

COMPREHENDING THE LASTING INFLUENCE OF STUDY ABROAD  
ON ETHNIC IDENTITY IN HERITAGE SCHOLARS:  
A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

by

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COMPREHENDING THE LASTING INFLUENCE OF STUDY ABROAD  
ON ETHNIC IDENTITY IN HERITAGE SCHOLARS:  
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Internationalization of higher education has become a priority and expectation for many United States (U.S.) universities and colleges as a way to address the developments of globalization and prepare their students for participation in the globalized world and workforce. A key strategy for this internationalization has been pushing students to participate in study abroad programs that provide first-hand international and global perspectives outside of the classroom. With the numbers of students participating in study abroad programming continuing to increase over the past two decades, including increases in the numbers of racially and ethnically minoritized students participating, there has been a rise in heritage scholars studying abroad in countries connected to their ancestry.

Scholarship examining heritage scholar experiences has been rare and largely under-researched. Additionally, student development scholarship and theories have been rarely applied to international education experiences. Thus, the development of a new framework was necessary. Using a qualitative constructivist grounded theory methodological approach, I collected data on the experiences and perspectives of SIT Study Abroad alumni who studied abroad in a country/culture connected to their heritage 5-15 years post their sojourn experience(s).

The emergent theoretical model resulting from this study offers insights on contributing elements and factors to perceived changes to, and lasting influences of, studying abroad on ethnic identity development. These included background factors (including demographics), input factors such as motivations and the strength of the program's heritage connection, as well as activity factors such as language immersion, acceptance by the home culture, program duration, and the presence of other heritage students. The model depicts how the different elements have stronger or weaker influences on perceived ethnic identity change by study abroad alumni. The findings from this study demonstrate the need to address heritage scholars in the pre-departure process; to provide specific training for study abroad professionals in-country; to enhance recruitment, retention, and engagement of underrepresented students for study abroad; and to require reflective and analytic opportunities, as well as provide resources and support, for students to process through their experiences, emotions, and potential struggles.

### **Dedication**

To my grandmother, Norma Jean Rutt.

While you never fully understood what I was studying,  
you always made sure I knew how proud you were of me (and that I better finish!).

Although you passed away one month before my defense,  
I know that you had no doubts that I would achieve whatever I set my mind to.

I miss you.

(1934-2020)

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

The world has become highly globalized. This global influence is continuously expanding into new realms. As a result of globalization, nations have become dependent on each other for goods and resources. In addition, many entities in the business, finance, and even education sectors have grown beyond the boundaries and borders of nation states (Achterberg, 2002). Due to this global influence, the demand for international skills and experience has increased.

Correspondingly, in the education sector, internationalization of higher education has become a priority for many United States (U.S.) universities and colleges as a way to address the developments of globalization, as well as to prepare their students for participation in the globalized world and workforce (Achterberg, 2002; Hudzik, 2015; Ogden, 2015; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014). Furthermore, Seeber, Cattaneo, Huisman, and Paleari (2016) discussed how internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become expected. This desire and expectation for internationalization stems from HEIs having a responsibility to “foster a student citizenry with stronger global awareness...[in order to] provid[e] greater employment opportunities for their graduates...or simply in heeding the American public’s growing interest in the importance of promoting global mindedness among future generations” (Tarrant et al., 2014, p.142). Thus, increased globalization is influencing HEIs to better prepare their students to be globalized citizens and compete in a globalized workforce post-graduation.

Many scholars (e.g., Achterberg, 2002; Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; de Wit, 2002; Tarrant et al., 2014) have argued that it is important for students to obtain the

knowledge of cultures, societies, and political systems that differ from their own in order to be prepared to interact in the globalized world post-graduation, which may increase global competency. Without acquiring a global competency, college graduates would lack the proficiency to connect and relate to others around the world (Achterberg, 2002). Thus, it is crucial to prioritize international awareness and perspectives comprehensively across initiatives and efforts of universities and colleges, in order to provide graduates with the skills and competency necessary to succeed in a globalized society and workforce.

There are various strategies for achieving internationalization of U.S. HEIs, focusing on both programmatic and organizational efforts (de Wit, 2002; Hudzik, 2015; Knight, 1997). One of the many aspects and strategies of internationalization efforts that U.S universities and colleges strive for is that of having students participate in study abroad programs (Braskamp et al., 2009; Tarrant et al., 2014). These experiences provide first-hand international awareness and global perspectives outside of the classroom (Hadis, 2005; Ogden, 2015; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011, Soria & Troisi, 2014). This strategy has become so key to the internationalization efforts of higher education institutions, that “the number of students participating in education abroad is often the primary indicator of an institution’s success in achieving globalization aims” (Tarrant et al., 2014, p. 143).

Studying abroad has become an “integral component” (Braskamp et al., 2009, p. 101) of educational experiences for college students, as it provides “global learning and development, intercultural competence, intercultural maturity, and intercultural sensitivity of students” (p. 101), and is considered an important strategy for HEIs to

internationalize. As such, participation in study abroad programming has been on the rise over the past two decades (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2018). IIE data show that college students from the U.S. are studying abroad in records numbers, with participation continuing to increase. In 2018, the U.S. reached a new high and tripled the number of students participating in study abroad over the previous two decades (IIE, 2018). Study abroad has been described as a transformative experience, with many students describing changes to their identity and worldviews (Angulo, 2008; Perry, Stoner, Tarrant, 2012; Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). With more and more students participating in study abroad experiences, it is important to understand the lasting (if any) influence on the identity development of these students. In addition, with an increase in the number of students studying abroad, the racial/ethnic background of the students participating is also growing in diversity (IIE, 2018). Furthermore, heritage destinations have grown increasingly popular for minoritized study abroad participants (Szekeley, 1998; Comp, 2008).

### **Statement of Problem**

Despite the volume of students studying abroad, there is a limited amount of literature that focuses on lasting influence of international education experiences on the identity development of participants. In addition, student development scholarship and theories have rarely been applied to international education experiences. Patton et al. (2016) argued “[m]ore evidence is needed to create something like a model of how study abroad or other international experiences influence...identity development among U.S. students, but it is clear that these experiences do have some effect on identity” (p. 268). Similar to the limited research on the lasting influence and impacts of studying abroad on

identity development, as well as student development theory being applied to international education experiences, the topic of heritage scholars is largely under-researched in the realm of study abroad scholarship (Petrucci, 2007).

This topic is important to study for multiple reasons. Firstly, heritage scholars – defined as students studying abroad in their ancestral homeland (Szekeley, 1998) – are typically seeking out connection to “one’s personal history and culture” (Pruitt, 2018, para. 5), and are argued to have more at stake regarding the development of their ethnic identity than a student not connected to the ancestry of the study abroad location. The reasoning is that heritage scholars have the opportunity to develop and understand their ethnic identity more holistically (Petrucci, 2007). They can have unique, and perhaps isolating, experiences in comparison to their non-heritage study abroad peers, which should be addressed in order to support the student through their study abroad program and identity journey (Comp, 2008). As Rubin (2004) stated, “heritage students hunt for a deeper understanding of their cultural identities and sharper language skills to better communicate with parents and grandparents” (p. 26), in comparison to their non-heritage peers who want to experience a culture unlike their own. Furthermore, heritage students look to formulate their own ideas about their cultural background in order to detach from the negative and/or tainted stereotypes that may come from mainstream media and/or family who chose to leave (Rubin, 2004).

Another reason this research is vital is that it may help address issues of underrepresentation of minoritized populations participating in study abroad, as well as the desire HEIs have for internationalizing their campuses and students. Of the existing literature, research is also limited in terms of examining racially/ethnically minoritized

students participating in study abroad programming. Despite increased participation in study abroad overall, the rate of racially/ethnically minoritized students is considerably lower than those of their White peers (IIE, 2018; Pruitt, 2018). Additionally, the majority of research on study abroad is conducted with White, non-minoritized students as minoritized students study abroad at significantly lower rates (Lu, Reddick, Dean, & Pecero, 2015; Soria & Troisi, 2014). It is necessary to find ways to increase participation of underrepresented minoritized students due to HEIs seeking more ways to provide study abroad opportunities to the wider student populations, including the growing diversity on campuses. Comp (2008) and Pruitt (2018) posited that increasing the offering and marketing of heritage study abroad opportunities could assist in increasing minoritized student participation. Pruitt (2018) further argued that heritage programming for those with minoritized backgrounds could benefit from cost savings as many are traveling to developing countries and have cheaper price tags than study abroad program in Western, developed countries.

However, heritage seeking motivations are not solely for students with a racially/ethnically minoritized status. Due to the U.S.'s history being relatively young and the composition of the majority of its residents having immigrant ancestry, there is a strong fascination and accepted notion of belonging somewhere else, and the belief of sharing common cultural background with another country/culture is "fundamental to the practice of heritage seeking" (Comp, 2008, p. 29). Thus, the focus of understanding benefits of heritage study abroad experiences, as well as identifying ways to provide support for these unique and (perhaps) isolating experiences should not rest solely on

ethnically/racially minoritized students, but rather include any heritage student seeking to connect with their ancestral background and culture.

Lastly, it is important to understand the lasting influence of heritage-connected study abroad experiences. While ethnicity is fluid, meaning that salience of identity is dependent on the unique environments and contexts of an individual (Jones & Abes, 2004; Naddaf, 2016; Savicky & Cooley, 2011), and thus can evolve over time, it is important for study abroad professionals to understand how the programming they offer influences long-term changes in identity and perception of self. Study abroad is touted as a high impact practice (Mulvaney, 2017), is supported and encouraged by most HEIs as pathway to internationalize their campuses and student bodies, and is seen as being highly beneficial to students who participate (Braskamp et al., 2009; Tarrant et al., 2014). However, researchers rarely examine the long-term influences or impacts of studying abroad in order to understand how these programs are affecting students later in life.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand ethnic identity development of college alumni who have participated in study abroad programs located in countries and/or cultures connected to their heritage. In this study, I chose to focus on the specific social identity facet of ethnicity/heritage because “identity is the product of one's personal history but also one's place in history” (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990, p. 171), and studying abroad in locations connected to their heritage provides students with the opportunity to explore this identity in ways they would not be able to if their studies remained solely on campus. In addition, there is a lack of research that specifically focuses on the lasting influence of studying abroad on ethnic identity development of heritage scholars.

Examining this topic is important to HEIs interested in student outcomes, and the outcomes of their internationalization efforts.

Additionally, it is vital to understand the unique experiences of heritage scholars to better support them through their study abroad experience, as a lack of understanding may prevent maximization of the long-term/lasting outcomes of studying abroad for these students. Furthermore, it is important to examine the lasting benefits and influences of studying abroad in a heritage location in terms of ethnic identity development as it is relevant to current social and political climates, which tend to be rooted in race and ethnicity across the world. Thus, ethnic and racial identities are continually brought to the forefront. The social and political focus on these identities can influence the development of students with minoritized identities. Therefore, this study investigated the following questions:

1. How do study abroad alumni who have participated in a program connected to their heritage perceive changes in their ethnic identity development – including beliefs and world perspectives – as a result of their study abroad experiences?
2. How are these perceived changes still present 5-15 years post studying abroad?

### **Significance of Study**

As previously discussed, there is limited scholarship on the lasting influence of studying abroad (Angulo, 2008; Naddaf, 2016). Most existing literature examining long-term outcomes of studying abroad has been quantitative in nature. There is a lack of qualitative research in this area, and the existing literature rarely, if at all, examines the concepts of identity development or even more specifically ethnic identity or heritage scholars. A qualitative approach is beneficial to research focusing on identity and lasting

influences because it “provides a more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research” (Roshan & Deeptee, 2009, p. 6). Furthermore, as described by Angulo (2008), “despite the large number of students abroad...there is relatively little work on the psychological ramifications of studying abroad. Specifically, research is lacking in the area of identity change during study abroad” (p. 1). This gap in the literature – a qualitative examination of the intersection of study abroad, ethnic identity development, and lasting influences – is critical in terms of comprehending the unique, and perhaps isolating, experiences of heritage scholars, and how those experiences influence long-term outcomes.

Examining and understanding student outcomes, especially long-lasting outcomes, are important to HEIs whose missions focus on “developing students as whole human beings...[and] are not only concerned with intellectual development and learning but also moral, social, physical, and spiritual development of students, including intercultural competency or global learning and development” (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009, p. 101). With many HEIs focusing on internationalization as a way to enhance student learning and preparation, understanding outcomes connected to international education is important. Naddaf (2016) argued that overlooking this area of research “could lead to a lack of inclusivity of support for students studying abroad in a heritage connected area. Student outcomes are critical to fully understanding the development process of those who study abroad in an area with ancestral connections” (p. 9). Without understanding ethnic identity development of heritage scholars, we may not be maximizing the outcomes of studying abroad for these students. As stated previously, as a high impact practice that is encouraged by HEIs as pathway to internationalize their

campuses and student bodies, it is important to examine long-term influences or impacts to better comprehend how these programs are affecting students later in life.

Research focusing on understanding the lasting influence of student experiences – specifically studying abroad – on identity development is important for aiding with decision-making at the administrative-levels, which can assist with the goals of enhanced lives and strengthened relationships. Studying identity development outcomes from study abroad experiences could benefit HEIs in a variety of ways, such as with student affairs professionals who focus on education abroad programming using this research to assist with designing education abroad programs, student screening processes, pre-departure preparation processes, and re-entry processes for students participating in education abroad experiences. In addition, third-party providers could use findings from this study to assist with student recruitment efforts, country selection, program design, selection of academic focus, training of staff, and marketing. Further examples are of faculty and advisors who could use this research to assist student development by helping students determine how studying abroad, specifically in a country or culture connected to their heritage, can aid and contribute to their personal, academic, and professional goals. Additionally, educational administrators could refer to this research in comparison to research about general student development on their campuses, to assist with administrative decisions affecting student welfare and academic/program marketing.

Lastly, the present-day social and political climates, which tend to be rooted in racial and ethnic tensions across the world, continue to bring ethnic and racial identities to the forefront. The social and political focus on these identities can influence the development of students with minoritized identities, which makes this topic of research

pertinent when examining lasting ethnicity identity development in former heritage scholars. Morgan, Mwegelo, and Turner (2002) argued that conducting cross-cultural research on heritage study abroad experiences will result in “heightened political awareness and a deeper appreciation of cultural differences and similarities for all involved” (p. 351). Therefore, it is important to examine study abroad experiences in countries and/or cultures connected to heritage in order to discern the lasting influence on ethnic identity development.

### **Operational Definitions**

A common challenge in research is that the terminology is not always clear to the audience. In order to assist in the comprehension of this study, the following definitions of key terms should be considered. Many, but not all, of the definitions provided are sourced from a glossary of education abroad terms compiled by the Forum on Education Abroad (2011).

#### *Alumni (aka Returnee)*

Alumni has many additional iterations, such as alumna, alumnus, and alumnae. The Forum on Education Abroad (2011) defines alumni (aka returnee) as an “education abroad participant who has returned...after completion of [their] program. Although technically the term Alumnus or Alumna...means a degreeholding graduate of an institution, in an education abroad context it has come sometimes to be used as a synonym for returnee” (p. 25).

#### *Ancestry*