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Understanding the unique nature of the adolescent study abroad experience



Mat D. Duerden^{a,*}, Eric Layland^b, Michael Petriello^c, Amanda Stronza^c, Mary Dunn^a,
Shelby Adams^a

^a Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, United States

^b The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA 16801, United States

^c Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, United States

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ABSTRACT

Despite rising numbers of adolescents traveling abroad each year, the majority of study abroad research focuses on emerging adults. This study represents an effort to expand our understanding of the study abroad experience from the adolescent perspective. Qualitative data were drawn from interviews and focus groups with, and observations of, participants in the program. Results indicate preparing for and then sharing the experience with like-minded peers, coupled with exposure to a new culture and direct interaction with locals, facilitated a process of reflection and growth with both perceived short-term and potential long-term impacts.

1. Introduction

Global interconnectedness is rapidly increasing. Accordingly, many organizations including the United States federal government ([Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, 2005](#)), institutions of higher learning ([Jackson, 2008](#)), and even the former First Lady Michelle Obama ([CNN, 2014](#)) are emphasizing the importance of internationalizing experiences like study abroad. Study abroad programs present participants with multi-faceted experiences. Contributing elements include program facilitators, fellow travelers, programmatic content and structure, and the environment, culture, and peoples of the travel destination.

While the common assumption is that study abroad provides meaningful learning experiences (e.g., [Comp, 2004](#); [Rubin & Sutton, 2001](#); [Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014](#)), this claim relies primarily upon data gathered from emerging adults (i.e., college students). Due to lifespan differences between emerging adults and adolescents ([Arnett, 2004](#)), research is needed to better understand the potentially unique ways in which adolescents experience and are impacted by study abroad. Although a variety of age range classifications exist, in this paper the term *emerging adults* refers to individuals aged 18–25 ([Arnett, 2000](#)) and the term *adolescent* refers to individuals 10–17 years of age (adapted from [World Health Organization, 2017](#)).

The importance of examining the unique perspective of specific groups of individuals, like adolescents, is further supported by experience design literature which highlights the co-creative nature of experiences (e.g., [Duerden, Ward, & Freeman, 2015](#)). This paper will use experience design frameworks to support its focus on adolescents and their subjective and lived, as opposed to reflected, experiences while studying abroad. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to investigate the lived experiences of adolescent participants ages 15–17 in a study abroad program to identify key elements, processes, and impacts of

* Correspondence to: Department of Recreation Management, Marriott School of Management, Brigham Young University, w435 TNRB, Provo, UT 84602, United States.

E-mail addresses: duerden@byu.edu (M.D. Duerden), erikeith@gmail.com (E. Layland), map242@neo.tamu.edu (M. Petriello), astronza@tamu.edu (A. Stronza), mdunn@provo.org (M. Dunn), shelbyadams166@gmail.com (S. Adams).

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their involvement.

2. Literature review

Due to the exploratory nature of this case study, the goal of this literature review is to provide a brief introduction to the study abroad literature and issues related to adolescence and study abroad.

2.1. Programmatic variations

Study abroad programs come in many shapes and sizes. Programs vary in types of participants, length of the experience, travel destinations, curriculum foci, degree of immersion, group versus solo travel, and multiple other programmatic elements. At the same time, many study abroad programs share similar, if not overlapping, characteristics and goals (Lyons & Wearing, 2012; Sherraden, Bopp, & Lough, 2013; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008). At their core, most programs share roots in experiential education. The international travel experience and all it entails—cultural immersion, service, education—is experiential in nature. Some programs focus on learning through service (Pechak & Thompson, 2009; Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2005) or volunteering (Everingham, 2015; Raymond & Hall, 2008) to assist various in-country causes and organizations. Others integrate international service into university curricula to promote critical thinking, risk management, and intercultural skills for personal and professional development (Foronda & Belknap, 2012b; Hayward & Charrette, 2012; Pechak & Thompson, 2009).

2.2. Study abroad research

The study abroad literature has expanded greatly over the last few decades (Vande Berg, Paige, & Hemming Lou, 2012) and has examined both the impacts and facilitating processes of study abroad. Researchers have focused on short-term impacts (e.g., self-confidence, interpersonal skills, intellectual growth, etc.) of study abroad experiences (Beames, 2004; Jones, 2005; Nelson & Klak, 2012; Wingenbach, Chmielewski, Smith, Piña, & Hamilton, 2006). Other studies have examined the long-term impacts (e.g., career path impacts, civic engagement, global citizenship, etc.) of study abroad experiences (Ngee & Luan, 2009; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009; Takano, 2010; Tarrant, 2010; Wingenbach et al., 2006). The mediating role of program facilitators has also received attention. For example, Young, Hanley, and Lyons (2017) recently completed a qualitative study of Australian university study abroad participants and examined how conversations and other experiences with program facilitators during the experience influenced participants sense of global citizenship.

A current issue of debate in the study abroad literature centers on the efficacy of long-term (e.g., semester long) versus short-term (e.g., multiple weeks) experiences (e.g., Dwyer, 2004; Fischer, 2009; Kamdar & Lewis, 2015; Kurt, Olitsky, & Geis, 2013). Research findings have shown support for the positive effects of both short and long-term study abroad experiences (e.g., Ingraham & Peterson, 2004) though some research suggests longer programs produce greater impacts among participants (Dwyer, 2004; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004).

Questions also remain regarding how personal, contextual, and programmatic factors influence participants' experiences (Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). For example, in a review of recent study abroad studies, Paige and Vande Berg noted the most successful programs incorporate cultural immersion with intentional content delivery, educator interventions, and opportunities for purposive reflection. Exploring processes *during* different types of study abroad experiences, especially from the perspective of participants themselves, could contribute to the literature related to understanding of the role internal elements and processes play within study abroad programs.

2.3. Adolescents and study abroad

Despite the range of study abroad programs and participants, much of the research data comes from emerging adults (e.g., Bamber, 2008; Foronda & Belknap, 2012a, 2012b; Kiely, 2005; Palacios, 2010; Sin, 2009; Tarrant et al., 2011). While some study abroad research samples have included younger populations, included adolescents make up only part of the studies' broader samples, thus making it difficult to separate the unique experience of adolescents. For example, age ranges in four studies including adolescents spanned from 17 to 25 (Beames, 2004; Pike & Beames, 2007), 16–25 (Jones, 2005), and 18–30 (Tiessen, 2012) years of age. Other larger studies of adolescent study abroad participants have focused on exchange experiences, as opposed to group travel (Hansel & Chen, 2008; Hansel, 2008). Given basic developmental differences among individuals ranging from 16 to 30 years old, the heterogeneity of these samples makes it difficult to draw conclusions specifically representative of adolescent perspectives.

Differences between adolescents and emerging adults suggest individuals in these stages may have different study abroad experiences. Adolescence, unlike emerging adulthood, is characterized by uniformity in relationship to parents and family (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adults experience freedom from parents and daily obligation to family, while adolescents regularly live within a parent or guardian structure because of financial and legal dependence (Arnett, 2004). As adolescents grow into emerging adulthood, they experience new freedoms and even a change in legal status from minor to adult. Adolescents and emerging adults also experience different physiological states and changes. Little research exists in this area, but scientists have shown noteworthy changes in brain matter and function between adolescence and emerging adulthood (Giedd et al., 1999; Gotgay et al., 2004) suggesting physiological changes may occur between these developmental periods.

Based upon the reviewed differences between adolescence and emerging adulthood, it seems plausible individuals in these two

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