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Study abroad dynamics: Anthropological perspectives

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Abstract

Americans typically lack cultural reflexivity--most Americans will even deny that there is a specific American culture. Many Americans often experience heightened states of anxiety and feelings of alienation, which several anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists attribute to an unhealthy reliance on individualism and consumerism. If Americans could learn cultural reflexivity, then they may experience a sense of connectedness and higher self-esteem. Since cultural reflexivity can be learned, I have investigated whether or not study abroad programs help to teach it. More generally, I have studied the education abroad experience anthropologically through participating in a 35-day tour of the Mediterranean offered by my university as a "Cultural History Tour."

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STUDY ABROAD DYNAMICS: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

By

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Abstract

Americans typically lack cultural reflexivity--most Americans will even deny that there is a specific American culture. Many Americans often experience heightened states of anxiety and feelings of alienation, which several anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists attribute to an unhealthy reliance on individualism and consumerism. If Americans could learn cultural reflexivity, then they may experience a sense of connectedness and higher self-esteem. Since cultural reflexivity can be learned, I have investigated whether or not study abroad programs help to teach it. More generally, I have studied the education abroad experience anthropologically through participating in a 35-day tour of the Mediterranean offered by my university as a "Cultural History Tour."

Introduction

Cultural reflexivity, or the ability to identify and describe one's own cultural characteristics has been a difficult concept for Americans to grasp. Since America is a relatively young culture with a historical record of rebellion and conflict amongst its various ethnic groups, anthropologists have had a difficult time convincing Americans that they have a culture. By joining an education abroad program and observing its dynamics anthropologically, I hypothesized that participating in study abroad programs will help to teach Americans that they do have a culture. However, since education abroad programs vary in lengths of time, topics studied, and housing (host family vs. hotels/hostels), not to mention that Americans vary in individual temperament and ethnic origin, reflexivity may be learned in different ways. More particularly, some students

may initially reflect on their native culture and the foreign culture *ethnocentrically*, i.e. believing that their native culture is better than any other, rather than *ethnorelatively*, i.e. viewing all cultures as equally valuable. Consequently, I thought it necessary to explore the dynamics of education abroad programs anthropologically in order to determine how such experience may facilitate the acquisition of *cultural relativism*, i.e. the understanding that all human behaviors and activities must be understood in reference to the culture in which they emerge (Boas 1920).

Reflexivity can be learned, but there is a strong interdisciplinary debate on what process can best favor its acquisition. On the one hand, some anthropologists continue to argue that it can only be learned through a series of experiences akin to rites of passage: that is, lengthy fieldwork in a foreign culture (to really understand the all-encompassing impact of culture on human behavior), followed by fieldwork in one's own culture (to recognize the cultural parameters of one's own behavior). On the other hand, some psychologists, communication specialists, and management consultants have long argued that intercultural expertise can be acquired quickly and effectively through appropriate short training programs.

The latter argument is favored by most study abroad programs, especially at the university level. For instance, about a month before my trip all students had to attend a one-hour cross-cultural presentation on cultural awareness and communication techniques. Examples that illustrated simple misinterpretations were used to encourage cultural mirroring, without any emphasis on cultural reflexivity. For example, the "moutza" in Greece is an open-palm gesture used to insult someone, whereas in America we may wave with an open-palm gesture to greet someone. In the end, the lecture was

intended to build enthusiasm about the study abroad program and to ease any worries about going somewhere foreign.

On the other hand, anthropologists have been struggling to give "culture" in-depth theoretical treatments, encompassing the social, historical, and environmental frameworks of human behavior, rejecting the use of the term as just a "popular TV word" (Cerroni-Long 1995:2). Until one adopts a comparative approach toward culture, one cannot understand it ethnorelatively, and this requires concrete experience. Srinivas (1990) refers to this process as becoming twice-born, or balancing cognitive and emotional reactions about a culture. In the end, enough experience needs to be acquired for one to view the culture as relevant in comparison with one's native culture. According to this view, culture cannot be understood through a brief presentation, but requires experiential learning *inside* the culture over a long period of time (Cerroni-Long 1995).

To become thrice-born, and truly knowledgeable of oneself, the individual who internalizes cultural relativism must then return to the native culture and transcend "a taken-for-granted reality" (Cerroni-Long 1995:2). As a practicing anthropologist, I agree with this argument for understanding culture and hope that this study will help to encourage the development of cross-cultural programs facilitating the acquisition of cultural reflexivity.

Methods

My study took place in the context of a summer study abroad program hosted by Eastern Michigan University. The program was 35-days long and it took students to numerous locations in Switzerland, Italy, and Greece. Using a participant observation methodology, I observed my classmates and my professors to assess whether any sort of cultural

reflexivity was being acquired. All observations followed a *naturalistic* approach, i.e. the study of events and actions that occur naturally in public settings; and all data I collected is *qualitative*, i.e. nonquantitative interpretations derived from observation and geared toward understanding concepts and relationships.

The "Mediterranean Cultural History Tour" was academic and provided six credit hours to students for art history and history. The group stayed in hotels and hostels throughout the trip, and all classes were held either in the hotels/hostels we stayed at, the churches and museums we visited, or on the walk toward the churches and museums.

I informed my professor and my classmates of my study (see Appendix 1), but I did not interview them in order to reduce *reactivity*, or the interviewee's tendency to give unnatural answers because of the structured format of the interview. However, I have provided comments volunteered by students involved in other study abroad programs to illustrate different typologies of learners (see Geisler 2000). More importantly, I am using an ethnographic methodology involving a reflexive form of native anthropology, which Cerroni-Long (1995:11) defines in the following way:

> It means that it is done on the basis of constant reflection upon one's biases to discern whether they may be personal or culture specific. It means that results are specifically offered for inspection to both the fellow natives under study and cultural outsiders. It means that it is built upon cross-cultural expertise on how the problem under study has been addressed in different cultural settings. It means that it incorporates systematic comparisons of native and nonnative research. It means that it clearly locates cultural knowledge both in terms of "where" it is and of "how" it should be retrieved and organized. It means, above all, that an attempt is made at developing a "theory of practice" by assessing the cultural matrices of research interests, ways of defining research problems, and approaches to their solution.

In other words, through contrasting and comparing my native culture with the Mediterranean cultures I visited, I attempted to concurrently analyze my own cultural

biases, thus hoping to draw valid conclusions on whether or not cultural reflexivity can

be learned by American students.

Hence, the major goal for this thesis is to offer further evidence for the value of a

reflexive ethnographic approach. One cannot ignore that anthropology involves

interpretations of alien practices, so it is the responsibility of anthropologists to reflect

upon their interpretations. By attempting a reflexive ethnography of my experiences

abroad with a group of American students, I tried to look at, as well as through, my

American cultural lens. Cerroni-Long (1995:15) notes:

> To do insider anthropology while studying areas of one's own culture defined by
> the rich and powerful is a great challenge; the aura of power is seductive enough
> to entice the type of emotional involvement that impairs methodological
> relativism. Ironically, it is precisely methodological relativism, reflexively
> applied, that can help us maintain detachment.

American Culture

Through a very interesting combination of social, historical, and environmental factors,

American culture is one of the most difficult to study for anthropologists (especially

native anthropologists) simply because of the cultural tendency to *deny* that an American

culture exists. As Cerroni-Long (2008) notes, a host of factors come into play when

figuring out why this cultural norm exists, but after studying Americans

anthropologically for many years, she attributes the denial to competitive individualism

(reinforced by capitalism), a complex history of ethnic mixing, and a general sensitivity

toward studying ethnicity. She remarks: "This is unfortunate, because a holistic

understanding of American culture could also provide a useful framework for analyzing

ethnicity and, especially, the thorny issue of continuing inter-racial conflict in American life" (2008:198).

The "melting pot" ideology and generations of inter-marriage have convinced members of the WASP (White, Angle-Saxon, and Protestant) majority that their ethnic roots cannot be traced, but this defines American culture simply on the basis of what cannot be described (Cerroni-Long 2008). In fact, what most European-Americans lack in addition to a sense of culture is knowledge of their ethnic roots, which can all be traced back to Irish, English, or German ancestry. Cerroni-Long (2008) provides the acronym CAT—for Celtic, Anglo, and Teutonic—in order to describe the ethnic constituencies of the "melting pot." Based on her anthropological research among university students, she developed the CATs' Compass (Figure 1) as a framework of factors that characterize American culture (Cerroni-Long 2008:202):

Figure 1: CATs' Compass

CHALLENGE

CONTROL   COMFORT

COMPETITION   COMMUNITY

CHANGE   CHOICE
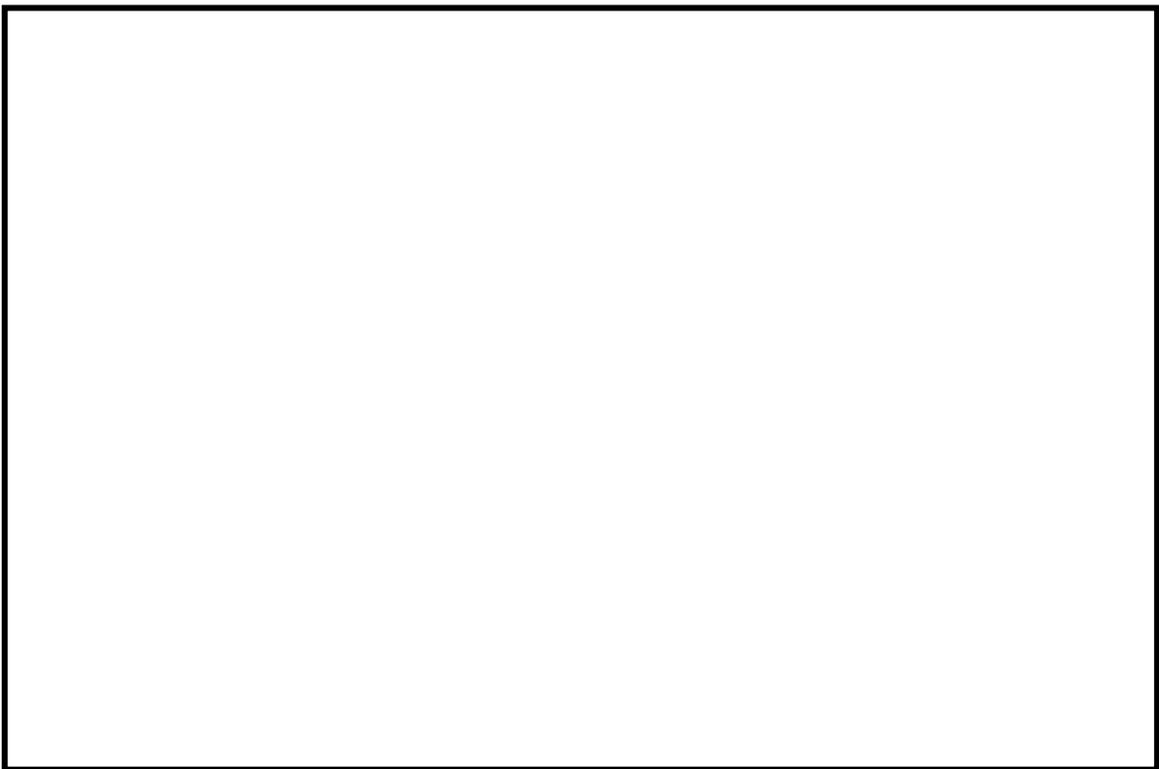
The *CATs' Compass*, or the "'7Cs' of American Culture," are seven recurring

words, concepts, or values that seem to operate as the "drives" of American culture

(Cerroni-Long 2008:202-203). As shown, these seven key words can be arranged in the

shape of a compass, implying that they move the social structure in particular directions.

This graphic arrangement provides a vital framework from which to view and study

American culture, which I adopted as a point of reference in my own study, even as I

moved from "inside" the compass.

Another point of reference I used was the rather large sociological literature

which analyzes American culture in terms of narcissism. Many have remarked on how

the ideological bent toward individualism has encouraged narcissistic attitudes among

Americans (Bellah 1985; Lasch 1978; Wagner & Magistrale 1995). Wagner and

Magistrale describe the "culture of narcissism" as "individuals who have lost their sense

of community and who…are primarily self-concerned" (1995:130). As a result, Americans typically feel disconnected and alienated from their culture, often needing psychotropic drugs to ease anxiety and depression. Furthermore, a reliance on competition to determine self-worth could be responsible for the culture's high rates of violence. The following are further explanations for why anxiety, alienation, and manic behavior are characteristic of Americans.

The book, *American Mania: When More is Not Enough* by Peter Whybrow (2005), incorporates genetics, primatology, and behaviorism to explain the general discontentment and obsession for self-fulfillment among Americans. The author argues that since the American colonists basically consisted of explorers, they probably were self-selected and characterized by a common dopamine allele that demanded copious amounts of novelty experience for individuals to feel rewarded. Today, this dopamine receptor inherited from those ancestors gets overloaded, as technology brings ever-expanding information and entertainment instantaneously, causing the demand for rewarding stimulation to increase sharply. As a consequence, many Americans are in a vicious cycle of overworking to provide for the habit of overconsuming, which is needed to combat the depression and angst resulting from overworking.

Lasch (1978) argues that due to increasing reliance on "consumer culture, the 'helping' professions, and bureaucratic authority," Americans have lost their sense of confidence and competence. This "contemporary narcissism" is marked by a new sense of helplessness—one that comes from relying excessively on experts, media personalities, and others to make personal decisions. For example, cross-cultural studies on Americans in European classrooms show that Americans typically struggle since the

lectures are less structured than in America. Typically, European professors do no have a syllabus nor requirements for how much to read of required texts, so Americans may feel lost or assume that the class is really "easy" (Wagner and Magistrale 1995:17).

As a result of feeling helpless, many Americans become discontented with themselves and with society. Wagner and Magistrale (1995) theorize that a type of nihilism develops out of this discontentment because many Americans come to view society as irreparable, i.e. a "broken government." Hence, the main goal becomes personal survival or community survival since society is beyond individual control.

It is important to keep in mind though, that the theories presented here are not anthropological perspectives, but are based instead on psychological and cross-cultural studies combined with philosophical critiques of American culture. This study does not seek to criticize American culture, but it does acknowledge the problem that Americans typically feel alienated as a result from feeling disconnected from a common culture, which they often do not even recognize to exist.

Culture Shock

> The reality of culture shock is that it makes us all feel like children;
> lacking a social compass, we tend to feel lost a lot of the time
> [Wagner & Magistrale 1995:132].

When I arrived in Zurich, Switzerland, I hadn't slept at all on the flight from Chicago to Dublin, or from Dublin to London, or from London to Zurich. Somewhere between transferring flights, my bags were lost and to make matters worse, we were taking a train to Venice in two days, so unless my bags were going to be brought by a jet-ski, I had little hope of ever seeing my luggage again for the rest of the trip. As I attempted to express my concerns to the Swiss baggage claim assistant who only spoke broken

English, I realized that I had to keep moving because I had to meet my group. I held

written instructions to board a train from the Zurich airport into the downtown area, but

when I looked at the outgoing trains, I couldn't understand any of the Swiss-German

signs since my written directions didn't have the proper accented letters. As I stood in

line at the electronic ticket processor, I perspired and shook from the anxiety of not

hearing any English around me or having any material possessions. When it was my turn,

the ticket dispensing machine was in Swiss-German and I had no idea where to start.

When I turned to the man behind me to ask for help, he tapped an imaginary watch on his

wrist and pushed me aside (later I would find out from a local that the Swiss have a very

rigid time orientation). Defeated, I walked up to the human ticket processor and put my

written directions on the counter and pointed to my destination. He said nothing in

response and charged me for a round trip.

I eventually found the train terminals and lay down on the pavement trying to

breathe and calm down—I was, after all, training to be an anthropologist, so I should be

able to deal with this situation with ease. Instead, I was lying on my back with no

possessions, no sleep, and on the verge of a panic attack because I could not navigate

through a culture not even considered "exotic." I decided that I looked suspicious to

people and sat up, pretending that I knew where I was supposed to be going. I approached

an old woman and asked her in English if she knew where my destination was. To my

surprise, she was very helpful despite the fact that she didn't speak any English, and she

sat next to me on the train and signaled to me when to get off.

In Zurich, there is a trolley system similar to San Francisco's, but free. This was

good news for me, except for the fact that I didn't know which direction to go. Again, all

I had was the name of a trolley stop written out in English, so I just got on the trolley and hoped for the best. When I reached the last stop 45 minutes later, I knew I had made a mistake, so I got off the trolley and asked an old man where I should go. This man was about 80-years-old, hunched over, and didn't know a word of English. Yet, he insisted on helping me find my destination by following me and asking other pedestrians if they could help me—I thought I was a child again, unaware of what grandpa was saying, but allowing him to pass me off to random relatives. The cultural implications of these actions amaze me now, but at the time, it was really annoying. I didn't want to be rude and just walk away from the man who was being really nice, but if someone in America asks you for directions and you don't know how to help, you just shake your head and keep moving.

I ran away from the man yelling "Thanks!" and boarded the trolley again. I rode it all the way to the other side of Zurich. By this time, I was too tired to be nervous and I simply rested my forehead against the dirty window and shut my eyes. I was now seven hours late in meeting my group and I had nothing but directions written out in English, which nobody seemed to understand. I was beginning to give up when I noticed a woman staring at me, so I decided to give it one more shot—"Do you have any idea where this place is?" I asked. She looked down to my written directions, squinted, and replied "Yes!" It turns out she was Canadian and worked at the hostel I was going to stay at.

When I arrived, my group was already touring the city, but the girl at the front desk knew enough English to help me communicate with the airlines and find my bags. They arrived at about 9 p.m., the night before we left for Venice, sporting about twenty

different tags representing airports in France, Ireland, England, Spain, and Switzerland. Even today, my luggage has traveled to more countries than I have in my whole life.

Many theorists (Barnett 1954; DuBois 1951; Foster 1962; Meintel 1971; Oberg 1954; Wagner & Magistrale 1995) would explain my feelings of alienation, anxiety, desperation, and disillusionment as an expression of culture shock. Oberg (1954:1) specifically calls culture shock an "occupational disease…with its own etiology, symptoms and cure…precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse." On the other hand, other theorists (Anderson 1971; Bock 1970; Laubscher 1994; Meintel 1973; Redfield 1962) view the experience of culture shock as an opportunity for "adjustment," as Deirdre Meintel (1973) refers to it, or a separate cultural reality from which one may reflect objectively. Again, Meintel (1973:55) provides a different view of the phenomenon as she notes, "the experience of the stranger, misleadingly labeled 'culture shock,' rather than being a disease to be avoided at all costs holds possibilities which are valuable for personal and intellectual growth."

In order to make sense of culture shock, I will first describe the theoretical framework of the phenomenon so that current views on its causes, effects, and remedies can be understood. To begin, the *enculturation process* is the acquisition of norms, values, and beliefs through learning and developing within one's own cultural milieu. We are all born into a cultural context, which defines our interpretations, interests, and social roles. Spradley (1972) has described five levels of learning an individual develops through enculturation:

1. Learning about the culture.

2. Understanding the culture.

3. Believing the culture.

4. Using those beliefs to explain behaviors.

5. Internalizing the cultural beliefs as a cognitive frame of reference.

Any individual who is traveling to a different culture for the first time can only be at the first stage, since *understanding* a culture "implies some degree of insight into the behavior patterns that characterize the host culture, which is a first step toward an awareness of the cognitive differences that are responsible for generating different behavior patterns" (Laubscher 1994:3). If we are to accept Spradley's model of the enculturation process, then we must recognize that before any sort of relevant insights on foreign behaviors can occur, one must go through a cognitive upheaval of some sort. In this sense, culture shock could represent such a cognitive phenomenon, marked by feelings of anxiety and disillusionment, which are indications that one's enculturation process has become challenged by a foreign culture.

Anderson (1971) theorizes that culture shock has several phases, which she derived through dream analysis of fifteen Americans who traveled to India with her for several weeks. In her analysis, she describes that everyone's dreams initially involved characters from the past, i.e. old friends, neighborhood kids, old girlfriends and boyfriends, etc. Furthermore, these characters would be in a past setting, such as an old classroom. At times, the dreams were exotic and odd.

The second phase of dreams began after about a month in India. The team reported seeing more family members, spouses, and close friends, but they were always far away or hard to understand. One subject reported having lunch with a colleague,

except the table was very broad, making it difficult to converse. Others reported watching their children fly kites, but they stood far away. Also, Indian and American clothes and traits became mixed in the dreams—one professor reported feeling a turban on top of his head.

The third phase of dreaming revealed no difficulties in communicating with loved ones, or a mixing of cultural traits. Instead, the subjects were Americans participating in Indian activities. For example, many subjects reported seeing family members who communicated with Indians as Americans taking part in Indian activities.

Anderson explains that these dream patterns are due to the mind creating "a secondary system of cultural identification," or a substitute for reality (1971:1124). The dream world became the anchor for familiar images, people, and environments as the group members' waking hours were spent just coping with unfamiliar people and settings. Hence, the first phase of dreams brought the individual back to familiar characters from their past, quite possibly in the middle of their native enculturation process. Then, in the second phase, the subjects were able to face their feelings of detachment, but needed to hold onto important characters in the present. Lastly, the third phase represented a synthesis between Indian and American cultures, and a state free from anxiety. Anderson writes: "It helps assure not only our adaptation to the new culture but the continuity of the old. It does this by shaping a protective secondary system of cultural identification that cushions us psychologically" (1971:1124-1125).

Psychologists refer to the state of anxiety resulting from holding two contradictory ideas as *cognitive dissonance*. Festinger (1957) argues that the anxious state created by culture shock is a sign of dissonance. In order to reduce dissonance, an

individual will try to avoid situations and information which provoke it. For instance, individuals may withdraw by locking themselves in a room, "oversocialize" by getting romantically involved immediately, or lash out against the host culture. Indeed, when I learned that my bags were lost, the first thought in my mind was "In America, this wouldn't have happened," which is obviously false.

Wagner and Magistrale (1995:42) propose that the healthiest way to overcome culture shock is to write analytically, which helps to accomplish three things:

1. Discover

2. Synthesize

3. Comprehend

As people struggle to understand the foreign culture, as well their own, the analytical journal will serve as a therapeutic means toward discovering cultural differences, synthesizing patterns, and comprehending why they exist. The ultimate goal is "cultural interpretation," or the ability to describe a culture. Furthermore, they add (1995:20) that to overcome culture shock, one needs to observe and mirror cultural norms, as well as make cognitive adjustments such as:

1. Reflect on why you feel the way you do.

2. Keep a good sense of humor.

3. Keep a good sense of humility.

4. Stay open to new experiences.

Using my experience of culture shock as an example of the strange emotional and cognitive turmoil that may immediately occur when going abroad helps to illustrate that all individuals, even those trained in recognizing and adapting to new cultural norms, are

apt to experience alienation and anxiety upon arrival in a foreign culture. Some theorists view culture shock as a disease, others consider it to be a phase of adjusting—either way, the universality of culture shock provides evidence of the unique enculturation process all individuals rely on to define their reality. The benefits of testing one's reality are noted by Geisler (2000:5):

> The novelty of the experience, introducing new social, cultural, and psychological assumptions, has the potential to foster the emergence of new perspectives that could potentially impart multiple directions and extend the frontiers of what previously defined the parameters of participants' learning and knowledge.

Study Abroad: History and Impact

Education abroad programs have been steadily increasing over the past two decades. An Open Doors 2009 report shows that overseas study by U.S. students has risen 8.5% in 2007-2008, and has quadrupled since 1997-1998 (http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/). The study also points out that American students are visiting less common destinations such as China, India, Japan, South Africa, and Argentina, and that rates of student participation continue to increase despite economic troubles. However, many students have opted to take shorter trips or visit cheaper countries, which may explain the influx of students visiting less "traditional" destinations. Many universities have also been offering more scholarships to students as encouragement to enroll in education abroad, which may point to the belief that education abroad is considered a vital learning experience. Laubscher writes in his book *Encounters with Difference* (1994:xii): "The higher education community recognizes that the educated person of the future will need a basic understanding of others nations and cultures in order to function effectively."

One of the first studies detailing the impact of study abroad on students was conducted by Mitchell Hammer, a member of AFS (American Field Study), a non-profit

organization dedicated to creating cultural understanding through international training. The program places volunteers (typically students) with host families and encourages them to work and study within the culture in hopes of teaching them the four dimensions of learning (Hansel 2008:3):

- Personal development

- Interpersonal development

- Intercultural learning

- Global education.

After 90 years of developing intercultural training, the AFS conducted a major study in 2002, surveying the impact of cross-cultural studies in students who had volunteered from 1980-1986. The first study compared applicants who went abroad with applicants who did not between the years of 1981-1982, using a pre- and post-test questionnaire. Applicants rated their behaviors using a scale validated with previous AFS students. The results showed that applicants who went abroad showed "considerably positive change" in ten of the scales listed in order of "importance" (Hansel 2008:3-4):

1. Awareness and Appreciation of Host Country & Culture

2. Foreign Language Appreciation and Ability

3. Understanding Other Cultures

4. International Awareness

5. Adaptability

6. Awareness of Opportunities

7. Critical Thinking

8. Non-Materialism

9. Independence/Responsibility for Self

10. Awareness & Appreciation of Home Country and Culture.

Acknowledging the limitations of this early study, such as a high level of pre-test bias, Dr. Mitchell Hammer developed the second study using the *Intercultural Development Inventory*, a survey based on the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*. The latter model, developed by Milton Bennet, shows that one must pass through six hierarchical states and two developmental stages until one acquires cultural relativism (Bennet 1986:58):

Figure 2: Bennet's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

- o Three stages of Ethnocentrism:

  1. An initial denial of cultural differences, which includes isolation and separation stages.

  2. A defensive state consisting of denigration, superiority, and reversal stages in which the reality of cultural differences is finally acknowledged but an attempt is made to maintain hegemony of one culture over another.

  3. A state in which cultural differences are minimized in an attempt to deal with the recognition that it is no longer tenable to maintain the superiority of one culture over another.

- o Three stages of Ethnorelativism:

  1. A state characterized by stages of behavior in which the individual accepts the relative viability of differences among cultures in adapting to the material environment.

2. Adaptation to the host culture, in which empathy and a sense of pluralism emerge.

3. A transcendent state in which "difference in general becomes integral to identity.

Bennet postulates that the ultimate goal for the individual is to reach *Constructive Marginality*, or the ability to use no "cultural frames of reference" (1986:61). At this stage, the individual will hold "no unquestioned assumptions, no intrinsically right behaviors, nor any necessary reference group" (1986:62).

The survey was given in nine countries using participants of a study abroad program and nonparticipants as a control group. Hammer sought to measure four specific areas of the program: intercultural anxiety, forming intercultural relationships, language fluency, and furthering intercultural experiences. The demographics broke down as follows:

Table 1: AFS Survey Demographic

Number of Times Person Participated in Study Abroad	Length of Program (of most useful program if more than one)		Living Arrangements	
1 72%	<1 month	3%	Host Family	26%
2 19%	1-2 months	16%	Student Dormitory	32%
3 5%	3-4 months	18%	Apartment	18%
4 4%	5-7 months	15%	Hotel/Hostel	2%
	8 months-1 year	32%	Other	22%
	>1 year	15%		

(Adapted from Hansel 2008:18)

Based on the results, AFS reports "The AFS group overall showed fluency in a greater number of languages and a different attitude concerning other cultures.…They were also more at ease and less anxious…around other cultures" (Hansel 2008:4). The

most significant difference between the AFS group and the control group was the influence the intercultural experience had on participants' personal values and beliefs, which should be enough of an incentive to further studies on education abroad programs.

As Laubscher notes, education abroad studies, such as the AFS study, have been quantitative and more concerned with the outcomes and effects of the study abroad experience, rather than the process (Geisler 2000). Indeed it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify a change in perception, which is why using anthropological perspectives is so vital if we are to understand the process of learning each individual goes through in education abroad.

One important concept the AFS study also noted was the theory of *reversal*, or an individual's tendency to criticize his/her native culture while idealizing another culture. Those who displayed a sense of reversal showed up primarily in the pretesting and were found to be valuable for host-culture behavior since they exhibit a lot of enthusiasm upon arrival to another culture. Based on my experiences abroad with Americans, I've noticed that reversal takes place quite often, unless, of course, a certain negative experience takes place before the student has achieved a sense of cultural relativism.

The point is that until individuals can get beyond the idea that one culture is better than another, which is only remedied with experience and *reflection*, they will always view a positive or negative experience in another culture ethnocentrically. As Cerroni-Long (2008:199) notes:

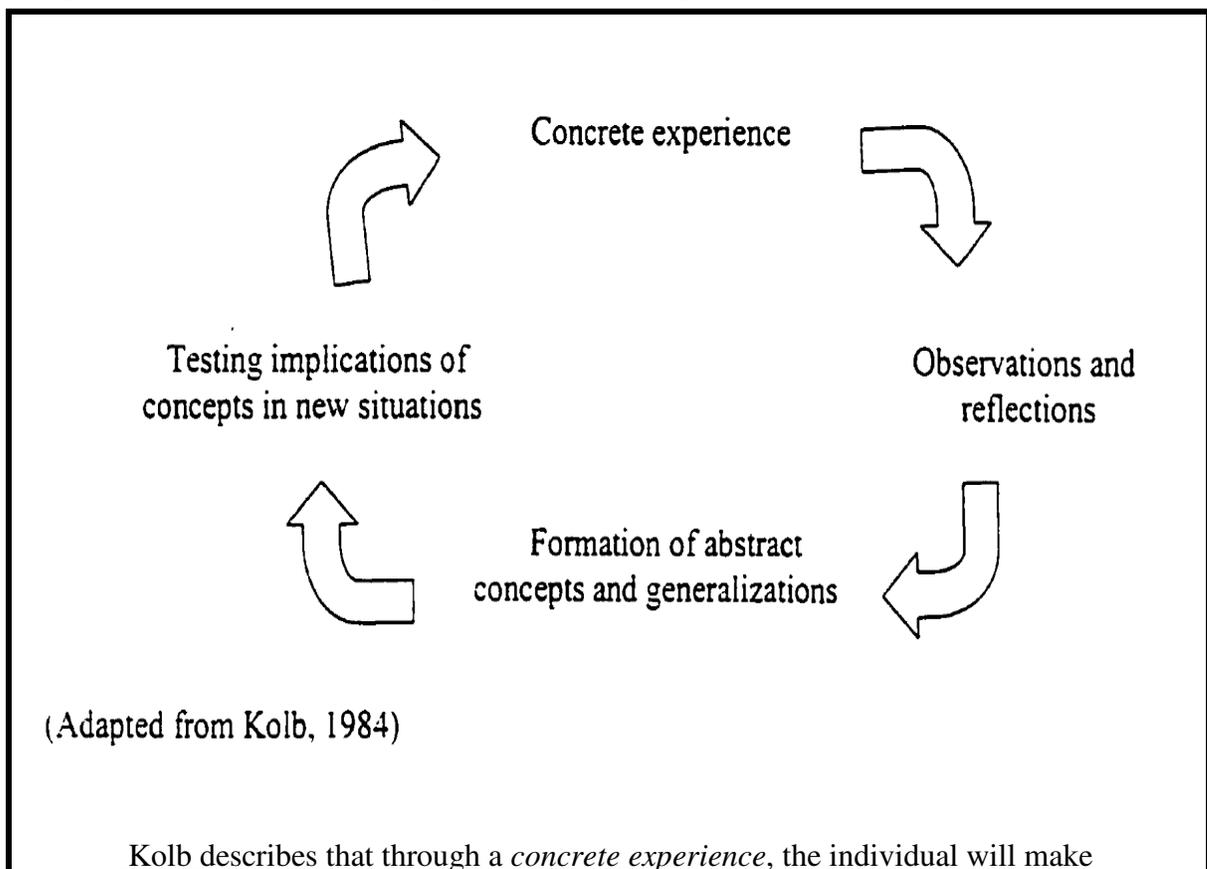> The most dangerous type of reaction to intercultural encounters, however, comes from the unwillingness to recognize the legitimacy of cultural differences, leading to the ethnocentric denial of the common humanity of the culturally "others" and to concocting all sorts of ideological justifications—such as supposed "racial" inferiority or "innate" evil tendencies—for their exploitation or victimization.

Hence, it is important to investigate learning models for education abroad in order to

fully understand how one can move out of the ethnocentric mode of thinking. I will then

apply these models to my observations to assess whether cultural reflexivity is likely to

emerge from such learning processes.

Learning Models: Education Abroad

Kolb's (1984) *Model of Experiential Learning* is the most basic learning theory

concerning the education abroad experience:

Figure 3: Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning

Concrete experience

Testing implications of
concepts in new situations

Observations and
reflections

Formation of abstract
concepts and generalizations

(Adapted from Kolb, 1984)

Kolb describes that through a *concrete experience*, the individual will make

observations and *reflect* on that experience in order to form generalizations. Then, the

individual will be able to test these generalizations in new situations, which will lead to

affirmation or rejection of the generalization. In theory, Kolb views experiential learning

as circular since the testing of generalizations in new situations will lead to new experiences to be observed.

Kolb's model relates to education abroad because his pedagogical technique is primarily based on experience. As James Coleman (1976) notes, experiential learning involves a reversal in the learning processes, meaning that the classroom uses abstract teaching points to be applied in the real world, while experiential learning uses particular events to lead to the formation of abstract concepts.

As Jacquetta Burnett (1972) suggests, students who rely on particular events to further their education are using ethnographic methods in a way similar to those adopted by anthropologists. In practice, all students are like amateur ethnographers as they study abroad because they naturally look for social clues to determine how they should act. As Laubscher (1994:7) notes:

> While students abroad are obviously not trained ethnographers, Burnett's analogy suggests that students are in fact making use of ethnographic methods, regardless of how unsophisticated or elementary, in acquiring information that helps them gain insight into the nature of the host country.

In my experience abroad, I found that indeed, concrete experiences abroad helped to remove my stereotypes about a culture, and to form generalizations based on valid observations. However, I only stayed in a number of Mediterranean cultures for about a month and I didn't stay with a host family, so my generalizations are not very reliable since they haven't been widely tested. Even with my undergraduate training in anthropology, which has primed my perceptions for studying cultural patterns, 35-days of visiting a set of cultures did not provide enough concrete experience to understand all of the differences between the places I visited and American culture. Hence, it is doubtful that any American students with no anthropological training could acquire much cultural

reflexivity on short study-abroad trips since, according to Bennet's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (see Figure 2), one must understand that differences exist in order to form generalizations, and this takes extensive experience.

Learning Models: Reflection

Due to its subjective practice, reflection is an ambiguous process that has been argued by theorists since Aristotle. The process can vary from simple memory recall in our everyday decisions to a type of learning theory called *reflective learning*. Jarvis (1987:86-87) defines reflective learning as "a process of deep thought, both a looking backwards to the situation being pondered upon and a projecting forward to the future, being a process of both recall and reason."

Boyd and Fales (1983:100) define reflective learning as "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective."

Through comparing and contrasting the many theories on reflective learning in his Master's Thesis, Geisler (2000:3) states that reflective learning:

> …looks to make the connections between experiences and the learner, and the perceptual relationships that govern those experiences. Reflective learning involves a dialectical relationship between the learner and experience, involving a revolving process of relating new experiences and knowledge to that which was previously known.

Based on an experiment with students studying abroad for one year in Nepal, Geisler used anthropological methods (interviews and participant-observation) to develop a typology of reflective learning (Geisler 2000:66):

Table 2: Typology of Reflective Learning

Core Category Types	Definitions
Focus of Reflection	Subject/Content of dialogue
Means of Reflection	Means sought to foster reflective learning
Reflective Intent	Result/Change/Action from reflection
Influences on Reflection	Variables affecting reflection both articulated by learner and implied through dialogue

The *Focus of Reflection* category describes specific content the learner chooses to discuss. The learner uses specific experiences as focal points to effectively reflect upon. This category also consisted of the majority of dialogue during interviews along with the greatest variability in areas of focus for the different learners. Hence, three subcategories were developed to describe the variance: *Content Reflection,* or the specific action of reflection on past or present experiences; *Process Reflection,* or discussing one's perceptions of the learning process such as relating past knowledge to a current experience; and *Premise Reflection*, or discussing the psychological, social, or cultural assumptions underlying the process of learning. As I have noted, Americans are particularly oriented toward using psychological assumptions to explain their learning since it reinforces the idea of individual agency. However, some students began to rely on cultural assumptions in their focus on reflection after the education abroad experience. For example, one student noted in an interview with Geisler (2000:69):

> I think because it has been such an important experience and it has made me view things differently than I normally do, so in the future there may be things that I don't even realize that I'll be looking at through different eyes. Through eyes of a person that has experienced a different culture and gone back to their own culture. Now I'm just more aware of my biases and things that (pause) why I look at things the way I do. Me and X were talking the other day that we are starting to notice that when we came here just things like looking at the marriages and stuff,

how we thought it was so terrible. We couldn't understand it. But we were comparing it to what we are used to in our society and now I'm starting to realize that it is not necessarily better; our way of doing things isn't better or the right way.

The *Means of Reflection* category "refers to the mechanisms, situations, etc. that

learners actively pursued, or reactively responded to in reflecting on their learning"

(2000:66). This core category is broken up into four subcategories that learners reported

learning something from: *Activities, People, Self,* and *Experience*. Through learning

experientially, one student reported (2000:85):

If you think of (pause) and I've just started to think about how Americans are so individualistic and so selfish, and that is good in the sense that, I mean obviously individual expression is a big thing, and being able to do what you want to do and that sort of thing, but I've just started to realize that we are so far removed from the idea of community that we live around other people that can help us and that we can share. And that is the thing that you can't, I mean I could read it out of a book but it just really drives home the point when you see it.

This response shows clear evidence that experiential learning fosters some sort of cultural

reflexivity, albeit ethnocentrically. However, as Bennet's developmental model of

intercultural sensitivity shows (see Figure 2), the learning process is a progression which

is developed through concrete experience (see Figure 3). It is also important to keep in

mind the conditions of the study abroad trip in Geisler's investigation—students stayed

with a host family, in Nepal, for 11 weeks. This may provide some clues for what type of

education abroad trips may foster cultural reflexivity in Americans.

The *Reflective Intent* category is any determined change by the learner as a result

of reflecting on specific content, which also includes the possibility of a perceived change

from the event. There are three different types of intentions Geisler (2000) identified:

Anticipated impact, or the expectation of a new or revised view to emerge; *Uncertain*

impact, or the uncertainty of not knowing what people have learned until one returns to

one's native culture; *Perceived impact—Attitude change/New perspective*, or the

knowledge of a changing view one may hold before the study abroad experience is over.

One example of the perceived impact, supporting the findings of the AFS study that those

who participate in study abroad experience all increase in self-confidence and a reduction

in anxiety, is seen here (Geisler 2000:88):

> It is something that I've lost in childhood or growing up, or somewhere along the line. Because I know that I used to feel like this. Maybe it was going to college. I don't know. But, just getting older and forgetting about enjoying life and having a good day everyday, and not waking up with heavy weight on your shoulders with something that you can't do anything about. So yes, it is definitely something that I'm going to keep.

The *Influence of Reflection* refers to the latent and definitive influences on the

learner as a result of reflection. The direct question Geisler posed to the students was

what, how, and why students reflectively learned from their experiences and to which

factors they attributed the most importance among the following: *Adaptability,* or the

ability to adapt to overwhelming situations that yielded new experiences; *Time*, which

directly refers to what the learner could experience in the 11-week program; and

Communication, which relate to the importance of knowing the native language, Nepali.

One student illustrates the importance of communication this way (Geisler 2000:94-95):

> One thing that I definitely (have) been thinking about, that I feel has inhibited me from learning as much as I could about Nepal, is the language. That I have barely learned any Nepalese and that I really should have taken a lot more initiative to learn it. Because I feel that with what people say to each other or to their children or what they talk about is so important, and I am completely missing it. Everything that I'm seeing is so visual. It is all in a physical context and in relation to the book learning that I've had and in relation to what I see in my house, but I feel that I'm missing a completely other world with what people talk about. Just what their feelings are. Because language is such a huge part of people and their world; their cosmology, what they feel is important with everything. And I think that I'm missing that. So I feel that I won't be able to get a complete picture of Nepal at all because of the language.

This example helps to show that through education abroad experiences an American student will become intrigued by the culture and even want to go so far as to communicate with the natives. This evidence is crucial since studies show that Americans consistently display a large degree of worldly naivety (Gore 2005).

Furthermore, Geisler (2000) went on to discuss the development of his *Typology of Reflective Learners* (Table 3), which is situated on a continuum of reflective learning containing the comprehensive core categories already seen in Table 2. His typology is as follows (Geisler 2000:132):

Table 3: Typology of Reflective Learners

Type	Typological Characteristics
Questioning Learner	Exploration of basic perspectives which guide assumptions of learning and reality
Synthesizing Learner	Looking to synthesize informative content of experiences with past knowledge so as to inform new opinions and actions
Content Informed Learner	Reiteration of experiences in comparing content with past knowledge and experiences

To expand, Geisler's first category, *Questioning Learner,* includes students who question their own assumptions from past experiences based on the content of new experiences. These learners seem to abandon their generalizations in favor of using a relativist perspective, which is especially beneficial for anyone who studies abroad. Since

cultural reflexivity requires a reflection on one's own culture, one can learn to do this

ethnorelatively by abandoning presuppositions about a culture based on past experiences.

However, it is critical to note that questioning one's assumptions is a good place to begin

and return to periodically, but to remain in this area of the reflective continuum would

limit intellectual progress.

Geisler's second category, *Synthesizing Learner,* includes students who look for

patterns. They seek a synthesis between new experiences and past experiences in order to

create new behaviors and conceptions. In a way, this process is at the heart of reflection,

but Geisler emphasizes that some reflective learners always gravitate toward comparing

and contrasting past and present experiences, rather than suspending all previous

assumptions as we see in the questioning learners.

The third category, *Content Informed Learner,* includes students who rely more

on the content of immediate experiences, rather than focusing on past assumptions. These

learners rely on a specific environment, or the context of experience, to teach themselves

the importance of an event, or its content. One student illustrates this point by comparing

the content of Buddhist and Hindu weddings in order to gain knowledge of the culture's

values (Geisler 2000:101):

> I went to both the Hindu and Buddhist weddings and I'm really glad I did that
> because it allowed me to compare the two and see how different they were from
> the U.S. The Buddhist wedding was really (pause) I didn't like it at all. It was
> really sad. It was really casual and (pause) but the Hindu wedding was more, it
> was exciting. They were playing music and dancing and it seemed like everyone
> was happy. But I didn't like the Buddhist wedding; it was sad.

As this interview reveals, the content informed learner compares and contrasts the

content of an experience through the context of the environment. This seems to be an

effective means for noting similarities and differences in cultural rituals, but it does not

seem to facilitate cultural reflexivity since one's previous assumptions and dispositions toward viewing the content in a certain light are not taken into consideration.

Through reviewing the numerous definitions of reflection and the theories of reflective learning, one can better understand the fundamental process leading toward cultural reflexivity. Since cultural reflexivity must be learned, one must be capable of reflection and as Geisler (2000) has noted, there are four core categories involved in the process of reflective learning, which he has called the *Typology of Reflective Learning* (see Table 2). However, Geisler notes that the process of reflection is not homogenous across humans, but varies across the continuum of three different categories, which he has termed the *Typology of Reflective Learners* (see Table 3). As I have noted, a particular learner type may be more likely to learn cultural reflexivity, but it is important to move throughout the continuum of learner types so that one may be capable of challenging assumptions, discovering patterns through past experiences, and discovering the similarities and differences between cultural practices.

Data

Since my trip was a relatively short one compared to many programs that may last for a year, I focused mainly on the most consistent environment which everyone would have to participate in—restaurants. Food rituals provided the most valid data for my study since I had at least three events every day in which I could observe Americans interacting in a foreign environment. As a result, I am able to identify comparative behavioral patterns because of the inevitable cultural conflicts resulting from different food rituals.

The best example of culture conflict over food happened in Italy, since the culture's food rituals are very specific and highly respected by the natives. Breakfast in

Italy is practically nonexistent unless you consider a shot of espresso nutritionally

sufficient. In fact, this was the most difficult cultural barrier for me to climb. As an

American, I believe that breakfast is the most important meal of the day--it should

include a lot of protein, vitamins, and be quite substantial in calorie content. In Italy,

however, I could only find pastries or a few slices of ham wedged between two giant

pieces of bread. The mornings were hard and many of the café workers seemed annoyed

as I stood at the counter, pondered, searched for something filling, and settled for a

cappuccino.

It was our last day in Florence, and we had been on the trip for over a week at this

point. Needless to say, we missed breakfast, so we circled around all of the restaurants

catering to tourists near the Duomo. There we saw a sign promising: "We Serve

Breakfast--Eggs, Bacon, Toast." Our jaws dropped--about ten jaws to be exact, so we

entered the restaurant cheering and laughing. The man working there greeted us, but told

us that the store was not ready yet, so we insisted that we would wait. We sat for a long

time and then gave our drink orders--orange juice all around…with ice. The man left

silently and went to the back to get our drinks…with ice. Now, I don't know much

Italian, but I could gather by the inflection of the woman's voice in the back (probably

the boy's mother) that she was very angry at him. However, no one in our group paid

much attention to it since we couldn't understand what she was saying. After what

seemed an hour, we received our drinks and we placed our orders. We all ordered the

same thing, but with modifications to every element of the dish--eggs scrambled, eggs

overeasy, eggs overhard, wheat toast, white toast, burnt toast, unbuttered toast, etc. The

man said "OK," and returned to the back. Another hour seemed to pass and my group

started to complain. When another family was seated and received their food immediately, our group elected one person to speak for us all. The student told the server of our situation: "We've been waiting here for two hours for our food. This is ridiculous." The server seemed to empathize with the student and went to the back. After about another half hour, the food came out, but with none of the modifications we requested. A few students complained, and they didn't receive their unbuttered toast or their scrambled eggs until after everyone else was done. Everyone in our group was furious and complaining to one another loud enough for anyone in the restaurant to hear. Finally, we received the check and the server told us we didn't have to pay since we were so patient. Was this a joke? Some of us started laughing, some were crying out of embarrassment for complaining so much, but all of us were confused, so I announced that we should leave right away, while the offer was standing. When we started walking out the door the server asked, "Where are you going? You have to pay!" Again, confusion spread like a wildfire and the expressions on everyone's faces went from jovial to irate. To think that we had finally been respected as customers, that our wishes had been granted after we waited for two hours, that we had been deprived of a good breakfast for more than a week by now--all of these thoughts circled around our minds. In the meantime, all of the servers had gathered to have a good laugh as we divided the check while our tongues were spitting fiery condemnations at them.

After I had settled down, I reflected on what happened in Florence. Cultural scripts had been broken in several places and it was my job to put the puzzle back together if I were to understand why things went the way they did. Our first mistake was to sit down in the restaurant while the family was still trying to open, but since there

wasn't a "Closed" sign, we assumed we could come in. This isn't part of the script in Italy--if someone says they are not ready to be open yet, regardless of the doors being open, they mean that no one is allowed to intrude on the ritual yet. Secondly, we all asked for modifications to our food and drinks, which gave an intimation of pretentiousness to the servers. Thirdly, we assumed that the customer is always right. In America, servers are expected to fulfill every request without arguing and then they are tipped according to how well they perform this role. In Italy (and in most European cultures), the server is there as a benevolent authority figure. In a way, a restaurant in Italy serves to attest the owner's idea of how the ritual of eating should be played out.

Reflecting on this incident pushed me into doing a cross-cultural comparison. In fact, everyone who shared that event with me was doing a cross-cultural comparison because all of the complaints centered on how American restaurants provide better service. Hence, not only was this highly emotional event causing conscious cultural comparisons to be made, it was also causing ethnocentric cultural reflexivity. If we had asked ourselves, "Did we act this way because we are American?" then this would provide ethnorelevant reflexivity. Hence, I can conclude from observing this event that food serves as a major gateway to cultural reflexivity since it involves satisfying a biological need. Furthermore, culture conflicts help to guide an individual to learning reflexive behaviors, albeit ethnocentrically at first.

Lunch began early and lasted several hours in the Mediterranean cultures we visited. In more traditional areas, most shops and restaurant were closed around 2pm and opened up again around 5pm. I would assume that this practice revolves around the sun, which is at its greatest height and degree of heat in the afternoon. Unlike Americans who

use "delicacies" such as ice cubes or spend money on expensive air conditioners, Mediterraneans work around the sun rather than fight against it. Americans on the trip, including myself, perceived this as an inconvenience. In fact, whenever we found one little pizza shop that stayed open in the afternoon, we would throw up our arms in praise; we would clap and roar as if we've been starved by a dictator and this one little pizza shop was a secret post for weary Americans. By the time I reached Greece, I realized that restaurant owners there were the most efficient since they spent their siesta in the restaurant instead of at home. They weren't going out of their way to cater to us, they were merely skipping a step in the cultural formula, and didn't mind making a pizza for some overjoyed Americans.

Dinner was the most prone to culture conflict since it is the most important food ritual in Mediterranean cultures. The meal serves as the cornerstone for family interaction--it gathers everyone for conversation, it provides opportunity for all members to play their role, and it essentially serves as a major context for bonding with one's kin. In America, our cognatic-neolocal kinship and obsession with time efficiency create a hurried meal with varied practices; roles may be exchanged or nonexistent, a TV may be on, or members may eat in separate areas of the house. More importantly, when Americans go out to eat, they expect quick and efficient service from kind servers whose performance is rated with a tip. Hence, most of our experiences in a restaurant during our study abroad trip involved sighing, complaining, and arguing over who would pay what amount since the checks were never divided individually. However, as many of the students began to adjust to the long dinner schedule, they began relaxing more over food by having a few glasses of vino and telling stories.

Food ritual is arguably one of the most prominent practices in a culture. Anyone can get some sense of what is important to a culture through observing or performing in the ritual of food. In general, Mediterranean populations consume their food with great patience and respect for the ritual. This practice is quite different from the "on-the-go" meal schedule typical in the U.S., so it took us some time to adjust to a two-hour dinner.

Using Bennet's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (see Figure 2), I can conclude that several students reached the first stage of ethnorelativism through the practice of food ritual in order to adapt to their material environment. However, these students only developed ethnorelativism toward certain practices of the culture--in this instance, food ritual. I would attribute this specialization to the nature of the trip, since we were constantly traveling and staying in hotels and hostels. If we had lived with host families and settled in one area for a long period of time, we would have been able to expand our experiences of the culture's kinship structure, communication patterns, aesthetic pursuits, etc.

Conclusion

Throughout my undergraduate career in anthropology, I have felt conflicted--I have always agreed with the basic anthropological definition of culture, but only so long as I could view cultures from afar. In other words, I always found myself agreeing with the outsider's position that there are certain behavioral patterns characterizing other cultures, but when it came to discussing American culture, I would become uneasy. In my junior year, my professor, E.L. Cerroni-Long, piloted a class on American culture for American students. She explained to me ahead of time that this was somewhat of an experiment--to see if "it" would "work" (meaning: "Will Americans be able to recognize their culture?").

Throughout the class we compared French and American behavior in relation to everyday activities. What happened was that every topic we discussed turned into an argument because every student could think of one person they knew who didn't adhere to the norm being discussed. Initially, I joined in these discussions or at least silently agreed with the fact that I didn't act the same as everyone else. It wasn't until I learned to challenge my reactions and to reflect on what I was about to say that I began to see my culture at work--I will always act aversely to the idea that I am not autonomous in my behaviors and attitudes. From this point on, I listened to the responses of my classmates and began to see the pattern of denial, or that knee-jerk reaction to challenge any attempt at clumping us together.

This initial reflection is what instigated my interest in cultural reflexivity. I began to wonder how Americans could best learn that they do indeed have a culture, because obviously a class on American culture wasn't working for everybody. Hence, the education abroad programs offered by the university offered me a great opportunity to test whether cultural reflexivity can be learned by American students if they are forced to adapt to another culture.

Based on my experience abroad, my uneasiness with considering culture a major factor in my behaviors was relieved. I witnessed my culture come out in the crowded buses in Rome as my group decided to sing songs instead of speaking quietly to a neighbor like everyone else was doing; I saw it at museums as we would sit and have class right in front of a famous painting, precluding other visitors from coming close to view the painting; I saw it as we demanded respect from the restaurant staff in Florence when our meal was late and our orders were wrong; I saw it as we gleefully visited

popular American apparel stores and bought new outfits every time we went out dancing. All of these "normal" behaviors came to my attention because the Mediterranean cultures we visited provided a different background for American culture to juxtapose itself on.

In terms of my anthropological investigation on the American students, I can conclude that culture conflict and culture shock are necessary components for learning cultural reflexivity. The breakfast incident in Florence was the single most influential event on the trip because it created an emotional surge of energy, which then led to the urge to systematically contrast and compare American norms, values, and beliefs to those of the Italians. Despite the fact that these reflections were ethnocentric, I believe that Bennet's model shows that there is a common progression from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism through concrete experience. Hence, the more experiences gained the more chances one has to confirm or disconfirm the generalizations formed about a foreign culture. However, cultural reflexivity is a necessary component in this process if one is to ever learn cultural relativism.

Based on my observations, I would recommend further research on what factors may help develop cultural reflexivity among Americans. Longer education abroad programs should be studied anthropologically, as well as the role individual temperament and personality types may play in one's ability to reflect. Just as importantly, ethnicity should be researched as it relates to the affect the education abroad experience may have on the individual. For example, does visiting one's "home country" help to develop cultural reflexivity, or does it create a sense of detachment from the culture of origin? This study attempts to call attention to the need to open new areas of research into the education abroad experience by using anthropological perspectives.

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