“I FEEL LESS BEHOLDEN TO OTHERS”:

HOW EDUCATION ABROAD FACILITATES MOVEMENT TOWARD SELF-AUTHORSHIP AMONG FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

A Dissertation

by

CHRISTINA APRIL DUNN

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Chair of Committee,	Christine A. Stanley
Committee Members,	Krista Bailey
	Kim E. Dooley
	Glenda Musoba
Head of Department,	Mario S. Torres

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ABSTRACT

Despite exponential growth in education abroad participation, first-generation students continue to be underrepresented in this activity. There is also little known about how first-generation students develop holistically. Using Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, this qualitative study explored how the experience of education abroad facilitated holistic development among 15 first-generation college students. The journey toward self-authorship is marked by increasingly complex meaning making, the catalyst for which is cognitive dissonance, as one begins to define beliefs, values, and identity internally. Findings from this study indicated that the experience of education abroad did indeed facilitate movement toward self-authorship among participants, and did so in ways unique to those socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized. For participants of this study, education abroad was an experience that provided (a) the necessary cognitive dissonance to prompt internal meaning-making, (b) a context in which to internally generate values, beliefs, and identity, and (c) an opportunity to reframe one's racial/ethnic sense of self and self-worth. Participants marginalized in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity encountered dissonance, adversity, and meaning-making that their White and wealthier first-generation peers did not.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my Mother, Jacqueline Dunn.

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NOMENCLATURE

Continuing-generation	College students whose parents attended or graduated from a post-secondary institution, and are thus not identified as first-generation.
COVID-19	The coronavirus disease 2019 that caused a global pandemic in 2020.
Disequilibrium	Experiences that challenge one's beliefs, ways of knowing, and conception of self. Used interchangeably with *dissonance*.
Dissonance	Experiences that challenge one's beliefs, ways of knowing, and conception of self. Used interchangeably with *disequilibrium*.
Education abroad	A credit-bearing international experience reported to the Institute for International Education. Used interchangeably with *study abroad*.
First-generation	A post-secondary student whose parents did not attend any two- or four-year college.
Hispanic	A person of Iberian or Spanish, European, descent. Used in US Census data and Federal education statistics.
Latino/a	A male or female, respectively, of Latin American origin. Also referred to in its gender neutral form, *Latinx*.
Latinx	An individual of Latin American origin. This is the gender neutral form of *Latino/a*.
Meaning-making	Making sense of the world and self on a broad scale.
Minoritized	A term used to refer to those of minority status, while acknowledging the socially constructed nature of that status.

Self-authorship	The cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development of an emerging adult, as iterated by Baxter Magolda (2001).
Socioeconomically marginalized	For the purpose of this study, participants whose families' annual income is less than $40,000.
Study abroad	A credit-bearing international experience reported to the Institute of International Education. Used interchangeably with *education abroad.*
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and math.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

LIST OF TABLES

Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Between 1990 and 2010, study abroad participation grew exponentially by over 400% (Heyl, 2011). Meanwhile, institutions of higher education undertook internationalization and widely adopted undergraduate learning outcomes that emphasize global learning and intercultural competence (Helms et al., 2017; Hudzik, 2018). The role of study abroad as a high impact educational experience, and an avenue for students to develop critical skills and outcomes, is well documented (Kuh, 2008; Martinez et al., 2009; Tolan & McCullers, 2018). *Study abroad*, used interchangeably with *education abroad*, is defined here as a credit-bearing experience outside the United States (IIE, 2019).

Despite the increased emphasis on study abroad, first-generation students remain underrepresented in this activity (Martinez et al, 2009; Tolan & McCullers, 2018). *First-generation* is defined here as those whose parents did not attend any college, two-year or four-year (Cataldi et al., 2018, February). First-generation students are not a homogenous group, but are more likely to be students who are socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized (Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004). For the purpose of this study*, socioeconomically marginalized* students are those whose families' income is less than $40,000 per annum.

Research on first-generation students largely focuses on one-dimensional issues such as college choice, adjustment to college, persistence, retention, achievement, and

identity development (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Cataldi et al., 2018, February; Davis, 2010; Gibbons et al., 2019; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Vega, 2018). While these are valuable insights, rarely does the literature address more holistic development, and when approached is often limited to one domain (e.g. cognitive, interpersonal, or intrapersonal) (Kilgo et al., 2018).

Although approximately 40% of all undergraduates at four-year institutions are thought to be first-generation, there is no nationwide data regarding first-generation student participation in study abroad (Cataldi et al., 2018, February). Since study abroad participation is lower for students socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized, and first-generation students are known to work more hours and engage less on campus, it is believed they comprise a small percentage of those who study abroad (IIE, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Underrepresentation of first-generation students in study abroad limits their access to learning experiences that develop the skills and capital important for success (Kuh, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004).

This qualitative study explored how an education abroad experience facilitated movement toward self-authorship among first-generation students. This study involved 15 undergraduates, who participated in a study abroad experience at least five weeks in length, and whose home institution was a research-intensive public university in the South. *Self-authorship* is an individual's cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal journey from external influences defining identity, decisions, and beliefs, to making these determinations for oneself based upon internally defined needs (Baxter Magolda,

2008; 2014). Self-authorship marks the shift to more the complex meaning-making, for example critical thinking, as reflected in undergraduate learning outcomes common in United States (US) higher education (Baxter Magolda, 2014).

Although the literature indicated that self-authorship generally does not emerge until one's mid- to late-Twenties, recent research indicated that socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized first-generation students may engage in self-authoring behavior earlier than their peers (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Carpenter & Peña, 2016; Pizzolato, 2003). This raises important questions regarding the types of experiences that best support this population's development (Davis, 2010). One such experience may be study abroad.

I will begin by discussing the research problem, detail the research questions, and then describe the purpose and significance of this study. The theoretical framework is briefly addressed in this section, although an in-depth exploration is saved for the review of literature.

Problem Statement

As institutions of higher education embraced and institutionalized the value of education abroad, undergraduate participation in study abroad steeply increased (Heyl, 2011). Meanwhile, first-generation students, who are more likely to be marginalized in terms of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, are among those least likely to study abroad (Pascarella et al., 2004). Indeed, Florida (2011, March 15) found holding a US passport significantly correlated to per capita income and a bachelor's degree or higher. First-generation students and their families are thus less likely to hold passports, except

perhaps to visit family in a country of origin. This chronic underrepresentation of first-generation students in study abroad limits their access to high-impact experiences that develop the skills and capital important for success beyond college (Kuh, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004).

At the same time, research on first-generation students and study abroad is often limited to deficit-based issues or singular facets of development (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Cataldi et al., 2018, February; Davis, 2010; Gibbons et al., 2019; Martinez et al, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tolan & McCullers, 2018; Vega, 2018). Rarely does the research explore development of the whole person among first-generation students, and indeed there seems to be no scholarship exploring the intersection of self-authorship and first-generation students who study abroad. Since first-generation students may self-author earlier, understanding the holistic developmental benefits of study abroad for this population may help inform how best to support both their development and participation in education abroad.

The purpose of this study was to explore how education abroad might facilitate movement toward self-authorship in first-generation students. This study aimed to answer how the experience of education abroad facilitated self-authorship among participants, the ways in which this behavior emerged in relation to their experience, and the ways in which this might be unique for participants socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized.

Research Questions

Since individuals are not typically self-authoring until their mid- to late-Twenties, it is unrealistic to expect traditional-aged college students, even first-generation, to necessarily exhibit fully self-authoring behavior (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Instead, I questioned how experiences associated with a study abroad experience prompted reflection and meaning-making that supports development of first-generation students within the framework of self-authorship. Additionally, given that first-generation students are more likely to be socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized, I wanted to know how these experiences of meaning-making might be unique to participants marginalized in the aforementioned ways (Terenzini et al., 1996).

With this in mind, this study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. How does a study abroad experience facilitate movement toward self-authorship among first-generation college students?
2. How does a study abroad experience facilitate movement toward self-authorship that may be unique to first-generation students socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify meaning-making that emerged, in relation to education abroad, that supported the development of self-authorship among participants. These experiences occurred before, during, and after the time abroad, but in direct relation to the experience of education abroad. This study aimed to explain the

role that study abroad played in facilitating movement toward self-authorship among first-generation students, and further analyzed how this was unique among participants socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized. The final aim of this study was to identify how this informed future research, practice, or policies in support of first-generation college student development and participation in education abroad.

Significance

First-generation students, who are more likely to be Hispanic and socioeconomically marginalized, are some of those least likely to study abroad (Terenzini et al., 1996). First a brief note regarding the use of the term *Hispanic*. Hispanic is used in this study since this is both how the US Census and federal education data identify this demographic, as well as how participants self-identified. As a high-impact educational activity, study abroad participants generate outcomes deemed essential by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (Kuh, 2008). The chronic underrepresentation in study abroad of certain categories of students is a concern with regard to the equitable access of developmental opportunities that equip undergraduates with the skills and knowledge essential for success beyond college (Engel, 2017, October; IIE, 2018; Kuh, 2008; Wilson, 2012).

The catalyst for self-authoring behavior is cognitive dissonance, or disequilibrium, which prompts self-questioning and meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Pizzolato, 2003). Given the myriad of dissonant experiences that arise when one engages with another culture, study abroad may be

uniquely suited for facilitating self-authorship across the three domains of development (Baxter Magolda, 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Students' beliefs and values, self-conception, and relations with others are all challenged when living in a different cultural context.

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, the theoretical framework for this study, is a multi-dimensional approach to understanding young adult development holistically. Baxter Magolda (2001) found that self-authorship generally emerged in one's mid- to late-Twenties, but recent research indicated that first-generation and students marginalized in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity may engage in self-authoring behavior earlier than their peers (Carpenter & Peña, 2016; Davis, 2010; Pizzolato, 2003). If this is the case, it is important to understand how this population might particularly benefit from a high impact experience like study abroad, which may facilitate the cognitive dissonance and self-reflection necessary to move students toward self-authorship.

A better understanding of how first-generation students develop holistically during study abroad may inform future research, policy, and practice. For example, this may help to address the gap that exists in the literature, inform the design of curricular and co-curricular experiences abroad that best support this population, or inform how to address the chronic underrepresentation of first-generation students in study abroad. Understanding how first-generation students develop during education abroad will illuminate how best to engage them regarding the question of participation, and prove useful in securing material support, for example scholarships, to remove financial

barriers. Shedding light on this topic may also encourage the Institute of International Education (IIE) to find a way to include first-generation student numbers as a disaggregated data point in their annual *Open Doors Report*. IIE serves to equitably advance international education and is a long-time partner administering programs for the U.S. Departments of State and Defense. This report is the preeminent source of data regarding US students studying abroad, to which institutions report data annually, and while they do track race/ethnicity, do not track socioeconomic or first-generation status. Granted, this is complicated due to the varying definitions of first-generation across higher education, but it nevertheless remains a data point of importance due to underrepresentation.

Theoretical Framework

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship served as the theoretical framework that guided this study. Self-authorship involves the emergence of increasing complexity, often catalyzed by cognitive dissonance, across three domains of development: Cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal (Baxter Magolda, 2001). In short, self-authorship involves the complex interplay across domains with regard to "how we know or decide what to believe, how we view ourselves, and how we construct relationships with others" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xix). Since the majority of research into self-authorship was conducted by Marcia Baxter Magolda, both on her own and with colleagues, this information was deemed inseparable from the literature review, where self-authorship is discussed in-depth.

Self-authorship was selected as the theoretical framework for this study for two central reasons. First, research on first-generation students is generally limited to more singular issues, such as persistence in college or some aspect of identity development (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Cataldi et al., February 2018; Davis, 2010; Gibbons, Hardin, & Rhinehart, 2019; Liversage, Naude, & Botha, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Vega, 2018). This study instead took a broader approach and explored development of the whole person. Self-authorship provides a multi-dimensional approach to understanding young adult development holistically, and thus was appropriate for trying to understand how the experience of study abroad is developmental.

Second, recent studies indicated that first-generation and marginalized students may arrive at self-authoring behavior earlier than their more privileged peers (Carpenter & Peña, 2016; Pizzolato, 2003). Baxter Magolda (2001) found that self-authorship emerged in her population, which can be classified as privileged, well beyond the college years of traditional aged students. Consequently, self-authorship was selected as the theoretical lens for this study since it had the potential, through prompting meaning-making, to uncover how education abroad may uniquely prompt such development in first-generation students, and more specifically, those who are socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study explored how an education abroad experience contributed to holistic development cognitively, intrapersonally, and interpersonally, in first-generation students, as well as first-generation students with intersecting identities as socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized. While the challenges faced by first-generation students are widely researched, not as much is known regarding their experiences in college or their holistic development (Carpenter & Peña, 2016; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pizzolato, 2003). Self-authorship is a theory of holistic development dependent upon meaning-making that emerges from encounters with cognitive dissonance (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato, 2003). The experiences of study abroad provide encounters with cognitive dissonance through engaging a different cultural context, and may thus be uniquely situated to promote self-authoring behavior among participants (Che et al., 2009). What follows is a review of the literature regarding (a) first-generation students, as the population involved in this study, (b) study abroad, as the context of this study, (c) cognitive dissonance, as the catalyst of self-authoring meaning-making, and (d) self-authorship, the theoretical framework utilized in this study.

First-Generation Students

According to Skomsvold (2015), 41.9% of students enrolled at four-year institutions in 2011 were first-generation. For the purpose of this study, *first-generation* is defined as students whose parents never enrolled in higher education. It is important to note that there is no single definition for first-generation status, which contributes to some uncertainty regarding the exact proportion of such students attending post-secondary institutions (Cataldi et al., 2018, February). For example, some institutions define first-generation as students whose parents, either one or both, enrolled but did not graduate from college. Although first-generation students are a diverse population, they are more likely to be Hispanic and low-income (Terenzini et al., 1996). In the absence of race as a consideration in college admissions, many institutions now actively recruit first-generation students as a means to generate a more diverse student body (Davis, 2010).

First-generation college students are arriving on college campuses in great numbers, but they are not as well prepared as their peers and do not experience college in the same ways. Broadly, first-generation students may lack the cultural capital to understand college and their role in that environment (Davis, 2010). That lack of cultural capital isolates first-generation students and impacts their college experience (Davis, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004). Those who are the first in their family to attend college, particularly those socioeconomically marginalized, are more likely to live off campus, work more hours than their peers, and lack the support of family and friends (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Consequently, these students may study less and

participate in extracurricular activities at a lower rate (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students are also less likely to interact with faculty and continuing generation peers, and more likely to encounter discrimination (Terenzini at al., 1996). *Continuing generation* students are those who are not designated first-generation. In short, "first-generation students were less likely than traditional [continuing generation] students to have experiences associated with success and persistence in college" (Terenzini et al, 1996, p. 17).

Pascarella et al. (2004) contributed to the understanding of first-generation students by looking at outcomes for this population. Despite their overall lower rates of extracurricular participation, out-of-class engagement and upper-class academic experiences positively impact cognition and academic success (Pascarella et al., 2004). As Pascarella et al. (2004) argued, "this [lack of participation] may place first-generation students at a disadvantage in terms of the developmental benefits they derive from postsecondary education" (p. 276).

Unfortunately, much of the literature on first-generation students is focused on issues of college choice, retention, persistence, and academic success (Carpenter & Peña, 2016; Cataldi et al., 2018, February; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Some recent studies on first-generation students who are Latinx or Black, do address more positively framed issues such as career development, professional identity, and identity development, though these take a uni-dimensional approach to development rather than holistic (Liversage et al., 2018; Storlie et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2020). Little research

directly explores the experiences of socioeconomically marginalized first-generation college students (Jehangir et al., 2015).

In a study that specifically addressed the role of intersecting identities (low-income, race, and immigrant) in first-generation college students, Jehangir et al. (2015) found that context and connections were both paramount to participants. Context, for example, addressed the variety of identities from which a participant made meaning of an experience, with particular emphasis on the role of family. Participants also placed great value on "meaningful connections" made with those at their institution (Jehangir et al., 2015). There is, however, very limited scholarship that explores the cognitive or holistic development of first-generation students.

Education Abroad

Education abroad is recognized as a high-impact experience, which Kuh (2008) described as activities that carry the greatest potential to facilitate critical learning outcomes. Although participation in study abroad has grown exponentially, racially/ethnically minoritized students remain underrepresented in both higher education and study abroad participation (Engel, 2017, October; Heyl, 2011; IIE, 2018; Wilson, 2012). For example, White students accounted for 52% of all degree-seeking students enrolled in US postsecondary institutions in 2018, yet they comprised 70% of those who studied abroad that year (Engel, October 2017; Heyl, 2011; IIE, 2018; US Department of Education, 2019; Wilson, 2012). At the same time, Hispanics comprise the fastest growing population of degree-seeking college students, followed by Asian/Pacific Islander and Black students, and yet the participation rate of

racially/ethnically minoritized students in education abroad has not kept pace (IIE, 2018; US Department of Education, 2019a). At present there are no data available regarding study abroad participation based on socioeconomic status nor first-generation status, beyond what individual institutions may track.

The study abroad experiences of first-generation students, specifically those racially/ethnically minoritized, remain understudied. Additionally, the research surrounding education abroad experiences of first-generation students is generally focused on deficit-based issues such as barriers to participation. With regard to racially/ethnically minoritized students and education abroad, the majority of literature is focused on Black students, with only scant literature that explores the experiences of Hispanic students (Chang, 2015; McClure et al., 2010; Wick et al., 2019; Willis, et al., 2019). Only one identifiable study explored the education abroad experiences of first-generation Latinx students, and looked at their development of community cultural wealth through study abroad (Wick et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, the benefits of education abroad are well documented, and include global citizenship and intercultural competence, both often included in undergraduate learning outcomes at institutions of higher education (Helms et al., 2017; Hudzik, 2018; Kuh, 2008; Martinez et al., 2009; Tolan & McCullers, 2018). *Global citizenship* involves "being aware of responsibilities beyond one's immediate communities and making decisions to change habits and behavior patterns accordingly" (Schattle, 2009, p. 12). *Intercultural competence* was defined by Bennett (2008) as "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate

interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (p. 97). This entails not just culture-specific knowledge, but also developing the capacity for self-awareness, empathy, openness, curiosity, tolerating ambiguity, accepting difference, and suspending judgement (Bennett, 1993; Byram, 1997; Chen, 1997; Deardorff, 2004, 2006; Dinges, 1983; Fantini, 2009; Gundykunst, 1984; Gundykunst et al., 1977; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Movement toward intercultural competence is dependent upon the development of higher order thinking skills, such as critical and analytical thinking, as well as cognitive flexibility (Bennett, 1993; Deardorff, 2004, 2006). Study abroad is known as a vehicle for dissonant experiences through engagement with cultural difference, and may thus promote development of both intercultural competence and self-authorship (Che, Spearman, & Manizade, 2009; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Given the critical role that cognitive dissonance plays in the development of self-authorship, study abroad may be uniquely positioned to move first-generation students, particularly those with intersecting identities, toward self-authoring behavior at an earlier age (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato, 2003).

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is psychological discomfort, referred to as *disequilibrium* and *frustration*, caused by inconsistency in one's opinions, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, or behavior (Festinger, 1957; Gergen, 1970; Harmon-Jones et al., 2015). Piaget (1950) described disequilibrium, or "unstable equilibrium" (p. 43), as the contradictions that must be assessed and incorporated into one's cognition in order to make meaning of contradictions. "Every new acquisition modifies previous ideas or risks involving a

contradiction," and yet "the gradually constructed frameworks…come to incorporate new elements smoothly" (Piaget, 1950, p. 43). Festinger (1957) explained that cognitive dissonance motivates efforts to reduce or avoid situations that create or increase inconsistency. Individuals respond to cognitive dissonance by either avoiding it or taking action to reduce the disequilibrium, which may involve changing behavior, the environment, or even beliefs (Festinger, 1957).

Baxter Magolda (1998) found cognitive dissonance key in the emergence of self-authoring behavior. Participants' encounters with cognitive dissonance, specifically when their response did not elicit the expected outcome, forced them to make meaning of a situation on their own, from the inside, in ways consistent with their own beliefs and needs (Baxter Magolda, 1998). "Encountering the complexities of the world," asserted Baxter Magolda (1998), "is a key factor in achieving…self-authorship" (p. 153). Study abroad, and the experience of crossing cultures, has the potential to challenge participants and provide a context rich with dissonant experiences that touch on beliefs, values, sense of self, and relations with others.

Self-Authorship

Background

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, which served as the theoretical framework that guided this study, is a holistic approach to understanding the emergence of higher order thinking. Self-authorship encompasses the affect, skills, and abilities necessary to successfully navigate the personal and professional demands of modern adult life (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2008).

Self-authorship emerged from a 22 year-long longitudinal study that followed 39 traditional aged students from age 18-40, and illuminated how adults develop cognitively, intrapersonally, and interpersonally. Essentially, self-authorship is concerned with increasing complexity in "how we know or decide what to believe, how we view ourselves, and how we construct relationships with others" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xix). Initially, individuals determine beliefs, values, identity, and relationships based on external sources (e.g. parents, school, church, normative values, etc.), but through experience utilize increasingly complex meaning-making to construct these things internally (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Although it is possible to exhibit self-authoring behavior in one domain, a fully self-authoring individual is doing so in all three domains of development (see Figure 1, Appendix A).

Baxter Magolda's (2008) study used a "constructivist approach and grounded theory methodology" to evaluate development holistically and arrive at the theory of self-authorship (p. 273). Baxter Magolda (2009) argued that individuals and meaning-making are both contextual, and therefore development is best explored holistically rather than as isolated parts, such as identity development (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Robert Kegan (1994), whose theory of the evolving self significantly shaped Baxter Magolda's (2009) approach, was the first to conceptualize a holistic view of development. Baxter Magolda (2009) explained that Kegan (1994) articulated the "underlying subject-object relationships [that] undergirds thinking, feeling, and social relating, [and] intertwines with cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development" (p. 624). That which is subject is unconscious or unconsidered, while that

which is object is grappled with and salient (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Baxter Magolda et al., 2008).

In addition to Kegan's (1994) work, Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2009) study was framed by an array of interwoven student development theories. To preface this discussion, given the vast number of theories involved, it was outside the scope of this study to explore each in detail. Baxter Magolda (1999, 2009) explained that theories of human development emerged as separate lines, or *foci clusters*, of inquiry. The first and largest of these were the cognitive developmental and psychosocial clusters, followed by maturity, typology, and person-environment models (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2009).

Prominent in the cognitive-developmental cluster was Piaget's (1950) constructivist-developmentalism, which held that meaning is constructed contextually through experience in increasingly complex ways (Baxter Magolda, 2009). Perry's (1970) theory of intellectual development explained that individuals move from a *dualistic* mindset, where knowledge is viewed as certain, to multiplicity, where knowledge is *relativistic* and contextual. King and Kitchener's (1994, 2004) reflective judgement model, as well as other seminal works, such as Kholberg (1969) and Gilligan's (1982) work regarding moral reasoning, also informed Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2009) conceptualization of processes within the cognitive domain.

The other critical cluster was composed of psychosocial theories that comprise the intrapersonal domain (Baxter Magolda, 2009). This includes the seminal works on identity development by Erickson (1968), Chickering (1969), and Chickering and Reiser (1983). "The way these lines of research developed," explained Baxter Magolda (2009),

"separated the psychology of the student mind from the social context in which it developed" (p. 623). Consequently, it was these clusters that Baxter Magolda (2001; 2009) sought to integrate.

Baxter Magolda's (2009) longitudinal findings supported Kegan's (1994) framework for the evolving self, and resulted in the theory of self-authorship. To describe self-authorship adequately, in particular as the theoretical framework for this study, what follows is an in-depth discussion of each stage and domain.

Stages of Self-Authorship

While self-authorship is a continuum of development, it is better understood as cyclical rather than linear (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). This reflects the slow, compounding process of building trust in one's internal voice. Baxter Magolda (2001) initially identified four stages for self-authorship, which was later reimagined as a more nuanced three-stage process, each with individual phases of advancement (see Figure 2, Appendix A) (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). The later iteration, with the following three stages, was utilized for the framework: (a) following external formulas; (b) the crossroads; and (c) internal foundations (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). What follows is a description of each.

Following External Formulas

Individuals initially *follow external formulas* and construct their ways of knowing based on expectations imposed on them by others and their environment. This may include parents, religion, school, friends, culture, or societal norms (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This form of knowing was most common when entering and during the

college years (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). As Baxter Magolda (2007) explained, "Many students enter college having learned how to follow formulas for success, and unclear about their own beliefs, identities, and values" (p. 69).

Baxter Magolda and King (2012) presented three steps within this realm of external meaning-making. Individuals first blindly *trust external authorities* since knowledge is viewed as absolute and coming from "reliable" sources (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 19). When knowledge conflicts, however, this creates *tensions with trusting external authorities*, which the individual must eventually address (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Following external formulas becomes problematic when the individual "recognize[s] the shortcomings of this approach," though takes no action, which is an example of dissonance avoidance (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 20; Festinger, 1957).

The Crossroads

As Baxter Magolda et al. (2008) explained, "When following external formulas no longer resulted in satisfaction or success, they needed support to explore alternative messages to help them develop into the crossroads and a more internally defined sense of self" (p. 195). This is also the point at which awareness is developing and that which was subject, for example personal or conflicting values, may move to object. Participants came to *the crossroads* once they were aware of, and began to question, prevailing assumptions (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Dissonant experiences, for which there were no easy answers or which required change, propelled participants into the crossroads (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato,

2003). It is in the crossroads that individuals engage, rather than avoid, dissonance. Pizzolato (2003) referred to encounters with cognitive dissonance as "provocative experiences - experiences that challenged students' current ways of knowing and conceptions of self," and that "inherent in all provocative experiences was a sense of disequilibrium" (p. 803).

Baxter Magolda and King (2012) discussed the crossroads in two phases, both when entering and leaving. Individuals enter the crossroads first into *questioning external authorities*, when recognizing shortcomings leads to an "awareness of the need for an internal voice" (p. 20). The first tentative steps into *constructing the internal voice* constitute the second part of entering the crossroads, as an individual begins to make meaning internally, though also still externally (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

The second phase, leaving the crossroads, involves the growing internal voice (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). An individual begins to leave the crossroads when they "listen carefully to their internal voice, which now edges out external sources" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 20). *Listening to the internal voice* gives way to the final step, *cultivating the internal voice*, when the individual actively tries to use and maintain their internal voice (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

The crossroads is characterized by the conflict and tension of cognitive dissonance (Baxter Magolda, 2014). In this stage, individuals gradually move from relying upon external authorities, which often overshadows their own perspectives, as they develop their internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2014). The internal voice must replace external sources if an individual is to develop the complexity of meaning-making

necessary for adult life (Baxter Magolda, 2007). As Baxter Magolda (2007) argued, "Complex learning outcomes require developing internal belief systems constructed through critical analysis of multiple perspectives" (p. 69).

Internal Foundations

The third and final stage involves the emergence of self-authoring behavior, as an individual's internal voice displaces external sources. Self-authoring behavior is reliant on the exclusive use of the internal voice, and trust plays a large part in this process (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). This transition is motivated in particular by cognitive dissonance: "These were times of confusion, ambiguity, fear, and even despair as individuals struggled to analyze and reconstruct some aspect of their beliefs, identity, or relationships in various contexts" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280).

There are three stages to self-authored meaning-making; *trusting the internal voice*, *building an internal foundation*, and *securing internal commitment* (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Learning to *trust one's internal voice* involves realizing that even if one cannot control what happens, one can control how they react (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). As Baxter Magolda (2008) explained, "Trusting their internal voices heightened their ability to take ownership of how they made meaning of external events" (p. 279). Trust provides flexibility to navigate otherwise disorienting dilemmas, and instills confidence in the internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2008). This is representative of the "cylical" or helix-like nature of development toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 16).

Building an internal foundation is a transition stage, amidst growing trust in the internal voice and continued dissonant experience, from understanding to living one's internal commitments (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Individuals in this stage are able to articulate the reasoning behind decisions, and establish a personal "philosophy or framework" that guides decisions (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

As an internal foundation solidifies across all three domains, and the individual lives their convictions, *self-authorship* emerges (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Self-authorship relies upon a secure internal foundation, unfettered by external voices, and is both contextual and reflective (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2008). This "frees adults from the constant need for affirmation from others, enabling them to function authentically in relationships" and in "mutual relationships with diverse others" (Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2008, p. 206). Self-authorship instills a sense of certainty and freedom, causing individuals to be more open (Baxter Magolda, 2008). As Baxter Magolda summarized, "Each [phase of self-authorship] reflects a distinct focus, yet all three are based on the same underlying organizing principle – internally determining one's beliefs, identity and social relations" (p. 281).

As Baxter Magolda (2001) noted of her participants, they often entered college following external formulas, and entered the crossroads during college. Very few were actually self-authoring upon graduation. Instead, self-authorship emerged in her longitudinal participants' mid- to late-Twenties (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Of course,

Baxter Magolda's long haul participants were all White, which is addressed later with regard to the limitations of self-authorship.

While the stages are critical to understanding self-authorship, so too is understanding the three domains of development: Cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. What follows is a discussion of each domain involved in the development of self-authorship.

Domains of Self-Authorship

In order to achieve self-authorship, "the internal voice [must] be built in all three dimensions…, and also in multiple contexts (i.e. work, personal relationships, parenting)" (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280; Baxter Magolda et al., 2008). It is important to understand that development does not occur in each domain as if a vacuum. Domains are interconnected, with development in one domain supporting development in another; hence the appropriateness of a holistic theory (see Figure 1, Appendix A) (Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). I will first discuss the cognitive domain, followed by the intrapersonal, and then interpersonal, domains.

Cognitive Domain

Cognitively, adulthood requires individuals develop the capacity for independent, contextual, and critical thinking, along with the ability to navigate ambiguity (Baxter Magolda, 2001; 2008; 2014). The cognitive domain of development involves this transition from dualistic to relativistic thinking in the construction of knowledge and beliefs (Baxter Magolda, 1994; Perry, 1970).

Part way through Baxter Magolda's (1994; 2004) longitudinal study, she articulated a four-stage developmental model of "epistemic assumptions" called the *epistemological reflection model* (ERM) (p. 26). The ERM reflects the increasingly complex ways of knowing that Baxter Magolda (1994) observed in participants, and how they transitioned from one stage to the next. The ERM progresses through four stages; absolute, transitional, independent, and contextual knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1994).

Absolute knowing is characteristic of dualistic thinking, where knowledge is obtained from authorities and viewed as certain (Baxter Magolda, 1994; Perry, 1968). *Transitional knowing* emerges when an individual begins to understand that knowledge may at times not be certain, and "require exploration to decide what to believe" (Baxter Magolda, 1994, p. 26). *Independent knowing* involves the understanding that knowledge is mostly uncertain, which prompts individuals to "begin to think for themselves and make judgements based on their own perspectives or biases" (Baxter Magolda, 1994, p. 26).

Contextual knowing comports with Perry's (1970) relativistic knowing, whereas knowledge is viewed in context and synthesized to arrive at one's own critically formed beliefs (Baxter Magolda, 1994). Critical to the development of contextual knowing is cognitive dissonance, which Baxter Magolda (1994) deemed the catalyst for development of self-authorship. "Cognitive dissonance…helps…develop the epistemic assumptions that underlie personally derived educated opinions" (p. 26). Baxter Magolda (1994) found that students entered college as absolute knowers, migrated to

transitional knowing during college, typically became independent knowers after college, and almost always became contextual knowers well after college.

While the ERM is pertinent to describe growth in the cognitive domain, it is important to note that these stages of knowing apply across domains, in the interconnected manner discussed previously (Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2008).

Intrapersonal Domain

Young adulthood is a time of transition toward increasing complexity in the formation of beliefs, values, and identity, initially framed by external forces but later constructed internally (Baxter Magolda, 2001). The formation of beliefs, values, and identity constitutes the intrapersonal domain. Those whose identity is generated externally are unaware and reactive, rather than making conscious choices, concordant with the characteristics of their identity being subject (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Perry, 1970). For individuals in this stage, decision-making is a reaction to societal norms and expectations, as self-worth is often derived from the approval of others (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Baxter Magolda (1999) asserted that there are two transition phases in the journey toward self-authorship. In the first transition, cognitive dissonance again plays a critical role. Cognitive dissonance creates tension and conflict when the internal voice begins to challenge the externally sourced sense of self (Baxter Magolda, 1999). "Participants still defined themselves primarily through external sources but were beginning to be aware of others' influence on them as well as cognizant of an internal voice that was growing" (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 634).

The second transition involves the internal voice beginning to take precedence, as the external gradually fades (Baxter Magolda, 1999). An internally generated sense of self is characterized by conscious choices made despite external pressures or expectations (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Increasingly, self-worth is defined internally, rather than through others' approval, as individuals' internal voice takes precedent (Baxter Magolda, 1999). As noted previously, Baxter Magolda (2001) asserted that this self-authoring behavior did not emerge in her participants until after college.

Interpersonal Domain

The interpersonal domain revolves around the ability to engage in healthy, mature, productive relationships with those whose beliefs and experiences differ from one's own (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Baxter Magolda (2000) asserted that growth in this area depends upon the development of *agency*, "characterized by increasing individuation and separation from others to achieve control, autonomy, and independence in relationship to others" (p. 141). The challenge with developing agency is that one's personal needs or perspectives may conflict with those around them.

Baxter Magolda (2000) articulated a multi-stage developmental model for interpersonal maturity that moved through the following stages: (a) external self-definition, (b) internalizing external self-definition, (c) the crossroads, (d) acquiring an internal foundation, and (e) at home with the internal foundation. Initially, in *external self-definition*, individuals are unaware of the influence others have on their sense of self, and make decisions that comport with others' expectations (Baxter Magolda, 2000).

This lack of awareness is an example of absolute knowing, the first stage of the ERM, and also of that which remains subject and uncovered to consciousness (Baxter Magolda, 1994; Perry, 1970).

The second stage, *internalizing external self-definition*, begins when an individual is aware and able to articulate that what they want or believe does not comport with what others expect of them (Baxter Magolda, 2000). In *the crossroads*, the internal voice continues to grow amidst growing conflict, until a breaking point where the individual must make a choice whether to act on their internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2000). Acting on one's internal voice, with the idea one must live for themselves rather than others, is *acquiring an internal foundation* (Baxter Magolda, 2000). One is *at home with the internal foundation* once actions and decisions are congruent with internal voice.

Baxter Magolda (2000; 2008) described this as a gradual transformation that was not fully achieved by her participants until nearly age 30, and also noted that an individual's personal circumstances may mediate the development of self-authorship. While Baxter Magolda's (2001) longitudinal population was all White, a small set of subsequent studies explored the role that race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, faith, and first-generation student status may play in the development of self-authoring behavior. What follows is a review of this literature.

Research Involving Self-Authorship

While a sufficient amount of research explores the development of self-authorship among college students, little explores this with regard to the study abroad

experiences of those with intersecting identities. For example, those who are first-generation students, socioeconomically marginalized, or racially/ethnically minoritized. Furthermore, these studies tend to be focused on one domain of development rather than holistic, or address issues related to academic success, retention, and persistence. What follows is a discussion of the key studies that contributed to our further understanding of self-authorship.

Very little scholarship has addressed development of self-authorship among first-generation students, specifically, outside the issues of retention and persistence. In one notable work, Carpenter and Peña (2016) found that self-authorship emerged in this population earlier than continuing-generation students, which comported with previous findings on the part of Pizzolato (2003) and King et al. (2011). Carpenter and Peña (2016) provided insight into how self-authorship developed among first-generation students. Students in the crossroads encountered the conflict that arises when beliefs are challenged, and developed internal foundations often as a result of "challenging life events" (p. 92). These experiences often required participants be true to their own self, which required internal needs and voice align (Carpenter & Peña, 2016). Status as first-generation was also found to influence life purpose (Carpenter & Peña, 2016).

Carpenter and Peña (2016) identified three areas of disequilibrium that catalyzed self-authoring behavior in their participants: Challenging life events, cognitive dissonance, and role modeling. Students who encountered difficult situations in life were "challenged to think differently, consider various options, and determine how to proceed in a manner that aligned with their intrapersonal sense of self" (Carpenter & Peña, 2016,

p. 93). Dissonant experiences forced students to make new meaning and align their voice with internal needs, which served to develop internal commitments to identity, beliefs, and values (Carpenter & Peña, 2016). According to Carpenter and Peña (2016), "students developed a stronger cognitive foundation and internal sense of self because of such [dissonant] experiences" (p. 96).

Participants who exhibited self-authoring behavior, and emerging internal commitments, were also very resilient (Carpenter & Peña, 2016). The greater the disequilibrium, the greater the role of resiliency in the participants' ability to make independent decisions (Carpenter & Peña, 2016). Role modeling involved individuals who challenged participants' beliefs and prompted self-reflection, as well as opportunities for participants to serve as a role model or mentor to others (Carpenter & Peña, 2016).

For their part, Jehangir et al. (2012) explored movement toward self-authorship among those who participated in a first-year multicultural learning community for first-generation students. While this study focused on the program's curriculum, Jehangir et al. (2012) found the role of cognitive dissonance and self-reflection critical to development of self-authorship in this population. Of this cognitive dissonance, Jehangir et al. (2012) stated, "It was this experience of encountering something new that the student had to understand and incorporate into their own knowledge system that helped them to move from one phase to another in their development of self-authorship" (p. 280).

A handful of studies explore self-authorship among students socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized, though not necessarily first-generation. For example, Pizzolato (2003) found that low-income students held the least privilege among those designated high risk, and notably, exhibited self-authoring behavior at an earlier age than their higher privilege peers. This latter finding was confirmed by Carpenter & Peña (2016). Pizzolato (2003) defined privilege as the supports in place, for example those in athletics or learning communities, to help high risk students navigate and figure out the college experience (Pizzolato, 2003). According to Pizzolato (2003), "privilege appeared to be a major factor in the inhibition or facilitation of internal foundations in the student participants" (p. 804). In the absence of supports, the process of independently navigating college forced students into disequilibrium, which served as a catalyst for self-authoring behavior (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Pizzolato, 2003).

Two particular studies explored the experiences of students racially/ethnically minoritized, and illuminated the development of self-authorship unique to Latinx students. Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) explored ethnic identity development among Latinx students, and found "cognitive dissonance and the construction of more complex ways of thinking was key to decreasing susceptibility to stereotype vulnerability and creating positive images of their ethnicity, …and enable[d] complementary shifts in intrapersonal and interpersonal developmental dimensions" (p. 345). While this contributed to the understanding of self-authorship's development

among those racially/ethnically minoritized, the study remains uni-dimensional in its exploration of identity.

In a longitudinal study on Latina college students, Torres and Hernandez (2007) identified certain ways participants progressed through self-authorship not evident in Baxter Magolda's (2001) population. For example, external authorities for Latina participants were their peers and families, while ethnic identity as Latina was "focused on geographic definitions, determined by family or influenced by negative stereotypes" (Torres & Hernandez, 2007, p. 571). Moving into the crossroads, participants' self-awareness helped them navigate these stereotypes in the formation of their ethnic identity, so that ultimately, they developed a solely internally defined sense of self as Latina (Torres & Hernandez, 2007).

There is literature that explores the experiences of Black students through the lens of self-authorship, and similar to research on first-generation students it largely focuses on issues of access and persistence (Amechi, 2016; Clark & Brooms, 2018; Strayhorn, 2014). Beyond the limited number of studies that succeeded Baxter Magolda (2001), and discussed self-authorship among minoritized populations, more recent works have criticized self-authorship for failing to adequately address issues of race, racism, and oppression (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Okello, 2018; Perez, 2019).

Criticism of Self-Authorship

While Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship is well respected, its major limitation is that her theory is based on an all-White population. While the majority of subsequent literature focused on exploring the self-authorship experiences of

more diverse students, more recent works have criticized them for failing to directly address issues of race, racism, and oppression, and argued for the use of critical perspectives (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Okello, 2018; Perez, 2019).

Self-authorship, as explained, is grounded in constructivism, the methodology often applied to qualitative inquiry exploring lived experience and meaning-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Those critical of previous scholarship on self-authorship argue that constructivism does not sufficiently account for the context of race, racism, and oppression (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Perez, 2019).

Perez (2019), who conducted a "critical empirical content analysis" (p. 71) of 22 studies on self-authorship, found only two that discussed these issues directly. Hernandez (2016), notably, used Critical Race Theory in her evaluation of self-authoring behavior in Latina activist students. In recognition of the context of her study, Hernandez (2016) revised Baxter Magolda's (2001) domain-specific questions based on her findings: "How do I know?" became "How do I make meaning of my social world?"; "Who am I?" became "How does my social world shape my sense of self as a racialized being?"; and, "What kind of relationships do I want to construct with others?" became "What relationships do I want with others for the benefit of my social world?" (pp. 172-176).

Another major criticism of Baxter Magolda's (2001) conceptualization of self-authorship is that, due to the population, it is grounded in Western norms and privilege (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Okello, 2018; Perez, 2019). As discussed in the overview of this theory, individuation and agency are critical in the development of self-authorship.

Agency, or attaining individual control, is a complicated notion within the context of oppression (Abes & Hernandez, 2007). For oppressed individuals, agency may simply not be possible, or may be achieved in ways different from what Baxter Magolda (2001) observed (Abes & Hernandez, 2007). With regard to individualism, critics pointed out that this overlooks how self-authorship might develop for those whose culture instead places value on interdependentness or collectivism (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Okello, 2018; Perez, 2019).

Also potentially unaccounted for in the absence of a critical lens are non-Western and non-White ways of knowing (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Okello, 2019). For example, Okello (2019) argued that Perry's (1970) subject-object concept cannot fully account for "Black subjectivity" since it separates emotion and the body from cognition, which is counter to the embodied knowing central to Black feminism (p. 534). This scholarship argues that failing to account for race, ethnicity, racism, oppression, cultural norms, and the many ways of knowing that exist, leaves self-authorship normed to the West and whiteness (Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Perez, 2019). As Perez (2019) asserted, "this perpetuates a White Western male norm in student development theory, and leaves Whiteness normalized and unscrutinized" (p. 78).

This criticism does not negate previous findings, but does make an argument for future research that gives attention to these issues and/or approaches it through a critical lens (Perez, 2019). Significantly, this engenders a responsibility on the part of researchers, like myself, who will use self-authorship as their theoretical framework, and yet may be White, with participants who are racially/ethnically minoritized.

Consequently, these limitations did inform the interview protocol, as discussed in Chapter III, to specifically illuminate any meaning-making that emerged in relation to a participant's racial/ethnic identity.

Much remains to be learned about the development of self-authorship among first-generation college students, and also those with intersecting identities, related to the experience of education abroad. The findings previously discussed, with regard to first-generation students, as well as students marginalized in terms of socioeconomic status and/or race/ethnicity, raise interesting questions regarding the types of college experiences that may best support the development of students with such intersecting identities, particularly if they are self-authoring earlier than their peers (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This qualitative study assessed how an education abroad experience facilitated self-authoring behavior in first-generation students. Self-authorship, the theoretical framework for this study, is a holistic theory of adult development grounded in a constructivist developmental pedagogy (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001). I will begin by explaining the selection of a qualitative approach with phenomenological methodology, then describe the participants. This is followed by a thorough discussion of the data collection and analysis procedures utilized, the measures used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, and an exploration of my positionality as the researcher.

Qualitative methods were best suited to explore the nuanced experiences of cognitive dissonance and meaning-making. Furthermore, quantitative studies of self-authorship have been only moderately reliable, and highlighted the challenge of empirically assessing the cognitive functions of reasoning and meaning-making (Creamer, 2010; Pizzolato, 2007). As Pizzolato (2007) explained, "students who show signs of self-authored reasoning but choose to act in ways seemingly inconsistent…, may in fact be making a decision that shows signs of self-authorship" (p. 38-39). This can be easily missed using quantitative methods. Consequently, qualitative methods were selected for this particular study.

Qualitative inquiry is grounded in constructivism, a philosophy of education that understands how individuals construct knowledge and meaning from experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schwandt, 2001). Constructivism's view of reality is well-suited to the act of unpacking an individual's meaning-making, particularly in the sense that participant and researcher are considered co-constructors of meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since culture itself is socially constructed, constructivism is an appropriate philosophical foundation for the study of individuals' experiences crossing cultures. As Schwandt (2001) elaborated, "we do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (p. 30).

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological methodology. The phenomenon under study was the experience of study abroad, on the part of first-generation students, and their individual meaning-making in relation to that experience. This does differ from Baxter Magolda (2001), who used grounded theory as the methodological approach for the longitudinal study that produced the theory of self-authorship. Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology that aims to generate theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 2015), and thus was the natural choice for Baxter Magolda (2001). The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of first-generation students who studied abroad, through the lens of self-authorship, rather than develop theory. Consequently, phenomenology was selected as the methodological approach. Next is an overview regarding phenomenology's underpinnings and application, with attention given to fit with this particular study.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology can trace its roots to the philosophical debate between Rationalists and Empiricists over the nature of knowing (Markie, 2004). Rationalists viewed knowledge as subjective and innate, as opposed to the Empiricist view of knowledge is objective and certain (Markie, 2004). In the early Twentieth Century, German philosopher Edmund Husserl iterated what is considered the modern conception of phenomenology, which is centered on subjective knowing (Groenwald, 2004). Husserl theorized individual reality "as pure phenomena and the only absolute data from where to begin" (Gorenwald, 2004, p. 4). This view of knowledge as subjective ultimately contributed to the emergence of constructionism and the adaptation of phenomenology to qualitative research (King et al., 2019).

Central to phenomenology is the idea of intentionality, in that a human is "always conscious of something," and "to understand consciousness we need to understand what goes on in the mind" with regard to "how we are engaged with the people and objects that make up our world" (King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2019, p. 231). As a research methodology, phenomenology is concerned with explaining the phenomenon under study through understanding the subjective experience of individuals, which collectively provide common meaning of the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This common meaning is referred to as the *essence* of the phenomenon. Since individuals do not experience nor interpret a phenomenon in the same way, it is important to understand individual variations in order to uncover the essence of the phenomenon. The phenomenological

approach “seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience,” and “uncover the qualitative rather than quantitative factors in behavior and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105).

The depth with which phenomenology delves into lived experience was well-suited to a study involving both education abroad and self-authorship. Exploring experiences to the degree that phenomenology requires, allowed an understanding to emerge of how individual meaning-making guided participants’ knowing, beliefs, worldview, decision-making, actions, and interactions with others (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Phenomenology is also particularly appropriate for the study of affect and emotion, both of which are components of self-authorship and inherently part of the experience of crossing cultures (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The steps for phenomenological methodology vary depending on source. Moustakas (1994) recommended first to identify and describe the phenomenon. Hycner (1999) suggested purposive sampling the most appropriate for this methodology, since the phenomenon dictates the participants. Phenomenological data collection primarily relies on one-on-one in-depth interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions provides the necessary flexibility to gain deep understanding of the phenomenon (Groenwald, 2004; King et al., 2019; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) recommended 5-25 participants, while Groenwald (2004) suggested at least 10. Groenwald (2004) advocated the importance of audio recordings, as a way to absorb and reflect on the participant’s meaning, as well as field notes and memoing.

The phenomenological approach to data analysis begins with bracketing (Hycner, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). To *bracket* is to uncover, acknowledge, and set aside one's positionality with regard to the phenomena of inquiry, in an attempt to mitigate researcher bias (Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). As Moustakas (1994) explained, "Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way" (p. 41).

To reach the essence of a phenomenon requires reflection, description, and viewing data from multiple angles, repeatedly, until "the nature and meaning of the experience" comes into focus (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Moustakas (1994) suggested first making note of units of data (essentially categories) that are important to understanding an individual's experience, then clustering these across participants into themes. Initially units have equal weight, until themes or clusters emerge, consistent with the emergent nature of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) also advocated for developing textural and structural descriptions from the data for further analysis. Textural descriptions describe the individual experiences, and what this reveals about the common experience of the phenomenon, while the structural description explores how context or setting impact an individual's experience (Moustakas, 1994). Collectively, these analyses allow the essence of the phenomenon to emerge, in what is referred to as a composite description or summary statement (Hycner, 1999; Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, I sought to understand and succinctly describe the essence of a study abroad experience with regard to ways in which it facilitated development of self-authorship among first-generation students. Self-authorship, a holistic theory of adult development, is grounded in Piaget's (1950) constructivist developmental pedagogy, making it well-suited to the application of a phenomenological methodology (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Phenomenology proved suitable to uncovering this essential experience and the related meaning-making, which inherently involved feelings and emotions. Furthermore, phenomenology provided a means to explore lived experience in depth, in a way that allowed the essence to emerge from the data concurrent with the emergent nature of qualitative research (King et al., 2019).

Participants

Since the nature of this study determined the population, purposive sampling was used. As a reminder, Hycner (1999) identified purposive sampling as most appropriate for a phenomenological study given this particular characteristic. The sample population for this study was first-generation undergraduate students, enrolled at a large research-intensive public institution in the South, who studied abroad for five weeks or longer between summer 2019 and spring 2020. The decision to include those on programs of five weeks or longer, as opposed to semester-long as a minimum, was informed by the ability to obtain participants during a preceding pilot study. These parameters included spring 2020, during which study abroad programs were cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. Education abroad is highly valued and heavily promoted at the public institution in question, which is also predominately White.

Recruitment

Recruitment was accomplished in August 2020 in coordination with the institution's education abroad office, which sent a recruitment email on my behalf to a pool of recipients matching the research parameters: Undergraduate students who were first-generation and studied abroad for at least five weeks between summer 2019 and spring 2020.

A total of 595 individuals were contacted. This included 587 individuals who received the email via the education abroad office. Additionally, I forwarded this email to the eight participants of a pilot study conducted the previous fall semester 2019. Twenty-six individuals emailed me directly to volunteer their participation, three of whom participated in the pilot study. Ultimately, it was determined that seven individuals already graduated and one student was only abroad four weeks prior to having to return due to COVID-19. These eight students were eliminated from consideration since they did not meet the parameters for participation. Another three students who initially volunteered never responded to schedule an interview. The remaining 15 individuals fully participated in this study. This included Amy, who previously-participated in the pilot study. A participant pool of 15 satisfied the recommended participant ranges of 5-25 by Moustakas (1994), and at least 10 by Goenwald (2004), for a study using phenomenology.

Demographics

Of the 15 participants, all were designated first-generation college students by their institution and from the same state in which they attend college. One caveat was

Fran. Fran was designated as first-generation by her institution since neither parent attended college, but in reality, Fran was raised by a step-father with a bachelor's degree. I debated whether to exclude Fran from the study, concerned she might have gained capital from that scenario not shared by the typical first-generation student. However, Fran technically qualified as first-generation and exhibited many of the same traits of first-generation students during the interview. Consequently, she was retained as a participant.

Participant demographics are outlined in Table 1 by pseudonym. Three participants were juniors and 12 were seniors. Ten participants identified as female and the remaining five as male. All participants were traditional aged college students. With the exception of one participant who was 23 years of age, all others were 20 and 21. With regard to race/ethnicity, eight participants identified as Hispanic, while Heather identified as Hispanic/Latino. Counted among those eight was Laura, who identified as Hispanic, but revealed during the interview she is also half White. These participants were collectively referred to as Hispanic in this study.

Notably, the overall nine who identified as Hispanic accounted for 60% of participants in this study. This reflected the literature that indicated first-generation students more likely to be Hispanic (Terenzini et al., 1996). Of the remaining five participants, four identified as White, one as Asian, and one as Black and White. Majors ran the gamut from arts and sciences to engineering and architecture. Study abroad destinations were equally varied, with programs based in Europe (9), East Asia (3), the Middle East (2), and Southeast Asia (1).

With regard to socioeconomic status, eight participants identified as lower income ($39,999 and below), five identified as lower-middle income ($40,000 to $59,999), and one outlier, Fran, identified as upper income ($120,000 or higher). While Zach did not respond to this particular question, based on comments he made during the interview with regards to his parents' income, it was reasonable to assume he fell within the range of lower to lower-middle income. He is counted here as lower-middle due to the uncertainty involved. Of consequence is that 14 of 15 participants came from families with incomes less than $60,000 per annum. Significantly, eight of these 14 came from families with incomes below $40,000 per annum. These eight participants who identified as lower income were considered socioeconomically marginalized, as outlined in the following discussion of data collection.

Table 1 Participant Demographics (as self-identified)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Year	Race/Ethnicity	Socioeconomic Status
Alice	Female	21	Senior	White	lower income
Amy	Female	22	Senior	Hispanic	lower middle income
Ana Sofía	Female	21	Senior	Hispanic	lower income
David	Male	21	Senior	Asian	lower income
Fran	Female	21	Senior	Hispanic	upper income
Heather	Female	22	Senior	Hispanic/Latino	lower income
Jack	Female	20	Junior	Hispanic	lower income
Karina	Female	20	Junior	Hispanic	lower middle income
Lance	Male	20	Junior	White	lower middle income
Laura	Female	20	Senior	Hispanic	lower income
Max	Male	21	Senior	Hispanic	lower middle income
Nate	Male	21	Senior	Black & White	lower income
Sophie	Female	21	Senior	White	lower middle income
Verónica	Female	21	Senior	Hispanic	lower income
Zach	Male	23	Senior	White	no response

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected at the beginning of fall semester 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the nature of data collection, as activities that might normally be conducted in-person were forced to pivot to virtual. Consequently, all data were collected electronically, and participants not necessarily physically located on or near campus since much coursework was delivered online.

Upon scheduling an interview, each participant was informed to watch for an email they would receive 48 hours prior to their interview time. This email contained links to two critical online forms that participants were instructed to complete prior to the interview. This consisted of both informed consent and a brief questionnaire, which were both collected via Qualtrics. In every case, participants completed these forms in a timely manner. Each individual semi-structured interview was conducted via Zoom. All participants agreed to Zoom recording in addition to auto transcription options. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they had any additional documents to provide for the purpose of triangulation. What follows is a detailed description of each instrument, the questionnaire and the interview, triangulation, and the processes utilized for each.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics in the 48 hours preceding the scheduled interview (see Appendix B). The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather participants' demographic, background, and study abroad information. The questionnaire was designed to be inclusive and largely utilized open-ended fields for any possible

identification, for example with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, and religion. Anticipating traditional-aged college students, age was a drop-down box with selections 18 through 26. Similarly, class rank was a drop-down box with four options of freshman through senior. The final section of the questionnaire was designed to gather information on participants' international travel experience preceding study abroad, as well as the nature of their study abroad experience(s) with regard to term abroad, location, program focus, and housing type. These questions were also designed as open-ended. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire in full, but invited to leave any section blank if they did not wish to answer.

Household income was an important demographic to collect in the questionnaire given the research question that addressed the experiences of those socioeconomically marginalized. Additionally, since the poverty rate is larger for Blacks, Hispanics, females, the foreign born, noncitizens, those with only a high school diploma, and those in the South, this was an important metric within which to locate participants (US Census Data, 2018a). Since these were traditional-aged college students, the aim was to collect their family's household income, in order to gauge the socioeconomic circumstances in which participants grew up. A scale of five income ranges, each of which corresponded to low, low-middle, middle, upper-middle, and upper income, were listed in a drop-down box on the questionnaire. Design of this scale in the questionnaire was informed by the pilot study. During the pilot study a scale of eight ranges, which did not correspond to specific income levels, were listed. In the end, this was too arbitrary. Consequently, this study's income ranges and labels were determined a priori using US

Census data in order to also inform and isolate a range that constituted socioeconomic marginalization. A brief description follows.

According to the US Census Bureau (2019), median household income refers to "the income of the householder and all other individuals 15 years old and over in the household, whether they are related to the householder or not" (US Census Quick Facts, 2019). The median US income in 2017-2018 was $63,179, and for the state in which this study was conducted it was slightly lower at $59,206 (US Census Data, 2018; US Census Data, 2017). According to Pew Research Center (2018), the qualifying tier for lower, middle, and upper income in those years was $25,581, $78,866, and $190,778, respectively. Pew (2018) "defines the middle class as those earning between two-thirds and double the median household income."

Considering the median household income in the state of this study was $59,206 in 2017, middle income for the purpose of this study ranged from $39,471 to $118,412. An income below or above would be lower or upper income. Consequently, the following income ranges were used on the questionnaire: (a) up to $25,999, (b) $26,000-$39,999, (c) $40,000-$59,999, (d) $60,000-$119,999, and (e) $120,000 and higher. Participants who selected ranges (a) and (b) were considered *lower income*, and thus socioeconomically marginalized. Participants who selected ranges (c) or (d) were considered *lower-middle* and *upper-middle income*, respectively, while those who selected (e) were considered *upper income*.

Interview

As previously noted, the COVID-19 pandemic required the electronic collection of data, such that all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Consent for the use of both auto transcription and recording within Zoom was requested, and granted by all participants, as part of the informed consent process.

In accordance with the flexibility necessary for a phenomenological study and the emergent design of qualitative research, interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured, and utilized open-ended and probing questions to explore participants' meaning-making in relation to their study abroad experience (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012b; Groenwald, 2004; King et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). What is critical in interviewing for self-authorship is not so much *what* participants are saying, but *how* they are thinking, which helps ascertain meaning-making (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012b). Consequently, open-ended and probing questions, that uncovered and delved into disorienting dilemmas, helped elicit from participants how they arrived at particular meaning. Given the complexity and fluidity of this protocol, I will discuss it in detail rather than relegating it solely to an appendix.

Design of the interview protocol was guided, first, by this study's research questions. The protocol design was guided, second, by Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, the theoretical framework for this study. Hence, this protocol was designed to illuminate the experiences and thought processes that exemplify how study abroad facilitates movement toward self-authorship. The protocol was designed and

refined at the pilot study stage (Glesne, 1999). Feedback was requested on the protocol from Marcia Baxter Magolda, a Distinguished Professor now retired from Miami University, and Patricia King, Professor at the University of Michigan. Baxter Magolda and King were frequent collaborators, while King is also known for her work on reflective judgement (King & Kitchener, 1994). One question was added on the advice of King, and another question tweaked based on committee feedback received during the dissertation proposal hearing.

Each question in the protocol (see Appendix C) was designed to highlight one or more of self-authorship's three domains. Since it was possible that the dominant domain(s) of meaning-making in the context of study abroad may shift from one participant to the next, dependent on the nature of the experience, this approach ensured ample opportunity to uncover each participant's meaning-making. The protocol began with four questions aimed at understanding the participant's reasoning regarding the decision to study abroad and any disequilibrium encountered at that stage. The four questions were as follows:

1. Tell me how your family felt about your decision to study abroad.
2. Tell me how your friends felt about your decision to study abroad.
3. Tell me about your expectations going into study abroad.
4. To what extent did your expectations match your experience?

The first two questions primarily addressed the intrapersonal domain of self-authorship, while the remaining two were more cognitive in nature. That said, in light of the interdimensional nature of self-authorship, I recognized that meaning-making might

involve more than one domain (Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Probing questions (see Appendix B) were necessary throughout each interview to dig deeper into how a participant made meaning of their experiences. Probing questions proved critical in the pilot study, in order to draw out more detail about events, experiences, feelings, impact, and how the participants made sense of it all. As previously noted, flexibility is key in order to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study (Groenwald, 2004; King et al., 2019; Moustakas, 1994). Probing questions were also designed to address the three domains of self-authorship. Other probing questions at times proved necessary depending upon the participant, in the spirit of phenomenology and the informal conversational style that Baxter Magolda (1998, 2008) utilized.

The second phase of the protocol sought to uncover meaningful or challenging (dissonant) experiences, and the underlying meaning-making on the part of the participant. Any number of the following questions were used to elicit detail regarding experiences and associated meaning-making:

- Tell me about your most meaningful experience while abroad.
- Tell me about your best/worst experience while abroad.
- Tell me about negative/challenging interactions you had with others while abroad.
- Tell me about a situation in which you were unsure what was right or what to do.

- Tell me about a situation in which you felt very challenged or conflicted.
- Tell me about an experience of cultural miscommunication you encountered.

The first three questions had the potential to touch on any of the three domains of self-authorship, dependent upon the context of the experience, while the remaining three questions primarily targeted the interpersonal and cognitive domains. Again, the use of probing questions was necessary to dig deeper and explore participants' underlying meaning-making.

The final phase of the protocol sought to understand participants' perceptions of their own development related to study abroad. Each participant was asked the following questions, which addressed the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains, respectively. Additionally, one question specifically inquired into sense of self based on racial/ethnic and gender identification, in order to address the second research questions regarding those racially/ethnically minoritized:

- How has the collective experience of studying abroad shaped your beliefs?
- How has the collective experience of study abroad shaped how you see yourself as a [e.g. Hispanic female]?
- How has the collective experience of study abroad shaped how you relate to others?
- How do you think the experience of study abroad has influenced your actions, choices, or decision-making moving forward?

- How do you think being a first-generation college student plays a role in how you have responded to the questions I asked today? (courtesy of Patricia King)
- How do you think you experienced study abroad differently as a first-generation student compared to your non first-gen peers?

At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to provide any additional data sources they were willing to share, and informed of next steps. Participants were provided a $20 electronic gift card from Target immediately following conclusion of the interview, after which the auto-transcription and recording from Zoom were saved.

Triangulation

At the conclusion of the interview participants were asked to share certain materials that might further inform the researcher about the participant's experiences and meaning-making while abroad. For example, this included reflective journals or papers completed personally or as part of a course requirement while abroad. These additional materials were collected for the purpose of triangulating data. *Triangulation* refers to the potential corroborating effect of multiple data sources in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation can contribute to trustworthiness through providing credibility, which is discussed in the subsequent section on data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Each participant was asked for additional artifacts at the conclusion of the interview, and then reminded again when the transcript was mailed for the purpose of a

member check. Four participants shared additional artifacts. Nate and Zach both shared a reflection paper, about their internship abroad, written for the class that provided them academic credit for the experience. Ana Sofía provided photos of select entries from a handwritten reflective journal kept for class, and Heather provided links to personal vlogs (video logs) she created and posted to YouTube while abroad, to share her experience with family and friends back home.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the emergent nature of qualitative research, data analysis was ongoing and continuous rather than completed only at the conclusion of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2015). This also addressed the reflection and description that Moustakas (1994) advised as necessary for data analysis in phenomenological studies. Data analysis was guided by this study's research questions and theoretical framework, Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship.

Data analysis began with a living spreadsheet of participants that included pertinent demographics and the nature of prior international travel, which proved useful in noticing trends in the data. Field notes were taken during the interview, with a summary written immediately afterwards. These notes contained initial thoughts and connections about the participant and across participants.

Data analysis continued with the transcription of each interview. The recording from Zoom was used along with the automatically generated transcription to create an accurate transcript. This meant I listened to the interview a second time, which provided an opportunity for deeper reflection. As a reminder, Groenwald (2004) advocated the

importance of audio recordings, as a way to absorb and reflect on the participant's meaning. On the few occasions that meaning was unclear, or that additional questions emerged, these were clarified with the participant via email. Once the transcript was complete it was shared electronically with the participant for the purpose of a member check. Only three participants responded to the member check request, and all noted their satisfaction with the transcript as it was. Themes were already emerging partway through interviewing as a result of this ongoing analysis.

Moustakas (1994) suggested first making note of units of data that are important to understanding an individual's experience, then clustering these across participants into themes. Consequently, each interview was first coded for individual thematic analysis, which was accomplished in the following manner. After the member check was completed, individual units were isolated as separate paragraphs in Microsoft Word. The separations were converted to a delimiter, which allowed the generation of a table in Word that listed each unit separately. These units were then copied and pasted into cells in an Excel spreadsheet, which included columns for participant pseudonym, unit, three columns for coding, and one column for notes.

At that point, open coding was conducted on the units to determine emergent themes. As each subsequent set of interview units were created and coded, the clustering of themes across participants was further refined as the essence of these participants' experience emerged. Meanwhile, I also kept a reflexive journal and conducted memoing as thoughts regarding the data emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Memoing, in particular, served as a useful tool, and was used to record ideas, thoughts, connections, and

reminders on a daily basis, as well as thoughts regarding the textural and structural descriptions recommended by Moustakas (1994).

Although I initially planned to conduct a second stage of analysis and code for self-authorship stage and domain, during the course of this study it was evident that open coding alone was necessary for the purpose of addressing the two research questions. Precise stage was not always possible to determine, though was naturally evident in the meaning-making experiences participants shared. Precise domain was also evident in the experiences that emerged, while it also became clear that there was significant overlap between domains in meaning-making. Consequently, that plan was dropped.

As themes emerged, the use of Excel allowed sorting by coding columns in order to refine themes. Eventually, each theme was isolated in a separate tab within the spreadsheet. Each was printed and utilized in the writing of Chapter IV. Collectively, these analyses contributed to an understanding of the essence, or shared conception, of the phenomena of study abroad as experienced by first-generation college students (Hycner, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Next is a discussion of how trustworthiness was addressed during this study. This chapter then concludes with researcher positionality.

Trustworthiness

Since validity and reliability are positivist parameters for rigor, a qualitative study instead aims for *trustworthiness*, which involves credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A number of steps were taken in these areas to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

Credibility is "to carry out the inquiry in such a way that the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 297). More specifically, credibility is attained when the researcher's representations comport with the participants' meanings (Schwandt, 2001). In this study, credibility was addressed by a sound research design, triangulation, and the use of member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation refers to the potential corroborating effect of multiple data sources in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Adding an additional source of data may create a richer and more robust picture of self-authoring behavior in the study population, and thus bolster trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four participants provided additional artifacts related to their study abroad experience that allowed for a degree of triangulation.

Transferability is the qualitative replacement for generalizability, and allows findings to be transferred to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was addressed in this study through purposive sampling and thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While there is no single definition for thick description, Schwandt (1985) explained that "to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations and so on that characterize a particular episode" (p. 255).

Dependability, the qualitative equivalent of reliability, relies upon consistency and stability in methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was addressed by an audit trail that involved memoing and field notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Memoing is a

data analysis tool where the researcher writes frequent memos to themselves as a means to process and grapple with observations during ongoing analysis (Schwandt, 2001).

The final component of transferability is *confirmability*. Due to its constructivist underpinning, trustworthiness acknowledges that research and the researcher are inherently value-laden (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This mirrors the necessity in phenomenology to bracket, or uncover, acknowledge, and set aside one's positionality with regard to the phenomena of inquiry, in an attempt to mitigate researcher bias (Gaudet & Robert, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Consequently, my own positionality is discussed at the conclusion of this chapter, and a reflexive journal used as part of the audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity is "the process of critical self-reflection on one's biases, theoretical predispositions, [and] preferences" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 224). A reflexive journal allows the researcher to continuously engage in a critical review of the entire research process (Schwandt, 2001).

Positionality

Given what we know about first-generation students, I anticipated this study would capture those with marginalized identities, and these identities might be the source of meaning-making during study abroad. This expectation was also informed by the participant pool of the pilot study. It is important to acknowledge the systemic oppression that impacts higher education, as all areas of life, which this study's participants navigate. With this in mind, and given that research is inherently value-laden, I chose to *bracket* and address my positionality fully (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994).

I am a middle-aged White female, the daughter of immigrants, and a dual citizen of the US and Canada. I was a first-generation college student myself. My parents were children of poverty, though both eventually obtained their high school GED. My father went on to build a financially secure, comfortable life, that in this study qualified as upper income. I was fortunate to have all my undergraduate college expenses, including study abroad in Japan, covered by my parents. Furthermore, at this point in my life I qualify as upper-middle income. As a White woman raised in an upper-middle class environment, poverty, race and the structures of privilege, oppression, and racism were not salient to me until adulthood. Consequently, although I try to educate myself on the experiences of those whose identity is marginalized, either socioeconomically or with regard to race/ethnicity, I cannot really know how it is to navigate life with those identities. Given my background this will always be a work in progress and I must remain vigilant to be aware of these realities and structures, and particularly with regard to my scholarship.

As an undergraduate, I studied abroad in Japan and later lived and worked in that country, after which I entered the field of international education, my profession now for over 20 years. My second language is Japanese. My educational background as an undergraduate was focused in international studies, heavily influenced by anthropology courses and ethnography, and my graduate work in education largely grounded in constructivism. While I used a methodology grounded in constructivism for this study of first-generation students, I acknowledged its limitations and the socioeconomically marginalized and racially/ethnically minoritized statuses of my participants, and aimed

to remain cognizant of the criticisms of self-authorship. In this study, I aimed to be mindful of the various contexts in which students operate, the intersecting identities that were present, and the ways in which these realities had the potential to impact how students made meaning.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This study began in August 2020 with purposive sampling of first-generation undergraduates, enrolled at a research-intensive public university in the South, who studied abroad for at least five weeks between summer 2019 and spring 2020. Fifteen students participated. Using a phenomenological approach, biographical data were collected through a questionnaire, administered via Qualtrics, and one-time interview via Zoom. Design of both the questionnaire and interview protocol were guided by Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship and this study's two research questions:

1. How does a study abroad experience facilitate movement toward self-authorship among first-generation college students?
2. How does a study abroad experience facilitate movement toward self-authorship that may unique to first-generation students socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized?

In addition to data gathered through questionnaires and interviews, four participants also provided additional artifacts for the purpose of triangulation. These artifacts included two reflection papers, one vlog, and one partial journal.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of this study. This chapter is organized around the presentation of the following four themes that emerged from the

data: (a) Navigating Uncertainty; (b) Meaningfulness of Interpersonal Relations, (c) New and Improved Abilities, and (d) Clarity Regarding Values, Beliefs, and Identity.

Briefly, *Navigating Uncertainty* describes participants' experience with cognitive dissonance. This includes participants' encounters with cognitive dissonance in general, in relation to parents and guardians who were unsupportive of their plan to study abroad, and dissonance that emerged from encounters with others. *Meaningfulness of Interpersonal Relations*, the second theme, describes the overwhelming sense among participants that genuine connections with others was one of the most meaningful aspects of their study abroad experience. These meaningful connections were a source of support, camaraderie, and learning for participants. The third theme, *New and Improved Abilities*, encompasses the abilities that participants perceived they took home from study abroad, which includes independence, confidence, openness, an awareness or acceptance of other perspectives that differ from their own, and improved interpersonal skills. *Clarity Regarding Values, Beliefs, and Identity*, the fourth theme, describes how participants felt studying abroad further shaped their life and career goals, how participants expressed a greater understanding of their own values and beliefs, and how racially/ethnically minoritized participants reframed their sense of self as a result of study abroad.

Themes are arranged in this order purposefully. *Uncertainty* involves the catalyst for self-authoring behavior, cognitive dissonance, and along with *interpersonal relations* created space in which participants made meaning. Meaning-making was expressed through the data that comprises participants' *new and improved abilities* and *clarity*

regarding beliefs, values, and identity. What is also evident from these themes is that they are intertwined and often overlap.

What follows is a detailed description of each theme, framed by substantiating data. Each section is comprised of two to five sub-themes that help to explain the overarching nature of the theme. Although data from triangulation is presented throughout, the discussion of themes is followed by a description of triangulation data. This chapter then concludes with a summary of results that sets the stage for Chapter V.

Theme 1: Navigating Uncertainty

Uncertainty, in the case of this theme, is best described as dissonance-inducing experiences, or cognitive dissonance, that cause some degree of discomfort for the participant. The experience of cognitive dissonance, also referred to interchangeably as disequilibrium, in turn prompted decision- and meaning-making that had the potential to facilitate movement toward, or induce, self-authoring behavior. Three sub-themes of *navigating uncertainty* emerged: (a) parental hesitation, (b) uncertainty in situations, and (c) discomforting encounters with others.

The theme of *Navigating Uncertainty* is situated primarily in the cognitive domain of self-authorship, which is concerned with how one knows, or the meaning-making that emerges from disequilibrium. That said, the sub-themes of parental hesitation and discomforting encounters also involve the interpersonal domain. Next is a discussion of each sub-theme, which first explains how participants encountered uncertainty, then describes how they navigated the resulting disequilibrium to make meaning of their experience.

Parental Hesitation Regarding Study Abroad

For the majority of participants, uncertainty was encountered at the very outset of planning for study abroad. This uncertainty surrounded how one's parents/guardians reacted to their decision to study abroad, and how they then chose to navigate those conversations in hopes of achieving their goal. Participants' encounters with initially unsupportive parents/guardians are here termed *parental hesitation*. Parental hesitation is descriptive of the range of concern directed at participants by parents/guardians, and which for many delayed support for their decision to study abroad. Parents/guardians are generally what Baxter Magolda (2001) termed external authorities. These are individuals or organizations whose expectations or values define one's values, beliefs, and sense of self prior to entering the crossroads (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Encountered

Among participants, Alice, David, Jack, Karina, and Verónica, encountered the greatest pushback from parents who did not initially approve of their decision to study abroad. Approval may be too generous a term in the case of these participants, whose parents eventually just accepted the inevitable. The majority of others (Amy, Ana Sofía, Fran, Heather, Lance, Laura, and Nate) encountered very concerned parents/guardians who later granted full support, while Sophie, Max, and Zach felt supported in their decision from the start. Of note, all the Hispanic females in the participant group experienced moderate to significant *parental hesitation*; moderate being the expression of serious concern and significant being outright objection to their plan. Parental

hesitation appeared to be rooted in four areas: (a) fear, (b) limited prior travel experience, (c) lack of understanding about study abroad, and (d) cost.

Fear

Parents worry about their children. That is universal. Most participants in this study, however, had to navigate what seemed like greater degrees of anxiety than typical on the part of parents/guardians. For many, this was fear initiated by the thought of a child going far away from home. This was more pronounced for families with limited to zero travel experience, and for participants who identified as Hispanic females (see Table 2). Fear in parental hesitation appeared to also be motivated by fear of the unknown. As noted, prior travel experience was largely nonexistent to limited among participants' families. Parents and families that lacked travel experience were more

Table 2 Parent/Guardian Travel Experience (sorted by income level, with those who encountered parental hesitation highlighted)

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Family Income Level	Parent/Guardian Travel Experience
Alice	Female	White	Lower	None
Ana Sofía	Female	Hispanic	Lower	Mexico
David	Male	Asian	Lower	Vietnam
Heather	Female	Hispanic/Latino	Lower	Mexico
Jack	Female	Hispanic	Lower	None
Laura	Female	Hispanic	Lower	None
Nate	Male	Black & White	Lower	None
Verónica	Female	Hispanic	Lower	Mexico
Amy	Female	Hispanic	Lower-middle	None
Karina	Female	Hispanic	Lower-middle	Mexico
Lance	Male	White	Lower-middle	None
Max	Male	Hispanic	Lower-middle	Mexico, Caribbean, Europe
Sophie	Female	White	Lower-middle	Mexico, Caribbean
Zach	Male	White	No response	None
Fran	Female	Hispanic	Upper income	Peru, Canada, France, Spain

likely to express concern about the idea of study abroad. Lance, who chose to study abroad in the Middle East, also garnered concern regarding his destination of choice. This was not unexpected for Lance, however, who characterized his home community as "very much White" and not very open. Lance realized how his background and his parents' lack of travel experience tempered their feelings toward study abroad. Reflecting on his parents' reaction, Lance stated:

> They gave me a lot of like very, like, aren't you afraid you're going to get mugged, killed, something like that's gonna happen? Are you sure you want to do this? ...Yeah, they were very concerned, but then again, like, none of us had traveled before.

Incidentally, "Are you sure you want to do this?" was a question often posed to participants who experienced parental hesitation.

Limited Prior Travel Experience

As touched on, lack of travel experience also motivated parental hesitation. In this study, lack of travel experience was determined to include those families with no prior travel experience (6) as well as travel limited to visiting family in a second country (5). This latter group involved trips to visit relatives in Mexico, Peru, or Vietnam. It was these 11 participants who encountered the greatest degree of parental hesitation (see Table 2). While lack of travel experience refers specifically to international travel, it is important to note that some participants also never traveled outside Texas.

The remaining four participants had more travel experience. Both Sophie and Max had visited Mexico and the Caribbean with family, while Max's parents had also

visited Europe. Zach and Fran were the most traveled of the participant group. Although Zach's parents had never traveled internationally, his aunt and uncle had the financial means to do so, and took him to Vietnam five times, as well as to Japan, Germany, and Thailand. Fran visited relatives in Peru each year, but also visited Canada, France, and Spain with family prior to studying abroad. Notably, Fran was the outlier in that she reported herself as upper income. This travel background possibly tempered parental hesitation for these four participants, who felt supported in their decision to study abroad.

While Fran did not encounter parental hesitation due to lack of travel experience, she did so as a Hispanic female, an experience shared by others. Fran's Mother agreed to let her study abroad since she could stay with her uncle in Barcelona, an opportunity that sealed the deal with Mom and determined Fran's study abroad destination:

> That really, I think, solidified my Mom's, you know, agreement to let me study abroad. ...She is a Mom, and a Hispanic Mom. So like any Mom she was worried about, you know, me being out there on my own.

Other participants who identified as Hispanic females experienced more outright objection when they shared their plan to study abroad. For example, Karina shared of her parents, "They were scared. They didn't want me to go." Verónica, for her part, found the experience frustrating but familiar, "It reminded me of my process for college applications as well, because they did not want me to go off. I am their only daughter, so it was very hard on them."

Lack of Understanding about Study Abroad

Parental hesitation also emerged from a lack of understanding the activity of education abroad itself. A lack of experience with both college and travel provided participants' families with little context to understand the nature or activity of study abroad. Some parents and guardians questioned the legitimacy of the opportunity, not understanding it was offered through the university as a sanctioned and credit-bearing experience. Amy, a Hispanic female, described this common sentiment quite simply with, "They didn't really understand the importance or significance of it." As Verónica, also a Hispanic female, elaborated of her parents, "They found it sketchy, I guess, where they were like, *ohhh, like maybe don't do that*." Nate, a Black and White male, discovered his grandparents were suspicious when he first announced his desire to study abroad: "They were very cautious. They didn't believe it at first. They're like, you need to make sure that this is like, it's through the school."

Cost

Cost was another factor that drove parental hesitation. Fourteen of 15 participants came from families making less than $60,000 annually, with eight of those indicating an annual family income less than $40,000. Participants with household annual incomes below $40,000 were considered socioeconomically marginalized, and also had the potential to be below the Federal Poverty Level (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Consequently, it was not surprising that cost was a source of anxiety that fueled parental hesitation.

The nature and benefits of study abroad were not evident to these parents and guardians, who initially questioned or criticized the expense. In reality, participants' families were responsible for providing little to no financial support for study abroad, but that did not eliminate the question of cost-benefit for parents and guardians. Karina shared, "My Dad didn't really support me that much to leave, cuz like, I don't know, he just didn't want me like wasting that much money." For her part, Amy reflected:

> It was kind of just like – why are you going to spend all this money to go travel to this place? – mentality. They didn't really understand like, what I would get out of it, or how it was like such a big opportunity.

Navigated

Understanding how parental hesitation was encountered, I now present how participants navigated this uncertainty. The end goal for participants was to secure their parent's/guardian's approval, even if they did not really need it financially to proceed with their plan. The question is how participants navigated parental hesitation in search of support, and how they responded (or might respond) if unsuccessful.

The six participants (Alice, David, Heather, Karina, Lance, and Verónica) who encountered the greatest degree of parental hesitation, also expressed their determination to participate in study abroad despite their parents' objection. These participants anticipated their parents' objection, but made up their mind prior to delivering the news that they were going to study abroad regardless. A common tactic among these participants was to only tell their parents of their plan after they applied and were set to participate.

Verónica experienced parental hesitation previously, when she decided to go away to college, which her parents strongly resisted. Like others, she was persistent in her intent to pursue study abroad, and would not be detracted. While Verónica did not want to come across as disrespectful toward her parents, she felt they would simply have to accept her decision:

> I told them like, oh, I'm going to go study abroad and they're like, *haha – no*. And I was like, oh okay, well, I already did my application, I already did this, and I already did that. And it was kind of just like they didn't really have a choice almost. I was like, well, I'm going to go or, yeah – it's just going to happen.

Unfortunately for Alice, a lower income White female, this encounter with her Mother devolved into an argument. Alice was very straightforward regarding her intent and her Mother being outside the decision-making in this particular case:

> She didn't want me to go. She didn't like that I did it without her permission, because I just sort of applied. Because I was like, I'm paying for my college degree, not her. And I didn't expect anything out of her or anyone else in my family, so I figured it was my decision whether or not I will go whenever I wanted. …I got really upset and so I was more like *well, it's my decision*, and *I'm paying for college, not you*.

Five participants (Amy, Fran, Jack, Nate, and Laura) reported a different experience. These participants indicated that encountering *parental hesitation* caused them to question their decision and realize it might not happen without parental/guardian

approval. For these participants, studying abroad in defiance of their family's wishes was not really an option. It did not occur to these participants to go against the wishes of their external authorities. As Amy summarized, "It kind of just made me, I guess, initially question it or question if I should do it." As Laura, a Hispanic female, reflected, "I knew there was no possible way I could do this without them or their support. If they had said 'no' [in the end], and been quite serious about it, I probably would not have gone." Not surprisingly, Jack, a Hispanic female, also noted that she called her parents and asked for permission to apply.

Regardless of these divergent responses, participants who encountered parental hesitation uniformly navigated it by providing information. Participants reported addressing a variety of topics, such as program details, affiliation with the university, benefit of study abroad, safety, and personal value. For those who encountered the greatest degree of parental hesitation, this was a protracted process that required repeated assurances, particularly regarding safety and readiness, before arriving at some degree of support. Heather, a Hispanic female, whose parents had never travelled internationally (beyond visiting family in Mexico), and who applied before telling her Mom about her study abroad plans, described how she used this approach with her Mom:

> I showed her like, the syllabus, and like just what we were going to be doing. …When she found out that it was like, school-related, and there was going to be an internship, and there was going to be like, classes, I think she started being a little more like, calm about it.

Like others, Laura addressed safety concerns through explaining the nature of the program and providing assurances:

> It was just more of me trying to be like, no, trust me, I'll be fine. …It was a faculty-led trip so it's not like they're just dropping us in the middle of Japan, you know. …So it was definitely, I had the details before to kind of reassure them.

As noted, navigating parental hesitation was a protracted process, not resolved in one encounter. Universally, this was navigated through sustained reassurances provided by participants over time that eventually won some degree of support. Lance described this best when he quantified the timeline: "It was more convincing my parents and they were, they were completely fine about it after a little bit. It took a month before everybody was like really cool with it."

It is interesting to note that parental hesitation was almost exclusively an experience of participants both socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized (see Table 2). Lance, a White male, was the only exception, and attributed the parental hesitation he encountered to his family's lack of prior travel and closed-mindedness. Participants in this study were more likely to encounter parental hesitation if marginalized in terms of *both* socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. Every participant socioeconomically marginalized encountered some degree of parental hesitation, while every participant racially/ethnically minoritized, with the exception of Max (a Hispanic male), also encountered some degree of parental hesitation. Max's parents, uniquely, had visited Europe, so it is possible their travel

experience, or Max being male, were responsible for their support. Notably, all eight participants who identified as Hispanic females encountered parental hesitation, with six of this eight also socioeconomically marginalized. While neither Max nor Fran were socioeconomically marginalized, Fran still encountered parental hesitation like the other Hispanic females, which illuminates a possible gender component of parental hesitation.

While most who encountered parental hesitation garnered full support in the end, for others, their parents simply backed down from outright objection. For instance, although Verónica's parents accepted her decision, they were still not completely on board with the plan. The weekend before her departure, Verónica felt pressured when her Father cried: "He just didn't want me to go, cuz I'm like, their little girl, and so I guess it was pretty hard on them." Of his Mom, David shared a summative comment regarding parental hesitation when he explained: "I think she still had reservations towards the end. I was just more like, hey, I'm going to do this, I'm just gonna let you know the situation." Regardless of the degree of support garnered, in the end this did not change participants' plans. Every participant got on a plane as planned.

Discomforting Situations

After navigating parental hesitation and arriving in their study abroad destination, participants encountered a range of experiences that were wrought with uncertainty, here referred to as *discomforting situations*. First and foremost among these dissonance-inducing experiences was getting lost, often repeatedly. Uncertainty also emerged when participants encountered situations in which they were unsure how to proceed. For six participants, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an additional layer of uncertainty, as it

unfolded while they were in the middle of studying abroad during spring semester 2020. As with parental hesitation, discomforting situations are first discussed as encountered, and then as navigated, in how participants chose to make sense of, and respond to, these experiences.

Encountered

Getting lost abroad, whether alone or with peers, was universally experienced among participants. The combination of being in an unfamiliar location, in another country, trying to get accustomed to public transportation, and possibly with a language barrier, was both stressful and scary for participants. Getting lost during study abroad was characterized in negative terms, such as "confusing," "challenging," "frustrating," "scary," "stressful," and "terrifying."

Since participants all hailed from car-dependent Texas, many found themselves challenged trying to navigate train and metro systems. Everyone got lost at some point, some repeatedly, and it often took longer to get anywhere, or they were late, because of getting on the wrong train. Unlike her peers, who lived within the city of Bonn, Ana Sofía found herself in a host home outside the city, which required a lengthy train ride to reach class and friends. Not a German speaker, and new to trains, she was often confused and frustrated, and soon realized that Google Maps' directions were not always accurate. Ana Sofía explained the stress involved when she said, "I think that was definitely one of the most [negative or challenging] times, cuz it was also like trying to control my fear of just never getting home." For her part, Heather described the frustration of being lost in her first vlog posted to YouTube for family and friends. As

Heather explained it, on the second day of class she took the wrong metro line and was 30 minutes late. She subsequently got lost three additional times before she learned the system.

While getting lost was generally an inconvenience, Lance had a potentially dangerous encounter with losing his way. While on a solo visit to Jordan during a break period, Lance got lost on foot for eight hours while hiking the ruins of Petra. Fortunately, he had company; a university student from Japan, also travelling solo, whom he befriended on the trail. As Lance recalled the seriousness of the situation, "We ended up getting lost for a long time. And we were, we were just like, we were super tired, we're running out of water, and everything. We're just like, this is bad."

Beyond getting lost, discomforting situations took various forms, for example when participants were unsure how to proceed. Nate thought he would be working with a team during his internship in Singapore, and instead was working individually with a professor. He was not very familiar with some aspects of the project and found himself feeling "isolated," "confused," and "frustrated," unsure what to do to meet the project's needs. This situation persisted for several weeks. For her part, Karina did not know what to do when she discovered on a train to Amsterdam that she left her purse, including her wallet and passport, in an Airbnb in Brussels. She quietly began to panic, and did not want to reveal the mishap to her peers. As she recalled of her feelings in that moment:

> I was just like in shock, because I was like halfway to like Amsterdam. We'd been on this train for like three hours and now I have to go back?! And I was

like, the Airbnb already closed like, they probably already have new guests. And then I was like panicking.

A different experience of uncertainty arose for the six participants abroad when the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. Initially, there were the concerns of family and friends to handle, despite conditions in-country still feeling normal. Later, as the situation worsened, participants had to consider their program might be cut short, and make sense of what that might mean and what they might lose as a result. In the end, all six returned early, although Alice was the only one with a choice in the matter. Participants were usually given a very short timeframe in which to arrange their flight home and departure. This was made worse by the masses of people attempting to return to the US at the same time. Participants described this experience as "shocking," "chaotic," and "saddening."

Alice's discomforting situation was the decision whether to remain in Japan or return home amidst the emerging pandemic. Given Japan's proximity to China, her friends and family had the impression that she was in danger. Her Mother, especially, pressured her to come home. Her university strongly encouraged Alice to return, though conditions at her host university were business as usual. Departing early meant abandoning a semester worth of credit. Alice reasoned that even if her courses transitioned to online, she would still be in Japan and benefit from her study abroad experience, and did not want to give that up. This decision was also complicated by financial aid concerns should she quit mid-semester. As Alice recalled:

> I worked so hard to make it happen, and so to give it up, because the university told me I should and because my Mom wanted me to, was a really hard decision for me to make, because it was entirely up to me.

These discomforting situations created disequilibrium, the condition necessary for movement toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998). How the participants responded and made meaning of these experiences is explored next.

Navigated

Discomforting situations generally involved an immediate reaction, often emotion-laced, followed by an opportunity for decision-making and problem-solving. While these experiences were generally framed in negative terms, and these emotions could interfere with their ability to problem-solve in the situation, the outcome was quite different for most participants. While some participants simply laughed off getting lost, and also realized the shortcomings of Google Maps, others shared varying ways in which they navigated this discomforting situation. They learned not to "overthink things," to remain calm, to approach strangers for assistance, to utilize tools at hand, to lean on their peers, and to keep things in perspective.

Trying to remain calm was one of the most common strategies for navigating discomforting situations, like getting lost or losing something. While all participants realized everything worked out fine in the end, some participants noted that getting upset would not help them problem-solve the situation. Ana Sofía recognized that remaining calm would help her focus on studying the train map to find her way home, while she also wrote in her journal of the role of patience while lost. For her part, Laura shared a

similar takeaway from her experience of getting lost in Tokyo upon arrival. As Laura reflected:

> Looking back on it now it didn't have to be that stressful. I could have just, you know, sat down, figured out, you know, what routes I needed to take instead of just freaking out and trying to run from train to train like we were doing. So, in retrospect, it was probably our own fault that we got lost - well, obviously it was - but the extent of how badly we were lost was definitely our own fault.

Planning and preparation were also important strategies for Ana Sofía, Laura, and others, who had to become familiar with train, metro, and bus systems.

Once Karina shared with her peers that she left her purse in Brussels, she learned some valuable tools from a friend who helped her trouble-shoot the situation. While Laura wanted to simply go to the nearest US Embassy and get a new passport, her friend was very methodical and calm, which was enlightening for her. Leaning on her study abroad peers proved helpful for Karina in navigating this uncertainty. As Karina reflected:

> Because he was calm, he made me calm, and he made me realize that I didn't have to like, constantly be like thinking too ahead of things. Like, I just had to take things step by step and like, trace my steps backwards. That just made me realize how like, you don't even have to worry like, if something bad happens, or something like that happens that's scary, just like, to calm down.

Asking for help was also a common strategy for navigating discomforting situations. While some participants readily identified this strategy and appeared

comfortable with it, others seemed tentative. While Nate did eventually work his way out of feeling confused and frustrated over his project, in retrospect he realized he would have benefited from asking for help:

> I felt like I could have gone to the fabrication lab and asked students. So, I probably could have done that, and then be more direct with what the problems were for me, instead of trying to put all this like, pressure on me, and feel like I have to figure it out. Because I feel like I had to figure out a lot of stuff when probably I could have asked a lot more people and make that easier on me.

As evidenced by some of these comments, keeping things in perspective was another way participants made meaning of discomforting situations. For example, this could be realizing it was not the end of the world, could be worse, or finding the positives in an experience. Lance and his new hiking partner leaned on one another, found villagers to ask for directions, relied on their map, and ultimately found their way out of Petra. Although Lance felt it was a scary experience, he looks back on that, and others, and sees the bright side:

> Like even getting lost I found that was an amazing thing, because I met my friend from Japan, and he's a great dude. …My worst [experiences] end up being like, some of my best, right. Like, worst experiences can just, you just figure it out, right. Even my worst experiences were actually just positive, right.

After Alice returned home due to COVID-19, she was left feeling "browbeaten" by her Mom and university. The fall-out from that decision, losing her experience and a

full semester of credit, remained a discomforting situation for Alice that prompted reflection after her return:

> It's been really hard because a lot of the decisions that have been made about my education have been made for me by other people, which I really regret, because college is supposed to be about what I want to do, not what my Mom wants me to do.

When Alice was faced with the decision of where to live during fall semester 2020, since her courses were all online, her family advised her to come home to save on housing expenses. Home, however, was a 20-foot trailer and an environment Alice felt was not conducive to learning. In the end, Alice recalled the fateful decision to leave Japan and chose to stay in her apartment near campus, despite her Mom's displeasure. As Alice reasoned:

> I definitely weighed the opinions of other people, but I think ultimately, I decided what would be best for me. …I knew what would be best for me, versus when I was coming back from Japan, I made the decision that would be best for everybody else.

In Alice's case, she learned from the consequences of one decision how she would like to make choices moving forward, by consulting with others but making decisions based on what she, rather than others, feels is best for her.

Collectively, the experience of navigating discomforting situations provided participants with learning opportunities. Discomforting situations created cognitive dissonance, often there was an initial negative reaction to the disequilibrium, then an

opportunity for decision-making. Alice was unique in the sense she specifically expressed how she applied the experience of navigating a discomforting situation during study abroad to later decision-making. In this case, her decision was to listen to herself rather than others.

Discomforting Encounters

Similar to discomforting situations, another source of disequilibrium emerged from encounters with others. In similar fashion, these encounters were rife with uncertainty, which induced dissonance, usually a negative reaction ensued, and then participants had to choose how to navigate and make meaning of their experience. This sub-theme is thus termed *discomforting encounters*, and encompassed communication challenges, cultural differences, politics, harassment, not clicking with peers, and one very serious situation. As with other sub-themes in Navigating Uncertainty, the experiences of discomforting encounters is first discussed as encountered, which describes relevant experiences and the resulting disequilibrium, and then as navigated, which describes how participants responded and made meaning of the experience.

Encountered

Uncertainty in encounters with others was a source of disequilibrium for participants. For some, these experiences were unsettling, but benign, and described as "confusing," "awkward," "uncomfortable," and "frustrating." These more minor sources of disequilibrium usually resulted from cultural differences or a language barrier. For others, discomforting encounters induced deeper feelings, which left participants feeling

"isolated," "insecure," and "sad." These feelings were often described in relation to not clicking with one's study abroad peers or "scary" incidents.

Only a few participants were on language-focused programs, so the majority of participants were based in a country whose language they did not speak. Many of these participants (Ana Sofía , Jack, Karina, Lance, and Sophie) shared stories of confusion, frustration, and awkwardness trying to navigate a language barrier. Oftentimes they could not find someone who spoke English, for example when lost, or encountered an individual in the service industry who they perceived was frustrated with them. For others, discovering cultural differences was a discomforting encounter. This included cultural norms, discussing politics, and general misunderstandings. For example, Karina felt she attracted dirty looks on the bus each morning as she ate her breakfast, which was confusing for her until she learned it was "bad etiquette" in Italy to eat on the go. While these experiences were confusing and did prompt disequilibrium, they were rather benign compared to others.

Several participants (Alice, Amy, David, Heather, Max, and Nate) shared deeper feelings, and described that discomforting encounters made them feel "isolated," "insecure," and "sad." Nate did not feel he was connecting with peers at his host institution, while Amy and David simply did not connect with the peers on their program. Amy and David felt they did not have much in common with their peers, whom they perceived had different interests and priorities for study abroad, which included an over-emphasis on bar-hopping and drinking. Amy described the disequilibrium she encountered attempting to connect with her peers:

> We weren't really interested in the same things. I wanted to go to a lot of like, like look at like museums and stuff, and like, look at art and things like that. They kind of didn't have the same, like, I guess, intentions. We just had differing interests, so it was kind of difficult to connect with them. And at first that was really isolating. …At first, I was like forcing myself to do everything like, everyone wanted to do. And then I was like, I'm miserable.

In David's case, there was also a financial component. His peers shared groceries and spent a lot of money at hookah bars and out drinking. He could not afford to keep up with his peers' social activities, which distanced him from his study abroad peer group and made his first few weeks not so enjoyable. As David indicated, "I really didn't feel as part of things."

Heather's study abroad involved an internship in a hospital in Barcelona, where she was placed with other students to learn from medical professionals. She had a hard time connecting with them at first. As Heather reflected, "I guess I went in expecting everybody to be friendly to me, but everybody was just minding their own business." She also quickly realized all the other students were actually medical students, which made her feel uncomfortable and unsure how to tell everyone she did not have that level of knowledge. As Heather recalled:

> At the beginning I just felt really insecure and just like, I wanted to step back and like, I don't want to say anything wrong. I just felt kind of like, insecure and outshined. That was one of the hardest things in the beginning.

For Alice and Max, discomforting encounters were more serious: In Alice's case, it was "uncomfortable," and in Max's case, "scary." Alice found herself on the receiving end of sexual harassment more than once during her time in Japan. One time she was in the company of male peers, who did not speak up to protect her when an older man began making comments about her breasts. Unsure what to do, Alice slowly moved behind her friend in an attempt to non-verbally communicate her discomfort. For Alice, a White female, her response to sexual harassment was complicated by being in a different cultural context and noticeably being an outsider. Alice explained of her resulting disequilibrium:

> It was sort of like there was a disconnect between like, how we would normally act in America and like, how we acted in Japan. Just because, you don't want to be that foreigner that's like, super rude and causes a scene, and is really loud or anything.

Max, uniquely, had a couple of frightening encounters while abroad. The more serious of the two occurred when Max unwittingly drank a shot laced with GHB (Gamma Hydroxybutyrate), otherwise known as the date rape drug, after being lured into a club by an individual he believed to be a "promoter." On break from school in Ireland, traveling solo in Poland, Max woke up the next morning on the floor of the club and soon discovered his wallet "rearranged," and his accounts emptied. Panic set in, as Max realized he was alone and without access to funds. This disequilibrium stayed with him even after he made it back to Dublin. As Max recalled of this disequilibrium:

> The whole time I was thinking like, what am I gonna do? What am I gonna do? …*That was the scariest thing* that ever happened to me. I, it made me feel so small, like, I felt helpless. …I was like, stuck here in a country where I don't - they don't speak English in Poland. I have no money - literally, I have 18 Euro in my pocket. …It definitely, when I came back, it messed up my head. Like, I was so scared. I felt *abused*, you know. And like, I don't know, I felt really insecure. *I didn't feel safe*."

Understanding how participants experienced discomforting encounters, I will now describe how this disequilibrium was navigated, and the meaning participants made of their experiences.

Navigated

Discomforting encounters prompted disequilibrium that manifested as confusion, awkwardness, frustration, and even isolation, insecurity, sadness, and fear. Participants had to choose how to respond to these experiences of uncertainty, through decision-making and problem-solving, and ultimately make meaning of the experience. Similar to discomforting situations, participants used a variety of strategies to navigate uncertainty. For some, this involved accepting and adapting to different cultural norms. For others, similar to discomforting situations, they recognized the role of patience and remaining calm, as well as leaning on and working with others. For those not clicking with their peers, this was an opportunity for change.

For those participants who encountered disequilibrium due to a language barrier, different cultural norms, or getting lost, most expressed the importance of adaptation, or

adjusting their thinking and understanding to their new reality. Both seemed generally short-lived. For example, although a language barrier persisted, how the participant responded to it changed. In many cases, they learned to work around this barrier to the best of their ability and use tools at hand. Google Translate, in particular, was an important tool used by participants in navigating disequilibrium and problem-solving during a language barrier, although most conceded it was not always an accurate source. While Amy explained, "I can try to formulate something, but if all else failed I would use Google Translate," Laura conceded "*a lot* of patience" was also necessary.

Of the participants who referenced the importance of adapting to new cultural norms, in order to navigate discomforting encounters, most seemed to accept cultural differences without attaching judgement. Differences were simply accepted as different. Sophie summed this up when she stated, "They do things differently, you know. You adapt and go on." Although Karina also understood the importance of adaptation, after learning it was impolite in Italy to eat on the bus, she had some difficulty suspending judgement: "I thought that was weird, because like people like, don't really do that here. We had to like, adapt to that like, setting I guess, to fit in the cultural like, like the behavioral norm, kind of."

For most participants, socializing during study abroad did not involve disequilibrium, though many did state that it required they move outside their comfort zone. For some, socializing and getting along with others was not so easy. Some participants, like Alice, Amy, David, Jack, and Nate, discovered they had little in common with their peers. Participants identified feelings of sadness, isolation, and

insecurity in reference to these challenges. These participants had to decide whether to continue socializing unhappily with their cohort, or seek out independent experiences or new connections. Some used work and campus activities as a way to meet other students, while Alice dabbled in online dating. For his part, David turned his attention to socializing with his lab mates, all graduate students at his host university.

Amy described this transition as she navigated the disequilibrium of discomforting encounters. She was in a downward spiral, unhappy socializing with her peers, but equally unhappy when she stayed home alone. Eventually, Amy realized she would only be happy if she went and did the things she enjoyed, like visiting museums:

> At first it was really isolating. And I was just like, oh, if I can't do it with them I guess I just can't do these things at all. And then I kind of was just like, no, I'm going to make the most of this, you know. I paid to be here, like, this isn't something I like imagined myself ever doing. …I was like, I'm gonna make the most of it, and I went out on my own.

Heather's situation was slightly different, in that she felt a disconnect with the individuals at her internship site. She was feeling "insecure" working amongst medical students, and eventually decided that being straightforward was the best approach in response to her disequilibrium:

> Once that problem was addressed and those issues were brought up, like, whenever I say I'm like, yeah, *not in med school yet*, they're really understanding about it and eventually like, they started to teach me how to read things and

> diagnoses and stuff like that. …It took me speaking up about it. …That was my wrong to just expect people to know.

Those who encountered more serious incidents of discomforting encounters, like Alice and Max, navigated these in various ways. Alice chose avoidance, when faced with sexual harassment, but later regretted trying to balance her response with Japanese cultural norms:

> I'd definitely handle it differently now, because I'm really not okay with that and it was really uncomfortable. …This is not okay. It's not okay for women that live in your country, it's not okay for women that are visiting your country, it's just not okay.

For his part, Max was overwhelmed after the GHB incident. Max called his parents from Poland for help, and leaned on his Dublin-based host Mom, who helped him work with the authorities and bank to recover his money. The experience made a significant impression on Max, who realized he was not invincible. This also reinforced the importance of not taking drinks from strangers.

As shown in these three sub-themes, disequilibrium often emerged from participants' encounters with uncertainty, which they attempted to mitigate through dissonance-reducing responses. Participants almost exclusively chose to engage the cognitive dissonance and made meaning of these experiences. Ana Sofía encapsulated this meaning-making, with regard to uncertainty, when she wrote the following in her journal:

> I start to question my decision of putting myself in this position. Not only for snoozing my alarm that morning but pushing myself out of my comfort zone and exposing myself to high-stress situations. At the same moment, I start to realize how crucial these experiences can be. I become aware of the decision before me – I could either let the situation intimidate me into sticking only to what I know, in every aspect, or use that temporary frustration to fuel and motivate myself to better equip myself for the next time a similar situation presents itself.

For some, disequilibrium was addressed through doing what they felt was best for themselves, while others learned the hard way to listen to their inner voice. Some decided that adaptation to their new environment was warranted, while others leaned on peers or found tools to assist. Some broke from peers altogether and discovered independence, while others sought out new connections. In every case, uncertainty initiated disequilibrium, to which participants initially responded with emotion, but ultimately treated as an opportunity for decision-making, and then meaning-making.

Theme 2: Meaningfulness of Interpersonal Relations

Participants universally identified genuine human connections as one of the most meaningful aspects of their study abroad experience. This included those who did not click with their peers, and sought out new connections. This was also inclusive of both friendships and one-time encounters. Many participants went into study abroad intent on meeting new people and making new connections, most for personal purposes but a few for professional.

Interpersonal relations proved meaningful to participants through a variety of avenues. This included friendships formed with their study abroad peer group, who were generally other Americans, friendships with locals and foreign students from other countries, internship work groups, and host families. Participants' social lives often involved more than one of these spheres, while a few who initially clung to their study abroad peer group eventually gravitated toward others altogether. These connections were a source of (a) support, (b) "camaraderie," and (c) learning for participants, and often required they (d) move beyond their comfort zone, which involved a certain degree of disequilibrium. Some participants also indicated that human connections increased their ability to relate to those different from themselves. What follows is a description of the aforementioned sub-themes a through d.

Interpersonal Relations as a Source of Support

Given that study abroad presented experiences of uncertainty, and one strategy to navigate uncertainty was to lean on others, it is probably no surprise that participants found interpersonal relationships as a *source of support*. This included genuine connections formed with other American students, new classmates or friends acquired in-country, a host family, or strangers casually befriended along the way.

Those who participated in cohort programs, and arrived with other American students, often developed genuine connections with their peers. Such friendships allowed for study abroad challenges to be shared experiences, and served as a form of support. For example, encountering cultural differences, getting lost, completing coursework, having to get home amid the unfolding pandemic, and other challenges,

seemed more manageable when it was a shared experience they could make sense of and trouble-shoot together. For example, Karina, whose friends helped her remain calm and returned with her to Brussels to retrieve her purse, reflected:

> No one made me feel like I messed up the trip. Like, it wasn't like - because we lost a whole day in Amsterdam. At no moment they made me feel bad or like, feel that I was less, for like, for being stupid, anything like that. So like, it just made me realize, if that happens to anyone else, or like happens to me again, to just not think like, less of them.

Host families, a source of genuine connection for almost all who lived with one, were also a source of support for some. Max was able to lean on his host Mom, who helped him file a police report and work with the bank to recoup his stolen funds after the GHB incident. Heather related that her host family created a welcoming environment that gave her a sense of security:

> They went really out of their way to make us feel welcome, and that kind of gave me a little bit of confidence to be like, be in a foreign place. I think that was a really strong foundation to bounce off of. For example, because I knew I had these people there that I could trust in, when I was at the hospital I felt like I had a lot more confidence.

The supportive aspect of interpersonal relations was also important for those who encountered an unexpected early return due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These relationships gave participants others with whom to commiserate over their shared disappointment, and others to lean on and work with to arrange their return. This moral

support also continued upon return, as most participants pivoted to online courses. As Jack pointed out, “We were all suffering together. They would crack jokes once in a while, and it was just like we’re back there.”

Interpersonal Relations as a Source of Camaraderie

As Jack eluded, these supportive interpersonal relations also provided *camaraderie*, or friendship and community, which made these relationships meaningful. “Camaraderie” was a word specifically used by Zach, as discussed below, and which best describes the communal aspect of interpersonal relations that comprises this sub-theme. Camaraderie also appeared to overlap with the supportive environment interpersonal relations created.

Some participants specifically referenced “collaboration,” “teamwork,” and “team” environments as particularly enjoyable aspects of their study abroad experience. In some cases this was informal, and simply the sense that a group worked together to achieve a goal, similar to the role of interpersonal relations in providing support. For example, Karina indicated her study abroad cohort helped one another in their school work so they would have time to take weekend trips together. For his part, Lance welcomed the collegial and “engaging” classroom environment encountered in Qatar, which was very different from the competitive atmosphere he was familiar with at home. As Lance described it, “Everybody was always trying to figure things out together.”

In other cases, teamwork was more formal. Karina really enjoyed her experience as part of a project team, while David, Heather, and Zach each referenced how much they valued being part of a team during their internships. As David explained it,

"Sometimes in the lab for me, it just felt like we're hanging out sometimes, you know. There were – when we ate lunch, we all ate lunch together." The Japanese work culture really appealed to Zach, who enjoyed the communication practices in his office, in particular the custom of *nomikai*, or after hours drinking with colleagues. Zach also valued how they would begin each workday standing in a circle:

> We'd all get a chance to speak on what it is that we're working on for the, for the day. And uh, so that was a different kind of thing that it was kind of cool to be able to experience. So there was a lot of communication there, and camaraderie, that I guess you wouldn't always get in a US company.

Interestingly, being part of a team was something Nate was particularly looking forward to, and a source of disappointment when he realized he was working alone with a professor for his internship.

Camaraderie was also experienced through shared experiences with host families. For most this included cooking and eating together, as well as simply talking and sharing about lives and perspectives. For others, watching television, playing board games, and meeting extended family members also contributed to a sense of camaraderie. For example, a few participants chose to cook a special meal, such as enchiladas, for their host family. In Heather's case, her first vlog documented a laughter-filled evening where her host parents were teaching her how to make a Spanish tortilla. As Ana Sofía reflected on her host home experience:

> They were so welcoming. They were like – we all cooked. They were like showing me like, some of the traditional, just like dishes that they do. And then

> the relationship grew even more once I started meeting her other family members.

Beyond one's host family, the friends made in another country served as a source of camaraderie as well. This included friends from their study abroad peer group as well as locals who were befriended. Locals were familiar with places to visit and fun things to do, so participants often shared entertaining outings with their new friends. For many, this was simply sharing the experience of visiting a good restaurant, interesting site, or event. Participants often felt they discovered these things only because of their friends. Laura and her American peers bonded with the Japanese peers whom they were partnered with by their host university, and even traveled with some of them after their program ended. For his part, Lance became friends with students in Qatar from other nations in the Middle East and South Asia. As Lance reflected, also about the Japanese friend he made hiking in Jordan:

> What I saw was great, but if I didn't have my friend, and some others I met with us, to like transcribe what the calligraphy means around the entire wall of the building, of the mosque, I wouldn't have really appreciated it. That was the best part. Meeting the people was 100 percent the best part. Going solo, as I did in Jordan, was fun, but being with the people in Jordan that I met made the experience better, and that was the same thing in Qatar.

Interpersonal Relations as a Source of Learning

As Lance eluded, interpersonal relations were also source of *learning* and meaning-making for participants, which seemed to also reinforce the importance of these

connections. For all participants, the opportunity to hear about other peoples' experiences and perspectives, particularly when their background was different, was an important component of what made interpersonal relations meaningful.

Learning the stories of others shed light for participants on other peoples' experiences and made them, otherwise considered different, more relatable in the process. Nate was fascinated by his peers' speaking *Singlish*, a mash-up of English and Chinese unique to Singapore. Lance found he valued talking to Qatar's taxi drivers, whom he learned were being displaced by the new metro system. As lower caste individuals in Qatar, Lance found them "pretty real," and easier to befriend than the Qatari. Lance also found he valued spending time with his Middle Eastern friends over his study abroad peer group, specifically due to the learning opportunities they provided. As Lance explained, "It was more for me wanting to learn the culture of these people than it was for sticking with people I've known already and doing stuff with them. …I don't get that perspective that they gave me."

For her part, Amy frequented a restaurant and befriended a waitress who eventually shared her story of being deported from the US. Amy explained this component of learning and how it was important to her:

> I kind of tried to really put myself like, within that country's culture, and kind of try to really get a full experience there. I kind of made it a point to talk to everyone there and like, get to know them - a lot of like shop owners and places we were staying. I would build relationships with them and kind of just liked

hearing, I guess, their experiences. A lot of that was really eye-opening and probably my most meaning experience there.

For some participants, learning about others highlighted the similarities between people despite the differences, and created common ground they did not expect. This common ground made others feel relatable. Since many participants had not left Texas prior to study abroad, simply interacting with a peer group of students from very different parts of the US was eye-opening. This was quite acute for Verónica, who realized the Bostonians and Californians on her program were "just humans like me." As Jack explained it, she learned she could easily relate to others with whom she shared experiences, and this gave her the feeling she could "talk to anyone." Karina elaborated on this, when she described how the diversity of her study abroad peer group allowed her to subsequently expand her friend group:

> Before I would kind of just like hang out with a lot of Hispanics, and like now like, I feel more comfortable like going up to other people and knowing like, they're not really that different, you know. Because I would just tend to like, stick to my group. Because I was like, oh, we're the most similar, you know.

For all participants, the sheer variety of individual met during study abroad provided learning opportunities. For example, Max worked alongside, and became friends with, students from all over the world at a part-time catering job while abroad. Zach found the start-up at which he interned had employees from a variety of countries, not just Japan. In addition to her study abroad peers, Verónica befriended Spanish

classmates, and also other foreign students from Mexico, Peru, and Portugal. As Verónica noted, "I feel really lucky that I had like all these connections."

Nate described this sense of learning from interpersonal connections when he wrote the following in a reflection paper: "Something that excites me that I have learned is understanding the culture of Singapore by talking to locals. The locals meaning my peers or the people I sparked a conversation with." Lance, as discussed, became friends with foreign students from across the Middle East, while Heather interned in a hospital with medical students from other Spanish-speaking countries. The other interns were actually medical students, and took the time to share their knowledge with Heather. As Heather reflected:

> I met like really great friends on the trip. I made really good friends with my doctors and the people at the hospital. Even though I was nervous, they were really willing to help. …Coming back here, I was just, I had met all these people that if it wasn't for my study abroad I would not…ever think to meet.

For these participants, meeting new people different from themselves was a source of learning that came in the form of new experiences, insights, and perspectives. Learning also served to reveal common ground, which facilitated interpersonal connections and helped make them meaningful for participants.

Interpersonal Relations as a Source of Challenge

Many participants remarked that establishing interpersonal connections abroad required they step outside their comfort zone, which presented a form of disequilibrium, the focus of this sub-theme. This may be no surprise since participants generally felt one

of the meaningful aspects of human connections was forming relationships with those who were different from themselves. This included both meaningful one-time encounters as well as new friendships formed.

While some participants established meaningful relationships with those in their study abroad peer group, others did not click with their peer group and chose to form relationships with others. Several participants arrived alone to study abroad, or traveled solo during break periods, and had no choice but to get outside their comfort zone in order to meet others. This meant all participants had to be open to new encounters and invitations. As Max succinctly stated, "It forces you to interact, it forces you to meet people. Like, if you want to do anything, you have to get out of your comfort zone."

Interestingly, several participants indicated they did not view themselves as particularly outgoing, and yet they pushed through this self-perceived barrier. Lance asserted this perspective best when he stated, "I myself, I'm not the most outgoing person in the world. I should say I'm not, but uh, I try to get myself to do it." Despite his self-assessment, Lance was rather assertive, and involved himself in student activities as a way to meet others. For most participants, going outside their comfort zone involved simply being open to meeting new people when an opportunity arose. For Jack, who studied in Germany, one of the most memorable experiences was a chance meeting with a group of paramedics from Spain. They asked her friend for directions, but Jack was able to respond in Spanish. A conversation ensued and they all spent the evening together. Amy, who gravitated away from her study abroad peer group, and described

herself as not naturally outgoing, explained how she arrived at going outside her comfort zone:

> It just goes along with me really wanting to understand people there, to understand the culture there, to kind of immerse myself into it. And so I figured the best way to do that was to just get to know the people who are, you know, live it every day. So that's what really made me really decide to go out of my way to talk to new people.

Participants overwhelmingly viewed interpersonal connections during and after study abroad as one of the most meaningful aspects of their experience. Regardless of the type of connection, these relationships served as a source of support, camaraderie, and learning. In many cases, participants also found the desire to connect with others overrode the discomfort of leaving their comfort zone. Although discussed in a cursory manner until this point, the next three themes address the new abilities and perspectives that participants felt they gained from studying abroad.

Theme 3: New and Improved Abilities

Participants in this study attributed a variety of new and improved abilities to their study abroad experience. Participants overwhelmingly shared that developing a sense of independence fostered feelings of confidence. Additionally, most participants expressed a new sense of openness to difference, which included both people and experiences, and for some meant seeking out such difference. Many participants also expressed a newfound awareness or acceptance that others have perspectives that differ from their own. And, finally, many participants expressed that these experiences

improved their ability to successfully interact with, and relate to, others. *New and improved abilities* is thus comprised of the following sub-themes: (a) Independence, (b) confidence, (c) openness, (d) awareness or acceptance of other perspectives, and (e) improved interpersonal skills. What follows is a description of each ability and how it emerged from the data.

Independence

For most participants in this study, a newfound sense of independence was the most often cited gain from study abroad. *Independence* is the state of being independent, or not dependent, which is defined as "not subject to control by others," "not requiring or relying on others," and "not looking to others for one's opinions or for guidance in conduct" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Entry 1 of 2). Participants identified independence emerging at two particular points in relation to study abroad. First, at the point of entering into study abroad, and more commonly, second, as an outcome after return.

The majority of participants (12) felt that study abroad gave them a new or improved sense of independence, and specifically used that word. While David and Laura did specifically discuss independence, they did so in the context of their decision to study abroad, and not in reference to an outcome. It is possible they already developed some degree of independence compared to the other participants prior to study abroad. Nate explained in a reflection paper that he derived independence from his internship since he ended up not being part of a team, and instead had work autonomously. Heather did not use the word independence, though she did mention the enjoyment and meaning she derived from being on her own.

Several participants specifically referred to their status as first-generation students contributing to a developing sense of independence. For most, the word "independent" was straightforwardly used, while for others simply referenced what they felt they gained having to do things on their own. As Zach simply explained, "I had to figure *everything* out myself." For example, some participants noticed their peers' parents provided support their parent did not or could not, and even visited them while abroad.

Although a few participants had a friend who studied abroad, and Ana Sofía had her older sister, for the most part participants indicated they were alone in navigating how to plan and prepare for study abroad. As previously discussed, by and large, parents/guardians rarely had travel experience, and did not have experience with college, so could not provide advice or insight. This included steps such as finding a program, figuring out how to fund the experience, obtaining a passport, and arranging flights. Reflecting on how she experienced study abroad differently from her continuing-generation peers, Ana Sofía stated:

> I feel like, even in college alone, like, I've seen a lot of like, different ways that we look at things. Like for me, from day one, especially with study abroad, it was like I had to kind of figure out everything on my own.

Ana Sofía wanted to fly with friends, also back home when her program was cut short by COVID-19, but she discovered this was impossible to coordinate and eventually flew alone both directions:

> I kept wanting to discuss it with my friends but they had no idea what they were doing, just because their parents were taking care of everything. And I was like, um, can I like talk to you Dad and Mom like, so we can coordinate? [chuckle] So it was just like, really hard.

Feelings of independence also emerged from having to fund study abroad independently. Jack and Karina, lower and lower-middle income respectively, specifically pointed to improved "money-management" skill, while others simply noted having to live on a budget and pay for study abroad independent of parents. For her part, Alice, who was lower income, had a visceral reaction to those students whom she perceived were wasting their parents' money. As she explained of her financial stress, "I had to worry about finances back at home, finances there, and like, how to budget the scholarship that I was given."

Solo travel was also a significant independence-building experience. In every case, participants had no prior experience with solo travel, even domestically. For a few participants this involved the very act of going on an independent study abroad program or not feeling they had a friend group abroad. For example, Max went independently for a full year exchange at a university in Dublin, as opposed to others who had a built-in study abroad peer group with whom they traveled and studied. As Max explained it:

> I guess I'm more independent. I was always an independent person, but now it's like I'm not uncomfortable being alone, which is really good, because I just feel like some people can't do that.

For Amy and Fran, solo travel also meant time spent on their own exploring their respective cities, which was motivated by a disconnect they felt with their study abroad peer group. As Fran described, of how being on her own was meaningful:

> I think I saw a side of myself that I really liked. Like my most meaningful experiences are just me doing things completely by myself and liking it, like riding the metro by myself, you know. I liked that sense of independence.

For others, solo travel was out-of-town trips taken independently on the weekend or during break periods. For these participants, solo travel was motivated by the desire to see something new and an intention to do so alone. For example, Sophie, who studied in Italy, did not sign up for an excursion, so rather than be alone while her roommates were gone, she decided to visit Nice, France. The sense that an opportunity would be missed seemed to override any discomfort the participant maybe felt traveling alone. For Lance, who studied in Qatar, all his friends dropped from a planned trip to Jordan. As Lance explained of his decision to visit Jordan alone, "I thought it'd be good for me. …You can't be like, hey, let's do it with somebody else or else you'll never do that."

Simply being far from home reinforced the need for independence on the part of some participants, who realized they had no one to rely on except themselves. Alice, Fran, and Karina expressed how this sense of independence persisted for them long after study abroad. This largely involved a commitment to doing what they feel is right for themselves, regardless of what other people say. For example, Karina reflected that she chose to study abroad to satisfy her curiosity, and after she returned chose to do an internship in real estate, which had long interested her. Karina's family protested that it

was not appropriate for her as an engineering major, but she felt, “I needed to do this for myself.”

Others took this yet further. Alice, for example, expressed increased independence in decision-making as a result of her early COVID-19 return. Alice described how she carried these feelings forward when she explained, “I feel more like I can just be a normal person and like, pursue my own dreams and goals. That makes sense for me and I feel less beholden to others.” Fran also directly attributed her sense of independence from study abroad to independence moving forward, when she stated, “My most meaningful experience was just doing things by myself and seeing that, you know, I can live a life that wasn’t cut out by someone else for me.”

Confidence

Similar to independence, nearly every participant mentioned they felt more confident as a result of study abroad. *Confidence* can be understood as “a belief in oneself, the conviction that one has the ability to meet life’s challenges and to succeed – and the willingness to act accordingly” (Psychology Today, n.d.). Independence and confidence were intertwined, in that successful experiences that generated independence created confidence for participants in their abilities. Thirteen participants specifically identified confidence as an outcome of their study abroad experience. While neither David nor Zach mentioned independence nor confidence directly, given Zach’s age and travel experience compared to others (see Table 2), as well as comments he made during the interview, it seemed he might already possess some degree of both.

While confidence was directly addressed by the majority of participants, several also mentioned related concepts. For example, a few indicated they felt more "capable" after studying abroad, and Alice and Heather felt "empowered." Others described themselves as what can best be described as more self-reliant, self-sufficient, and self-assured, which are quite similar to confidence in that they involve a belief or confidence in one's own abilities. Also of note is that four participants felt "proud" of themselves, having navigated study abroad, and referenced this in relation to confidence gains. While participants talked about confidence as a permanent gain, Fran felt her confidence was somewhat situational to study abroad, and waning a little after return.

Feelings of confidence generated satisfaction in tackling the challenges and uncertainty encountered during study abroad. For example, taking public transportation, getting lost, traveling alone, and simply navigating all that is unfamiliar with international travel. Participants emerged from these experiences feeling more capable and self-reliant, which grew confidence. While some realized they grew independence just leaving for college, Jack pointed out it took a lot more to go away to another country, which in turn generated confidence in oneself. Sophie summed this up when she stated:

> I think it definitely was a big confidence booster overall. Just, you know, like I said, learning that I can do things on my own, that even though it's scary, I'm far away from anybody I've known my whole life, that, you know, you have the ability to do it.

Confidence was expressed in various ways. For example, Laura and Ana Sofía found themselves more confident in decision-making skills. This generally involved improved trust in their own ability to make an appropriate decision and stick with it. Nate felt more confident to approach people who are different from himself, while Amy felt she made a serious dent in her struggle with imposter syndrome. As Amy explained:

> I'm not saying I'm cured by any means, but for sure, kind of, like I said like, navigating through all of that, it wasn't just by chance or because of anyone else or any other circumstance. It was like, I did this on my own. …Knowing like, oh, like *I am* capable of like, taking charge in these situations, like, *I am* capable of, you know, a lot of things that I thought I wasn't.

Some felt more confident to speak up for themselves, largely to advocate for their own interests, while Nate felt empowered to speak about things which are important to him. Heather found that speaking up at the hospital helped to alleviate her insecurity about not being a medical student, while Alice felt her newfound confidence helped her move beyond her insecurity in seeking assistance. As Alice explained it:

> Before I went to Japan, I was, I used to be a really shy person and I used to be really horrible about asking for things. …I felt really proud of myself and it felt meaningful to me that I was more self-sufficient.

Interestingly, Alice never learned how to drive, which she found extremely frightening. With her newfound confidence, Alice was finally ready to learn how to drive, and looked forward to the independence a car provides.

Others took away the feeling that having overcome the challenges of study abroad, they could tackle anything. For example, Lance very simply explained, “It gave me the power, like, not the power, just the self-confidence – sorry, that’s a better word – to feel like I can do anything.” Verónica elaborated as to how this feeling of confidence carried forward after study abroad:

> It just helped me feel more, I guess, confident, and just more proud, and just made me feel so much better about myself. …I feel like I just carry myself with so much more confidence. And like, like just because I was able to do this abroad, what means that I can't do it here?

Openness

While participants overwhelming indicated gains in independence and confidence, two thirds of participants also expressed increased openness as a result of study abroad. *Openness* refers to being receptive to cultural otherness and suspending judgement of difference (Deardorff, 2006). Participants discussed openness more in terms of the former, being receptive to difference, but also in terms of a new desire to learn more about people and places different from what they know. As for suspending judgement, this involved not attaching value to perspectives that differ from one’s own, and was represented in a number of participants’ comments.

Several participants indicated they gained a new sense of openness, in general, from study abroad. Amy expressed this when she plainly stated, “I think it’s made me a lot more open to things.” Others were more specific. For some, this included openness to learn more about the world. Even Zach, who had the most prior travel experience,

indicated that study abroad "strengthened" his desire to learn about new cultures. For others, openness meant being open to trying new things. For Nate, this was new foods. Writing in a reflection paper of the cognitive dissonance he welcomed, in pursuit of openness, Nate explained, "The goal was to feel somewhat uncomfortable in a foreign place so that I may truly learn about myself. I did this by trying different foods, for example, chicken feet!" For Laura, openness was to anything new. She credited study abroad and her Japanese peers with pushing her to be more open: "I'll try something once and that way I can say I've experienced it. And going to Japan was really the kind of thing that opened me up to that."

Interestingly, three participants indicated that study abroad as a first-generation student required openness, in a way that turned a lack of capital into an advantage. These participants felt that their lack of travel experience created a corresponding lack of preconceptions, which meant they entered study abroad with a more open mind. These individuals also felt they gained more from the experience compared to their continuing-generation peers. About study abroad, Sophie commented, "It's like a really new experience that's not something that I like, grew up having, so I guess my mind was just more open to it in general."

For others, openness manifested as a willingness to meet and talk to people who are different from themselves. As discussed previously, connections with others were a particularly meaningful component of study abroad for participants, many of whom indicated they had to step outside their comfort zone in order to connect with others. Openness, particularly the ability to suspend judgement, overlaps with awareness and,

particularly, the acceptance of other perspectives, which is the focus of the next sub-theme.

Awareness or Acceptance of Other Perspectives

In a recurring theme with these data, openness overlaps with this next sub-theme, the awareness and acceptance of other perspectives. Nine participants expressed they returned from study abroad more aware that their perspectives differ from others', and more accepting of these differences. This was expressed in numerous interrelated ways. Karina, Heather, and Zach indicated they returned home "more accepting" of others, while Alice, Amy, and Ana Sofía described themselves as "more understanding." In Laura's case, she felt she returned "more accommodating." Heather and Max directly described themselves as "less judgmental" in relation to other perspectives, while this arose indirectly for others as well.

Through their study abroad experiences, participants learned to attribute these differences to variations in such things as background, life experience, political system, values, and culture. Ana Sofía, Heather, and Verónica realized they grew up in a "bubble" in their respective hometowns, and even just Texas, and understood how this limited their ways of thinking. Ana Sofía recognized her thinking was probably limited to the perspectives of those within a "10 mile radius" of where she grew up. Verónica noticed how her bubble changed and eventually burst as a result of studying abroad. As Verónica explained it:

> I'm, again, from a small town. Like, it's just like, you don't really see too far beyond that. It's really interesting. And then I went off to college, and I just only

> saw myself in a like, little Texas bubble. …And then I went all across the world. Um, and just like, being able to see that there is so much more out there and you're just like, you shouldn't just be limited to that little like, small town point of view.

For Karina, Heather, and Zach, study abroad made them more accepting of other perspectives. In Karina's case, this came with understanding that Italy had cultural norms quite different from her own, but not to pass judgement on those differences. Although Karina related she initially found these difference "weird," she eventually reasoned, "Nothing can be weird like,…it's just different, and like, you just gotta accept it." Max and Heather also felt they returned from study abroad less judgmental. For Max, this involved having a more diverse friend group while abroad, and, as he related, understanding the value in "not closing people out because of their beliefs."

Alice, Amy, and Ana Sofía felt they returned from study abroad "more understanding," which like others involved the ability to recognize that other perspectives exist, but also how their thinking changed. Ana Sofía, who realized things "are not always black and white," described this perceived change as a result of study abroad. As Ana Sofía explained it, "In a lot of ways, it made me more understanding. I think subconsciously I was so used to like, imposing my own beliefs on people." This also overlapped with the ability to suspend judgment, in that Alice took *understanding* a step further and explained she also moved past the idea that her perspectives were inherently better. As Alice reflected:

> Before, I think, before I was really protective of my own views and I thought that they were the only views that mattered. …It's made me have like, more conversations with more people, and I've been able to understand like, more viewpoints.

While Nate did not use this direct language to describe such awareness or acceptance, he provided one of the best examples of awareness that multiple perspectives exist. Nate learned that what constituted diversity, and how racial or ethnic groups were broken down, was quite different in Singapore compared to the US. As Nate commented on this realization, "I'm like, well, I'm over here believing diversity is one thing, when three billion other people think it's a different thing, you know. It definitely showed me like, diversity means different things."

Collectively, participants communicated that developing a new or stronger sense of independence fueled feelings of confidence, while they also gained newfound openness that overlapped with the ability to not just be aware of, but in many cases accept, other perspectives. Participants described these perceived gains in relation to an improved ability to relate to others, the next and final sub-theme of this theme.

Improved Interpersonal Skills

Participants often expressed that study abroad improved their ability to relate to others, and described these gains in close relation to their perceived gains in openness and awareness or acceptance of other perspectives. This theme is thus called *improved interpersonal skills*, much like the interpersonal knowing domain of self-authorship. While nine participants expressed these gains in a variety of ways, the majority

explicitly felt they emerged as a "better listener." Others felt study abroad increased their comfort in interpersonal relations, while some felt they returned from study abroad "more empathetic."

As noted, most participants described being a better listener in explicit terms. Others took this a step further. For these nine, listening was associated with taking time to get to know others, "understand where they're coming from," how their experiences shaped them, and as a way to find "common ground" and "bridge the gap" to relate better. As discussed in the preceding section, some participants recognized they used to rush to judgement more readily, without taking the time to understand others' perspectives. Lance described how study abroad helped him learn to suspend behavior that limited his ability to hear everything an individual wished to communicate. As Lance described of this change:

> Just trying to take it a little slower and trying to get everything, all the details, and understand where they're coming from and stuff, before I make assumptions, conclusions, and stuff like that. I was very rash to jump to conclusions sometimes beforehand, so I say that's a definite improvement in that area.

Others simply drew a direct line between listening better and the need to step back and observe in order to understand. Sophie most fully encapsulated what was shared by participants when she described how her encounters with difference compelled her to listen better, and that she connected this with improved relations:

> I think after experiencing like, such a different culture, and so many different people – not just in Italy but from the other students in our program being [from]

> all across the country – um, really just learning to be like, open-minded and just listen to people. …I think it made me more aware of how other people grow up, and how not everybody does have the same experiences. So, seeing how many varying backgrounds people can come from, all the different things that they can go through, I think it opens your mind to how you can communicate and relate to other people.

In addition to simply being better listeners, participants also perceived an increased comfort in relating to others. While for a few this was framed in general terms, several felt they emerged from study abroad much more comfortable in approaching other people and more successful in interpersonal relations. For example, dating in Japan made Alice feel more confident in successfully navigating those often awkward-feeling initial conversations. Verónica felt an increased comfort with her own self after studying abroad. As she explained of her experience, and what it meant for her interpersonal skills, she stated, "It helped me, the person, to like, be okay with making like, social connections, and like, just being comfortable in my own skin."

For Alice and Jack, comfort in interpersonal relations came in the form of understanding that relationships should not be forced, but rather happen naturally. Both felt prior to study abroad that they were on the perimeter of their respective friend groups, and perhaps tried too hard to make relationships work with individuals who were either not reciprocating or did not treat them with the same degree of respect. For Alice and Amy, being a better listener, and being patient to understand others, meant they returned home feeling more empathetic.

For others, increased comfort was found in approaching those who were different from themselves. This included both study abroad peers and those met while abroad. This allowed participants to expand their friend group, often with individuals they might not have previously considered. Bridging difference provided new and previously unexpected friends, and also overlapped with the skill of listening. As participants discovered, in order to bridge difference, one must first listen. As Karina explained of her study abroad experience and its interpersonal outcome:

> It helped me to get comfortable with different types of people. Now, like, I have a more varied group of friends and like, I'm very thankful for that now. And like, now I see it that I feel like, I can talk to, like, …more people than, like, I could before.

Participants carried these gains home after study abroad, and felt they would relate to others better moving forward. Collectively, these new and improved abilities overlapped, with increased independence, confidence, openness, an awareness or acceptance of other perspectives, and improved interpersonal skills that emerged in interrelated ways. As Amy succinctly stated, "I see myself a lot stronger, more capable, a lot more empathetic, a lot more understanding, a lot wiser, for sure."

Theme 4: Clarity Regarding Values, Beliefs, and Identity

For participants, studying abroad was instrumental in clarifying what they want from life, how they wish to live, and how they see themselves. At its core, this demonstrated a refined sense of self, the intrapersonal domain of self-authorship, which included clarity regarding beliefs, values, and identity.

In this case, *clarity* was a realization known with certainty. Clarity emerged with regard to careers, but also involved how participants wanted travel to be a component of their future, and how their experiences informed a better sense of their own values and beliefs. Clarity is composed of three sub-themes that address movement toward self-authorship in the intrapersonal domain. This includes (a) clarity regarding the future, (b) evolving values and beliefs, and (c) a clarified sense of self.

Clarity Regarding the Future

For nine participants, studying abroad served to clarify, as Max put it, "the kind of life that I want to live." By and large, this involved clarity regarding one's path forward beyond college. For example, a realization regarding the career they wished to pursue or the work environment they desired, as well as a plan to continue to travel and learn about the world.

Through their internships abroad, David and Nate discovered the type of work environment that best suits them. Nate expected his job in Singapore to be fast paced and hectic, but instead discovered it was more relaxed and provided a balance that he valued. Nate even felt he returned home more "chill" and approached work in a different way as a result. As Nate described it:

> I appreciated the work ethic that they had over there. …It was more like if you need to take a break, take a break. If you need to go outside and walk around, go walk around. I'm going to be in here [in the lab] until as long as I feel comfortable.

David similarly came to this realization, with an interesting outcome. Rather than the competitive, goal-driven environment of the on-campus job that made him feel "on edge," David learned he valued the team-based environment and work-life balance that his internship site offered. David quit his on-campus job once he returned from study abroad, realizing it was a poor fit with what he valued.

In the case of Ana Sofía and Lance, whose programs were cut short by COVID-19, clarity seemed to be a reminder to live more in the moment. Once she had to go home, Ana Sofía realized she kept planning for the next weekend trip, rather than spending time with her host family or exploring her host city. This reinforced for Ana Sofía the importance of living more in the present. Lance similarly learned that while planning ahead is valuable, sometimes one needs to be flexible. When his summer internship also fell through due to COVID-19, another fell in his lap. Although it was not quite his area of interest, from Lance's perspective, he returned much less bound to a "rigid" career path:

> I'm going to be super open to any opportunities that come forward, right. …I was like, *why not*? …When I thought about it more, right, you can't be too choosy about stuff, especially during this time. …Now I'm just kinda like, a little more free rein.

Going into study abroad, several participants already had an idea what career they might want to pursue, but for a number of reasons had not yet committed to that path. For example, being in Japan solidified Laura's plan to pursue a career in localization teams, an area of anthropology that adapts products to markets in a different

cultural context, a career path she initially discovered through gaming. In a reflection paper, Nate addressed how he would now like to have a career with a research component. For Zach, completing an internship in Japan confirmed his intent to return there for work after graduation. He also addressed this in a post-study abroad reflection paper, where he wrote:

> I think these growths and overall experience will impact my future career decisions as it has taught me what it is that I would want in a future career. I now know my strengths and what type of work that I would like to focus on in my future. I also know that I would like to work internationally with an organization that holds some of the same values and practices that [my internship site] exhibited. My future career decisions would be made to get me closer to these new goals.

For her part, before studying abroad Heather was on the fence about becoming a physician assistant, but her internship in a Barcelona hospital changed all that. "It was an opportunity that kind of sealed the deal for me," explained Heather. "When I came back, I was totally decided and like, determined, to work towards that."

Verónica's study abroad experience convinced her to pursue a career as a bilingual child therapist. For Verónica, the experience of studying abroad shifted her perception of graduate school to something that felt feasible: "It was a little like, in my brain, right before the studying abroad like, oh, like you *could* do this, but [afterwards] it was more like, uh, you *should* do this." At the time of the member check, Verónica was completing applications for doctoral programs, half of them outside Texas. Verónica

specifically attributed her study abroad experience with creating a desire to go to graduate school out-of-state: “I would say 100%, living abroad influenced that decision, where I’m not just looking at Texas, because I know I’m able to go off and figure it out by myself.”

For a few participants, study abroad propelled them in an entirely new direction. Laura, for example, was motivated to work for her institution’s education abroad office as a peer mentor after returning. For Fran and Max, studying abroad completely changed their plans for after graduation. Prior to studying abroad, Fran planned to go directly from undergraduate to graduate studies. Studying abroad, however, made Fran realize that graduate school was not her best next step. Also, similar to Lance, Fran felt more flexible and open to possibilities, rather than tied to a timeline. As she explained it, “I think it taught me that I don’t really have to have my whole life planned out 10 years in advance.” Fran recognized she had no idea what to study and did not want to make a decision that simply met the expectations of her family. Of study abroad, Fran exclaimed:

> It’s completely – it’s changed everything. Um, before study abroad my plan was to go to grad school, next um, next semester. And I still do, I still would love to go to grad school, …but first I think I really need to figure out what I want to learn and who I am.

Instead of proceeding to graduate school right away, Fran now plans to return to Spain after graduation and work for a while as she figures things out.

Before studying abroad, Max intended to go to law school and work as an attorney. After studying abroad, however, he is intent on being an entrepreneur in order to support a life in Europe. In a first move, he recently started a company with friends to sell a COVID-19 friendly door handle they invented. Max still intends to go to law school, but in order to use that knowledge to support his businesses. As Max explained it:

> Coming out of it, I was like, nope, I actually don't want to work. If I do, I want to work for myself. That's what changed the most. I don't want to work for anybody else, I want to earn for myself, because I want the freedom to travel and to just expand.

Max actually quantified how much income he would need to generate off his companies in order to move around Europe every few months. As Max explained, "I got that sneak peak of the kind of life that I want to live."

These comments point to another realization among participants, who overwhelmingly indicated they want travel to be a part of their future. Study abroad seemed to normalize travel for participants. While the initial airfare was a substantial expense, many participants shared their surprise at how easy and affordable it was to travel once abroad. This was also partially due to the revelation of Texas' size relative to Europe, and the ease with which they could move about using public transportation. As Karina explained, "Now I'm actually curious to see like, other states and even other countries." For her part, since Heather did not waste any time in travelling. Among the

vlogs she shared was one that detailed a trip she took to Paris with friends the winter after she studied abroad.

Like Karina, many participants referenced curiosity, specifically, and a desire to learn more, as their motivation to travel in the future. Having had a taste of the world, they realized there was more to discover. After visiting Paris, for example, Verónica decided to begin studying French, with the intent to visit someday. “I still want to learn more,” she explained. “I’m like, it inspired me a little. …I’m 100% positive that at some point, when I am completely financially able to, I will return to Paris or France.”

For Lance and Max, life back home simply felt “boring” compared to their adventures abroad. Lance summed up the curiosity and desire to learn that participants expressed in relation to study abroad when he stated:

> I wanted to go right back out and go to some other place, like some other place different, like South Korea, Thailand, something like that. …I really want to learn. Like, the only thing is to just engage my, my wanting to learn more and just my curiosity of other places, right.

For participants, the experience of education abroad clarified the kind of life they wished to live, the kind of work that best suited them, and defined their sense of self as a traveler. Evolving values and beliefs is discussed in greater detail in the next sub-theme, while a discussion of identity follows to conclude this theme.

Evolving Values and Beliefs

Clarity regarding the future overlaps significantly with this sub-theme, evolving values and beliefs. Most participants shared some realization that represented how a

study abroad experience honed their own values and beliefs. For some, their study abroad experience reinforced or intensified their values and beliefs, while for others they acquired entirely new emerging values and beliefs as a result of study abroad.

First, I will revisit the intent to travel that many participants developed from study abroad, discussed under the previous sub-theme. Participants' comments often communicated not just the desire to travel, but the reasons why it held value in their eyes. As Max explained, there is no substitute for visiting someplace in person: "I don't care if someone reads a book, if you haven't been there, *you don't know*." Karina related this takeaway from education abroad to a real estate internship she accepted the summer after her return. Her family was opposed to the idea, as it was unrelated to her major in engineering, but she felt she had to satisfy a lingering interest in real estate, the same as travel would satisfy her curiosity about the world. As Karina explained of her beliefs, "If I know this is going to benefit me in the future, if I know like, I'm going to take some learning experience from this like, I want to continue things."

Max's experiences "reaffirmed" existing beliefs. In particular, Max's experience with GHB drove home his understanding of how to remain safe: "No, like actually *do – not – take – drinks – from – strangers."* Amy similarly found her views only stronger after her study abroad. Amy described how talking to others, in particular her encounter with the waitress deported from the US, reinforced her views: "Hearing everyone's stories and views on things kind of just, I'd say like, fueled my passion for things and things that I believe in."

Others returned with evolving values and beliefs they probably did not anticipate. For Ana Sofía and Jack, the conservation efforts and eco-friendly practices they encountered in Germany made them think about their actions and question how they could do better for the environment. In the case of Karina and Max, both acquired a taste for minimalism while abroad, and both gestured to sparsely decorated rooms behind them during the Zoom interview as evidence. For Karina, this was prompted by the realization that you can move around easier with fewer things, and that in turn "helped me focus on what I actually need." In Max's case, he noticed how much smaller things were in Ireland, and how people had fewer belongings. Max described how this experience shaped his behavior upon return:

> The way they live like, I really fell in love with all of that, like the way they grocery shop, the way they live is very minimalist, and they don't need a lot. So I kind of adapted some of that into my way I live now. I try to minimize everything. …I kind of got home and started throwing like – if I didn't use it, I threw it away. And my room's kind of, not bare, but there's nothing that I don't use.

For Alice, Heather, and Lance, their values and beliefs generated from study abroad were expressed in ways that communicated how meaningful they were to each participant. Lance returned from Qatar with a new appreciation for the Middle East, and a sense that he has a responsibility to combat the negative stereotypes of the Middle East and Muslim world. As Lance commented on the role he sees for himself, "I feel like my

place now is to just be, is to try to be a better person, and educating people on this, right. Especially with my friends and family members."

In retrospect, Heather realized she was in a "bubble" prior to studying abroad. While study abroad prompted her to consider a variety of issues, interning in a hospital highlighted the contrast between Spain's universal health care and that of the US. As Heather explained her journey in this area:

> I wasn't ever really like, focused on like, political issues or economical issues, not even health care differences, until I went over there. …It just really opens your mind to like, where we could improve, especially as somebody that's aspiring to be a healthcare provider. It just, I think it gives you that little like, push, and motivation to try to make things better.

Heather's evolving values regarding health care also prompted her to consider what role this played in the COVID-19 responses mounted by Spain versus the US, since Spain more securely locked down. Interestingly, Heather also developed the belief from study abroad that being bilingual is an asset. Heather left Spain "grateful" to be bilingual and understanding how this is a skill she can use in her future career as a child therapist.

Alice, similarly, formed new beliefs and values from observing how Japan responded to societal issues compared to the US. Alice believed that being in a "collectivist society," as opposed to independence-focused America, made her more appreciative of the Japanese emphasis on community and caring for older adults. For Alice, however, one of the most meaningful aspects of studying abroad was discovering her sense of spirituality. Growing up, Alice believed that organized religion and belief in

God were the only possible routes to spirituality, which could not possibly exist outside that context. Through experiencing Japan's very different relationship with religion, Alice discovered that she is indeed a spiritual person and that she has the ability to define spirituality and morality for herself. Alice became quite emotional as she related this discovery:

> It made me realize that even though I'm not spiritual, in like the Judeo-Christian sense of the word, that I still have spirituality and that my morals don't necessarily have to come from the Bible or from what my Mom has told me. They can just come from being a human being that feels for other people, and understands that my point of view isn't the only one that matters, and that my way of life isn't the only one or the correct one.

For participants of this study, the experience of education abroad helped shape their beliefs and values. Participants came to view themselves as travelers, who value the experience of travel as a learning endeavor. Others felt their beliefs were reinforced or strengthened as a result of their experience abroad. Some acquired new values and beliefs that impacted their choices in how to live. In every case, participants more internally defined these evolving values and beliefs based on experience abroad. This brings us to the final sub-theme of clarity, that explores how an education abroad experience shaped certain participant's sense of self, or identity.

Clarified Sense of Self

For the vast majority of participants, studying abroad helped to further shape their sense of self. There was, however, an interesting divide in these takeaways between

Hispanic and non-Hispanic participants. While this was most evident among the three Hispanic participants who studied abroad in Spain (see Table 3), as heritage speakers of Spanish, every participant who identified as Hispanic expressed a keener sense of self as Hispanic due to their experience abroad.

Table 3 Study Abroad Locales with Hispanic Participants Highlighted

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Study Abroad Locale
Alice	Female	White	Japan
Amy	Female	Hispanic	Italy
Ana Sofía	Female	Hispanic	Germany
David	Male	Asian	Cyprus
Fran	Female	Hispanic	Spain
Heather	Female	Hispanic/Latino	Spain
Jack	Female	Hispanic	Germany
Karina	Female	Hispanic	Italy
Lance	Male	White	Qatar
Laura	Female	Hispanic	Japan
Max	Male	Hispanic	Ireland
Nate	Male	Black & White	Singapore
Sophie	Female	White	Italy
Verónica	Female	Hispanic	Spain
Zach	Male	White	Japan

In many ways, this sub-theme best represents how these data are intertwined. The things participants attributed to their greater sense of self as Hispanic revealed how their experiences navigating uncertainty, in various ways, contributed to abilities, interpersonal relations, and clarity, that for Hispanic females proved particularly meaningful.

For the six participants who identified as White or Asian (see Table 3), how racial/ethnic identity manifested in interviews seemed minor compared to participants who identified as Hispanic. Of the non-Hispanic participants, only four communicated a

keener sense of self due to study abroad. For Alice, Lance, and Zach, who identified as White, each also studied abroad in a region of the world where they felt othered either by race/ethnicity (see Table 3). Each made comments that indicated awareness of their race/ethnicity, and the complexities they encountered navigating life as a racially/ethnically minoritized individual, though it was unclear whether or not this awareness predated study abroad.

For Alice and Zach, navigating social encounters and establishing relationships in Japan was a challenge as a *gaijin*, or foreigner (literally outsider), an identity they struggled with but accepted. While Zach did not directly address race/ethnicity, Alice and Lance brought this up in discussions related to uncertainty encountered in social interactions. In Lance's case, he was aware of the reason he was singled out on the street, an encounter he found "scary," for a document check by the authorities in Jordan. As he explained it, "I'm a white dude, I speak English, and I just look strange from everybody else."

In the case of David and Sophie (see Table 3), study abroad did not appear to shape their sense of self, at least not in a way they could articulate. As an Asian male, David felt the same degree of annoyances in Cyprus that he did at home. For example, he was often mistaken for Chinese, although his background is Vietnamese. In that sense, studying abroad did not feel too different, or seem to prompt reflection on his sense of self. Sophie, a White female who studied abroad in Italy, could not articulate anything related to race/ethnicity during the interview.

While it is difficult to know to what degree Alice and Zach were aware of their race/ethnicity prior to study abroad, each were quite clear about how studying abroad made them see themselves. Zach already had a significant amount of prior travel experience with his Aunt, including other Asian countries, and seemed to have the most developed sense of self amongst participants. At the age of 23, Zach was the oldest participant (see Table 1), which might also have been a contributing factor. Zach described himself as "not necessarily American," and "more as a person of the world."

Alice found studying abroad "empowering," in that it allowed her to break away from the gifted and talented designation she felt dominated her life up until that point. While in Japan, Alice's host institution approached her about the possibility she might be dyslexic when it came to writing in Japanese. Dyslexia and related disorders are common in her family, and Alice indicated her experience in Japan caused her to reflect on her own learning, and made her feel "empowered" to seek diagnoses, also for attention deficit disorder. As Alice explained of her change in thinking:

> I didn't want to like, have the stigma behind it, and I saw how much my brother fought it. And I was like, well, I'm not my brother, and like, that's not the same thing, and I'm fine. And I wasn't. I was really stuck in my GT [gifted and talented] kid mentality, because I was that GT kid, and like, I was supposed to do great things, and I was going to be the savior of the family. And I feel like, there's less pressure on that now for me. I feel more like I can just be a normal person, and like, pursue my own dreams and goals. That makes sense for me, and I feel less beholden to other people.

For his part, Nate, who identified as both Black and White, studying abroad in Singapore provided some unexpected realizations. Similar to David, Nate realized his identity was less clear for others abroad, most notably when a professor mistook him for South Asian, and a friend thought he was Mexican. While these were frustrating experiences for Nate, he also saw advantages to his situation in Singapore. Nate recognized he was in a different racial/ethnic context with stereotypes of its own, which allowed him to step outside his identity as a person of color in the US context. As Nate reflected:

> Over there it's like…we didn't think about our race and we weren't dealing with the pressures of stereotypes. I think that was, in a way, more favorable for me, just because, yeah, I'll take a stereotype of Westerners rather than like, specifically Black people or White people even.

In Singapore, Nate viewed himself more as a Westerner than by race, which he seemed to appreciate and in which he found some respite. Unlike his fellow White participants, what Nate shared regarding his ability to step outside the US context regarding race/ethnicity, to reshape his sense of self abroad, resembled the experiences of participants who identified as Hispanic.

The participants who identified as Hispanic seemed to get more out of their study abroad experience with regard to a keener sense of racial/ethnic identity. This was particularly evident in the three participants who studied abroad in Spain. Of the 15 total participants, nine identified in full or part as Hispanic (see Table 3). A better sense of self as Hispanic emerged from study abroad for these nine participants in varying ways.

Some simply became more aware of their Hispanic identity, what that meant to them, or how it shaped them. Others, similar to Nate, were surprised to discover they did not feel racially/ethnically minoritized while abroad. For some, this increased their comfort with, and acceptance of, their Hispanic identity. A few shared feelings that went even further, feeling pride in their Hispanic identity, and even connected this to feelings of confidence.

For some participants, studying abroad and observing other cultural norms prompted them to reflect on their own culture in ways that created new awareness of their Hispanic identity. For example, Amy felt that Italians placed the same value as Hispanics on the importance of family, yet had not reflected on that value prior to studying abroad. As she explained, "Where I'm from, it's mostly a Hispanic population, so it's not really something I thought twice about. It's pretty much just like, this is how life is." For Ana Sofía, watching her German host family interact, in particular the dynamic between host Mother and daughter, caused her reflect on her Hispanic culture and what she perceived as the relative importance of warmth and touch in Hispanic families. As Ana Sofía explained, "I didn't think anything about it until I was over there."

For Laura, awareness also created acceptance. Studying abroad helped Laura get in touch with her Hispanic side, even though that was in Japan. Laura's Father was White and her Mother Mexican-American. Her Mother did not speak Spanish at home, a trend started by the grandparents, who wished their children to assimilate. Laura also conceded she was "White passing" and that she "had the pleasure, I guess, of not having

to think about it." For Laura, Hispanic was largely just a box she checked on forms. Studying abroad in Japan, however, prompted Laura to reflect on race and ethnicity, and realize that she can combine both White and Hispanic/Mexican-American into her identity. As Laura explained it:

> I think, um, going to Japan and seeing that kind of homogenous culture made me realize, you know, how important it is to relate to, um, the culture that you do have. So it definitely, when I got back it did make me, um, appreciate being Hispanic more. …It's just made me more aware of *who I am*, if that makes sense. So, I don't really fit into one sub-theme.

For Karina and Jack, being able to speak Spanish outside the US and Mexico changed how they viewed themselves as part of the Hispanic world. Both discovered they could be "instant friends," as Jack referred to it, speaking Spanish with others outside the US or Mexico. For Karina, who also identified as Norteña, a female from Northern Mexico, this transcended the regional distinctions that she perceived created barriers in Mexico. In Spain, Karina instead discovered she felt welcomed and part of a larger community as a Spanish speaker, in spite of the dialect differences. "They just spoke Spanish. I felt like, I was their friend, like it was *home*."

In addition to awareness of one's Hispanic identity, some participants expressed a new sense of self-acceptance and comfort with regard to their Hispanic identity. Both Fran and Verónica were reminded of the beauty of the Spanish language, and finding it the norm, felt increased acceptance and comfort in their identity both as Hispanic and a

Spanish speaker. This in turn created pride in their Hispanic identity and confidence in conveying this part of themselves.

Although Fran grew up speaking Spanish, she never had Spanish-speaking friends. Verónica also grew up speaking Spanish, but unlike Fran, lived in a border town surrounded by her first language. After going away to college, however, Verónica feared she might be losing her Spanish language skills, which in part influenced her decision to study in Spain. Verónica wanted to exercise her Spanish skills, but she took more than that away from study abroad. As she explained it, "I like, forgot how like, beautiful a language it is. It's just, I'm really grateful that I know two languages." Fran more fully described how using her native language on a regular basis helped her connect with that part of her identity. "It helped me being in a country where the language I speak is beautiful, it's the norm, you know. Everyone is speaking it. I think that really helped me become more comfortable and accepting of that part of myself."

A number of Hispanic participants, similar to Nate, expressed that they discovered themselves not racially/ethnically minoritized while studying abroad. This was both new and unexpected for participants, who found themselves outside the context of the racial stereotypes and racism that saturate life in the US. This was the case for Fran, Heather, and Max, who realized they did not feel like a "minority" in their respective study abroad locations. For example, Max felt that being Hispanic felt "more acceptable" in Ireland, where he did not feel racially/ethnically minoritized compared to his experience the US. Heather and Fran, both of whom studied abroad in Spain, seemed more deeply touched by the experience. Fran described these feelings quite plainly when

she stated, “I didn’t realize how much I felt like a minority until I was in a place where I really wasn’t.” Heather realized that as a Hispanic, and particularly a Mexican-American, her experience of feeling denigrated and racially/ethnically minoritized might be limited to the context of the US. For her part, Heather felt the experience of studying abroad helped her grow beyond the negative perceptions of others. As she explained of her experience as a Mexican-American in Spain:

> Everybody was just like, fascinated by it over there, whereas here it’s like, looked down upon. So I think – obviously it’s a sad thing, but – getting there [to Spain] and like, realizing that it’s literally only here [in the US], just made me feel like I – I think I grew a thicker skin. I was like, I don’t need this.

For these participants, feelings of awareness, acceptance, or comfort were mentioned in reference to feelings of pride and confidence in their identity. This was the case for Amy, Fran, Heather, and Verónica, for whom the experience of studying abroad engendered pride in their Hispanic identity. As a reminder, Fran, Heather, and Verónica were the three who studied in Spain. As noted, Fran felt more comfortable and accepting of her Hispanic and Spanish-speaking identities. Fran also found she was “much more confident” and “appreciated” herself more after studying abroad. Fran elaborated how she perceived study abroad shaped her sense of self:

> It has changed how I see myself. Going from Texas to somewhere like there, I, I felt seen, and here I just don’t, and I didn’t realize that. I didn’t realize how much I give myself like, I give others excuse, or just this like, place and excuse for

> treating me – or not treating me specifically but – the way I see myself, you know.

In this vein, Fran related she used to use *Fran*, rather than her full name *Francisca*, on job applications, since it appeared less Hispanic. Since her return from study abroad, Fran decided she would no longer do that, since it allowed others' perceptions to influence her decisions and how she sees herself. As Fran concluded, "I'm not going to work for a company that's not going to hire me because of my name."

As a Hispanic female and STEM major, Heather felt relief in Spain, where neither being a woman nor being Hispanic felt like barriers. For Heather, being Hispanic and speaking Spanish instead felt advantageous, which imbued her with confidence and pride in her Hispanic identity. As Heather described it:

> I felt like I was at an advantage, and it just gave me like, confidence. …Nobody really paid attention to that and nobody was like, oh, she's a woman, she's not going to know as much as, or oh, she speaks Spanish, she's just Mexican, you know. It just made me grow more confident. ...It gave me like, a sense of confidence that when I came back, I just kept with me. I was like, okay, if these people don't want to talk to me then that's fine, like, they're not gonna matter. …It just made me proud to be like, a Latina and Hispanic, because I go over there and I can identify myself as proud of who I am.

For these participants, studying abroad allowed them to see themselves anew, and in a positive light, creating acceptance, comfort, pride, and confidence in their Hispanic identity not previously encountered. While non-Hispanic participants'

takeaways appeared limited to awareness, only Nate's realization he did not feel racially/ethnically minoritized in Singapore was shared in common with some Hispanic participants. For those who identified as Hispanic, study abroad generated far more in relation to their Hispanic identity than simply awareness.

Development of one's identity as Hispanic encompassed a richer set of data and is representative of how these data are intertwined. Participants attributed meaning-making surrounding their Hispanic identity to their study abroad experience. They expressed how study abroad provided them a greater sense of acceptance or appreciation, in part due to feeling they were not racially/ethnically minoritized abroad, and for some due to being in a Spanish-speaking country. Those who studied in Spain felt this extended to feelings of pride in their Hispanic and Spanish-speaking identities, and allowed them to overcome the marginalization experienced as a racially/ethnically minoritized individual in the US, ultimately giving them confidence in their identity and self.

Collectively, these themes represent the interconnected nature of these findings. Participants encountered cognitive dissonance, and when successfully navigated, generated new or improved abilities. The experience of education abroad shaped participants' values, beliefs, and identity in ways that provided them self-assurance and confidence moving forward. Now that a presentation of the four themes is complete, the next section addresses the data collected from artifacts used for the purpose of triangulation.

Triangulation

As noted in the preceding presentation of findings, substantiating data at times included that derived from triangulation artifacts. Ana Sofía shared part of the handwritten journal she kept while abroad, Heather shared vlogs she made while abroad, while Nate and Zach both shared reflection papers they wrote for the course associated with their respective internships. While only four of 15 participants provided additional data sources, these data in part corroborated that gathered through interviews, while many of the same themes emerged. What follows is a brief description, presented thematically, that explains the degree to which these data served to triangulate findings.

Theme 1: Navigating Uncertainty

Data that emerged from triangulation artifacts comported with the sub-themes surrounding discomforting situations and discomforting encounters. Although participants did not directly address parental hesitation, the first sub-theme of Navigating Uncertainty, given Heather's challenge in that regard it seems important to point out that her first vlog included video of a large, multi-generational contingent of family at the airport to send her off.

Three participants who shared additional data sources discussed in their respective artifacts what was categorized as discomforting situations. Ana Sofía and Heather addressed the disequilibrium encountered from being lost, which was a common experience. For Zach, uncertainty was encountered in the form of "new problems I had not dealt with before" at his internship site, which Zach navigated by "developing creative solutions, [which]…ultimately became one of the biggest take-aways."

Theme 2: Meaningfulness of Intrapersonal Relations

All four participants discussed the role of genuine connections with others in ways that touched on the first three of the four sub-themes of support, camaraderie, learning, and being pushed outside one's comfort zone.

The camaraderie aspects of interpersonal relations were most mentioned and often overlapped with support or learning. In his reflection paper, Nate wrote he "made lifelong friends and will continue to stay in touch with them as the years pass." Ana Sofía and Heather both found their host families a source of camaraderie, and enjoyed cooking with and for them. Ana Sofía, however, also found this camaraderie a source of support when she felt a little homesick. As Ana Sofía wrote in her journal of this experience:

> The day was filled with food, board games, snacks, and Netflix. And somewhere in between I managed to forget I have only known them for a few weeks. As much as I miss my family, I know I can remind myself of the relationships I am able to build while I am away.

Heather also referenced experiences of camaraderie that overlapped with learning. For example, Heather's vlog documented her host Father teaching her how to make a Spanish tortilla. All participants appeared joyful, laughed often, and enjoyed a meal together at the end.

Nate and Zach addressed the learning aspect of interpersonal relations in their respective reflection papers. Zach wrote of how he valued the very relationship-oriented Japanese work culture, and how he can see applying what he learned in Japan elsewhere:

"I greatly admired and enjoyed these activities and think that other organizations could benefit to incorporating such practices." For his part, Nate described his excitement that he could learn about Singapore by talking with locals.

Theme 3: New and Improved Abilities

Four of five sub-themes of new and improved abilities emerged from triangulation artifacts: Independence, confidence, learning, and awareness or acceptance of other perspectives. Only improved interpersonal skills did not emerge from these data. This particular theme also only involved Nate and Zach with regard to data from triangulation artifacts.

Nate and Zach both addressed perceived gains in their reflection papers, which is probably no surprise since these were written to describe their internship experience. While Nate indirectly indicated during the interview that he now experiences more independence, he directly described this in his reflection paper. For Nate, this emerged from learning upon arrival that he was working on his own: "I have learned to work alone. Because I did not have a group to work with, it was often a challenge to seek out help from my peers. …I was able to work independently."

Although Nate did not mention confidence in his interview, he did so in his reflection paper, where he wrote, "I know that I am more confident." For Zach's part, he reiterated in his reflection paper how he gained independence and confidence, while Nate also reiterated how he used trying new foods as a way force openness on his part, and also described how he made meaning of multiple perspectives. Of that, Nate wrote:

> My perspective has changed in the sense that I am a small person in this vast world. I already knew that but being able to see and experience other cultures as well as social norms let me know that it exists and those people can be at peace with something far different than what I am used to.

Theme 4: Clarity Regarding Values, Beliefs, and Identity

Clarity involved three sub-themes, clarity regarding the future, evolving values and beliefs, and a clarified sense of self. In the case of triangulation artifacts, data emerged that aligned with the first sub-theme clarity regarding the future. For Nate and Zach, this was with regard to career clarity. This emerged in Zach's interview, but not in Nate's. The other aspect of the sub-theme involving clarity regarding the future was a desire on the part of participants to make travel part of their life. While both Ana Sofía and Heather expressed this intent during the interview, Heather did not mention she already started. Amongst the vlogs that Heather shared was one that documented a trip she took with friends to Paris the winter after she studied abroad.

Triangulation Summary Statement

While data emerged from triangulation artifacts that comported with that collected via interviews, this was not complete. It is important point out that data did not emerge from artifacts in relation to identity development, which was presented in the fourth theme. It might not be a surprise that this did not emerge in these artifacts, first due to the nature of the artifact and, second, due to what the participants shared in their interviews. While Heather expressed a new sense of self as Hispanic during her interview, this did not emerge in her vlogs. However, given the audience for her vlogs,

family and friends, it might be reasonable to understand why she focused on fun aspects of her experience and created what can best be described as video postcards. Similarly, it is possible that Nate did not touch on how he stepped outside his racially/ethnically minoritized identity since he wrote the reflection paper to address the internship work experience.

As for Ana Sofía and Jack, what they shared via the interview was limited when it came to identity development. For example, Ana Sofía discovered studying abroad made her aware of certain aspects of her Hispanic culture, and helped her to see how it permeates her life in ways she had not previously recognized. For Zach, he was aware of his racially/ethnically minoritized status in Japan, and the challenges that posed, but did not elaborate. In each case it may also simply be that participants did not particularly reflect on identity until an interview question prompted such reflection.

Despite that the triangulation data did not align in every single case, and in light of possible limitations with the artifacts, it remains significant that these data generated units that directly aligned with a majority of the existing sub-themes.

Summary

These data present a picture of the experience of education abroad for first-generation students, as well as those with intersecting identities as socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized, through the lens of self-authorship. Participants encountered and navigated cognitive dissonance, from unsupportive parents pre-departure to a variety of experiences at every stage of their study abroad experience. They built meaningful relationships with others, often pushed through the disequilibrium

involved outside their comfort zone, became aware of differences, and even grew to accept inherent differences in people and perspectives. It is no surprise then that participants expressed they felt they grew from this disequilibrium, in the form of independence, confidence, openness, increased comfort with other perspectives, and improved interpersonal skills.

While themes are intertwined, so are the new and improved abilities participants perceived they gained. From some experiences of disequilibrium and gains came clarity in the kind of life participants wanted to lead and the values and beliefs they better understood. Racially/ethnically minoritized participants largely discovered they did not feel minoritized abroad, which allowed participants to see themselves through their own eyes, not others. This was particularly true of the Hispanic female participants, and even more so of the three who studied in Spain, who connected in a meaningful and positive way with their Hispanic and Spanish-speaking identities. This concludes the presentation of findings. Next, Chapter V will explore these findings through the lens of Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, the theoretical framework used, with the aim of answering the two research questions that guided this study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the findings of this study through the lens of Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, address the research questions, and discuss the implications that emerged from these findings. First, the findings described in Chapter IV are summarized, followed by an overview of self-authorship, the theoretical framework used in this study. The third section of this chapter discusses the findings through the lens of self-authorship. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for research, policy, and practice.

Summary of Findings

Four themes emergent from open coding of this study's data. *Navigating Uncertainty* described how participants encountered and navigated cognitive dissonance during education abroad. This included parental hesitation to participation in education abroad, discomforting situations, and discomforting encounters. Participants engaged this dissonance and made meaning of these experiences, often by listening to and acting upon their own needs. *Meaningfulness of Interpersonal Relations* involved the role of human connections in providing support, camaraderie, and learning opportunities that were particularly meaningful to participants. Interpersonal relations was also a source of cognitive dissonance for some. Cognitive dissonance and interpersonal relations contributed to *New and Improved Abilities* that participants perceived they gained as a

result of education abroad. This included, independence, confidence, openness, awareness or acceptance of other perspectives, and improved interpersonal skill. And, finally, the experience of education abroad provided *Clarity Regarding Values, Beliefs, and Identity*. This involved how study abroad shaped participants' plans for the future, evolving values and beliefs, and for most racially/ethnically minoritized, reframed their sense of self and self-worth. This was particularly the case for Hispanic participants, also heritage speakers of Spanish, who studied in Spain. Collectively, the experience of education abroad was a source of cognitive dissonance that challenged participants to consider what was best for them as individuals, what they believe, and how they see themselves. The findings of this study also demonstrated the interconnected nature of development, since findings often overlapped domains or were interconnected.

Theoretical Framework

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship served as the theoretical framework that guided this study. Self-authorship involves the emergence of increasing complexity, catalyzed by cognitive dissonance, across three domains of development: Cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal (Baxter Magolda, 2001) (see Figure 1). In short, self-authorship involves the complex interplay across domains with regard to "how we know or decide what to believe, how we view ourselves, and how we construct relationships with others" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. xix). Self-authorship's domains are interconnected, with development in one domain supporting development in another, and the theory thus considered a holistic view of development (Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004).

A three-stage iteration that describes the development of self-authorship was utilized for this study (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). The three stages are (a) following external formulas, (b) the crossroads, and (c) internal foundations (self-authoring) (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) (see Figure 2, Appendix A). In the first stage, individuals determine beliefs, values, identity, and relationships based on the expectations of external sources, for example parents, school, church, or normative values (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As an individual realizes that external sources do not have all the answers, and external sources' needs sometimes conflict with one's own, the individual begins to lean on their internal voice and enters the crossroads (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). The crossroads is marked by conflict between external sources and the growing internal voice, as well as cognitive dissonance, the catalyst for increasingly complex meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 1998; 2001; Pizzolato, 2003). An individual begins to build an internal foundation when their meaning-making is entirely internal, unfettered by external sources (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Trust in the internal voice is key to construction of an internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). As Baxter Magolda (2008) explained, "Trusting their internal voices heightened their ability to take ownership of how they made meaning of external events" (p. 279). Trust provides flexibility to navigate otherwise disorienting dilemmas, and instills confidence in the internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2008). This is representative of the "cylical" or helix-like nature of development toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 16). As an

internal foundation solidifies across all three domains, and the individual lives their convictions, self-authorship emerges (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Self-authorship relies upon a secure internal foundation, unfettered by external voices, and is both contextual and reflective (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2008). In the case of this study, the context was the experience of education abroad on the part of first-generation students, as well as those who were also socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized. According to Carpenter & Pena (2016) and Pizzolato (2003), first-generation students, and those marginalized as described, arrive at self-authorship earlier than their more privileged peers.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide insight into the ways in which a study abroad experience facilitated movement toward self-authorship for 15 first-generation students, as well as for those among them who identified as socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized. As a reminder, this study was guided by two research questions:

1. How does a study abroad experience facilitate movement toward self-authorship among first-generation college students?
2. How does a study abroad experience facilitate movement toward self-authorship that may unique to first-generation students socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized?

The findings of this study indicated that education abroad had the capacity to facilitate movement toward self-authorship for participants through three key avenues. Additionally, the experience of education abroad provided opportunities that had the capacity to facilitate movement toward self-authorship in ways unique to participants marginalized in terms of socioeconomic status or race/ethnicity. Education abroad (a) provided experiences that generated cognitive dissonance; (b) refined abilities that contribute to the development of one's internal voice/foundation; and (c) created space in which participants internally generated values, beliefs, and identity. What follows is a discussion of each avenue toward self-authorship, followed by discussion of a relevant finding outside the scope of this study's questions. The discussion section then concludes with a summary statement.

Cognitive Dissonance

The experience of study abroad was one of cognitive dissonance, from which participants chose to engage and make meaning. This is significant since cognitive dissonance is understood as the catalyst of self-authoring behavior, and those who engage dissonance are at least in the crossroads stage of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998; 2014; Pizzolato, 2003). As Festinger (1957) hypothesized, dissonance motivates efforts to reduce or avoid situations that create or increase inconsistency, so individuals will take actions to reduce dissonance by changing their behavior, the environment, or even beliefs.

For participants of this study, cognitive dissonance emerged both prior to and during study abroad. For many participants, the first encounter with dissonance occurred

when they informed their parents/guardians of their plan. Participants universally encountered dissonance-inducing experiences of some degree during their study abroad program as well. The theme *Navigating Uncertainty* was centered exclusively on dissonance-inducing experiences, and included parental hesitation, discomforting situations, and discomforting encounters. Dissonance was also the focus of participants' experiences stepping outside their comfort zone in order to establish new connections. While dissonance probably occurred in other ways, these four areas focused on the experience of cognitive dissonance, and provide the clearest examples of the meaning-making that emerged, and the ways in which this facilitated movement toward self-authoring behavior.

Parental hesitation was experienced by 12 participants whose parents/guardians did not initially grant support for, or outright objected to, their plan to study abroad. The experience of parental hesitation was almost exclusively limited to participants marginalized in terms of socioeconomic status *and* race/ethnicity, and uniquely included all Hispanic Females (see Table 2). This is not surprising given the drivers of parental hesitation, such as cost and lack of travel experience, though there might be a cultural component at play regarding gender norms and Hispanic female participants. While parental hesitation was frustrating for participants, they did not want to be at odds with their parents/guardians. Anticipating some degree of parental hesitation, participants often delayed informing parents/guardians of their plan.

Parents/guardians are often external authorities, from whom individuals not yet self-authoring seek approval. It is important to note that none of the 12 participants who

encountered parental hesitation chose to abandon their plan when approval was not immediately granted. Six participants exhibited internal meaning-making when they indicated they would study abroad regardless of opposition, while five exhibited the conflict of the crossroads, and indicated the opposition of parents/guardians caused them to question their decision and recognize they could not go without approval.

Parental hesitation was most immediately couched in the interpersonal domain, since it involved relations with others. Self-authoring behavior in the interpersonal domain requires agency, or "increasing individuation and separation from others to achieve control, autonomy, and independence in relationship to others" (Baxter Magolda, 2000, p. 141). As Baxter Magolda and King (2004) described of self-authoring behavior in the interpersonal domain, individuals reflect a "capacity to engage in authentic, interdependent relationships…in which self is not overshadowed by a need for others' approval, mutually negotiating needs, and genuinely taking other's perspectives into account without being consumed by them" (p. 279).

While six participants refused to be "overshadowed," five were susceptible to their external authorities. These five had a sufficiently developed internal voice to at least attempt to gain support, in spite of the initial parental hesitation, and yet expressed they would not study abroad against the will of parents/guardians. This likely placed them in the crossroads, where dissonance is engaged rather than avoided, the internal voice begins to take precedent, but individuals still lean on external authorities in areas where the internal voice is not sufficiently developed (Baxter Magolda, 2007; 2014; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Fortunately for these participants, their commitment to their internal voice paid off, a success that might build trust in the internal voice and help move them into internal foundations toward self-authorship. As Baxter Magolda (2008) noted, trust in the internal voice is necessary for the development of an internal foundation, the steps toward self-authorship. Successes with trusting the internal voice, particularly for the participants who were prone to concede to their external authorities, had the potential to encourage meaning-making that is exclusively internal, thus allowing one to transition from the crossroads to internal foundations.

Notably, six participants planned to study abroad even if that was against the will of their parents/guardians. These participants were probably operating *at least* at the first stage of self-authoring meaning-making in this case (see Figure 2, Appendix A), since they trusted and "used their internal voice to shape reactions and manage external sources" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 20). These participants leaned on their internal voice exclusively, thereby contributing to the further construction of their internal foundation. This helped participants make meaning of how to respond, while trying to negotiate a satisfactory outcome out of respect for parents/guardians. They also demonstrated the agency critical for self-authoring behavior in the interpersonal domain (Baxter Magolda, 2000). Verónica's comment regarding parental hesitation perfectly encapsulated an internally-sourced response that reflected the internal foundation she was constructing:

> I told them like, oh, I'm going to go study abroad and they're like, *haha – no*. And I was like, oh okay, well, I already did my application, I already did this,

and I already did that. And it was kind of just like they didn't really have a choice almost. I was like, well, I'm going to go or, yeah – it's just going to happen.

These data were also representative of the cross-dimensional nature of self-authorship's development, such that development in one domain supports development in another (Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda, 2008; Pizzolato, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). While parental hesitation to study abroad was inherently an experience of the interpersonal domain, it also involved the cognitive and intrapersonal domains (see Figure 1). The very ability of participants to construct and communicate counterarguments, for example regarding personal value and cost, required some degree of at least independent knowing (cognitive), sense of self (intrapersonal), and ability to manage the interpersonal component (Baxter Magolda, 1994). This indicates that participants were at least in the crossroads, the second stage in which an internal voice is built (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Parental hesitation also proved to be a more common experience for those participants socioeconomically marginalized *and* racially/ethnically minoritized, and exclusive to those who identified as Hispanic females (see Table 2). This meant the experience of cognitive dissonance, and resultant meaning-making, were more often the experience of participants marginalized in these ways, which might provide them developmental opportunities not available to their more privileged peers. Although cognitive dissonance is undesirable, parental hesitation was nevertheless an experience

that facilitated movement toward self-authorship mostly for those socioeconomically marginalized or racially/ethnically minoritized.

While participants largely anticipated parental hesitation, they did not always anticipate the experiences or dissonance induced by discomforting situations, discomforting encounters, or going outside one's comfort zone to establish human connections. Given the range of experiences, from getting lost to a participant being slipped GHB in a drink, participants also expressed a range of emotions that reflected the degree of disequilibrium encountered. Participants engaged dissonance and made meaning of their experience through the process of problem-solving and decision-making, and often leaned more on themselves since they were on their own far from home. This meaning-making was integrated it into how they know, how they relate, or how they saw themselves.

A universal discomforting situation among participants was getting lost, often repeatedly. Since participants could not change their environment, or dependence on public transportation, they had to work through how to respond to the negative emotions generated from unsuccessful attempts using a train, metro, and bus system. In the face of dissonance, most attempted to modify their behavior, and responded by trying to remain calm, being more patient, studying the system maps ahead of time, asking others for directions, or using tools like Google Maps. Some participants realized in the process the shortcomings of these online tools, or external sources, and found other ways to manage their situation.

COVID-19 cutting one's semester abroad short also served as a discomforting situation. Alice provided an interesting example of how listening to external authorities impacted her later decision-making. Alice immensely regretted her decision to depart Japan early due to COVID-19, and in retrospect felt "browbeaten" by her Mother and university. The following semester Alice's classes were online due to COVID-19, so she had to decide whether to stay home or go back to her college town. Alice's Mother wanted her to live at home and save money, but home was a 20 foot trailer that Alice did not feel was an environment conducive to learning. Alice recalled how awful she felt making the decision to return early, which she realized was meant to please her external sources, chose to listen to her internal voice more, and moved back to her college town. Alice described this journey as follows:

> It's been really hard because a lot of the decisions that have been made about my education have been made for me by other people, which I really regret, because college is supposed to be about what I want to do, not what my Mom wants me to do. …I definitely weighed the opinions of other people, but I think ultimately I decided what would be best for me. …I knew what would be best for me, versus when I was coming back from Japan, I made the decision that would be best for everybody else.

In this case, the consequences of behaving in alignment with external authorities while abroad informed a later decision, when once again faced with dissonance, that prompted Alice to further "cultivate" her internal voice (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 20). Although Alice took others' concerns into consideration, and managed her external

authorities, she made a decision she felt was best for herself, and demonstrated agency in doing so.

Success in independently navigating discomforting situations instilled participants with a sense of independence, which they also described in conjunction with newfound confidence. Independence and confidence are indicative of trust in one's own abilities, and can reinforce trust in one's internal foundation. This is explored in more detail in the next section, which looks at how study abroad developed abilities that serve to increase trust in the internal foundation, which is necessary for the development of self-authorship.

Dissonance emerged from discomforting encounters most commonly through experiences with different cultural norms, the challenge of a language barrier, and not clicking with peers. Education abroad also presented two more serious situations, when one participant encountered sexual harassment in Japan, and another was given a drink laced with GHB in Poland. One might expect differing cultural norms and a language barrier to be huge drivers of cognitive dissonance, but these appeared to be more benign experiences for participants. While Karina had difficulty withholding judgement, and thought some of Italy's cultural norms were "weird," she eventually recognized the importance of adaptation. Everyone else took these differences in stride, as Sophie represented: "They do things differently, you know. You adapt and go on."

Since participants could not change their environment, they simply modified beliefs and behaviors in response to the differences they encountered. For example, although she found it "weird," Karina stopped eating on the bus when she discovered

this was not acceptable behavior in Italy. Participants demonstrated more relativistic than absolute thinking, in that they recognized cultural differences in context and ultimately did not pass judgement on differences, and were thus exhibiting higher order thinking (Baxter Magolda, 1994). These higher order thinking skills, which apply across domains, are necessary for the development of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1994). Furthermore, Baxter Magolda (1994) found cognitive dissonance critical to the development of contextual knowing. "Cognitive dissonance…helps…develop the epistemic assumptions that underlie personally derived educated opinions" (p. 26).

Perhaps the deepest feelings of cognitive dissonance were described by those who did not click with the peers on their program. For some, this also included a financial component, since they were on a tight budget and could not keep up their peers' spending during nights out. Interestingly, it was not always those who were socioeconomically marginalized who described this, but those whose families' annual incomes were lower-middle income. Granted, an annual income of $40,000 - $59,999, which constitutes the lower-middle range, is still limited if supporting a family of three or more. Ultimately, participants handled this dissonance by doing things on their own, travelling solo, or making new friends, but this generally involved dissonance for participants who did not see themselves as particularly independent nor outgoing. For these participants, it seemed the dissonance of doing things alone was easier to accept and navigate than the dissonance of trying to conform to others' needs. As Max explained of how education abroad generated this type of disequilibrium, "It forces you

to interact, it forces you to meet people. Like, if you want to do anything, you have to get out of your comfort zone."

Peers can also serve as external authorities from whom individuals without a strong internal voice, might seek approval. Participants who did not click with their peers experienced disequilibrium trying to be happy doing what their peer group planned, in order to socialize, but soon realized this did not meet her own needs, nor for some their budget. Gradually, these participants listened to their internal voice, recognized their own values and interests, and chose to pursue them. This represented either development of the internal voice within the crossroads, or a possible shift from the conflict of the crossroads to internal foundations. Either way, use of the internal voice/foundation in meaning-making only serves to further develop that voice/foundation and move the individual toward self-authorship.

The final key driver of cognitive dissonance was encountered when participants stepped outside their comfort zone in order to establish new connections. Interpersonal relations were a particularly meaningful aspect of study abroad for participants, and provided support, camaraderie, and opportunities to learn about others who were different from themselves. This included connections with peers on the same study abroad program, new friends made in-country, and also acquaintances and one-time encounters that made an impression on participants. Participants felt these experiences improved their ability to relate to others, particularly those who are different. As Baxter Magolda (2001) asserted, growth in the interpersonal domain revolves around the ability

to engage in healthy, mature, productive relationships with those whose beliefs and experiences may differ from one's own.

The experience of education abroad was a significant driver of dissonant experiences that prompted and informed meaning-making before, during, and after that actual time abroad. Participants exhibited meaning-making in the crossroads, while others leaned exclusively on their internal voice and contributed to the construction of their internal foundation. Participants both socioeconomically marginalized and racially/ethnically minoritized, including all Hispanic females, were uniquely situated to experience the dissonance and resultant meaning-making of parental hesitation. Collectively, these findings show education abroad is an experience that provides rich opportunity for meaning-making that prompted participants to construct their internal voice/foundation.

Abilities that Contribute to Construction of an Internal Foundation

Participants of this study attributed education abroad with strengthening certain abilities. The majority felt that study abroad made them feel more independent, which they largely viewed as an outcome, though some attributed to being first-generation. Many also expressed a new sense of openness to difference, awareness or acceptance of perspectives that differ from their own, and an ability to interact more successfully with others. Universal feelings of greater confidence rounded out the perceived gains.

These new and improved abilities reflected the success participants encountered making internal meaning of the challenges and cognitive dissonance of education abroad. Baxter Magolda (2012) indicated that movement toward self-authorship is

facilitated by increasing trust in one's internal voice and foundation. I argue that these success and abilities reinforce trust and serve to further strengthen the internal voice/foundation, thus serving a crucial role in development toward self-authorship. These refined abilities, and how each contributes to participants' trust in internally-sourced meaning-making, is discussed next.

Independence, quite simply, is not being dependent upon others. A more formal definition is "not subject to control by others," "not requiring or relying on others," and "not looking to others for one's opinions or for guidance in conduct" (Merriam-Webster, 2020, Entry 1 of 2). Since the state of independence does not rely on external authorities, it requires some degree of trust in the internal voice in order to exist (see Figure 2, Appendix A). Baxter Magolda and King (2012) described this entry point to self-authoring behavior as "Trust[ing] the internal voice sufficiently [to] refine beliefs, values, identities, and relationships" (p. 20). It is reasonable to expect that some sense of independence begins to emerge as an individual encounters successes using their internal voice in the crossroads, since it does not suddenly appear when one become self-authoring. This reflects the non-linear, helix-like, "undulating, cyclical, or wavelike nature" of self-authorship's compounding development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

A new or improved sense of independence was addressed directly by many participants, while others described decisions, meaning-making, and perspectives that represented increased independence. For some, simply being on their own far from home generated independence, while for others travelling solo while abroad was a first-time independence-building experience. Some participants referred to independence in

relation to their decision to study abroad and also connected to their status as first-generation students to independence and lack of cultural capital. Participants realized they could not lean on parents/guardians for guidance in planning or preparation, financial support, or other assistance, such as arranging flights, and were cognizant of what they were capable of compared to their continuing-generation peers. This was reminiscent, as a couple participants eluded to, the experience of going away to college. The decision to study abroad was similarly a context in which they held a lack of capital, posed cognitive dissonance, and provided an opportunity to further build one's internal voice/foundation.

The experience of education abroad imbued participants with a sense of independence that strengthened trust in their internal voice/foundation. As Baxter Magolda and King (2012) explained, the process of leaving the crossroads, and entering internal (or self-authoring) meaning-making, is dependent upon the internal voice taking precedence over external authorities. This was particularly on display with a couple participants whose comments powerfully represented how education abroad created for them a sense of independence that released them from their external authorities, and helped them build trust in their internal voice. Alice and Fran both shared comments that perfectly describe internal meaning-making imbued with growing trust in their internal foundation. "I feel more like I can just be a normal person and like, pursue my own dreams and goals. That makes sense for me and I feel less beholden to others," shared Alice, while Fran commented, "My most meaningful experience was just doing things

by myself and seeing that, you know, I can live a life that wasn't cut out by someone else for me."

Trust in one's own abilities, which builds the internal voice, is really about confidence. Participants gained confidence from navigating dissonance experiences, in their ability to be independent, to relate better to others, or pursue a life of their choosing. Given this connection, it is not surprising that another ability that emerged was confidence. The vast majority of participants discussed confidence in terms of a permanent gain. Confidence was addressed directly by the majority of participants, while some referred to feeling more "capable," "empowered," "proud," "self-sufficient," self-reliant, or self-assured as a result of their experience. Confidence is "a belief in oneself, the conviction that one has the ability to meet life's challenges and to succeed – and the willingness to act accordingly" (Psychology Today, 2020). Independence and confidence are thus intertwined, in that successful experiences operating independently built participants' confidence, or trust in, their own abilities, and thus internal voice/foundation. As previously noted, the development of self-authorship is grounded in trust, which is necessary to fully develop one's internal voice (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Feelings of confidence largely emerged from tackling the challenges and uncertainty, or cognitive dissonance, encountered while abroad. For example, getting lost, travelling solo, or doing things in general on one's own. Others felt more confident to speak up for themselves or more confident in their decision-making skills as a result of their experience. Decision-making is best understood as the experience of meaning-

making in response to disequilibrium. Amy described best how study abroad built confidence, and thus trust, in the internal voice:

> It wasn't just by chance or because of anyone else or any other circumstance. It was like, I did this on my own. …Knowing like, oh, like *I am* capable of like, taking charge in these situations, like, *I am* capable of, you know, a lot of things I thought I wasn't.

While participants overwhelmingly indicated gains in independence and confidence, many also expressed increased openness, awareness or acceptance of perspectives different from their own, and improved interpersonal skills. These particular abilities significantly overlap.

According to Deardorff (2006), openness refers to being receptive to cultural otherness and suspending judgement. Participants described openness largely as an outcome, while some established this as a goal for study abroad. Openness was generally described as a stronger willingness to accept and engage difference in experiences, cultures, and people. Awareness or acceptance of perspectives different from one's own, and the ability to suspend judgement, is predicated upon openness. Participants also emerged from study abroad with a sense they could relate better to those who are different from themselves. They emerged "better listeners," "more empathetic," and more willing to bridge difference in order to relate, which culminated in more diverse friend groups and willingness to suspend judgement.

Openness and awareness are important abilities that support the development of self-authorship. Awareness, for example that other perspectives exist and may conflict

with one's own, is critical to evolve beyond the ERM's first stage of absolute knowing, where knowledge remains subject and unconscious (Baxter Magolda, 1994; Perry, 1970). The goal of the fourth and final stage of the ERM, contextual knowing, requires an ability to recognize the relativistic and contextual nature of knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 1994; Perry, 1970). The ability to develop from dualistic to relativistic thinking, in the construction of knowledge and beliefs, is critical for development of self-authoring behavior in the cognitive domain (Baxter Magolda, 1994; Perry, 1970).

Collectively, openness, acceptance, and an improved ability to relate, all in relation to difference, weave the cognitive domain into the interpersonal domain, and supports development toward self-authorship. As a reminder, the ability to self-author in the interpersonal domain involves the ability to engage in healthy, mature, productive relationships with those whose beliefs and experiences differ from one's own (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Acceptance and awareness of perspectives that differ from one's own also contributes to the "individuation" necessary for the development of agency, since individuals are not threatened by difference (Baxter Magolda, 2000, p. 141).

Openness likely supports the ability to accept that others' perspectives may differ or even conflict with one's own, and this in turn may support one's ability to successfully relate to those who are different from themselves. Collectively, the refined abilities of independence, confidence, openness, awareness or acceptance of perspectives different from one's own, and the improved ability to relate to others, are foundational to the development of self-authorship. Each contributes to confidence and trust in one's

abilities, and in turn strengthens the internal voice/foundation, which facilitates movement toward self-authorship.

Internally Generated Values, Beliefs, and Identity

The final aspect of the findings that explain how study abroad helps facilitate movement toward self-authorship involves the clarity participants developed regarding their sense of self. Participants returned from study abroad with a keener sense of what is important to them. This included clarity regarding their career path, plans for after college, and how travel would be a valued component of their life in the future. For some participants, study abroad also helped to shape values and beliefs. For racially/ethnically minoritized participants, particularly those who identified as Hispanic females, study abroad helped them connect in a positive, meaningful way with this part of their racial/ethnic identity.

Baxter Magolda (2001) asserted that self-authorship in the intrapersonal domain involves increasing complexity in the formation of beliefs, values, and identity, which is dependent upon the construction of an internal voice despite the expectations of others. Study abroad provided the opportunity and space for participants to consider what would be best for them as an individual, and how they wished to live their life. For many, this started with the recognition they valued international travel and wished to make it a part of their life, even if their family did not relate. Others realized what would be best for them, knew their families might struggle with their choice, but expressed a commitment to the new path anyhow. For example, Fran chose not to go straight to graduate school, and Verónica decided to apply for doctoral programs outside Texas.

For some participants, their experience abroad reinforced existing values and beliefs, while for others their experience helped to shape new ones. For example, some learned the value of minimalism, or discovered political and economic issues, while Alice realized that no one else could define for her what constitutes spirituality and morality. Alice's comment below beautifully summarized this move from an externally to internally generated sense of self:

> It made me realize that even though I'm not spiritual, in like the Judeo-Christian sense of the word, that I still have spirituality and that my morals don't necessarily have to come from the Bible or from what my Mom has told me. They can just come from being a human being that feels for other people, and understands that my point of view isn't the only one that matters, and that my way of life isn't the only one or the correct one.

Among the most interesting findings of this study were how the experience of study abroad helped to shape the identities of participants minoritized in terms of race/ethnicity, in particular those who identified as Hispanic. While some White participants at best shared an awareness of their racial/ethnic identity, minoritized participants exhibited deeper, more complex meaning-making. For some, study abroad was an experience that allowed them to step outside the US context in which they were racially/ethnically minoritized.

The impact of being racially/ethnically minoritized is understood in a new way when considered through the lens of self-authorship. Prior to the emergence of an internally defined sense of self, individuals are subject to defining their self-worth from

the approval of others (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Thus, racially/ethnically minoritized individuals' self-worth may falter amidst stereotypes and racism when still leaning on external sources. Instead, the experience of studying abroad provided space for participants to distance themselves from their identity as racially/ethnically minoritized, and instead consider an internally generated sense of self and self-worth.

This space gave most racially/ethnically minoritized participants an opportunity to connect with their racial/ethnic identity, regardless of where they studied abroad. It was significant that all eight participants who identified as Hispanic reported a change in how they viewed themselves as Hispanic. In the space their racially/ethnically minoritized self previously consumed, participants generated a more positive perspective of their identity as Hispanic. This reflected a shift from defining self-worth externally to internally. For the three Hispanic females who studied in Span, the experience of study abroad made them acutely aware of their racially/ethnically minoritized status in the US. As that identity subsided, they found themselves accepted, understood, and valued in their new context of Spain, which prompted them to reframe their sense of self as Hispanic in positive ways that resulted in feelings of pride and confidence.

In this way, the experience of study abroad prompted Hispanic participants to build their internal foundation with regard to their identity and self-worth as Hispanic. As Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) asserted of their Latinx population, "cognitive dissonance and the construction of more complex ways of thinking was key to decreasing susceptibility to stereotype vulnerability and creating positive images of their ethnicity, …and enable[d] complementary shifts in intrapersonal and interpersonal

developmental dimensions" (p. 345). This was particularly the case for the three Hispanic females who studied in Spain, who did not simply gain acceptance, but gained confidence and pride in their identities as Hispanic and Spanish-speaking.

As Baxter Magolda (1999) asserted, self-authoring behavior in the intrapersonal domain requires that individuals generate self-worth internally and make aligned conscious choices unfettered by the definition or expectations of others. Fran, who studied in Spain, exemplified this shift inward, when she made the conscious choice upon return to start using her full name, *Franscisa*, on job applications, and concluded, "I'm not going to work for a company that's not going to hire me because of my name."

As previously noted, the emergence of self-authorship is dependent upon securing commitment to one's internal foundation, and developing a philosophy with which to approach life, in all three domains of development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). The experience of education abroad provided participants the cognitive dissonance necessary to further construct their internal voice/foundation and internally generate new values, beliefs, and identity. For racially/ethnically minoritized participants, in particular, this also involved a shift from external to internal definitions of self and self-worth as Hispanic. As stated previously, individuals must build their internal voice and foundation in order to become self-authoring. Consequently, study abroad provided participants with opportunities to strengthen their internal voice/foundation, which is believed to facilitate movement toward self-authorship.

Self-Authoring Earlier

Lastly, I would like to address an additional finding relevant to this study. This involves the issue of whether first-generation students self-author earlier than their continuing-generation peers. As a reminder, Baxter Magolda (1994; 2001) found individuals entered college adhering to external formulas, entered the crossroads while in college, but did not become self-authoring until well after college. Pizzolato (2003) and Carpenter and Peña (2016), however, found that self-authoring behavior emerged earlier in lower privilege high risk and first-generation students, respectively. Pizzolato (2003) attributed this to cognitive dissonance and lack of supports, while Carpenter and Peña (2016) attributed it to adversity in life events, cognitive dissonance, and one's beliefs being challenged. These experiences prompted meaning-making that developed the internal voice (Carpenter & Peña, 2016). Similarly, Baxter Magolda (1994) indicated that development of more complex ways of knowing, specifically independent and contextual knowing, typically emerge after college.

In this study, participants were actively constructing their internal voice in the crossroads, or their internal foundation, which represented self-authored meaning-making. Additionally, participants in this study often exhibited independent knowing, or the ability "to think for themselves and make judgements based on their own perspectives," while some even exhibited the critically formed beliefs characteristic of contextual, or relativistic, knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1994, p. 26). This was particularly the case for those who encountered parental hesitation, who were more likely to be socioeconomically marginalized *and* racially/ethnically minoritized, and for those who

reframed their sense of self as Hispanic. Consequently, the findings of this study support those of Pizzolato (2003) and Carpenter and Peña (2016), and contribute to the understanding of self-authorship occurring earlier among first-generation students, in particular those marginalized and minoritized in the ways discussed.

Participants encountered adversity, dissonance, and meaning-making that their continuing-generation peers did not. More specifically, those marginalized in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity encountered adversity, dissonance, and meaning-making that their wealthier and White first-generation peers did not. Participants marginalized in these ways were more likely to encounter the dissonance of parental hesitation and reframe their sense of self as Hispanic. Thus, participants, particularly those marginalized as discussed, likely started to construct their internal voice earlier. The experience of education abroad then served to further strengthen their internal voice/foundation in the march toward self-authorship.

Summary Statement

The experience of education abroad facilitated movement toward self-authorship among these 15 first-generation college students, and did so in certain ways unique to those socioeconomically marginalized and racially/ethnically minoritized. For participants of this study, education abroad was an experience that provided the necessary cognitive dissonance to prompt internal meaning-making, the successes with which strengthened trust in their internal voice/foundation. Additionally, these successes reinforced trust, or confidence, in one's own abilities, which in turn support further construction of the internal voice/foundation.

The experience of education abroad also provided participants the opportunity to internally generate values, beliefs, and identity. This was particularly the case for those marginalized in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, who encountered dissonance and meaning-making their White and wealthier first-generation peers did not. Hispanic females, in particular, generated a more positive sense of self and self-worth outside the US context in which they are racially/ethnically minoritized. This shift from externally toward internally generating self-worth, and building stereotype resistance, represent the shift to an internal foundation.

Next, I will discuss the implications of this study for future research, policy, and practice, which concludes this dissertation.

Implications

Most of the literature regarding study abroad that explores the experiences of first-generation students, or students minoritized in terms of socioeconomic status or race/ethnicity, focuses on issues involving participation. While the barriers that prevent these students from participating in education abroad are important to understand, I argue it is equally critical to understand what first-generation students, particularly those socioeconomically marginalized or racially/ethnically minoritized, might gain from study abroad. After all, it is one thing to be aware of a barrier, and it is another thing to explore how that barrier might be addressed.

The findings of this study suggest that first-generation students, in general, and particularly those marginalized in the ways discussed, may encounter dissonance and meaning-making that their White, wealthier, and continuing-generation peers do not.

Consequently, the experience of education abroad may provide more opportunities for meaning-making that facilitate movement toward self-authorship. In light of the preceding discussion, following is a presentation of implications for future research, policy, and practice.

Implications for Future Research

Perhaps the most interesting finding from this study involved the experience of participants who identified as Hispanic. Regardless of where they studied, these participants connected with their Hispanic identity, even in small ways. Heritage speakers of Spanish who studied in Spain, however, reframed their sense of self and self-worth as Hispanic in ways they found meaningful and strengthened internal foundations. Researchers should give greater attention to the particular issue of racial/ethnic identity development and study abroad, and perhaps specifically to Hispanic/Latinx students and those who are heritage speakers of Spanish.

The limited literature focused on heritage speakers of Spanish and study abroad generally involves language learning, and what does address identity is focused on ethnolinguistic identity (Shively, 2016). Ethnolinguistic identity addresses the "subjective feeling of belonging or affiliation with a social group that is defined in terms of a common ethnic ancestry and a common language variety," but does so from the perspective of language use (Noels, 2017). Hispanic/Latinx students, particularly those socioeconomically marginalized, study abroad at much lower rates than their wealthier White peers, and programs for heritage speakers of Spanish are not as well developed as those for second language learners (Beaudrie, Ducar, Relaño-Pastor, 2014; IIE, 2018). In

one of the only studies related to this topic, Lee and Green (2016) used an Afrocentric paradigm to study Black students who studied abroad in Africa, and found participants returned more aware of their identity as Black and felt more connected to the African diaspora as a result (Lee & Green, 2016). Given this gap in the literature, and related finding regarding Black students, it is important to better understand the role of education abroad in racial/ethnic identity development among Hispanic/Latinx students, first-generation and marginalized in particular.

It was of particular note that participants of this study, who were both socioeconomically marginalized and racially/ethnically minoritized, were most likely to encounter parental hesitation to study abroad. As discussed in Chapter II, both race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status are known inequities in study abroad participation (Simon & Ainsworth, 2012). The role of parents in a student's decision to study abroad is generally explored as a barrier or facilitator of participation, but not as a developmental experience, nor as an avenue that might inform how parental hesitation is encountered and navigated, also a means to address the role of parents as a barrier.

Cognitive dissonance played an important role in this study as a prompt for internal meaning-making that facilitated movement toward self-authorship. This was particularly the case regarding parental hesitation and racial/ethnic identity development among minoritized students. Researchers should extend this area of inquiry to explore the connections in the experience of cognitive dissonance during study abroad on the part of racially/ethnically minoritized and socioeconomically marginalized first-generation students.

Implications for Policy

Education abroad is a developmental opportunity that facilitates movement toward self-authorship, particularly for first-generation students who are marginalized in the ways discussed. Unfortunately, first-generation students are believed to study abroad at a rate much lower than their wealthier White continuing-generation peers (IIE, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). The underrepresentation of first-generation students in education abroad limits their access to a high impact experience that develops the skills and capital necessary for success in adulthood (Kuh, 2008; Pascarella et al, 2004). This calls attention to the importance of ensuring equitable access to study abroad.

One means of addressing equitable access, in light of this study, is to insure financial assistance is available for students whose families are socioeconomically marginalized. In the case of this study, students whose families earned less than $40,000 per year were lower income and considered socioeconomically marginalized. That said, the stress of finances was also encountered by those lower-middle income, whose families earned between $40,000 and $59,999. Therefore, I recommend institutions generate the funds necessary, for example through capital campaigns, to fully fund the education abroad experiences of lower income first-generation students, with scholarships going to those in the lower-income range that significantly defray expenses.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study with regard to parental hesitation, reinforce the importance of implementing strategies to recruit students historically underrepresented

in education abroad. This includes maintaining online information and resources directed at students' families, also offered in languages other than English based on pertinent student demographics. These resources should clearly communicate that education abroad is a legitimate activity endorsed by the university as an academic and developmental component of an undergraduate education. The cost-benefit should also be addressed in a way that highlights the academic, developmental, and particularly, the career benefits of education abroad. Additionally, health and safety should be addressed in a way that describes the supports available to students while abroad, as well as how programs are vetted. Collectively, this information should help allay concerns on the part of parents, particularly those unfamiliar with the college experience, education abroad, and international travel in general. Similarly, guidance should be available to students on how to talk about education abroad with their parents/guardians. This might cover similar concepts, such as purpose, educational and career benefit, cost-benefit, and health and safety.

Participants in this study often informally related how happy they were to participate in this study, as it was an opportunity to shed light on this topic in the event if might help more first-generation students study abroad. Laura, for example, applied to be a global ambassador with her university's education abroad office upon return, in order to share her enthusiasm for study abroad. Demetriou et al. (2017) found peer mentoring relationships an important component of first-generation students' experiences in college, while Carpenter and Peña (2016) found first-generation students often savor the opportunity to serve as a role model or mentor to others. Some

participants in this study pointed to first-generation students who served as their mentor, and encouraged them to study abroad.

This calls attention to the importance of recruiting first-generation students who are study abroad returnees, particularly those socioeconomically marginalized and/or racially/ethnically minoritized, to promote the experience of education abroad among their peers. The opportunity to see others who share your life experience and successfully navigated the challenges of parental hesitation and finances, could be particularly impactful in recruitment, while also giving returnees an opportunity to fulfil a mentoring role.

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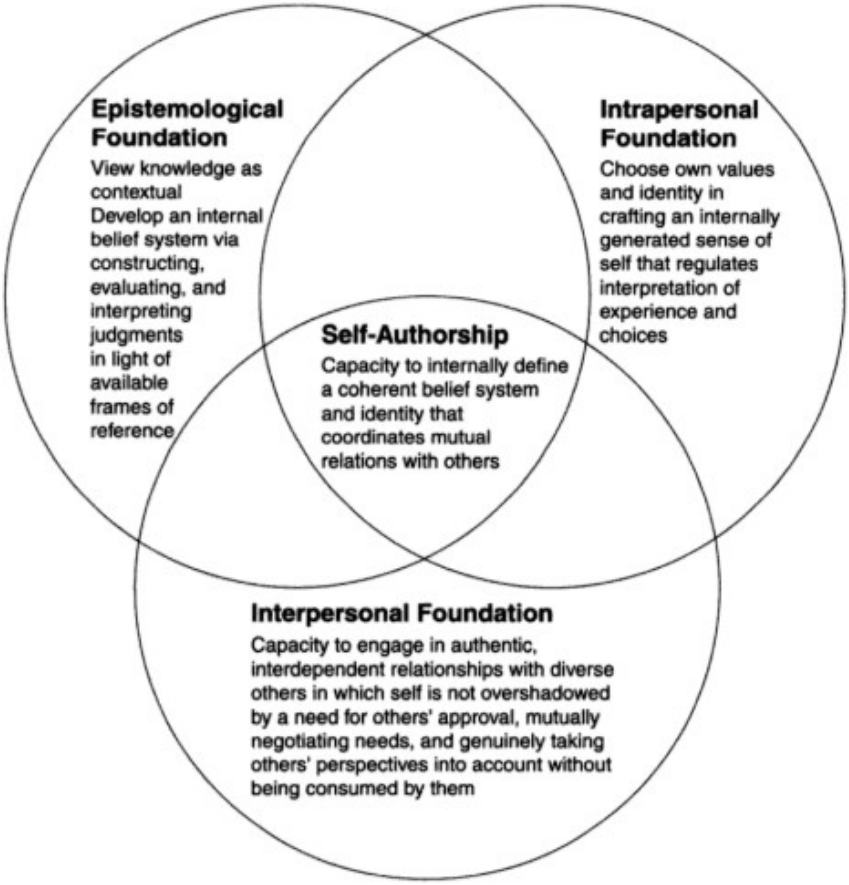
APPENDIX A

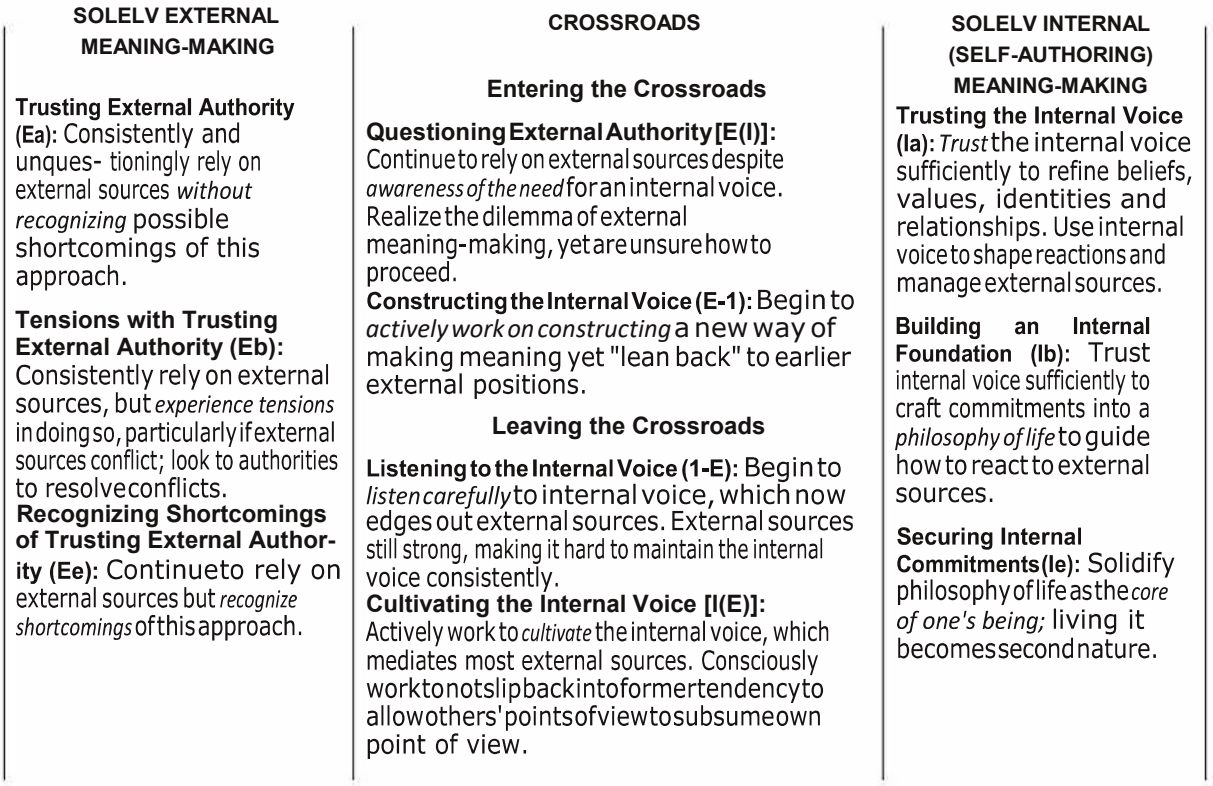
FIGURES

Figure 1 Domains of Self-Authorship



Note. Visual representation of self-authorship. Reprinted from Baxter Magolda & King (2004). Copyright 2004 Stylus Publishing.

Figure 2 Stages of Self-Authorship



Note. Reprinted from Baxter Magolda & King (2012). Copyright 2012 ASHE.

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Preferred pseudonym (fictitious first name) for use in any reports	Open text entry
Age	Drop-down box with options 18 through 26
Gender	Open text entry
Race/Ethnicity	Open text entry
Religion	Open text entry
Hometown	Open text entry
Family Annual Income	Drop-down box • up to $25,999 • $26,000-$39,999 • $40,000-$59,999 • $60,000-$119,999 • $120,000 and higher
Major(s)	Open text entry
Minor(s)	Open text entry
Class Rank	Drop-down box with options freshman through senior
Term(s) abroad	Open text entry
Study abroad program location(s)	Open text entry
Focus of program (i.e. language, specific discipline, etc.)	Open text entry
Housing type(s) during program	Open text entry
International travel experience prior to study abroad	Open text entry

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Primary Domain(s) Addressed	**Interview Questions**	**Probing Follow-up Questions (and corresponding domain addressed)**
Interpersonal Cognitive	Tell me how your family felt about your decision to study abroad?	Tell me more about that. How did you handle that? (Cognitive) How did you make sense of that? (Cognitive) How did that affect your beliefs? (Cognitive) How did that affect how you view yourself? (Intrapersonal) How did that affect how you relate to or interact with others? (Interpersonal)
Interpersonal Cognitive	Tell me how your friends felt about your decision to study abroad?	
Cognitive	Tell me about your expectations going into study abroad?	
Cognitive	To what extent did your expectations match your experience?	
Cognitive Interpersonal Intrapersonal	Tell me about your most meaningful experience while abroad?	
Cognitive Interpersonal Intrapersonal	Tell me about your best/worst experience while abroad?	
Interpersonal Cognitive	Tell me about a negative or challenging interaction you had with others while abroad?	
Cognitive	Tell me about a situation in which you were unsure what was right or what to do?	
Cognitive Interpersonal Intrapersonal	Tell me about a situation in which you felt very challenged or conflicted?	
Cognitive	How has the collective experience of study abroad shaped your beliefs?	
Intrapersonal Cognitive	How has the collective experience of study abroad shaped how you see yourself? How about how you see yourself as [e.g. a Hispanic female]?	
Interpersonal Cognitive	How has the collective experience of study abroad shaped how you relate to others?	
Intrapersonal Cognitive	How do you think being a first-generation college student plays a role in how you have responded to the questions I asked today?	