

2-1-2013

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Jessup-Anger, J. E., & Aragones, A. (2013).  
*Students' peer interactions within a cohort and in host countries during a short-term study abroad.*  
*Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 50(1), 21–36.  
doi:10.1515/jsarp-2013-0002  
Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/jsarp-2013-0002>

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*Innovations in Research and Scholarship Feature*

# Students' Peer Interactions Within a Cohort and in Host Countries During a Short-Term Study Abroad

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*In this qualitative case study, we explored students' peer interactions within their cohort and in the host countries during a short-term study abroad. Framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory, findings revealed that students spent considerable energy reflecting on interactions with peers. The students considered themselves loners, mediators, messengers, and learners. Findings illustrate the need to attend to students' differing personal attributes and relationships with peers, as these affect their overall experiences.*

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Concurrent with the increase in the number of students studying abroad over the past thirty-five years (Institute of International Education, 2011) is a change in the way they do so that has repercussions for students' experiences while abroad. Historically, students spent a semester or more abroad and lived with a family or stayed in a dormitory isolated from other Americans (Institute of International Education, 2011); today many students choose to attend faculty-led programs during which they travel with a cohort of peers (Engle & Engle, 1999). This change in the structure of study abroad potentially limits students' integration into the host culture and heightens their interactions with other domestic students.

In addition to raising questions about the effectiveness of the short-term format in promoting cross-cultural learning (Dwyer, 2004; Engle & Engle, 1999; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009), cohort-based programs raise questions about the role of peers in students' experience. A cohort is a small group of learners who complete a program of study together (Lawrence, 2002). The cohort-based, short-term study abroad experience creates a unique context for fostering relationships and learning among peers. Unlike in traditional classrooms where learners spend several hours together and then part ways, in cohort-based study abroad programs students are forced to interact continuously with the same peers. These interactions increase the importance of understanding the cohort as a learning environment, recognizing its potential to enrich peer learning or increase conflict and feelings of marginalization (Ransbury & Harris, 1994). In a reflective essay, Lenz and Wister (2008), two faculty members who spent ten years leading short-term trips to Central America, credited the presence of a cohort with providing "a comfortable set of personal and group relationships [and] an ideal space in which to express [their] deepest thoughts safely..." (p. 86), but little research exists to substantiate their claim.

Although several researchers explored the experiences of students in cohort-based programs, their studies focused on outcomes, investigating global awareness (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), culture learning (Brubaker, 2007), long-term impact (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011), and gender identity (Jessup-Anger, 2008; Twombly, 1995) and not on students' interactions with their peers. Only Ransbury and Harris (1994) explicitly investigated the role of the cohort in the experiences of students engaged in a short-term program. Using participant observation methods, the authors found that the presence of the group influenced behavior, as students were simultaneously engaging in a group process and adjusting to a new culture (Ransbury & Harris, 1994). The researchers determined that group formation played a key role in the students' behavior and not enough attention had been given to the group's interpersonal interactions. Although their research provides evidence that cohort-based peer interactions influence students' experiences, it stopped short of examining students' perceptions of their roles and how these roles affected students' experiences with the host country, relying solely on observation notes (which would not have reflected how students made sense of their interactions unless it was explicit).

In the current study, we explored students' peer interactions within their cohort and in the host countries to understand the role of the cohort in students' experiences. Our specific research

questions were: (a) How do students describe their roles as group members?, and (b) How do they interact in the host countries (e.g., interactions with people, food, experiences)?

## Theoretical Framework

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory to understand the interactive effect of peers and developmental processes enables researchers to gain a more holistic understanding of the complexity of students' experiences (see Renr & Arnold, 2003). The theory lends itself to understanding students' interactions in a cohort of peers in study abroad because it provides multiple units of analysis; the student, the cohort, and the context of the host countries. Bronfenbrenner (1993) envisioned development as a function of person and environment, with the interaction taking place in the immediate setting in which the person exists. His model illustrates how personal attributes, called *developmentally instigative characteristics*, set in motion "reciprocal processes of interpersonal interaction" (p. 12) that affect learning. He outlined four types of these characteristics.

Perhaps most relevant to exploring students' peer interactions in study abroad is Bronfenbrenner's (1993) first type, *personal stimulus characteristics*, which details how people's actions invite or inhibit particular responses from the environment that can disrupt or foster psychological growth (e.g., how peers might respond differently to a shy versus outgoing member of the cohort). Bronfenbrenner's second type, *selective responsivity*, describes how people interact with their surroundings (e.g., some students may immerse themselves fully in the host country by choosing authentic food and experiences, while others seek out comforts of home, choosing to dine at American fast-food chains and mimicking activities they are used to). The third type, *structuring proclivities*, details how people seek out increasingly complex activities (e.g., after some time, some students may elect to integrate more fully by separating from other Americans). Because of the duration of a short-term study abroad, students' structuring proclivities may not be apparent. The fourth type, *directive beliefs*, refers to how people view their agency in relation to their environment (e.g., students who believe they are cross-culturally competent may approach interactions with the host country with confidence, whereas students without such agency may be more passive).

In a cohort situation, students possessing varying developmentally instigative characteristics interact with one another in addition to interacting with members of the host country. These interactions shape students' social integration, host country contact, and their learning.

Another important aspect of Bronfenbrenner's (1993) model is the context, described as the environmental characteristics that interact with the person and affect developmental processes. Bronfenbrenner envisioned these characteristics as nested systems that surround an individual, from proximal to distal. He labeled these the *micro*-, *meso*-, *exo*-, and *macrosystem*.

Most relevant to understanding students' experiences on a short-term study abroad are students' microsystems because they include the student and study abroad setting. The microsystem is defined by Bronfenbrenner (1993) as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations"

that are experienced in one's immediate environment that "invite, permit, or inhibit engagement" in that environment (p. 15). During a cohort-based, short-term study abroad, many of students' microsystems are identical, including their learning environment, living arrangements, and travel experiences. However, students bring their backgrounds, expectations, and developmentally instigative characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) to the microsystem.

The mesosystem, defined as "a system of two or more settings frequented by the same person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 20), details the linkages students may make to their shared microsystems (the study abroad setting), which may include their home, family, or peer group. While other elements of the context (exosystems and macrosystems) may affect students' developmental processes and experiences, they are more distal and do not contain the student. The current study focused on the interaction between the student, microsystem, and mesosystem to understand students' peer interactions within their cohort and in the host countries during a short-term study abroad.

## Study Design

We used a constructivist approach (Broido & Marring, 2002) to explore students' peer interactions within their cohort and in the host countries during a short-term study abroad. The constructivist perspective (Piaget, 1972) aligned with our assumption that students' interactions with peers and the host countries could not be understood as an independent reality; rather, it would be rooted in context and include their previous experiences and perspectives as knowers. A single qualitative case study design, framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory, focused the analysis procedures. Because the unit of analysis was the study abroad experience, the ecological perspective enabled us to examine the student, students' interactions with each other, and the host countries simultaneously. Consistent with case study design (Yin, 1984), data were gathered at different points and through different mechanisms, including observation, interviews, and document review.

## Setting

As detailed in Jessup-Anger (2008), the setting of the study was a three-week, cohort-based study abroad program to New Zealand and Australia that took place in the summer of 2006 and focused on food, environment, and social systems. It was sponsored by Large Midwest Research University, a public, research-extensive university located in the Midwest with more than 20,000 undergraduate students. A tenured faculty member and an administrator planned and led the trip. Twenty-eight students participated (19 women and 9 men). The majority of students were pursuing majors within the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, with 15 students in agriculture-related areas and 5 in environmental studies or parks and recreation. The remaining 8 students had majors unrelated to the academic emphasis of the trip. All of the students knew one or more other students or faculty members through classes and friendship prior to the orientation.

After flying together to the South Island of New Zealand, the entire group spent a week touring the island via bus. Tour guides, content experts (park rangers, farmers), and university administrators met the group and provided information. In lieu of formal classes, the program facilitators conducted two whole group reflection sessions while in New Zealand, asking students open-ended questions about their observations of the host country, reflecting on material provided by content experts, and encouraging them to relate their experiences to their existing knowledge. The group stayed together in hotels, where students shared rooms. One evening the group separated and stayed on several farms with families.

The study tour continued to Australia, where the group spent two weeks touring the eastern coast. Instructional methods were similar to those in New Zealand. While in Australia, the program facilitators conducted two additional reflection sessions, asking students to relate their experiences to existing knowledge. The group stayed in hostels or hotels, with students rooming together.

## Method and Sample

The first author was a participant-observer in all formal and most informal experiences (i.e., touring, residing, dining, and spending free days with students). The author took field notes of her observations 3 to 10 times each day, noting students' interactions with each other and the host countries (who they talked to, what they did). Notes were taken of all students' experiences, but the author made an effort to observe more closely the students who agreed to be part of the interview portion. An outsider would have likely assumed that the author was a participant, but students were made aware through an announcement at orientation that the author was conducting research about "the study abroad experience." At the end of each day, the author typed observation notes and reflected on their meaning. In total, the author collected 24 single-spaced pages of observation notes.

Second, the same author conducted two sets of individual, semistructured interviews with 9 of the 28 students. Students were selected for interviews through purposive sampling to arrive at maximum variation (Patton, 1990). Using autobiographies that were published on a public website set up for the trip and initial observation of the group, the author identified students who were diverse in terms of major, sex, social group, and interests and asked them to participate. Five female students and four male students completed both interviews. The participants were representative of the overall group in terms of sex, race/ethnicity, and major. Participants chose or were assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality (see Table 1 for demographics).

Each interview lasted between 45–75 minutes – the first took place during the second half of the trip and the second about six weeks after the end of the trip. In addition to several questions about their observations of culture, the first set of interview questions solicited students' feelings and reflections about their experiences, including "Have there been times on the trip where you have been uncomfortable, if so, when?," "Have you seen, felt, or experienced anything on the trip that has caused you to question any of your values?," and "Are there aspects of the trip that you

Table 1  
**Participants' Demographic Information**

Pseudonym	Age	Year	Major	Race/Ethnicity
Amber	20	Junior	Family Community Services	White
Danielle	20	Senior	Agribusiness Management	White
Elizabeth	21	Senior	Agriculture Education	White
John	21	Senior	Environmental Studies	Did not disclose
Kevin	23	Senior	Agricultural Science	White
Michael	21	Senior	Environmental Studies	White
Ruby	20	Senior	Human Relations and Psychology	Lebanese-American
Sandra	24	Senior	Agribusiness Management	White
Tony	21	Senior	Parks and Recreation	White

believe will impact your beliefs in the long term?" The follow-up interview focused on participants' reflections and transition back to the United States. Specific questions included, "As you reflect back on your experiences, what stands out the most to you?," "Have you come back from your experiences forever changed in any way?," and "If a friend of yours was going to study abroad in Australia or New Zealand, what would you tell him or her about your experiences?" To ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007) in the data collected, the first author transcribed interview data verbatim and sent synopses to participants after the second set of interviews.

Finally, upon return to the United States the first author collected and copied the reflection journals of interview participants, in which they wrote throughout the tour as a formal course requirement. Students were asked to write about specific topics (e.g., "How have your new surroundings affected your behavior and choices?," and "What ideas and lessons learned on the trip will you take home with you?") in addition to sharing their observations. The journals provided additional context about the interactions among students while on the trip.

## Analysis

Both authors analyzed the data, initially reading through observation notes, interview transcripts, and journal entries independently with an eye toward students' understanding of themselves, their role in the cohort, and interactions in the host countries. Then, we met and focused on understanding the interaction of each participant and the context. We first noted characteristics of students (e.g., that Michael was patriotic and Amber felt different than others) and discussed how these characteristics affected their interactions with peers and navigation of the host countries.

In the process of discerning the students' characteristics, we noted that several participants had essentially named themselves, using categories to describe themselves in relation to their interactions with peers and study abroad experience (e.g., loner, mediator). Others used descriptions to which we applied a name (e.g., messenger, learner).

One benefit of both authors not serving as participant observers was that the second author asked numerous questions that helped the first author reflect on her observations and compare them with the data. We were careful not to assume that inconsistencies in our analyses resulted from our differing roles, rather we discussed them and referred to the data to clarify our interpretations.

## Limitations

Despite our focus on students' peer relationships and interactions with the host countries, our interview questions did not explicitly ask students about their roles and interactions with other students, enabling our themes to emerge organically without forcing disingenuous reflection. Had we focused more acutely on their roles and interactions in the interviews, we may have gained additional insights about the influence of the cohort on students' experiences. Second, although the entire group of students was observed and variation in sampling occurred, not all students were interviewed, raising the potential that other findings may have emerged had we interviewed all students within the group. Furthermore, our sample, while reflective of the entire group in terms of race and ethnicity, was relatively homogenous, making it impossible to draw inferences about race or ethnicity.

## Findings

In the context of their shared microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), the study abroad setting, we found that most students spent considerable time and energy concerned about the cohort and their role in it, as revealed by observation notes, journal entries, and interviews. The design of the trip, with everyone traveling together, forced students to make decisions several times a day about with who to sit on the bus, eat, and room as we switched hotels. These decisions necessitated that students attend to their role in the group, which revealed their developmentally instigative characteristics, a key element of Bronfenbrenner's (1993) model. Some students welcomed the idea of changing seatmates or roommates whereas others pleaded with the trip facilitators to keep everything the same. The data illustrate how students approached and experienced the trip differently.

Of the nine students who completed both interviews, seven discussed their roles and interactions in the group and with the host countries (e.g., interactions with people, food, activities) in detail. The description of their interactions revealed their selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) to the environment and illustrated their personal stimulus characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) in relation to other students and the host countries. Furthermore, their directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) were exposed by their response to their experience. Two students dis-



cussed feelings of loneliness and awkwardness in relation to the group and host countries, describing themselves as *loners*. Two others discussed their roles as *mediators*, describing themselves as attending to group conflicts and working to make certain that everyone in the cohort felt welcome, sometimes even when interacting with people from the host countries. One more discussed how he felt compelled to make sure that others in the cohort saw their study abroad experience and interactions with the host countries from his perspective; we labeled him a *messenger*. The last two described themselves listening to and observing members of the group and host countries to reflect on their perspectives and learn from them; we labeled them *learners*. These labels were a product of students' self-identification or description coupled with our interpretation from the observation notes, interview transcripts, and journal entries. The labels are not meant to imply that students were one dimensional, but rather reflect the dominant characteristics of their understanding of their cohort and host country interactions. Below, we discuss the categories of students that emerged.

## Loners

The two loners in the group, Amber and Danielle, described experiencing awkwardness and isolation within the cohort. When asked to recount her experiences on the trip, Amber explained that the aspect that stood out most to her was how she struggled while she was there. She explained, "I kind of felt like a loner, I felt like I didn't fit in ... and, I had a hard time." She revealed her selective responsivity to the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) when she attributed her difficulty fitting in to differences in values, sharing that she is the type of person who likes to stick with one person and no one on the trip held similar values. She explained,

I definitely had a personality clash with a lot of the people. I mean, I could get along with them, and I came from the same background as them [her father was a farmer], but my ideas and values were much different than what theirs were. And, it wasn't just about the drinking; it was about the bigger issues.

Amber spent ample time reflecting on her role in the cohort, fretting about it daily with peers, writing about it in her journal, and discussing it in detail in both interviews. As alluded to above, she also was preoccupied by her peers' drinking behaviors, believing that her decision not to drink separated her from them. In her journal Amber wrote, "Am I one of the very few people who are going to be sober for the majority of the trip?" During our initial interview she expanded on her concern, "I have been uncomfortable with the fact our group [has] used [the trip] to get away from home and to party ... That's really something that I've struggled with." Amber felt little agency (a directive belief; Bronfenbrenner, 1993) in addressing the situation. She explained, "I can't expect everyone else to be like me, and I just have to accept that, and it's not necessarily wrong, it's just different."

Like Amber, Danielle experienced bouts of awkwardness and isolation within the cohort. In our initial interview, Danielle discussed her selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) to the

study abroad experience, explaining that she approached the cohort by “float[ing] around to different people” and sometimes, around certain people, got the feeling that they didn’t really want her there. Later in our follow-up interview, Danielle discussed how her struggle with the group had been a catalyst for her to take charge of her experience, which illustrated her directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). She explained, “I can’t sit back and let someone else try to make sure I have a good time, I have to be in charge of it myself.” As a result of her feelings of insecurity on the trip, she became more aware of the need for her to be more assertive about with whom and how she spent her time so that others’ actions did not affect her as much.

Absent from Amber’s and Danielle’s observations and understanding of their experiences were meaningful interactions with people in the host countries, elucidating their selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) to the host countries. Although both commented on differences between the United States and Australia and New Zealand, they rarely engaged with people from the host countries, gleaning the differences primarily through observation. For example, when Amber discussed differences in lifestyle and relationship roles, she explained that she picked up on the differences by “observing people on the street, in restaurants, and on the farm stay” but did not mention talking to people from the host countries. Danielle also described her observations of the culture from a distance, assuming they were similar to her experiences. She explained, “the people in New Zealand are very laid back, and since they are all very rural, most of them are pretty ‘small town,’ kind of like it is in my town.”

## Mediators

The two mediators in the group, Sandra and Ruby, approached their surroundings by attending to group conflicts and working to make certain that everyone in the cohort felt welcome. Sandra described herself as a “mediator” and “leader” who sought to assist other students with navigating their cohort experience. In her journal entries and interviews, she referenced her role as a mediator, discussing how she helped resolve conflicts that emerged in the different cliques. She explained that she wanted to be “buddy-buddy” with everyone, and because she was the oldest on the trip, saw it as her responsibility to model tolerant behavior. Perhaps because of these personal stimulus characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), many people confided in her about their disagreements with other students. Sandra listened to these students, affirming their perspectives and offering advice about how to navigate differences and personality conflicts. Sandra credited the trip with bolstering her ability as a mediator, explaining her realization that serving in the role was “in her nature” because so many students had confided in her. Her insight revealed how her interactions within the cohort strengthened her directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Ruby also took on the role of a mediator, seeking to include everyone in the cohort. During the first few days of the trip, Ruby’s journal entries detailed her selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), spelling out her strategy for creating a welcoming cohort, including “talking to everyone and learning their names.” One week into the trip, Ruby’s observations revealed her concern

that some of her peers were not open to trying new things and her desire to “help them let go of whatever is holding them back.” She described a situation in which two of her peers were discussing vegetarianism. The issue was particularly contested because one of the students was a vegetarian and the other student’s family made their livelihood raising livestock. Ruby said one of the students made a comment that “vegetarians don’t understand, and they will never understand, there’s no way that you can reason with them—but they are wrong.” She discussed her desire to help both students see the issue from one another’s perspective, and her directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) enabling her to do so.

Sandra and Ruby both discussed how their mediator roles served them in interactions with people in the host countries, each drawing examples from interactions with locals at bars. Sandra recounted a story of being with friends and encountering an intoxicated Australian who was making inappropriate comments to her friend. She explained that since she was more sober than the rest of her friends, she “felt like she had to protect her [friend]” and so she stepped in and tried to mediate the situation. When it became clear to her that the man was not going to apologize, Sandra “gathered up [her] friends” and left the bar.

Ruby also described attempting to mediate a situation between her, some friends, and an Australian. She explained that while at a bar, the Australian confronted them about the U.S. president. She responded by asking, “Well, weren’t you going to ask me first if I voted for him, or what my opinion was?” When he continued to badger her, she countered with, “I am really sorry, but you offended me and my friends, and I would really appreciate it if you would leave us alone.” Ruby explained that although ultimately the man apologized, which made her feel like her mediation strategy worked, she felt uncomfortable about the exchange. It is clear from their descriptions that both Sandra’s and Ruby’s directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) about their mediation abilities were not limited to their cohort interactions, but rather, played a role in their interactions with the host countries as well.

## Messengers

Michael was the sole messenger in the sample, behaving as an envoy to the group and dictating to the cohort how to experience study abroad properly. He expected his peers to share a similar approach to the trip as his, revealing his belief that their selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) was wrong. Early in the trip, he commented in his journal that he wished “more of the group [was] socializing after the day’s events are over.” He explained that going out to bars at night and interacting with locals was a good way to get “a full experience of the culture,” and he was preoccupied that other students were missing out. On several occasions he pestered other students to join the cohort at the bars at the end of the day despite their discomfort.

Michael also felt that other students were not as engaged in the trip as he was, revealing his selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). When asked to provide an example, he explained that some people chose not to do certain activities (like bungee jumping or hang gliding) because

they cost too much money. He asserted that when students are half way around the world, they should take advantage of every opportunity to “seize the day” no matter the cost. Michael also discussed his dismay at others when they were not appropriately moved by their experiences. While in Australia, students visited the Australian War Memorial, which commemorates the sacrifices of Australians who died in war, and includes a shrine dedicated to unknown soldiers and a museum. In his journal, Michael reflected on the disengaged behavior of several of his peers during the visit, explaining “I was disappointed with how bored everyone seemed [at the War Memorial]. I honestly don’t think they understand what the term *unknown soldier* means . . .” Michael discussed his perspective regarding the War Memorial again during our follow-up interview. He commented that his classmates “just didn’t get it” and were “spoiled” because they did not appropriately respond to the memorial.

Michael’s strong directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) and desire to have others’ share his views and experiences pervaded his interactions with the host countries. In describing a conversation with his host family during the farm stay in New Zealand, Michael explained that they were “old-fashioned” and had strong opinions about “how our automotive industry is going downhill and [our] president doesn’t know what he’s doing.” Michael felt like it was his role to “set the record straight,” since “I would definitely know more about my own country than this guy would.”

## Learners

The two learners in the sample, John and Elizabeth, discussed their selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) in relating to the cohort, and specifically how their interactions caused them to reflect more deeply. John, a self-described “environmentalist,” described a discussion he had with some students in agriculture-based majors. He expressed surprise at the fact that the agriculture students had similar views about the environment and came away from the conversation with the understanding that “we all [are] necessary. And that the best way to improve things would be to combine ideas and work together.” He explained,

We’re really not that different from each other. We have a lot of the same ideas, it’s just the stereotypes are there, it’s hard to break them down in a normal situation, but when you’re thrown together for this amount of time—here together with everyone all the time—you learn to break those down a little bit, expand on what you know.

Elizabeth also shared several situations where she learned from listening to and observing other members of the cohort. She described how listening to and interacting with her classmates compelled her to think more deeply about her experiences. She explained,

Being around the group, the first couple of days, I didn’t ask that many questions, I just kind of observed the other kinds of questions that everybody else was asking. I noted that they were deeper, meaning that they would see something, but then they would connect it to something else. [Through their example,] I slowly began to piece together some things.

Elizabeth observed others' selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) and adopted their strategies to bolster her learning. She used that strategy to reflect on what she was learning and also to change her behavior upon return to the United States.

Elizabeth discussed her realization during a whole-group reflection that people often talked about cultural differences in conservation but didn't learn from them or change their behavior. She shared an "aha moment" that ultimately changed her directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) toward conservation, explaining that after observing others, she became convinced she possessed the agency to make a difference. She observed how the cohort would

Talk about "this and that" is wrong with Americans and "this and that" is right with Australians, and how [Australians] do this better, but [Americans] do that better. . . . It made me realize that's what everybody does, we sit around and talk about things [and] . . . that I need to take the next step and try to change it—to be part of the change I want to see. Because I was in a different country . . . I was able to see a better way of doing something, tak[e] it, and apply it to what I do already.

The dynamic interaction of others' lack of commitment to conservation coupled with examples of sustainability from the host countries inspired Elizabeth to reflect on and ultimately transform her behavior. For example, in our follow-up interview, she described encouraging her family to take a smaller car on trips and to start composting their waste.

John's and Elizabeth's approach to people in the host country were also learning oriented, illustrating their selective responsivity and directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). More than any other student in the sample, Elizabeth discussed insights she gained from conversations she had with the content experts. She recounted a discussion she had with a sustainable farmer that inspired her to act more responsibly. She explained,

[The farmer] was so dedicated to her cause—she saw that the area needed to remain a marsh-like atmosphere—and that was what she wanted to do, she wanted to preserve it. So she took it on herself. She saw a cause and went after it. . . . I have always wanted to live like that, really self-sustained.

Elizabeth reflected on the differences she perceived between the conservation values held by the Australian farmer and the farmers she knew in the United States, commenting that long-term land sustainability was not as explicit a goal in the United States.

John also described many interactions with people in the host cultures, explaining that through the formal portion of the trip he met "environmentalists, agriculturalists, and social systems people, like either politicians or school teachers," but by going out at night he was able to meet "normal people. . . the garden variety of all different groups." He explained that each time he went out he talked to at least one or two people and got to know them, illustrating his selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) to his surroundings. These interactions caused him to be more open-minded because he heard different perspectives on everything from agriculture to international issues.

## Discussion

Students' differing developmentally instigative characteristics, more than their demographic characteristics, shaped their approach to peers and experiences in the host countries, extending Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory to the context of study abroad and illustrating the importance of considering the person and context together. The mix of these characteristics caused anxiety for some students (like the loners) and deepened learning for other students (like the learners). For example, both Amber (a nondrinker and passive observer) and Danielle (someone who floated from group to group) had personal stimulus characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) that inhibited their connections with others in the group and people in the host countries. In contrast, by virtue of John's and Elizabeth's curiosity about the environment and willingness to listen, which demonstrated their selective responsivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), they engaged content experts more often than other students did. As might be expected, the content experts responded positively, which led these students into deeper learning-oriented discussions.

Students' developmentally instigative characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) also explain why they took on certain roles within the cohort or chose to interact in certain ways with members of the host countries. For example, from the beginning of the trip, Ruby sought to know everyone and help them get along, and Sandra felt obligated to act responsibly and role model tolerant behavior. Because of their behavior, these women were seen as trustworthy sources for others to share their frustrations. Ruby's and Sandra's personal stimulus characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) shaped how they interacted with their peers (selective responsivity, Bronfenbrenner, 1993) and directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) in serving as mediators—ultimately empowering them to serve as intermediaries with people in the host countries.

Michael's role as an envoy can also be explained in part by his developmentally instigative characteristics. Among his strongest characteristics were his directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), as he portrayed a clear sense of conviction in his viewpoints and spent ample time conveying them to others. This conviction, coupled with his "seize the moment" mentality, meant that he regularly sought out new experiences and insisted others try new things too. Furthermore, he often discussed his viewpoints with other members of the cohort and host countries. Although he invited others to share their differing perspectives (a personal stimulus characteristic; Bronfenbrenner, 1993), Michael did not consider their views, preferring that they adopt his points of view.

The findings also underscore the importance of helping students to foster meaningful interactions in the host countries to deepen cross-cultural engagement. Unless students were inclined to explore host country interactions by virtue of their developmentally instigative characteristics (like the Messenger or Learners), they reported very few, illustrating the need for facilitators to be mindful about ensuring all students have meaningful opportunities to interact with people in the host countries. Facilitators play a vital role in setting expectations for interactions and helping students interact with and reflect on their experiences with the host countries. Like the students



in Ransbury and Harris's (1994) study, our students benefitted from reflection time because they were encouraged to direct their gaze at the host countries. The fact that students described learning more from peer interactions (like Mediator Sandra discovering that helping others to negotiate conflict was in her nature and Learner Elizabeth adopting others' learning strategies to bolster her learning) than from interactions with the host countries illustrates that more must be done to help students meet the potential of study abroad as a rich educational context.

## Implications for Practice

The findings of the study illustrate the importance of attending to students' varying developmentally instigative characteristics and peer relationships when planning and leading study abroad programs. For the Loners, one of the enduring memories of their entire experience was their struggle to be part of the group. To reduce the amount and degree of anxiety Loners feel, study abroad facilitators should vary activities so that students have the opportunity to interact with all other students (using some meal times for small-group reflections or assigning a topic and students to small groups so they can discuss their experiences) so that students develop deeper connections to each other. Facilitators should also pay attention to the process of group formation, setting ground rules for cohort interaction (such as treating each other with respect) and encouraging them to get to know one another.

The group's Messenger would have benefitted from active learning activities that encouraged him to listen to peers' perspectives in addition to sharing his perspective. These activities may include writing journal entries where he was asked to compare and contrast different perspectives. Engaging with and reflecting on his and others' perspectives invites the Messenger to expand his viewpoint and add complexity to his thinking, which may advance his cognitive development (Baxter Magolda, 1999). The Facilitators should ensure that there are ample opportunities for students to engage their varying viewpoints, adding reflection sessions and providing structured discussion during travel days.

The Learners clearly benefitted from engaging with others, both peers and people in the host countries. In addition to the large group reflection sessions, learners might benefit from other opportunities to interact with members of the cohort through small group discussion. Also, because Learners and Mediators seemed to rise above the group conflict, they might be helpful resources in making the Loners feel more welcome.

In addition to being more attentive to intragroup dynamics, study abroad facilitators should also provide ample opportunities for formal and informal interactions with the host countries. These opportunities should extend beyond time at a bar after the day's formal activities are over and should include more than a single content expert (e.g., park ranger, farmer) whose time will likely be dominated by Learners or Messengers (by virtue of their developmentally instigative characteristics). Faculty might consider connecting with a local university to organize meals or other

interactions with local students who share similar interests or majors. In addition, facilitators should investigate whether there are community service opportunities that would put students in close contact with local communities. These interactions will help to facilitate connections with the host countries for all students, regardless of their developmentally instigative characteristics because they will be forced to engage with the host countries.

As the demand for short-term, cohort-based programs continues to rise, student affairs educators and faculty must grapple with study abroad as a group experience. The current study illustrates how students' varying developmentally instigative characteristics affect their experiences within their cohort and interactions with the host countries. The findings call for study abroad facilitators to understand study abroad as a group experience in order to foster group and cultural interactions that promote growth in students' understanding of themselves, others, and the host countries. Additional research is needed to determine pedagogy that enables facilitators to utilize a cohort effectively to promote cross-cultural learning.

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