



How 'Family' is your host family?: An examination of student–host relationships during study abroad



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ABSTRACT

This research uses schema theory and expectancy violations theory as a framework to examine students' expectations about homestay, factors that facilitated and constrained student–host interaction, and the construction of student–host relationships during study abroad. Through journaling, American students answered specific questions about their experiences living with a host family during an eight-week summer semester in Luxembourg. Participants indicated that they expected interactions to function, in part, like family. However, less than a third of the participants described their relationships with their hosts as family. Instead, the relationships functioned as friendships, guest–host relationships, or tenant–landlord relationships. A number of factors facilitated and constrained their opportunities to communicate with the hosts. Students' expectations about the homestay also appear to be shaped, in part, by the language used to describe the arrangement. Implications for study abroad programs are discussed.

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The number of U.S. students who study abroad for credit has more than tripled in the last 20 years as universities promote engagement in international encounters for students (Gore, 2005; Institute of International Education, 2010). Study abroad provides learning opportunities that often cannot be gained in a typical college classroom (Hopkins, 1999; Penington & Wildermuth, 2005). It can help students improve proficiency in another language (Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Ryan & Twibell, 2000; Tarp, 2006; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009), increase cultural knowledge about the host country (Jackson, 2006; Kauffmann, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992), gain cultural competence (Penington & Wildermuth, 2005), increase their cultural sensitivity (Anderson & Lawton, 2011), and improve knowledge of cultural relativism and global independence (Sutton & Rubin, 2004). Additionally, students often become less ethnocentric, have increased cultural awareness, improve intercultural interaction skills, develop greater consciousness of biases, have a better understanding of international issues, and experience intrapersonal growth (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Drews, Meyer, & Peregrine, 1996; Hopkins, 1999; Jackson, 2006; Kauffmann, Martin, Weaver, & Weaver, 1992; Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990). Some research indicates that cultural immersion alone is not enough, but that students need cultural mentoring as well (Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou, 2012).

One aspect of the study abroad experience that increases opportunities for experiential education and mentoring is homestay (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002; Peterson, 2002). In this type of accommodation, students pay to reside in the homes of members of the host culture, often with the expectation that they will have the opportunity to interact

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with native speakers and experience the culture first hand (Jackson, 2006; Tanaka, 2007). Living with a host family can be a meaningful way to observe and engage in familial practices specific to the host society and provide opportunities to interact with members of the culture (Campbell, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Pearson-Evans, 2006; Tanaka, 2007). Homestay students tend to “experience a higher degree of otherness” than those who study abroad without private accommodation (Tarp, 2006, p. 164) and can help students with cultural adjustment by providing a source of emotional support as they manage the stress of adapting to a new culture (Pearson-Evans, 2006).

Understanding homestay outcomes is important because they often influence students’ cultural adjustment, attitudes toward the host culture, cultural learning, language acquisition, and the study abroad experience as a whole (Campbell, 2004; Kim, 2005; Tanaka, 2007). However, the findings of research on the value of homestay experiences are somewhat mixed. Some students have rich host family experiences, while many others have little interaction with their host families and express disappointment with the outcomes (Jackson, 2006; Tanaka, 2007). Because homestay influences the overall study abroad experience, it is important to understand students’ expectations about the process and the types of student–host relationships that develop during study abroad. Schema theory and expectancy violations theory serve as a framework for examining students’ expectations about host family relationships and their perceptions of the types of student–host relationships that develop during homestay. An understanding of these two components of the study abroad experience may help administrators better prepare students and hosts for positive outcomes.

1. Variations in homestay expectations and outcomes

Although there is broad support for homestay during study abroad, few studies have examined homestay experiences and student–host family relationships, in particular. The research that has been done indicates that students’ homestay experiences and their levels of satisfaction with those experiences are varied (Campbell, 2004). Some hosts treat students as members of the family while others seem to be more focused on hosting students as a commercial enterprise (Tanaka, 2007). In a study of Japanese students studying in New Zealand, Tanaka found that students who stayed with host families to improve their foreign language skills often found that they did not have as many opportunities to interact with the hosts as they expected. Similarly, Wilkinson (2002) found that some French hosts took on a role of teacher to help American students learn conversational French, while other hosts’ efforts were minimal. These students expressed disappointment about lack of opportunities for interaction with members of the host family, reporting that homestay did not facilitate language acquisition in the ways that they had anticipated (Campbell, 2004).

These studies suggest that some students develop close relationships with host family members and enjoy fulfilling homestay experiences while others are dissatisfied with the scope and nature of student–host interactions (Campbell, 2004; Tanaka, 2007). It seems that students’ expectations about homestay experiences combined with their interpretations of their interactions can color their evaluation of their study abroad experience overall. Because homestay is an important contributor to student learning and self-development during study abroad, it is important to identify the factors that contribute to these positive and negative homestay experiences. As such, this study seeks to develop an understanding of the differing nature of student–host family relationships and the elements that facilitate and constrain the development of these relationships. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students describe their relationships with host family members?

RQ2: What factors facilitate and constrain student–host relationship development?

It is also important to understand how students’ expectations about the nature of the student–host relationship may shape their evaluation of the relationship.

2. Schemas, expectations, and the social construction of relationships

Both expectancy violation theory and schema theory are useful tools for understanding expectations and relational outcomes. Expectancy violation theory (EVT) posits that how one interprets events is closely tied to expectations about that event. Specifically, one’s expectations “serve as perceptual filters, significantly influencing how social information is processed” (Burgoon, 1993, p. 32). Features of the communicator, the relationship, and the context shape expectations for what one desires and/or expects will occur in the interaction (White, 2008). When individuals’ expectancies are violated they experience arousal, which affects interpretation of what caused the violation. Whereas positively valenced violations (ones that exceed expectations) may serve to enhance a relationship, negatively valenced violations often lead to negative evaluations and decrease relational satisfaction (Afifi & Metts, 1998). Examining students’ expectations about homestay and the ways in which their expectations have been violated may help us to understand how students evaluate their homestay experiences.

Similarly, relational schema theory posits that individuals rely on schemas, knowledge structures that develop from previous experience that guide our cognitive processes, to help them negotiate relational behavior (Fletcher & Fitness, 1993; Planalp, 1987). Schemas are developed, adapted, and refined over time through socialization with other members within a culture, assessments of previous relational experiences, interactions with others, observations, and exposure to mass media (Anderson, 1993). Once developed, these knowledge structures function as blueprints for how to behave in different types of

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