

After Study Abroad: A Study in Personal Development through Study Abroad

Eve Sundberg, Lily Moua, Ruth Nervig

Executive Summary:

Setting:

This study was conducted during Second Semester at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. St. Olaf is a small, liberal arts college with a student body of 3,000. The school boasts impressive study abroad programs that attract students to escape the quaint campus and gain a global perspective.

Problem:

Do students undergo personal changes, academic changes, and changes in their view of individual identity in the St. Olaf and world communities from their study abroad experiences?

Methodology:

We contacted a list of past study abroad program participants from Spring and Fall Semesters, 2004 and Interim, 2005 requesting contribution to our project. With the respondents, we conducted three focus groups consisting of approximately eight post-study abroad students, as well as individually conducting 4-7 personal interviews, totaling 38 participants.

Observations:

Students often return from study abroad programs with a new sense of independence, and proclaimed freedom from the usual college life-induced personal and academic stresses. Participants felt a strong association with the nation they visited, often leading to a sense of authority from the knowledge they gained. This frequently produced a condescending attitude toward the St. Olaf community, based on both their academic and personal revelations. Minority students encountered different problems from white students, leading to distinct personal discoveries. The experiences the minority students shared with us enlightened our view of the white experience abroad.

Synopsis:

Two different ideas of race emerged in our discussions with white students and students of color. White students generally reached a consensus that race does not exist, and individual differences account for diversity, while race became more prevalent to students of color. This mirrors the sense of authority that many white students revealed during our conversations in interviews and focus groups. All of these issues collaborate within white privilege.

Abstract

The goal of this study is to examine how studying abroad has changed/influenced the views of St. Olaf students who have had the opportunity to do so. By interviewing these certain students, we can see how they perceive other students at the college, and the people of America in general. In addition to this general focus of the project, we will focus specifically on evaluating the perspectives of St. Olaf white vs. non-white students returning from studying abroad by analyzing and comparing their reactions and experiences returning back to St. Olaf's campus. In discussing their new perceptions of the St. Olaf community, we hope to determine how a study abroad experience can affect perspectives on 'difference' as determined by American culture, mainly in terms of race/ethnicity. We are interested in finding how personal experiences as a minority in another country can impact a student's conception of minorities in the U.S.—particularly at St. Olaf.

The Setting/Community

St. Olaf College is a small liberal arts school that sits atop a hill overlooking the small town of Northfield, Minnesota. Located forty-five minutes south of the Twin Cities and a half-hour walk from downtown Northfield, students often feel secluded from 'real' life. Despite St. Olaf's efforts to bring a variety of activities to this campus, students describe St. Olaf as a 'bubble.' They often feel isolated from cultural events and diverse populations. St. Olaf is composed of approximately 3,000 students who are predominately white. The Norwegian Lutheran affiliated school has a multicultural population of 10.3% (<http://www.stolaf.edu/about/profile.html>, March, 2005).

Walking around St. Olaf's campus, one is generally greeted by a jovial atmosphere. The 'typical' St. Olaf student is pleasant and takes their studying seriously. Each year at St. Olaf College, more than 800 students leave this comforting bubble and venture out into the world around us to study abroad and live in an entirely different context from our sheltered community. The studying abroad opportunities are one of the main attractions for students deciding on the college. In the St. Olaf Mission Statement, St. Olaf believes that study abroad programs, "enhance[s] students' global perspective by helping them encounter and understand changes confronting our world in a context of global community and world citizenship." At St. Olaf, the study abroad programs "provide significant opportunities for cross-cultural study and experience in the broader area of the humanities—including the natural sciences—within the general education program of the college" (http://www.stolaf.edu/international/mission_statement, March 2005).

Methodology

The study abroad office supplied us with a list of students who have studied abroad between February 2004 and January 2005. We created an alias to send out an email request for student participation to tell us about their experiences. When students replied, we organized the respondents by location, length of stay, and racial/ethnic status. From our newly formed lists, we sent emails inquiring when respondents could meet. Once they informed us about their availability, we created three focus groups according to their availability and location of trip. The rest of the respondents were divided among the three of us to conduct personal interviews. We created seventeen questions addressing areas such as: the reason for interest in studying abroad, changed perceptions on the St. Olaf community, perceptions of being a minority, definitions of diversity, and personal growth.

During the focus groups we rotated roles in moderating and taking notes from the conversations. Each focus group consisted of approximately eight students, who represented a variety of study abroad programs. We asked open-ended questions and allowed the students to discuss their experiences. We observed the students engage in conversations with each other. Each focus group lasted one hour but boisterous conversations continued afterward among the eager students.

Each of us conducted individual interviews that offered a more comfortable sharing opportunity. We were able to engage in deeper conversations with these seventeen individual interviews. We questioned a total of thirty-eight students and 24% of them were students of color.

Problem

History has taught us that knowledge is power. Presently as college students, we are learning how to become part of an elite class of educated Americans. St. Olaf students strive not to be the typical college student who seeks a degree just to make money—we know that our degrees offer opportunities to make the world more equitable. Duke University's director for study abroad, Margaret Riley, offers some of the reasons behind the school's commitment to internationalizing education at Duke: "We have a strategic plan—the internationalization of Duke...[that] will benefit the students in an increasingly global, interdependent world" (Gaines 39). What we learn when we are abroad will affect our image of the world, and our place in it. That image will directly influence how we spend our "lives of worth and service" as St. Olaf hopes to impart in us.

Here in the confines of the St. Olaf campus, our academic and social stresses seem all encompassing. We are predominantly white, moderately wealthy, run tight schedules and live busy lives. We are privileged to have our bathrooms

cleaned for us, a roof over our heads and warm beds to retreat to after long hours of studying, and although we are not provided with breakfast on the weekends, we can always count on being fed at mealtimes. Most of us do not even think about how fortunate we are—until we are put into a situation where misfortune is apparent. Does studying abroad help St. Olaf students become more aware of real-world issues and accepting of other cultures? Does leaving America allow students to stray away from an ethnocentric mindset, and open their eyes to other ways of living—ways that do not involve spotless showers, warm comforters, and endless choices for dinner? Does studying abroad allow St. Olaf students to see life at St. Olaf in a new perspective: experiencing new interests, values, attitudes, and personalities? Do minority students experience this prestigious opportunity differently from non-minority students? We each have experienced trips abroad that have influenced our visions of our place in the global community. The insight we gained brought us to question how other people's experiences have shaped their worldviews and their opportunities at St. Olaf.

Findings

New Priorities

The majority of the students at St. Olaf College have very packed schedules. We are always occupied with something, and racing from one activity to the next. Since we are at St. Olaf to be college students, we generally conform to the typical image of a college student: we study hard and let loose for specific amounts of time on Friday and Saturday night. If we have a few moments free, we feel as though we are forgetting something. "Here, it's always rush, rush, rush," one junior complained, "people don't value wandering or just sitting [anymore]." Our lives contain a large amount of stress because of these tight schedules and repetitive routines. If we break the restrictions of our routines, we develop many anxieties about homework, friends, grades, relationships, and tests. Since we are so preoccupied with our busy lives, we rarely find the time to stop, think, and appreciate all that we have.

When the interviewees had returned from studying abroad, some of them changed the way they lived their lives by changing their priorities: they discovered that an uncompleted homework assignment was not the end of the world, and spending a half an hour watching the sun go down was more important than reaching the cafeteria before it closed. Students reevaluated their priorities, and their once nerve-racking type-A behaviors had dissipated. Many students expressed their new sense of relaxation; they replaced "worries about homework" with cares about friends, "the sunshine," and other aspects of life. They "took things easy" and found the time to "stop and smell the roses."

The students expressed their more “laid back” attitudes toward life, and how they did not adhere to their “perfect schedules and routines.” “Details don’t matter anymore. Before I would plan everything...now I don’t care as much,” replied a student upon her return from Asia and the Middle East.

After spending an interim or semester in another country where students are expected to soak up the culture without our noses in textbooks, one student learned that “life is fleeting--seize the opportunities...even if it means less sleep.” Many countries that students choose to visit offer an exotic locale that requires us to take our attention away from the small problems in our worlds. From those experiences, students learn that amazing opportunities lie right in front of our noses. One student who spent interim exploring the theater in London noticed the plethora of great productions performed around Minneapolis and St. Paul, of which she had rarely taken advantage. When she returned to St. Olaf she took time to explore the venues in Minneapolis, figuring that “I could spend two hours watching a movie in my dorm room, or three hours driving up and seeing a production at the Guthrie.” After exploring a bit of the world, students had become more committed to what is important to them.

Power: exercising privilege

Most students at St. Olaf are committed to living a life with meaning. What kind of mark will we leave on the world? If we learn respect, we will contribute to wider celebration of difference in our communities. If we learn to glamorize or pity, however, we will never lead lives of justice but rather continue the hierarchy that distinguishes the “first world” from the “third world,” ‘us’ from ‘them.’ Categorizing the world into the “first” and “third” itself denotes an inaccurate physical distinction of the world. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said introduces his notion of a unified world that has been manipulated into two distinct parts—the East and West. This division demonstrates his emphasis on the political nature of knowledge: “Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” (Said 40). Since our generation is one of international networks, we need to make certain that our educational experiences present us with a fair picture of the world, which we can share with people who have not had the chance to explore it. If our imaginations have been shaped to distinguish an innate difference between the ‘first’ and ‘third’ world, can our study abroad experiences tear down that boundary?

St. Olaf wishes to internationalize us, so we can learn what it means to be a global citizen personally, academically, and economically. Internationalizing students has become a general concern around the nation because according to

Florida A&M University's associate vice president for academic affairs, Eva Wanston, "We have to graduate competent students in a global marketplace" (Gaines 39). 'Competency' appears often in works regarding internationalizing students. In the age of corporate off-shoring and global expansion of capitalism, studying abroad is vital to educate students in the global marketplace.

International competency encompasses more specific and distinct types of competencies. Processual competencies become one of the cornerstones of the study abroad programs by enabling students to survive and communicate with people in a foreign context. Students "relate to unique cultural peculiarities, situational conditions and to the people involved," basically figuring out how to grasp the culture (Stiers 85). Usually when students leave the U.S., they hope to understand the social cultural character of another part of the world. This knowledge includes "cultural detection [that] pertains to the ability of being able to adopt and keep an open and receptive mind and notice, analyze and understand cultural differences and peculiarities, without valuing them automatically and uncritically" (Stiers 85). How do students prepare for encountering a new culture when they go abroad?

Our global age instills in many college students a desire to see the world so that we break out of the confines of American culture. On the topic of studying 'Oriental' literature, Sir Hamilton Gibb wrote in 1931 that it may "assist us to liberate ourselves from the narrow and oppressive conceptions which would limit all that is significant in literature, thought and history to our own segment of the globe" (quoted in Said 256). Gibb wrote in a period of growing European xenophobia between the two world wars, when the 'West' studied the 'Orient' to release "the spirit from sterile specialization, [and ease] the affliction of excessive parochial and nationalistic self-centeredness" (Said 257). Today, students may find a similar opportunity to 'ease their affliction' by studying abroad, for they often disagree with nationalistic politics leading American international relations. Interwar Europe and the present U.S. are two different times, but a common thread of incredible popular nationalism binds the two eras. Students feel the need to experience lifestyles different from the U.S. so we can understand (and eliminate) poverty, despite the inequity prevalent even here in Northfield.

We leave St. Olaf's beautifully manicured grounds with perfectly matching incredibly structured buildings, to find cities full of garbage and pollution. Two students who had studied in China and Japan over interim together recounted the incredible pollution in Taiwan, painting a picture of a city with "a huge pollution problem...people have to spit always." Seeing those problems left the students feeling fortunate for America's comparative cleanliness, and aware of the struggles of impoverished cities. Exactly how do these experiences deal

with America's tendency to compare developing nations "to our economic and technological standards...to create an image ... in the American mind that is a chronicle of its deficiencies to the Western standards" (Pires 39)?

Surrounded by the blatant economic crisis that many nations face profoundly impacts students, and they often begin to consider how lucky we are. Seeing the inequity of the world, "most students come away from these exchanges with a greater appreciation for their privileged economic position and the wealth of opportunity available to them by virtue of their citizenship" (Pires 42). Yet the relationship that grows from this interaction smacks of Said's argument that "the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks" (40). Do students recognize the rampant poverty right here in the U.S. when they offer examples of destitution abroad? As St. Olaf students, we will see the world through our lenses since our lives littered with privilege are all that we know. How can we then make observations responsibly, remembering that strife exists everywhere including the U.S.?

Stereotypes: Breaking or Replacing?

Before many students leave, they receive bits of information about the place to which they are going. Some students have studied the nation for years at St. Olaf, and finally are able to put a picture to the facts. However, some of the information is bound to be wrong. The blatant stereotypes of 'third world' nations become internalized even when we try not to think in those terms. As Pires notes, "when it comes to Africa, 'newsworthy' is almost always associated with famine, drought, poverty, and civil strife" (39). Does studying in those nations we hear about serve to break those stereotypes?

Each of us contains many ideologies about the world that have been shaped by our culture. We each have accumulated certain stereotypes from the media, our education, and the people around us about other cultures. These stereotypes have created dogmatic barriers that separate 'us' from 'them.' Yet, after speaking with students who have studied abroad, it is evident that these barriers are not indestructible—they can be broken.

Many students recalled preconceptions that they would find strife-ridden nations on their trips abroad. Most expected to see lots of poverty, "people dying in the streets," but were shocked with the modernity and wealth they encountered. "The country was different from what I learned in class...I saw wealth I didn't expect," a student explained while describing her trip to Mexico. One senior lamented how "wrong her misconceptions were" as she walked through the modern city streets of Botswana, and realized that probably "almost all Americans have these misconceptions." Most of the students "realized [their] ethnocentrism" and began to respect and accept the culture for what it was. Similarly, in Jerry S. Carlson and Keith F. Widman's study on

“The Effects of Study Abroad During College On Attitudes Toward Other Cultures,” (1988) they concluded that students who study abroad are more critical of their home country, have higher international awareness, have increased interest in other countries and cultures.

Students who had studied in developing nations offered their new recognition of American privilege. One student described his trip to China as “a humbling experience.” Upon her return from Bangladesh, a senior admitted that “after experiencing so much poverty [she is] very grateful for everything [she has].” Along with feeling thankful, many of the students interviewed realized exactly how materialistic Americans are, and grew more “conscious of the things we have and throw away.” One student came back from Global Semester astonished by how many pieces of clothing were in her closet. After surviving five months with five shirts, two pairs of pants and a skirt, she ended up donating most of her clothes and simplifying her life overall. “I realized you don’t need a lot of money and material possessions,” one junior explained after she saw the cheerful smiles of people who lived in much less fortunate conditions than her own. Many students felt an outpouring of this sort of warmth in nations that they expected less palpable happiness. One pair of students that had spent an interim in Cuba came back saying that apparent poverty could not destroy the vitality in the people. Locals were happy to be alive, despite the visible deprivation.

One sophomore found herself very uncomfortable on her trip to China and Japan as she encountered the bows of the people who greeted her. When she learned to accept and appreciate the differences she had with the culture, she eventually became comfortable and began to practice their tradition herself—finding it “enjoyable.” “I began to accept and connect with the culture,” she stated. Similar to these students, many of the interviewees expressed how comfortable they became with the differences that people have among them as they pushed their stereotypes aside and immersed themselves into the culture. Therefore, they were prepared and able to function in a multicultural world, agreeing with Anastasia Kitsantas’ study on “Studying Abroad: The Role of College Student’s Goals on the Development of Cross-Cultural Skills and Global Understanding” (2004). Kitsantas found that study abroad programs enhance students’ worldviews, global perspectives, cross-cultural effectiveness, and interest in travel.

As these students reconstructed their images of the nation abroad, we must ask if spending one to five months in a foreign country warrants constructing a new image of an entire nation. Are the old stereotypes just painted over to show the American student that wonderful notion of perseverance? Edward Said addresses this problem of attempting to understand a culture from an outside perspective in his critique of anthropology. He determines the impossibility and

harm associated with our “attempts in the purely Western humanities to understand culture as a whole” (Said 258). Replacing old stereotypes with a new “‘knowledge’ consists of ‘reductions’ of stereotypical information to ascribe positive or negative value and emotional order” (Stier 84). Do old stereotypes simply regenerate into new stereotypes that are more informed but still great reductions of the culture?

If we eliminate the entire category of stereotypes, how can we even communicate what we thought and did on a trip? Our stigmas with political correctness too often constrict our abilities to speak openly and constructively about heated issues. One student, who studied in Ireland over interim and Germany for a year after graduating high school, had developed a useful approach to stereotypes. Since stereotypes can become so ingrained in our brains, he realized that it could be impossible to erase them. “Take stereotypes for what their worth:” to provide a frame of reference, not exemplify individual truths. He had two specific encounters in Ireland that displayed the fluctuation of truth wrapped in a specific stereotype of Irish “niceness.” He grew wary of this typical pleasant image when a woman working at a restaurant yelled at him and his friends for occupying seats when they began to study at their table after finishing their sandwiches. This new impression was later torn down when he met a man at a pub, who he described as “the nicest guy I ever met,” who “knew everything” and with whom he engaged in exciting dialogue. Sometimes generalizations are helpful in making us aware of different aspects of a culture, but this is only possible when students are skeptical enough to recognize the gray areas between what we often wish were a black and white world.

Diversity: Is it just race?

As their stereotypes diminished, many students found themselves more “hesitant before jumping to conclusions [about people] and generalizing.” After one sophomore returned, she realized how much she had judged people before she left. She returned to St. Olaf more appreciative of the diversity we have here, realizing that “they’re not all white, rich, Norwegian kids.”

Unfortunately, many people believe that St. Olaf College is not a diverse campus because of the traditional definition of diversity. Many of the students’ definitions of diversity changed while abroad; they realized that diversity comes in many forms, not just race. After one girl returned from Global Semester, she changed her definition to encompass “different backgrounds, tastes, experiences, and so on. The campus is diverse because we’re all individuals.” The students tried to recognize diversity in individuals rather than only in socially assigned ‘diverse’ groups. St. Olaf’s campus seemed more vibrant as these students recognized personal rather than structural differences. “There are different types of diversity,” one student explained, while another

said, “diversity is more than just race.”

After their experiences abroad, the interviewees began to wonder if race matters, noticing that we are “all the same in the end.” The student on Global Semester who had previously only understood diversity as racial diversity concluded “the concept of race doesn’t affect [her] anymore” after her experiences abroad—she “doesn’t even see it.” While studying in Costa Rica, one sophomore student was amazed that the concept of race did not exist there. “They don’t even have terms of race!” she exclaimed. Experiencing this culture caused her to “think less racially.” Lester Thomas McCabe’s study on “The Development of a Global Perspective During Participation in Semester at Sea: a comparative global education program,” (1994) encountered similar findings. The students he studied that participated in this program gained insights about not only themselves, but the world in general. One student realized that “in a really broad sense people are the same....” Race therefore does not matter. All that distinguishes one culture from another are the “world view[s] and perspectives” that our individual cultures have taught us (McCabe 279). Though these students idyllically express that diversity breaks the confines of race, history and society tell us that race does matter socially. These sorts of multicultural issues must be addressed so that minority and non-minority students can embrace and understand each other’s perspectives. Though race was not used to define diversity (by both white students and students of color), we are still living in a black and white world. We need to take account of this difference because it does matter to people of color.

Minority Experience

How does race affect students of color when they study abroad? Marilyn Brewer’s theory of optimum differentiation postulates human desire for uniqueness and belonging: “When extremes of uniqueness lead to aloneness, we seek belonging and the companionship of others. When extremes of belonging cause us to lose our identity and self-awareness, we emphasize our uniqueness” (Jones, 28). According to the Asian Americans interviewed, many felt that being a part of the Asian culture made them more comfortable and confident about their Asian identity. Relating by physical features made a great impact for some individuals because they felt included in the majority society for the first time in their lives. One Asian-American student felt accepted into the Asian community during Term in Asia, “I was able to blend with the people in Asia and for the first time, I didn’t have people question me about my race/ethnicity because I fit right in.” Upon returning to St. Olaf, he became more involved in the Asian American experience and activities on campus. This example demonstrates that we need not shy away from race; it can carry sources of connection to community as well as provide divisions at other times.

Although these Asian Americans were grateful to finally not look ‘different’ in Asia, they faced struggles as Asian Americans that made their experience in Asia different from their white St. Olaf peers. Questions such as, “Am I Asian enough to be Asian?” arose in our short conversations. These students were confronted with the challenges of the country’s native language and some of the cultural values that were different from their own. Asian American students felt discouraged by the inability of Asians to reconcile the students’ American identities because of their Asian appearance. One Korean student complained, “I got really frustrated in Korea when people approached me and they expected me to speak perfect Korean.” Even when they looked like everyone surrounding them, they remained in the minority.

Social Identity Theory states that a person has not one “personal self,” but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on the basis of his personal, familial, or national “level of self” (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This theory states that in understanding one’s own social identity, an individual will need to understand the psychological basis of inter-group discrimination. When Asian students feel discriminated against in the U.S., they cling to their Asian identity, but when they faced questions in Asia about their American identity, the students had to accommodate their Asian American identity.

The story of one Korean adoptee interviewed exemplifies this theory. Before she left, she considered herself, “more white than Asian because growing up around all whites, people told me I wasn’t like the rest of them [Asians].” Her American identity became different abroad because she had to change her mentality of her identity in the different countries on Global Semester, especially in South Korea. Many people harassed her because she physically blended in with the different races abroad, but she could not speak clearly in many of the countries. Although she made the effort to learn and use the different languages abroad, she was not accepted as a native because she had her own American values that made her distinct. “I always made an effort to learn the languages of the different countries and so I passed okay for many of the different countries. It felt great to be fully immersed, but it was really challenging for people to accept me as an Asian American.” Being placed into situations where she could not consider herself similar to the rest of the St. Olaf group or the Asian communities, she had to recognize her own identity as an Asian and American.

Transitioning to one’s own ancestral culture was the hardest challenge for most interviewees because they looked the same but acted different. Even though the majority of the Asian American students went abroad to experience their Asian roots, it was hard for many students to face their own heritage. For example, in

Vietnam, the people expected one Vietnamese American student to know her language and culture, which made a positive impact in a sense that it forced her to understand the importance of her Vietnamese identity. However, she simultaneously felt alienated from Vietnamese society, which made her experience more intense than that of most St. Olaf students. “There were times when Vietnamese people made fun of me because they thought it was a disgrace that I was Vietnamese American and I couldn’t speak Vietnamese. They took advantage of me and they made me feel bad for not knowing my language.”

Derise E. Tolliver, a clinical psychologist coordinated a three-week course focusing on race in Ghana. She found that white students describe their understanding of being in the racial minority more positively than how Black students describe being a racial minority in America. Tolliver stated that while abroad, white students often reported the “experience of warmth, hospitality, and open-ness from the Ghanaians,” which contrasted with the hostility and tensions that Black students often describe as part of their minority experience in America. In our study, Asian-American females also faced incredible ridicule from their ancestral societies while they balanced the thin line between their Asian and American identities. A student stated that there was a time in Thailand when she and her two St. Olaf male friends went out to the night market and some older women verbally attacked her. “The older women gave me the dirtiest looks. They were yelling at me in Thai so I couldn’t understand what they were saying, but for sure they thought I was a prostitute because I was with two tall white males.” Minority students were expected to conform to the society because of their physical similarities, while white students were allowed to be American.

“Abroad, lighter skin complexion is more acceptable,” a Filipino American said. People in Cuba denied her of her American status because she was darker. She and her Latino American friend were refused entry to a hotel because it was reserved for “white” foreigners only. In Hong Kong, she told a local that she was Filipino and was discouraged when she later learned that a Filipino is considered lower class, equivalent to a “Nigger” in early American history. The student felt that “we need to redefine what is American because people don’t understand that America is a mixture of cultures and people.” As America works toward diversifying the economy and establishing a just society, there are many different multicultural aspects on which we must speculate further. Multiculturalism refers to the social arrangements characterized by cultural diversity. In practice:

[T]his means non-trivial interpersonal contact between individuals and groups who differ in their ethnicity. In multicultural societies, such contact occurs within a climate of tolerance and mutual respect. A distinction is drawn

between the processes of multicultural contact, which include the behavior, attitudes, perceptions and feelings of the participants, and the institutional structures. (Brockner, 19)

Americans cannot expect the world to recognize the many faces of America if we ourselves do not truly recognize American multiculturalism.

Knowing too much?: Condensation after Studying Abroad

St. Olaf's small 'bubble' effect pushes many students to study abroad for a 'real world' experience. One student who fell in love with Mexico over interim described a reverse culture shock when she returned to her relationships here. The rest of the focus group she was a part of nodded and chimed in with their personal bitterness towards the triviality of what constitutes an 'issue' at St. Olaf. Homework, shopping, and boys pale in comparison to the problems these people saw in their experiences abroad. Students who have been abroad for a semester or interim often return finding themselves separated from anyone who has not been abroad. One girl noticed in her last week in Italy that she had grown in her semester away from St. Olaf, describing the feeling as something "you can't explain unless you've gone." Study abroad seems to drip with an element of condescension to those who have not experienced the real world. Upon return, many students described feeling miserable that they were trapped in such a boring life here at St. Olaf.

The hierarchy that seems present depicting the level of experience abroad represents our version of society's fascination with 'worldliness.' We idealize lives of travel. When we think about the historical roots of travel in conquest, however, this contemporary admiration becomes a bit uneasy. We think about travel as a means to learn about diversity, but does it also maintain and strengthen our ideas of superiority? Said recounts the insidious nature of power in travel as he speaks of British conquest in Egypt, "the cosmopolitanism of geography was, in Curzon's mind, its universal importance to the whole of the West, whose relationship to the rest of the world was one of frank covetousness" (Said 216). When we feel we know about another part of the world, superiority sneaks through in both our relationship to that nation and our nation. Instead of asserting our authority by lecturing on our 'knowledge' of the world, could students returning from studying abroad gain more from asking questions? Hugo of St. Victor's Didascalion said "the man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land" (Said 259). If we no longer consider ourselves experts, will we continue to learn more at home and abroad?

Conclusion

We originally intended to explore how people understand their personal developments in the St. Olaf community after they studied abroad. As we entered conversations with students, we became aware of different dialogues that society tends to sweep under the rug.

Our separation of the white from the minority experiences in our paper demonstrates that these conversations are premised on an ingrained division between white and the 'other' — people of color here and abroad. The section titles themselves show the 'otherness' of anyone who is not white, as there is a specific section entitled "The minority experience" but no "white experience." White students' conclusions that race does not exist illustrates the ignorance that white privilege allows them. Historically and presently white people have expressed their power by containing and controlling the 'other'. White Americans feel ashamed of our connection to atrocities associated with a white global empire that defines the white as elite and anyone else as subordinate. Instead of dealing with this unequal relationship, we deny that race exists. Students leave the U.S. to find 'humbling experiences' that leave them feeling responsible to generate equality. Does this simply reassure their power and distinguish 'us' from 'them'?

The minority experience abroad proves that the elimination of a racial hierarchy remains a mere hope. While the white students we interviewed denied the existence of race, Asian American students found that they could not escape it. In the U.S. and abroad, race defines their identity and separates them from people viewed as 'American.' In the U.S. people of color have a title before we allow them the name 'American' (i.e. Asian American, Latino American, African American). Where can they find their 'home' if not in the U.S. where they have grown up and lived, nor in their ancestral home? What can we learn from these problems that become apparent after studying abroad? We must recognize that we feel responsible because of our white privilege so that we can eliminate the need for that responsibility. How can our experiences help us be accountable and not be authority figures? After presenting these issues, what will we do to address them as a community?

Beginning a dialogue at St. Olaf

Asian Americans experience a different perspective abroad in Asia, but what can we learn if we do not dialogue about our experiences? In Derise E. Tolliver's research analysis on her group of students abroad in Ghana, she facilitated a course on "learning about race, racial identity, and the impact of racism in America today" to talk about the subject of race, which remains a 'taboo' in society. Many of the students agreed that St. Olaf does not provide enough opportunities to dialogue about 'taboo' topics concerning diversity.

How can we recognize white privilege if we fear expressing ourselves freely without people thinking that we are being racist?

St. Olaf sends hundreds of students out into the global society, but do they prepare them to succeed over the boundaries and barriers of discrimination? A Latino American said, “I thought going abroad was going to be the best experience of my life because I was with a great group of students and a nice professor at orientation, but I was not prepared to face these sorts of minority issues.” Her experience gave her a new perspective to see through a different lens when she later studied in the Middle East, but she still did not know how to deal with the situations regarding race.

As a liberal arts institution, St. Olaf College needs to prepare students to discuss the issues of ‘race,’ ‘class,’ and other forms of diversity that are taboo in our society. From Tolliver’s study about race, she concluded that in talking about racial issues, one white student wrote, “I realize that for the first time, my discomfort in conversing about racial issues...I must think about the role I have played in racism” (Tolliver 115). Tolliver’s students reported increased willingness to confront their family and friends about the issues of racism and oppression. We need to realize that racism remains at the root of hate and oppression in our world. We will continue to tour the different countries, nation-by-nation with our eyes closed, and return to America and St. Olaf, realizing the beauty of our privileged nation’s diversity surrounding us.

Ask Questions

It is important for our American society to ask questions about what we fear and do not understand. Since we can be blinded by our power and privilege, we need to be aware of the different perspectives that we do not encounter everyday. The only way we can learn and break down barriers is to ask the questions that mystify us. As much as we think we understand the places that we travel, our short time abroad does not provide us with expertise. Sharing experiences not only helps us put into words what we have seen and learned, but it can also generate questions that we had not considered while abroad. If we keep questions flowing after we return from studying abroad, the learning experience never ends.

Suggestions for Further Research

Conversations with students who have not studied abroad greatly influenced the final section in our findings, “Condescension after studying abroad.” When we talked with friends, who have not left St. Olaf or the U.S., about our apprehension towards the ‘knowledge’ people gain while abroad, they were replete with words that expressed feelings of condescension. In a future study, we might study how studying abroad affects the community of St. Olaf beyond

those who participate in studying abroad. Future researchers should also interview more minority students with a variety of ethnic representation to balance the number of white students, for this will allow the research to represent the views of different minority groups.

Appendix A : Individual Insights

Lily

When I became a sophomore here at St. Olaf, I was fortunate to finally return back to Asia with hopes to search for my true Asian-American identity, and to experience the life in the East, where everyone had similar physical features like myself. Perhaps for once I would finally gain the privileges of being a part of the privileged majority group. As a female minority in America, there have been many times in my life where I have felt isolated, oppressed, and unwanted because I looked or thought 'differently' and not completely what people would stereotype as 'American.' Going to Asia was a gift that changed my perspective of the world and myself both positively and negatively. For once in my life, I felt empowered and did not have to worry about what the majority thought of me, until I finally spoke with them. Those were the times when I began to wonder if it would ever be possible for me to 'fit in' somewhere and not feel discriminated against. This curiosity has led me to ponder if other students of color experience similar experiences abroad. Will it ever be possible for people to acknowledge Asian Americans as Asians and Americans or is it something we will continuously claim to be, but never be recognized for it? In researching this project, I came to conclude for myself that Asian American is a term that has labeled and divided us, and unfortunately, it's something I or we can hide from. It is not a phrase that we should be afraid of or go searching for. It should just be something that we are proud and willing to share because like most privileged whites, we are privileged ourselves to be able to be a part of two beautiful cultures.

Lily's Personal Reflection Abroad

I write this reflection with no intentions to offend any reader, but to express my perspective learning about white privilege abroad, since I spent a chunk of my time reflecting on this topic.

I am grateful and thankful for the great opportunities to study abroad on Term in Asia and in Tanzania. It was a privilege to study and learn from two groups of wonderful St. Olaf students and two awesome professors. Going abroad has provided me with endless opportunities to continue to pursue global issues and be more skeptical of American perspectives. Most importantly, I got to understand the Hmong American person I am.

Whether in the United States or overseas, many people are often confused about who I am and what the Hmong are. I always got bombarded with

questions about my relations to America and that became annoying because people contradicted who I should be. I never became so aggressive about the issues of race until I experienced it abroad. As a person of color in America (being a female American minority as well as Hmong minority) and as a minority abroad, I continued to feel oppressed by the way my race and social class have placed me in society. As a minority from America overseas with the Asian majority in Asia, Asians never identified and accepted me as being American. "You can't be American! You're not white," most would say. Obviously my long black hair, yellow skin, and short physical features didn't make me "American" enough. This one time, my American professor's son asked me, "Is Lily your real name or is it a nickname because it sounds really American." It humored me because I think I'm as American as anyone else in America.

Observing my peers, I realize that not only do whites never get questioned or laughed at about where they came from or what their religious background is, but they too receive more respect and privileges from other global outsiders without even recognizing it. At Chiang Mai University, Thailand, with which St. Olaf has had a relationship of 30 years, we were privileged to stay with host families after our intensive Thai language courses, and it was disappointing for me to hear that one of the host families requested only a real "American" student who was white. Other similar situations occurred in Tanzania with my roommates as well. "Can you tell Anna to help me with my English assignment and my Economics homework?" my roommates in Tanzania would ask, assuming that my English is not perfect and I would not have enough knowledge so they should ask someone who is a real "American."

There were times when white Americans also contradicted the diverse picture of America. While at Chiang Mai University, the St. Olaf group was asked to present the "American Culture" at Chiang Mai's International Night, and it was really disappointing for me because all of the ideas were "Christian-white" related. "We'll do a skit starting with New Year's, Valentine's, Easter, Independence Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and ending with Christmas." Everyone completely forgot that America also celebrated other holidays. When I mentioned incorporating a multicultural aspect of America, I was outnumbered by other ideas and so I performed my own solo piece for the event.

When we talk about race in and outside of the classroom, it amazes me that white students don't recognize their privileges as white Americans. Of course it's not their fault, but it's something this society is pretending doesn't exist. White Americans abroad are often very fortunate because they don't even have to worry about not having white American food present since most of the time, countries overseas expect to have white travelers for profit. Whites even have

people globally who admire them based on their skin color. For example, in Asia and Tanzania, so many youth wanted to erase their skin tone using varieties of whitening products so that they can be more beautiful. Even all the different labels and magazine cover girls were light-skinned, or white. It seems like abroad and in the U.S., many white Americans are not aware of how the topic of race affects their daily lives.

I think the topic of race is something that most students of color and some professors on campus struggle with because we are so visible. I personally feel like I and some other students on campus, get burdened trying to educate these sorts of issues and at times, I even appear to be racist because it is such a sensitive topic. Since we are really privileged to be a part of the St. Olaf community and our mission embraces and respects diversity, we need to incorporate the issues of race into studying abroad programs because it does play into how we perceive different parts of the world. It should not be something we dwell upon, but it should be something we address so that we can understand and value cultural diversity in the twenty-first century.

Lily's Research Reflection

One of the challenges Ruth, Eve and I faced while putting this research together was recruiting minority students. Obviously, with only 10.3% of the student population as students of color, the number of students traveling abroad was even lower. It was easier for me to recruit names that were familiar for me because I knew for sure that the names were students of color. The majority of my interviewees were Asian Americans because their names were easier to spot. Although I did send invitations to other minority students on campus, the return responses were not successful. I only had a turnout of seven interviews. All were Asian Americans except for two (a Latina and White American) and two of the five Asian Americans were males.

Another challenge I came across was trying to hold myself back from talking about my own experiences in the interviews. Since I was trying to make the students feel comfortable with the interview, I approached it in a less formal way after they signed the consent form. This informal interview also led to some of the interviewees asking me for my experiences, and at times, it was difficult to not express myself until the end. This could have had some effect in my data outcome.

I can honestly say, that it was easier for me to approach the students of color in the one-on-one interviews because I was more relaxed, I didn't have to worry about what others were going to think of me, didn't have to worry if I was being biased or was stepping on toes, and my interviewees were less tense. The majority of them, I have never had conversations with before, but this interview about studying abroad was something that excited all of us because we had

similar minority experiences. We all personally agreed that more dialogue and conversations like this are important and healthy for the St. Olaf community. It was challenging for me to interview the white St. Olaf students in the focus groups and the one white interviewee because I always felt like there was an invisible barrier that others and myself are facing. Whether it was they, or I, these sorts of tensions are some of the issues that we Americans need to overcome in order to learn from one another. I remember a time when Eve was stressing about how she was going to approach one of her student of color interviewees without offending or not feeling like she was going to attack her about diversity issues. In the end, it was one of her most valuable interviews. We need to talk about: Why these sorts of barriers exist? Why can't we break them down? What is the importance of diversity and multiculturalism, or is it even important? Lastly, how can we overcome racial stereotypes and discrimination? These are discussions that liberal arts students need to be able to have and not feel resentment about. I can't speak for everyone, but I know that these are some of the issues and challenges that I continue to face and because I am a person of color myself, there are probably many who feel this way. Talking and asking questions are important especially if we are planning to travel the world and learn about other global issues. How are we supposed to "help" or "find solutions" to make this world a better place if we can't even discuss some of the "taboo" issues in the present American society?

Ruth

In creating a major studying Colonialism, I originally sought to understand negative impacts of colonial rule on the colonized so I could begin to apologize for the wrongs of my European ancestors. I knew that as an undergrad I could not offer much assistance, but I set on a mission to "[obtain] a fuller picture of [the colonized] traditional culture, a better understanding of the processes of change taking place in it at present, and a deeper insight into the psychology of human groups brought up in [post-colonial] culture," achieving "harmony between the West and a neighboring world area" (Raphael Patai quoted in Said 309).

I left to study abroad in Senegal in the midst of writing the proposal for my major studying the Colonial legacy in Post-Colonial societies. I anticipated gaining personal accounts of the injustice that France thrust on Senegal during Colonial rule. My proposal was premised on colonial subjugation of the colonized. Within the first few weeks of living with my host family, I asked a relative what he thought of colonial rule. He replied that as a tour guide he would be out of a job if the French had never colonized. Throughout the semester this idea consistently recurred that the Senegalese could take advantage of the French presence even though Colonial rule implies a

disproportionate power structure to the advantage of Europe. The Senegalese have not formed their culture in a vacuum that could resist French influence. Rather, the conglomerations of French and Senegalese cultures have created a vibrant community that demonstrates active participation of both nations. When I returned to St. Olaf, I had gained a new appreciation for the agency of the colonized. My original major proposal disgusted me with its degrading tone of the subjugated 'other.' I realized that the 'harmony' I hoped to find through studying post-colonial societies "[was] the result of the conquest of maidenly coyness; it is not by any means the coexistence of equals" according to Said's Orientalist idea of studying the 'other' as a separate entity that 'Westerners' have classified. I severely questioned (and continue to question) my original pretext of studying to 'help' after studying in Senegal and reading Said's work. Thinking about why I feel this need to 'help,' I learned first-hand the definition of the term 'white man's burden' through my deep guilt as a white person who profits from colonial conquest.

These ideas of my own privilege colored the context in which I analyzed the remarks of interviewees. I have lauded certain descriptions of abroad experiences and interactions back at Olaf as condescending, but how am I any different for making those judgments? When students described the poverty they had witnessed and others could not understand, I noted condescension towards non-travelers. I maintain that we often return from travels with a false sense of ultimate knowledge that can both confine the 'other' into a pre-established hierarchical relationship and establish unnecessary distance from other Americans who have not traveled. However, am I any better? When I impart my 'knowledge' in this paper, am I not also condescending in stating that study abroad students return with a condescending attitude?

I do not retract any of the statements this paper makes, but instead of leaving it as a pure critique on all of us young travelers, I want to set an agenda for myself and other students who have traveled and hope to travel. We must realize the importance of our words--they carry authority when others have not seen what we have; but we can never take for granted our right to that power. If we are critical of our own knowledge, it will be apparent that we are not experts to everyone we talk to. Yet precisely by not claiming this unfounded authority, we move toward an equitable world that defies and constructively criticizes the categories created by power.

Eve

This study has shown that studying abroad has made students more aware of their current positions in the world and instilled in them values to lead lives of worth. From this study, I gained the exact same things—and I did not even have to leave the town of Northfield.

I was originally interested in conducting this study because of my strong interest in other cultures. I wanted to hear about the other cultures that St. Olaf students had the opportunity to spend time with, and their experiences within those fascinating communities. Another purpose I had involved the month I had just spent in Greece and Turkey on a St. Olaf abroad program. The trip was so incredible that I had a hard time returning to campus. With this study, I planned to seek out other students who also had this ‘after abroad let-down’ as they returned to the hill and back to their ordinary routines, as a sort of healing and coping method. As Ruth, Lily, and I progressed through the study, I realized that my original purposes had dissipated...and from our findings I resulted in gaining knowledge much more valuable than the information I had originally sought. This is especially thanks to Ruth and Lily, for their purposes of the study caused me to realize issues that I had never contemplated before. Before conducting this study, I thought it was beneficial to consider everyone equal. I believed that all of us, no matter what our race or culture, were all the same in the end. I never saw people in terms of their race, and often forgot the concept existed. I can see now that this view is mostly due to my white privilege, which has shaded the world so that I do not see the color barriers that constantly burden people of color. My power and privilege made me fail to see that skin color does have a large impact on people’s perspectives and experiences, not just a person’s cultural ancestry, as I originally believed. This study has helped me see that these ignorant ways of thinking can also be considered racist, even though I do not mean to discriminate. I have come to the realization that I should take race into account, for it is an imperative factor when considering people’s experiences and lives. I learned to celebrate our racial differences along with our cultural differences, instead of merely searching for possible commonalities among us. This novel mindset I gained will hopefully aid me on my travels in the future. In the fall, I will be participating on the Global Semester program at St. Olaf, where I will encounter many contrasting cultures around the world. Instead of searching how I can fit in to each community I visit, I should embrace how I stand out as a way of rejoicing in the incredible diversity that every part of the world contains...even St. Olaf’s campus.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Why Study Abroad?

1. What made you decide to study abroad?
2. Where did you go?
3. What made you decide on that particular program?

Changes in Community

Subject 1: How have your perceptions of the “St. Olaf community” changed?

1. How do you define diversity? How do you view diversity on campus?
2. Do you view the St. Olaf community in a more positive or negative light?
3. Do you feel your role at St. Olaf has changed since you’ve studied abroad? If so, how?

Perceptions of Being a Minority

Subject 2: Did your perceptions of what it means to be a minority change?

1. How were you a minority abroad compared to at St. Olaf?
2. Can you describe your current interactions with students who are different than yourself? Have these interactions changed since you’ve spent time abroad? Do you have any examples?
3. How has your view of minority students changed after experiencing first-hand what it was like to be a minority?
4. Did you feel welcomed to participate or interact with the minority/majority students within your abroad program? Why or why not?

Personal Growth

Subject 3: How have you “personally” changed after your experience abroad?

1. Before you left did you have an idea of what you would encounter?
2. How were the cultures and people you first met different or similar to what you expected?
3. How did those first impressions last through your experience abroad?
4. Do you feel you interact differently with fellow St Olaf students after your time abroad? If so, how?

Is there anything you would like to mention that we failed to discuss today?

Appendix C: Consent Form

After Study Abroad: A Study in Personal Development through Study Abroad Focus Groups and Interviews

CONSENT FORM

Background Information:

You are invited to participate in a research study using focus groups and personal interviews to explore the impact of study abroad on St. Olaf students.

You were selected as a possible participant because you have studied abroad through St. Olaf College. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before deciding about being in this study.

This research is being conducted by Eve Sundberg, Ruth Nervig, and Lily Moua for Ethnographic research methods, So/An 373.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to do the following:

- (1) Participate in one focus group session or an interview, lasting approximately one hour.
- (2) Give us permission to audio-tape the session, so that we may transcribe accurate notes.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

There is little risk involved in participating in this focus group. If you agree to participate, you can choose not to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain strictly confidential; you will not be identified in any reports produced from this study. In the types of publications that may be involved, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify individual participants. Research records will be kept in locked files and only the researchers will have access to the records. The audio-tape will be destroyed after data transcription is completed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By participating in the group you are giving your consent to be in the study. Your decision whether to participate will in no way affect your current or future relations with St. Olaf College or any of its departments.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign below.

_____ Date _____

Contacts and Questions:

At this time, please ask any questions you might have. If you think of other questions later on, please contact Ruth at nervig@stolaf.edu, Eve at sundberg@stolaf.edu, or Lily at moua@stolaf.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the St. Olaf College Institutional Review Board. The address is St. Olaf College, Administration 127, 1520 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, MN 55057. The telephone number is 507-646-3910

You may keep a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Appendix D: Emails to participants St. Olaf College Study Abroad Students,

All of you have had the privilege to take advantage of St. Olaf's incredible study abroad opportunities. To further enhance the knowledge and insights obtained from the experiences studying outside of the United States, we would like you to reflect on how all the novel events that were encountered have influenced your perceptions.

We, Lily Moua, Ruth Nervig, and Eve Sundberg, are Sociology/Anthropology majors who are currently conducting a study here on campus for our Ethnographic Research Methods/ Qualitative Studies course. The particular topic of interest for our specific research study is the experiences of St. Olaf students who have studied abroad. Whether it was for an interim, semester, or for an entire year, we are eager to hear your accounts of your travels and time spent off campus.

This study requires many participants, so please consider volunteering an hour of your time to answer a few questions and to share your experiences (feel free to bring pictures!). To donate your fascinating tales, please email any one of us as soon as you are able. Thank you so much, and we hope to hear from you soon!

Sincerely,
Lily Moua (moua@stolaf.edu)
Ruth Nervig (nervig@stolaf.edu)
Eve Sundberg (sundberg@stolaf.edu)

Hello! This Thursday, you will be taking part in a little group interview/discussion about your travels and experiences studying abroad. So please keep all possible conflicts at bay during the hour between 7-8 on Thursday, April 14th. If you cannot make it, please email Eve Sundberg (sundberg@stolaf.edu) immediately(!!!), so that something can be figured out. We'll let you know the actual place to meet. before Thursday arrives. It'll be a grand ol' time reminiscing and perhaps you'll even make some self-discoveries you haven't noticed before. Remember, you can bring pictures if you want. SO...see you Thursday (place to be announced).

Cheers,

Eve, Lily, and Ruth

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