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## Coming Home: How Identity Plays a Role in Students who Study Abroad in an Area That is Representative of Their Heritage

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Coming Home: How Identity Plays a Role in Students who Study Abroad

in an Area That is Representative of Their Heritage

Mariana Issam Naddaf

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

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## **Abstract**

Study abroad participation has more than tripled over the past two decades in the United States and has led to increased research efforts on topics such as the benefits of study abroad and the development of students who study abroad; however, little research exists on students who have heritage connections to the area in which they study abroad. In order to address this need within the field of higher education and study abroad, a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to explore what factors, if any, affect changes in identity salience for students who study abroad in areas that are representative of their heritage. Rather than focus on one aspect of identity (e.g., social, ethnic, racial, or nationality), this study left it up to the participants to disclose what pieces of their identity, if any, were affected by their individual study abroad experience. Identity salience in regards to ancestral connection was a focus of this study. The theories that guide this study include Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity. This research provides insight into this phenomenon by exploring the lived experiences of American students who studied abroad in an area connected to some part of their heritage. In addition, this research embraces a holistic perspective of student development as a guiding philosophy throughout in order to represent the fluidity and intersectionality of identity.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

Studying abroad can be a life changing experience for students and possibly a re-attachment to heritage roots for those with a heritage connection (Moreno, 2009). Heritage has been defined as “something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Heritage can therefore be understood as an ancestral connection and may include the beliefs, values, and traditions that are acquired through that person’s predecessor group (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Research is available on linguistic learners’ identities with heritage ties to the host country (e.g., Kinginger, 2013; Moreno, 2009) along with research on how the community of the host site accepts students who study abroad with a heritage connection to the country (Petrucci, 2007; Riegelhaupt & Carrasco, 2000); however, there is a noticeable gap in the research on the influence of study abroad on one’s identity within the heritage-connected population. Therefore, the focus of this research revolves around identity salience and what factors, if any, influence changes in salience for students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage.

### **Rationale**

Researchers have found that identity change occurs during study abroad and the change is affected by the individual’s own characteristics (e.g., Angulo, 2008). Students bring their own experiences and intersecting identities along with them on a daily basis, informing their epistemological outlook. Attributes such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, personality, native language and culture have all been found to impact identity development (Angulo, 2008; Kinginger, 2013). Researchers have also documented that program choices such as choosing a location, the time abroad, living arrangements, along with the actions and interactions with locals

while in the host area, are all factors that may affect student outcomes while studying abroad (Angulo, 2008; Dwyer, 2004; Stewart, 2010). Although there is study abroad research on heritage language learners, choices made prior to departing, and actions while abroad, there is a gap in our knowledge on identity outcomes in relation to heritage students. Ignoring 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. By researching this topic, student affairs professionals can offer more guidance in supporting students who are preparing to study abroad, in choosing a study abroad destination, and in assisting during their re-entry process.

### **Background**

Study abroad participation has been on the rise throughout the past two decades (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2014, p. 2). IIE reported that over the past two decades, U.S. student participation in study abroad has more than tripled. In 1987-1988, the number of U.S. students who studied abroad for academic credit was around 62,000 (IIE, 2014). According to the “Open Doors Report” published by IIE in 2014, study abroad participation rose steadily to 289,000 in 2012-2013. One can assume that within these numbers is a representation of individuals who studied in an area that was connected to their heritage. These students have their own stories to tell about their experiences abroad, which may differ from other students’ outcomes if they do not have a heritage connection to the area. Research highlights numerous benefits to studying abroad, such as: intercultural development; language skills; academic attainment; more community involvement; personal growth; and a clearer direction of career goals (Angulo, 2008; Dwyer, 2004). Exploring the benefits for students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage is necessary to properly equip these individuals.

As more students study abroad, it becomes pertinent to find information to support these students, including identifying the reasons why students choose study abroad programs. Research suggests that students choose programs because of the location (Eder, Smith, Pitts, 2010); cost (Eder et al., 2010); the courses offered (Angulo, 2008); and heritage (Angulo, 2008; Moreno, 2009). Research has pointed to heritage students feeling disappointed and frustrated by lack of assistance and resources through their study abroad offices (Moreno, 2009). Since heritage has been identified in multiple studies as a factor in picking a study abroad destination, supporting those students with appropriate resources is critical before departure, during the program, and through the re-entry process. Additionally, it is also important to identify the ways heritage factored in the student choosing a study abroad destination, since marketing can be tailored to fit this population.

This study will provide practitioners, students, families, and researchers an opportunity to understand how students studying abroad in an area representative of their heritage respond to their surroundings and how the experience affects the saliency of their self-disclosed identity. Adler (1975) was one of the first in this field to address culture shock with a deeper understanding by creating the transitional experience theory. His description allowed readers to understand that the experience of culture shock is a pattern that stimulates a wide range of emotions. These emotions can lead to personal growth, and eventually a higher sense of self (Adler, 1975). He outlines five phases of experiential learning that sojourners experience as they go through emotional peaks and valleys. Adler noted that his phases were not assumed to be linear, as he recognized that individuals will come from different backgrounds, which causes varied responses in dealing with cultural distinctions.

Although Adler's (1975) transitional experience theory provided a description of the common steps that individuals may experience while going abroad, his research was not specific to the heritage-connected population. Adler stated that, "The transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self" (p. 18). It is important to study the ways in which student identity salience may be influenced by the ancestral host area they study in and how this connection might lead to a different type of *culture shock* experience. Understanding this phenomenon will assist those in the field with navigating the preparation and re-entry process for these students.

A language learning component may often be added to study abroad programs, which adds another layer to students' experiences. Stewart (2010) claims that, "the role of culture and personal identity in language learning can be paramount in understanding the learner's experience" (p. 139). Students with heritage connections may be learning their heritage language while abroad and their identities are directly impacted from their language experiences (Moreno, 2009). Kinginger's (2013) overview of research examines the ways in which identity is shaped by language learning, but still does not focus on heritage learners. Moreno's (2009) research has attempted to address identity development of heritage language learners; however, her research only focused on those studying their heritage language and did not specify other factors of their identity development.

Ideally, study abroad programs take students out of their familiar surroundings and immerse them into a new culture (Kinging, 2013). The immersive design of study abroad programs presents an opportunity for students to learn more about themselves and experience personal growth. Students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage are likely to be familiar with host cultures and may feel like they are reconnected with their identity

and more integrated into the host community (Moreno, 2009; Petrucci, 2007). Nevertheless, some students have negative experiences with their surrounding culture and may end up feeling more disconnected within their culture, and more connected with their American nationality or with other parts of their ethnic identities (Angulo, 2008; Block, 2007; Moreno, 2009). Overall, heritage connections while studying abroad can produce circumstances involving a student's identity development and this study explored what factors, if any, influence identity salience in study abroad alumni with heritage connections.

### **Statement of Purpose**

With the increase of study abroad participation, there has been an increase of data and literature within the field. Identity is a critical component of study abroad outcomes; however, most research relates identity to language learning while failing to address students who have an ancestral link to the area. Identity development may be impacted differently with students who have a heritage connection to the host area. Studying abroad is an experience that places students into an immersive setting and often leads to identity challenges (Kinging, 2013). Examining study abroad experiences for heritage-connected individuals may provide some clarity as to the factors that influence identity salience.

This study will add to the higher education and study abroad knowledge bases and will assist future heritage-connected sojourners by exploring the possible factors influencing identity development while studying abroad.

### **Research Questions**

Although Angulo (2008) and Dwyer (2004) have identified what variables can be associated with successful study abroad outcomes and Moreno (2009) has studied identity in relation to heritage language learners, there is still a gap in the literature. In order to address this

need within the field of higher education and study abroad literature, a hermeneutic phenomenological design was used to explore what ways, if any, identity salience changes for a student who studies abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage. The research questions guiding the study were:

- 1) In what ways, if any, does identity salience change for students who study abroad in areas tied to their heritage?
- 2) What factors (e.g., time abroad, living arrangement, encounters with the locals, and language acquisition), if any, influence changes in identity salience of students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage?

### **Design, Data Collection and Analysis**

The research site was at a large, public four-year university in the Midwest. The participants were current students and graduates of the research site that had studied abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage and were recruited through snowball sampling. Data was collected via interviews which were completed in a one-on-one setting in a comfortable location on campus or at the location of the participant's choice.

A hermeneutic phenomenological design (Seidman, 2013) was used for this descriptive qualitative study. A phenomenological design was used to interpret the lived experiences of the study abroad alumni and to find commonalities of those identity experiences. The *hermeneutic circle* was used to recognize prejudgments, rather than focusing on eliminating present bias (Kafle, 2011). This method allowed for insight into this phenomenon and understanding the factors that impacted identity salience for students who studied abroad in an area representative of their heritage.

The initial data analysis began with creating a narrative summary of each participant's responses that were also used for member checking purposes (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Data analysis included coding to identify emergent themes within participant responses (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Key variables of interest were identity salience and heritage connection. Salience refers to the student's recollection of their self-disclosed identity and if that identity was influenced by their heritage-connected study abroad experience. Identity disclosure was asked for the time periods including: prior to study abroad, during study abroad, after the experience, and at the time of the interview.

### **Definition of Terms**

For clarification purposes, it is important to define the key terms that were used throughout the duration of this study.

I have selected the word *area* instead of country through a strategic inclusion process. While some individuals may have heritage ties to a specific country location, others may not. For instance, an individual may identify with a particular heritage that is not linked to a recognized country, but rather, a designated area or multiple countries.

*Heritage* was chosen specifically in comparison to other terms such as ethnicity, race, nationality, or culture because at time those terms may overlap. Heritage will refer to an ancestral connection that the student identifies with (Eilers, 2012) and will include biological and adoptive heritage connections.

*Heritage-connected area* will also be used to identify the host location that the students are studying abroad in, while the term *heritage-connected students* will identify those students studying abroad with the ancestral ties to that location.

*Identity* is typically defined as the trait or traits that a person identifies with (Eilers, 2012). This may include categories such as religion, race, heritage, ethnicity, nationality, culture, social class, gender, and other social identities (Eilers, 2012; Kinginger, 2013).

*Saliency* in regards to identity will be a focus of this study and will include how much effort is put into those intersecting identities, along with the level of commitment and value placed on those facets of identity. Identity saliency will be operationalized as to what the participant self-discloses as the identities that were most prominent and central to who they were and currently are. Stryker and Serpe (1982), best explain identity saliency as:

One of the ways, and a theoretically most important way, that the identities making up the self can be organized. Identities, that is, are conceived as being organized into a saliency hierarchy. This hierarchical organization of identities is defined by the probabilities of each of the various identities within it being brought into play in a given situation. Alternatively, it is defined by the probabilities each of the identities have of being invoked across a variety of situations. The location of an identity in this hierarchy is, by definition, its saliency. (p. 206)

For the purpose of this study, the term *study abroad* will refer to American students both born and naturalized in the United States that participated in a study abroad program, including undergraduate and graduate academic levels. The education abroad experience had to take place through a United States university for academic credit, without a limiting time frame. This study will explore the possible identity changes in regards to the varying factors such as language and length of study abroad program.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are imposed by the researcher in this study. Participants were current students or alumni at one large Midwest, four-year university. The research collection method included one method of interviews. In addition, the interviews included participants that have a heritage connection, without a comparison to a non-heritage connected group.

### **Limitations**

As with most research, this study had limitations and shortcomings. This topic is fairly new to the field of study abroad and therefore, a qualitative research design is appropriate, however, this design caused limitations such as researcher bias and reliance upon memory. Interviewing with coding will ultimately lead to an interpretation of the emergent themes based off of my transcription, which leads to researcher bias. Additionally, data were reliant upon reconstruction of memory and there was the possibility of misremembering or recalling events out of sequence. Participants were current study abroad students or alumni; therefore, there is no consistency in how long ago participants studied abroad. Nevertheless, this study and the qualitative design technique will increase our knowledge of the identity development for students who study abroad at a site that is connected to their heritage, and the information can be used to support the student departure and re-entry processes.

### **Organization of Thesis**

This first chapter provided an introduction to the study of how identity plays a role in students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage. Chapter two will review the theoretical framework guiding the study and will synthesize literature on study abroad and identity development within study abroad programs. Chapter three will specify the qualitative research design, data collection, and analysis in order to properly address the topic.

The findings will be presented in a detailed manner including the articulated themes in chapter four. Finally, results, conclusions, implications of the study, and future recommendations will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In order to begin to understand the identity salience in students studying abroad in an area that is connected to their heritage, it is first important to review literature about study abroad, culture shock, and the ways in which identity is developed within a student context. This study explored the factors that influence student identity salience for students who study abroad in an area representative of their heritage using Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological process-person-context-time model and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) student identity theory through their reconceptualized model of their original multiple dimensions of identity model. Following the introduction of the theoretical frameworks, chapter two provides a synthesis of research conducted that is relevant to this study, and that shapes the research design and questions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Ecological Process-Person-Context-Time Model**

Bronfenbrenner's (1995) foundational theory takes an ecological approach to understanding how an environment can affect one's development. His ecological systems theory stems from multiple discipline domains including biological, behavioral, and social sciences. This theory addresses the importance of the environment where students are studying abroad. It is important to address the ways in which the environment and timing of a study abroad experience may affect identity.

The *process, person, context, and time* (PPCT) components of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) model were created to give a holistic approach behind human ecological development. Bronfenbrenner's original exposition of his ecological systems theory was introduced in 1979 and did not include the PPCT model. Although the model first appeared in his literature four

years later, it did not include the *time* component (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Bronfenbrenner created the PPCT model to explore principles that applied to phenomena not only across time and space, but through people that have widely varying characteristics and, as a result, respond differently to their environment. He explains that such variation should be taken into account when conducting scientific investigation. If one takes these personal characteristics into account while guiding research, they can better define the difference between a developmental outcome and the “sources of variations in the person’s susceptibility to the developmental effects of environmental conditions and of enduring patterns of interaction between the person and his or her immediate environment (i.e., proximal process)” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 633). Overall, his PPCT model seeks to analyze research through a synergistic effect of the four components operating together. What follows is an introduction to each component.

*Process* refers to the interactions between the organism and environment overtime and the key is to have a complex process without overwhelming the individual. The *person* component covers the how and what of the person and their interactions within their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). *Context* is the most detailed of the theory and includes a nested series of context surrounding the individual that include: the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (1995) explained that the context can influence development through the interactions of others that are environmental influences such as classmates, teachers, mentors, and friends and through “environmental stability” (p. 640). In this study, his theory connects to how the study abroad context could affect a student’s identity salience.

The *microsystem* series of the context component is described an individual's closely related environment such as the home, school, neighborhood, and peer groups (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). In connecting this component to the proposed research, the microsystem might be comparable to the role of being a member of study abroad. The *mesosystem* surrounds the microsystem and is described as the pattern of roles and relationships among those groups in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Within this study, the mesosystem might be parallel to the connection of studying abroad in the student's heritage related area and attempting to make sense of that identity while taking classes. The *exosystem* is defined as the "consisting of one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant but in which events occur that affect or are affected by, what happens in that setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 237). The exosystem could be parallel to negative political events having an impact on the individual while in the heritage-connected area. The *macrosystem* is the outer most part of the systems model and is defined as the dominant beliefs and ideologies of the culture (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The macrosystem in this study might be comparable to the history of the area where the student is sojourning, along with the cultural expectations and social forces from the other study abroad students. Ultimately, these systems relate to each other as an individual's surroundings, interactions, and policies from the context affect their development.

Finally, the last component, *time*, describes the "chronosystem that moderates change across the life course" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xv). Bronfenbrenner (1995) specifies that one's life course is "powerfully shaped by conditions and events occurring during the historical period through which the person lives" (p. 641). He also stated that the timing of one's "biological and social transition as they relate to culturally defined age, role expectations, and opportunities throughout the life course" could be a major factor in human development

(Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 641). In addition, Bronfenbrenner (1995) highlights the interdependence of family members and how their reactions to the timing of an event can impact the “developmental course of the other family members, both within and across generations” (p. 642). How students’ family members react to them going abroad to study in an area that has ancestral connections to the student and the family itself can impact their experience abroad and their identity association to that part of their heritage. The PPCT model describes the ways in which ecology may affect individual development.

### **Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

Understanding the different facets of one’s multiple and intersecting identities is crucial to incorporate within research, especially when studying identity development. In 2000, Jones and McEwen created a model of multiple dimensions identity that included the *core* of an individual’s attributes and the various aspects of their *context* that can influence identity. In 2004, Abes and Jones completed a study using that same model to research lesbian college students. Through their research, they formed the reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity that illustrated individual meaning-making with the influence of context on the perception and salience of their identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). This model focuses on how identity is fluid and may depend on contextual influences. In addition, Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) highlight how this model focuses on the wholeness of human experience including self-perceptions, contextual influences, and how an individual creates their meaning-making.

The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of was influenced by Kegan’s (1994) theory of lifespan development and Baxter Magolda’s (2001) articulation of self-authorship research (as cited in Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) work

recognizes “the dynamic construction of identity and the influence of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions, such as race, sexual orientation, culture, and social class” (p. 3). Identity salience depends on the context of an individual as identity dimensions are fluid in nature. Through Abes and Jones research in 2004, the *meaning-making* filter was subsumed into the original model to create the new model (Abes et al., 2007). The meaning-making filter serves as the individualistic pathway between contextual influences such as family, stereotypes, and sociopolitical conditions and the self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions, such as race, social class, and religion. The added filter can change its depth and permeability depending on the complexity of the person’s meaning-making capacity which seeks to identify differences in self-perceptions (Abes et al., 2007).

The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity helps analyze the fluidity of identity and the broad context where individuals are surrounded. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) commented on the original model of multiple dimensions identity as it “captured the ways in which identity salience changed for participants in their study, often depending on contextual influences and participants’ meaning-making capacity” (p. 16). The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity in conjunction with Bronfenbrenner’s process-person-context-time model will guide this research in exploring the factors influencing identity salience for heritage-connected students during study abroad programs.

## **Synthesis of Research Literature**

### **General Benefits to Studying Abroad**

**Personal benefits.** Researchers have documented the various experiences of those who study abroad (e.g., Dwyer, 2004; Kinginger, 2013; Stewart, 2010). According to a longitudinal survey from participants of studying abroad programs through the Institute for International

Education of Students (IES), benefits include personal growth, intercultural development, education and career attainments (Dwyer & Peters, n.d.). Data were collected from alumni from all IES study abroad programs from 1950 to 1999, regardless of location or length of study. The survey included with 3,400 respondents with a 23% response rate (Dwyer & Peters, n.d.). Within the personal growth category of the survey, 96% of alumni reported increased self-confidence and 97% noted, “studying abroad served as a catalyst for increased maturity” (Dwyer & Peters, n.d., p. 1). These responses show personal development as a benefit through study abroad programs.

**Academic and intercultural benefits.** The results from the IES survey were also overwhelming positive in terms of academic commitment and intercultural development (Dwyers & Peters, n.d.). Eighty percent (80%) of alumni reported an enhanced interest in academic study and 86% felt a reinforced commitment to foreign language study (Dwyer & Peters, n.d.). Regarding intercultural development, 98% of respondents said studying abroad helped them better understand their own cultural values and biases. Ninety percent (90%) of alumni said studying abroad influence them to seek out greater diversity of friends and 94% said their experience continues to influence interactions with people from different cultures (Dwyer & Peters, n.d.).

**Career benefits.** In addition to the IES survey responses revolving personal growth and academic and intercultural attainment, the survey included positive responses about career development. Seventy-six percent (76%) of the respondents said they acquired skill sets that influenced their career path and 62% of alumni said studying abroad “ignited an interest in a career direction pursued after the experience” (Dwyer & Peters, n.d., p. 3). The overall

responses from this longitudinal survey claimed benefits in multiple areas of career development and commitment to their careers.

To confirm these results, a follow-up study was completed on career benefits from study abroad through IES in March of 2012 (Bohrer, 2015). This research elaborated on the career developments noted in the previous general benefits IES study conducted by Dwyer & Peters, (n.d.) by surveying 1,008 study abroad alumni through IES Abroad that had recently graduated. According to the survey, “90% of study abroad alumni secured a job within the first six months of graduation” and “90% were admitted into their first or second choice graduate or professional school” (Bohrer, 2015, para. 11). These data note that study abroad has an impact on obtaining employment or admittance into education institutions. Alumni also stated that they felt like study abroad helped them develop valuable job skills such as tolerance for ambiguity and foreign language knowledge (Bohrer, 2015). Overall, 85% of surveyed IES alumni felt that studying abroad helped them build job skills (Bohrer, 2015). The aforementioned outcomes are influenced by program length.

**Program length benefits.** Currently, there are main categories of program options and types for participants to choose from, including *short-term*, *mid-length*, and *long-term* (IIE, 2014). Short-term options that include two subcategories of an *educational travel/study tour* or a *summer program* abroad (Behnke, Soobin, & Miller, 2014). Short-term programs have grown in popularity as they are “cost effective and well-received by participants” (Zamastil-Vondrava, 2005, p. 44). These shorter programs often help alleviate concerns for underrepresented students and therefore, encourages them to consider study abroad (Dessoiff, 2006). These short-term options or educational travel/study tours, also give students the opportunity to study for one to four weeks in a single location, multi-location tour, or as a hybrid program (Behnke et al., 2014).

Zamastil-Vondrava (2005) completed a study on the benefits of short-term study abroad programs and found evidence that the student's experiences had a lasting impact and enhanced their professional skills and competencies. Although short-term study abroad participation proves beneficial for students (Zamastil-Vondrava, 2005), mid-length abroad programs are also available for students. Mid-length programs are classified as a semester or one or two quarters length of time (IIE, 2014). There is limited information specifically available for mid-length program benefits.

***Long-term program as most beneficial.*** Long-term program participants represented 3.2% of all Americans studying abroad in 2012-2013 (IIE, 2014). Long-term programs are defined as an academic or calendar year length of stay abroad. These programs can be intensive and lengthy, however, prove to be more beneficial than shorter lengths of stay (Dwyer, 2004).

Dwyer (2004) conducted a study that analyzed an IES survey design to measure longitudinal benefits. This study was completed by sending out U.S. mail surveys to alumni who studied with IES between the academic years 1950-1951 and 1999-00 with varying program lengths (Dwyer, 2004). The survey was sent out to 17,000 alumni and received a response rate of 25%. The sample represented all IES programs, which included 14 countries and over 500 U.S. colleges and universities.

The survey included 28 questions with sub-questions that were divided into three types and five areas (Dwyer, 2004). The three types included 1.) basic demographics, 2.) impact of key study abroad elements, and 3.) impact of study abroad on select behaviors, attitudes and specific achievements. The five areas for student outcome included *general findings, academic attainment, intercultural development, career impact* and *personal growth*. Each category was

comprised of five to seven questions with a rating on a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to respond to questions about specific behaviors since studying abroad.

The findings from the survey concluded to support full year programs (Dwyers, 2004). Of the sample (3,723), 32% (1191) studied abroad for a full year, 62% (2,308) studied abroad for a semester, and 6% (224) studied for only a summer term. Some of the major findings indicated that 20% of full-year students studied abroad more than once and full-year students were more likely to enroll in foreign university courses. These results indicate that full-year sojourners may be more committed to learning languages and that foreign university courses may supply this need.

Additionally, the data found that 46% of full year-students reported acquiring graduate degrees, which indicates that a longer time abroad influences academic attainment (Dwyer, 2004). Other results indicated that, 57% percent of full-year students were more likely to engage in international work or volunteer activities than other term length students. These students studying for the full year also were more likely to pursue a career direction and speak another language regularly while in the workplace. The conclusion of this data supports the belief that a full year abroad has more significance, benefit, and impact on the participant over various student outcomes including: continued language use, academic attainment measures, intercultural and personal development, and career choices (Dwyer, 2004).

### **Choosing a Study Abroad Program**

Choosing a study abroad program can be influenced by variety of variables including culture, courses available, language learning, and exploring family/cultural heritage (Angulo, 2008; Moreno, 2009). Students with an interest in learning their heritage language (HL) often choose study abroad programs because of where their HL is widely spoken, which provides more

for full immersion (Moreno, 2009). Other participants within Moreno's (2009) study stated that they chose a program because of heritage relation and having extended relatives within the area. A participant that studied abroad in a heritage-connected area within the same study was reluctant to use the term *study abroad* and explained her experience as "going back" (as cited in Moreno, 2009, p. 106). While the aforementioned participant used "going back", other students often deal with culture shock.

### **Culture Shock**

Broadly, culture shock is thought of as the disorientation one may go through when a person is in the context of a different culture (Duke, Reinemund, & Bouyer, 2014). From a historical perspective, culture shock was first thought of as a form of anxiety and categorized as an illness or disease (Foster, 1962; Oberg, 1958, as cited in Adler, 1975). Building upon Oberg's (1958) earlier definition, Adler (1975) stated, "Culture shock has traditionally been thought of as a form of anxiety which results from the misunderstanding of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social interaction" (p. 13). Adler was one of the first in this field to address culture shock with a deeper understanding by creating the transitional experience theory. His description allowed readers to understand that the experience of culture shock is a pattern that stimulates a wide range of emotions. In some instances, these emotions can lead to personal growth, and eventually a higher sense of self (Adler, 1975). Along with this description, he outlines five phases of experiential learning that sojourners experience as they go through emotional peaks and valleys. However, Adler did note that his phases were not assumed to be linear, as he recognized that individuals will come from different backgrounds that causes varied responses in dealing with cultural distinctions.

These phases start at *contact*, when an individual feels the excitement of a new experience (Adler, 1975). The second phase, *disintegration*, is characterized by confusion and possible frustration of the new culture. *Reintegration* is the third phase and leads to a rejection of the new culture. Additionally, sojourners tend to cling to others with a similar culture rather than exploring the visiting culture (Adler, 1975). The fourth phase, *autonomy*, is a transition of comfort within the new area and skills gained in understanding the cultural cues. Finally, the fifth phase of *independence*, is marked by “behaviors that are independent but not undependent of culture influence” (Adler, 1975, p. 18). Overall, this transitional experience theory was a new way to interpret experience of those who go abroad. Adler (1975) stated, “The transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with self” (p. 18). Culture shock is often felt by students who study abroad.

### **Culture Shock and Study Abroad**

Culture shock specifically within the study abroad context can be categorized by the various shocks and surprises of the transition between life at home and life in the host country (Duke, Reinemund, & Bouyer, 2014). The description of culture shock within study abroad can be depicted through the descriptions of *predeparture*, *arrival in-country*, and *reentry* (Duke et al., 2014). Culture shock and stress experiences can begin within the first days or within weeks of being abroad. The shock could be caused by simple tasks such as grocery shopping or the culture disconnect between people within conversations. Emotions felt by students studying abroad can include anger, anxiousness, frustrations, or feeling annoyed (Duke et al., 2014).

Overall, the culture shock experience while studying abroad is explained as a “series of emotional ups and downs” (Duke et al., 2014, p. 103). The adjustments and coping to culture

shock often comes through knowledge and understanding about the host culture's norms, values, and behavior patterns (Duke et al., 2014). Culture shock also deals with students' identities.

### **Student Identity Development**

In beginning to understand the identity development of students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage, it is important to address broad student identity theories developed through research. In Chickering's (1969) foundational theory of identity development, he emphasizes various aspects of development through his seven vectors including, intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal development. He incorporated six years of data collection from students from his original theory and then later revised the theory with data from thirteen small colleges around the country. Chickering later revised his theory with Reisser (1993) that includes seven vectors: (a) *developing competence*, (b) *managing emotions*, (c) *moving through autonomy toward interdependence*, (d) *developing mature interpersonal relationships*, (e) *establishing identity*, (f) *developing purpose*, and (g) *developing integrity*. These vectors were created to define development in terms that were not necessarily sequential and were an expression of students moving at their individual rates.

Chickering's (1969) managing emotions vector covers how students recognize, process, express, and control their emotions. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) sum this vector as including a range of feelings such as, "anxiety, depression, anger, shame, guilt, as well as more positive emotions such as caring, optimism, and inspiration" (p. 67). This vector relates to Alder's (1975) transitional experience theory and provides a context for understanding identity development within study abroad programs.

Additionally, with students who have an ancestral roots to the area they are studying in, their establishment of identity relates to Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors. His research

seems to highlight that identity builds upon what comes before and takes into consideration other demographic traits. This development includes “reflecting on one’s family of origin and ethnic heritage, defining self as a part of a religious or cultural tradition” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 49). This vector lays the groundwork in relation to heritage connectedness as it covers the development of social and cultural heritage aspects of identity.

### **Identity Development and Study Abroad**

Culture shock literature gives an overview of the emotions that individuals may experience while abroad, while identity development research is available in attempt to explain what identity changes may happen while studying abroad. According to Block (2007) “identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future” and “individuals are shaped by their sociohistories but they also shape their sociohistories as time goes on” (p. 27). Although one may have an ethnic background and heritage represented, they can continue to develop their identity through events such as studying abroad.

Sojourning abroad immerses students into a new environment where their identity is destabilized (Kinging, 2013). These students strive to achieve an emotional balance while attempting to decipher their identity. Even though study abroad is a temporary event, the immersive experience often creates identity development throughout their exposure to the new area (Kinging, 2013). Block (2007) suggests that students are confronted with challenges while abroad and oftentimes, they retreat to their country’s cultural norms and are frustrated for a short time period.

In Angulo’s (2008) study on identity change during study abroad, she administered an online survey before students left for study abroad, and three surveys while participants were abroad. Results noted that ethnocentrism increased over time and was reported to be higher after

12 weeks abroad. Angulo (2008) also noted that “identification with the host country was positively associated with some personal growth and change” (p. 59). Angulo’s research also recognized that participants were able to identify with their host country without relinquishing their United States identification.

The difference in identity development from those who are with a host family to those who are not is important to highlight. Angulo (2008) found participants who received the most *verification* from their host families, did not change in ethnocentrism across time. Students who lived with host families “had higher identification with the host country after 12 weeks abroad than students living with Americans” and those “in other living arrangements” (Angulo, 2008, p. 70). Students who live with host families had more cultural experiences with the host country and identified more with the host country than those who live with other students from the U.S.

**Language learning and identity.** In an article by Kinginger (2013), she noted that language learning research has been linked to identity development. Her article focused on students who studied abroad to pursue language in countries related to their heritage. Kinginger’s (2013) study suggests that students’ identity development is affected by multiple factors including age, time abroad, how they evaluate identity development with their context, and their sociohistorical background. Additionally, navigating from being a minority to becoming a part of the majority in the visiting country can also have an effect on identity while abroad (Kinging, 2013).

Stewart’s 2010 study sought to distinguish students’ language gains and losses through personal narratives in the form of e-journals. She used e-journals to assess their Spanish language awareness and social identity during their study abroad time in Puebla, Mexico. Some of the factors that influenced language learning from her research included: gender, living

situation, classroom dynamic, and social networks (Stewart, 2010). Stewart noted that contextual and individual factors are paramount in understanding language learners' experiences.

**Heritage language learning and identity.** Moreno (2009) highlighted the complexities of heritage language (HL) learning with regard to identity, expectations, and beliefs within the study abroad context. Seventeen (17) HL learners who studied abroad in 2007 or 2008 and who wanted to improve their HL proficiency participated within the study. All participants had basic comprehension and communication skills of their parents or grandparents native language and were dominant English speakers. Data were collected through interviews before and after going abroad, email reflections, blog entries, and a focus group.

The findings within Moreno's 2009 study pointed to participants identifying themselves differently throughout their time abroad and after, depending on the context. Participants discussed both their ethnic and non-ethnic identities. In regards to ethnic identity, participants spoke about themselves as "having re-connected with their heritage," and "having an increased appreciation for their American identity," and as "having a mixed identity" during the data collection process of Moreno's (2009) study (p. 116). Individuals who studied abroad in locations that spoke their HL used words like *reattach(ed)* and *my roots* when referring to their experiences. Oftentimes, participants who could not speak the HL at a proficient level, felt less a part of their heritage identity (Moreno, 2009).

While some participants felt closer to their heritage identities due to their study abroad experience and heritage language learning, others felt more appreciative of their United States identities (Moreno, 2009). For example, a participant who was of Hispanic decent said that he considered himself Hispanic, but "first and foremost an American" once reflection on his experience (as cited in Moreno, 2009, p. 119).

## **Heritage-connected Study Abroad Identity**

Overall, the literature is sparse when it comes to exploring the impact of study abroad on heritage identity development beyond a language learning lens. Petrucci's (2007) article suggests that the perception of heritage scholar's identity is connected to the acknowledgment or rejection of the hosts in the ancestral location. His overview of research covers four studies of heritage language students in their ancestral lands of Mexico and Japan. While some of the ancestral related students were integrated well into their associated communities and host families, some students were received with suspicion. Kinginger (2013) summed up his research stating, "A return to the ancestral homeland does not necessarily guarantee that heritage learners will be received as welcomed guest and persons of consequence in host family settings" (p. 350). In addition, Kinginger's (2013) research indicates that interactions with the locals in the host country and living arrangements can affect identity development in students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage.

### **Summary**

The theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) person-process-context-time model and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity will be used to guide the research of this study. Additionally, research literature from Dwyer and Peters (n.d.) describes the benefits of study abroad on personal and career growth and Dwyer's (2004) research demonstrates how the length of study abroad programs leads to differed outcomes. Kinginger's (2013) research provides an understanding for how different facets of identity can impact language acquisition. Finally, Stewart (2010) demonstrates how language is impacted by social identity while abroad, and how the use of reflection is beneficial in bringing awareness to past experiences.

## **Conclusion**

The theoretical basis and research literature used for this study will guide the research methods and data analysis. Study abroad participation is at its peak, which has led to increased research on the topic (IIE, 2014). Overall, literature indicates that studying abroad is beneficial (Dwyer, 2004; IIE, 2014) and has an impact on student identity development (Angulo, 2008; Moreno, 2009; Petrucci, 2007). Studies on the benefits of study abroad and identity development with language acquisition while studying abroad are available; however, little information is available on students who study abroad in a host location with an ancestral connection. This study explored factors that go into identity salience with students who study abroad in an area representative of their heritage. Chapter three will cover the research design of this study.

## **Chapter Three: Research Design**

### **Introduction**

In order to describe how studying abroad in an area that is representative of one's heritage plays a role in identity development, I conducted a descriptive qualitative study using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, where I found the commonalities in the perceptions of the participants regarding a particular phenomenon (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). This study explored what factors affected identity salience for students who study abroad in area that is connected to their heritage. Some of the possible factors that were explored will include living arrangements; prior exposure to the heritage language; language acquisition while studying abroad; and the time abroad. This study did not focus on one piece of identity (e.g., social, ethnic, racial, or nationality), rather, participants disclosed what pieces of their identity, if any, were affected by their individual study abroad experience. Chapter three provides information on the justification for the qualitative study, the overall research design, and the specific steps used in the collection of data for this study. After introducing the participants that were involved in the study, I will outline when data was obtained, how data was analyzed, and give a summary of the chapter.

### **Participants**

Participants were students who studied abroad in an area that was representative of their heritage. A purposive convenience sampling was used for this study. Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) define purposive sampling as "a non-random sample selected because...those selected have the needed information" (p. G-7). The participants will be study abroad alumni from one large Midwestern public four-year university. The study abroad alumni were current students or graduates from the four-year university and included both undergraduate and graduate student levels. Recruitment for the research subjects was done through snowball

sampling through researcher connections and the research site's office of international education. Individuals that responded to the distributed emails received study documents including the consent form, and were asked to schedule an interview time during the designated period of November 11, 2015 to January 31, 2016. After interviewing research subjects, I asked if they would assist in identifying potential participants that fit the research criteria and that interested study abroad alumni should contact the researcher. I also utilized snowball sampling by asking personal connections to identify individuals who may be a fit for this study.

This topic is fairly new to the field of study abroad and therefore, a research collection process of interviewing was an appropriate instrument used in this exploratory study. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design provided an opportunity for research subjects to reflect and make meaning out of their lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). A hermeneutic emphasis will be utilized to assist in identifying the possible factors of participant identity salience through their heritage-connected study abroad experience. Moustakas (1994) points to the interrelationship of hermeneutics through "the direct conscious description of experience and the underlying dynamics or structures that account for the experience" which then "provides a central meaning and unity that enables one to understand the substance and essence of the experience" (p. 9). Through the hermeneutic phenomenological interview process, I asked questions that focused on the subjective experiences of the participants in an attempt to unveil the phenomena of their identity salience (Kafle, 2011). Kafle (2011) suggests that descriptions of lived experiences are a form of an interpretative process. Participants reflected on their experiences during the interviews and I then interpreted the phenomena of studying abroad in an area that was representative of their heritage.

Although interviews are likely to create researcher subjectivities, the questions were asked in a semi-structured format and did not refer to my own study abroad experiences. In addition, I controlled my reactions during the interviews in an attempt provide what Key (1997) suggests as an unbiased view of the participant responses—Seidman (2011) suggests maintaining a delicate balance of respecting participant responses while asking in-depth and open-ended questions. As a form of validity, the interview questions were aligned with the research objectives and goals, in order to ensure the content is assessing the information that is desired.

In order to continue combating researcher bias, the *hermeneutic cycle* is suggested by Kafle (2011). The hermeneutic cycle allows scientific understanding to occur through the self-consciousness of researcher pre-judgements (Moustakas, 1994). Editor and translator of *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Linge comments on the use of hermeneutic circle in making the researcher aware of their prejudices and correcting them “in our effort to hear what the text says to us” (as cited in Gadamer, 2008, p. xviii). While being aware of researcher prejudices does not transcend all prejudices, it does point in the direction of a *prejudice-free* apprehension during the interview (Gadamer, 2008). Rather than focusing on the possibility of researcher bias, I entered the hermeneutic circle by reflecting on my own prejudgments by journaling them prior to the start of the first participant interview. In order to approach the hermeneutic phenomenological research design effectively, I created the interview protocol based upon prior research and scholarship and developed an open-consciousness of prejudice through personal journal reflections that helped establish focus in interpreting participants’ experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were completed in a one-on-one setting in an office on the research site’s campus or if the participants preferred, a comfortable and private location of their choice. The

participants were first asked brief participant demographic information. The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were semi-structured to allow for the flow of conversation and discovery of the individual's perceptions of their study abroad experience in relation to their identity salience and heritage connection. The questions (Appendix II) were developed by the researcher and approved through the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the institution's respective research committee, and the researcher's own thesis committee. Interviews were audio recorded to assist in the collection, storage, and data analysis process. After completing the interview, each participant received a \$15.00 gift card as a token of appreciation. Interviews were conducted at the research site from November 11, 2015 to January 31, 2016.

Open-ended questions were primarily used to encourage the participant to re-construct their time abroad and how their identity played a role before, during, and after that process. Seidman (2013) states, "interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action" (p. 19). Different types of questions were included in the interview protocol including: knowledge, experience, feelings, and sensory questions (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Knowledge questions pertained to factual information; experience questions elicited responses about past or current participant experiences. Feeling type questions focused on emotional responses; sensory questions were concerned with what a respondent has heard, seen, tasted, smelled, or touched (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Including various types of questions during the interview helped increase the comprehensiveness of the data collection.

When studying identity and heritage within a student population, it is important to impose boundaries of respect for the participants. Research subjects picked a pseudonym that was used to protect confidentiality throughout the study and any possible identifying information. I also made it clear that if the participant did not feel comfortable answering a question during the

interview, they would not be put under pressure or scrutiny to continue to speak on that subject and were able to opt out of the study at any point. Once the data was transcribed, I provided participants with a summary and asked them to confirm the summary to their lived experiences. The participant summaries were used for member checking to ensure validity and an accurate representation of their lived experiences. Member checking is defined as, “asking one or more participants of the study to review the accuracy of the research report (Frankel et al., 2012, p. 458). In addition, member checking provided an opportunity to establish rapport with my participants by involving them in the data analysis process and assisted in establishing trustworthiness.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study began by determining what is common to the participants’ perceptions and searching for the defining characteristics of their experiences (Frankael et al., 2012). Themes prevailed through those defining characteristics and created the overall essence of their experiences. I extracted relevant statements that helped to describe the factors that may go into identity salience of those who study abroad in an area representative of their heritage, and I then integrated those themes into a narrative (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The initial analysis process involved a narrative of each participant’s responses and once that was completed, I sent a summary of the interviews to the participants and encouraged them to confirm the alignment of their experiences. Data was then interpretively coded to ensure focus was placed on each individual participant’s responses (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Codes were used to capture the main idea of the responses to give meaning to the overall experience.

Once participant summaries were sent, initial transcribing was completed, and coding for final themes was finished, I looked for connections from the data to the theoretical foundation of

my study. The theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) person-process-context-time model and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity was utilized to interpret any connections of participant experiences to the established theoretical guides. The emergent themes of the study were identified through the narratives of exemplary quotes, as suggested by Benner (1994).

### **Summary**

This research was completed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Although the study had limitations, I used member checking and was aware of researcher prejudices through the hermeneutic circle, in order to promote reliability and credibility within the research. Data analysis included coding and transcribing of the audio recordings of the interviews and identifying themes through interpretation of the participant's lived experiences. The goal of data collection and analysis was to identify possible factors in the identity salience of students who studied abroad in a heritage-connected area.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **Context**

Through the snowball sampling method, the study concluded with eight study abroad participants from the one large Midwestern public four-year university. Out of those eight participants, three were alumni that have since graduated from the university, four were current students, and one student is an alumna for her undergraduate degree and is currently a graduate student at the university. In addition, six participants identified as female and two as male. This chapter describes the findings in relation to the research questions of the study, and concludes with a summary of the results.

Demographic information (see Table 1) was collected at the beginning of the interview to gather initial characteristics including sex, age, location of program, length of program, and how long ago each participant returned from their study abroad program. The participants ranged in age from 20-28 years old. All participants completed their study abroad programs at the same university; however, some returned from their study abroad experience more recently than others. Participants' return from their study abroad experiences ranged from four months from time of the interview to six years and four months from time of the interview. The durations of study abroad programs varied from two weeks to one year. Finally, study abroad destinations included: Italy, China, Germany, Taiwan, Mexico, Jamaica, and Ghana. Interviews with the participants lasted an average of 47 minutes.

Table 1

*Demographic Information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Student Status</b>	<b>Undergraduate or Graduate During Time of Study Abroad</b>	<b>Length of Program</b>	<b>When Returned</b>
Grace	Italy	27	Female	Alumni	Undergraduate	1 year	6 years ago
Sophie	China	21	Female	Current	Undergraduate	6 months	4 months ago
Felix	Germany	23	Male	Current	Graduate	9 weeks	4 months ago
Rob	Taiwan	21	Male	Alumni	Undergraduate	6 weeks	2 years and 5 months ago
Natalia	Mexico	28	Female	Alumni	Undergraduate	9 months	6 years and 4 months ago
Isabella	Italy	20	Female	Current	Undergraduate	3.5 months	4 months ago
Mary	Jamaica and Ghana	24	Female	Alumni-Undergraduate Current-Graduate	Undergraduate-Jamaica Graduate-Ghana	Jamaica-2 weeks Ghana-5 weeks	Jamaica-3.5 years ago Ghana-5 months ago
Leigh	Germany	24	Female	Current	Graduate	8 weeks	5 months ago

**Findings**

The results of this study are outlined by the factors of the two categories of identity salience that emerged: heritage identity salience and American identity salience. Participants disclosed how they identified themselves before, during, and after study abroad, along with at the time of the interview (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Identity Self-Disclosure*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>% of Heritage</b>	<b>Identity Before</b>	<b>Identity During</b>	<b>Identity After</b>	<b>Identity Now</b>
Grace	25%	American	American	Italian	Italian American
Sophie	100%	American From China	American From China	American Born in China	Chinese American
Felix	50%	American	American with German Heritage	American	American
Rob	50%	Half Chinese	Half Chinese	Half Chinese	Half Chinese
Natalia	100%	Hispanic or Latino	100% Mexican	Mexican	Mexican
Isabella	100%	Italian	Italian	Italian American	Italian American
Mary	98% (Undergraduate)	American, Black, Black American	American, Black, Black American	Black, Black American, African American	n/a
	(Graduate)	Black, Black American, African American	African lost in America, Black, Black American, African American	African lost in America, Black, Black American, African American	African lost in America, Black, Black American, African American
Leigh	75%	White	White	White	White

**Heritage Identity Salience**

Of the eight participants, six disclosed feeling a stronger connection to their heritage identity either during or after studying abroad in their heritage-connected area in comparison to their identity as an American. Various factors played a role in their identity salience such as

language proficiency, familiarity of culture, sense of belonging, ability to navigate the culture, and family influence (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Factors of Stronger Heritage Identity Saliency*

<b>Final Themes</b>	<b>Initial Codes</b>
Language Proficiency	Language improvement, advanced proficiency, blending in
Familiarity of Culture	Traditions, norms, cuisine, migrant family, been to area before
Sense of Belonging	Community acceptance, recognize last name, one of us
Navigating Culture	Feeling comfortable in society, able to say they had been there
Family Influence	Able to relate with family about experiences, family visits

**Language proficiency.** The most notable of the factors that participants discussed was language proficiency. Participants felt more connected to their heritage identity if they were able to keep a conversation with the locals, haggle in the markets without any trouble, and blend in with the community. Language proficiency included higher language proficiencies and those who improved their language while studying abroad.

For instance, Sophie had an advanced proficiency level for the Chinese language before leaving for her study abroad experience and was taking language classes while abroad to continue to improve. Sophie was born in China, however, she was placed in a Chinese orphanage from two weeks old until she was adopted by an American family at the age of ten. While abroad, locals were surprised to find out she was an American because she was able to speak colloquially and her physical appearance allowed her to “blend in” with society. Sophie stated, “everyone thought I was a local...they didn’t treat me any different.” She felt proud that locals thought she was one of them. Her identity change occurred in her self-disclosure of being an American *from* China to after her experience and now identifying as, “American *born in*

China”. This was due, in part, to her confidence in her Chinese language skills. Sophie stated that ultimately her identity experienced a change due to her time abroad:

Before I was confused; I always just thought people decided who I was. I felt like everything was not my choice. Now was the time for me to decide if I want to keep moving on as a full American and forget China completely or embrace both and I decided to embrace both after I came back. I never felt confident about it and now I am like YES! I am an American, I love every part of it. But I also love every part of China. Yeah, it is a good feeling actually.

For Grace, the beginning of her program in Italy, with her Italian background and low language skills, made her feel like more of an American. However, as she developed her language skills to an advanced level by the end of her program, she felt a stronger identity salience with her Italian roots. Grace noted, “towards the end I definitely felt like I could blend in.” Grace’s identity disclosure changed from identifying more with being an American, due to language barriers, to ending her experience with feeling more Italian; due, in part, to her Italian language improvement.

In addition, many of the participants had experience with haggling with vendors while they were abroad. Due to their physical ability to appear as a local, they would also attempt to haggle appropriately with their language skills. For instance, Natalia claimed that she was not an American when she visited Mexican museums:

When we would go to museums, the Mexican people are allowed to go in free because it was a national museum, but foreigners had to pay. So it was like, I have to pay? Towards the end I pretended I wasn’t (an American). They were like, “Oh you speak English?” I was like, “No hablo inglés.”

While many of the participants seemed to “blend in” by physical appearance with the locals, due to their heritage connections, their encounters with language is what set their identity salience apart. Locals would often approach the participants and assume that they were one of them and begin speaking their heritage language without hesitation. If the participants were able to continue those conversations, they felt proud and a stronger sense of their heritage identity.

**Familiarity of culture.** This theme highlights that participants who had some familiarity with the culture were more likely to have a stronger heritage identity salience. The factor of familiarity included participants who were raised with a strong heritage connection; being accustomed to the traditions, norms, and cuisines of the area they studied abroad in; having a close generational connection to family who were immigrants of the study abroad location; and having been to the heritage-connected area before.

*First or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants.* Both Isabella and Natalia mentioned a strong family connection to their culture due to their upbringing and having sets of grandparents that were immigrants. Isabella grew up surrounded by a strong Italian cultural influence, including her close connection with her grandparents who are Italian immigrants. She identified as being an Italian American before going abroad to Italy. In Natalia’s case, her parents were Mexican immigrants and she identifies with being 100% Mexican. She was familiar with certain parts of the culture and could also speak the language at a high proficiency.

*Cultural traditions and norms.* Familiarity with cultural traditions and norms was commonly discussed. Mary studied abroad in Jamaica as an undergraduate for a total of two weeks, and then studied abroad as a graduate student for five weeks in Ghana. Both areas had a heritage connection to her, as she identifies with being Black. Before leaving for her first study abroad experience in Jamaica, she would have identified with being American, Black, or a Black

American. After her time in Jamaica, she felt less of identifying as *just* American and identified herself as being Black, Black American, or an African American. In addition, her graduate level study abroad experience in Ghana took her identity salience to a new level. During and after her time in Ghana, she recognized the strong connection she had with being an African American. She started identifying and continues to identify as an African lost in America, in addition to her intersecting identities as being Black, Black American, and African American. Part of her connection to her African American and Black identities included her familiarity with the cultures she was surrounded by in both Jamaica and Ghana.

During Mary's time in Jamaica, she felt hesitant of not being able to understand locals with her low language proficiency, however, she was surprised to find that she recognized cultural sayings and Jamaican slang. She noted, "It was the same stuff my grandparents would say, or my mom would say. I am like, yeah we all grew up totally differently and we still got these same sayings and these same metaphors."

Her experience in Ghana lent itself to more familiarity with her culture and was ultimately a pivotal factor in her heritage identity salience. Although her proficiency in the Ghanaian language of Fante was extremely low, she felt at ease with the cultural similarities. Mary stated, "The culture was similar to...the Black culture here, at least what I grew up with." She recalled a time when she was in Cape Coast and recognized the tradition of greeting each person in the room with a handshake before starting any activities. Mary's grandmother raised her with the same cultural norm. She noted, "I know how to navigate in this space even though I am in a different country because it is literally the same things back at home."

*Cuisine.* Familiarity of the cuisine while in the heritage-connected area was often discussed as a factor that influenced heritage identity salience. Seven out of the eight

participants mentioned food as a factor that impacted their identity. Although Felix disclosed that he felt more American than German towards the end and after his study abroad experience, the cuisine was a positive factor in his comfort as a German:

The cuisine was very similar to the things I already eat in my own home. My parents have done a great job of embracing cuisine, as far as the German heritage. We've always had sauerkraut and bratwurst, all those different things have been really present in my home. So the food, I felt right at home.

Leigh also mentioned cuisine as a factor, she felt familiar with the German food that she was eating while she was abroad. She stated, "I had already eaten a lot of the food through my family...so it was like this is like a Sunday night dinner, okay!" That familiarity made her feel comfortable within the German society.

*Been before.* Out of the eight participants, three had traveled to or were born in the heritage-connected area in which they studied abroad. With Rob, who described himself as half Chinese before, during, and after study abroad, he stated, "I feel like I have always had a strong connection to my Chinese connection, so that (the study abroad experience) just reinforced it." Rob was also familiar with the Taiwanese culture because he had traveled to Taiwan six times for about four weeks each time, when he was younger. His identity as being half Chinese was reinforced through his heritage study abroad program due to his strong connection to the culture, having traveled there before, and language improvement.

The factor of familiarity of the culture included cultural traditions, norms, cuisine, and a first or second-generation connection to their immigrant families, and having been to the heritage-connected area before. These factors all played a role in the identity salience of the participants.

**Sense of belonging.** Throughout the entire study, one constant theme was discussed among the participants; the desire to feel a sense of belonging within the community of the heritage-connected study abroad location. Natalia, who studied abroad in Mexico and identified with being 100% Mexican heritage, never felt like she belonged as an American due to negative racial teasing experiences during grade school and throughout her life. Natalia noted, “It was a series of events that led me to think, I wasn’t worth anything.” However, during her study abroad experience in Mexico, she felt a sense of belonging with other Mexicans that looked like her and made her feel accepted:

There was no question, yeah you are one of us. That was the first time that I had ever gone somewhere and there was no question you are one of us. It was weird because I was technically like a foreign exchange student; I wasn’t from there. So, I felt out of place with the study abroad kids and I felt more at ease with the people from there. My whole life I had always been, not one of us, and now I was one of everyone.

Natalia ended her experience abroad feeling deeply connected to her Mexican roots and stated that:

Before I went I probably would have said Hispanic or Latino but after I went, I was like oh, I am *Mexican*. I tended not to (say Mexican before) because of the stereotypes. It didn’t help when your parents didn’t speak very good English, I was always there to translate. It was like we’re [named stereotypes]. I felt kind of ashamed of who I was. Then when I came back it was like, this is my family. I know what they went through to come here. I am very proud of what they went through. So it was a moment of understanding my parents and being so proud that I was Mexican.

Mary's story also highlighted her sense of belonging, which was the most prominent factor in her heritage identity salience. While she was in Jamaica, she recalls community members assisting her while she was ill, without the requirement to do so. She stated:

At the hotel we were staying at, I had a throat ache and the lady made me some tea. Oh my goodness this tea was so good and it healed me immediately. She was like yup just drink this and you will be fine. Two days later she just sat with me literally until one o'clock in the morning. This was an older lady too. Just talking, wanted to know about my family. It was just me and her.

Although Mary's language skills were low in both Jamaica and Ghana, she felt a part of the community because the locals were open to teaching her the language and oftentimes they would speak English for her benefit, so she could be included in the conversations.

The overwhelming community acceptance that participants received allowed them to feel that sense of belonging they desired within the area that already had an established heritage-connection. Participants that felt like they were one of the locals were able to attach to their heritage identities more often than those who felt more American identity salience.

**Navigating culture.** In addition to the language proficiency and familiarity of culture, another prominent factor that emerged through participant data was the ability to navigate culture. Of the six participants who felt a stronger heritage identity salience than their American identities, all six mentioned that they felt confident in their ability to say they have been to that area, understand the culture, and felt an overall comfort in the heritage culture by the end of their programs. Grace's ability to navigate Italy was a prominent factor in her change of identity self-disclosure from being an American before and during her program, to claiming herself as an Italian after her study abroad experience:

I was much prouder to be able to say I had Italian heritage only because I understood more of what it meant and I...could prove I knew what I was talking about because I could speak Italian and I could navigate Italy.

Grace felt ownership to her Italian heritage due to her experience in Italy. She stated that she was, “just more comfortable saying Italian American and not feeling like it is just my name or something, but it is actually a piece of me now.”

Mary’s study abroad experience in Ghana also led to a change in her identity salience. During and after her time in Ghana, she felt more comfortable being able to claim that she was an African American since it was her first time visiting Africa. She notes, “because I was on the continent, it was real now.”

Grace and Mary’s examples of feeling confidence in their ability to navigate the culture, including awareness of cultural norms, local slang, and food, factored into their heritage identity salience. These individuals had either never been to their heritage area before or had been before, but increased their confidence to independently navigate around culture.

**Family influence.** The final major theme and factor to a stronger heritage identity salience was a positive influence from their families. For example, Natalia was able to relate to her family about where she was going in Mexico and what she was seeing on a daily basis. She noted, “They were excited because they were like, oh did you see so and so? Did you do this and that?” In Isabella’s case, she was also able to relate to her family about what she was experiencing, especially her Grandmother, who is an Italian immigrant. She can now have conversations with her Grandmother about specific places, cuisine, and words in the Italian language. Isabella stated:

That's why I feel like me and my Grandma are so close right now, because I went there and now we can talk about certain things. We have made plans like this summer. (She is) going to teach (me) how to make all of the homemade tomato sauce, and pasta, and all of this stuff. I want to learn. We are going to learn a new word everyday so that maybe someday (I) will gain a better understanding for the language.

In addition to her positive family influence with her Grandmother, she was also able to visit family at the end of her study abroad program, and was accompanied by her father. Isabella noted, "My dad ended up meeting me there the last two weeks I was there and brought me back. So he got to see his family and he got to see what I was doing all summer."

Although Leigh felt a stronger American identity salience than her German identity, she was able to visit a bridge that was named after her family-and feel a connection there:

There is a bridge in Germany that's named after my family and so I was able to go and see that. That was so cool to be like, this is me, this is where I came from. People who I had never ever met but had left a lasting impression on that place.

Family influence of participant study abroad experiences in their heritage-connected locations had an impact on identity salience. Individuals were able to relate to their families about specific places and the culture, visited family while abroad, and recognized locations with their family names.

### **American Identity Salience**

Although a majority of the participants felt a stronger connection to their heritage identity, some participants ultimately recognized the strength of their American identity. The most prominent factors that emerged in the data were: linguistic barriers, feeling foreign, and historical influences (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Factors of Stronger American Identity Salience*

<b>Final Themes</b>	<b>Initial Codes</b>
Linguistic Barriers	Limited proficiency, not blending in
Feeling Foreign	Reminders of American identity, negative interactions with locals
Historical Influences	Historical influences leading to negative stereotypes of heritage

**Language barriers.** Just as language proficiency was the most noted factor of heritage identity salience, language barriers were noted as one of the defining factors in feeling more American. Language barriers included individuals who had a very low to advanced low proficiencies.

In the case of Leigh, she was visiting Germany for the first time with an intermediate proficiency. She self-disclosed her identity to be White before, during, and after her study abroad experience. She felt a stronger connection to her American identity rather than her German identity, due in part to her language barriers. Leigh stated:

I look very German, appearance wise; until I spoke, I fit it. Nobody noticed that I was an American until I was like, “Oh hi!” You could see their perceptions change. If I got the response where they would start speaking to me in English, I felt really disheartened because I was like, I’m trying so hard.

Although Grace and Isabella ultimately felt a stronger connection to their heritage identity, they recognized language barriers that at times made them feel like more of an American. Grace noted, “When I would open my mouth, that’s when it was given away. Like, oh you are not Italian and you never will be.” While in Isabella’s case, her appearance as an

Italian allowed her to blend in physically with locals, however, her language barriers created a disconnect with her identity as an Italian:

If someone could just see my name on a piece of paper and look at me, I think I could have blended in pretty well. But if someone were to hear me talk, then I think it set me back by a landslide.

**Feeling foreign.** Another factor in the stronger connection to an American identity were participants' experiencing moments of feeling like a foreigner rather than blending in with their ancestral counterparts. These moments included negative interactions with locals, hosts families, or professors, and the constant reminders of being an American.

In the case of Felix, who identified with being an American before, during, and after his study abroad experience in Germany, he stated:

I think since I kept having to establish myself as an American to everybody, then it started to sink in that being an American is the piece that really came out rather than the German piece. I really felt the need to establish that I was American.

Felix recalled "sticking out" as an American when he was with a group of fellow students. The mannerisms of the group did not match the cultural norms of Germany. For example, he said the louder volume of their voices, American accents, and clothing styles were different than the local Germans:

If I was with a group of students, instantly you were known as an Americans if they hear you talking in the street. Even if they hear you talking in a medium or high volume, they instantly know you are not from Germany, because they don't do that in the streets.

Felix also noted feeling foreign with the constant questions revolving his identity as an American. Once locals realized he was an American, they would ask questions about American

politics and the country in general. He stated that he felt “ownership of [his] birthplace, so [he] really felt the need to start identifying as an American”. Overall he claimed that, “Once I was in Germany, I had a heavy realization [that] I am American.”

Isabella also experienced feeling foreign after an encounter with her Italian professor:

My marketing professor, she grew up in Italy [but] she would travel to the States, she was born there. With the first day of class she saw my name and she asked me, “Are you Italian?” And I said, “Yeah.” She goes, “So well do you speak it?” and I said, “No.” She basically acted like that’s such a shame. It’s a shame that you are what you are and you aren’t accustomed to your language.

Her encounter with her professor made her feel more of a foreigner in that moment than identifying with being an Italian woman. Similar moments like this cause some of the participants to attach more to their American identities.

**Negative history.** The final prominent factor in a stronger American identity salience were historical influences. While in Germany, Leigh visited locations that were negatively impacted and were damaged by effects of the Holocaust. She also attended museum exhibits that outlined the World War II impression on Germany. Due to this historical influence she stated that it made her “more deeply consider how [she] felt about [her] heritage and nationality.” Leigh said, “I would still identify as [German] and I wouldn’t be ashamed of it necessarily, but I think I’m more cognizant of how deeply it affects people as well.” Although she recognizes that her family was not specifically tied to the Holocaust and she has a positive association with her German heritage, her experiences abroad made her more cognizant of self-disclosing as a German.

There were various factors that played a role in influencing identity salience of participants who studied abroad in an area that was representative of their heritage. Every participant experienced some sort of change in their identity salience; however, two main categories emerged through the data. Participants either felt stronger about their heritage identity or felt stronger about their identity as an American. Identity outcomes depended on the factors that were outlined earlier, including language proficiency or barriers, feeling foreign, and historical influences. The most notable factor that appeared was the desire for individuals to feel a sense of belonging within the society in which they had a heritage-connection. Beyond blending in through physical appearance, navigating culture, and language, participants wanted to feel like part of the majority, rather than a foreign minority.

### **Other Considerations**

In addition to the factors that emerged as influencing identity salience, other considerations should be acknowledged. Those considerations included a reduced influence of culture shock, reasons for choosing a heritage-connection study abroad program, the timing of their experience, and the time that elapsed since the participants returned from their study abroad experience.

**Reduced influence of culture shock.** One of the considerations included a reduced influence of culture shock experience while studying abroad in a heritage-connected area. Six out of the eight participants reported feeling a reduced influence of culture shock. Often times this lessened influence was due having somewhat of a familiarity to the language and culture they studied abroad in. For instance Leigh noted, “I feel like I had lessened culture shock because I already knew a lot of the language and I had already eaten a lot of the food through my family. Mary said that she experienced a different kind of culture shock, “it was culture shock

but it was a welcoming shock. Not a fearful shock or uncomfortable shock. It was shock as in wow, I can't believe I feel so comfortable here.”

**Reasons for choosing a heritage-connected study abroad program.** Another notable finding with the data was the initial reasoning behind choosing the heritage-connected study abroad program. While some participants just happened to choose the location due to a partnership with the university or direct curriculum transfers for their programs, others choose the location in part or specifically for the heritage-connection. Natalia stated, “I really want(ed) to know where I come from.” Many participants claimed a reasoning of wanting to “re-connect” with their ancestral roots and learn their heritage language. For instance Rob stated, “I figured going back to Taiwan was kind of two birds, one stone. I got to go back and see my family and yet still learn Chinese.”

Isabella also wanted to explore her roots claiming, “I wanted to explore on my own, get my own take on it.” In addition, she also choose an Italy program because it was an incentive to being allowed to study abroad in the first place. Isabella stated, “Even just to get my family to allow me to somewhere, that's a big part in why I chose where I went.”

**Timing of experience.** Some participants noted particular world events that impacted their study abroad experience and how they identified themselves. For instance, Felix stated that his salient American identity was likely “inspired by [the] Fourth of July being two days after [he] had returned home.” In Grace's case, she was studying abroad in Italy during the time of the United States presidential election and it affected how she identified herself. She said that she would tell people she was Canadian because “the elections were happening right then and [she] probably preferred not to talk about politics.” Natalia's parents were nervous of her traveling to Mexico because of the drug cartel operations that were happening in the country.

Although the area she was specifically traveling to did not have a history of cartel issues, her parents were still hesitant about her abroad experience. Before departing, she stated that her family would express their concerns and that “they had in their mind I was going to get robbed (or) that I was going to get taken by the cartel.”

**Time of return.** The length of time of when a participant had returned from their study abroad varied from four months to six years and four months. It appeared that participants who had returned from their programs longer than those who just returned, were beginning to feel more American identity salience than directly after their study abroad experience. Natalia stated, “I identify as Mexican and sometimes I will think wow, I am becoming more Americanized again.” Grace also stated a similar feeling, also being back for six years. She identified as being an Italian immediately after returning from her time abroad, and now identifies with being and Italian American.

### Summary

All of the participants experienced some sort of change with their identity salience. The major findings that emerged through data analysis were two groups: 1) those identifying with stronger *heritage* identity salience and 2) those who identified with a strong *American* identity salience. While six of the participants self-disclosed as identifying more with their heritage identity due to their study abroad experience, two participants felt a stronger connection to their American identities. In addition, some participants had certain moments of feeling more salient with either their American or heritage identity, although their most prominent identity may have not matched with how their identity was impacted during those situational moments.

Within the two groups of identity salience were overarching factors that influenced identity. Within the category of stronger heritage identity salience included language proficiency, familiarity of culture, sense of belonging, ability to navigate the culture, and family

influence. Whereas, the category of stronger American identity salience included language barriers, feeling foreign, and historical influences. Based on participant experiences, identity does play a role in students who study abroad in an area that is representative of their heritage. Participants experienced a change in how they identify themselves and recognize their heritage-connections and identity as an American.

Chapter five will outline the theme connections to the theoretical framework. In addition, this chapter will elaborate on the impact of these findings on the student affairs and study abroad fields to influence policy and practice.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

This chapter provides a summary of the study as well as the conclusions of the research. The discussion is framed by the guiding theoretical framework for the study. Finally, this chapter presents future recommendations for policy and practice building upon the implications of the study.

### **Summary of Study**

In order to address a need within the field, a descriptive qualitative research design was conducted, using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, to highlight the study abroad experiences of students with heritage-connections. The research questions focused on how identity plays a role for heritage-connected student who study abroad, particularly with identity salience. In addition, this study aimed to investigate what factors influenced the changes in identity salience. Students were asked to self-disclose how they identified themselves before, during, and after going abroad, in addition to their identity at the time of the interview. Self-disclosure allowed participants to identify the pieces of identity that were most salient to them. Most of the research that is available seeks to address identity development within study abroad, and not specific to the heritage-connected student population.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling from researcher connections and the research site's office of international affairs. Participants were American students who had previously studied abroad in an area that was representative of their heritage. Criteria for participation included the possibility of being a current student or alumni of the research site institution. In addition, participants could be at either the undergraduate or graduate academic levels.

Data were collected through recorded interviews that were manually transcribed and coded to analyze emergent themes. All participants experienced some sort of change in their

identity salience, however, the final analysis presented two categories of student identity outcomes: 1) stronger connection to heritage identity salience and 2) a stronger connection to American identity salience. Within the two categories were prevailing factors that had an influence on identity changes. For the participants who felt a stronger connection to their heritage identity, prominent factors included language proficiency, familiarity of culture, sense of belonging, ability to navigate the culture, and family influence. Whereas, the factors that influenced the second group of participants who felt a stronger connection to their American identity included linguistic barriers, feeling foreign, and historical influences. The notable theme that emerged through the data was the desire for participants to feel a sense of belonging within the heritage-connected community in which they studied abroad.

### **Conclusion**

All participants experienced a change in their identity salience, whether it was feeling reconnected or more proud of their heritage identity, the prominence of their American nationality, or being able to recognize how they embrace their intersecting identities. Identity salience varied due to defining factors that ultimately influenced how participants disclosed their identity.

The results of the study aligned with the limited research available on heritage-connected students who study abroad, however, the data revealed new information about this population that was otherwise unavailable. The data were interpreted using Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualized model of their original multiple dimensions of identity model and Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological process-person-context-time model (PPCT). These models helped to connect participant experiences including the critical influence of the study abroad context and environment while being abroad in the heritage-connected area. In addition, how participants made meaning of their identity because of their familiarity to their heritage and how

they interpret the salience of their intersecting identities. Finally, through interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) time component, participants' identity disclosure varied depending the timing of their study abroad program and the historical influences of the area.

### **Discussion**

Studying abroad can be a life changing experience, and for heritage-connect students, their study abroad experience can have a profound impact on the ways they identify themselves. Within this study, participant interactions within the cultural context of the study abroad area influenced the strength of their identity disclosure. Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualized model multiple dimensions of identity highlights how a person makes meaning of their self-perceived identities through their contextual influences. According to Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007), peers, family, norms, stereotypes, and sociopolitical conditions are examples of possible contextual influences. Participants of this study were impacted by the sociopolitical environment and interactions with locals within the community they had an ancestral connection to. Those participants who had negative interactions with locals, peers, or professors led to a decreased heritage identity salience, as they felt less connected with their heritage counterparts within the community. All participants had a change in their identity, which is similar to Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) research that emphasizes the fluidity and intersectionality of identity.

The data within this study highlights the intersectionality of identities as interpreted by the reconceptualized model multiple dimensions of identity. Similar to Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) framework, participants in this study often identified with different facets of their identities at different points in time. Although every participant could legally identify with being an American, some felt the stronger connection to their heritage roots due to their study abroad experience. Other participants clung to the familiarity of being an American, while still

recognizing their heritage identity. Once participants returned from their time abroad, there was a greater likelihood of disclosing and embracing their two most prominent intersecting identities of being an American while having a heritage identity from their ancestral roots. Overall, participants made meaning of their identities differently because of their contextual experiences and their self-perceptions before going abroad, during their time abroad, and after being abroad.

Through interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's (1995) PPCT model, the data in this study demonstrate the ways in which the environment and timing of a study abroad experience may affect identity. In connection to Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) research on the influence of context on an individual's identity, Bronfenbrenner's (1995) research focuses on how the environment can affect one's identity. Bronfenbrenner (2005) noted the *process* component of the PPCT model highlights the interactions between the organism and environment.

Participants in this study were directly impacted by their interactions within the study abroad environment. While some participants felt a part of society through their ability to blend in physically and speak the language, others felt foreign in their own ancestral stomping grounds. Acceptance within the community through positive interactions and the ability to get around independently through proficient language skills were prominent factors among the participant who felt a reconnection to their heritage identities. Kinginger (2013) and Angulo's (2008) research note how community perceptions and living arrangements affect identity development. Those participants who had linguistic barriers often felt ashamed and experienced difficulties in haggling with local merchants and taxi drivers, which created a closer connection to their American identity.

The findings of this study also connected to the *context* component of the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The context component had a nested series of systems that surrounding

the individual that include the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). According to Bronfenbrenner (1995), the PPCT model was meant to give a holistic approach to individual development by considering how varying characteristics of an individual results in varied responses to their environment. The factors that played a role in identity salience were similar to the some of the descriptions within these systems.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) microsystem is described as an individual's closely related environment. Since the participants had a heritage-connected to the area they were studying abroad in due to their ancestral connections, parents and family were often involved in the process. Two participants mentioned having either first or second-generation family members who immigrated from the areas they studied abroad in. In addition, other participants were able to relate and recount their specific experiences while being abroad to their families. Participants could discuss specific locations, monuments, learning cultural norms, and colloquial language. Four out of the eight participants mentioned connecting with family or family friends within the area they were studying abroad in, which also had a direct impact on their identity salience. Some participants met their family members while abroad and traveled together. Participants were influenced by the microsystem of their school environment, their interactions with their host families, and most notably, their own families.

According to Bronfenbrenner (2005) within the macrosystem individual development is impacted by beliefs and ideologies of the culture and history of the area. Participants who had prior exposure to their heritage and were familiar with their culture felt a stronger connection to their heritage identity. A common factor within this group was being acquainted with the traditions and cuisine of their heritage culture. Their comfort levels within their familiarity of their culture allowed them to navigate the area and feel proud of their heritage cultural

knowledge. Through interpretation of the macrosystem, the background knowledge and confidence of the heritage culture causes a direct impact on identity salience.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) also highlights the impact of *time* on one's development. The data within this study suggested that the length of the study abroad program was not necessarily an influence on identity salience, however, their identity salience was influenced by the timing of their study abroad experience. All participants experienced a change in their identity salience and responded differently depending on when they were asked to disclose their identity: before, during, after studying abroad, and at the time of the interview. Bronfenbrenner (1995) stated that a person's life course is "powerfully shaped by conditions and events occurring during the historical period through which the person lives" (p 641). This study highlighted the historical and political influences of the area in which they studied abroad as a factor that influenced identity salience. If the area was associated with a negative historical event or political atmosphere, participants were more hesitant to associate themselves with that heritage identity. In addition, the timing of events in the United States (i.e., Fourth of July, presidential election) while participants were abroad also impacted their experiences. As applied by the time component, identity is influenced by the timing of the study abroad experience at the time in their lives and by the historical influences of the heritage area.

Adler's (1975) culture shock theory on transitional experience outlined the five phases of experiential learning that sojourners may experience while they are abroad in an area that is unfamiliar to them. Heritage-connected study abroad students often have some sort of familiarity to the culture of the area they are studying abroad in, resulting in a different experience. Seven out of eight participants of this study felt a reduced influence of culture shock due to their familiarity with the heritage culture. The prior exposure to the language, cuisine,

traditions, cultural norms, or having traveled to the area before assisted students in their transition to being abroad. Studying abroad typically evokes a new environment, while this group of participants were oftentimes previously acquainted with the culture of their heritage.

Similar to the observations of Petrucci (2007), this study acknowledges that the perception of identity is connected to the acknowledgement or rejection of the hosts in the ancestral site. The factor that most influenced identity salience was the ability or inability to feel a sense of belonging within the heritage-connected area in which they studied abroad. Most participants physically blended in to the society and appeared to be a local due to their heritage background. If participants were approached as a seemingly local, their inability or ability to converse in the heritage language was a strong factor in determining where individuals placed the strongest value in their identity salience. Many participants expressed a desire to explore their heritage and learn more about their roots through their time abroad, while expecting to feel like part of the majority rather than a minority. Those expectations in tandem with feeling accepted and a part of the heritage community played a role in participant identity salience.

### **Recommendations**

With study abroad participation at its all-time high (IIE, 2014), it is important to recognize the needs and experiences of heritage-connected students and tailor programs to be inclusive of this population. The implications of this study can provide practitioners, students, and families with opportunity to understand how studying abroad in an area representative of their heritage can influence student identity. This study closes by offering recommendations for practice and policy within the higher education and international education fields. Suggestions are grouped by 1) before studying abroad, 2) during the program, and 3) after returning.

First, marketing, preparation, and orientation materials should be reevaluated to offer more guidance in supporting students who are preparing to study abroad and in choosing a study

abroad destination. For six out of the eight participants, heritage was the top or one of the top factors for choosing the location of the study abroad program. Therefore, a question could be added on to study abroad applications that inquire whether students want to study abroad in a heritage-connection location. This question could be tracked to determine what type of programs would be the best fit based off of their heritage interests. This question could also be asked during the initial study abroad advising stage in order to determine a suitable program for the student.

Since all participants in the study discussed language as a factor in their identity salience, it would be pertinent highlight language within study abroad marketing. Program marketing could be tailored to these populations of students with an emphasis placed on language and culture exploration. Study abroad professionals could maintain a database available with specific programs that focus on heritage exploration through language and culture for those students desiring heritage-connected study abroad experiences.

A typical study abroad orientation often addresses the common experiences of culture shock and adjustment, however, participants in this study reported experiencing a reduced influence of culture shock. Adjusting the orientation materials for study abroad programs would allow for proper preparation of the study abroad experience for heritage-connected students. Students could be made aware of the possible changes in identity salience and how they may be developmentally impacted. In addition, helping students create goals that outline what they would like the outcomes of the experience to be, in regards to their heritage exploration, could be useful. Outlining these goals before students' departure will assist students in their expectations while going abroad. Many participants expected to feel like part of the heritage majority, while some ended up feeling more American, and ultimately foreign.

Second, proper support should be offered during their time abroad. All participants experienced a change in the value they placed on their identities due to their time abroad. That identity change can create feelings of reconnection to heritage or possibility feeling like a foreigner within their heritage area. Student affairs and study abroad practitioners might communicate with the students during the experience by asking about possible highlights and challenges of their experience thus far. In addition, these professionals could check up on the progress of student goals and offer advice and resources to further that progress. Resources could include blogs of other heritage-connected students studying abroad, connections to campus multicultural centers, counseling centers, or LGBT centers to assist with student identity development.

Finally, it is recommended that practitioners evaluate and possibly revamp the reentry process to allow for a supportive environment for students to reflect upon possible identity salience changes. With any experience abroad, there can be a reverse culture shock experience, however students with a heritage-connection can have a different reverse culture shock response focusing on identity. Six out of the eight participants identified themselves differently during their program in comparison to when they returned. There should be a development or adjustment of reflection materials to be inclusive of this population of students. Specific questions could relate to their experiences building upon the outlined goals they set for themselves in regards to their heritage-connected time abroad. Simply asking students to identify themselves helps students determine the salience of their intersecting identities of being an American and having a heritage background. In addition, study abroad offices could host a luncheon for recent returnees to share their stories with others and discuss their outcomes. The

opportunity to articulate their identity experiences could help with the readjustment period of being back in America and assisting students in embracing who they define themselves to be.

Since there is limited research within this field, future research is recommended. This study was conducted at one large Midwestern public university, therefore, more heritage-connected study abroad research is suggested. For example, the current study did not compare identity salience in participants to those who did not have a heritage-connection to the area in which they studied abroad and warrants further attention. Further, although a qualitative research design provided rich, thick descriptions of student experiences, future researchers should utilize quantitative and mixed-methods research to further explore heritage-connection study abroad programs. Finally, future research should focus on the reasons for choosing a heritage-connected study abroad program, so practical solutions can be developed to meet student needs.

Studying abroad creates immersive experiences for students, often placing students outside of their comfort zones and into a new culture. This study and future research will assist student affairs professionals in supporting heritage-connected students through the preparation of studying abroad, their time abroad, in their re-entry process, and perhaps most importantly, in reflecting how their identities have been influenced.

## Appendix I

### Study Introduction Letter

Date

Hello!

My name is Mariana Naddaf and I am a master's student completing a research study about the study abroad experiences of students who studied abroad in an area that was representative of their heritage connections. The title of the study is, **“Coming Home: How Identity Plays a Role in Students who Study Abroad in an Area Representative of Their Heritage”**.

If you identify as a student or alumnus that studied abroad in a location that has an ancestral connection to you (either biologically or through your adoptive family), you would be a possible candidate for this study. You would be asked to reflect on your study abroad experience and on how identity played a role before, during, and after your heritage related study abroad program, so I may learn more about study abroad experiences with this population of students.

If you are interested and willing to participate in the study, please reply to this email with your interest. I would like to forward you the informed consent document, explaining your involvement and the study in further detail. I would also like to speak with you about scheduling a time when we could meet for an interview.

By participating in the study, you will receive a **\$15.00 Target gift card** as a token of my appreciation. You may contact me at [Naddafm1@gvsu.edu](mailto:Naddafm1@gvsu.edu) or (810) 810-845-5409 if you need any additional information. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Mariana Naddaf  
Graduate Student, College Student Affairs Leadership  
Grand Valley State University

## Appendix II

### Example Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What is the heritage connection that you have with the area you studied abroad in (ie: what side of your family, designated race, ethnicity, and/or nationality that comes from your heritage)?
3. If you were adopted, are your heritage connections to the area you studied abroad in from your adopted family or from your biological family, or both?
  - a. Adopted Family
  - b. Biological Family
  - c. Both
4. Approximately what percentage of your ancestral heritage (either adoptive or biological) is tied to the area you studied in?
5. Where did you study abroad (country/area)?
6. How long ago did you study abroad?
7. What kind of a program did you do?
  - a. Short Term (1-4 weeks, less than a semester)
  - b. Mid-Length (Semester)
  - c. Long-Term (1+ year)
8. What were your reasons in choosing the study abroad program?
9. Tell me about your study abroad experience.
  - a. Culture shock
10. What were your living arrangements like?
  - a. Homestay with host family alone
  - b. Homestay with host family and other American student(s)
  - c. Without a host family alone
  - d. Without a host family, but with other American students
11. Did you feel accepted by your host family (if applicable)?
12. Did you feel accepted by the community and surrounding society?
13. Did you have prior knowledge of the host area's language(s)? If so, what language?
  - a. To what level?
    - i. Low
    - ii. Intermediate
    - iii. Advanced
14. When you were studying abroad, did you take any language classes related to the host area?
  - a. If so, what language?
15. If I had asked you to identify yourself (in whatever way you choose) prior to leaving for your study abroad experience, how would you respond?
16. If I had asked you to identify yourself (in whatever way you choose) during the middle of your study abroad experience, how would you respond?
17. If I had asked you to identify yourself (in whatever way you choose) after returning from your study abroad experience, how would you respond?
18. At this point in time, how do you identify yourself?

19. Did you feel like your nationality as an American outweighed your heritage identity at any point (before, during, or after study abroad)?
20. Any other comments, questions, or concerns you would like to make?

Appendix III  
Consent Form

**Project Title: Coming Home: How Identity Plays a Role in Students who Study Abroad in an Area Representative of their Heritage**  
**Principal Investigator: Mariana Naddaf, College of Education M.Ed Student, Grand Valley State University (GVSU)**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

You are being invited to take part in a research study designed to explore the ways in which identity plays a role while studying abroad in a heritage-connected location. You are being asked to reflect on your study abroad experience and your identity salience in relation to your heritage connection to the area you studied abroad in, so that higher education researchers, practitioners, and I may learn more about study abroad experiences of this population of students. You were invited to participate in this study because you identified as a student who studied abroad in an area that was representative of your heritage.

PURPOSE OF CONSENT FORM

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all of your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in this study or not. If you choose to participate, I will need verbal consent.

PROCEDURES

I will meet with you one time during the school year. I will meet you at a location that is convenient for you and allows for privacy during the interview. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the study include: emotional or psychological discomfort. All of the interviews will be conducted in a way that should not inflict any harm. However, the interview questions do ask for you to be reflective of your experiences and that may be uncomfortable. If you feel like talking about your experience is too much, I will stop the interview. If at any point you decide that you no longer want to participate in the study, you can leave the study. I believe the risk of emotional or psychological distress is very minimal. I do not know if there are any benefits from you being in this study. However, I hope that I will learn from your experiences. If you are interested in the results of the study, I will be happy to share them with you.

COMPENSATION

As a thank you for participating in the study, you will receive a \$15.00 Target gift card.

PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. All of the data will be locked in a file cabinet or another secure location.

Results will be reported in such a way that you cannot be identified. However, federal government regulatory agencies and Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee (HRCC) (a committee that reviews and approves research studies involving human subjects) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research.

Additionally, one aspect of this study involves making audio recordings of the interviews. This will help me as I go through and analyze the information I receive from all of the participants. After each interview I will have the data transcribed, double check the transcription against the audiotape, and then destroy the audiotape. I will be the only one who has access to the tapes. Anything you say to me, or that I have on record, is between you and me and completely confidential.

#### VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. You also have the option of skipping any question that you do not want to answer. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, I may keep information about you and this information may be included in study reports, or you can elect to withdraw your information from the study.

#### CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact:

Mariana Naddaf                      (810) 845-5409                      Naddafm1@gvsu.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact:

HRRC                                      (616) 331-3197                                      hrrc@gvsu.edu

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

Appendix IV

Participant Information Sheet

1. Pseudonym (Please choose a made up first name that will be used to protect your identifying information)

• \_\_\_\_\_

2. Age

• \_\_\_\_\_

3. Sex

• \_\_\_\_\_

4. Are you a current student or an alumni member? If you are a current student, are you an undergraduate or graduate student?

• \_\_\_\_\_

5. Where did you study abroad?

• \_\_\_\_\_

6. What was the length of your study abroad program?

• \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix V

### HRRC Approval

This research protocol has been approved by the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University. File No. 16-045-H

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