have been in college for a couple years have most likely fully transitioned into the ‘college life’ rhythms. Thus, students who study abroad earlier in their college experience may more likely be influenced by studying abroad.

Secondly, students in their first few semesters of college have less likely formed deep relationships with their peers and are, therefore, more likely to do so during a study abroad experience. This was evidenced in the interviewed participants’ descriptions of the importance of relationships with other students from their home institution, both during and after the study abroad experience. Many participants indicated this bond created by studying abroad made these relationships last long after returning from the semester abroad. Students further in their college experience who study abroad have most likely already formed deep relationships with peers at their home institution. Three of the four



interview participants identified as having a secure attachment style studied abroad during their first two years of college. Conversely, three of the four “non-secure” participants studied abroad during the second half of their college experience. While this sample size is not enough to be conclusive, it does seem to indicate a relationship between a student’s attachment style and the year in which he or she studied abroad.

*Number of semesters since study abroad experience.* Another noteworthy finding in this study was the relationship between respondents’ attachment styles and the number of semesters between when they took the survey and when they studied abroad. Notable frequencies include three higher than the total participant pool: three semesters (100% secure), five semesters (80% secure), and seven semesters (80% secure). On the other side, three semesters showed lower numbers of secure students than the total participant pool: zero (62.5%), one (63.64%), and four (54%). This indicates a possible link between students who have had more semesters to reflect upon their experience and the likelihood of having a secure attachment style. This relationship was reflected in both the interviews and the existing literature. Interview respondents talked in depth about how their study abroad experience had changed the way they interacted with people in their home country. Students who have been back longer from their study abroad experience have had more time to interact with their peers at their home institution and at home and to “put into practice” what they learned overseas (Participant 4). Additionally, Costa and Kallick (2008) noted the importance of reflection on the actual learning a student gleans from an experience. Students who have had more time since their study abroad experience have had more opportunities to reflect on their experience.

*Experience reflection scores.* The final finding worth noting is the participants' experience reflection scores. Since the vast majority of students scored above a six, there is a general confirmation of the existing literature that indicates the growth students go through during a study abroad experience and the growth indicated by the interview participants. A plethora of studies have detailed the interpersonal and intrapersonal growth students undergo during a study abroad experience (Anderson & Lawton, 2012; Bandyopadhyay & Bandyopadhyay, 2015; Savicki, 2013). Since the two elements of an attachment style are one's view of self (intrapersonal) and one's view of others (interpersonal), it makes sense that positive growth in either or both of those areas would be associated with a secure attachment style. Additionally, the interviews provided more insight into how students reflected on their experiences. Since all the interview participants highlighted personal growth and spoke in almost exclusively positive terms about their experience, the correlation is not necessarily seen in the interviews; however, they do serve to reinforce the significance of the study abroad experience on a student's view of self and of others, as discussed in greater detail below.

The lack of correlations between the study abroad experience and the other factors could be due to a couple of reasons. The first and most obvious reason is that no such relationships exist. However, the interviews uncovered one significant factor that somewhat contradicts this. Students who stayed with host families were more likely to have a secure attachment style. Indeed, 3 of the 4 participants identified as "secure," indicated that staying with a host family was a significant part of their study abroad experience. This seems to show that living with a host family could have a positive effect on a student's attachment style. One participant detailed how her study abroad experience

with her host family lead to her connecting more with her family back home and even lead to her current engagement, something that “would not have been possible” without her strong ties to her host family abroad (Participant 5).

A second reason for this lack of correlations could be that either the study did not assess the factors of studying abroad that actually do influence attachment style, or the study did not do a proper job of assessing the factors. This could be a limitation of the study or an indication that further research needs to be done on possible influencing factors before they can be assessed through a survey.

**Students’ growth in their view of others.** Multiple studies show that studying abroad has a significantly positive effect on a student’s ability to interact with others, or interpersonal development (Kim, 2013; Simmons, 2014; Stebleton et al., 2013). This was evident in the responses of the interview participants. In particular, the subthemes of “More accepting of others,” “Seeing others the way God sees them,” and “Seeking out new friendships” support the idea that studying abroad improves a student’s ability to view others positively and enter into deep meaningful relationships with others.

The seven students who mentioned that their study abroad experience made them more accepting of others reinforced Bennett and Bennett’s (2004) study, which showed that studying abroad can help improve students’ social competency and social interactions. Participant 2 stated that her study abroad experience has made her “more open-minded about being friends with people [different than me] and helped me learn how to interact with them without judging.” Other interview participants indicated that their friends from before their study abroad experience had noted their newfound abilities to listen better, ask better questions, and engage in relationships at a deeper level. According

to Baxter Magolda and King (2004), it is essential to interpersonal growth to be able to respect other people's differences and engage with them positively. As students engaged in new cultures and with people who had very different life experiences, they found themselves more able to be accepting of other people's differences and more willing to engage in learning the "why" behind people rather than judging them.

Secondly, students mentioned their spiritual growth as an important factor in their interpersonal growth, particularly their ability to see others "the way God sees them." As students were pushed out of their comfort zones, they could see what parts of their faith were more cultural and what was absolutely essential, which helped them to be more accepting of others. Kim (2013) and Simmons (2014) both detailed how spending time in a difference culture opens students' eyes to their own culture and the relationship between the two. Participant 2's statement evidenced this: "It's [seeing God in another culture] helped me stop assuming that I know where people are coming from, because [going] to another culture opens up your eyes to how wide the world is." The interview participants strongly indicated their spiritual growth as crucial in learning to accept and overcome their differences with other people.

Finally, the students indicated a newfound desire to seek out relationships with a diverse group of people, indicating both a curiosity about other cultures and a desire to broaden their own worldview as impetuses for doing so. According to Stebleton and colleagues (2013), studying abroad in a different culture improves students' ability to interact well with people different from themselves. Interview participants stated that they actively sought out new, deep friendships with not only students at their home institution who were originally from their host country but with other racially, politically, and

religiously diverse people as well. Overall, the students' interview responses and the average experience reflection score of 6.2 out of 7 fit with the body of literature that suggests students grow in their interpersonal ability during their time abroad.

**Students' growth in their view of themselves.** The second main component of attachment style is one's view of self, or intrapersonal capability. Again, a body of literature has shown that study abroad experiences tend to have a positive impact on a student's intrapersonal development (Anderson & Lawton, 2012; Braskamp et al., 2009; Simmons, 2014). This positive increase in one's view of self was supported through both the survey results and the interview findings. In particular, the subthemes of "Confidence and independence," "New insights into God," and "Comfortability and uncomfotability" highlight the intrapersonal growth that students experienced during their semester abroad.

According to Braskamp and colleagues (2009), Simmons (2014), and Steinberg (2002), students who studied abroad showed definite increases in self-confidence and self-reliance. Five participants mentioned how their study abroad experience had increased their confidence and independence. For example, Participant 1 stated:

I think it really helped my confidence because I, after this semester I looked back and I was like wow I did that I was in a whole different country for three and a half months and that gave me the confidence to have the courage to want to say yes to whatever god's going to call me next.

Additionally, students mentioned a new found courage to be the instigators in relationships, being more willing to seek other people out and have the courage to ask tough questions and engage relationships at a deeper level than before. Students indicated that an increase in self-confidence and self-reliance were two of the most significant

differences they had noticed in themselves since returning. This increase in students' levels of confidence helps to increase their positive view of themselves, helps them to rely less on others, and should be positive factor in developing a secure attachment style.

Secondly, students cited "new insights into God" as a crucial factor of their personal growth during the study abroad experience. The six students who mentioned this subtheme noted how studying abroad helped them to rely more on God and be less anxious about what the future holds: ". . . essentially God just, when you put yourself out of your comfort zone or God puts you of your comfort zone, that's when we grow" (Participant 2). Minimal literature addresses spirituality and its effect on study abroad and/or attachment styles, but students indicated that their new insights into how God works overseas played a significant role in their overall intrapersonal growth. Students discussed how these insights helped them to learn more about themselves and shape their view of the world at large.

Finally, five students mentioned becoming comfortable in the uncomfortable as a notable area of personal growth. For example, Participant 7 stated, "I intentionally put myself in situations that make me a little uncomfortable, but I know that through that situation I'm going to become more comfortable." Kim (2013) and Simmons (2014) both found that students who study abroad show an increased ability to cope with new and unfamiliar situations and to deal with stress. Students who study abroad learn new ways of adapting and surviving in tough situations, which, in turn, helps them to keep a positive view of themselves even through such difficulties as rejections in relationships (Kim, 2013). Keeping a positive view of self through adverse situations is a major factor in students developing a secure attachment style. Since most of these students did not live

with a roommate from their home institution, one way for students to put themselves in uncomfortable situations may be to live with either a host family or local students.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The results and findings from this study provide some recommendations for practice for institutions that hope to help students develop a secure attachment style, which is recommended by existing literature. The first and most obvious implication is that study abroad is an impactful experience. Whether a semester away from campus explicitly affects students' attachment style or simply helps students grow as individuals, institutions should encourage students to study abroad. While a semester abroad may not be feasible or even advisable for every student, the majority of research and this study show the many potential benefits for students who study abroad.

The second implication of this study is that institutions should consider the timing of students' study abroad experiences. The slight correlation between positive personal growth and studying abroad earlier indicates that it might be beneficial to encourage students to study abroad in their early years of college rather than their last few years.

Thirdly, administrators should provide space for students to reflect on their experiences. Since students who had been back longer were slightly more likely to exhibit a secure attachment style, it seems that having additional time to reflect on their experience is beneficial. However, students who study abroad later in their college career do not always have this time; therefore, institutions should seek additional ways of helping students to reflect on their experience in order to enhance their learning.

Finally, administrators and institutions should give careful consideration to the design of their programs, particularly the living situations of the students. The interview

participants indicated that being “pushed out of their comfort zone” lead to most of their personal growth. Therefore, facilitators of study abroad programs should consider encouraging students to live outside of the traditional “dorm setting” and instead stay with a host family or with international roommates. This helps students to get involved in and experience a new culture instead of providing an experience similar to their home university, simply in another country.

### **Limitations**

This study had, as all studies do, a number of limitations that factored into the data collection and analysis. The first limitation is the lack of a comparison group. If the researcher has sampled a general population of students for their attachment style, more in-depth correlations and conclusions could have been drawn regarding the impact of the study abroad experience. Without a proper comparison group, it is difficult to analyze properly whether the percentage of students with a secure attachment style is different in the population of students who study abroad when compared to the general population of students at the university.

The second limitation is that the researcher did not conduct a pre- and post-test of respondents’ attachment styles. Therefore, there is no way to tell if students’ attachment styles are affected by a study abroad experience or if students with a certain attachment style are more likely to study abroad in the first place.

A third limitation comes with the demographics of the survey respondents. All respondents were from a small, private, religiously affiliated university in the Midwest. Additionally, there was low male participation in the survey. The demographics of the



interview participants proved a similar limitation. All interview participants were female, and no minority students participated in the interviews.

Another limitation is the use of a modified version of the ECR-S. This short form of the ECR is a less precise method of determining attachment style. Also, the scale was originally designed to analyze the relationship with romantic partners, but the researcher modified it to apply to all attachment figures.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the bias of both the researcher and the respondents/participants. The participant selection bias is present because they chose to participate in the study, demonstrating they thought their experience was transformational and interesting enough to share with others. Additionally, although the researcher attempted to bracket out personal life experience, there remains a degree of bias since it is impossible to fully bracket out the researcher's own preconceptions about study abroad.

### **Future Research**

As with the limitations, the suggestions for further research are many. Because this topic has not been investigated often, there is a lack of research on the subject of attachment theory and its effect on the college experience as a whole, particularly its relationship to study abroad experiences.

Firstly, the researcher recommends a pre-test/post-test study to see if a study abroad experience actually changes a participant's study abroad experience. This study could also show if students are more likely to choose to study abroad if they have a certain attachment style.

Secondly, more research could be done into possible implications of factors of study abroad. Interview participants strongly indicated host family experiences as a

significant factor of their experience. A study determining the effects of a student's living situation (alone, with other students, or a host family) could prove quite informative when discussing the overall effects of studying abroad.

Additionally, a study determining if a student's attachment style effects his or her overall experience could be illuminating. The quantitative analysis indicated a weak negative correlation between attachment style and reflection on the experience. It may be of interest to determine if this is a result of certain attachment style leading to a student's pessimism or optimism about his or her personal growth during the experience.

Another idea for future research is to investigate the role of spirituality and religion in both study abroad experiences and attachment style. All of the interview participants mentioned spiritual growth as a major factor of their experience, but little literature exists investigating these phenomena.

Finally, further research should be done into possible factors during the college experience that could affect a student's attachment style. The literature shows that helping students to develop a secure attachment style helps them in many areas of their life. Identifying what factors promote and inhibit a secure attachment style could equip colleges and universities to help their students develop a healthier attachment style.

## **Conclusion**

College is a significant time of transition for students, as they seek to both transfer into college as well as eventually out of college in a healthy manner. One factor that has been show to help students navigate this transition well is the development of a secure attachment style (Lane, 2014). Helping students to develop secure attachment styles should be on the minds of administrators as they seek to facilitate developmental

experiences for students during their time in college. One such experience is spending a semester studying abroad. Institutions must work to encourage students to study abroad in order to help them increase their positive view of themselves and their positive view of other people, thus contributing to the development of a secure attachment style. It should be encouraging for administrators and facilitators of such experiences to know that students who do study abroad usually return more confident, more accepting of others, and having experienced an intense amount of personal growth in their interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Questions**

#### **ECR-S**

- It helps to turn to those closest to me in times of need.
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Slightly Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Slightly Agree
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
- I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by those closest to me.
- I want to get close to others, but I keep pulling back.
- I find that those closest to me don't want to get as close as I would like.
- I turn to those closest to me for many things, including comfort and reassurance.
- My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
- I try to avoid getting too close to others.
- I do not often worry about being abandoned.
- I usually discuss my problems and concerns with those closest to me.
- I get frustrated if those closest to me are not available when I need them.
- I am nervous when others get too close to me.
- I worry that those closest to me won't care about me as much as I care about them.

#### **Program Characteristics and Demographics**

- Have you studied abroad for a period longer than 4 weeks during your time at Taylor (Not including January Term trips)?

- Yes
- No
- Gender
  - Female
  - Male
- Current Academic Year
  - Freshmen
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
- Academic Year Studied abroad:
  - Freshmen
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
- Academic Semester studied abroad:
  - Fall
  - Spring
  - Summer
- World Region
  - South America
  - Africa
  - Asia
  - Europe
  - Australia
  - Canada or Mexico
- Length of time abroad
  - 4-6 weeks

- 6 weeks-4 months
- longer than 4 months
- I stayed with
  - Host family
  - North American roommate
  - Local roommate
  - myself
- I interacted most with
  - Myself
  - North American students
  - Local students
  - Local residents
- My interactions with people from another culture
  - Looked very different than with people from my native country
  - Looked somewhat different than with people from my native country
  - Looked the same as with people from my native country
- My engagement with the local language before I arrived
  - I and the people around me all spoke my native language
  - I knew nothing of the native language when I arrived
  - I was semi-fluent in the local language when I arrived
  - I was completely fluent in the local language when I arrived
- My engagement with the local language during my time there
  - I did not learn a new language during my time abroad
  - I learned the local language in a formal classroom setting
  - I learned the local language mostly through informal interactions with local people
  - I learned a new language mostly through interactions with my host family or roommate

**Experience Reflection**

- My experience taught me something new about myself
  - Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
- My experience increased my understanding about myself
- I view myself differently since my experience
- I value myself differently since my experience
- My experience taught me to view others in a different light.
- My experience increased my ability to understand others
- I view others differently since my experience
- I value others differently since my experience
- My experience increased my ability to express my ideas, opinions, and thoughts verbally
- My experience increased my ability to interpret the verbal cues of others
- My experience increased my ability to interpret the non-verbal cues of others
- My experience increased my ability to work with others to find a mutually agreeable outcome
- My experience increased my ability to work with others to identify, define, and solve problems
- My experience increased my ability to communicate freely with others concerning my values, ideas, beliefs, opinions, needs, and wants.



## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

- What did your interactions with others look like during your study abroad experience?
  - Other students
  - Professors
  - Locals
  - Host families
- Do you think your interactions with others have changed as a result of your time abroad?
  - Other Taylor students
  - Family
  - Friends
  - Others
- How has your study abroad experience changed your perspective about relationships with others?
  - More tolerant
  - Stereotypes
  - View of community
- How has your study abroad experience affected you behavior?
  - More confidence
  - More independence
  - More flexible/better coping
- Do you feel like you learned something new about yourself through your experience?
  - How you view yourself
  - How you value yourself
- Do you feel like you learned something new about those closest to you through your experience?
  - How you view others
  - How you value others
- Do you think your study abroad experience has affected your closest relationships?

## **Appendix C**

### **Informed Consent for Survey Participation**

#### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT**

##### **A Convergent Parallel Study of the Intersections Between Study Abroad and Attachment Theory**

You are invited to participate in a research study concerning the intersection between study abroad and attachment styles. You were selected as a possible subject because of your participation in an international study abroad program. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. The study is being conducted by Maddy Trudeau a graduate student in the Master's of Arts in Higher Education program (MAHE)

#### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine how studying abroad may or may not affect your ability to form close relationships.

#### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of at least 30 subjects who will be participating in this research.

#### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:  
Complete the attached survey which should take \_\_\_ minutes

#### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While on the study, the risks are:

Exceedingly minimal and unlikely. However, it is possible that if your study abroad experience was a particularly negative one, the survey could cause you to think back and re-experience some of the negative emotions associated with your study abroad experience.

While completing this survey you have the right to not answer any question you feel uncomfortable or unable to answer.

#### BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

The benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are: the survey may help you to reflect on your experience and studies have shown that reflecting well on an experience increases the benefits received from that experience. Other than this, there is no direct benefit to the participant.

#### ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

Instead of being in the study, you have the option to choose not to participate.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. Your name and information will not be attached to the data you provide unless you choose to supply your email at the end of the survey for further participation in the study.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Dr. Scott Gaier, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### COSTS

There are no costs associated with being a participant in this study.

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### COMPENSATION FOR INJURY

Because there are no anticipated risks of physical harm for participating in this study there is no compensation for injury.

#### FINANCIAL INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The researcher does not stand to benefit financially from this study.

#### CERTIFICATE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

[If a certificate of confidentiality has been obtained for this study, include the required informed consent language found in the approved certificate of confidentiality.]

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study contact the researcher Maddy Trudeau at 765-667-4009. In the event of an emergency, you may contact Maddy Trudeau at 765-998-0655.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University or the MAHE program. Your participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to your consent in the following circumstances: if for some reason the data you provide is unusable.

**SUBJECT'S CONSENT**

*(This section should be in first person.)* In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D**

### **Informed Consent for Interview Participation**

#### **TAYLOR UNIVERSITY**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT**

##### **A Convergent Parallel Study of the Intersections Between Study Abroad and Attachment Theory**

You are invited to participate in a research study of the intersection between study abroad and attachment style. You were selected as a possible subject because you indicated your willingness at the end of the previous survey. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Maddy Trudeau a graduate student in the Master's of Arts in Higher Education program (MAHE)

##### **STUDY PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine both how your attachment style may affect your ability to reflect on your study abroad experience and how your study abroad experience may have affected your attachment style.

##### **NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 8-12 subjects who will be participating in this research.

##### **PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:  
Participate in a 30 minute interview with the researcher.

##### **RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:**

While on the study, the risks are:

Exceedingly minimal and unlikely. However, it is possible that if your study abroad experience was a particularly negative one, the survey could cause you to think back and re-experience some of the negative emotions associated with your study abroad experience.

While completing this survey you have the right to not answer any question you feel uncomfortable or unable to answer.

#### BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

The benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are: the survey may help you to reflect on your experience and studies have shown that reflecting well on an experience increases the benefits received from that experience. Other than this, there is no direct benefit to the participant.

#### ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

Instead of being in the study, you have the option to choose not to participate.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. Your name and information will not be attached to the data from your interview in the final document and presentation. Only the researcher will have access to any recordings or transcriptions that result from your interview.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Dr. Scott Gaier, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

#### COSTS

There are no costs associated with being a participant in this study

#### PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

#### COMPENSATION FOR INJURY

Because there are no anticipated risks of physical harm for participating in this study there is no compensation for injury.

#### FINANCIAL INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The researcher does not stand to benefit financially from this study.

#### CERTIFICATE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

[If a certificate of confidentiality has been obtained for this study, include the required informed consent language found in the approved certificate of confidentiality.]

#### CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study contact the researcher Maddy Trudeau at 765-667-4009.

In the event of an emergency, you may contact Maddy Trudeau at 765-998-0655.

#### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University or the MAHE program. Your participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to your consent in the following circumstances: if for some reason the data you provide is unusable.

#### SUBJECT'S CONSENT

*(This section should be in first person.)* In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Subject's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Subject's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

