

Out of Place: Culture Shock and the Reentry Experience

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Abstract

In this study the experiences of *culture shock* and the *reentry process* of 14 St. Olaf College students who had participated in semester-long international study programs were explored in one-on-one interviews. Themes that arose in responses included: social circles, living situations, experiences as an outsider, effects of language, and shifts in attitudes and habits. This interview study revealed that most students *did not* hold previous literature's crisis model language surrounding the constructs of *culture shock* and *reverse culture shock*, suggesting that the current discourse surrounding the experiences of those who enter a new culture and return to a previous one inadequately captures how many St. Olaf College students feel during and after their international study programs.

Keywords: culture shock, reverse culture shock, reentry experience, international study

Summary of Findings

- The current discourse surrounding the term and concept of *culture shock* and *reverse culture shock* inadequately captures how many St. Olaf College students feel during and after international study programs.
- Most students *did not* hold the previous literature's "catastrophic" attitude of inevitable fear and anxiety for those who enter a new culture and return to a previous culture.
- Most respondents either embraced *culture shock* or felt that the concept wasn't applicable or telling of their experience.
- Few saw *culture shock* as a focused anxiety-ridden experience.
- The crisis model language which dominates the discourse of culture shock should change to a language of *cultural shift*.

ABSTRACT

In this study the experiences of *culture shock* and the *reentry process* of 14 St. Olaf College students who had participated in semester-long international study programs were explored in one-on-one interviews. Themes that arose in responses included: social circles, living situations, experiences as an outsider, effects of language, and shifts in attitudes and habits. This interview study revealed that most students *did not* hold previous literature's crisis model language surrounding the constructs of *culture shock* and *reverse culture shock*, suggesting that the current discourse surrounding the experiences of those who enter a new culture and return to a previous one inadequately captures how many St. Olaf College students feel during and after their international study programs.

SETTING

St. Olaf College is a private liberal arts college in southern Minnesota, part of the small town of Northfield which also hosts Carleton College. Founded in 1874, St. Olaf College is a college of the Lutheran church which places a strong emphasis on the values of sustainability, inclusive community, academic strength and a global perspective. Within these values, students are highly encouraged to take advantage of incredible opportunities for international and off-campus study. Nearly 70% of students during their average four years (82% 4-year graduation rate) at St. Olaf will have participated in at least one, if not more than one, of either a domestic or international off-campus program. Students interested in international study, or as it is popularly called "study abroad" are provided with an extensive list of St. Olaf College approved programs: 33 programs are offered as 4-week sessions for Interim term in January, as well as 72 pre-approved semester long programs.

The entire student body is around 3,100, and over 95% of students reside in on-campus housing. There are slightly more females than males, though each year this gap is lessening. Around 85% of the student body define themselves as White, non-Hispanics. Students are

frequently involved in several organizations at once, as St. Olaf College has nearly 250 student organizations, and 27 intercollegiate athletic teams.

Data was collected from a specific group of current St. Olaf students: those who had participated in semester-long international study programs within the last four semesters (Spring 2009-Fall 2010). The final participants in my study were 14 St. Olaf juniors and seniors, 3 male and 11 female. They had participated in a wide range of programs: 3 in Asia, 3 in European countries, 3 in Central and South America, 2 in the Middle East, and 1 each in Russia, Australia and India. Some travelled with other St. Olaf students in a program trip that visited more than one base site during the course of the semester, while others were in a situation of more “on-their-own” living with host families through programs that included students from all over the world. All interviewees were current St. Olaf students as there were limited options of contacting those who had participated in international study but already graduated.

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured guided interviews were the basis of data for this study. An email was sent out to all current St. Olaf students who had participated in semester-long international study programs within the last four semesters (Spring 2009-Fall 2010) inviting them to participate in one-on-one interviews about study abroad. This email was forwarded by Helen Stellmaker to email aliases formed by the International and Off-Campus Studies office of all students who went abroad. It informed them of the goals of the study, the costs and benefits of participation, the confidentiality and volunteer nature of the study as well as to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. I chose to do in-depth interviews rather than a more quantitative analysis because in my initial investigation I found a lack of *qualitative* analysis in previous

studies examining culture shock. For example, John S. Seiter and Debra Waddell's (1989) conference paper and Mumford's (1998) "The measurement of culture shock" involved questionnaires, and Richard M. Wielkiewicz and Laura W. Turkowski (2010) used as one basis of analysis the "Reentry Shock Scale" consisting of 16 items which participants rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale. I believe these forms of analysis miss out on the nuances in the experience of cross-cultural interactions, and therefore a strength of an in-depth ethnographic interview is its more adequate examination of these nuances.

Using themes found in previous scholarly as well as non-academic literature such as blogs and informal conversations, I formulated two pages of interview prompts to perform semi-structured guided interviews in time blocks of up to one hour. All interviews ended up being between 30 and 70 minutes. I conducted a total of 14 interviews of all voluntary respondents to the "Invitation to participate" email. I only turned away two interested participants who responded to the email too late for the time constraints of this study.

To keep respondent answers separate from what many times would be a simple identifiably, (basing information on gender, semester of study, and program of study is quite narrowing) each interviewee was given a pseudonym, and in the writing of this final paper, many quotes and thoughts are generalized out of the specific program and person contexts. Although taking these responses out of context could be seen as a limitation in analysis, I believe that the themes and sentiments present in the interviews were connected enough to benefit from the mixing of specific interview cases, in order to demonstrate overall concepts relating to the experience of *culture shock* and the *reentry* process by St. Olaf students.

Throughout the following paper, I have chosen to use the words "culture shock," "reverse culture shock" and "reentry" to describe the phenomena I explored, not because they are the

most adequate use of language (based on the findings of this study), but rather because they are the most widely accepted and commonly used terms in the international study vocabulary.

Discussed later in the paper are interviewees comments on the difficulties and issues of using these terms to define aspects of international study, but for the convenience of outside readers I have chosen to stay with these as the most easily identifiable constructs. Also interesting to note is that I, the researcher, intentionally did not mention the term 'culture shock' in interviews until after the interviewee themselves had used the term. By the end of the discussion it is easy to note that for describing many international study experiences these terms are limited in their scope and usefulness.

I recorded all one-on-one interviews by pen and paper in a personal notebook, deciding that electronically recording students' interviews poses a risk of making them more nervous, and therefore less open and more cautious about their true sentiments regarding a sometimes difficult adjustment in their lives. After each interview I took 15 minutes to finish annotating ideas they had mentioned. A potential weakness of this method is that in not electronically recording, although there may be more honest responses, there may also be more inaccuracies in the exact phrasing and precise details of the data recorded by the researcher. I then organized all interview notes into a Word document, where I found themes and trends in the comments provided by the interviewees. After I compiled this groundwork data I organized it around themes which I had found in previous scholarly literature. I revisited these prior studies and evaluated how this previous theoretical discourse both frames and conflicts with the findings of my study.

My original sample was going to include only students who had participated in semester-long international study programs in which they were not on a specific St. Olaf program and they stayed in one location for the entire semester. I had these time and location limitations in mind

because of the findings of a previous study at a school of similar demographic characteristics, where findings indicated that those who studied abroad for a semester or more instead of three weeks had significantly higher scores on the Reentry Shock scale, and therefore would seem to have more pertinent information to my study (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:652). Other studies also mention that a shorter study abroad experience may be more tourist-like, so the student does not become immersed in the host culture. Consequently, they may not be able to compare and contrast their home culture with the host culture (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:658) Focusing on semesters that stayed in one location, rather than continuously travelling with a transplanted group of St. Olaf students I believed would mitigate some of the “tourist” sense.

I was able to stay with the proposed time length of a program, one semester, but as I came closer to interviews I had to reframe and modify the location limitation because the email aliases I used to contact all who had studied off-campus for a semester were not separated between individual trips (like the original sample size limitation) and the St. Olaf semesters such as Global and Term in the Middle East. Surprisingly, although this sample then seemed so immensely varied, responses still proved to have intensely common themes and important findings that I discuss in next section.

One small way I reframed the problem as research progressed was also in eliminating a few follow-up questions I had regarding St. Olaf College programs and services for returnees. I had hoped to explore student opinion as to whether or not they felt current St. Olaf College programs and services provided them with necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in a new culture and then return to their original culture. After conducting interviews, I found that students had little to say about specific programs they attended or found helpful, nor had articulated

opinions about the overall experience, so I decided to save those ideas for a possible future study. I did provide an outline of the few direct comments that were collected to the International and Off-Campus Studies Office of St. Olaf College just for their information.

PROBLEM

The overall purpose of this study was to investigate the causes, manifestations and effects of *culture shock* and the *reentry* experience among St. Olaf College students who had participated in semester-long international study programs. I wanted to explore the similarities between “this is how culture shock is described” and “this is how students actually experience it today.” In doing so, I could provide a detailed exploration of how current St. Olaf College students are experiencing culture shock and the reentry process on the current programs approved by St. Olaf College, and provide this as one more resource for the continual development of international study orientations and reentry programming.

I chose this topic because of my own personal experiences. In the Spring of 2010 I participated in an international study program in Valparaíso, Chile, and upon return not only wrestled with ‘culture shift’ (the word I would prefer to use instead of *culture shock*), but was also consistently intrigued and amazed at listening to the stories of others who had studied off-campus for a semester. I had a desire to talk to anyone about my experiences and noted the difficulty even close friends had to find the time to listen. The goals of this study were to provide this outlet for at least a few interview subjects, as well as a resource for the continued development of the international and off-campus study programs at St. Olaf College.

The Institute of International Education noted that in 2005/2006, “223,534 U.S. students studied abroad for academic credit” and that “U.S. student participation has grown 150% over

the past decade” (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:649). The valued outcome of study abroad, stated most simply, is to help an individual acquire a deeper understanding of another culture, and to begin to appreciate and develop empathy for people who are different. As college international study programs become increasingly popular so do the concepts and stereotypes surrounding cross-cultural interactions, including the concept of *culture shock* which this study investigates.

A GENERAL OVERVIEW of ‘CULTURE SHOCK’

Culture shock was first critically analyzed in the late 1950’s, when the term was first used by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in an article based on observations of expatriate Americans (Mumford 1998:149). Oberg defined it as “anxiety that results from losing familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, and their substitution by other cues that are strange” (Brown and Holloway 2008:34). Other researchers shortly thereafter elaborated on similar themes saying *culture shock* was “an anxiety reaction to being unable to understand, control or predict other people's behavior” (Mumford 1998:149). As Abarbanel (2009:136) states, cross-cultural sensitivity does not come to humans as natural nor easy due to such fundamentals as even basic survival instincts of avoiding the unknown. Culture shock is the entirety of emotional reactions to the loss of a person’s normal societal reinforcement, and “often relates to the temporary inability to assimilate the new culture, causing difficulty in knowing what is appropriate and what is not” (Bolen 2007:184).

Various models have been formed over the years to try and qualify how *culture shock* manifests itself, with some overlap yet limited consensus on the signs and stages of this adjustment. Commonly using Oberg’s definition, theorists and scholars have attempted to

delineate a model of transition, pointing out exactly when *culture shock* takes place during transitions between an original culture and the next. In one of the earliest models, Lysgaard made a U-shaped curve, with an initial stage of positive feelings, then a period of maladjustment, and finishing with a positive stage of re-adjustment. Oberg noted four stages in a similar fashion: fascination during a honeymoon period, then a crisis stage of hostility, a third stage of recovery and ending with complete adjustment stage. Shortly after Lysgaard's model, Gullahorn & Gullahorn extended the U-model to a "W," adding the readjustment process and *reentry shock* stage as internationals return to their home country. Since the formulation of these two models, most scholarly literature continues to elaborate on the U-curve and the W- model in four or five stages. Such models include Brown's acculturation model (excitement and euphoria, culture shock, culture stress, adaptation), Adler's model of transitional experience (contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, independence), Mohamed's four step model (orientation and autonomy, transitions of self-worth, consolidation of role identity, competence and integrative maturity) and Torbiorn's model (fascination, culture shock, increased satisfaction, subjective adjustment) (Brown and Holloway 2008:34).

Although most previous studies have found different specific core causes of *culture shock* and *reentry shock*, in general the most commonly noted ones are "Conflicts between cultural values, symbols, behaviors, and rules of the host and home cultures" (Seiter and Waddell 1989:4). Spradley and Phillips (1972:526) wrote that "difficulties in cultural readjustment often arise from the feeling that individuals in the new culture are violating norms learned in one's native land." This quantitative analysis done by Spradley and Phillips in 1972 used a Cultural Readjustment Rating Questionnaire (CRRQ), which included 33 items that they had deemed based on previous research and focus groups as indicative of cultural readjustment processes.

These included habits and sentiments such as eating practices, how punctual people are, spoken language, sense of family closeness and obligation, etc. (Spradley and Phillips 1972:522). Many studies point to the immense societal pressure from friends, family and peers to “behave in predictable ways” as also contributing to the experience of readjustment processes (Seiter and Waddell 1989:4).

A large grouping of previous studies have also focused on cultural exchanges and transitions being centered around stressors, where “radical change in cultural environment [...] includes new stimuli for which one has not learned a previous definition and even familiar objects which are defined in novel ways by members of the new society” (Spradley and Phillips 1972:520). Some found that whether these stressful events were viewed as being within or outside of the control of the individual did not have a correlation with reentry shock, but the stressors themselves were most likely prominent experiences of difference ((Seiter and Waddell 1989:5). One example of these stressors most prominent for international study participants includes schoolwork load. Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010:661) show that the statement “My courses and work load (homework) have increased this semester” is also more likely to be endorsed the more recently one has returned from abroad, as well as in general how after international study some students reported negative changes in study habits.

Much previous research frames the concepts of *culture shock* and the *reentry* experience using words with overall negative connotations. Oberg began the discourse by defining *culture shock* as the stress of “fear, anxiety, a feeling of helplessness, longing to be back home and a feeling of frustration” (Spradley and Phillips 1972:520). Later research, especially of the 1960s and 1970s, referred to *culture shock* as a "malady," "personality maladjustment," a "temporary attitude," "affliction" and "psychological malfunctioning" (Meintel 1973:48). Even more

recently, Mumford (1998:151) identifies seven core culture shock items as the “strain to adapt,” “homesick,” “feel accepted,” “wish to escape,” “confused about identity,” “shocked or disgusted,” and “feel helpless.” Previous studies also list many psychological problems including “irritability,” “depression,” “anxiety,” “apathy” and “loneliness” --all powerfully negative psychological responses (Seiter and Waddell 1989:5). Recently, popular literature has tried to reverse this trend, describing positive experiences of culture shock and reframing the discourse, no longer only seeing it as “The difficulties and frustrations of living in a foreign culture” (Spradley and Phillips 1972:520).

With an increasingly internationally mobile population, the experience of reentering a previous “home country” and the readjustment process that comes with that has become more common. After these initial studies of *culture shock*, studies of the 1980s suggest that reentering a home culture is more difficult than the original entry into the foreign culture (Seiter and Waddell 1989:5). Previous literature describes this process most frequently in terms of the *reentry experience* or *reverse culture shock*, which has a variety of related yet nuanced definitions. In simplest terms, *reverse culture shock* is “the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw 2000:83). It is the disorientation which sometimes characterizes a return to the home country, where “Having shaped their values abroad, students returning home find that they are out of step with their own culture” (Meintel 1973:52; Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010). Students find themselves changed.

Common reentry problems reported in previous literature include “cultural identity conflict, academic problems, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, grief, and interpersonal difficulties.” Feelings often experienced by returnees could include anxiety, disorientation,

stress, disillusionment and helplessness (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:650). Gaw (2000:88) also notes that these common reactions may be formed most strongly when returnees “experience value conflicts with non-returnee Americans.” As part of returning from international study, new attitudes are formed, especially in three categories as explained in the research of Meintel (1973:50). Frequently, upon return to a home culture participants of study abroad form new concepts about what they had taken for granted within their own culture, the assumptions they had held about other people both abroad and at home, and their own self-identity (Meintel 1973:50). These internal attitude shifts are common among returnees, perhaps because their time abroad facilitates exposure to new and different ways of viewing the world, which then allows them to interpret situations of personal interactions in ways they could not previously have imagined. Previous literature specifically focusing on the category of self-identity claims that one of “the most important ‘shocks’ to be encountered by those who enter another culture or subculture are those of self-discovery” (Meintel 1973:47). These times of transition become fosters of “Developing a coherent sense of whom one is, who one is not, what one stands for, and how one is seen” (Bolen 2007:65). In past literature this is most frequently regarded as identity *conflict* rather than identity formation.

Some studies have posed that the returnee “expects the home culture to have remained unchanged and welcoming” and *reverse culture shock* is caused when “sojourners return home and discover that they cannot pick up where they left off” (Gaw 2000:86; Seiter and Waddell 1989:3). Several previous studies, such as Walling et. al (2006) have also posed that in groups of returnees, “a negative reaction to their home culture was the most predominant theme” (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:650). Other research explores reactions to relationships within the home culture as one specific manifestation of *reverse culture shock*. As summarized

in Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010), much previous literature has shown that friendships only sometimes survive the reentry process, and often personal relationships are negatively affected upon returning. There also appears to commonly be less reported relational satisfaction related with higher levels of reentry shock (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:651). Similarly, Seiter and Waddell (1989:7) state that individuals have “three basic interpersonal needs: inclusion, control, and affection.” They also emphasize that sojourners who have lower levels of satisfaction within their relationships have more reported reentry programs, emphasizing the important role social circles may play within the interview data (Seiter and Waddell 1989:9).

As shown within this overview of previous research, the language of *culture shock* and *reverse culture shock* is generally characterized by words of anxiety, stress, and disillusionment. There is a need for research which explores the juxtaposition of “this is how culture shock is described in previous literature,” and “this is how international study participants actually experience it today.” The central aim of this paper is to examine whether the “crisis model” language of *culture shock* which dominates current literature is adequate for current manifestations of cross-cultural interactions. Abarbanel’s (2009:135) study is one of a sparse few which points to how international exchanges involve a process of growth and change, but a process which is “rarely shocking or catastrophic.” This paper will start to fill this gap in the literature by comparing the previous literature with new interview findings to see if they complement each other, contradict each other or both.

A few studies have focused on effective ways to interact with *culture shock*, perhaps in a way that begins to stray away from the “crisis model” of *culture shock*. Spradley and Phillips (1972:521) noted specific skills such as “belief in mission, cultural empathy, a sense of politics, and organizational ability” as helpful to effective cultural readjustment either entering or

returning to a culture. The sense of purpose could allow for a greater investment in a culture as a sense of connectivity is fostered between two cultures and two distinct aspects of identity. Spradley and Phillips' (1972:521) skills can be fostered by returnees through intentionally educating themselves about their place of study and examining their reasons and goals for participating in international study. These skills would then contribute to, as described by Paige et al. (1998:177), an effective and ongoing process of *cultural learning* as "acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures" Sojourners can react as cultural relativists or cultural opposites: "the one embraces the differences of being removed from the society she knew, and the other feels isolated and clings to all things of their home culture" (Morgan 1975:211). These suggested skills and possible *cultural learning* process are two of only a few suggestions provided by past literature as to how those experiencing *culture shock* should and can positively interact with their experiences as they first immerse themselves in a new culture and then return to the past culture again. This paper will, in addition to examining this crisis model language of culture shock, compare adjustment methods noted in previous literature with interview findings to see if they complement each other, contradict each other or both.

FINDINGS

The following findings are divided into prevalent themes that arose in multiple interviews, which are then directly integrated with previous research findings and theories. The subheadings include: the descriptive data provided within that specific theme by respondents, the

general *culture shock* discourse used to frame the theme, the analysis of these findings in light of current discourse, as well as comparisons with past research findings of others.

Nearly every theme that emerged from the 14 interviews conducted with St. Olaf College students was also included in a quantitative analysis done by Spradley and Phillips in 1972. The instrument used was called The Cultural Readjustment Rating Questionnaire (CRRQ), and the themes bolded in the following table, even if not intricately discussed in the following paper, arose at some point during the interview process (Spradley and Phillips 1972:522).

TABLE: CULTURAL READJUSTMENT ITEMS

The type of food eaten	The type of clothes worn	How punctual most people are
Ideas about what offends people	The language spoken	How ambitious people are
Personal cleanliness of most people	The general pace of life	The amount of privacy I would have
My own financial state	Type of recreation and leisure time activities	How parents treat children
The sense of closeness and obligation felt among family members	The amount of body contact such as touching or standing close	The subjects which should not be discussed in normal conversation
The number of people of your own race	The degree of friendliness and intimacy between unmarried men and women	How free and independent women seem to be
Sleeping practices	General standard of living	Ideas about friendship
The number of people of your religious faith	How formal or informal people are	Your own opportunities for social contacts
The degree to which your good intentions are misunderstood by others	The number of people who live in the community	Ideas about what is funny
Ideas about what is sad	How much friendliness and hospitality people express	The amount of reserve people show in their relationships with others
Eating practices	Type of transportation used	The way people take care of material possessions

As interview participants talked, the conversations became a whirlwind of these themes and topics. I separate the themes by two broad categories: *Experiences while Abroad* and *Experiences upon Return*.

Experiences while Abroad

The Foreigner

Arriving at their new location, most international study program participants mentioned the mentality they began their semester with: in general, they talked about being “so eager to experience anything” and having a fascination to explore. One said, “I was being really open to living like a Russian.” Most emphasized how they were intentional about “getting into the place” where they were, and finding their favorite pub and sandwich place, feeling that “I’m in their culture, it is my job to adapt to them.” This is interestingly unique in light of what Milton Bennett writes, saying ‘Intercultural sensitivity is not natural. It is not part of our primate past, nor has it characterized most of human history. Cross-cultural contact usually has been accompanied by bloodshed, oppression, or genocide’ (Abarbanel 2009:136).

Being the foreigner in a brand new country appeared to have both benefits and costs for the study participants. Most said that “they treat you different as foreigners”: charging “higher prices on rickshaws [...] and beggars and kiosks target[ing] you” in India and receiving preferential treatment for entering nightclubs in Shanghai. One respondent said it was “disconcerting” to have “everybody looking at me,” as a white person, but later laughed as she said, “I was in everyone’s vacation pictures.”

Cross-cultural stereotypes existed and sometimes guided study respondents cross-cultural interactions. One female in China said, “[my Chinese host family] had no idea what to do with

me” because the basis of their perceptions of American culture was from commercials. Many respondents said that they were met with mixed reactions as to their outsider status: some who were frustrated that they were there, and some who were intrigued he or she was an American and would say “let’s do something special.” Participating in a program in Asia one interviewee said “some people expect you not to know anything, be just a bumbling foreigner [...] but most people were excited to know where you came from, and why.” During the interviews several respondents brought up that there was always less tension with their status as a foreigner when interacting with people that are used to interacting with Americans, like seasoned host families and teachers, because they were “used to modifying their language” or, as those in Central America noted, “knew we liked schedules and weird things like that.” Study participants interactions were often guided by their visitor status as they were treated differently in wither these positive or negative ways by members of the host culture.

Homestays

Nearly all students who stayed with a host family while abroad said that the homestay was “the best part,” frequently elaborating on the ways the families helped them feel like active participants in the culture. Especially the females (in various programs) commented that they felt like part of the family, even being given endearing nicknames and introduced as “here’s our new daughter.” Many commented that talking with their host families was “so informational” in learning about the culture, and one said his relationship with his family was most valuable because “They can take you to museums, and *real* Russian events.” Two females emphasized how “everyone has different motivations for hosting,” and this can affect the familial interactions, as well as what you as a person signify, such as a possible symbol of status or

wealth. Other students who did not have homestays stayed in dorms or flats with other international students. One expressed a desire for staying with a host family and/or other Chinese student, because it offers “a whole different layer of appreciation for the country.” Another said she didn’t “become great friends” with her apartment-mates, but two others in this living situation emphasized again and again how “my flat was really tight,” and how the dorm life provided great friend-making opportunities.

Social Circles

As noted earlier, in terms of social life many students who participate in international study programs become connected with their host parents and siblings. Most interview respondents also appeared to have formed their strongest relationships with other international students. One expressed a strong dislike of this social situation, seeming disappointed he didn’t really have a peer group of his own age among host-culture students. He did say however that “The places you frequent” are often where friends develop: he met and fostered relationships with “migrant laborer friends” that owned and worked at the restaurants he frequented. Those who did not participate in St. Olaf group travel programs of only Olaf students took full advantage of the common situations of many international students: in Germany, one said “There was this network of international students” through which she met a ton of people from all over the world,” and this was similarly echoed by the students in London and Denmark.

Those travelling in St. Olaf College sponsored group travel programs such as Term in the Middle East (TIME) and Environmental Studies in Australia had a split reaction to the pros and cons of there travel situation. Some said “There is something invaluable in travelling in a group. You share all these experiences together that you can’t fully explain to anyone else, but you

know they [the group] understand.” One commented how it provides a different cultural perspective when you experience Latin American countries with a group of other American students. But overall more respondents expressed how it was difficult to be stuck in one group of 26 St. Olaf students for a semester because you couldn’t “float between groups” of distinct friends, nor avoid the heightened drama of constant close contact. Three respondents also expressed desire for having peer groups in the host culture, but how it was difficult to gain this when travelling in an American group. One said “I never felt like I was really there. It was more, St. Olaf transposed to Australia.”

Language

Participants’ experiences of language while abroad were the most extensively elaborated portions of the interviews. 11 of the 14 study participants travelled to countries where their ability to use English was limited, if applicable at all. The most common phrases used to describe their experience were: “I’m really good at charades,” and references to “gesturing,” “pantomiming,” “pictures being drawn and pointing” and “just trying this sort of sign language charades thing.” International study emphasized for many “how non-verbal that communication can be” Those with little or no previous language skills for their country of study said “it was an adventure,” “both frightening and exhilarating.” One respondent noted while in the Middle East that she had never been somewhere where she was “not even [...] able to read the signs.”

Interviewees also focused on developing their linguistic skill while studying internationally. Two mentioned that the first step was learning the “rough and ready survival language” to then be able to at least maneuver around (mostly) independently. Several said “I became more flexible with my language, and good at making my point known with a limited

vocabulary.” Those with fairly substantial language skills when asked how that affected their experiences in the country, said feeling competent in their language skills helped them push themselves to “just jump” into conversations, even about politics and more intellectual topics. The social circles that you spend your time with affects the experience of the language, as respondents pointed to their homestays and friends within the country as integral to improving their Spanish skills. An interviewee who went to Central America said that “learning Spanish was one of the most meaningful parts,” in being able to talk to people, and learn about them and hear their stories.

Interview respondents seemed very conscious of the impact and implications of their language use. A fluent Spanish speaker said, “With the language, you also need a *cultural fluency*” in knowing things like intonation patterns and popular slang. Another Spanish speaker said the practice in Ecuador of never wanting to hurt someone’s feelings and therefore frequently being ambiguous in conversation was sometimes frustrating to deal with. She said “It was not the cultural customs that were the hardest to adjust to, rather the communication problems.” These communication differences are easily imagined when one thinks about how impactful tone, slang and connotation are in one’s native language; not always being able to unconsciously grasp those nuances provides for a different experience of a language.

“By studying a language you are showing interest” in the culture and the people of a place. Many interviewees noted that people were impressed and excited that an American was learning their language, and were “excited that you speak any Japanese at all.” Perhaps this serves as an indication to them that you care more deeply than the average tourist. Because of this a decision to speak English, either to other international students or to host country residents, becomes an intentional decision. During interviews it was common for certain words of this

language of interest to become unconsciously mixed in with the English phrases, and for accents to become part of the pronunciation: “gaijin,” “campo,” “Porteña.” This is the language the international study participants used in that place, and so the memories are inherently tied into the language: the language we have accessible to us is the way we have available to define our experiences. With a second language, we have that many more ways to frame our stories.

Schoolwork

Schoolwork was stated as “a lot easier” for many of the participants of international study programs, one saying “this homework isn’t *real* homework”. Some interviewees appreciated how this meant they had more free time and were able to go on long weekend trips or go out frequently and that “to not have to worry about homework was good.” Most talked about how, in general, “schoolwork” during their international study experience was, simply put, different than St. Olaf. One said her program was very experiential: “we actually got to talk to military leaders.” Another had an Internship as a core part of her schoolwork, which again created a different type of learning. One interviewee described how, in some ways, it seemed odd to adapt to these lower level of expectation due to their status as an exchange student, because it was so different than St. Olaf College where “the overall environment is driven by homework, and even when I hang out with my friends it’s cuz I need a *break* from homework.”

Two interviewees had international study semesters in London and in Denmark with a heavy focus on schoolwork. They balanced their comments between, “some things I might have done, but I had too much homework” and “The classes I was taking were so interesting, I wanted to be in the classroom! Which is different than [St. Olaf].” Part of the reason that schoolwork

was in some ways even more challenging than St. Olaf was that, for example in London, there was “more reading” and “different essay requirements.”

Food, Time, Health, Transportation.

Included in the table of Cultural Readjustment Items” from Spradley and Phillips (1972) are many themes centered on habits, often habits and *common sense* that go unnoticed and that we take for granted as the norm. Four that appeared in more than one interview during this study include eating practices, conceptualization of time, types of transportation used, and attitude toward health.

Eating practices: Aside from eating new foods distinct to a new country, like frogs, full meats and fresh vegetables from the market *everyday*, interviewees also talked about the new “food cultures” that they encountered. In India, the family oriented culture made dinner a time to be with family, and the food-oriented day made that “I have never been so full in my life.” In China time was spent “going to meals and sitting there forever.” Some respondents said they never thought about the shift of something so “fundamental in my life, until I was there, eating roasted frogs.” Most talked about making a point to try everything, at least once, even as they found it was “hard to explain to them why it’s difficult to eat things with heads. It was hard to explain to them that hesitancy, because it doesn’t even make sense to me. In the US we just don’t see our meat that way.”

How punctual most people are and the general pace of life: The ambiguous concept of time experienced during international study programs in Russia, Ecuador, and India appeared in three student interviews, mainly commenting on the more relaxed pace of life. They said you couldn’t necessarily generalize about time in any of the three cultures, as to “everyone is always

late,” but they did find that time was less of a concrete constraint in those countries. One said, “If no one was gonna hold time against me, I’m not gonna worry about it,” and another “nobody else is freaking out that the bus is gonna be late” so he won’t either. As the pace was “very not worrying,” and someone may not show up when they say ““Oh, I’ll be there in 30 minutes!”” these respondents noticed their own behavior and attitudes towards time also modifying.

Types of transportation used: Public transportation was another theme that arose in multiple interview sessions. Several students referenced that having grown up in smaller towns, they had to “learn how to be a city dweller,” and not only consistently use public transportation, but be proactive about figuring out the transit system. They referenced many cultural differences in the use of buses and trains. On the buses in Russia, they employed old women to collect the fares on the bus, and over the weeks you “get to know your bus lady;” in Denmark “No one talks to each other on the bus or trains;” in Japan the pushing and shoving trying to get on the train is not malicious and not trying to get on first, rather it is just trying to get as many people on the train as possible, all the while apologizing profusely.

Attitudes towards health: A few participants had interactions with their countries health care system while abroad, and explained it as both an interesting, and “scary” experience. Being in a Russian and an Indian hospital, two respondents talked about how it was “overwhelming” because they first “did not know the medical terminology” and second, did not know “the medical and health system,” because this sudden necessity of knowledge was “the stuff you don’t learn in class.” In Russia, he also explained the culturally varied concept of healthy, where first the doctors come to you rather than having a visiting room and if it is severe they bring you in an ambulance to the hospital. He was brought to the hospital, though he also said “I could still walk!”

When moving into a culture other than the one in which you grew up, each moment is cause for interpretation and reflection on the differences and similarities between your culture of the present and your culture of the past. Within a new host-culture there are aspects of daily life, mentalities towards social relations, expectations of language and attitudes as a foreigner which cause for a new experience while abroad. For international study participants, these experiences are combined with a process of returning to the original culture in which attitudes and mentalities continue to shift and solidify due to experiences upon return.

Experiences upon Return

As previously mentioned, in simplest terms *reverse culture shock* is “the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw 2000:83). This process of possible disorientation may be accentuated by the changes previous literature noted, especially in terms of newly shaped values, and personal transformation. This is exemplified by what one interviewee said: “There is a huge divide between who I was and who I am.” At least one, if not multiple, activities, habits and attitudes shifted for all 14 interview respondents; a personal transformation brought about, as many felt, because of their international study experience.

Some studies have posed that the returnee “expects the home culture to have remained unchanged and welcoming” and *reverse culture shock* is caused when “sojourners return home and discover that they cannot pick up where they left off” (Gaw 2000:86; Seiter and Waddell 1989:3). Several previous studies, such as Walling et. al (2006) have also posed that in groups of returnees, “a negative reaction to their home culture was the most predominant theme”

(Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:650). The 14 interviews of this study did not strongly demonstrate the “negative reactions” and crisis language present in much previous literature. Rather there was a conscious “noticing-of-difference reaction” to the home culture. Many respondents had specific and articulate comments as to the usage of the term *culture shock* in itself, and how it was manifested in their experiences, or if it was applicable or useful to them to define their experiences. Many also expanded on previous literature such as presented by Spradley and Phillips (1972) and Paige (1998), elaborating on the methods of adjustment they employed to transition within cultures.

Leaving, or returning

As stated before, common reentry problems reported in previous literature include cultural identity conflict, academic problems, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, grief, and interpersonal difficulties. Feelings often experienced by returnees could include anxiety, disorientation, stress, disillusionment and helplessness (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:650). Overall, interviewee responses connected to the articulated idea that “I lived pretty differently than I do here [in the US].” Transitioning between living spaces is more than merely physically moving from one place to another, you must also “transition mentally between the places.” There are two directional flows in which to view this transition, so I posed the question: “Did you feel like you were leaving [the country of study] or returning to the United States?”

The range of responses was equally spread. Even within people who appeared to have an incredible experience during their semester of international study there was a mixture of whether they felt they were “leaving” or “returning.” While many said they felt like they were “leaving” the host-country, nearly the same amount said they were “returning home.” There were also a

few who said it was a mix of both. Those that felt like they were “leaving” cited things like “I did not wanna come back,” “just the connections I made there, I didn’t want to leave after such a short time” and “I still had stuff to see.” Those who said they were returning or coming home to the United States spoke: “I definitely was homesick for a lot of that time,” or “returning home seemed like the logical next step.” A few placed a timeline on the sentiments saying that “the feeling of leaving has strengthened over time” or they didn’t miss the host country until “one month after, as nostalgia hit me.” Still others say, “I don’t miss it. I appreciate the experiences, but I don’t say I miss it.”

This question was clearly complex, as one respondent, even after saying how she felt that she was leaving Germany” was at the same time “excited to come back.” Another said, “I wanted to go home and at the same time I didn’t.” Yet another, “I enjoyed it while I was there,” but was also “totally fine with getting back.” One respondent said that it was neither a “leaving” or a “returning:” it was “a goodbye to Ecuador.” As a fourth of the interviewees felt mixed feelings, it was also said “Since I’ve been back I’ve been really homesick for Japan, yet when I was there I was also homesick for the US. I don’t think I’ll ever really be happy where I am.” *Homesickness* can be defined as an “emotional reaction to a loss of reinforcements from the original culture” (Brown and Holloway 2008:43). This *original culture* implies that homesickness only works in one direction. A few interview responses however used this term in a non-traditional definition of “being homesick” for what had clearly become a home to them. One even asked herself after saying that, “How can you be homesick for a place that isn’t home?” Perhaps the answer lies in another interviewee’s response: “I really consider it home. I feel a connection to the place.”

Describing the transition process of leaving or coming home, in whichever way they framed it, interviewees said they felt “distress,” “upset,” “unsettled,” “not re-rooted,” and

oppositely, “relieved” and “comforted.” Three respondents mentioned feelings of transition, either within themselves or within the environment, during events while still *in transit* home! While still in Japan waiting at the gate for a flight back to the United States, one respondent said all she felt was “I don’t wanna go back with these people” referring to the “loud, obnoxious” tourist Americans that were also taking the same flight. “They instantly rubbed me wrong,” she said. Another said, “In Ecuador, speed is not important, personal interactions are” so then getting into the Miami airport, she “felt so dehumanized, depersonalized.” Another said in that same Miami airport, “hot water came out of the sink!” These stories exemplify that reentry starts as soon as you begin packing your bags.

Once arriving home, the most commonly mentioned “best part” was seeing family and friends. A few explained that this was because even though they felt they had a great social life abroad as well, in terms of the depth of those relationships, “it’s not the same as these people you’ve known for so long.” Some were happy to “kinda just slip right back in,” and that it was “good to be getting back to normal accents and familiar news. One female said it was refreshing because “You’re coming back to somewhere you’ve been your whole life,” while another found it refreshing to “Not having to worry about how I’ll be interpreted, in terms of not representing anyone more than me,” because in Ecuador if you were trying not to perpetuate negative stereotypes you had to be careful what you did. Overall, “Things felt more regular [...] there was more structure here,” and as humans are creatures of habit, this is comforting.

With “the best parts” of returning to the United States there were also specific parts and reasons as to what was “the harder part” of returning for interview participants. There was some overlap as to what each individual interviewee felt was the hardest part about coming back, but all were articulated in distinct ways.

Many talked about “More than anything, people don’t really have the time to talk.” Then this dilemma is accentuated because “When people ask, they don’t really expect or want a 20 minute soliloquy.” There is this strong and incessant “pressure that can be exerted by family and friends to behave in predictable ways,” and balancing this with the changes in yourself can often be trying (Seiter and Waddell 1989:4). Many commented on coming back and being “just the same as everyone else,” blending in again as “one of the masses” at St. Olaf. Having to shift from being a cultural observer to an average participant was difficult. Some sounded almost disappointed in how they returned to their past life: “I’m sad in a weird way at how quickly I got back into my old routine, how quickly I adopted my old habits.” Some elaborated that while abroad there were things about themselves they had decided to change, but didn’t end up doing when back in the United States.

A related and equally as prevalent theme in interview responses was “The hardest part is feeling isolated in the process. No one else understands why you’re kinda different [...] unless maybe they also went abroad.” There is an intense desire for some to constantly say to everyone “You just have no idea what’s out there,” but not really being able to. This sense of isolation and distinctiveness from peers made some notice how once back at St. Olaf, “My mental scope was a lot larger in terms of what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go. It was hard for me to scale it back.” After experiencing “what’s out there,” certain events and comments seemed “trivial” compared to what they had been doing, and in general a common feeling includes, “I feel like this is very small.”

Attitudes

Feelings and attitudes are constantly changing within situations of cultural transitions. As paraphrased before, Meintel (1973:50) explains that as people return from international study they notice “sudden unforeseen revelations about the world they had taken for granted, about the baselessness of their assumptions concerning other people, and the persons they had implicitly presumed themselves to be.” These internal attitude shifts are relatively typical among returnees; after experiencing varied ways of viewing the world many returnees are lead to self-reflection where they question, solidify or re-form their attitudes. The interviews conducted in this study provided specific examples of all these responses perhaps because, as one interviewee stated, “It’s like you almost live a totally different life. Things just *have* to change.”

Seven of the 14 interviewees used the phrase (in varying verb tenses) of being “more *aware* of the world,” especially in terms of “paying attention” to international events. Nearly half of the interviewees referenced how in international study programs you gain “a dosage of realizing how lucky you are” and also by seeing the struggles of others you gain an appreciation for what you have. International study also helped one interviewee “be more careful” because as he explained, “as you’re more knowledgeable about a culture, you may hear something on the news about China, and be like “Well that’s bullsh**” because it is a generalization. Then I realize that I may make statements like that about Papa New Guinea and someone else is responding in the same way. Therefore, I have become more careful.” As you study abroad you realize how complex things are and with each layer, the less you can allow yourself to use “easily generated ideas.” You learn to keep on questioning and keep on challenging what CNN and your professors and your peers claim.

Most interviews involved one, if not more, stories of self-discovery. Meintel (1973:47) said that this self-discovery is often one of the more prominent “shocks” experienced by those who enter another culture. Many commented that off-campus study is a “good time for reflection,” and that reflection allowed for new facets of oneself to emerge. Some described their time as an “evolution of me” and “process of liberation,” where they could “grow into” themselves. Others pointed to the more specific, noting that due to experiences during an international study program “I realized I am not one to be a backpacker” or it “solidified an idea I had before, of wanting to live on an international scale.” It can be either an amorphous shifting of identity, or a solid reinforcing of previous ideas of identity, because it is a time for “Developing a coherent sense of whom one is, who one is not, what one stands for, and how one is seen” (Bolen 2007:65).

Several respondents found a sense of cultural self-awareness on top of their own self-awareness and discovery. Certain question responses referenced understanding of the role of culture in the formation of patterns of behavior and beliefs. One interviewee said that upon returning to the United States she misses “not having so much extra stuff.” Now that she had experienced the daily life of having less stuff and could say “for real, I’m okay” she felt that many things in her lifestyle were “excessive.” She also told the anecdote that some other people in her program had “closet shock” where they came from a week-and-a-halfs worth of clothes in Ecuador to “Why do I have this much clothing?!” in their closets at home. She became consciously aware of how the American consumerist culture formed her behaviors. Four interviewees referenced how direct contact with a different form of political system changed some of their political beliefs. For example, one said “I am a big fan of social democracy and socialism now.” Another female’s “identity in-group has expanded” as now, still through her

identity as an American, she more consciously feels “a responsibility to making it better,” also affirming that “I know my vote dictates the way money is spent on things halfway around the world and for people you’ll never meet.” Political attitudes and life attitudes shift through reverse culture shock experiences.

Social Circles

The responses during these interviews did not support the assertions of previous research that the experience of reentry shock interferes with relationships in either eliminating or negatively affecting them (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:651). Nearly all respondents, both male and female, indicated that their core group of friends in the United States remained the same before and after international study, and how great it was to “return to best friends.” Perhaps this is because these tight-knit groups serve individuals’ “three basic interpersonal needs: inclusion, control, and affection” (Seiter and Waddell 1989:7). The fact that many of these groups of friends stayed the same regardless of international study semesters also does not support the assertion that “The more dissatisfied sojourners are with their relationships, the more reentry problems they report” because, as delineated in the following sections, many returnees still felt various forms of reentry difficulties despite referencing sentiments of strong relationships (Seiter and Waddell 1989:9).

Many respondents also felt that overall, their social circles were more *expanded* after participating in an international study program, for two main reasons. Some referenced how they still stay in contact with the friends they made while studying internationally, and how they now have a whole new friend group of “BFFs” spread around the world. Two interviewees said “I miss my friends the most” from their time abroad. Several respondents also stated that after

returning they felt there were more opportunities to “bridge more friend groups” either through people that also participated in the same program, new people you were living with, and some people mentioned “I’ve been able to make new friends through the changes within her other friends.” Most of the females acknowledged the fact that with friends, “obviously things change while you’re gone” and you “come into a different situations” due to that movement, but most found that “It was just myself needing to figure out where I fit in.”

Two participants did reference that they had had a hard time relating to friends and family that had not participated in an international study program, confirming what Gaw (2000:88) states as “experience value conflicts with non-returnee Americans.” They felt that it was stressing to re-adjust to those who “didn’t also go through it” and although people may empathize, “those who hadn’t been abroad understand it on a different level.” There sometimes was a feeling of disconnect between the traveller and those they had left behind.

Activities and Habits

During interviews students also talked about their involvement in campus groups after a semester of being abroad, with some returning to the same groups, others joining additional new ones, and still others not going back to the same activities. For some, they felt disconnected from campus life, and those on international study programs in the fall semester said it seemed hard to join into clubs mid-year, because it seems and feels like they are “already set.” One participant said she could not return to band, and even though she knew that was part of in order to go abroad, “It was a bummer.” Others talked about being thrown back into their “routine of activities at St. Olaf” right away, and how “It was reassuring that many things stayed the same.” They returned with renewed fervor to Model UN, Team Tibet events and Muslim Student

Organization, enjoying them because “I really like talking about it.” A few explained how it was nice to return to certain activities that were really important to them that they had not been able to do while abroad, such as CrossFit and Ultimate Frisbee

Some everyday habits of returnees changed due to their experiences during a semester of off-campus study. It varied from “instead of clapping I knock on my desk,” to feeling the sense of “respect” for feet from India, spending more time during the day reading the news, watching more Chinese TV shows, or continuing his strengthened interest in cars and racing. One interviewee felt especially focused on her resource usage after “We had been to the Amazon, where you could see the natural space, the effect of the industrial on it.” She said that upon return this extra consciousness of resources on a personal scale “made me feel less careless.” The fear of becoming apathetic and complacent upon reentry into the St. Olaf College environment was prevalent in many interviewees’ responses, and holding onto these habits was one way to stave off this worry.

Schoolwork

References to schoolwork during study interviewees were most centered on the sense of “harshness” created by returning to the St. Olaf “pressure”. One interviewee said that everything felt “scheduled” and “limited” again, and the shift from exchange student expectations to a St. Olaf 300 level class was difficult, because “I didn’t do anything over there.” This might be the result of less academically rigorous programs while abroad contrasted with more rigorous workloads upon return, which is consistent with Carsello and Creaser (1976), who found after international study some students reported negative changes in study habits (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:661). Wielkiewicz and Turkowski’s (2010:661) related findings of feelings of

increased workload in school being stronger the more recently one has returned from abroad was also consistent with the interviews of this study.

Some felt it was “hard starting classes at Olaf” being “stuck back here in the bubble, having to jump through hoops.” Several felt “stressed” by the studies, one referencing that “expectations are so much higher here.” Somewhat uniquely, one respondent had felt that international study had actually helped her learn that school “doesn’t have to monopolize my life,” because it “proved” to her that “learning doesn’t have to be in the library and books.” This changed her approach to academic schoolwork upon return to the United States.

Habits of food, time and language

Some cultural differences international study participants had noticed upon their arrival to a host country they also noticed when they returned to the United States due to the fact that their habits were no longer those of the United States, but rather had shifted to those of the host country. There were references to “drinking more tea than I used to” and “soy milk every day with my breakfast” as they had become accustomed to do in their host countries. There were also many foods which respondents missed, again as it is “what you get used to.” Three participants mentioned that they missed the meal culture where you would “sit there forever” and feel no guilt in taking that time. Some said they have tried to hold onto the mentality of “Slow things down!” in both meal culture and overall life, so that they can return to being “always supposed to be aware of all those around you.”

A different sense of language use was also pertinent to three interview respondents as they returned to the United States, in two different ways. After time in China, one female stated that she loved “being vastly more articulate” again instead of like a “questionably articulate 3-

year-old.” Many travellers report this frustration as one of the most trying aspects of second language use. Additionally, this same participant felt that the best part of coming back was always understanding what people are saying, and even more so, understanding all the nuances and connotations. Some pointed out that all the while “you’re happy in a second language if you can just get the words right!” Two interviewees whom both had high levels of language competency noticed that for the first four months back in the United States there were “times I accidentally would start speaking in Spanish,” or Japanese words were still “slipping in” as she said “I just couldn’t think of the word in English.” This continued use of the language they used while abroad is evidence of how intricately language is tied to our memories, and how we define our experiences based on the language we have accessible to us, which for many participants in international study has become a base of more than one language.

Methods of Adjustment

The major assumption of Morgan’s (1975:208) study was stated as follows: “individuals differ in their methods for adapting to the behavior patterns associated with the cross-cultural experience.” This is true, but in 14 ethnographic interviews three salient central themes arose as to what international study participants believed helped them adapt to arriving to a new culture or returning to a past culture: good attitude, continuous reflection and forward momentum.

Many said what helped them with transitions between cultures was emphasizing that “when I’m there, I’m there.” Having “a hope and goal,” a purpose, and wanting “to see who I am apart from something I know” is a way to remain positive and even in trying circumstances push through. Having a good attitude toward the transitioning was referenced multiple times in interviews, with phrases such as “All you can really expect to do is find that things are different,

and accept them.” The “latent knowledge that things will be different” is crucial to grasp onto, where you tell yourself, as one example, “I *know* that I will have to drive everywhere again”.

When you know what to expect, it doesn’t catch you off guard. Or put bluntly, “Just handle it.”

Nearly all of the study participants referenced how continuous reflection let them process their experiences in helpful ways. Several commented that keeping a blog or a journal as a log of experiences was “a way to feel centered” while abroad, and one said that sending update emails to friends and family while she was in South America was comforting when she came back “having known there were people that went with me along the journey.” Multiple interviewees mentioned telling stories to their families, and “doing a lot of talking,” where having to articulate what they had learned “helped solidify it.” A few students mentioned how helpful it was to live with or near someone that either went on the same program, or if that wasn’t an option at least a similar program in that “It’s nice to be able to check in [...] without having to explain everything.” There was a desire, an importance, for the study participants to have other people who have done similar things to talk to, where “you could both reminisce.” One male said he felt lucky that the others who went abroad on the same program with him were also in his Russian class, so he could see them every other day back at St. Olaf. Meeting for meals with others from a program was “great” because of the sense of “common experiences” and all being able to “talk about things we’re missing,” and not have to explain the background context to the sentiment. Also, having decorations and little things from the country of study as continual reminders was mentioned, especially photographs being “really special” in being “able to say I’ve been there [...] to know the feeling of that moment.” This continuous reflection allows for a continual deepening of the international experience; as one male said, “Anytime I reflect on it [his time in Russia], I pick up other things.”

Some respondents joined new activities upon their return, stating that having something new really helped because it was *new* people and a *new* activity. That “forward momentum” as someone who started Frisbee referred to it as, allowed her to “feel more agency” in that she “was not just going back to my old life.” Others said that organizing events at St. Olaf about the issues and places visited while abroad, was “my way of directing this energy I had when I came back” and it felt empowering to say “I’m not just having these experiences and keeping them to myself.” Many said how they “kept moving” or “hit the ground running” as they returned to the United States, going straight into an internship, or developing new relationships, and how this was refreshing to again have something that held that meaning, goal and purpose. This forward motion of energy may have been helpful because it allows a returnee to focus on something in the future instead of the past, where their experiences can then be melded into not only something they once did, but also something that still shapes them.

Culture Shock

As explained in the literature review in the section titled “A General Overview of Culture Shock,” there are current prevalent definitions of the term *culture shock*, most referring to some type of anxiety resulting from the loss of the ability to easily understand societal cues. Many models have been explained, most involving multiple stages that the experiencing party goes through as they adjust to one new culture, and then reenter the original culture.

At the end of each interview session I asked participants if the term *culture shock* had any meaning to them, how they might define the term, if they felt they experienced culture shock, or if they thought there might be a better language to use for the adjustment process of travelling through cultures. People provided a wide range of descriptors of what *culture shock* meant to

them and these findings suggest a wide variety of reactions to the term. Some said it referred to situations that were “hard to grasp,” “unfamiliar,” or “those things that jump out.” Still others phrased it as:

- “something that doesn’t quite sit well with you”
- “a process where you slowly start to feel less alienated”
- “It’s like you finally got your foothold, and then felt like you were thrown into a tumble dryer”
- “Forgetting the realities of your specific subjective position, and being forced back into it”
- “the sense of jumping into a cold swimming pool”
- “being slightly taken off-guard by the things that you’ve taken for granted”

No descriptors of *culture shock* stated in interviews included the terms noted in previous literature such as fear, anxiety, affliction, or helpless. (Mumford 1998:151; Spradley and Phillips 1972:520; Seiter and Waddell 1989:5). The term *culture shock* was seen by most respondents as inadequately describing their experiences. One explained how “that’s just the term people generally say” because it has become “part of our study abroad culture.” Because of this common language, many respondents embraced the contemporary language of culture shock, saying they “*had* culture shock” and were “*dealing* with culture shock.” Several also noted how it is usually used with a negative connotation as something you have “to deal with,” most likely because of the trend in previous literature of defining culture shock as “the difficulties and frustrations of living in a foreign culture” (Spradley and Phillips 1972:520). Two students felt that they did not experience what they “had imagined as culture shock,” (though this might be related to the fact that both went abroad to English speaking countries).

The language of *culture shock* is a language of catastrophe, a crisis model which many interviewees took issue with. One said, “You know that things are going to be different. It shouldn’t be shocking.” Abarbanel’s recent study from 2009 recognized this sentiment as well: “The process of growth and change, which is built into international exchanges, demands

emotional adjustments which rarely are without challenges, but also rarely shocking or catastrophic” (135). One respondent said he would focus on the word *shock* and that to him would be a “sense of being completely overwhelmed,” and feeling that “I have no idea where I am, and no idea how to handle this situation if anything happens.” This again complements Abarbanel’s research which is one of quite few to say “the culture shock vocabulary, which in itself imagines overwhelming stress as something students and faculty should expect, is not a healthy model” (Abarbanel 2009:134).”

Several said “the culture shock was part of the experience” and many said that when studying internationally “everyone should experience a little bit of culture shock.” If you don’t have to readjust to a distinct place, does it mean that international study failed in its goals of broadening your worldview? One participant emphasized how “anytime you have that moment [of difference], it gives you the ability to imagine things differently,” and in that way you know you grow from your experience. It should happen, whether at a small or large scale, because it is not a bad thing. It is important to “bring something back with you. Don’t just leave it at the baggage claim.” This sense of cultural transitioning is a part of learning and “becoming effective global citizens” (Abarbanel 2009:134). These responses point to the problematic aspects of the crisis model language of *culture shock* in framing international study experiences.

Previous research was also not supported by interview responses regarding *reverse culture shock*, or *reentry shock*. Previous studies state that “returnees nearly always report feeling out of place, as if they were not at home but in a foreign country that is something like home” (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010:651). Previous literature also frames that “The surprising quality of reverse culture shock [is that] home itself is no longer ‘home’ but uncharted territory” (Meintel 1973:52). Though most interview participants did notice differences during

cultural transitions, very few mentioned that “home” was what had changed. If anything had changed, it was *themselves*. In fact, some specifically stated that things were the same: “I know what my house is like, what St. Olaf is like [...] it’s the same place, the same people, the same love. It’s just a new curiosity.” Many did not experience the previous literature’s “anxiety” or “stress” about returning, saying “This is where you grew up, so it’s like oh duh, I knew that.” To others she had talked to who were complaining about how hard it was to be back, she would like to say “What would you expect?” and follow with “Why are you making such a big deal about it?”

One interviewee said “I read the handbook ‘these are the symptoms of culture shock’ but I don’t like that term.” She noted how “it wasn’t a onetime thing I got over” and perhaps a term like *transition shock* would be better. Another took issue with the terminology of *culture shock* because it “assumes that there is not consistency” between cultures. She felt that yes, although certain aspects between Latin America and the United States were distinct, we are still all human, and some “norms aren’t all that different;” therefore a less jarring term would be more representative of cross-cultural experiences. Another respondent suggested the terms of *culture critique* and *cultural shift*. This response, among other interview responses in this study, did not seem to fit with the typical “stage models” common in previous literature such as Lysgaard’s U-curve and Gullahorn & Gullahorn’s W-model (Brown and Holloway 2008:34). Most of the past models are inadequate in analyzing culture shock because all form it as a linear process with distinct stages to pass through (see section “A General Overview of ‘Culture Shock’” above). Participants appeared to experience it as more of an amorphous experience, where feelings of difference and *culture shock* can come and go, lessened in one situation and stronger in another.

These past models also all end with adaptation or acculturation, which although not clear in the responses of this study, most likely do not occur for some students.

Many students who had travelled internationally before their semester of international study commented that “Every time you leave and come back it gets easier.” Some said “transitioning is part of my way of life,” (those who had been abroad many times before or moved around a lot), and these people seemed less drastically affected by moving between cultures. Perhaps practice makes perfect. Most interviewees acknowledged that they didn’t *always* feel excited or comfortable with the differences between host cultures and the home cultures, whether they were abroad or returning to the United States, but again as one interviewee said, “What do you expect?”

Culture shock and *reentry shock* were explored in this study to find that 14 individual St. Olaf College international study participants experienced, and did not experience, many aspects of the complex constructs of *culture shock* and *reverse culture shock*. Respondents felt *and* did not feel affected by cultural difference, “left” their country of study *and* “returned” to the United States, held onto previous habits *and* developed new ones, shifted some assumptions *and* solidified others. Their dynamic process of adjustment represented an overall shift away from the crisis model of cultural transitions to a discourse on the importance and benefit of having to adjust within cultural changes.

SUMMARY AND OPPORTUNITY FOR FUTURE STUDY

As demonstrated by the disparities between previous literature and the findings of this study, the current discourse surrounding the term and concept of *culture shock* and *reverse culture shock* inadequately captures how many St. Olaf College students feel during and after

their international study programs. Yes, there were some stories told by interviewees that included stress and un-comfortableness in dealing with different eating habits, learning ways of transportation and conceptualizing a different pace of time, among other things. But most important from this study is that most students whom I interviewed *did not* hold the previous literature's catastrophic attitude of inevitable fear and anxiety for those who enter a new culture and return to a previous culture. Most respondents either embraced *culture shock* or felt that the concept wasn't applicable or telling of their experience. Few saw *culture shock* as a focused anxiety-ridden experience. The crisis model language which dominates the discourse of culture shock should change to a language of *cultural shift*, where one knows that some things will be different, and some things will be the same, and as many interview respondents said, "You can deal with it."

I hope these findings and explorations can be used as a resource for knowing how St. Olaf students experience and think about the construct of *culture shock*, and how specifically St. Olaf students struggle and succeed as they return from a semester off-campus. It could also then be used by St. Olaf College and the International and Off-Campus Studies Office for the continued development of international study orientations and reentry programming for future participants in St. Olaf approved international study programs. These findings could also be made available to students soon-to-be participating in international study programs as a resource to see what their peers had experienced and found helpful in their culture shifting experiences.

There are still many opportunities for further research in the field of *culture shock*, and more specifically focused on *reverse culture shock*. In terms of reentry, this study examined only a small window of the long process. In order to get a more holistic representation, future studies could look at several points in the entire crossing-cultures adjustment process, beginning before a

participant leaves for international study, noting differences and similarities at regular intervals throughout the year, and then examining the time after a participant returns. Other themes that appeared within this study which merit further exploration include whether factors such as different states of mental health or varied levels of language competency have an identifiable effect on increased or decreased levels of culture shock? Lastly, and most importantly, how can we effectively reframe or rename *culture shock* so that it's not based on a crisis model? The need to explore the cultural adjustment process posed through cross-cultural interactions still exists.

Reflections on the research process and results

As a participant in international study programs through St. Olaf College, I agree with the findings of this study. I believe that the current “crisis” and “catastrophe” language of *culture shock* is inadequate and problematic in framing the experiences of international study participants who sort out cross-cultural transitions. It was often trying for me to play the role of the un-biased objective interviewer, when all I wanted to say was “I totally agree!” The interviews were also one of the most frustrating parts of the research because they were quite difficult to coordinate, and many interviewees would not show up at the times we had agreed upon. I believe that most of the frustration arose with this because this research was my top priority, while it was a low priority for them.

The paper writing process was not frustrating, but it was “painful.” Having to take my 59 pages of interview notes, then compile them into coherent themes, then relate them to the previous research, and then to have to eliminate some things from the final findings simply because they weren't “quite as important” as the next, was definitely “painful.” I still have nearly 20 pages of unused information. And I wanted to include *all* of the interviewees' stories: compile

all these experiences that were so wonderful to them into almost a novel of “short stories from abroad.” But I could not do that in this paper to the extent I wanted, because this was about including literature and analyzing for readers what further could be seen through these vibrant memories. It was hard to find a balance between telling these beautiful glimpses of distinct worlds but not just writing a storybook.

Due to time constraints and information overload, I also had to leave by the wayside one part of what I had hoped to study. Originally, I had wanted to not only describe the experience of *culture shock* and *reverse culture shock*, but also comment on how students felt about St. Olaf College’s International Office of Off-Campus Studies and its programs. This would still be another way to further focus this study: investigate more specifically the International Office of Off-Campus Studies programs and goals to see what is done well, and what could be added to make it even better. Ethnography can influence policy and further change, and I hope this study may do that by improving the understanding of the international cultural transition experience.

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ADVICE FOR FUTURE STUDY ABROAD-ERS

*These are direct quotes provided by interview respondents when asked the question:
“Do you have any advice for other students that are studying abroad?”*

- “Always have the mantra: You’re only here for a semester.”
- “You’re going to see the old friends soon enough.”
- “Hang out with your family, and stay away from Americans.”
- “Get lost. It’s the best way to discover things.”
- “Be willing to go places by yourself. It is there that you will meet and talk to amazing people.”
- “Get to know everyone. Engage in those conversations to learn the perspectives of people not from the United States.”
- “Don’t be afraid to talk to strangers.”
- “Limit calls home.”
- “Be in the present.”
- “Travel!”
- “Really assess the reasons why you want to go abroad. It can motivate you to push through the walls.”
- “Know your environment.”
- “Ask yourself, ‘What do you think you’ll get from it?’”
- “Do you know that it is going to be different?”
- “Be adventurous, but never get into a situation where you are powerless.”
- “You have to be independent. You have to be willing to do s*** on your own.”
- “Be really sure of yourself.”
- “Pack a jar of Peanut Butter.”
- “Think about what you want out of the experience, what you want to do.”
- “Take the time to process what’s going on.”
- “Know what you’re doing, and getting into.”
- “You don’t have to fight to define yourself.”
- “Be more laid back.”
- “Push yourself to do everything you can.”