

Taking the Plunge into Culture Shock:  
Study Abroad Elements Impelling Cultural Adjustment

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**Chapter One**

**Taking the Plunge**

Studying abroad is considered a pivotal point in a students' university experience—one that can positively shape students as individuals and citizens, but can also offer students a mixed-bag of personal challenges. In the 2013-2014 academic school year, over 280,000 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit (Institute of International Education 2013). Study abroad posters line campus hallways, touting foreign exchange as a prime opportunity for students to grow while experiencing a new, stimulating culture. Effective cross-cultural adjustment, however, is not inevitable. Consider two examples. While studying abroad in Cusco, Peru in autumn 2012 with 12 students, I noticed that some but not all peers adjusted to the new culture with ease. For example, Chad\* progressed rapidly in his Spanish classes, hiked with local friends in the Andes, sampled Peruvian cuisine, and developed a close relationship with his host family. Other students struggled. Alicia favored American cooking rather than what she called her host family's "mystery meat," and resolved to eat a majority of her meals at the Plaza De Armas Burger King. A dislike of outdoor activity kept her from weekend hikes, and differing religious beliefs dissuaded her from cultivating close relationships at home. Chad and Alicia's differing experiences are two of many that spurred my desire to examine elements of studying abroad that may impel or impede students from adjusting to their new cultural surroundings.

To understand the cultural bones constructing a host society, students must be able to obtain a deep understanding of the meaning of their new surroundings. Comprehending a new environment entails learning how to best synthesize the stimuli of the novel host culture. This occurs primarily through communication. Every society lives, according to Dewey (1916), within a community of shared commonalities that they come to possess by way of

communication. A like-mindedness of similar aims, beliefs, aspirations, and knowledge thread a society together, and the norms of communication become shared “emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements” (p. 4). Due to shared history and a mutual sociocultural setting, a society acts and reacts—and individual people do too—via communication. An exchange student living within a new community hopes to become immersed temporarily into a society’s cultural tissue, to generate the kind of internal responses that are aroused in other individuals of the host culture (Mead 1934; Heider 2013). Therefore, he or she needs to understand and enter the overarching conversation linking the individuals of this society. Language is critical to this process, but it requires more than speaking or hearing words. In the view of Montgomery (2010), “For communication to be successful it is essential that speakers across cultures have the same understanding of the deeper, culturally specific, pragmatic meanings of language” (p. 99). Communication is more than using words. In a study abroad context, if messages—verbal and nonverbal—can be effectively sent and received, there can be deep and rewarding, human-to human understanding (Ting-Toomey 1999). A shared comprehension produced by communication provides a crucial link between the student and their perceived place within this new society, and the global community as a whole.

Research has not fully explored the crucial role of communication between student and host society in helping students to achieve healthy cultural adjustments while abroad. I suggest that a failure to effectively communicate with members of the host culture is at the root of all elements impeding cultural adjustment. Scholars have identified and argued that specific variable factors—such as *exchange program length* (Abrams 1960) and *mental and physical ailments* experienced while abroad (Misra & Castillo 2004)—may hinder students’ cultural adjustment. I suggest that communication is key, and I am specifically interested in four communicative

## **Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

characteristics of studying abroad. The first element is *host culture interaction*: the degree a student engages with the host society; second is *host language confidence*: a student's confidence—regardless of fluency—in utilizing the host language; third is *previous experience traveling abroad*: the amount of time a student has spent living in other countries outside the native one; and fourth is *home-host cultural disparity*: the perceptions of cultural difference—encompassing beliefs, values, identity—between the student's home and host countries. If the student is unable to effectively enter the cultural conversation of a society both linguistically and emotionally, or if this communication is surface-level and ineffective, healthy cultural adjustment is unlikely. In this study, in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted to examine whether and how study-abroad students enter their host's cultural conversation, with the focus on communication practices, and how these obstacles might be avoided or overcome.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Conceptual Argument**

For decades, scholars have noted the facilitating role of communication in the sequence of intercultural development over time. Several scholars have created models explaining this process. Most commonly used is a framework by Lysgaard (1955), who defined such adjustment as a u-shaped curve with three stages, positing that a person's location on the curve and future challenges could be predicted. My work is focused on the second, *crisis* stage, so it is important to provide a brief overview of Lysgaard's model. First comes the *introductory* stage, in which wide-eyed, awed students familiarize themselves with their new surroundings and the daily routines of work and leisure in the host society (Ryan & Twibell 2000; Zapf 1991). Second, students descend into a *crisis* phase, a period of severance from the host culture—a perspective of “us” and “them”—during which students may feel a strong sense of ethnocentrism while struggling to communicate and form genuine relationships superseding casual, superficial connections with locals (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003; Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001; Pederson 1994). Third, students may progress to a stage of *integration* if they modify their outlook and behavior to manage and overcome their adjustment problems, ultimately engaging and integrating within the host community. Oberg (1960) developed an acculturation model similar to Lysgaard's. Both scholars attest that students reach the final stage of adjustment only upon forging an appreciation for home-host cultural differences and, ultimately, adapting appropriate cultural responses to the unfamiliar, host culture cues.

Notably, external factors, such as length of stay in the host society, have been found to influence students' progression through these stages; during Lysgaard's study, foreign students

who resided in the United States for 6-18 months were found to be significantly less adjusted than those who lived in the country for less than 6 months or more than 18 months—a pattern suggestive of the u-curve’s shape (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham 2001, p. 81). In this current study, I use Lysgaard’s u-curve to track the general traveler experience, albeit it is understood that different students may encounter the stages in a dissimilar order, or not at all (Yu-Wen Ying 2005; Church 1982; Klineberg & Hull 1979). Regardless of distinct order of stages, I expect that communication between student and host is likely to be crucial in triggering intercultural progression past the crisis stage, and to the final cultural adjustment stage abroad.

I now wish to focus on the crucial second stage of crisis. A form of crisis is fundamental to most cultural adjustment models (Zapf 1991; Berry & Zheng 1991; Kamal & Maruyama 1990). Lysgaard (1955) and Oberg (1960) dub it the crisis stage. Howell (1986) calls this period the *conscious incompetence* stage. Kohls (1979) labels it the *frustration* stage. Each model’s phase of crisis has similar identifiable characteristics. Momentously branded by what Oberg coined as *culture shock*—an “occupational disease” complete with a cause and cure—students in this cultural-transition crisis stage tend to experience symptoms of helplessness, homesickness, irritability, anxiety and disorientation (La Brack 2013; Lee & Koeske 2004; Kim 2001; Zapf 1991). Chiefly, scholars posit that the discomfort of culture shock experienced during this phase is potentially due to an individual’s inability to recognize key cultural cues (Savicki 2011; Argyle 1988). Crisis may temporarily or indefinitely shape a student’s abroad experience—as it appeared to during Alicia’s exchange in Peru. However, scholars generally agree: some travelers find this stage more difficult to overcome than others (Harrison & Brower 2011; Savicki 2011). This study will focus on *why*: why some students overcome crisis to achieve healthy cultural adjustment while others fail to do so, remaining, like Alicia, overwhelmed and culturally

stagnant for the entirety of their exchange. Determining key communication elements aiding and inhibiting integration within the host culture may help students determine how to overcome the unpleasant phase of crisis and effectively adapt, connect and develop abroad. In this research, I focus on four such elements: *host culture interaction*, *host language confidence*, *previous experience traveling abroad*, and *perceived home-host cultural disparity*.

The first element potentially aiding or hindering a students' cultural adjustment abroad is their garnered *interaction with the host society*. In-depth communication with the host provides crucial companionship (Lee, Koeske & Sales 2004; Mallinckrodt & Leong 1992). These relationships offer an opportunity for students to experience the host culture from a native perspective. Through conversations with the host about their culture, the students may begin to view their environment through their hosts' eyes (Williams 2005). A student's success at progressing through Lysgaard's model, I believe, hinges on a student's ability to communicate, to engage with host nationals. Scholarship attributes crisis to an individual's inability to build fulfilling relationships abroad, and loneliness and maladjustment are deemed as consequences of the gap between a travelers' craving for genuine relationships and the realistic time in which these interactions can be secured (Molinsky 2007; Lysgaard 1955). Travelers who interact more frequently with their host society are better integrated within their host community and therefore are less likely to indicate personal depression, report feelings of homesickness and loneliness or a desire to drop out, and are more likely to report academic success, assign a higher rating to both the teaching quality and helpfulness at the host university, and, overall, report increased satisfaction with their total exchange experience (Klineberg & Hull 1979; Kamal & Maruyama 1990; Hull 1978; Westwood & Barker 1990). Scholars acknowledge that not all encounters with acquaintances will prove insightful or enjoyable. Prejudiced individuals may view the student as

an ambassador of their origin, hence using the communication opportunity to castigate the country (Furnham & Bochner 1982). But quality, not quantity of relational engagement largely correlates with a positive experience abroad (Ward & Rana-Deuba 2000; Church 1982). Valuable, local relationships fostered through communication create a stable base from which students may securely explore and investigate their surroundings, learning more about the world and about themselves.

The second element potentially aiding or hindering cultural adjustment abroad is a students' *host language confidence*. Due to its implicit connection with overseas interaction, the ability for the student to fluently communicate using the host language may strongly impact an exchange experience. Students who travel for a longer stretch of time report more language difficulty than those traveling for a briefer period—as, after the “adventurous” introductory period wears away, forming deeper, valuable relationships may be frustrating without the local jargon (Bacon 2002; Lysgaard 1955). While language competency has been dubbed the “*sine qua non*”—or essential condition—for extensive communication with host nationals, scholars have found that confidence in one's language abilities may trump actual proficiency in securing relationships abroad—as long as the student has the host cultural specific “sociolinguistic awareness of how one uses language within a societal and social context” (Deardorff 2008, p. 38; Gullahorn & Gullahorn 1966; Savicki 2011). Linguistic confidence encourages a snowball effect: secure speakers interact more with locals, more frequent communication leads to greater fluency, and greater eloquence further facilitates future engagement (Bacon 2002; Gullahorn & Gullahorn 1966). After persistent practicing in social settings, beginners of a local language can make fluency gains comparable to and even surpassing that of more practiced speakers, facilitating future discussion with locals (Spender 2011). A resolve to speak the host

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

language—regardless of aptitude—likely assures more local friendships and, therefore, a more fruitful exchange as the student continues communicating, bonding and submersing themselves within the host community.

The third element potentially aiding or hindering cultural adjustment abroad is students' *previous experience traveling abroad*. An assuredness in one's ability to travel due to preceding exchanges paves a more effortless, swifter path to communication between student and host. Students with extensive prior travel experience are more likely to lodge with locals, socialize with mainly local students, and identify a host native as their "best friend" during an exchange (Klineberg & Hull 1979, p. 165). Students less traveled, conversely, report spending less time with fellow nationals, naming fewer host-nationals as their "best friends" and are less likely to choose to live with host nationals. From the perspective of a first-time traveler, establishing relationships with locals appears an enormous and daunting task bounded by the "anonymity and impersonality of social life in the role of a stranger" (Gullahorn & Gullahorn 1966; Brecht & Robinson 1993). Feelings of discomfort and even maladjustment are common among such individuals, whom often seek clusters of like-minded, unseasoned travelers sharing similar ghastly tales of attempts to assimilate abroad (Harrison & Brower 2011; Peltokorpi 2008). A lack of effort to communicate and engage with the host culture only further reinforces sensed alienation and separation of novice travelers, while those with previous experience traveling abroad relish the confidence and comfort characteristic of a grizzled nomad. Past experiences traveling abroad increases students' assuredness in their ability to navigate foreign environments; while inexperienced travelers may feel overwhelmed outside of their comfort zone in a new place, students familiar with travel remain largely unflustered by the newness of their foreign surroundings. From the eye of the experienced traveler, the new setting appears, perhaps, as an

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

unobserved haven to explore, juxtaposed with a new travelers' view of the same place as an unfamiliar, puzzling land to survive.

The fourth element potentially aiding or hindering cultural adjustment abroad is *perceived home-host cultural disparity*. Differences between cultures equals what students see as the stretch from their comfort zone. A students' struggle with molding to and communicating within their new cultural environment depends on the degree of perceived variance between their home and host environments (Lee & Koeske 2004; Earley & Ang 2003; Myers-Scotton 1993). The larger the cultural gap—of differing religions, values and beliefs—between a student's home and host culture, the larger the potential obstacles hindering communication, due to differing social and cultural cues (Ward & Kennedy 1999; Kamal & Maruyama 1990; Spradley & Phillips 1972). After classifying countries of origin into three groups according to similarities in religion, language, and climate, overall cultural difference was found to highly correlate with social difficulty (Lee, Koeske & Sales 2004; Guclu 1993; Furnham & Bochner 1982). For instance, while a trip from the United States to England may demand only modest flexibility, personal pliancy may prove key during a trip from the United States to Cambodia. For some, this need to bend will prove a challenge (Savicki 2011; Bhawuk & Brislin 1992). Due to differing upbringings and sociocultural surroundings, the student and host may view the world through very different cultural frameworks. In an attempt to digest cultural differences, the student may seek to "fit" an unfamiliar scene into an inappropriate framework, which can result in a false understanding of observations (Pederson 1994; Laubscher 1994). Instead, students must work to adapt their cultural framework to discern and facilitate navigation in a new, unfamiliar lifestyle and culture (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman 2003; Anderson 1994; Bettenhausen & Murnighan 1991). In order to successfully adjust, students must learn to digest and traverse successfully

## **Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

within a new environment potentially very different from their own. Perceptions of home-host cultural disparity can present as an opportunity—not to be debilitated by stark cultural differences—but to cultivate both a new cultural understanding, and the ability to adapt and attune to an unfamiliar place.

Communication is the crucial doorway to understanding and immersing within all aspects of the new host culture; without engaging with the host society, students are left to observe their new environment without any explanation or connection with their cultural surroundings. The common denominator of the four factors—*host culture interaction*, *host language confidence*, *previous experience traveling abroad*, and *perceived home-host cultural disparity*—is their shared foundation as explicit communication (the former two) or as elements tied to communication (the latter two). These elements intertwine to create each student's personal exchange experience. A dearth of one, consequently, may encumber a student's ability to connect with or appreciate the host community, sending the other three in disarray. For example, previous experience traveling is likely related to confidence to employ the host's language with locals—and host language fluency likely spurs increased engagement abroad. As students acculturate through the stages of cultural immersion abroad, each of these communicative elements may manifest as a lifeline or destructive force in the process of cultural adjustment. This study seeks to further our understanding of these communication-aligned elements, and their relationship with students' adjustment abroad.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Methodology**

As students participate in study abroad, the focus of this research is on assessing the connection of the four elements with students' cultural adjustment. Specifically, I examined the relationship of *host culture interaction*, *host language confidence*, *previous experience traveling abroad*, and *perceived home-host cultural disparity* with students' experience of the crisis phase. To do this, I utilized a qualitative method to gather data from students currently engaged in study abroad. The qualitative process utilizes the researcher as an instrument of the study. Observations are not restricted by external tools of measurement, such as surveys. Instead, a qualitative approach enables the researcher to immerse mind and body within the data, examining unlimited facets of a focused topic. This method is best fitted to capture a complicated experience constructed of multiple contributing social factors which may be difficult to control and express (Xuehong 2002). Primed to gather and interpret irregular and unpredictable answers and behaviors, a qualitative study captures the uniqueness of situations. The researcher with a qualitative method follows the flow of the incoming data, refining study techniques to better capture the desired information. A study of intense and nuanced student adjustment within a new culture was especially appropriate for a qualitative approach.

Qualitative interviewing provides subjects with the opportunity to share their story in their own ways, on their own terms. Interviews allow respondents to recount experiences without the need to insert their commentary into a researcher's imposed framework. More so than other techniques, the method of interviewing permits the researcher to uncover the inner-workings of the subject: how they perceive themselves, their experiences and the world (Di Cicco 2013;

Burns 2000). Capturing more than ethnographical observations, the exchange of dialogue between researcher and participant provides insight into the character of the subject, lending more context to the information they disclose. This study necessitated students to talk about their experiences abroad, with the four elements of interest as the particular foci. The accounts of the students were captured through an interpersonal, open-ended, question-and-answer process. How the individual disclosed their narrative is revealing, providing further color and dimension to the respondent's disclosures.

To emphasize and accentuate a free flow of ideas, this study used, specifically, a qualitative, semi-structured interviewing method. "Semi-structured" denotes an organized but flexible method of interviewing. For this study, I prepared a list of predetermined questions for each subject, but the order in which the questions were asked was not strictly regulated—and some of the questions were excluded if I felt they would disrupt the subjects' process of disclosure. Without a rigid interviewing structure, subjects can be further probed and questioned for clarification (Barriball & While 1994). The interviewer can assist the subject in brainstorming stories to recount, and encourage the participant further down avenues of discourse that seem promising—the process becomes a team effort to unearth valuable insight that a check-the-box response or more structured interviewing method may omit. More uniform approaches mandate identical question sequences for each subject—and divergent answers are due, then, to differing respondents rather than altered questions. But this strict process assumes respondents share a common vocabulary and a mutual understanding of all words (Barriball 1994, p. 330; Nay-Brock 1983). A semi-structured method captures the variances of character and language by allowing the interviewer to change the course of the conversation to better suit the subject. This method also establishes a sense of rapport with the participant, reducing the

chance of superficial responses meant to purely satisfy social desirability or the apparent needs of the study (Patton 1990). Studying abroad is a complex social phenomenon. A method encouraging detailed accounts provided a fuller picture of cultural adjustment.

### **Participants**

To study a broad spectrum of exchange experiences, a sample from two diverse study-abroad locations were interviewed. A total of eight students participated in this study, four studying and living in Quito, Ecuador and four studying and living in Rome, Italy. To recruit participants, I first accessed a list of Winter 2014 exchange programs for undergraduate students at the University of Washington, located on the University's study abroad office website. Second, I contacted a professor directing an exchange program in Rome via email and asked her to relay the details of this study to her students. Third, I Facebook messaged a description of this study to students whose online profiles indicated that they were studying abroad in Quito. As incentive for the participants, I offered a \$25 University of Washington Book Store gift card for each interview. The first eight students who responded—four via email and four via Facebook—were selected to participate in the study. Due to the process of student selection, an involuntary pre-selection of participant traits exists in this study; the characteristics of students opting to partake, for example, are likely more outgoing and outspoken than others. While this self-selection process may have impacted the results of this study, this same process of student self-selection is not unique from the studies that are the foundation for the conceptual argument, and therefore, in this regard, this study stands consistent and applicable in comparison to the rest.

Among the Rome students, housing was located within walking distance, or a short bus ride, from classes at the UW's Rome Center facility. Three of these four students—two females

## **Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

and one male—completed a program called “Communication and Culture.” The first half of the course concentrated on the fundamental skills of various types of written communication, including travel and feature writing, profiles, photography and graphic design. The second half of the program focused on multi-media project production by the students, who were assigned to document life in and around Rome. During their first three weeks, students also participated in an intensive Italian language course. The fourth student in Rome, a male, participated in a program called “Italy Today: Ancient Glories, Modern Challenges,” a Sociology-European studies course covering current and historical challenges in Italian politics, economics, and society. This student’s curriculum included an Italian culture course in which students learned about the historical development and contemporary value of many structural elements of the host country’s culture, including food, music, religion, wine, art and architecture.

The second set of four students—one female and three males—studying in Quito were housed with host families. Students took Spanish grammar, Latin American literature, and Hispanic cultural classes, and earned one academic university credit completing a service learning course. The Spanish courses were taught at the 300-level, indicating that students had completed at least two years of Spanish language courses prior to the program in Quito. The eight student participants studied diverse topics—Communication, Business, and Language—while abroad, but were similar in age (young 20s), hometown (all grew up in Washington, barring one student born in Korea) and, likewise, shared an aspiration to enjoy a culturally immersive experience while abroad.

Each student was interviewed in March 2014 via Skype. The interviews ranged between 60 and 90 minutes. Before each interview, the student was informed of the intended process and told that at any time he or she could decline to answer a question or choose to discontinue the

interview altogether. Each subject agreed to be recorded. After responding to approximately 20 to 30 questions, the student was thanked for their participation and encouraged to contact the researcher should there be a desire to clarify a response or to add additional information. All recordings were transcribed for analysis.

## **Questions**

Interview questions were grouped thematically, and the interviewer made sure that the full subject range of the planned questions was covered, even if each interview was uniquely tailored to aid a particular subject's disclosure. Questions ranged from general (e.g. "Have you traveled abroad before?") to specific (e.g. "Do you think your previous travels hindered or helped you adjust in your current country?") to ensure that participants had the opportunity to reflect on all aspects of the four elements thought to impact cultural adjustment.

### *I. General Intro-Questions*

1. What's your name/age/major/year at UW?
2. Where are you originally from?
3. Why did you decide to travel abroad?
4. Why did you pick [Quito/Rome]?

### *II. Host communication interaction*

1. Take me through a typical day—who do you usually engage/interact with?
  - a. On a weekly basis, who do you spend the most time with?
  - b. Who are your closest friends in [Quito/Rome]?
  - c. How often do you communicate with city locals in [Quito/Rome]?
  - d. [Quito] tell me about your relationship with your host family.
  - e. [Rome] tell me about your living situation. Do you communicate frequently with roommates/housemates?

### *III. Host language confidence*

1. How much [Italian/Spanish] do you know? How did you learn [Italian/Spanish]?

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

- a. How confident are you in your speaking abilities?
- b. How much [Italian/Spanish] do you use on a daily basis—when specifically do you use it throughout the day?
- c. How easy do you find it to communicate with [Italians/Ecuadorians]? Why?
- d. When, if ever, is communicating with locals a challenge? Why?

### *IV. Previous experience traveling abroad*

1. How experienced of a traveler do you consider yourself?
2. Have you traveled or lived abroad before?
  - a. [If yes] how many times and where? For how long? Why?
  - b. [If yes] Do you think your past travels made the transition to living in [Equador/Rome] easier?
  - c. [If no] Why have you never traveled abroad before?
  - d. Do you plan to travel or live abroad again? Why? Where?

### *V. Home-host cultural disparity.*

1.
  - a. **Personal Disparity:** What are some ways your daily life in [Quito/Rome] is different from your daily life in the United States? (For example, [Quito] perhaps putting toilet paper in a bin. [Rome] maybe locals greet by kissing cheeks?)
  - b. **City Disparity:** What daily differences between Seattle and [Quito/Rome] influence your current life the most?
  - c. What differences have you recognized between [Quito/Rome] and Seattle in terms of beliefs? Morals? Values? How do these differences impact you?
  - d. While interacting with locals, do [Ecuadorians/Italians] communicate differently than Americans? How do these differences impact you?
  - e. [Quito] Are there any cultural differences between your host family and your family at home? Maybe differing religious ideals, or differing morals, or differing values?

### *VI. Anything you'd like to add?*

## Identifying Culture Shock

To distinguish if a student experienced culture shock, identifiers presented by past scholars were used. Conceptually, culture shock is a fundamental component of the *crisis* phase

of Lysgaard's u-curve of cultural adjustment. As defined by Pederson (1994), culture shock is "an internalized construct or perspective developed in reaction or response to the new or unfamiliar situation" (p vii). Therefore, first—in a literal sense—I examined the student interview transcripts for any reported "shock," or reactions, caused by the new constructs of students' host culture. Specifically, manifestations of culture shock often revealed in student behavior and emotion (Ward, Bochner, Furnham 2001). Operationally, symptomatic indications of culture shock included statements of homesickness, disorientation, helplessness, ethnocentrism, anxiety, and disgust (Pederson 1994; Oberg 1960). Triggers of culture shock were suggested by following the trail of these characteristic symptoms to the causes as claimed by students. By utilizing past scholars' methods for identifying the cornerstones of culture shock in an individuals' abroad experience, the responses of the eight students in this study were carefully inspected for this key facet of the cultural adjustment continuum.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Results**

This study examined the relationship of four elements—*host culture interaction*, *host language confidence*, *previous experience traveling abroad*, and *home-host cultural disparity*—with students' cultural adjustment abroad, specifically their experience of culture shock. Across the eight interviews, two key patterns emerged. First, students' depth of their cultural immersion correlated with the extent of their experience of culture shock. In other words, the more cultural engagement a student reported, the more culture shock he or she claimed to feel. Second, the two geographically separated clusters of students described starkly different experiences and outcomes. Specifically, the four students in Quito evinced significant symptoms of culture shock that they said would linger, while the four students in Rome appeared unaffected by their time abroad. In this chapter, I present a general overview of the manifestation of the four elements in this study's interviews. The final chapter will move into a deeper discussion of these results.

#### **Host Culture Interaction**

Across the two examined groups, living situations surfaced as the chief instance of student interactions, and differences between the student groups were apparent. Specifically, students in Quito lived with host families and commonly developed intimate relationships with the Quiteños in their temporary homes abroad; indeed, students in Quito cited their chief local interaction to be their Spanish-speaking host families. Students in Rome, conversely, lived with their U.S. classmates and found interacting with locals in the city a mostly insurmountable challenge. In fact, students in Rome shared in common a principal local interaction—an English-

speaking restaurant host named Boren. The students in the two programs seemingly lay at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of garnered local interaction.

By the end of their abroad experience, students in Quito considered themselves an extension of their host family. All four students developed markedly close connections with their hosts. During his interview, for example, Charlie described a struggle with personal anxiety. This topic became a comfortable dinner-table discourse with his Quito host family.

It gets pretty deep for what you consider normal, around-the-dinner-table conversations...like sitting around the table with your family—[whom] I've only known for a little over two months now—and openly discussing mental health and their own personal issues...I consider my [biological] family to be really open with each other, but here, I feel like I really know them and it hasn't been hardly any time at all.

Jack presented an aggressive approach toward interacting with locals in Quito: "I'm paying a heck of a lot of tuition to be in South America," he said. "So for me it's like, I'm literally going to talk to every South American who crosses my path." Living with a family was unfamiliar territory for Jack, who moved out of his biological family's home at 16, but he nevertheless quickly embraced his new environment. "I realized how much I liked simple things," he said. "Like eating with people, or when people asked me how school went." Sarah interacted with her host mother during their private "chat time" each evening at dinner, when her host mother often imparted "Some worldly advice about traveling or health," she said. "And we're both religious, so that's kind of a cool thing to talk about, to see her perspective, because she's 61 and I'm 21." Mike detailed the boundless nature of his interactions with his mother. "I can talk to her about practically anything," he said. "I can talk to her about politics, I can talk to her if my day's shitty, I can talk to her about, where's her husband?" Mike described his interactions with various Quito community members as well. "I'm actually on a first name basis with a lot of members of the community," he said, "because I just really like to talk to them all and really learn about their

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

lives.” He added, “It’s just awesome to really get to know about the people here, where they live, their culture.” Commonalities and disparities between the Quito students and host society provided ample discussion material for interactions with locals in the city, and for shared meals and moments with host families.

In contrast, when asked to detail their foremost local interactions, students in Rome offered much more cursory responses—and shared a surprising commonality. Three of the four students detailed their interactions with one English-speaking individual: Boren, an Italian restaurant host near the students’ housing. Describing her interactions with him, Becky said: “There’s a restaurant right next to our apartment, so we interact with the guy at the restaurant a lot. His name is Boren, and he’s really friendly. He says ‘hi’ all the time to anyone in our program.” Rachel said, “Probably the closest relationship I’ve formed here, there’s this little restaurant down in campo...the first time I walked by this restaurant I was like, ‘This guy is way too forward,’ but you know, now he calls me ‘spicy blond American,’ so it’s all good.” David said, “We’ve made friends with this guy who works at the restaurant, his name’s Boren. I began just speaking Italian with him...Sometimes I’ll just go down there and be like, ‘Lo vado al palestra’ and that means, ‘I’m going to the gym’ and he’s like, ‘Oh, bravo.’” Many students indicated that David had the most local interaction, and he said, “Now when I go out at night, I’ll meet a group of Italian guys and just hang out with them.” Yet despite David’s eagerness to interact with locals, he said that the conversation topics of these hangouts were rarely profound. “For the most part, these Italian guys, I think they just get a kick out of finding an American who can speak Italian, so they’ll just joke around with me usually,” he said. “We generally won’t have a super deep conversation... ‘Come drink with us, come club with us,’ that generally happens.” David also identified his living situation—seven male U.S. classmates—as largely

influencing his interactions with locals. His roommates primarily flocked to *Americanized* establishments to listen to *American* music and have interactions with other *Americans*. Overall, the Rome students had relatively little interaction with locals.

### **Host Language Confidence**

Confidence with—and therefore use of—the host language emerged as a major difference between the Quito and Rome groups. Specifically, students in Quito completed a minimum of six quarters—or two years—of college-level Spanish language classes before traveling to Ecuador, and as a result they reported primarily employing Spanish to communicate with locals. Students in Quito reported communicating with a broad range of locals in Spanish: from taxi drivers and street vendors to fellow volunteers and host family members. Furthermore, the Quito students' language acquisition increased during their program's language classes. Students reported, for example, picking up on the local jargon during lessons, and utilizing these colloquial terms in public. This heightened ability to banter in Spanish perpetuated students' self-assuredness and confidence to approach and communicate with strangers in Spanish. Students in Rome, in contrast, spoke little to no Italian before and during their program, and as a result, were limited to communicating mostly in English. The Rome students' program was called "Communication and Culture," and comprised largely of instruction on travel and feature writing in English. Therefore, lessons were unrelated and unhelpful for students' acquisition of the host language. Students reported their inability to speak the host language as stunting promising exchanges, even when the opportunity for significant conversation presented itself. For example, one student described spending hours with a local grocery store owner, after the vendor shut down her shop to paint the students' nails. However, those hours were spent largely in silence, due to the

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

encumbering language barrier. These differences in confidence regarding the host language had significant implications, as will become apparent.

The main focus of the Quito curriculum was to absorb Quiteño culture and acquire Spanish language fluency. Students' aspirations for uninhibited conversations with locals were clear. For example, three months prior to studying in Quito, Charlie participated in a similar language-intensive program in Peru. To improve his Spanish and deepen his cultural immersion, Charlie applied to study in Ecuador. And after a total of six months abroad, he described feeling as though he'd acquired years of language proficiency. While his host family claimed to know a fair amount of English, Charlie said conversations were more fluid in Spanish; this was likely, he explained, because of his consistent progress with the language—linguistic headway he noticed from his peers as well. Jack, laughing, recalled the start of the program: "I was using words that I didn't understand in ways that other people didn't understand," he said. After two months abroad, Jack became confident in his ability to communicate effectively in Spanish. In fact, he said, he increasingly caught himself "code-switching." As he said,

I'll code switch while I'm speaking English because the majority of what I speak here is Spanish. My family speaks Spanish, I speak Spanish at school, I speak Spanish in the street. And now when I speak English...I can think of [the word] in Spanish, but I can't think of what it is in English.

Jack recalled one prized morning when his host mother knocked on his door, "And I responded in Spanish: 'Mande?' Which means, 'What do you need from me?' and she's like, 'Oh my god, you sound like an Ecuadorian!'" Mike reveled in a similar moment: An Argentinian woman in Rio de Janeiro asked him where he was from, "and I said, 'I'm from the U.S.' and she said, 'No, where are you really from? You have an Ecuadorian accent.'" He called it "the best compliment I've ever received." Mike expressed a developing pride as his fluency increased; he had a propensity to either stop talking or completely monopolize a discussion if a classmate used a

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

“horrible accent” while speaking with a local—Mike greatly disliked any association with someone seemingly not giving the program their “all.” “I can be a conversation hog,” he said, “but I guess that’s for the best because I’m trying to learn as much as possible.” Jack stated a similar sentiment regarding the practice and use of the host language:

I feel like as a foreigner who has the opportunity to learn the language that is predominantly spoken here, I also have the responsibility to give the country that’s hosting me my respect to speak the language that they understand in their spaces, because at the end of the day, it’s not my city.

The four students in Quito entered their program with a passion and drive to learn and use Spanish. That commitment to language competency spurred greater and more profound interactions with locals.

The students in the Rome program knew very little to no Italian, with only David having had a quarter of Italian class. Three of the students participated in a three-week crash course in Italian at the commencement of the program, which they said proved largely useless: by the end, Becky said she knew how to say “Hi” in Italian, and Rachel said she absorbed nothing from the course—but added: “You can’t let that hinder you while you’re here. I have this English-to-Italian pocket dictionary that I carry around with me everywhere.” She said, however, that regardless of most students’ effort, communication with locals was very difficult: “For the most part, a lot of Italians do not know much English. And if they do, it’s broken English. Or they have a thick accent, so you often can’t understand what they’re saying.” Shawn, likewise, described his hesitation to use Italian to interact with locals:

It’s not the actual language that’s different. The dialect, the tone, how people talk, the mannerisms, it’s so different that if you just use one quick word of it, you seem even more like a tourist than if you were just to speak English. So that’s why we just speak English, and then if they don’t speak English then we point, and if pointing doesn’t work then there are some charades that I can use to express myself.

## **Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

Of the four students in Rome, David was the most proficient speaker of the Italian language. Close to two-months—two thirds of the way—into the program, David said he began understanding the responses of local Italians instead of hearing “just one long word.” David even described a dream he had in the host language, in which he endeavored to speak a grammatically correct sentence. However, as stated above, due to David’s knowledge of Italian on a “very basic level,” his conversations—and those of his U.S. classmates in Rome—awake and sleeping, were just that: basic.

### **Previous Experience Traveling Abroad**

It turned out that all eight students had relatively small amounts of past travel, providing insufficient data to correlate this element with student acculturation. Three of the students—Jack (Quito), David (Rome), and Shawn (Rome)—were traveling for the first time outside of North America, and the others had traveled only a bit more than their peers. Among the Quito group, Sarah spent three weeks in Spain in high school, Charlie spent three months in Peru the previous fall and two weeks in Europe in high school, and Mike traveled to Vietnam three times and Trinidad once during high school. Within the Rome group, Rachel traveled to Peru once in high school, and Becky, originally from Korea, moved to the Philippines in middle school and flew to the United States for college. If a greater range of past travel existed among students, evidence of the elements’ connection with cultural immersion may have emerged. However, due to a lack of variance on this concept, I was unable to gain a sense of whether amount of previous travel experiences mattered in students’ cultural immersion.

### **Home-Host Cultural Disparity**

## **Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

When asked about disparity between their host and home culture, students in Quito and Rome offered a number of examples. Observations, for example, ranged from misogyny in Quito to societal driving habits in Rome. Specifically, in Quito, students detailed both positive differences between their home and host cultures—such as the affectionate and open nature of Quiteño households—and unsettling disparities such as prevalent homophobia in the largely conservative environment, maltreatment of the cities’ indigenous population, overt misogyny, and lack of women’s rights. In Rome, the predominant home-host disparities offered by students included: an Italian style of communication, traditional methods of ordering coffee, driving methods, drinking habits, eating times, slower speed of life, government instability, equality of society, values of family, and traces of homophobia. Notably, the latter two were offered only in passing, rather than as central distinctions. Overall, both student groups offered a wide range of home-host disparities.

In assessing the impact of those disparities, however, the students in Quito and Rome were markedly different. In Quito, students described a feeling of connection with their observations in the city. That is to say, specifically, when a student perceived a disparity between Seattle and Quito that they disliked, the variance seemed to cause them personal distress. For example, Charlie retold stories he heard of sexual harassment while traveling through Ecuador. Charlie also described witnessing the maltreatment of indigenous Quiteños in the city. “I saw a cop just really manhandling this woman,” he said. “Like grabbing her and throwing her around, throwing her into the back of his cop car, and she wasn’t doing anything.” This discernment of injustice, he said, inhibited his desire to interact with locals. After relating the mistreatment of the native society in Quito, Charlie said:

It’s hard for me and see that everyone else doesn’t care, doesn’t care at all, just completely turns a blind eye and doesn’t think about it twice, it’s hard for me to

feel a close connection or want to be close with someone who thinks like that, which is a lot of the people here. So in that way I think it's been hard for me. I haven't really, besides my brother—I haven't really become good friends with any Ecuadorians.

Mike, likewise, noticed physical and verbal abuse of the indigenous population, which he compared to the treatment of Native Americans in the United States. He also described the openness of the culture as enabling locals to state their opinions idly, despite the potential harmfulness of their insinuations: “The United States is making a real effort, racism doesn't fly. [The U.S.] is not as much of an open culture, so a lot of people get offended by things, which makes us think a lot more before we speak as opposed to the people here.” Mike detailed racism he experienced in Quito, due to the bluntness of the culture.

People are always asking me if I'm Chinese. I'm Vietnamese. They pull their eyes back and make 'chinky eyes,' and it's a really racist thing. That does not fly in the States, but over here it's such an open culture that they just do whatever they want and no one ever gets offended by it.

The racial slurs were not something he took personally, Mike said. He appreciated the open culture in Quito. Americans, he added, can take things too seriously. However, Mike described growing increasingly annoyed by the repetitive attention drawn to his ethnicity by locals. Eventually, he snapped. “We all went out to this bar,” he said, “and someone asked if I was 'Chino', and I turned around and said, 'So what if I am?!' And he gave me the thumbs up and said, 'That's good,' and I realized, 'Oh, I guess they have good intentions when they ask.'”

As Mike dealt with racism, Jack—who identifies as homosexual—dealt with some trying times as he confronted homophobia in Quito's conservative environment. The overt discrimination incited Jack's ethnocentrism and furthered a desire to undertake a gender change once returning home; Jack identified as female before and during his program in Quito. Jack

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

described being screamed at in women's bathrooms due to androgynous appearance, and detailed the misogyny *she* experienced. Jack said,

They do not care about your bodily autonomy, and they will touch you without your permission. But part of that is the culture, it is a very affectionate culture, but without excusing it...which is misogyny, a lot of men here feel they have the right to make uninvited advances on women. And it's really frustrating. It's really difficult, because it's accepted as a cultural norm. They just call it machismo.

The first week of the program, some of Jack's classmates watched an angry mob beat a homosexual man outside of a gay nightclub in the city. Although his host family was aware and accepting of Jack's homosexuality, events like these restrained Jack from revealing his sexual orientation to strangers. In effect, he said he was forced "back into the closet." But while his overall experience was unmistakably very trying, Jack described garnering a profound insight and strength from the adversity:

I'm here to have this totally, completely, life changing, cultural immersion process happening, and those things are happening. So at the same time, day to day life can be very defeating and very frustrating because I don't have the privileges that I have in the United States of being able to completely open, but that's also a very prospective changing experience.

Disparities offered by the Quito students triggered both difficulty and progressive discovery.

Three of the four Quito students reported enduring intense emotions and experiences due specifically to disparities between their home and host culture.

In comparison, students in the Rome group seemed more disconnected to the home-host variances. Shawn—when asked similar questions to the Quito group regarding impact from observed cultural disparities—stated that the slower and more deliberate Italian "speed of life" altered his perspective. The U.S. keystones of "work and responsibility" were overshadowed by the Italian essentials of spending time during the day "with the people you care about." Shawn said that while Seattleites work hard and play hard—drinking to get drunk and encouraging fast-

paced recreation—Italians decelerate their lives to leisurely enjoy food, drink and time with friends and family. Generally, students in Rome reported a largely inconsequential impact from disparities between their home and host culture. Nate, for example, said the higher regard he saw for slowing down to focus on enjoying the company of others chiefly influenced only his—and his classmates’—punctuality.

At first it was a little harder to realize. We were still in our fast-paced, American way of thinking. We’d be walking along faster than people, we would leave later and just get to places on time, and towards the end we started realizing it.

David—when asked about the impact of observed and experienced home-host cultural disparities—said:

I don’t know if I will necessarily be more Italian in the way that I act. I don’t think I will go home and have a three-hour meal. I don’t think I’m going to go home and be very aggressive with women. I love my mom, she’s already the god of my household...I mean, for me, it’s not that it’s necessarily changed me...I might talk with my hands more.

Comparing the two student groups, while observations seemed to impact the outlook and actions of students in Quito, students in Rome reported less meaningful influence from the home and host cultural disparities they experienced while abroad.

### **Culture Shock**

The Quito and Rome groups emerged as practically polar opposites in their manifestations of culture shock symptoms of helplessness, home-sickness, irritability, disorientation, and anxiety. According to Lysgaard’s u-curve of cultural adjustment, after initially experiencing an awe and euphoria within their new environment, students may dip into a period of discomforting culture shock as they grapple to understand and adapt to new cultural cues and norms (Zapf 1991; Argyle 1988; Lysgaard 1955). Students may develop an

ethnocentric “us” versus “them” mentality as vexing disparities become more prominent between their home and host culture. Scholars note that individuals may not experience the phases of intercultural development in the specific “u-curve” sequence, but the expectation is that symptoms of culture shock will occur at some point. And indeed, in Quito some students reported following the established model of cultural adjustment, while others described experiencing culture shock at the beginning of their time abroad; regardless, all students in Quito explicitly mentioned facing crisis while abroad. In contrast, students in Rome appeared not to have encountered culture shock during their time abroad. Students disaffirmed any suggestion of their dealings with the crisis phase’s correlating symptoms. In fact, the Rome students reported remaining largely elated and enraptured by their surroundings throughout the entirety of their program. These differences are detailed in the remainder of this section.

In Quito, students explicitly stated coping with sensations of culture shock. One strong indication of culture shock is feeling an overwhelming sense of ethnocentrism—and indeed, some did. During his interview, Jack said: “I just want to be on American soil, I want to be holding a Starbucks ... and I want to be standing on the campus of my school, wearing an American flag t-shirt, being in the United States.” Jack’s culture shock abroad chiefly correlated with the homophobia he faced:

I’m not going to lie, it was a really rough time, it’s really weird to be very socially isolated, especially in Ecuador—which is a lot more conservative...I mean, I had my days; it definitely was a little hard to get up in the morning a couple of times, to say the least ... I’m being reduced diminutively to this thing that I literally am not, It’s absurd and it’s also very defeating. It’s really, really intense.

Mike explicitly stated his tribulations: “It was a big culture shock; it was completely out of my comfort zone. You know, coming from America, the hardest thing about study abroad is the lack of ability to really be able to express yourself.” Mike found this helplessness overwhelming. He

## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

found himself at a loss, at the start of the program, to effectively understand and convey the intrinsic meanings of everyday communication. “It’s a bit difficult to express everything that you want: to your taxi driver, the server, to your host parents even. So the first few weeks were completely rough.” Charlie explained the telltale signs of the phenomena, which he grappled with while in Peru.

I just really started missing home; I really wanted to go home. I was calling my mom almost every day. I would face-time my friends and they’d be like, ‘I can’t make time to talk to you this much, just wait until you get home.’... I was just trying to put the situation in perspective and be like, ‘It’s totally cool, it’s not even a big deal, it’s almost like the U.S.’ and after a couple weeks of trying to do that—I was like, this is nothing like the U.S. at all...and I was just dying to go back.

The students in Quito related bouts of both light and intense culture shock—either explicitly or through illustrations of symptoms and program outcomes.

Conversely in Europe, students in Rome clearly specified a lack of encounters with the culture shock beast. For example, when asked of any big challenges abroad, Rachel said: “No culture shock, no homesickness.” David stated, “I never got super homesick. There are things I miss ... but in the end I’m still so happy to be here, and I still have my American roommates, so it wasn’t like I was pulled out of the American culture entirely.” When Shawn was asked about his “biggest culture shock moment,” he described realizing how much wine Italians drink. “So people must just think that they’re not drinking,” he said, “Or that they’re just naturally drunk all the time.” After further questioning about any personal struggles or emotional dips while abroad, Shawn responded, “Not in the slightest.” While the students in Rome appeared to not stray from Lysgaard’s *introductory*, honeymoon stage haven of the u-curve of cultural adjustment, the students in Quito appeared to plunge head-first into the culture shock of the u-curve’s crisis phase—this discovery will be expounded on in the following discussion chapter.

**Chapter 5**

**Discussion**

When students study abroad, the common assumption is that they will have a life-changing, transformative experience. At U.S. universities, studying abroad is often listed amid clubs, sports teams, and volunteer work as a crucial milestone of the collegiate experience. Upper-class students encourage freshman to study abroad with claims of inevitable success, citing cultural immersion and vast personal development as concrete outputs. The research in this thesis challenges the perception that any student can be matched with any study abroad program to generate an outcome of profound cultural engagement. Studying abroad, this research argues, does not automatically guarantee a cross-cultural deep dive for the traveling student. Previous scholarship has identified elements impeding and facilitating students' immersion process during study abroad. I examined four communication-focused elements: *host culture interaction*, *host language competence*, *previous experience traveling abroad*, and *perceived home-host cultural disparity*. Communication, I posit, is a crucial tool in entering the cultural fabric of the host society. Integrating within a foreign environment requires grasping the intrinsic nature of a place—the societal structure, values, and dialogue of the host culture. A student must be able to ascertain the cultural meanings of a society, or he or she will become merely an observer instead of a participant. The four selected elements, I suggested, beget or prevent a cross-cultural experience from occurring.

To assess how the elements related to cultural immersion, in March 2014 I interviewed a small sample of students studying abroad in two disparate locations. A total of eight students—four students studying abroad in Quito, Ecuador, and four students studying in Rome, Italy—

were asked a series of in-depth, open-ended questions via Skype. These students consisted of five males and three females, and students ranged in college standing from sophomores to seniors. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and allowed students to disclose trials and triumphs confronted while abroad. Comments by students about their interactions with locals, fluency and use of the host language, and perceived distinctions between home and host culture provided insight into the connection of these elements with students' depth of cultural engagement. Evidence drawn from these conversations supported several conclusions, to which I now turn.

### **Key Findings and Implications**

I begin with the general pattern of distinctively different communication experiences of students in the two programs. First, students in Quito reported a higher quantity and quality of *host culture interaction* than their UW peers in Rome. Students in Quito lived with host families, who were cited by all the students as their primary local interaction, and said they conversed daily with hosts in an unrestricted fashion, often about intimate and weighty topics. Students described developing emotional attachments to their home-away-from-home, and even related a strong desire to visit their new families after returning to Seattle. In contrast, host culture interaction within students' living situations in Rome was largely nonexistent, as students lived with their U.S. classmates, and in terms of local interactions, three of four students cited the same person: Boren, the English-speaking restaurant host. Second, regarding *host language competence*, students in Quito used Spanish to converse with local Quiteños and developed their host language skills in the classroom throughout the program. Notably, all of these students had completed two-plus years of college-level Spanish before heading to Ecuador. In contrast, students in Rome reported very little usage of Italian—and indeed, among the four students

interviewed, only one had completed a quarter of elementary Italian language classes. Third, students in Quito described *home-host cultural disparities* as positive to unsettling, and communicated that they exerted sizeable impact on their outlooks. In contrast, students in Rome said that perceived disparities were not overly meaningful and unlikely to have a long-term impact. Fourth, for students in both the Quito and Rome programs, *previous experience traveling abroad* was relatively little, and as a result there was not sufficient evidence to assess whether this element bears any relation to students' cultural engagement while studying abroad. In sum, three of the four communication elements emerged as substantially distinct between the Quito and Rome students.

Second, the pattern of culture shock in this study was clear: students in Quito experienced the phenomena, but students in Rome did not. All four students in Quito explicitly stated that culture shock was a component of their time abroad; granted, each student coped with different characteristic symptoms of the phenomena. Specifically, students in Quito detailed tackling a concoction of anxiousness, social isolation, ethnocentrism, irritability, sadness and homesickness while abroad (Pederson 1994; Oberg 1960). Each student described the ascension of these sentiments for different reasons—whether incited by an observation in the city or an interaction with a local. As each new layer barring students from cultural adjustment peeled away, students reported new roused psychological and behavioral reactions—likely the emotional implications from confrontations with culture shock. In contrast, students in Rome described no ardent symptoms of crisis or culture shock. In fact, the internally stirring sentiments reported by Rome students were predominantly awe, euphoria, communality, and gaiety. All of these attitudinal responses fall in the first stage of Lysgaard's u-curve of cultural adjustment: the honeymoon, *introductory* phase. This suggests that Rome students may never have progressed from the initial

phase of scholars' sequence of intercultural development. Lysgaard describes the characteristics of this primary period as:

One's energy is gratifyingly spent in registering available facilities for work and pleasure, in observing American patterns of living, in familiarizing oneself with the routines of everyday life in work and leisure. One is happy making acquaintances among the personnel at the institution in which one works...one is gratified by the adventure of being 'abroad', seeing new things...social contacts are still somewhat accidental, superficial and segmental, concerned with specific and limited situations which do not involve the total personality (1955, p. 50).

Students in Rome were content to socialize primarily with their American classmates. The splendor of the artful city captured their interest; and wandering the streets with U.S. peers, while occasionally enjoying a pasta or surface-level conversation with an English-capable local, satisfied their quota of coveted worldliness abroad. While students in Quito seemed to recognize the personal benefits of overcoming culture shock—and therefore attempted to best embrace the often difficult constituents of the phenomena—the students in Rome appeared content to remain distant enough from their surrounding culture to afford them a clean, comfortable, tourist-version of the host city.

These data spur what is the most significant conceptual outcome for this research. At the outset of this study, I viewed culture shock to be an undesirable but unfortunately essential hurdle of cultural acculturation—a difficult phase to be *surmounted* or *survived* en route to cultural understanding. This perspective is how the concept is largely discussed in scholarship on cultural adjustment, as the second *crisis* phase of Lysgaard's (1955) u-curve of cultural adjustment (see also: Ward, Bochner, & Furnham 2011; Kim 2001; Church 1982), preceded by the *introductory* stage and succeeded by an *integration* stage. Before conducting interviews with students, I viewed culture shock as an existential abyss, likely to spur less intercultural participation, propagate a dislike of the host culture, and discourage open-mindedness among

students to their new environment. Now, however, I have begun to think of culture shock as desirable, as a boon worth the discomfort, angst, and unsettlement. Culture shock, I have come to think, is an *indicator of students' cultural immersion*; that is, a students' strain or inurement under the unfamiliarity of culture shock is a denotation of their headway into the culture. For students studying abroad, culture shock is the manifestation of a tussle with the inner, foreign contents of a new culture: it is a confrontation causing questions to emerge about both the individual and the host. Students who experience culture shock were actively engaged with the foreign culture.

Communication practices were central to this engagement. At the commencement of this thesis I suggested that to understand the cultural bones constructing a host society, students must be able to obtain a deep understanding of the meaning of their new surroundings, and this would occur primarily through communication. The evidence in this research supports this perspective. As Williams (2005) argues, "Essentially, effective intercultural communicators must have an understanding of cultural communication differences, an ability to overcome those barriers, and a desire to use those skills" (p. 359). Students in Quito used the host language to enter the overarching conversation of their host society, both emotionally and relationally. In contrast, the largely nonverbal communication used by students in Rome was detailed by students as insufficient for intercultural understanding. A foundation of dialectal communication appeared as a requisite for the formation of an emotional connection between student and host society; understanding and speaking Spanish seemed rudimentary before students could seek insight from the conversation taking place. Originally, I suspected that students in Rome would effortlessly immerse within their host culture due to the cosmopolitan nature of Rome and a seeming greater similarity to Seattle. However, students' inability to speak Italian led students to report

communication with locals as largely ineffective and surface-level. In result, the students seemed to remain disconnected from their surrounding culture. An emotional connection cannot be formed, this research argues, unless students build an intrinsic bond through communication. As stated by past scholars, to immerse within a new environment, an individual must be able to generate a matching internal response in themselves as they arouse in the individuals of the host culture (Mead 1934; Heider 2013). This emotional connection, this research argues, is the building blocks for culture shock. After laying the foundation of communication, students may begin to unpack the similar and dissimilar aspects of their new environment, leading to a greater understanding of—and immersion within—the host culture.

Such cultural shock, and thus deep engagement, has profound personal benefits: in this study, those who experienced greater communication connection and more culture shock also reported undergoing increased character growth and cultural immersion. Adler (1975) asserts that culture-shock should be perceived as a phenomenon that leads to personal development and self-awareness (Kim 2001; Ruben 1989). Culture shock, he argues, is not a “disease for which adaptation is the cure,” as described by Oberg, but conversely, lies “at the very heart of the cross-cultural learning experience, self-understanding and change” (p. 29). This study supports Adler’s claim. Specifically, while the students in Quito detailed numerous indicators of culture shock—including homesickness, ethnocentrism, hopelessness and isolation—and even explicitly stated that they had tackled “culture shock” during their span abroad, they simultaneously described being impacted positively long-term by their experiences. Consider the example of Jack. In tandem to positive cultural and personal insight, Jack also dealt with prevalent homophobia in Quito, which incited his ethnocentrism and desire to undertake a gender change once returning to Seattle. As a woman during the program—due to her androgynous appearance—Jack described

frequent unnerving incidences in women's restrooms. "Oh I've gotten screamed at in bathrooms," she said, "And people stare at you for a really long time, it's just very conservative." Observing and experiencing the treatment of homosexuals in Quito was, Jack said, "A very perspective changing experience." While his experiences furthered his appreciation for his own rights and treatment in the United States, he concurrently reported stepping into the shoes of akin individuals in Quito—and his eyes were opened to some harsh realities, deepening his understanding of a vastly disparate community construct. As Jack faced homophobia, Mike tussled with the blunt honesty of the Quiteño culture. While Mike's Vietnamese heritage elicited racial slurs in his community environment, he concurrently admired this honesty and openness of the culture—the communal encouragement and ability to speak one's mind. Specifically, Mike said he appreciated the "Personal questions that you can just ask off the bat...I get to know someone so much better, so much quicker, just from that. I feel like in the States I have to be a bit more cautious about what I have to say." In sum, culture shock from cultural disparities often revealed in a mix of disorienting and pleasant forms; a grappling with culture shocks' many manifestations, nevertheless, aligned with a student's new understanding of themselves and their host culture. Adler described culture shock as a transitional period, a "movement from a state of low self- and cultural awareness to a state of high self- and cultural awareness" (p. 15). While observing their environment and utilizing their host language competency to strengthen relationships with locals, the students in Quito—stepping outside their comfort zone—dug deeper, reporting disparities between their home-host culture, and the influences of these disparities on their personal character and view of their home and host cultures.

In Rome, in contrast, things were different. Students there negated experiencing any of the cornerstones of culture shock and overtly affirmed themselves as largely untouched by the

phenomena; for example, Shawn responded, “Not in the slightest” when asked if the changes in his cultural environments had caused any personal difficulties or emotional dips. The students in Rome knew little to no Italian and—in part due to living solely with U.S. roommates—realized few opportunities to learn the host language or, wholly, to interact with locals at all. In result, any conversations between these students and locals were largely trivial, and appeared to nullify students’ unearthing of influential home-host culture disparities. In effect, when an appreciated or discomforting difference was observed, these students may have been too far removed from their host culture to personally connect with their new cultural insights. Evidence of this observation was offered by David, who said: “If you were to thrust me into a completely new environment with people I didn’t have any relations to at all, I would have been fine, but it would have been a culture shock. I think this way I got to test the waters. I was put into the Italian culture, but I still have my American culture to fall back on, which was comforting to me.” Simply dipping their toes into the host culture instead of truly getting their feet wet, these students remained within the safety of their comfort zones, and consequently refuted experiencing significant influences from observed home-host cultural disparities. Seemingly remaining as tourists—in comparison to their traveler counterparts in Quito—students in Rome undertook a program experience more similar to a vacation than a trying journey through a continuum of individual and intercultural development.

### **Future Research**

There are several opportunities for future research suggested by this thesis. First, in future work I would employ a more structured format for this study’s interviews, to avoid potential gaps of significant information that I think may have occurred. Questions for each student—

although nearly identical—were not asked in a concrete order, and this differentiation of sequence alone may have caused disparate answers; in future work, subjects should be given the chance to respond to a similar ordering of questions. Second, research subjects should be pre-screened for previous travel experience. I did not do this, and as a result, students' limited variance of this element could not be correlated with cultural immersion in this study. Third, I suggest choosing to interview students who vary on whether they are traveling abroad solo or in groups. All students interviewed in this study traveled with a group of U.S. classmates. Findings in future work may differ if students have chosen to travel alone. A study comparing the cultural immersion and culture shock experiences of students traveling alone versus students studying abroad with peers would also facilitate my overall goal: to help match students with a study abroad program likely to produce desired results—regardless of whether it's cultural comfort or cultural immersion.

In a broad sense, this research offers insights for how students can better pre-select the amount of culture shock they wish to undergo while abroad. Specifically, this study argues that students wishing to undergo more culture shock and cultural immersion may covet a program more similar to that of the students in Quito. Elements of a program facilitating cultural immersion may include: the opportunity for the student to live with a host family, a host language spoken fluently by the student, and marked cultural disparities between the students' home and host culture. In contrast, students wishing for a more lax experience free from the discomfort of culture shock may choose to: live with English-speaking peers abroad, relax behind a language barrier between themselves and locals, and select a destination with relatively few disparities from their home culture. I suggest that students are not merely pawns in a game of study abroad; they should have an informed option to determine just how pivotal this point in

## **Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT**

their university experience will be. In given this agency, students would be able to choose if they wish to take the—immensely challenging yet immeasurably rewarding—plunge into culture shock.

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## Running Head: STUDY ABROAD ELEMENTS IMPELLING CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

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