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Running Head: THERE AND BACK AGAIN

There and Back Again:

Perceived Long-Term Effects of a High School Immersion Abroad Experience

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By

Nora A. Flom

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2014

There and Back Again:

Perceived Long-Term Effects of a High School Immersion Abroad Experience

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological case study examined the perceptions of young adults regarding the effects of an approximately month-long immersion abroad experience in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, in which they participated when they were adolescents. School staff from Mexico who worked with these students were interviewed to help identify and articulate the context in which the adolescents studied and lived while in Mexico. Former sojourner participants recalled their memories of their attitudes and experiences before, during, immediately after, and long after the trip. Additionally, former sojourner participants were invited to share five photographic images they considered emblematic of the trip; their narrations of those images contributed to the data.

Evidence indicated that school staff constructed a context heavily emphasizing the social environment in which students studied and lived. Evidence also indicated that former sojourner participants believe the trip, in conjunction with other experiences, contributed to their seeking other international experiences, pursuing international careers or careers that required intercultural skills, and establishing significant intercultural relationships.

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Without the work and friendship of my colleagues in Mexico, some of whom participated in this study but many of whom did not, none of the experiences described here would ever have been possible. For their vision and tireless efforts in cultural understanding, I am forever indebted. *No pueden imaginar lo que han hecho por mí y por mis alumnos. No hay palabras que describan el agradecimiento que siento. Gracias por su solidaridad y su amistad.*

Finally, thank you to Cohort 21. Our entrance into the program may have been unconventional, and our road may not always have been smooth, but they have become my support, my inspiration, my teachers, and my friends. I hope I have given to them at least a portion of what they have given me.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

In 1998, I began teaching Spanish in the Pine Bluff School District (not its real name. Except for towns or pueblos in Mexico, all subsequent person and place names are pseudonyms.) Early in the next school year, I got an e-mail from a teacher at a different school in the district. Would any Spanish teacher in the district be interested in leading the month-long language and cultural immersion trip to Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico? “Me! Me! Pick me!” was my reply. That summer, with my own two elementary-aged children in tow, I led a group of 14 students aged 14-18 to the *Ciudad de la Eterna Primavera*—the City of Eternal Spring. Students spent their mornings in small groups with language and culture instructors, my own two sons were cared for by a Mexican non-English speaking nanny, and I spent my time in literature and culture-based classes with other adults.

Since that time, I have led six similar trips with adolescents and one with adults to the same place, Renovar Language Institute. Through this experience I have grown immensely on a personal as well as professional level. My Mexican colleagues and friends have been invaluable sources of information and insight. Though I could perhaps write a whole dissertation about my personal experiences, I will settle at this time for sharing just one “Aha” moment that I experienced during my third trip, the summer of 2002.

I had begun teaching at Archbishop High School (AHS), a suburban Catholic high school. In our department, we were going through a curriculum revision cycle. While in Mexico with a group from AHS that summer, I requested help writing the curriculum for our Spanish 3 classes. I spent many hours one-on-one pouring through Hispanic short stories and non-fiction articles. The man working with me was Bernardo, a professional artist and former official photographer for the state of Morelos. He offered a wealth of personal experience and



knowledge that went far beyond what I was reading in our textbook, more than once enthralling me with personal stories about the political or cultural figures that were profiled.

At one point, he said something that profoundly moved me. He told me he sometimes forgot I was not Mexican, and I was surprised at the depth of my reaction. I told him I wished I could express how much that meant to me. I knew I wore my Whiteness as a mask I could not take off, and no matter how much I knew or how much Spanish I spoke or how closely I wanted to identify with my Mexican friends, I felt like I only caught glimpses of the life behind the facade we are shown. Bernardo understood, and we spent a great deal of time discussing our mutual masks and how we behave and what we say in the presence of the other.

On my walk home with my sons that afternoon, I was still very reflective and moved by our discussion. Once we got back to “our” house, I got my boys involved in something and retreated to my corner of our room. My thoughts swirling, I remember feeling a cross between profound shame for our collective White cultural arrogance and profound gratitude for this unique access to this type of friendship. I felt deeply convicted that our cultural awareness training in the United States was sorely lacking, and the idea of tolerance was profoundly insulting. We must go beyond teaching tolerance. We must go beyond even the idea of respect. What we needed was not just to bring other voices to the table and make room for them as one would make room at dinner for an unexpected poor cousin. What we needed to do is to work as equal partners in the pursuit of a more just global community. We needed to approach the dialog from what Paolo Freire would call a “radical position” of humility (Freire, 2003).

This, then, led me to the question of what knowledge do we lack as persons from this United States English-speaking culture? What knowledge, skills and insight do the Mexican people have that we need to know? As a White, suburban adult woman, what am I missing?

**Statement of the Issue**

Now, years later, I find myself almost having backed into the question again. I have taken dozens of students abroad for three to four weeks at a time. The oldest of my first group are now in their mid- to late-twenties; the youngest of those from the most recent trip recently started college. Some of those students have maintained contact with me. Several former participants have gone on to more subsequent journeys or studies abroad, in Spanish-speaking countries as well as into other countries.

My central question revolved around this: years after their initial educational immersion trip abroad, how do former cultural sojourners feel the month-long journey they took in high school impacted them? Other questions I wanted to understand are: did the trip influence their college choices? Their majors? Their professional decisions? Does it affect how they perceive people who are “different?” In short, what did they take away from the experience that enriched their knowledge, skills, and insight? Did they get below the cultural surface? What did they learn, did it change them, and if so, how?

**Significance of the Issue**

Globalization and global education are buzzwords that education professionals hear and must address. In higher education, colleges are increasingly offering study abroad programs because of the benefits these types of programs offer in developing a competent global citizen or employee. High school study abroad programs like American Field Service (AFS) International Programs, Youth for Understanding, or Education First (EF) promise to help students break down language and cultural barriers (AFS, 2011; EF, 2011; YFU, 2001). In a world that is becoming increasingly economically, socially, and politically interconnected because of

globalization, awareness of cultures other than one's culture of heritage is an important aspect of educational and professional life.

Anecdotal feedback from several former students that traveled with me to Mexico in high school indicates that the trip impacted their future experiences in college, in their emerging professional careers, and in their personal lives. By interviewing former students who participated in the immersion abroad experience during the years 2000-2010, I attempted to discover how they perceive their experiences in Mexico impacted their cultural perceptions, personal relationships, college experiences, and professional paths. In this study, I asked former participants to reflect on their experience and to engage in an investigation about what they see are the long term effects of their high school language and cultural immersion experience in Mexico. Ideally, these findings will be useful for teachers who are contemplating conducting similar experiences for their students, for teachers traveling with students to become more strategic and skilled in preparation, execution, and reflection of their international trips, for districts considering the long term effects of this type of education, and for parents deciding whether to approve their child's participation in this type of trip. Additionally, researchers interested in globalization, diversity, intercultural competency, or the impact of formative experiences on students' attitudes and behaviors will benefit from this research.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Before beginning an investigation into the retrospective perception of an immersion experience abroad, I wanted to understand what was already known and what had already been discovered about adolescent experiences abroad. In this chapter, I present a review of the literature regarding the current practice and reported effects of study abroad. I continue by examining study abroad and various themes, including its impact on intercultural competence, its intersection with socialization and identity formation, its relation with transformative learning, and its location within critical literature.

In this research, I sought to understand how former students perceive their summer experience abroad affected them personally, academically, and professionally. Using search terms such as “study abroad,” “K-12,” “secondary,” “immersion abroad,” and “students,” I found no research that investigated the experiences of secondary students abroad in a setting similar to those who attended Renovar Institute in various summers from 2000-2010. I found little research about secondary students abroad in general (Thorpe, 2007; Babbit, 1997; Bachner & Zeuschel, 1994; Dragonas, 1983). Spenader (2011) wrote, “More research is needed to further educators’ understanding of what advantages exist to studying abroad prior to college, both socially and psychologically” (p. 393). Because of the dearth of literature about secondary students in general, and the absence of literature regarding an experience similar to the one I led, I expanded my search to postsecondary study abroad in general. Although the student participants are older and therefore at a different point both in psychosocial development and academic trajectory, research regarding this level of study abroad informed my understanding and therefore my construction of this study.

### **Related Literature Regarding the Practice of Study Abroad**

Research about U.S. adolescent learners in an immersion experience abroad proved sparse. Much more abundant were studies reflecting the experiences of postsecondary students, graduate students, or professionals abroad.

**Definition, history, and current practices of study abroad.** In this section, I provide a definition of study abroad, outline a brief history of its practice in the U.S., and highlight some of the proposed outcomes of a study abroad experience.

McKeown (2009) defined studying abroad as “an academic experience, whether short term (as short as one week) or longer (up to a full academic year), during which students physically leave the United States to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country” (p. 11).

The practice of students from the United States studying abroad dates back decades. As early as the 1932, study abroad was seen as a means to promote international responsibility and understanding (Spiering & Erickson, 2006). Marion (1974) refuted claims of the positive effects of study abroad, claiming that after travel, students’ views of their host countries became more realistic and therefore less positive than before they left. Dragonas (1983) investigated high school international homestay exchange programs and found them to be valuable tools for motivation for language learning, improvement of cultural awareness, and a heightened consciousness of other cultures, not just for students but for their parents as well. In the decades leading up the mid 1980s, international education was driven by the cold war; when the cold war ended, it left “a vacuum in policy thinking for foreign affairs and international education alike” (American Council on Education, p. 5). More recently, study abroad has been viewed as promoting a culture of peace. In 1999, the United Nations passed Resolution 53/2433 that “called

for a global movement to forward the promotion of a culture of peace. The 2001-2010 period was declared the ‘International Decade for the Culture of Peace and Non-Violence’; the UN deemed promoting study abroad to be an important component of this pursuit (Bond, Koont & Stephenson, 2005, p. 101).

The quantity of study abroad offerings has increased rapidly in recent years (Davidson, 2010; Wang, 2010; Soneson & Cordano, 2009; Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard, 2008; Lincoln Commission, 2005; Stephenson, 1999). Today, more than 85% of U.S. colleges and universities offer study abroad programs (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010). This figure represents more than three times the number of U.S. individuals studying abroad in the late 1980s. The idea that an international experience abroad is essential in the development of a student’s global perspective drives the growth of study abroad programs (Bender, Wright, & Lopatto, 2009; Soneson & Cordano, 2009; Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2005; Wilkinson, 1998). “How-to-conduct-study-abroad” guides are appearing with more frequency in academic journals (Koernig, 2007). Projections indicate that by 2023, over one million U.S. citizens will be studying abroad (Ogden, 2006). Regardless, the proportion of college students that take advantage of these opportunities is very low: fewer than 5% of students earn credit abroad during their college careers (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Furthermore, the proportion of college students that study abroad has actually been declining for forty years (Skidmore, Marston, & Olson, 2005).

Educational institutions and professional trainers increasingly tout study abroad experiences as opportunities for their students to improve linguistically and academically, grow personally, and compete globally (e.g. Brux & Fry, 2010; Bender, Wright, & Lopatto, 2009; Soneson & Cordano, 2009; McRobbie, 2008; Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008; Rexeisen,

Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard, 2008; Koernig, 2007; Spiering & Erickson, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998). Potential employers expect students who have studied abroad to demonstrate certain intercultural skills as well as a more cosmopolitan outlook (Alfaro, 2008; Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008; Place, Jacob, Andrews,, & Crago, 2002; Hadis, 1998). Chen and Starosta (2006) stated that globalization “creates a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds increasingly come to depend on one another” (p. 357). One rationale that supports the need of training in diversity is economic: workers will need to work in diverse environments. Preparing students to participate in a global environment concerns educators in teacher preparation programs (Paese, 2008; Cushner, 2007; Dantas, 2007; Chen & Starosta, 2006; Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Adam, 2005; Levine, 2005; Hayward & Siaya, 2001; American Council on Education, 1995). A variety of research indicates that one way to augment intercultural competence in prospective and current educators is through an international experience or a study abroad program (Alfaro, 2008; Benson, 2008; Sahin, 2008; Karaman & Tochon, 2007; Dooly & Villanueva, 2006; Rapaport, 2006; Gu, 2005). The American Council on Education (1995) recommended ten rules for internationalizing higher education, including that all graduates be required to be competent in at least one language other than English, that students have an understanding of at least one other culture, and that they demonstrate an increased understanding of global systems.

Study abroad experiences vary. Experiences can be as short as one week to as long as one year. While historically the dominant model of study abroad was in the context of at least a semester, now, more than 50% of students participate in short-term (fewer than eight weeks) study abroad programs such as a summer semester, a study tour, and a service-learning trip (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010; Bond., Koont, & Stephenson, 2005; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005).

Norris and Dwyer (2005) found no standard definition of programs nor any commonly accepted taxonomy of definitions of programs. They identified three typical types of programs: the island model, in which students and teacher travel together and study as a cohort in the host country; the direct enrollment model, in which a student enrolls as an international student in a learning institution abroad; or a hybrid model, which combines elements of the two. One school of business (Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008) defined an international experience as at least six weeks, a definition which excludes many current short-term international sojourns, including the model I am investigating. Chieffo and Griffiths (2004), in a quantitative analysis of the experience of over 2,300 students, found that short-term experiences, even those as short as a month, are “worthwhile educational endeavors that have significant self-perceived impacts on students’ intellectual and personal lives” (p. 174).

Students study abroad for different reasons. Some desire to gain an increased understanding of other cultures. Some cited increased opportunities and competitiveness in the job market. Others cited a desire to increase language proficiency. Still others reported a desire for personal freedom or adventure (Spiering & Erickson, 2006).

Research has shown, then, that student expectations of and experiences during a study abroad experience vary, but the actual effects of study abroad are less well documented. Many studies lamented the absence of concrete evidence about the effects of study abroad (e.g. McKeown, 2009; Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008; Norris & Dwyer, 2005; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005, Stephenson, 1999; Freed, 1998; Bachner & Zeuschel, 1994; Stitson, 1987) Stitson (1987) provided a plausible explanation for the lack of research when he stated, “Many persons predisposed to become involved in exchange activities are unlikely to be qualified to conduct systematic assessment,” and “International interchange tends to recruit people-oriented persons,



not those who want to measure, evaluate, and quantify its impact on people” (p. 8). McKeown (2009) attributed the lack of research regarding the impact of study abroad to a lack of consensus about the purpose of study abroad; programs cite language development, cultural understanding, global awareness, career-oriented skills, personal growth, and various other goals as justifications for study abroad. This lack of evidence combined with the increased popularity of programs has led to the perception that study abroad is “academic lite” (McKeown, 2009, p. 2), or the idea that programs abroad are less rigorous and more enjoyable than comparable domestic educational endeavors.

Some research indicated an increasing pressure on programs to define their outcomes and to substantiate their results (Davidson, 2010; Rexeisen & Al-Khatib, 2009; Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard, 2008; Bolen, 2007; Ogden, 2006; Jackson, 2005; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). Williams (2009) proposed a reflective model for the assessment of study abroad experiences; in this model, programs gather qualitative data that reflects students’ perceptions of their own intercultural competence in the cognitive dimension, the affective dimension, and the behavioral dimension. Doyle (2009) recommended assessing outcomes through a holistic model that measured growth in intercultural competence based on the dimensions of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive growth. Zamastil-Vondrova (2005) asserted that when researchers evaluate study abroad programs, they often fail to consider student perceptions of their experiences; student understanding and analysis of their experiences are not reflected in much of the research.

**Defined learning outcomes of study abroad.** Despite the reported dearth of literature about the effects of study abroad, some research identified defined learning outcomes of

international experiences (Wang, 2010; Williams, 2009; Bolen, 2007; Thorpe, 2007; Ogden, 2006; Slimbach, 2005). Some of these outcomes included:

Increased self-confidence, a greater self-awareness, communication and leadership skills, an awareness and appreciation of different cultures, an interest in learning about another culture, a foreign language, adaptability to new environments, empathy, an understanding of the world as one community, and a greater interest in one's own home culture and community involvement (Thorpe, 2007, p.2).

Citing the work of Gundykunst, Ogden (2006) listed the following competencies as appropriate goals for an education abroad experience: mindfulness, cognitive flexibility, cross-cultural empathy, and tolerance for ambiguity.

Williams (2009) identified the following learning outcomes for students studying abroad: increased understanding of international and cultural issues; increased flexibility; increased open-mindedness and curiosity; enhanced critical skills, including resourcefulness, creative thinking, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork. Similarly, Slimbach (2005) proposed that the ideal of a transculturally-competent person is attainable, and that the realization of that ideal requires an education beyond the traditional classroom. Slimbach identified six categories of competencies for learner development in study abroad: perspective consciousness, or the ability to question one's own assumptions; ethnographic skill, or the ability to observe behavior and document learning; global awareness, or a basic awareness of transnational conditions and ideologies; world learning, or direct experience with contrasting histories, lifestyles and cultural orientations; foreign language proficiency, or a facility in the spoken, non-verbal and written systems of another culture; and affective development, or the capacity to demonstrate characteristics such as empathy, inquisitiveness, and justice. Slimbach continued by identifying a

set of propositions and accompanying learner competencies for each proposition that would describe the ideal of an interculturally competent individual.

In one case study, Wilkinson (2000) found a significant disparity between program promises in the recruitment literature and students' actual experiences. He enumerated these differences as: contrast 1: cross-cultural (mis)understanding; contrast 2: the host family (dis)advantage; and contrast 3: (un)impressive linguistic progress. The circumstances of host family placement, ease of interaction with English-speaking peers or host country counterparts, and over-generalizing due to cultural misunderstanding mitigate the attainment of the competencies promised initially. An international experience is no guarantee of progress in language, cultural competence, or global awareness (Wilkinson, 2000).

### **Relevant and Related Literature Regarding the Effects of Study Abroad**

The understanding that study abroad affects student perception and behavior dominates the literature (e.g. Kidwai, 2011; Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010 ; Tarrant, 2010; Wang, 2010; McKeown, 2009; Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard, 2008; Thorpe, 2007; Hadis, 2005; Norris & Dwyer, 2005; Bachner & Zeuschel, 1994). Students perceive themselves or are perceived to be mature after having studied abroad (McKeown, 2009; Norris & Dwyer, 2005). Another common theme was student development of independence and self-confidence (Spiering & Erickson, 2006; Hadis, 2005; Norris & Dwyer, 2005; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005). Zamastil-Vondrova (2005) reported that students perceive themselves to be more patient, more sensitive, and more able to cope with uncertainty. An increased awareness of global issues was a common characteristic of study abroad participants (Bender, Wright, & Lopatto, 2009; Shedivsky, 2004). Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009) studied a total 1,300 language students, divided into those that studied abroad and a control group of those who studied only in their home

institutions. As a group, those who studied abroad made more language and intercultural gains than those who stayed home, but some students learned more effectively than others.

The role of study abroad in nurturing global citizenship represents one justification for the growth of programs in educational institutions (Sefcik, 2010; Tarrant, 2010; Thorpe, 2007). Tarrant (2010) proposed implementing a conceptual framework adapted from the Value-Belief-Norm theory in the design of programs abroad that would intentionally impact students' understanding of justice, the environment, and civic obligations. Thorpe (2007) found transformative learning in students in areas of leadership, personal growth and development, and cross-cultural understanding; additionally, Thorpe (2007) also reported that students studying abroad developed values of acceptance of difference and "a stronger feeling about social, racial, and economic equity" (p. 8). Hadis (2005) reported that students after having an international sojourn had a higher level of curiosity in general as well as a deepened interest in world affairs. Bachner and Zeuschel (1994) reported student growth in self-confidence and coping skills. Shadivsky (2004) reported an increased awareness of Latin American affairs as a life-changing discovery for some participants in a study abroad to Mexico.

Much of the literature examines the effects of study abroad on language competence (Wang, 2010; Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009; Spiering & Erickson, 2006; Norris & Dwyer, 2005; Kinginer, & Farrell, 2004; Pellegrino, 1998). Spenader (2011) found a degree of correlation between language proficiency and acculturation, which was defined as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group" (p. 382): a higher degree of language proficiency was associated with a higher degree of acculturation while lower levels of proficiency were associated with a rejection of the host culture.

Career development was a minor theme in the literature. One study reported a lack of research into study abroad's effects on student career choices (Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008). In a longitudinal study, Norris and Dwyer (2005) found 48% of respondents who had participated in a study abroad program through the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) either worked or volunteered in an international capacity; 42% of those who had participated in a direct enrollment program, and 49% of those who participated in a hybrid program through IES, developed global careers. However, Orahood, Woolf, and Kruze (2008) found that, while study abroad may have increased students' chances of gaining employment, it had no influence in the career paths of business school students that participated. One student reported that by the time she studied abroad, she had already chosen her major. In contrast, in a study of formative experience of geography educators, an international experience at a young age or even into adulthood proved to be a significant factor in the sojourner's subsequent professional development (Catling, Greenwood, Martin, & Owens, 2010).

The idea of "culture shock" and "reverse culture shock" also emerged as themes in the literature describing students' experiences abroad (Hadis, 2005). Referencing a study by Hanvey (1979), Pellegrino (1998) found stages of cultural adjustment: tourism, a period of fascination with the new culture; deviance, a stage in which students interpret cultural differences as deficient, lacking, or deviant; intellectualization, when students seek explanation for the differences they have observed or experienced; and assimilation, when students become integrated into the new culture. The common concept of "culture shock" likely represents the experience in Hanvey's second stage of cultural adjustment, the time when differences are no longer interesting or amusing but when they cause discomfort or dissonance for the sojourner.

An academic educational experience abroad often predisposes students to subsequent travel abroad or a higher degree of comfort with unfamiliar situations (Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008; Hadis, 2005; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005; Holzmueller, 1974). At one university, 10% of participants in a short-term study abroad program were students who had already participated in at least one other short-term international experience (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Business students who participated in study abroad were more likely to leave their region of heritage when looking for and accepting an offer of employment (Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008).

A few articles reported the enduring affects of a study abroad experience. Discussing the role of memory in students' perceptions of their study abroad experience, Balken (1996) wrote, "The memory of educational episodes [has] a lasting impact on one's life. This research is especially germane to study abroad, an experience that students cite over and over again as 'life changing'" (p. 2). The travel abroad experience, Balken asserted, is its own continuum of transitional moments, and memory plays a significant role in shaping and analyzing those moments. Bachner and Zeuschel (1994) found that, "at least in respondents' subjective estimations, exchange participation results in meaningful, long-lasting changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors" (p. 37). In their study, they reported six categories of effects of study abroad: Manifestation of exchange effects, including students' applying skills, insights, knowledge and behaviors to their lives after their sojourn abroad; pursuit of exchange, including participation in international pursuits in their home culture; educational choice/direction; career choice/direction; effects of exchange/changes/consequences, which include alterations in student behaviors, goals and values; and ripple effects, or incidents in which students influenced others as a result of their experience abroad.

### **Study Abroad and Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence was a common theme among much of the literature. Intercultural competence differs from intercultural sensitivity (Benson, 2008). Intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process that affects one's awareness of cultural differences. Intercultural competence is behavioral and refers to an individual's actions and manner of being in an unfamiliar or different cultural context. Thus, an individual's intercultural competence is directly related to his or her intercultural sensitivity.

A study abroad does not guarantee intercultural competence (Pellegrino, 1998). However, many studies referred to the development of intercultural competence as one of the outcomes of a successful international experience (Bender, Wright, & Lopatto, 2009; Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton & Hubbard, 2008; Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2005; Byrnes, 2005; Norris & Dwyer, 2005). Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton and Hubbard (2008) used the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to measure the intercultural competencies of study participants of an "island" program and found that study abroad has a significant positive impact on participants' overall development score, indicating that students who studied abroad did indeed gain skills in intercultural competence. However, in a subsequent survey of the same participants, those researchers found that the participants did not retain those long-term benefits, and in fact scored lower on the IDI after four months after their return than they had scored just before returning from their sojourn. This finding led researchers to question the long-term positive effects on intercultural development and contributed to researchers' recommendation that institutions more closely examine cultural re-entry and subsequent intercultural experiences. Angulo (2008) reported findings that could serve as an explanation to the surprising lack of evidence of the long-term effects in the aforementioned study Angulo found that "living with a

host family is correlated with enacting certain behaviors, which are then correlated with identification with the host country after 12 weeks abroad. Living with other Americans is correlated with enacting certain behaviors, which are then correlated with identification with the United States after 12 weeks abroad” (p. 75). Thus, the fact that Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton and Hubbard (2008) studied participants in an island program, which is characterized by a high degree of interaction with other members of the same culture of heritage and a correspondingly relatively lower level of interaction with people in the host culture may have served to mitigate the potential long-term positive affects on intercultural development.

Other researchers employed the IDI as an instrument to quantify intercultural development. Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009), in a quantitative study of 1,300 students, most of whom studied abroad but some of whom served as part of a control group, found that students that had begun language study in high school and then studied abroad in college made significantly more gains in intercultural development than their counterparts that began their language study in college. Medina-López-Portillo (2004) found that the length of stay influences intercultural development on the IDI; the longer the stay, the greater the degree of intercultural development. Interestingly, Medina-López-Portillo also found a disparity between student self-perception of intercultural development as discovered through qualitative methods and the measurement of their intercultural development using the IDI; students perceived themselves to be more interculturally competent than their IDI results indicated.

One commonly accepted trait of an interculturally competent individual is the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to difference. Another prevailing theme in the literature that corresponds to a positive impact on intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence is the focus on the social construction of difference (Joseph, 2008; Lee, 2007). An effective strategy



for preparing students to focus on difference and reflect on their understanding of its construction is to train international immersion experience participants to become ethnographers. Roberts, et. al (2001), writing in the context of international experience for language acquisition, proposed an approach that trains language learners as ethnographers and requires participants to conduct a research project while involved in the immersion experience. Based on the theory that language and culture are profoundly intertwined, the authors present an argument for training language learners in cultural as well as linguistic competence. These ethnographic projects presented a mode of engagement that heightened participants' awareness of cultural practices and artifacts. Citing an example of how language and culture interact, the authors cited one student's realization that words mean different things to different people. "The false transparency of a bilingual dictionary, with its apparent one-to-one relationships between language and meanings, is replaced by the discovery of complex relationships" (p. 231).

Byrnes (2005) claimed two common responses to difference: to romanticize the difference and to judge difference as negative. Wilkinson (1998) also found students often initially perceived differences as negative. Proposing a third way, Byrnes (2005) promoted "other-regarding travel," or nurturing in cultural sojourners the recognition of limited linguistic and cultural knowledge, and the willing suspension of judgment in favor of mutual understanding, understanding of self, and intercultural good will. In fact, tolerance of ambiguity was reported to be a positive outcome of study abroad (Norris & Dwyer, 2005).

The construct of "intercultural competence" contains an inherent problem, according to Dervin (2009) who criticized the common understanding of culture as fixed, claiming that cultures are not as homogenous as they are often presented in pre-experience orientations and post-experience evaluations and analyses. Instead, Dervin asserted the liquidity of identity and

culture, that the individual simultaneously embodies multiple identities, and that culture is continually renovated by the individuals within it. Aligned with Dervin, Wilkinson (1998) found that much recruitment literature for study abroad programs present a homogenous cultural environment.

### **Socialization, Identity and Study Abroad**

The idea that learning is a social endeavor is nothing new. Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) posited that an individual can only attain global awareness and intercultural competence through interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. Some study abroad programs measure the success of their program by the degree to which participants develop positive or appreciative relationships with people of the host country (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Peterson (2009) asserted that the design of the study abroad greatly influences the quality of student experience; the variables he mentioned that contribute to a positive international experience (well-designed housing arrangements, internship and service-learning opportunities, research projects, and field assignments) all situate the student abroad in a social context. Koernig (2007) recommended social interaction with host-country cultural peers as an important component of learning in study abroad. Both Spenader (2011) and Stitsworth (1987) cited a homestay as a significant factor in the learning experience.

Wang (2010) situated language socialization in the context of study abroad, and found that a study abroad program does not guarantee significant progress in second language ability. The student's acquisition of language depends on a number of variables, including the type quality of interaction with individuals in the host culture, the type of relationships the student is able to nurture while abroad, as well as individual learner personality traits. Marion (1974) reported similar findings; students with a significant number of friends from the host culture

demonstrated more positive attitudes to the host culture, while students who maintained relationships abroad with other U.S. students felt more negatively towards their host culture.

Wang (2010) further asserted that self-identity played a role in language acquisition; identity in part involves the “degree of belonging to a certain discourse community” (57). A student solidly positioned within a social discourse network will experience a higher degree of language acquisition while abroad. Pellegrino (1998) found that students reported increased language ability, automaticity, and social salience through interaction with personal contacts, including teachers, friends, and often through romantic relationships established with a heritage or native speaker of the language. Spenader (2011) found a degree of correlation between language proficiency and acculturation: a higher degree of language proficiency was associated with a higher degree of acculturation while lower levels of proficiency were associated with a rejection of the host culture. Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige (2009) found a similar correlative relationship between proficiency and intercultural learning abroad. While the study did not determine a causal relationship, one might assume that a lower level of proficiency would make it difficult for the student to engage in the requisite socialization that might lead to greater engagement, understanding, and respect for the host culture.

Few studies investigated the effects of study abroad on identity formation (Angulo, 2008; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004). Stitsworth (1987) studied U. S. students abroad in Japan and found that participants showed an increase in flexibility and independence and became less conventional than their counterparts that did not study abroad, but that significant personality differences did not persist over time. U.S. students studying abroad in Mexico reportedly underwent a shift in identity; interestingly, students who experienced short-term experiences

abroad were found to have undergone a stronger shift in cultural identity than those who participated in longer programs (Medina-López-Portillo, 2004).

Study abroad has been linked to the formation or solidification of one's national identity (Angulo, 2008; Spiering & Erickson, 2006; Dolby, 2004; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004). Dolby (2004) wrote, "Thus, study abroad provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself— particularly one's national identity—in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self" (p. 150). The type of program with which students travel abroad affects their opportunities for socialization and the construction of an intercultural identity. Students on a study tour have fewer opportunities to interact in authentic relationships with members from the host country, while students who spend extended time in one place have more opportunities for authentic cultural interaction in classrooms, in homestays, on campuses, or at social or cultural events (Gesinski, English, & Tyson, 2010).

### **Transformative Learning and Study Abroad**

Transformative or transformational learning is often cited in conjunction with study abroad. Morrell and O'Connor (2002) defined transformative learning in this way:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. xvii)

To give a broad cultural context for transformative learning, O'Sullivan (2002) claimed that transformation involves cultural change. "When a cultural manifestation is in its florescence, the educational and learning tasks are uncontested and the culture is of one mind about what is ultimately important. During these periods, there is a kind of optimism and verve" (p. 2). O'Sullivan continued by defining two types of criticisms that occur in the face of the aforementioned cultural manifestation. First, O'Sullivan described "reform criticism," or criticism that accepts the fundamental heritages of a culture and denounces a cultural manifestation for its loss of purpose. In contrast, O'Sullivan asserted that "transformational criticism" questions the very foundation of a dominant cultural form and demands "radical restructuring of the dominant culture and a fundamental rupture with the past" (p. 3).

After having given a broad cultural context for transformation, O'Sullivan (2002) continued by drawing on general systems theory as applied to an individual learner, who learns through self-monitoring within a feedback loop. Homeostatic feedback reinforces a cultural perception or practice, while adaptive feedback leads to change in suppositions or assumptions. Similarly, Aragon and Fránquiz (2009) posited that "the first sign of transformation is questioning one's competence and beginning to examine what one originally thought were professional axioms" (p. 287). Reinforcing the need for reflection and feedback, Pence and Macgillivray (2008) found that both are instrumental in the stimulation of significant growth and transformative learning in preservice teachers who participated in study abroad. Critical analysis and reflection during an intercultural experience leads to conscientization, or a growing awareness of one's own and others' position in society, an ability to envision other possibilities, and a willingness to act toward the realization of that vision (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Similarly, Alfaro (2008) found, "Participants were able to re-think and reorganize their

personal and professional value system, negotiate differences and switch roles when the need arose” (p. 24.) Alfaro demonstrated the adaptive behavior consistent with learning that demands behavioral changes.

Pagano and Roselle (2009) elevated the metaphor of light implicit in the description of reflection when they described the process students undergo upon their return to their home countries. Reflection implied that knowledge and experience acquired abroad, like an image in a mirror, are simply reasserted without undergoing any transformative process. The next step in the knowledge development cycle, which echoed other literature, was critical thinking; students, at a degree of emotional distance, needed to be encouraged to analyze their knowledge and experiences in a purposeful and systematic way. The final step in the knowledge development cycle was refraction. “Refraction is the transformative knowledge that occurs which validates the use of critical analysis and problem solving providing interpretation and conclusions of important issues and situations considering course content and the international context” (p. 221). Beyond simple reflection, knowledge is bent and shaped because it has been processed through the lens of critical analysis of new experience.

In a review of the literature on transformative learning, Goulah (2006) found the concept had been applied primarily to adult learners, and exhorted researchers to examine transformative second language learning among primary and secondary students. One example of the transformative impact of a study abroad came from Allen (2010), who investigated the practices of French teachers before and after a summer study abroad experience in Lyon, France. Another example of transformative learning as applied to adults in the context of study abroad came from Escamilla, and Fránquiz (2009), who applied the framework of asymmetrical relationships to examine the experience of U.S. teachers as they participated in a summer study abroad in

Mexico. Initially applying a deficit lens, teachers in this study equated the material culture of the classroom with effective teaching and judged the classrooms in Mexico as reflective of a lower effectiveness of instruction. Through the course of their experience, however, teachers realized their initial underestimation of instruction in Mexico and came to understand the deficit paradigm within which they had been functioning initially. At the end, teachers were able to identify approaches and techniques from which they could benefit in their own classrooms in the U.S.

Bond, Koont, and Stephenson (2005) reported a lack of transformative power of study abroad. Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) found that students who participated in subsequent learning opportunities continued to find meaning in their experience abroad, while those that did not engage in subsequent experiences had less vivid recall of their sojourn abroad. Upon their return to their campuses, students who engaged in speaking about their experiences to groups of students or others reported more contact with a greater number of international students than their counterparts who did not present about their experiences (Mills & Campbell, 1994).

Much of the existing literature attributed student transformational growth while studying abroad to learning from experience (Wang, 2010; McKeown, 2009; Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Peterson, 2009; Thorpe, 2007; Hadis, 2005; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002; Montrose, 2002). McKeown (2009) theorized that study abroad forces students into an intense encounter with diversity; this experience produces stress, anxiety, and intellectual discomfort in students, and these factors are particularly acute in students in their first sojourn abroad. Calling this “the first time effect,” McKeown found that even brief experiences abroad could lead to intellectual development in students. In a study of teacher candidates from the United Kingdom that studied abroad in India, Scoffham and Barnes (2009) echoed the findings that an international experience

creates cognitive, emotional, and existential dissonance, and that the result was transformational change in student thinking. Similarly, Stephenson (1999) found that students studying abroad in Chile reported that cultural differences were more stressful than linguistic differences.

Stephenson specifically reported differences in perceptions of class and race, time use, food patterns, and sexism as items that heightened students stress while studying abroad. Montrose (2002) posited that it is not the educational experience abroad itself that triggers transformative learning. Rather, transformational learning requires participants' critical analyses of that experience.

Studying undergraduates during a short-term international experience in Cuba, Bond, Koont, and Stephenson (2005), found the following aspects to be the most stressful for participants: figuring out how things work in Cuba, adjusting to the life styles and realities in Cuba; speaking Spanish, and understanding the Cuban professors. The study found that the single aspect participants cited the most as contributing to their learning was the personal relationships formed with Cubans. Echoing other studies, their research also showed students to have initially a negative view of Cuba in comparison to the United States; after some experience, however, students were able to identify aspects of Cuban culture practices that they perceived would benefit the United States.

Ogden (2006) cautioned that the "greatest challenge may be preserving the fundamental mission of education abroad which is, in part, to engage our students in meaningful intellectual and intercultural experiences" (p. 87.) The rapid growth in short-term study abroad programs coupled with increased access to technology serve to minimize the stress involved in a travel abroad experience. Programs that allow students to remain within their "comfort zone" and that



do not expose students to the stress that may trigger transformative learning undermines the mission of study abroad.

### **Critical Literature, Globalization, Language and Study Abroad**

Some of the literature reflected a critical perspective of globalization and study abroad. Reilly and Senders (2009) identified three rhetorical frames that justify the implementation of study abroad: class reproduction, or study abroad as a means to cultural acquisition and the increase of social capital; idealist internationalism, or the idea that a positive international experience promotes international peace and intercultural understanding; and political internationalism, which is study abroad as a factor of national interest or in the pursuit of national security. They continued by asserting that study abroad has not only the ability but also the responsibility to do more than the aforementioned rhetorical frames outline; they put forward several alternative frames which could be used in the promotion of study abroad, including promoting awareness of environmental interconnectedness, valuing the local, examining contemporary culture, and posing international experiences as searches for solutions.

Zemach-Bersin (2007) found that “the discourse of study abroad surreptitiously reproduces the logic of colonialism, legitimizes American imperialist desires, and allows for the interests of U.S. foreign policy to be articulated through the specious rhetoric of global universality” (p. 16). In Zemach-Bersin’s view, students abroad essentially extract abroad what is necessary to maintain U.S. supremacy while functioning as surrogate diplomats dispersing pro-U.S. sentiments. The idea of a sojourner abroad as acting as a diplomat or ambassador was reflected by Sefcik (2010) in an autoethnographic account of his experience abroad.

Woolfe (2006) identified privilege and wealth as two barriers to genuine communication within non-traditional study abroad destinations; these barriers impede the development of

intercultural understanding in traveling students. Dantas (2007) reported that one study abroad program in Brazil for U.S. pre-service teachers was designed specifically to “engage... active exploration of [participants’] assumptions about the nature of literacy and culture, and communities' funds of knowledge” (p. 75); Dantas continued to characterize cultural misunderstanding as “frame clashes,” in which assumptions emerge and divergent expectations are exposed.

Ripple (2010) defined globalization as “a somewhat vague term used to explain a direction in economic and social flows that are neither centrally planned nor controlled by local citizens. For the purpose of definition globalization [refers] to 'systematic forces that act above and beyond the level of the nation-state, and above and through international institutions, by passing national borders to affect local actors’” (p. 18). Globalization drives the current increase in the number of students studying abroad (Davidson, 2010). Slimbach (2005) reported that individuals are becoming increasingly transcultural, “physically or electronically connected with diverse peoples, and involved in decision-making that is influenced by, and in turn influences, the affairs of a global society” (p. 205), and that ideally, transnational efforts seek to redress such attitudes and behaviors as prejudice, group violence, environmental destruction, and human rights violations.

From the standpoint of public policy and global political and economic positioning, U.S. students' inability or disinterest in international perspectives will put the country at a distinct disadvantage (Levine, 2005; Lincoln Commission, 2005; American Council on Education, 1995). The Lincoln Commission tied intercultural competence to issues of national security. “What nations don't know can hurt them. The stakes involved in study abroad are that simple, that straightforward, and that important. For their own future and that of the nation, college

graduates today must be internationally competent” (Lincoln Commission, 2005). To answer this high demand, the Progressive Policy Institute (Levine, 2005) set the following goals: teach critical foreign languages to 100,000 Americans, train 25,000 teachers in international subjects, create internationally themed high schools, and modernize public media and technology funding to promote distance learning.

From the perspective of the marketplace, corporations seek employees with international experience and a global perspective; one in six U.S. jobs is tied to international trade (Levine, 2005). U.S. companies and policy pundits lament the lack of candidates and citizens with these characteristics, and studies expose the lack of student international competence and awareness (Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008; Levine, 2005; Lansford, 2002). Students who are able to compete in a global society will be the ones who can “penetrate the opportunity structure” will succeed, while students who cannot will be left out (Paese, 2008, p. 270). Competition for prime employment is no longer local or even national; recent graduates are competing for coveted positions in a globally competitive environment (Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008). Globalization demands new student competencies (Levine, 2005).

On the international stage, in a documentary study of education abroad policy in China, Pan (2011) found that China has a strategic dependence on higher education resources abroad in an effort to raise foreign trained human capital. Reporting that a university education is increasingly viewed as a commodity, Choi (2010) lamented the hegemony of English and the concurrent de-emphasis of education in regional languages; Choi described the difficulty of offering a post-secondary education rooted in decolonization while having to address the perceived demands of globalization. In the face of globalization rhetoric, Chinese students increasingly study abroad to gain the commodity of the English language and of western

education. These opportunities undermine programs that emphasize regional language, culture, and knowledge.

In this increasingly competitive job market, of particular concern are the constraints faced by many students because of race or lack of economic resources. Some literature addressed the racial and economic disparity in access to study abroad opportunities. Students of color and students from families with fewer economic resources are less likely to study abroad (McClellan, 2011; Brux & Fry, 2010; Adam, 2003). The Lincoln Commission (2005) urged the democratizing of study abroad. McClellan (2011) chastised as unacceptable “that more young Americans of color...are not taking better advantage of opportunities for international education aimed at preparing them for global citizenship” (p. 247). “Students of color represent only 17% of American study abroad students which is a much lower percentage than their participation in higher education broadly” (McClellan, 2011, p. 250). In an attempt to discover the rate of participation of students of color in secondary school international educational experiences abroad, McClellan conducted a survey of approximately 50 companies that offer educational study abroad experiences to secondary students. Of the 50% who responded, only two collected racial/demographic data of participants, and those two reported that less than two percent of their participants were African American. Except for White, no other ethnic or cultural heritage was reported. Among the various barriers that lead to the exclusion of non-White participants, McClellan reported was “anxiety about the ‘unfamiliar’ and related to this many students are hesitant about being the first of their families or friends to go abroad” (p. 253).

Talbert and Stewart (1999) endeavored to study the effects of race and gender in the study abroad experience but found those topics were largely absent from the literature; they explored the experiences of a group of students studying in Spain for five weeks. The group

included one African American woman; their study posited that her presence and interaction with the group expanded the group participants' understanding of race and privilege, because interacting with her and reflecting as a group about her experience with race and culture both at home and in Europe led to other participants' expanded understanding and empathy. Brux and Fry (2010) presented the benefits of diversifying study abroad, arguing that the benefits for the individual student are coupled with the benefits to the group with whom they travel; they cited barriers to multicultural participation abroad as finances, academic conflicts, and work or home responsibilities.

### **Conclusion**

While the number of study abroad opportunities has increased, the proportion of students studying abroad has decreased. While study abroad opportunities vary from a year abroad to a few weeks abroad, the most rapidly growing form of immersion abroad experiences are short-term trips of eight weeks or fewer.

The expressed purposes of study abroad generally include language development, academic improvement, personal growth, and global competence. Types of study abroad experience include the island model, the direct enrollment model, or a hybrid model.

The effects of study abroad include increased independence and increased self-confidence as well as the self-perceptions of increased maturity, patience, sensitivity, tolerance of uncertainty. Learning abroad is a social endeavor, and increased learning has been shown to correlate with stronger relationships forged with host peers.

Research of an adolescent immersion abroad experience of the specific type I led and proposed to investigate was non-existent in the literature. More abundant were studies of postsecondary and professional experiences abroad. While adolescents and postsecondary

students may only be a few years apart in chronological age, post-secondary students have achieved many significant milestones: they have graduated from high school, are legally adults, often have moved out of their families' homes and thus live more independently, and have experienced a greater freedom and autonomy. The literature discussing study-abroad experiences in a postsecondary context cannot automatically be applied to secondary contexts. Regardless, the literature informed my development of the questions I asked as part of the study, and much of the data revealed themes apparent in the current literature.

### **Chapter Three: Analytic Literature**

To examine and analyze the data, analytic theories provide interpretive lenses to view and interpret the findings. In this research, I found two theoretical frameworks provided the most rich exploration of the findings. Without intending to imply a chronology or a hierarchy of the importance of these two theories, I review first the analytic literature regarding human development, especially regarding cognitive development (Piaget) and identity (Erikson). Next, I review the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy.

#### **Theoretical Framework of Cognitive Development and Identity**

This study strives to discern how students perceive themselves affected by a month-long study abroad experience in Mexico. Because participants reported being changed, I realized I needed to understand human development, especially at the adolescent stage, in order to analyze what I was learning. Additionally, because so much of what was narrated involved participants' perceptions of themselves, I also needed to investigate the concept of identity. Theories of identity and theories of human development, specifically adolescent development and cognitive development, served as lenses through which I analyzed the changes participants perceived.

No expert need be consulted to learn that adolescence is a period of change. Any parent of teens will attest that adolescents change physically, emotionally, and cognitively. "One thing common to all adolescents...is their engagement in a process of psychological development. Understanding that process is central to understanding adolescents" (Mosham, 2005, p. xv). Mosham (2005) enumerated four essential characteristics of developmental change. Developmental changes, biological and psychological, are 1) substantial and occur over time, 2)

directed or regulated from within, 3) qualitative rather than solely quantitative, and 4) progressive.

**Piaget's theory of cognitive development.** Constructivism is a branch of developmental theory that posits that an individual is an active agent in the construction knowledge through ongoing reflection on and coordination of actions and interactions. Jean Piaget, a foundational theorist of constructivism, theorized that during childhood and early adolescence, individuals “actively construct qualitatively new structures of knowledge and reasoning, and that the most fundamental of such changes are progressive in the sense that later cognitive structures represent higher levels of rationality than earlier ones” (Mosham, 2005, p. 4). As part of his theory of cognitive development, Piaget posited that all species demonstrate two “invariant functions”: adaptation and organization (Ginsburg & Opper, 1969). Organization refers to the tendency to systematize or organize processes into logical, coherent, higher-order systems. Applied to psychology, then, it is the tendency to organize various disparate actions or thoughts into a logical hierarchy or taxonomy. Adaptation, a term borrowed from biology, is the tendency to adapt to the environment. Piaget identified two complementary processes that work in intellectual adaptation. First, assimilation describes the process by which an individual incorporates external input into that individual's existing psychological structures. Accommodation explains that an individual modifies his or her own psychological structures to explain or integrate the environment. O'Sullivan's (2002) conception of self-monitoring within a feedback loop echoes this process. Homeostatic feedback, which reinforces a cultural perception or practice, recalls Piaget's concept of assimilation. Adaptive feedback, which leads to change in suppositions or assumptions, invokes Piaget's concept of accommodation.



Organization, then, would explain how people classify and categorize the world. As an example, a child typically attaches first to a parent figure. Later, the child might learn the primary parent is part of a family. As the child grows, she organizes brother, sister, grandma, grandpa, etc. into the definition of family. As the child gains new experiences, grows into adolescence, and perhaps travels abroad and lives with a host family, she undergoes adaptation. The new home is an environment to which she must adapt. She observes the social and physical environment of the home, and ideally accommodates her own behaviors to conform to the expectations and habits of those in the home. At the same time, her observations of the definitions and behaviors of family expand to include extended family, and even herself within the host family, into her existing concept of family. She assimilates an expanded concept into her existing psychological structure.

Piaget further explained that individuals' actions can be regular; when they are, we commonly refer to them as habits. Piaget termed an organized pattern of behavior a scheme (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1969). The term in Piaget's use refers not only to a coherent and ordered pattern of behavior, or the habits of an individual, but also to the basic structure underlying the behavior, such as the operations of classifying and ranking.

Piaget theorized that the functional invariants (organization and adaptation) and underlying psychological structures are inextricably linked. The individual assimilates new events into the psychological structures already present, and simultaneously modifies existing structures to accommodate new information or experience (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1969). As an individual develops, the functions remain invariant, but the structures continually adapt as one learns, experiences, and reflects. In early adolescence, typically a child enters into the stage of formal operations, a stage in which the child first begins to have the cognitive ability to conceive

of possibilities beyond reality. “The formal thinker spontaneously and systematically generates possibilities, and reconstrues realities in light of those possibilities” (Mosham, p. 9).

This leads to another theory of Piaget: individuals tend toward equilibrium. As a person experiences new input, he enters into a state of disequilibrium. The new experience does not match what the individual already knows, and the result is the individual experiences a sense of being off-balance intellectually, emotionally, or even physically. Consequently, he tries to develop structures applicable to the new experience. A new experience means that the individual must accommodate his own thoughts and behaviors to adapt to the experience, and at the same time assimilate the new experience into his existing psychological structures. The more experience an individual has with this process, the more readily the individual can navigate other novel situations (Ginsburg & Oppen, 1969). McKeown (2009) theorized that study abroad forces students into an intense encounter with diversity; this experience produces stress, anxiety, and intellectual discomfort in students, and these factors are particularly acute in students in their first sojourn abroad. Calling this “the first time effect,” McKeown found that even brief experiences abroad could lead to intellectual development in students. Applying Piaget’s hypothesis of equilibrium to the travel abroad experience described by McKeown, we understand that the new environment abroad plunges the student into a state of disequilibrium. The student undergoes adaptation through assimilation and accommodation in order to achieve equilibrium. Once the student has undergone this process once, the student more readily manages subsequent novel cultural experiences.

This process of organization and adaptation, which includes the invariant functions of accommodation and assimilation, characterizes cognitive development. Regular actions, or habits, are physical manifestations of psychological patterns.

**Erik Erikson and identity development.** Identity is a complex idea. In some ways, identity is factual: one's name and some personal information are on any "ID". Of course, those personal statistics are only the facade of a much more complex and varied definition of who we are. "An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3).

Erik Erikson is a foundational theorist in the field of identity; the preceding definition reflects Erikson's description of the dimensions of identity: "a process 'located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture'" (Erikson, 1968, p. 22). Identity formation is an activity which continues through adulthood (Moshman, 2005). Identity is not a status, but rather a process, continually changing. "At its best it is a process of increasing differentiation, and it becomes ever more inclusive as the individual grows aware of a widening circle of others significant to him, from the maternal person to 'mankind'" (Erickson, 1968, p. 23).

Erikson (1968) emphasized the importance of the concept of environment in identity development, both the exterior environment and the interior environment, a concept encapsulated in the German word *Umwelt*. The social and cultural contexts are significant in development (Moshman, 2005). A well-adjusted individual approaches identity formation in adolescence "with a sense of self as an autonomous, active, and competent agent in a relatively secure world" (Moshman, 2005, p. 81). Erikson (1968) further posited that in adolescence, the ideological structure of the environment is essential for identity development, because "without an ideological simplification of the universe the adolescent ego cannot organize experience according to its specific capacities and its expanding involvement" (p. 27).

An aspect of Erikson's theory is that individuals must successfully reach eight benchmarks of psychosocial development. Included among these benchmarks, during the adolescent stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, individuals must develop the strength of Fidelity (Mooney, 2000). During adolescence, children become more independent while simultaneously wanting to belong to society. Adolescents experiment with identities and their own places within the social. Successful navigation of this stage leads to the achievement of fidelity, which "involves being able to commit one's self to others on the basis of accepting other even when there may be ideological differences" (McLeod, 2013).

Certain characteristics correspond to certain stages in development. Children experiment with various identities, real and fictitious, whereas adolescents are often preoccupied with how others perceive them as compared with how they see themselves as well as with wondering who they will become and how they will achieve that. "Adolescents not only help one another temporarily through such discomfort by forming cliques and stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies; they also insistently test each other's capacity for sustaining loyalties in the midst of inevitable conflicts of values" (Erikson, 1968, p. 133).

Echoing Piaget's functional invariants of organization and adaptation, Erikson emphasized the role of conscious interpretations and adaptive choices in development (Moshman, 2005). He wrote of cultural consolidation, a process of action, formation of habit, success or failure, in a way that make individuals become what they do. This cultural consolidation functions in identity formation and can serve to reproduce "entrenched privileges, enforced sacrifices, institutionalized inequalities, and built-in contradictions" (Erikson, 1968, p. 32).

**Symbolic interaction and identity theory.** Identity, then, is a process of defining who an individual is and what societal or group role that individual occupies. Identity and role are inexorably linked. Central to the understanding of the significance of the connection between identity, role, meaning, and perception is symbolic interaction.

Attributed to George Herbert Mead and coined by Herbert Blumer, symbolic interactionism represents a sociological perspective that centralizes the thinking individual's social interaction as the way a person interprets environments and defines meaning. Perspectives influence one's perception of reality. "Reality is social, and what we see 'out there' (and within ourselves) is developed in interaction with others" (Charon, 2010, p. 43).

Central to the social construction of reality are social objects, which exist in definite form, but whose meanings are defined by their use. An object's use can be a generally accepted application: a chair is something to sit on, a bed is something to sleep in, a movie is something to watch. However, the meaning of an object changes when an individual, in conjunction with a social group, uses the object differently: a chair is something to hang a coat on, a bed is something to jump on, a movie is something to distract a busy child. We understand objects because of their use for us. "Understanding is not habit but is instead applying knowledge we have to objects" (Charon, 2010, p. 46).

Symbols are a subcategory of social objects. Symbols are created socially, used intentionally, and understood by those who use them (Charon, 2010). "A symbol derives its meaning from social consensus and is arbitrary, varying from one culture to another. Different symbols may have different meanings" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 11). Language itself is symbolic communication. Words, objects, or actions used to represent meaning are symbols. "These symbols are learned in interaction with others as one learns how to classify, divide, and name the

world” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 16). Thus, although not all social objects are inherently symbols, all social objects can potentially become symbols through their use to appreciate, communicate, or convey meaning in social interaction.

In order to understand the connection between symbolic interaction and identity theory, it is helpful to return to the definition quoted earlier. “An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3). Essentially, the ‘self’ is conceived in the mind of the individual, and it functions as a social object, which an individual can regard, evaluate, and manipulate in order to bring about a different state.

The responses to the self as symbolized object are from the point of view of others with whom we interact (taking the role of the other toward ourselves), and this implies that our responses are like their response, and the meaning of the self is a shared meaning. Thus, paradoxically, as the ‘self’ emerges as a distinct object, there is at the same time a merger of perspectives of the self and others and a becoming as one with the others with whom we interact (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 10).

The fact that identity and the self are linked is a truism, which at its surface needs no further explanation. The complexity arises when one considers that the concept of identity entails self-perceptions as an autonomous and as a social being, the roles one plays in the social environment, and the behaviors of others in regards to the individual; this identity is construed and acts in the form of the “self”, which in essence is a social object with a symbolic function.

### **Theoretical Framework of Critical Pedagogy**

Central to my purpose for research is my anecdotal understanding that this short-term study abroad experience in high school leads students to shifts in perception, sometimes gradual and sometimes radical, of the other. When I began leading the trip in the year 2000, my vision was not nearly so broad; my hope was that students would make progress in their language abilities, and that they would come to understand our neighbors to the south a little better. I cannot recall envisioning any significant life alteration for these students as a result, which in retrospect was shortsighted, because my own first experience abroad led to my own personal significant life alteration. As I have become more interested in issues of social justice and globalization, I have questioned whether it is possible to lead students to an awareness or understanding of issues of race and privilege. Primarily in suburban schools, my students have been predominantly White, middle-class residents of the suburbs. Can I, as a White, suburban middle-class teacher, hope to participate in the conscientization of White, suburban, middle-class students? Could this trip have been a tool in that process?

**Freire, humanization, and transformation.** In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2003) exhorted that humanization is the vocation of the people, and that the task of the oppressed is to restore humanity to themselves and to their oppressors. The singular path toward this humanization is through dialog grounded in truth and undertaken in love. Forged during his time teaching literacy skills to impoverished workers in Brazil, Freire's methods involved invoking the personal circumstances of his students, encouraging those students to reflect upon the reality they perceive, problematizing asymmetrical relationships of power that students identify, and working with students to transform the reality. In short, through the vehicle of

literacy and the process of conscientization, Freire and his students engaged in a process of reading the world and acting to transform it.

Freire's work engaged the oppressed, and although he called on the oppressed to engage the oppressor in dialog, and cautioned that a converted oppressor must trust the oppressed to lead the charge for transformation, Freire did not address how or why the oppressor might willingly undertake the radical posture of solidarity with the oppressed. Allen and Rossatto (2009) asserted that critical pedagogy's lack of focus on the oppressor "represents a hidden hopelessness" (p. 171) and a sense that the oppressor will not change and become an ally in counter-hegemonic practices. Such pessimism undermines the role critical pedagogy plays as a vehicle for possibility and hope.

**Critical pedagogy and students of privilege.** Giroux (1981) analyzed how schools sustain and produce ideologies that serve to maintain hegemony. Dominant ideology is infused in schools in myriad elements, including the form and content of classroom materials, the organization of the school, the daily classroom social relationships, the principles that structure the selection and organization of the curriculum the attitudes of the school staff, and the discourse and practices of individuals (Giroux, 1981). Furthermore, schools serve the purpose of reproducing the current social strata, a practice that guarantees a continued systemic emphasis on maintaining the privileged class (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990; Ross & Vinson, 2009). Educational inequities abound in schools and classrooms (Bejarano, 2005; Kozol, 1991). Given that schools unconsciously or consciously function to reproduce social inequities, and that the majority of those with power in schools or that succeed in schools represent members of the class that benefits from the current structure of privilege, creating an environment that encourages



examinations of power, reflections of privilege, and actions of anti-oppression is a risky endeavor for a school representative.

A review of the literature indicates that educators have applied tenets of critical pedagogy with students of privilege (Allen & Rossatto, 2009; Fox & Diaz-Greenberg, 2006; Hill, 2009; Luke, 2005; Moreno-López, 2004; Sleeter, Torres & Laughlin, 2004; Wallace, 1999.) As one avenue to a critical approach, much of the literature invoked the concept of teaching for social justice (Allen & Rossatto, 2009; Hill, 2009; Moreno-López, 2004; Osborn, 2006; Ross & Vinson, 2009). Additionally, the literature described critical multicultural education as paramount in promoting social transformation with the goal of equality (Kubota, 2004). Kubota (2004) contrasted liberal multiculturalism, which she defined as a “color-blind” approach, with critical multiculturalism, an approach that examines issue of race, class, and gender with the purpose of recognizing and intervening in injustice.

Most of the literature reflected using critical approaches in the context of postsecondary experiences. Allen and Rossatto (2009) challenged college students of privilege to examine how they contribute to hegemony and to intervene on behalf of the oppressed when confronted with hegemonic constructions. Kubota (2004) exhorted that educators “must engage mainstream students and teachers in critical learning about cultural and linguistic diversity” (p. 47). One common theme that emerged is the discomfort of White students when the lens is focused on the issue of privilege; this discomfort ranged from a sense of awakening, to a self-proclaimed sense of oppression even from White middle-class males, to resistance in the form of emotional or physical withdrawal from the class (Allen, 2002; Allen & Rossatto, 2009; Hill, 2009; Sleeter, Torres, & McLaughlin, 2004). Little of the literature focused on whether the critical pedagogical approaches were effective in achieving a transformational character in the privileged students

with whom the approaches were applied. One notable exception was Hill (2009) who reported anecdotal evidence of students' pursuits of social justice that emerged after critical encounters with marginalized individuals and groups.

**Critical pedagogy and world language education.** Freire's conscientization was enabled by the context of his encounter with the oppressed. His state-sanctioned purpose was to promote literacy among the poor. Although the purpose was prescribed, Freire was free to choose his approach. Engaging students' knowledge and experience, Freire promoted a critical examination of students' social, economic, and political reality with the goal that, once aware, students would work to transform the world.

Similarly, the function of a world language classroom is to promote literacy. While Freire's work was within the context of first language (L1) literacy, a world language teacher promotes the acquisition of second language (L2) spoken, written, and cultural literacies. However, beyond the acquisition of academic literacy, world language classrooms can serve as a space to promote political literacy as well (Leeman, 2005; Luke, 2005; Moreno-López, 2004). Luke (2005) identifies a sense of opportunity or urgency in engaging language learners in the critical because our current globalized situation represents "a volatile moment of both unparalleled flows of bodies, discourses, and capital and a moment where such flows can face unpredictable stoppages, blockages, and collapses" (p. 25).

Combating hegemony in a world language classroom is to confront political as well as emotional barriers. Osborn (2006) pointed to the legacy of non-success in world language education's ability to produce linguistically and culturally competent graduates. Asserting that this shortfall is not the result of poor teaching or inappropriate pedagogy, but rather of systemic

and political barriers, Osborn wrote that “the ‘failure’ of foreign language instruction represents success in terms of hegemony” (p. 16).

The levels of freedom a world language educator possesses to implement unique approaches vary by state, district, site, and department, but Osborn (2006) argued that the ideals of the published national standards could serve as a basis for the reinvigoration of curriculum that centralizes communities of local language communities. Two of the five standards in world language education deal with the concept of culture; a superficial treatment of these two standards can lead to the study of the four Fs: food, fashion, festivals, and folklore (Fox & Diaz-Greenberg, 2006). The concept of teaching language through culture is not new (Seelye, 1994). What emerges, however, is the concept that culture in the world language classroom can be co-opted as a space for the conscientization of the student. Arguing that postmodernity has shifted the focus of emancipatory practices from the means of production to the realm of culture, Cho (2009) argued counter-hegemonic practices must be confronted within the realm of culture. This exhortation invites the world language teacher to address the political directly.

Using culture as the basis of language study, an approach supported by the national standards, allows critical educators to create spaces that lead to critical reflection and dialog. For example, Standard 3.2 of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning is: “Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are available only through the foreign language and its cultures” (Lafayette, 1996). The performance of skills that satisfy this standard necessitates that students engage in dialog with individuals or interact with material representative of another linguistic heritage. Using this as a threshold, a critical pedagogue could encourage L2 learners to compare and contrast their own perspectives with those encountered in the target language. “An educational practice must be instituted that proposes and takes

advantages of situations where the learners may experience the power and the value of unity within diversity” (Freire, 1997). Question-posing about differences in a world language classroom could lead to a critical examination of student perceptions and preconceptions.

Osborn (2006) further posited that world language curriculum must engage in macrocontextualization, which implies that educators plan programs based on the local, regional, national, and global contexts. Osborn advocated finding space within existing frameworks and approaches to dialog about advancing social justice, and that “teaching world languages for social justice begins with a teacher who is concerned about social justice and holds a belief in the students’ humanity” (p. 28). To approach the theme of social justice in world language instruction, Osborn proposed implementing a critical inquiry cycle (CIC) which consists of a cycle of mutual critical reflection, informed investigation, inductive analysis, and tentative conclusions; the cycle ends and begins again with mutual critical reflection. Cautioning that this approach is not prescriptive, Osborn urged practitioners to, as Freire did, work with students to read the world, critically examine injustice, and act to transform the world.

## **Conclusion**

World language study can serve as a means for the critical pedagogue to promote awareness of social structures, cultural assumptions, and structural inequities. As an extension of the classroom practice, a study abroad program can be a useful tool to bring students of privilege into critical contact with a cultural other. Study abroad recruitment literature currently promotes practices that represent cultural reproduction and increased social capital for the sojourner. The predominance of the literature shows that study abroad can engender transformative learning and lead to behaviors that reflect an awareness of privilege and a desire to change oppressive

practices. However, a study abroad experience does not automatically lead to this conscientization; an international sojourn does not guarantee transformative learning.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

In the summer of 2000, I led my first group of students to Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico to study Spanish at Renovar Institute. In the years following, I have led or co-led six more trips with adolescents to the same institute in Cuernavaca, most recently in the summer of 2010. In all trips, students lived with families, studied Spanish during the day at the school, participated in group activities in the afternoons or evenings, and went on excursions in the city and its immediate area. The expressed purpose of the month-long experience was to improve their Spanish abilities by immersing students in the language and culture of Mexico.

In the years since I took that first group, several former participants have remained in contact with me, or have reconnected with me through social networking such as Facebook. Many of those former participants had one thing in common: they continued to participate in or crave intercultural experiences. This made me curious. Was there something about the trip that motivated students to delve deeper into language and culture? What did students learn about themselves or about their world as a result of this trip? How did this trip whet their appetites for knowledge about the world and their positions in it? How did this trip influence their decisions about college, careers, lifestyle choices, or vocations? In this phenomenological case study, I sought to understand what this language and cultural immersion experience means to several young adults that participated in a summer during the years 2000-2010 and how they perceive the trip impacted them personally, academically, and professionally.

### **Phenomenological Case Study**

Researching the perceptions of former participants years after they traveled requires a methodology that allows participants to narrate their memories, interpret their experiences, and

ascribe meaning to their interactions. Qualitative research, with its foundational belief in the complexity of human interaction and the attention it gives to participants' unique words and expression, ensures that participant perspectives will be expressed in their own words.

“Qualitative research assumes that everyone has a story to tell” (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007, p. xiii).

“Qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 2). Asking participants to recall events and activities, and to express their understanding of those events with the help of several years of additional life experience, provided a unique opportunity for me to listen for clues to understanding the catalyst for what many described as personal growth and change.

In preparing the research design, I considered several approaches. One compelling approach was that of phenomenology. Bogdan and Biklin (2007) wrote, “[Researchers] in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 25). Cresswell (2007) explained that phenomenology studies how participants interpret the meaning of a common lived experience, and attempts to distill the common essence of the experience by interpreting the perspectives of all participants. Cresswell (2007) described four philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology. First is that phenomenology is a return to philosophy as a search for wisdom in the traditional Greek interpretation of the endeavor. Next, in phenomenology, a researcher suspends all judgments about what is real until it is revealed in the research. Third, consciousness is always directed toward an object, and the reality of that object cannot be separated from one's consciousness of it. Finally, the reality of the object can only be perceived through one's consciousness of it. Referencing van Manen, Cresswell (2007) further went on to explain that in

hermeneutical phenomenology, research references the lived experience of participants, and the researcher interprets or mediates the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants.

Additionally, because the data I collected revolved around various participant experiences within the context of study abroad at one institution, Renovar Language Institute, approaching the research as a case study provided a bounded system within which to consider the phenomenon. Yin (2007) asserted that a case study approach is particularly appropriate when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clear, when the phenomenon being investigated is inextricably tied to its particular real-life context (p. 18). By its very definition, an immersion experience involves taking students out of their cultural context and exposing them to a different cultural context. The phenomenon of an immersion experience abroad is essentially tied to the cultural context in which it occurred. Bogden and Biklin (2007) defined a case study as “a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or a single event” (p. 59). Later, they described the form of case study they labeled “situation analysis. In this type, a particular event...is studied from the points of view of all the participants” (p. 66). Yin (2009) wrote that a case study offers the researcher the ability to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 7).

Because I led trips to the same institute in the same city over several years, approaching the research as a case study allowed me to focus on the shared experiences of participants, albeit those individual participant experiences occurred over the course of a decade. Additionally, the case study approach allowed me to expand my sources of data from just the participant interviews to include artifacts and evidence such as participant photos and an on-line journal I kept during the 2010 trip.



Discussion of how students perceive the experience affected them led participants to narrate experiences and relationships beyond the actual trip itself. Because those experiences beyond the boundaries of the case itself are integral to describing the effects of the case, and because in this research, I sought to understand the significance participants attach to this particular phenomenon inspired within a particular setting, I approached the data using the framework of a phenomenological case study.

### **The Case**

Yin (2009) identified five rationales for choosing a single case study. Among those listed “is where the case represents an extreme case or a unique case” (p. 47). An extensive review of the literature revealed no published research about study abroad programs for high school students that reflect the immersion model we experienced. Because of my trips, I know that other institutes like Renovar exist in Cuernavaca, so I assume the school is not exactly unique. However, the absence of literature indicated that a single case study might be a good place to start to investigate the effects of this type of immersion model for secondary students.

I chose to study effects of an immersion experience at Renovar Institute because of my personal involvement with trips. Renovar Institute began receiving students decades ago. The district in which I taught had sponsored an immersion experience at Renovar for several years prior to my leading the trip. In the fall of 1999, with the help of the former trip leader, I announced the trip and organized my first group of fourteen students. We met several times throughout the year to prepare for the experience. At these pre-trip meetings, we talked about cultural differences students might experience while traveling, including different customs, foods, and patterns of behavior. We discussed Mexican history so students would have some background knowledge when they traveled. We talked about what it meant to be a part of a

group and a guest in a home. Some years, we had one of those meetings at a Latino retail cooperative with a food court so students could experience a *mercado* environment and sample authentic Mexican food.

While in Mexico, students stayed with families. Every morning, students attended classes, participating in small groups of about five students with a teacher. In the early afternoons, the group often went on various short excursions, to the *mercado*, the *zócalo* (central town square,) the cathedral, the botanical gardens, or the mall, for example. Students went back to their families for lunch about 2:00 in the afternoon. Later in the afternoons, the group often met for other activities, such as movies, sports, games, or classes like salsa dancing, cooking, or art. On the weekends, the group went on excursions a little further away, to Mexico City, to surrounding pueblos like Taxco or Tepotzlán, or to archeological sites, such as the pyramids at Malinalco or Teotihuacán. While details of each trip were different, the pattern described here was common to all trips.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Gathering rich data is essential in order to interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of those who have experienced any particular phenomenon. Yin (2007) maintained that one way to ensure construct validity of the case study design is to employ multiple sources of evidence. In this phenomenological case study, I sought a variety of sources of evidence to ensure construct validity. I employed in-depth interviews of a several students who had participated in five different trips ranging from the years 2000-2010. I also interviewed several adult leaders of the experience. Additionally, students provided images in the form of photographs, and analysis of their narration also served as a source of validity. In this section, I detail the processes I used for selecting participants, conducting in-depth interviews, and analyzing the data.

**Participants.** The immersion experience was open to any district student who was at least fourteen years old and who had studied Spanish for at least one year. While I was in the public school district, the trip was offered for credit. At the private school, the trip was offered as enrichment, but not for credit. Consistent with the demographics of the schools in which I served, most participants in the immersion experiences were White suburban adolescent students.

Cresswell (2007) recommended that in phenomenological research, researchers interview 5 to 25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon in question. To find participants for the study, I began by approaching two young women, both in their mid-20s, who had previously “friended” me on Facebook and one young man, age 19, who had just finished high school. After conducting and coding those initial interviews, I continued to seek participants from among those that had maintained contact with me or who had reconnected with me through social media sites such as Facebook. In some cases, those students referred me to others with whom they were in contact.

In addition to the eight primary participants, those former adolescents that traveled and who are now adults, I interviewed four Renovar staff members who were also host parents to U.S. students. These secondary participants contributed to data regarding the context of the learning and home environments students experienced in Mexico. To connect with Mexican participants, I contacted the current director of Renovar Language Institute, who put me in contact with people who served as teachers and host parents of adolescent participants in Mexico. In total, I interviewed twelve participants: eight former sojourners as my primary informants, and four Mexican professionals that provided further context. Below, I have included

brief biographies of the study participants in the order in which they traveled with me followed by study participants that were part of the staff of the institute.

*Jill.* At the time of the interview, Jill was in her late 20s and worked as a bilingual case manager at a national corporation centered in the Twin Cities. She traveled with me during my first travel abroad experience with students, in the summer of the year 2000.

*Lucy.* Now in her late 20s, Lucy traveled with me on the 2001 trip. At the time of the interview, she was in what she described as “a huge transition from a five-year career in importing and exporting specialty coffee,...and preparing to move to Nicaragua for six months and likely six months in Tanzania after that to do cervical cancer prevention work.” She had just finished a master’s degree in public health.

*Sonya.* Also in her late 20s and also an alumna of the 2001 trip, Sonya was one of Lucy’s roommates while in Mexico. At the time of the interview, Sonya was living and working in El Salvador. I was able to interview her at a bar/coffee shop she and her Salvadoran husband were starting outside of San Salvador.

*Mali.* An alumna of the 2001 trip, Mali was only 14 years old during the trip, making her one of the youngest of the students I ever took. At the time of the interview, Mali was in her mid-20s. She was working with middle high school students, especially English Language Learners, with a college access program. She was the only participant to describe herself as having been an at-risk student.

*Philip.* Philip traveled in 2004 just after graduating from high school. At the time of the interview, he was in his late-20s and described himself as a sustainability professional working in the wine industry.

**William.** Also an alumnus of the 2004 trip, William was 15 when he traveled and was in his mid-20s at the time of the interview. He was doing graduate work in environmental engineering.

**Katrina.** Katrina traveled in 2006. At the time of the interview, Katrina was in her early 20s and had just started law school.

**James.** James was the participant who had traveled most recently. An alumnus of the 2010 trip, James was 19 at the time of the interview. He was beginning his first year of college and was anticipating majoring in computer science.

**Daniel.** Daniel is the current director of Renovar Language Institute. He lives and works in Cuernavaca.

**María.** María has served both as a teacher and as a host mother for students at Renovar Language Institute. She is married to Daniel, whom she met through the Institute.

**Silvia.** Silvia and María are sisters. Like María, Silvia has served both as a teacher and as a host mother for students. Also like María, she met her husband through Renovar.

**Claudia.** Claudia has served Renovar as a host mother, a teacher, and a curriculum director.

**In-depth interviewing.** Yin (2007) outlined that a researcher involved in a case study must have an active inquiry process before, during, and after data collection. A continuous dialog between the researcher and the data, represented in the form of active listening to participants, an active awareness of researcher assumptions and biases, and a constant search for evidence to substantiate any inferences made.

In order to achieve this balance between investigation and reflection, I sought to write guiding questions that would yield rich data. After conducting an initial literature review, I

developed questions based on four basic time frames: before the trip, during the trip, immediately after the trip, and the present (See Appendix A). My questions were designed to elicit participant memories of events and activities; to understand personal connections with people in the group, in Mexico, or of other cultures upon their return; to elicit participant definitions of what the trip meant for them; and to discover how the trip influenced their subsequent choices and experiences. I approached each interview with this list of potential questions, which I modified as necessary to ask for clarification, explanation, or further interpretation. Additionally, I developed a list of guiding questions for instructors at Renovar (See Appendix B) with the intention of eliciting their descriptions of specifically their experiences with adolescents and their interpretation of the meaning and implications of those experiences.

Before beginning any interviews, I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of St. Thomas and from Renovar Language Institute. Once approval had been granted, I contacted potential participants and conducted in-depth interviews with participants at locations of their choice. With U.S. former adolescent participants, those interviews were usually held at coffee shops, restaurants, or in my classroom. Some students lived out of state; most of those interviews, as well as interviews with Mexican participants, were conducted via Skype. I conducted the interview with Sonya in the coffee shop she runs with her husband in El Salvador. Participation was voluntary; participants were not compensated for their time. Participants signed a consent form (See Appendices C and D) either electronically or in person. This consent form provided information about the purpose of the study, procedures, a statement of confidentiality, and contact information for me and for the University of St. Thomas.

All participants already knew me in the context of the immersion experience, so establishing rapport was not difficult. Generally, both the participant and I began the conversation with a brief time to “catch up” with each other’s personal lives. Because I traveled always with my sons and often with my husband as a chaperone, many conversations began with participants asking me personal questions about my family. To be respectful of participant time, however, I quickly moved the conversation through the probing questions I had anticipated, actively selecting, omitting, or inventing questions as the conversation progressed.

**Visual methodologies.** Bogden and Biklin (2007) addressed the use of photographs as tools for analysis. “In educational researchers’ quest for understanding, photos are not the answers, but tools to pursue them” (p. 152). Collier (1979) wrote, “The promise of photography is not only that it can gather valuable research tangibles, but that the detail of the visual evidence it provides can preserve a constantly ‘present’ context for subsequent analysis” (p. 272). Using photographs as tools for interviewing is valuable because “the imagery dredges the consciousness (and subconsciousness) of the informant, and in an exploratory fashion reveals significance triggered by the photographic subject matter” (Collier, p. 274.)

Rose (2007) differentiated vision, or what we are physiologically capable of seeing, from visuality, or scopic regime, which is the way in which what is seen and observed, and its interpretation, is variously constructed. What is noticed and how it is interpreted are subject to the cultural context of the observer. An image, even a photograph, is never a simple transparent window of the world. Rose (2007) posited that visual images are increasingly important in Western society, and used the term *ocularcentrism* to describe the importance seeing has in understanding. “[Modern] forms of understanding the world depend on a scopic regime that equates seeing with knowledge” (Rose, 2007, p. 2).

Central to the interpretation of images is the idea of discourse analysis. Rose (2007), interpreting the work of Foucault, asserted that discourse is a group of statements which construct the way a thing is thought, and in turn, how we act. Rose (2007) further claimed that visual images could be understood as discourse and that intertextuality is important to interpreting that discourse. “Intertextuality refers to the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts” (Rose, 2007, p. 142). Thus, the singular image, the images together, combined with the narration of the experience and the participants’ explanation of the images work together to serve as a source of data.

Photographs as a source of data in research are unique tools in social science research because “...they can carry or evoke three things—information, affect, and reflection—particularly well” (Rose, 2007, p. 238). Photo-elicitation is based on the insertion of a photograph into the research interview. The photograph can be taken either by the researcher or the researched and can be used to elicit more and different insights into social phenomena. Rose (2007) specifically illustrated an approach in which research participants are given cameras and given some guidance about what to photograph and how many photographs to take. While this is an appropriate approach when participants are actually experiencing the phenomena in question, it would not be applicable in the frame of this phenomenological case study. For this reason, I modified Rose’s approach to ask participants to choose five emblematic photographs they took during their trip years before. By asking for only five, I anticipated that participants would develop their own screening criteria and choose five images that, in their own interpretation, were significant and important.



As I was initially setting up the interviews with former participants in the immersion experience, I asked them to look through their photos and choose five that they believed to be emblematic of the trip. Several participants asked what I meant by that, and I was intentionally vague, explaining that I was hoping to see five pictures that for them best represented the trip. Five of the eight participants provided photos; two of those that did not explained their photos were stored at their parents' homes and they did not have access to them during the interview. The eighth participant chose not to provide photos for the interview. As the final part of each interview, then, I asked students to show me one photo at a time, to describe what was in the image, and to tell me why they found the image significant.

At the end of each interview, I invited participants to volunteer any other information they thought relevant or important. In some cases, participants initially said they felt we had covered everything, but then thought of something else as we were saying our good-byes. In those cases, I asked if they would mind if I interrupted them in order to turn my recording device back on. Those last thoughts in some cases yielded very valuable data.

**Data Analysis.** “The process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data is messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p 207). Marshall and Rossman (2011) emphasized the importance of the researcher being immersed in the data. In order to achieve the level of requisite immersion in the data, I resolved to transcribe the data myself. This effort, though time consuming, allowed me to reflect on the data as I was hearing it. I often included affective comments about participant tone of voice in observer comments I made during transcription. After transcribing the interviews, I added further observer comments and memos.

When this process was complete, I uploaded the transcriptions of the interviews and my observer comments to NVivo. Additionally, I uploaded the images participants provided to the program, along with the narrative participants used when describing the images they had selected. Once all dialog and narrative had been uploaded, I was able to use the software program to easily employ line by line coding. When all interviews and narratives were coded, I was able to discern which codes were most common; from there I was able to view emerging themes. Once the process was complete, I again reviewed the interviews and the narratives, making certain that I had not missed any significant data, information, or codes, in the process. This served as a quality control measure I found valuable.

As an additional source of data about experiences during the trip, I analyzed an on-line interactive journal I kept in the form of an on-line wiki during the 2010 trip. This journal was not my own private reflection. Rather, the purpose of the journal was to communicate the experience on a regular basis to parents of participants and other interested parties. Prior to the 2010 trip, I had created an educational page on Wikispaces.com. On that page, I was able to upload documents, photos and text before and during the trip. For this research, I analyzed the text in the journal in conjunction with the images the text described. I looked for themes that reflected what participants had disclosed during their interviews.

Additionally, I asked participants to provide any documents they still had that expressed their views about their experience or about their subsequent intercultural experiences, whether they were journals, e-mails, or letters. Only one participant provided a journal. Others either did not keep a journal as they traveled, did not have access to it any longer, or chose not to provide that source. Because of this, data collection from that source proved elusive; I therefore chose not to pursue the inclusion of participant journals in the data.

### **Validity and Ethical Considerations**

The question “Are the conclusions reached in this study valid?” needs to be addressed in the research design. Maxwell (2005) defines validity as referring to “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 106). Arguing that the idea of “objective truth” is not essential in the theory of validity in qualitative research, the researcher must still account for any credible alternative explanations and threats to explanations and conclusions. In order to maintain validity, Maxwell (2005) enumerated two broad threats: researcher bias and reactivity.

**Researcher bias.** Qualitative research acknowledges researchers approach data with beliefs and perceptions. Thus, the concern is “understanding how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study...and avoiding the negative consequences” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 106). Creswell (2007) asserted that clarifying bias from the outset aids the reader in understanding the researcher’s position when approaching the study, and in this clarification, “the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (p. 208). With this in mind, I was careful to address my own personal perspectives and potential prejudices in observer comments. Throughout those comments, I became aware that personal and professional goals influenced the way I approached the research question.

As a teacher, I know I have experienced language skill development, professional growth, and personal satisfaction during this trip. Anecdotally, I have heard many former participants refer to the trip as a transformative experience, as the reason they chose to major in Spanish or their motivation for pursuing the careers they did. I knew I was entering into this research project hoping to find evidence that affirmed my hunch and my experience that study

abroad is a transformative learning event. To guard against such bias influencing the data contributed by the participants, I frequently addressed the issue in observer comments and personal memos to separate my feelings and memories from those expressed by participants. For example, I have a strong memory of one of my participants during his sojourn sitting next to me on a bus and talking to me about all the social insights he was noticing. In my memory, that moment was pivotal in his expression of the awareness of the world. During the interview, he did not narrate that experience; in follow-up questions he appeared not to recall the event. My personal memo expressed my frustration that his political insights, so novel and sincere when expressed at age 15, and so pivotal in my view, were so easily forgotten. “Experiences are layered, and contribute to understanding and change regardless of our ability to remember them” (personal memo). My own memories may have influenced my perception of what I heard from participants, but line-by-line coding of text helped me remain grounded in the data and to minimize the influence of my own perceptions and memories.

I am keenly aware that my initial travel abroad experience transformed me and redirected my professional path. This experience was profound and personal, and it perhaps led to my interest in providing a similar experience to students and to my academic curiosity in researching this question. While my experience may have influenced my perspective, my observer comments and reflections demonstrated a conscientious effort to focus attention to what the data showed rather than any personal voice influencing my analysis.

I must acknowledge that I am not an objective researcher on this topic because I was the group leader that participated in the experience along with the student sojourners whom I later interviewed. My very presence in pre-trip meetings, during the trip, in post-trip meetings, and in personal contact after the trip influenced student experiences and recollections. In the parameters

of this study, it would be impossible to parse out which student recollections might have been different with a different group leader, or what data would emerge if participants interviewed with a researcher with whom they had no prior personal connection.

I acknowledge here that because of my position as teacher, group leader, and on-going personal connection to many of the study participants, I am in a unique position, and that this positionality potentially influenced the results. Many of those who participated in the study were people who sought continued contact with me after graduation, perhaps because of the value they placed on the experience; their subsequent experiences may not have been typical of the dozens more former sojourners who did not remain in contact. Those who agreed to participate in the study may have done so because they already perceived the trip had changed them in some way. Even though I am no longer connected professionally with any of the participants, and those participants were told that they would receive no compensation for their participation, it is not beyond imagination that former participants experienced a type of Hawthorne effect, or the idea that they tailored their responses because of their awareness of the research topic. Without the capacity to conduct a blind study to control for this effect, it is important to acknowledge its possibility. Therefore, while I trust former sojourners responded in sincerity to questions, I acknowledge their responses may have been affected by the very study in which they were participating. Additionally, those former sojourners whom I approached and invited but who declined to participate may have done so assuming they had nothing of significance to contribute and therefore chose not to be interviewed. Thus, perceptions that may have mitigated the perceived effects described here are perhaps absent because of the voluntary non-participation of those who perceived themselves as not significantly impacted by the trip.

**Validity tests.** Maxwell (2005) enumerated several strategies researchers use in order to eliminate threats to validity. One strategy I employed was “rich data.” To meet this standard, I transcribed the interviews myself and used these verbatim transcriptions to uncover themes.

A second strategy Maxwell (2005) identified was respondent validation. Once my first rough draft of my findings chapter was completed, I invited former sojourner participants to review and comment on the findings. I expressed that my goal in asking for their input was to make sure I had not in any way mischaracterized, misinterpreted, or misrepresented their voice or their experience. Two participants responded with clarifications and updates to their stories; their clarifications and additions are noted within the text where appropriate. Three others responded that the text accurately reflected what they had intended to convey.

Additionally, I employed triangulation of multiple sources of data in order to confirm what I understood participants to be expressing during the in-depth interview. Triangulation refers to the use of “a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112). To meet this standard, I selected participants representing a variety of trips over a ten-year span of immersion trips I had led. I interviewed these former participants as well as former staff members of the school we attended. Additionally, I had former sojourners bring photographic images they considered emblematic, and I transcribed their narrations of the images and their significance; I looked specifically for themes used in the narrations that echoed themes I had heard in the initial segments of the interviews.

**Ethical considerations and confidentiality.** I treated all participants under the guidelines of the University of St. Thomas’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participating in the study was voluntary, and participants were not compensated in any way. The study had minimal risks. To protect participant confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for each participant.

Some participants requested their own pseudonyms; for others I selected pseudonyms. I assured participants that I would not disclose their names, but I cautioned them that the details they provided might make them identifiable to people who participated in the trip with them or to people who knew them well. I kept a record of all names of participants and those to whom participants referred during their interviews and the pseudonyms I used for them. I recorded our conversations as voice memos on my iPod touch or on my iPhone, and then downloaded the memos to my laptop. I transcribed the interviews myself using ExpressScribe. Upon completion of the dissertation, I deleted the audio as well as the list of original names coupled with their pseudonyms.

### **Limitations**

High school students that choose to travel when they are between the ages of 14 and 18 are likely to be ready for cultural experimentation, willing to acquire new cultural patterns of behavior, and able to remain open minded about worldviews. Additionally, former study abroad participants who remained in contact with me, or who subsequently initiated contact after a period of time, perhaps maintained this personal relationship with me because of a shared interest in other cultures or the common experience of having traveled together. Because of this, the results of the study are not generalizable as descriptive of the experience of all participants who have been on this trip or on any trip similar to this. Neither can this study lead to a prescriptive formula for creating an effective transformative educational experience for all privileged students from suburban schools. Furthermore, the unique structure of the immersion experience cannot be extrapolated to explain other educational travel experiences.

**Conclusion**

Qualitative research gives the researcher the best opportunity to hear about participant experience, insight, and perception in their own words. In this study, participant perspective is crucial to understanding how young adults perceive their own educational experience during a month-long language and cultural immersion trip to Mexico. A phenomenological case study of Renovar Institute and the participants that studied there allowed me to begin to understand how students perceive the trip influenced their subsequent education, relationships, and professional trajectories.



### **Chapter Five: History and Educational Approach of Renovar Language Institute**

My connection with Renovar began in the 1999-2000 school year when my friend and colleague offered me the chance to lead a month-long immersion experience for high school credit with any district student who wanted to travel. She had begun the program a number of years before but was unable to travel that summer for personal reasons. Her first experience with Renovar was when, as a parent of a student in a Spanish immersion elementary school, she traveled with her son as a part of a family educational experience. She made arrangements with Renovar to design a program specifically for high school students. I was eager to volunteer, provided that I could bring my own two elementary school age sons along. I arranged for Renovar to provide a nanny who would care for and teach my sons while I was with the students. In the summer of 2000, I brought my sons and my first group of 14 high school students to study with Renovar. Since then, I have led the trip six more times with high school students, and once with adults.

The contents of this chapter are based primarily in the history given to me by Renovar's current director. The interview was conducted in Spanish; I subsequently transcribed and then translated the interview. The quotes that appear in this chapter, then, are my translations of Daniel's words.

#### ***History, Philosophy, and Growth of Renovar***

Cuernavaca hosts many students while they study Spanish in Mexico. Tripadvisor.com (2014) claimed, "Cuernavaca is the leading destination for Spanish language study in the Western Hemisphere." The same site continued by asserting "Cuernavaca is known for having the best Spanish immersion schools in Mexico. You will find some schools that have been in

business for 25 years or longer.” Renovar Language Institute traces its history to the origins of language study in the region.

In the 1960s, Jesuit priest and radical educator Ivan Illich founded the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca as a means to counter two forces that Illich perceived would contribute to cultural imperialism in Latin America: John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress and Pope John XXIII’s call for priests and nuns to help modernize the Latin American church. Valenzuela-Aguilera (2008) wrote that Illich “established CIDOC to divert the flow of missionaries to Latin America and to establish an intellectual center to develop alternatives for society” (16). One purpose of CIDOC was to provide Spanish language instruction for foreigners.

According to Renovar’s current director Daniel Martínez, the institute traces its heritage to CIDOC. In 1968, Daniel’s older brother Francisco decided to discontinue his studies at the seminary in Zacatecas. Returning to Cuernavaca, he began looking for work, and someone suggested that he apply at CIDOC, which was advertising for people to teach Spanish to foreigners. Francisco took their three-month training course and was hired as a language teacher. By 1970, CIDOC had grown and had upwards of eight hundred students. “It was a monster,” quipped Daniel.

Daniel reported that despite the school’s popularity, the working conditions for the teachers were not good; workers were paid little and were not given *seguro social*, which would provide medical assistance and a pension. Workers organized a strike, and a portion of the teachers, including Francisco, left to create another school.

Like CIDOC, this new school used the then cutting-edge language teaching methodology known as the Audiolingual Method. In this method largely based on behaviorism, language

learning is modeled through dialog which students repeat and practice to establish a correct language habit; accuracy in grammar and pronunciation is important (Lingualinks, 1999).

However, Francisco's involvement with this new school was short-lived. Because of interpersonal conflict among this group, Francisco decided to leave the cooperative and form his own language learning institute in 1973, and Renovar Institute was born. During the development of the school, Francisco brought in other teachers, including his younger brothers Mateo and Daniel, who also became intrigued with the idea of language instruction, and the school "really was turned a little into a family institution."

Unhappy with the philosophical underpinnings of the Audiolingual Method, Francisco investigated other language instruction methodologies, and he discovered a promising alternative in The Silent Way, a method created by Caleb Gattegno. In this method, language learning is motivated by discovery and centered on problem solving. Teacher involvement is minimal while learners produce as much language as possible; grammatical structures are learned inductively rather than taught explicitly (Bowen, no date.) Francisco liked this method because grammatical patterns were not used, and students did not have to memorize charts. Additionally, less importance was given to accurate pronunciation, the philosophy being that student pronunciation would improve as the student acquires more language. Renovar, Daniel reported, was the first language institute in Cuernavaca to use this method.

At first, according to Daniel, other schools criticized and even made fun of Renovar, but later, they began to ask for help in implementing the Silent Way, and Renovar began to offer professional training in the methodology. This training increased the school's profile and reputation, and Renovar began to grow, until it became perhaps the foremost institute of its kind

in Cuernavaca during the 1970s and 1980s. Daniel reported having up to five hundred students per summer at the pinnacle of its success.

Renovar also differed from other schools because it was the one that most emphasized the importance of family stays. “Ninety-eight percent of students, before Renovar, lived in hotels. We were the first that, little by little, began to push students...to live with a family” because by living with a family, a student comes know the culture as well as the language. The school also began to organize student excursions to different sites within Cuernavaca or to Mexico City, informally at first. Daniel reported being the first language institute to incorporate the use of excursions in its programs. Their model evolved to providing students with a pre-excursion orientation, in which students became familiar with the physical composition or the space, its historic and/or cultural context, and the vocabulary necessary to be able to understand and discuss important aspects of the experience. Then, students would travel with a staff member, who would further explain the site’s history, context, and significance. Thus, language instruction became the vehicle by which cultural aspects were shared.

“But we weren’t satisfied,” Daniel reported. During the 1970s and 80s, the school had the opportunity to bring various linguists and experts in language teaching methodologies to the school, including an expert in Total Physical Response (TPR). In TPR, teacher language is central to the classroom. Students react to the language by performing a variety of tasks in response to the teacher’s instructions, much like the game Simon Says. The approach seeks to lower the affective filter of the students so that students acquire the language through play (Shearon, no date).

Daniel recounted that the niece of Dr. Stephen Krashen came to study Spanish one summer at Renovar. “We didn’t know who she was. She came by chance.” A professor at the

University of Southern California, Dr. Stephen Krashen is an active researcher and prolific author in the field of language acquisition, bilingual education, and reading. Krashen's Theory of Language Acquisition, central to modern language methodologies, is based on five hypotheses, the first of which he titled the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). According to this hypothesis, language acquisition is a subconscious process that happens when one is in an environment in which language is abundant and accessible. Learning, on the other hand, is the result of a conscious process of examining rules and memorizing words and patterns.

When Daniel discovered a student at the school was the niece of the famous Dr. Krashen, he asked her to help him arrange an invitation to Krashen to give a professional conference in Cuernavaca. She agreed, and Daniel went to Los Angeles to arrange the training. This was a turning point for the school, because "we definitely became *Krashenistas*." In Krashen's theory, abundant comprehensible input, or language that is comprehensible to the student, is the most important, and Renovar began to develop materials with this in mind.

Today, Renovar, like many other language institutes in Cuernavaca, has suffered because of a variety of factors that have negatively impacted them. Daniel cited the H1N1 flu scare that caused a sharp drop in student travel to Mexico. Economic problems coupled with Mexico's recent negative publicity have further impacted student travel to Cuernavaca. At its peak, Cuernavaca had, "twenty or twenty-five language schools. Sadly, I have to say, I think this began to degenerate the question [of language philosophy] because many people thought that a school was very easy, that it meant a lot of money, because it was payment in dollars, and there got to be many programs with a horrible quality. This lowered Cuernavaca's prestige." Now, Daniel thinks there are only six or eight schools left open in Cuernavaca. Renovar is not among them; it does not currently operate in the same capacity. Renovar continues to accommodate individual

language students, but it does not currently serve groups of students. Daniel's current goal is to establish a vibrant on-line presence of the school. He is also currently working with postsecondary institutions in the U.S. to establish a teacher certification program in Cuernavaca.

### **Renovar's Work with Adolescents**

According to Daniel, in the 1970s and 80s, language schools in Cuernavaca drew the majority of their students from colleges and universities, especially those in the United States. "I think we were the first school, in 1978, that received various interested high school groups." The first high school group to study with Renovar, according to Daniel, was from a school that served troubled youth from Washington. After that, another group came from Texas, with a teacher that was committed to bringing the best students from across the state of Texas. "After that, we said, well, this is a marvelous market, and that was when we began to give more importance to high school."

Daniel reported that high school students, as one would guess, have different needs than adult learners. "You have to have very dynamic activities, that change constantly, so the young person doesn't get bored. Many times you have to offer activities that include the physical, like sports, or 'Let's go here,' 'We're going there,' because if not, the student, the youth, quickly loses attention, because that is the stage in which they are hyperactive." This applies linguistically, as well. Citing an idea of Krashen's theory, Daniel reported loving the idea "it is important to try to teach the student according to their likes and needs." Daniel reported that all students, regardless of individual interests, hobbies, and passions, have two interests in common: language and culture.

### **Recruitment of Student Participants**

As the trip coordinator, one of my responsibilities was marketing this trip to students and their parents. Promoting the experience in a way that attracted participants and convinced parents of potential benefits was accomplished through class announcements and presentations by me and by former participants, showing a student-produced video of the trip, distributing an informational brochure to interested students, and hosting an interest meeting for students and their parents.

Produced in fulfillment of one of the requirements when the trip was for credit, students in the 2000 cohort collaboratively created a short video portraying the experience and showing students learning, traveling, and interacting with their peers and their hosts. Students took turns keeping the video camera for a day and filmed whatever they chose at school, during activities, on excursions, and in their host family's home. Upon return to Minnesota, then, one student edited the film to create a promotional video, which I showed to students and families in subsequent years.

The following is an excerpt from the brochure promoting the experience (See Appendix E):

This immersion program will give students the chance to significantly improve their ability to communicate in Spanish as well as to enrich their understanding of modern and historic Mexican culture. Students will live with carefully chosen families so they will have continuous exposure to the language and culture while they are in Mexico.

Students will attend classes for at least 2-3 hours a day to improve their understanding of Spanish grammar and usage. They will have activities with their class in the afternoons and weekend day-trips out-of-town. They will have opportunities to join

with Mexican teenagers in activities like conversation sessions, cooking classes and sports activities. They will visit archeological sites, museums, markets, and resorts. Additionally, students will participate in a service project at a local orphanage. This program offers students a lot of fun with the chance to really practice the language.

Upon successful completion of the program, students will receive a summary of their performance (a grade) from [Renovar] Language Institute. This summary will include the number of hours of instruction and a summary of the skills addressed.

### **Experiences and Perceptions of the Renovar Staff Participants**

As part of the context of the student experiences, I wanted to understand the perceptions of the staff who worked at Renovar during our time in Mexico. In addition to Daniel, the director of Renovar, I interviewed three other staff members from Renovar: María, Daniel's wife and a teacher and host mother for students; Silvia, her sister, also a teacher and host mother; and Claudia, a teacher and curriculum director at Renovar. Questions posed to these participants were designed to elicit perceptions regarding pedagogy, practices, and the adolescents with whom they interacted. Because all of these staff members live in Cuernavaca, I conducted these interviews via Skype or by telephone. All these interviews were conducted in Spanish; I will report direct quotations in Spanish in italics along with my English translation.

In general, the data from the interviews with staff revealed an intentionality regarding a social pedagogy. An awareness of the social aspect of language learning became evident as staff participants described their experiences and perceptions.

**Convivencia.** Staff participants all described to varying degrees the concept of *convivencia* among staff and students. The denotation of the term is “co-living” or “co-experiencing,” but the implications are deeper. *Convivencia* connotes shared experiences, shared



living, and shared relationships. After realizing that the concept of *convivencia* was emerging as significant for staff members, I asked Daniel to e-mail me an explanation of the term. Defining *convivencia*, Daniel responded with this: “*Tener contacto constante con alguna persona, ya sea por razones personales o profesionales, participando de actividades profesionales y sociales que ayuda a conocer a esa persona de una manera profunda*”. In English: “To have constant contact with some person, whether it be for personal or professional reasons, participating in professional and social activities that help to know that person profoundly.” The term *convivencia* has no good direct translation in English, and I will therefore use the Spanish term when discussing this concept of mutual experience and profound interpersonal interaction.

María described this type of profound personal contact among students and staff at Renovar:

*Y era todos los jueves con todos los estudiantes algún café a convivir, y era muy bonito. Después, era el viernes, había una fiesta. El sábado, otra fiesta...Sí, había mucha convivencia con los estudiantes. Y aparte, también había muchas reuniones sociales en la escuela. Sí, eso era los viernes, al mediodía. Había mucha, mucha convivencia con ellos. Por eso, digo que llegó el momento en que ya no éramos tanto maestro y alumno. Éramos como una familia. Renovar era como una familia.*

And it was Thursdays with all the students in some café to be together, and it was very lovely. After, it was Friday, there was another party. Saturday, another party.... Yes, there was a lot of *convivencia* with the students. And, too, there were many social get-togethers in the school. That was Fridays at noon. There was a lot, a lot of *convivencia* with them. That's why I say the moment came that we were no longer so much teacher and student. We were like a family. Renovar was like a family.

María's recollections invoke a regularity in opportunities to have shared social experiences among students and staff, both in the form of parties and in informal but planned social experiences in some public space. These shared social experiences led to María's sense that the traditional teacher-student boundaries were diminished, and the familial relationship was a better descriptor of the educational relationship at the institute.

In addition to the events such as parties and social get-togethers, María applied the concept of *convivencia* within the context of classes as well:

*En Renovar, se daban clases de cocina. Entonces los estudiantes aprendieron a hacer comida Mexicana, y dentro de ese aprendizaje, había mucha convivencia, con el maestro que estaba impartiendo la clase de cocina, por alumnos, porque era una clase informal, donde el estudiante podía relajarse, podía divertirse, y aprender sobre todo.*

In Renovar, they gave cooking classes. So the students learned to make Mexican food, and within this learning, there was a lot of *convivencia*, with the teacher that was giving the cooking class, for the students because it was an informal class, where the student could relax, could have fun, and above all, learn.

In the context of an informal class, students were relaxed, and the concept of co-experiencing for the students as well as the teachers giving the class led to, in María's perception, a more profound learning experience.

Several of the staff reported being personally affected by this type of profound co-experiencing, and all three of the former teachers I interviewed reported being themselves affected by this type of cross-cultural contact. Claudia reflected, "*A nosotros, como, tal vez padres de familia, que decimos, de estudiantes, o profesores, de alguna manera, te abre un panorama. Te hace pensar de otra manera.*" "For us, maybe as parents of the family, let's say, of

the students, or as teachers, in some ways, it opens a panorama to you. It makes you think in another way.”

María reported

*Para mí la experiencia de haber trabajado en Renovar me abrió una visión al mundo muy grande. Al conocer a muchas personas de diferentes países, me abrió la mentalidad porque conocerles de muchas partes del mundo, pues, llegaban estudiantes de Japón, de Nepal, muchos de Estados Unidos, y muchos europeos, empecé a conocerlos y para mí, eso fue como viajar en el mundo aunque no lo hice físicamente.*

For me, the experience of having worked in Renovar opened a very large vision of the world. Meeting many people from different cultures opened my mind, because knowing students from many parts of the world, well, students came from Japan, from Nepal, many from the United States, and many Europeans, I began to get to know them, and for me, that was like traveling the world although I did not do so physically.

Sílvia echoed this appreciation of close relationships with people from abroad:

*Entonces, cuando yo entré a trabajar en Renovar, para mí, fue conocer otro mundo. Sí, para mí, fue un cambio muy radical. Pero me gustó muchísimo porque también el conocer tantas personas de diferentes culturas, diferentes costumbres, nacionalidades, y vas ensanchando tus amistades también. Tu círculo de amistades se va haciendo muy grande. Compartir experiencias con los estudiantes, verdad, que llega a haber una relación tan estrecha que ya los llegas a ver como a tu familia, también. Era algo muy, muy bonito para mí también.*

So, when I began to work at Renovar, for me, it was getting to know a different world.

Yeah, for me, it was a very radical change. But I like it so much because getting to know

so may people from different cultures, different customs, nationalities, you broaden your friendships also. Your circle of friendship gets very big. To share experiences with students, there gets to be such a close relationship with them you begin to see them as your family as well. That was something very, very lovely for me, too.

Thus, Claudia, María, and Sílvia all reflected that interacting with students from abroad, this connection with cultures beyond the immediate, opened for them a broader horizon, even though they had not experienced these cultures personally or independently.

**Family.** Staff participants described their experiences with students whom they hosted. Claudia described what the school hoped students would get out of the family stay, and what was expected of families:

*En la familia, también había comentarios muy buenos. Que en la estancia de la familia..., no era nada más el único objetivo sino ser aceptado, a ayudar, y siempre hubo mucha, una amistad muy bonita entre estudiantes y familia. Por lo general, sí, sí, lograba, la mayoría, el objetivo.*

In the family, as well, there were very good comments. That in the stay with the family, there was no other objective than to be accepted, to help, and there was always a very lovely friendship among students and family. In general, the majority achieved the objective.

The only objective for the family stay, according to Claudia, was for the student to feel accepted and for the family to help. A developing friendship between the family and the student is a common outcome of the family stay.

During her interview, María reinforced Claudia's description on a formed attachment between family and student. María served as a host mother for various students, including some

of the students with whom I have traveled. She was not a host mother, however, for any of my former students who participated in this study. María described the attachment she experienced with students as very close:

*Llega el momento en que cuando son personas que sí son adaptables, llega el momento en que sí, traspasa la línea de que somos dos desconocidos, ¿no? Que nos acabamos de conocer en una, dos semanas, o las semanas que estén, y realmente lo aceptas como parte de la familia. No es una persona más que llegó. No es una persona x....Para mí eran muy difíciles las despedidas también....Sí, a veces era muy difícil, muy difícil, especialmente que te encariñas con alguien que te duele realmente verlo irse.*

There comes a time that, when they really are adaptable, there comes a time when we cross the line that we are two strangers, right? That we have just met for one, two weeks, or however many weeks they are here, and you really accept that student as part of the family. They are not just people who came. It is not just “Person X”... For me, the good-byes also were very hard.... Yes, at times, it was very, very hard, especially when you care for someone that it really hurts to see them leave.

María, then, felt an attachment to those she hosted. Additionally, María used the concept of *convivencia* to describe her experiences with students in her home:

*Fue una muy bonita experiencia [tener estudiantes en casa] porque hay más convivencia. Esa cuestión de que estás comiendo y estás platicando, que le llamamos sobremesa en México, de la comida, quedarte un rato en la mesa, y platicar las experiencias, las vivencias, de tanto de los estudiantes como a nuestras de los mexicanos nos ayudan mucho a entender más la cultura de cada quien, ¿sí? Porque, la persona es de una manera o de otra, eso no lo puedes lograr más que cuando hay una conversación*

*estrecha, más íntima, que solo se puede dar en el esceno de la familia. Entonces, a mí se me hizo algo hermoso cuando tuve a mis estudiantates, tener esa clase de convivencia.*

It was a very lovely experience [to have students in our home] because there is more *convivencia*. That question of what you are eating, or what you are discussing, which we call *sobremesa* in Mexico, over the food, to stay awhile at the table, and to discuss experiences, life-lessons, as much for the students as for the Mexicans, helps us a lot to understand each other's culture, right? Because, a person is one way or another, and that [mutual understanding] you cannot achieve except when there is a very close conversation, more intimate, that you can only give in the setting of the family. So, it was something very beautiful for me when I had students, to have this type of *convivencia*.

María differentiated between what can be achieved in the classroom, and the more profound, close, intimate understanding that can be achieved in a family setting. Having experienced relationships with students as a teacher and as a host mother, María expressed that within the context of family, a student and a host can know each other at a level unattainable in a classroom, however informal and relaxed that classroom might be.

**Classes.** The social setting of the classes emerged as something significant among the staff. Claudia described the goal of getting students to trust their instructors:

*Tratábamos siempre de romper el hielo, porque era mejor que el estudiante tuviera confianza, y tenían libertad de preguntar o comunicarse, y a veces, eso, al estudiante adolescente, le costaba trabajo. No podía creer que un profesor quisiera comunicarse, o hubiera cierta confianza entre maestro y estudiante. Pero, no era difícil, pero en un principio, ellos no lo entendían. Pero, después de que nosotros cruzábamos o rompíamos*

*esa pared, realmente había una relación, una bonita relación, porque ellos veían que lo que queríamos realmente era ayudarlos.*

We always tried to break the ice, because it was better that the student had trust, and they had the freedom to ask and to express themselves, and at times, this, for the adolescent student, was a lot of work. They couldn't believe a teacher wanted to communicate with them, or that there was this mutual trust between the teacher and the student. But, it wasn't difficult, but at first, they didn't understand. But, after we crossed, or broke down that wall, truly there was a relationship, a lovely relationship, because they saw that what we really wanted was to help them.

Claudia described the importance of breaking the ice between students and teachers, and the initial distrust among students. Establishing trust in the classroom was the first goal necessary to achieve before a relationship could be established. And then, within the framework of that relationship, students would learn.

Similarly, María described the school atmosphere in the context of hospitality and making the student feel comfortable:

*Creo que los mexicanos somos muy hospitalarios. Cuando nosotros tenemos una visita, nos gusta hacerlo sentir que está en su casa. Que no se sienta incómodo. Queremos que se sienta lo más cómodo. Entonces, si alguien viene a mi casa, verdad, yo lo quiero tratar de la mejor manera. Cuando estábamos en Renovar, queríamos que ellos se sintieran como en su país, en su casa, en su escuela. Era muy, muy importante, nuestra relación con ellos...Las clases eran más relajadas, donde hacíamos que el estudiante se sintiera tranquilo, para que entonces pudiera aprender. Porque muchas veces cuando hay mucha distancia entre alumno y maestro, está todo más ceremonioso, o más frío, pero más*

*distante. Entonces no había esto. Era más para que el alumno se sintiera cómodo, y entonces pudiera aprender más.*

I think that we Mexicans are very hospitable. When we have a visit, we want him to feel at home. That he not feel uncomfortable. We want him to feel the most comfortable possible. So, if someone comes to my house, truly, I treat him in the best way possible. When we were at Renovar, we wanted them to feel as if they were in their own country, at home, in their school. Our relationship with them was very, very important... The classes were more relaxed, where we made the student feel calm, so that then, he would be able to learn. Because many times when there is a lot of distance between the student and the teacher, everything is more ceremonious, or colder, but more distant. So there was none of that. It was mostly so the student felt comfortable and then able to learn more.

Interviews with staff, then, showed that the social environment characterized their perception of the strength of the program. Deliberately constructed, the pedagogy of personal connection with students emerged as paramount in the reflections of the staff. The concept of *convivencia*, or deliberate, profound co-experiential learning impacted staff; staff descriptions of homestays and classes reflect this value of shared experience.

## **Conclusion**

During the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>, Cuernavaca enjoyed international fame as a haven for Spanish language learners from abroad. Renovar Language Institute was among the first language schools in Cuernavaca, and, according to its current director, was among the vanguard in linguistic pedagogy, being among the first to conceive of language learning as a social process centered on experiential learning.



Interviews with former staff members at Renovar reflected an awareness and deliberate implementation of a social pedagogy. The concept of *convivencia*, which implies shared practices designed to achieve a mutual profound understanding, emerged as significant in the construction of the classroom environment, the school atmosphere, and the expectations of the host families.

## **Chapter Six: Findings Regarding Student Perceptions Prior to and During the Trip**

Discussing the role of memory in students' perceptions of their postsecondary study abroad experience, Balken (1996) wrote, "The memory of educational episodes [has] a lasting impact on one's life. This research is especially germane to study abroad, an experience that students cite over and over again as 'life changing'" (p. 2). Memory of this educational episode during their high school years is central in understanding and analyzing the perceptions of adults as they reflect on their adolescence. Was this, in their perceptions, a "life-changing" educational experience?

In order to learn how former student travelers perceive the effects of this particular immersion abroad experience, I conducted in-depth interviews with twelve young adults who had participated in the immersion experience in Mexico while they were adolescents. During the interview, I asked former sojourners about their attitudes and experiences during four general time frames in relation to the trip: before the trip, during the trip, immediately after the trip, and long-term. Then, I asked participants to describe the images in five photographs they had selected as emblematic of the trip. Five of the eight participants agreed to share and describe photos. Two of the participants reported no access to their pictures because they were living outside the state and their photos were stored with their families. One participant chose not to bring photos to the interview. I will report the findings using the same general time frames. In this chapter, I address the perceptions students reported of their experiences prior to the trip and during the trip itself.

### **Student Participant Perceptions: Prior to the Trip**

Dewey (1938) exhorted educators to design quality experiences that are “more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences” (p. 27). Designing an enjoyable experience that students would desire to repeat is an admirable goal, and as the leader of an adolescent trip abroad, I certainly hoped the participants would have an enjoyable experience. The idea that students would have fun while learning was part of the vision expressed to students in the recruitment literature: “This program offers students a lot of fun with the chance to really practice the language” (See Appendix E).

During the first segment of former sojourner interviews, I asked participants what they remembered about their attitudes and perceptions before going on the trip. Student recollection of their experiences before the trip to Cuernavaca and their attitudes about the trip before they left varied. In general, participant responses regarding the time leading up to the trip revolved around 1) reasons for going, 2) acquiring familial permission and support, 3) imagining the social, and 4) imagining Mexico.

**Reasons for going.** Why would any teenager choose to leave the safety and security of their home and their peer groups for a month? As a Spanish teacher, I know experience abroad is helpful in language development. But what was the draw for adolescents? Discovering the motivation for student travel interested me. Participants reported recalling wanting to have an interesting experience and to improve their language. They also reported some previous international or intercultural experience as influencing their desire to travel or study abroad.

Some participants recalled feeling like the trip was an interesting opportunity. Traveling or studying abroad was a way to gain experience. “It was something I had never done before, and I was a typical, like, high school over-achiever.... I enjoyed learning the language and wanted to

learn it better and thought it would be a good opportunity” (Sonya). “I just think it sounded like a really neat opportunity. I’d never left the country, and I didn’t have a lot of international experience at all” (Jill). However, the conception of the experience as a way to make themselves more competitive for college applications or eventual professional opportunities did not emerge as significant. Despite what I had expected to hear based on the review of the literature, no one reported anything about the trip looking good on a resume. Thus, acquiring experience as a way to differentiate themselves from any potential college or professional competitors did not emerge as a significant factor in the adolescent decision, at least as former participants recalled.

Language acquisition was the expressed purpose of the trip. The ability to learn a language in its cultural context may motivate many to study abroad, but fewer than half of the participants in this study described actually improving in the language as a motivation for studying abroad. “I was hoping to actually use my Spanish for once, and I was hoping to come back feeling somewhat confident in it” (Philip). Katrina signed up to go to Mexico because she wanted “to learn as much Spanish as possible in as short of a time.” Sonya reported, “I wanted to learn the language well, and I wanted to come back speaking it quite a bit better.” Other participants did not cite language improvement as a motivation for going on the trip. Language acquisition, the expressed purpose of the trip, did not emerge as the significant draw for student participation.

Previous experience emerged as the single most common factor participants cited for wanting to travel to Mexico for a month on a school trip. Only Jill and James reported not having any type of previous experience traveling abroad or any previous intercultural experience as a factor affecting their decision to travel.

Sonya did not report having traveled before, but she reported an important personal connection she had made with a Spanish-speaking child when she worked as a volunteer among migrant farm workers in northern Minnesota.

I was heavily involved in the kids' camps, and so there was one little boy. I think he was around four years old and his name was Francisco, and we just had a click, but he was at a young enough age that he hadn't yet gone to kindergarten, and begun to learn English like some of the older kids already had. And so he really didn't speak any English, and at that time, I didn't speak any Spanish other than what we got in the one quarter of 8<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish, and so we tried to communicate, and couldn't really, but had a special bond, and it made me want to learn Spanish, because I wanted to be able to talk with him, because the twelve words that I could say and the twelve words that he could say in each other's language were enough to help us establish just a special bond and special relationship, and I wanted to increase my ability to do that more (Sonya).

Sonya was one of the three students that reported that language acquisition was a specific reason for her interest in the month-long study abroad experience. This personal connection with a child with whom she could not communicate but with whom she bonded left her craving a more profound ability to communicate and thus connect on a personal level through Spanish. This desire drove her motivation to study abroad.

All the other study participants reported having been abroad previously, often in the context of a family trip for profession or pleasure. Katrina was the only one to report having previously been on an educational journey abroad. Katrina's "first" second language was German, and she had previously traveled with an educational tour to Germany. She differentiated

this trip in her description, though, by describing that in Germany, "...we were traveling around, so it was a completely different experience to get to know a family [in Mexico]."

William described wanting to go to Mexico because he had lived abroad when he was in early elementary school: "I always wanted to go to Mexico, and I always wanted to do a study abroad, because we had lived abroad. My family had lived abroad when I was in first grade."

Lucy reported changing the language she studied from French to Spanish because of a week-long mission trip she had taken at age 15: "I had a new found passion for Latin America....And then you showed us the video of the other students [who had gone the year before] and I knew I had to go." Mali reported having traveled to Japan as a child when her grandfather worked there.

Philip reported previous family trips to Mexico, but he differentiated between the Mexico he had experienced with the Mexico he anticipated: "I'd been to Mexico before, but only in resorts, and to actually go to Mexico...seemed really cool."

For many participants, then, the desire to travel or study abroad was predicated by some sort of previous international, or at least intercultural, experience. Although this was not the entire motivation, it proved to be a common thread among most participants when they described their reasons for deciding to travel. Despite what I as a language educator wanted to hear, student motivation for study abroad was only partially attributed to language acquisition. Only three of the eight students referred at all to language development when they recalled wanting to go. Statements about the utilitarian aspect of an immersion abroad experience also did not emerge as a common theme. Only two participants described this summer experience as a potential unique or interesting opportunity.

**Acquiring familial permission and support.** Unique to adolescent travelers is this: they are old enough to travel without their parents as long as they are supervised by a responsible

adult, but because they are under 18, they still need the approval of their parents to travel abroad. Many students recounted approaching their parents with the opportunity to travel abroad with differing levels of anxiety or trepidation. Singular among the experiences was Mali, who described her experience in this way:

Mali: I don't even remember having to convince [my mom]. I brought it up. I asked my mom, or somebody about it, and she must have contacted my dad's side of the family, because my great-grandma...was a world traveler, and she had a lot of money, and she had been literally everywhere....She was 100% behind me going to Mexico, and they paid for the whole thing,...which was completely unbelievable to me, because honestly, a person like me shouldn't have been able to travel abroad, at that age, or any time, when I think about it.

Nora: What do you mean, a person like you?

Mali: A person like me meaning, like somebody, you know, when they talk about quote un-quote "at-risk youth," which I hate that term, but that's what I was, you know. Not stable.

Mali described herself as having "lucked out" because she had extended family that supported the trip both personally and financially, but she differentiated herself from others with whom she identified as "at-risk" because of this financial and personal support. In her eyes, a youth with what she later described as a history of homelessness should not have been able to partake in an opportunity like this. Mali was the only participant to describe herself as an "at-risk youth," but she benefited from the experience of a great-grandmother, who valued travel and who was in a position to financially support Mali's education. Even so, Mali reflected that her family's support of this opportunity might also have been because it would keep her occupied for

most of a summer so she would not be their problem. “My mom really didn’t care that I was going to Mexico....Maybe a person like me would travel around. But not with a school. I’d just randomly run away one day to Mexico.”

The experience of a significant person in Mali’s life led to Mali’s being able to take advantage of an opportunity to study abroad in high school. Similarly, William benefited from the experience of his parents. He reported his parents approved of the trip because they “just wanted me to get a more global perspective. My parents had traveled a lot. My dad was in the Navy,... and then my mom did a lot of studying abroad when she was an undergrad, and my parents actually met abroad.”

The experience of parents or extended family, then, contributed to adolescents’ abilities and opportunities to study abroad while still in high school. Also significant in the data was the perceived educational value of a trip like this. Earlier, I discussed the idea that “globalizing education” was a buzzword contributing to the increase in postsecondary study abroad opportunities and programs. Consistent with that trend, several participants reported the assumed educational value of study abroad. As already quoted above, William’s parents wanted him to get a “more global perspective.” Echoing William’s assertion that the trip would be of educational value, James believed his parents let him go because the trip “...would probably help me a lot in my education...They really care a lot about my education.” Sonya reported that her mother “was particularly interested in that idea of getting to know the world and expanding one’s horizons.”

Not all students had family so eager to support them. One mother questioned the value of a study abroad experience: Katrina reported, “I actually remember having a fight with my mother about whether or not I should go. She didn’t want me to go because she thought it was a waste of money.” Katrina won the argument, and paid for the experience herself. Philip, in contrast to



Katrina's mother, saw the experience as a very good value. He reported having been planning to travel abroad with a different high school group to Puerto Rico, and then realized he could spend a month in Mexico for about the same price as a week in Puerto Rico, and, because he had been planning to finance the trip himself, posed the change to his parents. "I screwed up my courage to do it, thought about it for a long time, and then, made my case....They were completely OK with it."

Other parents were reluctant at first but relented. Lucy reported working on her parents for a long period of time "It took literally six months to convince them to let me go, and maybe [they let me] because I just kept pushing." Sonya conveyed that her parents were acquaintances with those of Lucy, and "her parents knew that my parents were supportive of me going, and so they became supportive of her going, and that reinforced the support from my parents, and so they were like, OK, so they have each other to go down and be there together, then, that's good."

Participant recollection of reasons parent support, then, varied from permission only to reluctant but willing acceptance to full financial and personal support. None of the participants reported their parents pressuring them into taking advantage of the opportunity, nor did any of the participants report their parents citing knowledge of Spanish as an important skill for their futures, and in fact, Katrina reported her mother "didn't think Spanish was worthwhile."

Thus, most participants reported parents' seeing the opportunity to travel abroad as good experience, or a way to gain a global perspective. No participant reported a parent's advocating for the trip as a way to improve language skills or as a way to connect with people who do not speak English. The educational aspect of the trip as a means to gain international experience appeared to eclipse the need for proficiency in a second language.

**Imagining the social.** Former participants recalled imagining the social context in which they would be traveling, both the group that would be going and the social connections they would be making in Mexico. None of the participants reported having any strong personal connections with anyone in the group prior to traveling with the group.

William's most significant pre-trip concern revolved around the social: "The only fear I had was just getting rejection. Not getting talked to at all." Similarly, Katrina disclosed, "I wasn't very good at making friends, so I was nervous about that." Lucy worried about "not getting along with my fam..., my host family." Philip remembered wondering if he was going to get along with the roommate he was assigned to live with.

Thus, while several participants remembered initially feeling concerned about the social context of the trip, all of those participants placed their anticipation within the context of their anticipated immediate social contexts: the group and the host family. No participant expressed imagining a significant long-term social connection with anyone from the group or with anyone from the host culture. Nor did they express any foreboding about feeling out-of-place because of their physical appearance or language abilities.

**Imagining Mexico.** When participants were asked about what they recalled about their attitudes and expectations leading up to the trip, many reported preconceptions about Mexico. Several used the term *stereotypes*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students who anticipated traveling to Mexico reported having preconceptions about what they would see and experience while there. In some cases, students reported having based those pre-trip expectations on what they had seen or heard in media.

Having already been to Mexico as part of a faith-based service trip, Lucy had an existing frame of reference about Mexican life and culture, yet she still reported media as having

influenced her perception: “I’d seen several movies that romanticized the Mexican culture, and I wanted to experience it first hand.” Mali’s perception of Mexico was heavily influenced by pop culture: “I loved that song, ‘If you like piña coladas, getting caught in the rain.’ I think I thought...I thought about the beach. I thought about piña coladas...I don’t know what I thought about Mexicans. I don’t think I had any idea.”

Many participants, however, reported a less-than-romanticized preconception of Mexico. Several reported concerns about security. Philip had reported traveling to Mexico previously, but he differentiated between the ocean-side resorts he had visited from the Mexican interior: “I’d been to Mexico before, but only in resorts, and to actually go to Mexico, and I always loved going to Mexico, seemed really cool.” The reality of what he had previously experienced was, in his view, different from what he would experience on this trip. In anticipation of this trip, Philip reported, “I worried about whether I was going to be safe.” Other participants recalled security concerns as well. Lucy reported, “I was a little worried about my safety.” Similarly, “I was nervous about...being in a country where it is a little bit more dangerous” (Jill). William’s reported preconceptions were the most negative: “I thought it was going to be a violent-filled place, just kind of full of poverty. Just kind of like a no-man’s land...” The anticipated security concerns reflected a perception many participants recalled: Mexico was a dangerous place.

When asked directly, Jill did not recall having any preconceptions about Mexico, but in the context of a different question, Jill referred to her first impressions of Mexico and compared them to what she had expected:

Jill: It felt like home. There didn’t seem to be a lot of violence, and these other stereotypical things that you think about....

Nora: You talked a little bit about that you didn't experience the stereotype. What kind of stereotypes are you talking about?

Jill: I'm just thinking what I've seen in movies and things like that. You know, being very dirty, and being, I don't know how to describe it. I just thought it would be very different from home, and it wasn't. I mean, the family welcomed me, and it felt comfortable. I wasn't afraid to be there.

When asked directly, Jill did not initially report having negative stereotypes of Mexico prior to travel. But in the context of her first impressions, Jill revealed she had perceived Mexico as dirty and violent, primarily because of what she had seen in the media.

Speaking in broad terms, Sonya reported not knowing what exactly to expect, but she remembered having a deficit lens, or having the perception that she was privileged whereas those from other countries were lacking:

I think at that time in my life the mind set that I had been exposed to both through things like church activities and...just the general vibe of the culture that I lived in, was to look at individuals from quote unquote "developing nations" as somehow in need of something. (Sonya)

Notably, Sonya was a young adult at the time of the interview, and the perception she held of herself as an adolescent is filtered through a lens of experience and time. I found it interesting, though, that, when she was reflecting about the perceptions of her adolescent self, she was able to articulate a having had a latent sense of cultural superiority compared with individuals from developing nations.

Former student preconceptions about Mexico, then, were largely based on two disparate factors: a romanticized Mexico based on movies and music, and a Mexico filled with violence.

The positive preconceptions helped motivate some participants to pursue the trip, while the negative preconceptions were not strong enough to prevent others from participating. While two participants had been to Mexico before, one of those viewed two disparate perspectives of the country: one experienced in the resorts frequented by tourists, and one he anticipated experiencing in the interior.

### **Student Participant Perceptions: The Trip Itself**

As part of the interview process, I asked students to recall the trip itself. In doing so, I was attempting to elicit their memories, believing that what students most remembered reflected what they most valued. What did they remember? What stood out to them?

Philip, Katrina, and Lucy all expressed memories of feeling initially overwhelmed with the experience. James recalled his first impression was at the airport upon his arrival: “Everyone spoke Spanish!” An image that emerged through the interviews was that of a student as a sponge, taking it all in. Lucy reminisced, “My eyes were big, and I was taking it all in, inside those first few moments. I was just so excited.” Later, she described, “I was just a sponge. I was so thrilled to be there. When I was fifteen and went to Mexico I knew I belonged there.... It felt like home. So going back at seventeen was just a reiteration of OK, this is where I need to be.” James described going to Mass: “It was just, sitting there, and really comprehending what the messages they were trying to bring through....And just sitting down and soaking it all in.”

James also described Mexico as feeling like home: “When you’re in one place for so long, you just want to stay there longer, because it just feels like home.” Philip told me, “Up until that point in my life, it was the best month I’d ever had. It was the best month of my life.” Participant recollections about the trip varied, but those recollections generally involved the social and the physical environments.

**Social environments and activities.** Students that traveled with me primarily circulated among three distinct social groups while in Mexico: the group of peers with which they traveled, the staff and teachers at the school, and their host families. Language acquisition was the primary purpose of the trip, so I anticipated participants' reflections about school. While students narrated some school experiences, those emerged as less significant in their recollection as other experiences. Memories of the host families, and their impact on the experience and subsequent experience of the students, proved the most significant in the data.

**School environment.** Students spent approximately 20 hours each week in academic classes, and another 10-20 hours in activities with the staff and faculty at Renovar. However, almost no one commented about the academic program in general or the staff in particular. Only one participant discussed the teachers or staff in terms of academics. James described appreciating what the staff did for the students: "They really were there to push us; they really opened themselves to us. They really opened their culture to us....In Mexico, I just felt welcomed."

The one interesting exception to this was that four of the six participants in the three earliest trips recalled one individual: Dolores. Dolores was a woman that ran a snack bar at Renovar during the years that the three earliest sets of study participants traveled; she was no longer at the school for my more recent trips. With a two-burner hotplate and a refrigerator, Dolores provided the students with soft drinks, coffee, and snacks during their ten-minute breaks. During the one 20-minute break between classes in the morning, Dolores fixed snacks like *sopes*, *sincronizadas*, *molletes*, or *bocados*. Lucy remembered Dolores making "those amazing *sopes*." Jill remembered "the little lady who would make you whatever. *Sopes*." She then lamented, "I have not had a good *sope* in ten years!" William confessed, "I don't remember anything about

the class. The only thing I actually remember about Renovar was this woman named Dolores, who made *sopes*, and they were my favorite food, and all they were was just a piece of bread with refried beans and sour cream and tomatoes on top of it.”

Philip chose a photograph of Dolores as one of his five photographs emblematic of the trip:

[Dolores] was the woman who had, you can't really see from this photo, but it was a little alcove or a little hole in the wall within the school grounds on the main courtyard, where she would cook up *sopes* and all sorts of food. She was kind of like our one-woman cafeteria of sorts. And the reason I included her is she was awesome. As soon as you met her, she became, she was like your favorite aunt. She was just this very solid, very familiar, very, very warm and welcoming presence at the school in Mexico, which was great because, you're going through what's for you, when you're going there for your first time, especially such a chaotic and transitional experience, and then you meet this woman who just instantly makes you feel at ease, and you just love being around her, and she has amazing food, and so she was just a very comforting part of that experience, and made a lot of that turmoil you were going through a lot easier a lot more interesting because you weren't quite so overwhelmed. Plus, she saved you when your housemaid served broiled pig skins for breakfast and you couldn't eat it.

Classroom memories, then, did not emerge as significant as participants recalled their experiences. Not one of the study participants reported memories of their specific teachers or tour guides from their experiences at Renovar in any classroom setting. William spoke of the staff in general terms. However, four of the six participants who had been on trips whose groups

had contact with Dolores mentioned her and her food among their specific recollections about Renovar.

*Family.* In studying post-secondary students who had traveled abroad, both Spenader (2011) and Stitsworth (1987) cited a homestay as a significant factor in the learning experience. Angulo (2008) found that “living with a host family is correlated with enacting certain behaviors, which are then correlated with identification with the host country after 12 weeks abroad” (p.75). Months after the experience, students who had lived with a host family maintained an affinity with their host culture. This extended identification was echoed among many of my study participants; perhaps the one social connection that participants recalled most vividly and nostalgically was the host family.

Jill described her first impression of Mexico “was that things were a lot like they were in the U.S. Especially with the family. The family I was with was just very caring.” James reflected, “My family was very, very caring....They made us feel very, very welcomed.” Mali remembered admiring her Mexican host mother because she was “a very strong woman...She seemed to call the shots.” William described his frustration with his lack of ability to communicate when he first arrived in Mexico. William and Philip were roommates; Philip was at a more advanced level in Spanish than William. William described that first night:

We were sitting around the dinner table the first night, and they were trying to have a conversation with me, and I was with Philip, and how Philip had just dominated the conversation, and I didn't actually get anything in, and that made me feel uncomfortable, because they kind of stopped paying attention to me that entire night. It was kind of a weird thing because I was living in somebody's house, and they didn't really know who I was.



Philip's and William's family had a housekeeper/cook, Juanita, who lived with and took care of the family. Juanita also had a young daughter that stayed with the family as well. Philip recalled how having a servant in the house made him feel:

It was also strange to be served. That was a little challenging for me, because, that doesn't happen where I'm from. And in my community and in my family, to have a house servant, and it was also particularly jarring, I think, because it was right at the point where I was going to step out and start taking care of myself, and all of a sudden I had a woman who took way more care of me than my mom did. You know, making my bed, juicing all my food. It was interesting that I felt really uncomfortable with it because I wasn't sure, like it just felt kind of wrong and weird to have somebody at home doing things for you. And then, to see that she was raising her daughter in that situation, too, took a lot of processing for me.

Also regarding Juanita, Philip commented on the way the host family dynamic changed when the host parents were or were not home:

[Juanita] was clearly in charge of the house [when the parents were gone]...She was much more comfortable and relaxed around us and friendly to us when the parents weren't home....Celia, her daughter, was pretty comfortable in the house when the parents weren't home, and so I was a lot more comfortable too, because everyone was more at ease. And then when the parents would show up, Juanita would disappear in the kitchen, and Celia would disappear in their bedroom, and all of a sudden, the house became a lot less welcoming.

Philip's memory of the distinctly different dynamic in the house, coupled with his initial reaction to being served, indicated an awareness of and discomfort with differences in social status. He

was more comfortable when the dynamic was casual; the parents' presence in the house led to a formality that Philip described as "very distant."

Lucy and Sonya were roommates while they were in Mexico. Sonya described their host family as "incredibly friendly" and "warm and welcoming." Lucy said, "my host mom was like my real mom, and she just took me in and loved me well." She also said that one of her host brothers "would tell jokes and play around with us, so very family oriented, and took really good care of us." She recalled, "I really nested with my Mexican family." As one of the photos emblematic of the trip, Lucy chose a picture of her with Sonya and their host brothers. "We just grew so close so fast, and I think for all of us it was a very significant combination of students and host family. And it felt so good to belong to a family and have brothers....To be in that family setting and to be so welcomed and accepted and become part of the family."

Lucy narrated an incident in which she and Sonya learned that socially accepted behaviors were different, at least with their Mexican host brothers. Their brothers had taken them out, and during the evening Sonya and Lucy had talked with other young men. Lucy described, "There was a lot of jealousy, and propriety over going out with us....We ended up getting in a big fight with our brother about it, and he didn't talk to us the whole next day....We're like Whoa! That's not how we work!" The mother in the host family, then, acted in a way consistent with Lucy's and Sonya's preconceptions of what a mother should be: warm, welcoming, and loving. In contrast, the brothers acted differently from what Lucy and Sonya perceived as typical. Lucy recalls balking at the brothers' jealous and possessive behavior when they were all out together, which led to a day of their not speaking to one another.

***Following rules, or not.*** Several participants reported some sort of rule-breaking behavior while they were in Mexico. Because students were either still in high school or recent

high school graduates when they traveled, they were told they were expected to follow certain rules. They could not drive a vehicle. They could not go out without a chaperone: a responsible adult from their host family, a staff member from the school, or me. They were told that, even though alcohol might be easier to acquire in Mexico, they were not under any circumstances allowed to drink alcoholic beverages. They were told that these behaviors could be grounds for sending them home at their parents' expense.

Regardless, several participants, sometimes sheepishly even after ten years, confessed to some sort of rule-breaking behavior. Katrina confessed that her family taught her to drive a stick shift. "That's where I learned the work for brakes. I didn't know what they were yelling at me until I almost hit a bus." During my first trip with students to Mexico, Jill and three other students on the trip took a bus to a nearby town for the afternoon, just for fun. I vividly remember it, because going out without a chaperone was prohibited, and was possible grounds for sending them home. I remember being both livid that they would take such a risk, and proud that they felt safe and confident enough to travel independently. During the interview, Jill recalled the experience as well. She remembered at the time, "We thought nothing of it, and we found out later it was a very big deal! But, our defense was that [our host mother] told us to do it, and we went." Jill also reported that she and others had violated the rules by going out drinking on more than one occasion.

Lucy reported "There was a flexibility with adhering to expectations....I've come to realize this....We felt so at home, that perhaps we should have been more flexible or more, I hope we were respectful of their tolerances and things like that. We may have taken things for granted." In explaining this, Lucy articulated that she knew I, and the program, had high expectations for their adhering to the policies of the program, but that her Mexican hosts were

more flexible, and she admitted she had taken advantage of that flexibility while she was traveling.

Sonya discussed going out dancing with Lucy and her host brothers: “We were with a whole group of friends, doing a Conga line, and that was an Aha moment in terms of really feeling attuned to new friendships in a new place, and that was a special moment that I can envision clearly.”

Philip celebrated his eighteenth birthday while he was in Mexico. Unbeknownst to me at the time, a group of adults from the school decided to take him out to celebrate. For several nights in a row, they picked him up and took him out clubbing. Philip described going out with this group of Mexican friends:

I didn't feel comfortable walking around at night by myself. Very clearly blonde hair, curly blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin, very clearly American. And my Spanish was still really bad. I could understand the other students, who were also learning Spanish, but I couldn't really understand many of the Mexicans because they spoke way too fast. And so, going in that group, I was really able to explore a lot more of Mexico. A lot more of Cuernavaca, I should say. Which was really, really fun, and gave me some more confidence to go out on my own a little bit after that.

Although going out clubbing was against the rules of the program, Philip described it as something that he enjoyed and that gave him confidence subsequently to explore independently. He continued the story, talking about the family's housekeeper and cook, and how she cared for him during this time: “[She] started putting a pitcher of water out by my bed, with Advil. It was a week of drinking. And it was very fun. And I learned what my first hangover was, which was a lot less fun.”

**Physical environments and activities.** The physical environments, what they represented for participants, and how participants perceived the physical space represented cultural values, emerged as important in the data.

Several participants associated their first impressions with Mexico with the physical or natural environment. “I remember being overwhelmed by all the flowers, all the orange and bright pink, fuchsia flowers lining the streets and just hanging over verdantly from the houses, and thinking how beautiful is this place” (Sonya). “You know the buildings were all brightly colored. And I loved that. I loved the color. And I loved how vivid everything was. And in the morning it would always smell really nice because it just rained. And at night it was always warm” (Mali). Lucy recalled, “I remember stepping on to the brick street. It was red brick. I remember seeing lots of big green plants right out there, and it was sort of late afternoon. And I remember... being in awe of, Oh my gosh, I’m in Mexico, and here we are!”

**Home.** Lucy recalled being pleasantly surprised when she first arrived at her host family’s home. “I remember the house was much nicer than I expected. I guess that was a surprise. I’m so used to it now that it’s normal, but it was clean and nice and pretty and big.” A memory Sonya described reflects that her concept of what a house is physically and structurally was broadened while she was in Mexico. She recalled a first impression regarding the home in which she stayed.

There was no yard. There was just the *portón*, and the parking area inside rather than having any type of garden or patio or yard, which now I realized is how most homes in Latin America are, not having a green lawn, but I remember that being interesting to me.

Some participants commented on the proximal juxtaposition of wealth and poverty. Mali reported that her host family in Mexico appeared wealthy, but very close to them lived others that appeared very poor:

We had a pool....We could go up on the roof and lay out in the sun, but then right close by, you have people living in shacks, like literally on the same street, and I think that was probably the biggest culture shock, was just seeing the huge gap between the poor and the wealthy.

Similarly, Philip recalled being surprised at this juxtaposition: “The fact that you could have rich and poor, side by side, very, very closely, whereas in the U.S. it’s very, very separated, typically, suburbs, exurbs, vs. rural, or I’m sorry, urban.”

***Food and meals.*** Meals and food are physical, concrete nouns, and for that reason I have included these data in a subsection regarding participant recollections of the physical environments and activities of the trip. However, the connection between the physical act of eating and the social aspect of mealtimes and shared dining experiences also place this squarely in the realm of social environments.

Many participants recalled experiences about food. Earlier, I reported various students’ recollections of Dolores, her food stand at the school, and particularly the *sopes* she made to order. Similarly, many student participants recalled food or meals as a significant memory.

Jill used food as a way to differentiate the Cuernavaca trip from subsequent trips to Mexico she took:

When I went back for a study abroad in 2003, I lived with a family that was very European, and all of the food that they cooked was very European. It wasn’t like, *frijoles*, *masa*, and things like that. And I kind of missed that. I was like, oh, I want my

*huaraches*, or something like that. So that's something I really loved about this trip, is that it was....It felt more authentically Mexican than some of the other times I've been back.

This idea that, at least for Jill, one Mexican experience felt more "authentically Mexican" than another Mexican experience reflected Philip's perception that his Mexican resort experience was different from and less authentic than the experience in Cuernavaca. European foods and resort vacations did not represent Mexico to these two individuals when they were adolescents.

Experiencing different foods and different food-related customs became one way students connected with Mexico. Katrina recalled an incident that to her signified the value her Mexican host family placed on togetherness during meals.

I think that once I stayed late to talk with my teacher, or something. I don't know why I stayed late at school, but when I came home, my family, they had people over, and they were all waiting for me to get home before they ate, which I found really sad, because I was two hours late.

Katrina found it unusual that her host family waited for her before they ate, and her tardiness and their waiting caused her to feel sad. Her prior experience had not prepared her to understand the possible consequences of being late for a meal.

James recalled an excursion to the *mercado*. "One of the things they told us to do was to look at the different fruits and try and memorize all the different ones....It was hard because there were just so much there!" During this excursion, our guide pointed out that some vendors were selling insects, which were a common snack for people from the region his mother had come from. In the wikispace for this day, I wrote, "Some [students] were more brave than others, and tried a *jumil* that Felipe bought. A *jumil* is a little live bug that is about a centimeter in

length. Most students agreed it tasted like cinnamon. Some appreciated it more than others!” Accompanying the narrative were various pictures of students sampling the insect. One of those pictures was of James, who recalled the incident during his interview: “We ate insects at one point.” Perhaps recalling strange experiences with food, James recounted one specific memory that was disconcerting for him:

I remember one time, we came in, and she said [our mother] was going to make us fish, and I was like, oh great, she’s gonna make like dish of fish, like cut it up, and then, five minutes later, we have this plate coming out. There’s a fish on there. Literally. No, like, the skin was still on there. You could see the eyes. And I was like, OK.

Fish, with the head still attached, the eyes still open, and the scales still on, is hardly a common experience among U.S. adolescents. For James, the experience was significant enough for him to remember, even after the amount of time that had passed. Recalling his host family and meals: “They always put a lot of work into the food....I always tried to eat as much as I could because I really wanted to immerse myself into the experience.”

Sonya vividly remembered meals. Specifically referring to her host mother as an “excellent cook”, Sonya recalled, “She made excellent *mole*” and “the *chiles rellenos* were delicious. I have clear visions of the food. I remember the food very clearly.” Lucy recalled the food as well. “Eating beans for breakfast. That was weird.” Similarly, Sonya recounted, “I thought it was so weird to eat for breakfast, but then by the end of the month, I remember I really grew to enjoy beans for breakfast, and nowadays beans are all I eat for breakfast.”

Among her memories, Lucy also recounted a common evening activity with her roommates and her host mother and how she viewed the practice as the origin of an aspect of her vocational life:



They had this huge custom of *café con pan dulces*, or sweet bread and coffee at night. And, we would do that every night with our mom, and that was my first experience with coffee. And, you know, it was sort of the beginning of my journey of what coffee signifies is building relationships, having fellowship, coming up with ideas. Spending quality time, which is part of the reason I so enjoyed my five years working with coffee. Contextualizing the drinking of coffee within the relationship with her host mother, and extrapolating the meaning of the practice to “fellowship” and “spending quality time” demonstrate an understanding of the custom of *sobremesa*, after dinner conversation that connotes these ideas Lucy describes as building relationships.

Sonya recalled being served fruit for breakfast every morning as well: “We always had papaya for breakfast, too, and neither Lucy nor I liked papaya, and we tried to force ourselves to eat it because we felt too bad to say to Mamá, ‘Hey, we don’t like papaya!’” This memory was significant because it recounts an experience in which Sonya and Lucy placed more value on pleasing their *mamá* than on their own personal tastes. They anticipated that their potential negativity to the food would cause their host mother to feel bad, so they chose to eat something they disliked rather than risk the emotional negativity.

***Excursions.*** James described that the trip to Cuernavaca was different from others trips he had taken because “it was the first time I was truly immersed in a completely different culture....It didn’t feel like it was a tourist attraction. It was real. It was really a normal society in a different country.”

Despite James’s description of not feeling like he was at a tourist attraction, we spent a good amount of time as tourists during the course of our time in Mexico. Therefore, it is not surprising that many participants recalled the tourist sites we visited. When discussing the five

photos he had chosen as emblematic of the trip, Philip chose a picture of himself standing on some ruins in Malinalco. “I chose this picture because it was one of the classic tourist photos. Part of the trip to Mexico was just going around seeing things... We did a lot of sightseeing on this trip.”

Lucy described the excursions as important in terms of personal development.

The excursions were fantastic. They open your brain at such a young age, to make you think about things. It’s a blessing and a curse because you’ll never be the same, and you’ll always have an insatiable thirst for more and for rich discovery of your world, like the one in your backyard and the one it takes a plane ride to get to.

Commonly, Latino towns have a central *plaza* surrounded by government buildings, churches, and other important constructions. The central plaza became part of the groups’ routine experience. James recalled the vibrance of the plaza: “The plaza. Just seeing how everyone was... They were very community oriented. Everyone seemed to be together. That was a big thing about when I was in Cuernavaca... There was just this sense of family that was shown with everyone there.”

Other central plazas became part of the group’s excursion experiences. As an emblematic photo, Mali chose a picture she had taken of the *Zócolo* in Mexico City.

I would say where it is, but it’s in *el centro*, I’m not sure exactly what it’s called, but there it is in the bright blue sky in the background. It’s important to me because that’s kind of I think the quintessential picture that kind of captures, it doesn’t really capture my whole experience, but I just love that giant Mexican flag waving around in the background.... It speaks, I guess, to feel a place. Belonging in a place.

For her, the enormous Mexican flag against the blue sky in Mexico City's central square was a "quintessential picture" that represented her experience in a significant way.

As one of his emblematic photographs, Philip chose a picture of the *Plaza de tres culturas*:

It's called the plaza of three cultures because it's three cultures literally stacked right on top of each other. And it was really interesting for me coming from the United States and particularly Minnesota, where we haven't been there all that long, where we don't have this sense of history that other completely different societies have existed in this exact same space, and that this space has all these different time periods within it, and so it's just really, really visible in this photo. That was the first time I'd really realized that the sense of history that other cultures and locations have really can change their outlook. Really was very cool.

*Plazas* were not the only physical spaces participants recalled as significant. For one of the pictures emblematic of the trip, Mali narrated a picture she took in Acapulco.

Why did I want to go to the beach? I guess escape is the word that just darted in my head without even thinking about it. Escaping my life, and the idea of paradise. I was obsessed with the beach after that, even. After going to the beach, ...it's kind of what you imagine heaven to be. I imagine heaven to be a beach....Problems can't follow you at the beach....You're still in paradise. It's so beautiful. It's so wonderful. I only have positive memories of it.

Mali, as stated earlier, described herself as an at-risk youth with a history of homelessness. For her, the experience in Acapulco represented an escape of almost religious significance. Paradise. Heaven. In her preconceptions about Mexico, Mali reflected the

romanticized version of Mexico she associated with the lyrics, “If you like piña coladas,” and she reported the beach as one of the motivating factors for traveling.

While Mali recalled the physical environment of a tropical beach, Sonya described climbing the pyramids of Teotihuacán as “not just an ‘Aha moment’ but an ‘Aha day.’” She described the experience as one in which she began to associate with a different history because of the physical environment in which she found herself.

Being at the top of the Pyramid of the Sun and of the Moon, and looking out at the surroundings around that area was just very impressive in terms of associating with a different history and a different cultural history, and just imagining entirely different roots than the roots with which I was familiar as a Minnesotan.

For perhaps the first time, Sonya experienced the reality of a cultural history different from the familiar.

Sonya was not unique in her description of connecting with a different history because of the physical environment. Similarly, William chose a photograph of himself overlooking a town in a valley in the distance.

I just thought it was so neat because it was at the top of this mountain, and there were not other buildings around, and it looked down onto this amazing, very old-world city that was built at the foot of it, and you can see me smiling, and looking kind of off into the background, where you see an old church, and you see me over the side, wearing sunglasses and some funky t-shirt. I like this picture because I like the contrast between modern and the old world, because this whole photo reminded me of a town like the 1900s and how I would have imagined Mexico back then. It kind of represented modern culture and American cultures. This weird 14-year-old who traveled down to Mexico,

seeing it the first time. I got there in basically half a day, whereas, you think about it from a historical aspect, Hernán Cortés, it took him several months to cross the Atlantic, and probably a lot, a couple people died on that trip over. It took him even longer to get in to inner Mexico to see what it was like. It was not very well developed, and it took me only sixteen hours to get to the same point.

In the narration of this photo, then, William compares his experience with what he imagines and what he understands was the experience of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador among the first Europeans to experience the Mexican interior. For a contemporary adolescent, the trip involved basically half a day, and yet for Cortés, the journey cost several months and probably casualties. William's narration reflects a comparison between modern and historical experiences; his choosing this image and narrating it in this manner reflect the importance he places on the space and its significance to him.

Another photo William chose as emblematic reinforced the connection he made with Mexican history:

[This picture] was me in front of a tree, and in the tree is a peacock. This picture was actually taken in, it was like some kind of fancy restaurant that was a converted restaurant from like, a, it was like a place that Cortés had gone, you know, it was a very luxurious garden, and I remember coming across this peacock, and thinking it was so neat, and how exotic it was, and how it described the place as far as it was like being a very, living a very luxurious lifestyle....I kind of thought that a peacock really represented luxury, and that kind of effect that Hernán Cortés had, a Spaniard, coming over....It was the neatest place, how cool it was. It was so old. It seemed so old, and so luxurious. And especially trying to remember back then, whoever occupied that ground must have lived.

As someone having led the trip, I suspect William was confusing two different locales in his memory. We had spent an evening with the group at Las Mañanitas, a beautiful restaurant with peacocks wandering the grounds. I believe William confused the restaurant with another locale, the *Hacienda de Cortés*, which was where Cortés's sugar plantation had been centered and which at the time of our trip was another beautiful restaurant and hotel with immaculately groomed gardens. Regardless of the blending in William's memory of these two locales, what was significant was that William conceived of Cortés's being within the space hundreds of years before him, and imagining the luxurious lifestyle that Cortés must have enjoyed, and how that luxury continued to define the space.

One site most participants remembered strongly and fondly was Taxco, a town whose growth was driven by silver mining. Lucy described Taxco as "amazing" and reported having returned two or three times since then. One of the photos William chose as emblematic of the trip was of him holding a bar of silver when we were on a mining tour in Taxco.

I remember getting the silver bar and thinking how cool it was that I was holding such a huge chunk of metal, like that was so valuable, and I just thought this was very emblematic of the town, because the whole town was built off the silver mining...Without silver, that town wouldn't have existed and the buildings or the church that was saw or the people would have been there....Showing the power of, I guess, how commodities affect where people end up.

As a young adult, William was able to articulate that the silver industry drove the town's development; as a young man, he had held the silver bar and reflected that this product was the reason this town and its people were there.

William also recalled Taxco because of a personal interaction he witnessed that held significance for him.

I remember [Taxco] being a very touristy area, but I remember these little kids that must have been three, four, or five, selling gum to foreigners, and how they just were hoping that a foreigner would buy a pack of gum, which maybe cost ten cents, and I remember just actually seeing an elderly couple, they must have been in their 60s traveling, actually buy a pack of gum and how excited this one kid was, and after that person bought a pack of gum, all the other kids rushed up to them. So I guess the big thing I'm saying is, it was very striking just, the difference between wealthy, and wealthy and the poor people in Mexico. There didn't really seem to be an in-between. It seemed to be the haves, the have-nots, which was the majority, and then the haves, you know, the people that have everything, which was a very select few group of people. Just like the importance of Americans coming down to just hang out and explore without really thinking about what kind of effect that would have on this country's culture.

William's comments set in the context of a memory of a tour to Taxco demonstrate a growing awareness of the disparity between the rich and the poor in Mexico. The physical space triggered a memory of the social context and a lesson involving wealth and poverty.

### **Conclusion**

In order to learn how study participants perceive the effects of their month-long immersion abroad in Mexico, I conducted in-depth interviews in which I asked former sojourners to discuss their memories, attitudes, and experiences related to the trip. I also asked participants to describe the images in five photographs they had selected as emblematic of their experience.

The first portion of the interviews elicited memories regarding student attitudes and experiences prior to and during the trip.

Interviews with former sojourners revealed several common threads. In general, students described being drawn to this trip because of some previous experience; many reported having parents or other family that valued travel as an educational opportunity. Participant recollections about their pre-trip state of mind revealed that several had preconceptions about Mexico, but those were preconceptions were typically in one of two extremes: romanticized or negative. Participants recalled anticipating their social environment with trepidation, especially regarding their host families and their peer group: Would they get along with the group? What would their host families be like? However, participants did not seem to anticipate making long term or significant changes in their current social environments due to the trip. No participant recalled anticipating changed friendships, affected family relationships, or new significant connections. Regardless, we will see in the next chapter that several participants reported such effects as long-term consequences.

Participant recollections about the trip itself revealed memories of significant people, places, and experiences. Sojourners reported initial impressions of Mexico as beautiful, lush, or exotic. Recollections about people centered around those with whom participants formed personal connections, either temporarily or more sustained. Sojourners' most nostalgic and profound memories were of their host families. Former students also often narrated behaviors they knew to have been against the rules established for the group.

Recollections about places revealed that participants reflected being aware of a sense of place. Some made comparisons between what was familiar and what was new or different. Participants favorably recalled food and meals. Some recalled connecting with a different history



as a result of being in a different space. Many recalled connecting with the different culture and the different history during of various excursions to locations such as Teotihuacán, Taxco, and Mexico City. Participant narrations of experiences reflect stronger recollections of experiences that were personally significant for a variety of reasons.

### **Chapter Seven: Findings Regarding Perceptions of Effects of the Trip**

“One of the most exhilarating outcomes for educators conducting study tours is to observe the insights that students make about themselves, yet this is one of the most unexpected results for students” (Younes & Asay, p. 145). The concept that travel changes people is hardly novel. In order to understand how young adults perceive the effects of this month-long sojourn in Mexico, during the latter portions of their interviews, I asked participants questions which elicited their views about the trip’s immediate and long-term effects. In general, student responses regarding immediate effects of the trip revolved around the social, especially in morphed relationships. Long term effects were described to include personal development; identity shifts, including the description of the self as “gringa;” relationship shifts; deeper cultural understanding; valuing travel; comparing subsequent international experiences to their experiences in Mexico; academic and professional development; and the ability to make cultural comparisons.

#### **Student Participant Perceptions: Immediate Effects or Consequences of the Trip**

The theme of the social, especially regarding the trip’s immediate effect on participants’ relationships with family and friends, emerged as predominant among participants as they recalled and described their experiences in the context of their immediate re-entry into the United States. McKeown (2009) and Norris and Dwyer (2005) reported that students who had traveled abroad as part of a postsecondary experience perceived themselves to be more mature after having studied abroad. The participants in my study vividly recalled personal growth during their journey and described various consequences they experienced as a result. These consequences primarily centered around morphed relationships.

Philip recalled feeling resentful upon his immediate re-entry into the United States. “I did not want to come home, because just as I was starting to feel like I was starting to get it...it was taken all away, and I went home. And I didn’t want to be home. I wanted to be in Mexico.” Further, Philip disclosed the trip “helped sever a lot of high school relationships. That way that I’d say that is, when I came back from Mexico I felt like I’d changed, and nobody else had.” Lucy echoed this when talking about going back to school the following fall: “It was so hard to go back to school because I felt like I had grown five years. My perspective changed. My friends changed. It’s so funny....I missed Mexico and the flowers and the mountains and everything. I was just devastated.” James talked about regretting the re-entry into the busy-ness of his U.S. life: “I was getting used to just that laid back feeling of being able to take it easy, and coming back, you know, after you get backed into that rushed feeling of doing this and this and this on a schedule....It was something completely different again.”

Several participants reported difficulty communicating the significance of the trip to friends and family immediately upon their return to the U.S. William reported, “Unless you really soak in the culture as long as we did, it’s hard to understand the things that we understood. Couldn’t really explain it.”

Mali was only 14 years old at the time she traveled, and, visibly amused at the memory, she recalled conveying the experience to her sister: Mali remembered developing the film from the twelve disposable cameras she took with her, and going through every single picture “in great detail” with her twelve-year-old sister. “And then I tried to teach her Spanish, and I did it the immersion way where I would not speak to her in English....[My sister] hates Spanish to this day because of me!”

William recalled that his friends were somewhat incredulous about his experiences:

In high school, I had, well, a lot of my friends were really wealthy, and I guess, I kind of remember coming back and being like, “Oh, did you go to Cancun?” or “Did you go hang out on the beach? Did you do any of that stuff?” And I’m like, “No, we were in Mexico City, we went and saw all these different ruins,” and they were like, “Why? Why didn’t you just go to the beach?” That just kind of being a weird thing to them.

William’s friends perceived Mexico as only a resort destination; its history and its interior were irrelevant or unimportant in their eyes.

Lucy learned from this experience in Mexico the difficulty in conveying the experience to family and friends:

They care, but they don’t care that much. Your family cares, but really they just want you to snap back into it. Like get with it, get over it. You’re here. Snap out of it. And my friends thought it was kind of weird that I had made new friends. I was still close with those old friends, but the fact that I had this experience without them, they couldn’t understand, and they really don’t care. They just want to hear that you had a good time and that you’re back. So, I’ve learned over the years you have to prepare an elevator speech before you get off the airplane. When people ask you how was it, you tell them what they want to hear. Two sentences....It was hard to relate to people. Really hard to relate. Really isolating.

Lucy was not alone in recounting the difficulty of conveying the experience to others.

Sonya ascribed the difficulty to youth and inexperience:

It was a bit difficult explaining the meaning to [my family]. Probably because it was difficult to articulate to myself at that time, exactly what the significance was. So the conversations we would have would be about, “Oh, it was so cool. We did this and we

did that.” And more relating events rather than lessons, which I think is a tendency for any kind of travel story.

Like Lucy and Sonya, Philip also remembered it being difficult to talk about the experience to family.

[My parents] didn’t understand how to listen, or how to ask. I had never experienced that before. Nobody in my family ever had. And so they were, like for them, they just thought I’d gone on a little bit longer vacation. “Oh, did you go to the beach? Did you have fun?” Da da da da. And for me, it was something much more fundamental and important and kind of life changing that that. And so it was really frustrating to hear that sort of nonchalance. They’d ask, “Oh, how was your trip?” But, you know, they’re not really listening to your response, because they hadn’t been through it. They didn’t really understand what I was going through, and I wasn’t, I didn’t understand it well enough to be able to explain it.

Bachner and Zeuschel (1994) reported that among the meaningful changes some postsecondary students undergo as a result of a travel abroad experience is their increased participation in international pursuits in their home cultures. Several participants recalled demonstrating a change consistent with those findings. A few participants also reflected that friendships shifted as a result of the trip. Both Sonya and Lucy described intentionally nurturing international friends upon their return. They developed strong friendships with exchange students at their school, and together they frequented clubs and cafes that had a more international clientele. Philip talked about the trip as the first step in his own personal changing that resulted in his having less in common with his high school friends. He reported that he has only one lasting friendship with anyone from high school. He reported that this friend “didn’t understand what I

had been through but at least he understood that something had changed, and was curious to learn more about it.”

### **Student Participant Perceptions: Long-Term Effects of the Trip**

Thorpe (2002) enumerated a wide variety of outcomes associated with postsecondary study abroad experiences. Among other outcomes, students report increased self-confidence and self-awareness, a greater appreciation of different cultures, a greater capacity for adaptability and empathy, and an increased awareness of the global community. Similarly, Slimbach (2005) identified six categories of competencies for study abroad participants: perspective consciousness, ethnographic skill, global awareness, world learning, foreign language proficiency, and affective development. Among the effects of participating in an exchange program, Bachner and Zeutschel (1994) reported students’ applying skills, knowledge, and behaviors to their lives subsequent to travel. These themes emerged as perceived outcomes for the adults I interviewed as they recalled their adolescent experiences.

During the interviews, I specifically asked participants about what they perceived the long-term effects of the trip to be for them. Lucy provided a strong metaphor for the long-term effects of this trip: “Imagine a ship navigating in the open sea, and my trajectory was shifted a degree or so because of these experiences, and now a decade, over a decade later, I am in a completely different place than I would have been on that original trajectory.” The image of the shift in trajectory is powerful. Formative experiences affect our personal and professional paths. Through the interviews, it became apparent that the month-long immersion experience in Mexico impacted the trajectories of every participant to varying degrees. Long term effects were described to include personal development; identity shifts, including the description of the self as “gringa;” personal relationships; deeper cultural understanding; valuing travel; comparing

subsequent international experiences to their experiences in Mexico; academic and professional development; and the ability to make cultural comparisons.

**Personal development.** When talking about changes she noticed in students after only a brief immersion experience like this, Claudia, a staff member at Renovar, noted:

*Es obvio que también la interacción con familias, o había cierta relación con familias, con maestros, en el ambiente en la escuela. Eso, le hacía que los estudiantes tuvieran una actitud diferente, ¿no? Sí, la diferencia al final, sí, era notoria....Se adaptaban a la cultura, a la familia, a la comida, pues, así, ayudaba mucho. Había un cambio. Para el bien, yo creo.*

It's apparent that also, the interaction with families, or that there was a certain relation with families, with teachers, in the environment of the school. This caused the students to have a different attitude, right? Yeah, the difference at the end was notable....They adapted to the culture, to the family, to the food, and this helped a lot. There was a change. For the better, I believe.

Claudia, at the end of a short-term immersion abroad experience, was able to notice differences in students' attitudes. Students, when reflecting years later about the experience, spoke of the long-lasting changes they saw in themselves as time passed. "It goes so deep into my being, I can't even....It's like, it's gone so deep that it's now what grows in me" (Lucy). "I think [the experience] is something that's shaped my entire life....I'm kind of living proof that it just, it made me change the whole course of my life" (Jill). Personal change was a theme that emerged in various permutations in the data. Participants used language that demonstrated their internalization of Spanish language and culture. They described changed perceptions, attitudes,

and awareness. Some described changed perspectives, and the subsequent strain those changes caused in their personal relationships.

Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) found that postsecondary students who participated in subsequent learning opportunities continued to find meaning in their experience abroad, while those that did not engage in subsequent experiences had less vivid recall of their sojourn abroad. Former adolescent travelers similarly described seeking opportunities that echoed their experiences in Mexico. Several participants cited the trip as a catalyst for some sort of personal change. For many, like Lucy in the quote above, the trip planted seeds that grew in ways they did not anticipate. Mali claimed, “It really affected me. Everything up until this point has really centered around my experiences traveling in Latin America, and that was my first time.” Sonya reflected that her senior year in high school was significantly different from her previous three years “because of the new friendships that I had made with the people in the group there, and because of the lessons that I had learned in opening myself and becoming more outgoing.”

I think that the trip to Cuernavaca had a lot of influence in my life in ways that I never could have foreseen ten years ago. I never thought that going to Mexico would spark an interest in a region that would then lead to living in that region, and making friends in that region, and having relationships in that region, and now I will be living my whole life, in some extent, in El Salvador....In a sense, you can trace it all back to the Cuernavaca trip, or to that moment when I met Gerardo in the day camp, and wanted to be able to connect with people from a different place (Sonya).

Katrina felt the trip made her more outgoing. Sonya reported feeling “stretched”: “It made me have to open up, have to converse with people that I wasn’t familiar with, and I think that helped in opening me up as a person and increasing my confidence.” Furthermore, she described that



this trip, in conjunction with subsequent experiences, changed her politics: “I went from growing up in a conservative Republican family to eventually becoming a liberal, and having very different political beliefs.” Philip reported that he developed, “...confidence, in terms of both language ability, but also it was my first time traveling abroad without my parents.” Lucy asserted the trip caused several unexpected changes, including, “I didn’t expect to become so independent and become more financially responsible.”

**Identity and *gringa*.** Several participants referred to themselves or others as *gringo* or *gringa* during the interview. A *gringo* or *gringa* is how Latinos, sometimes affectionately and sometimes in a derogatory way, refer to a White person. Daniel, the director of Renovar, often affectionately refers to the United States as *Gringolandia*. During the interviews, it became apparent that several participants had internalized the label and used it as part of their common vernacular.

Lucy recounted often hosting parties in her apartment which were frequented by her White and her Latino friends. “The dining room would always end up being the *gringos*, and the living room would always end up being Latinos.”

Jill spoke about getting a job among Hispanics when she returned to Minnesota after the Mexico trip. “It was a great experience...being able to try to use my Spanish with them, and I’m sure they were kind of annoyed by it at some times. ‘We’ve got this little *gringa* trying to speak Spanish to us?’”

Mali referred to an episode when she first got to Mexico. “I remember saying in my *gringa* accent, ‘*Tengo hambre.*’ And I was trying to say, ‘*Tengo hambre,*’ but I didn’t know any Spanish!” Additionally, she recounted feeling very popular because she was White. “People were like, ‘¡*Rubia!* And I’m like, I am not blonde! I’m a red-head!....I remember being deeply

offended they were calling me a blonde, and realizing later, well, we're White. Everybody's called blonde." Later in the interview, she told of a conversation she had with some of the elementary students with whom she worked: "'¿Eres latina?' and I'm like, no, but in here I am, in my heart I am, but, no. I'm a *gringa*. I'm from here."

Sonya recalled that immediately after her return to the U.S. from the Cuernavaca trip, she traveled back to northern Minnesota for the faith-based service experience she had been to before. She recounted going to church, and during a time for sharing at the church service, she stood up to speak.

Everyone just kind of looked at me, and here I was, just back from Mexico, and I looked like I was just back from Mexico because I was so tan, comparatively, and I just started speaking in Spanish to the congregation about how happy I am to be here with you all and just sharing, and I remember being able to do that so easily, and people just looking at me like, "Who is this *gringa* who's speaking Spanish?"

She also recounted that, as she got older and more experienced with Latino cultures, she went through a period "where I used to kind of look down on them and be like, 'Oh, yeah, *gringos*,' and it's almost like, a self-deprecating way of looking at one's culture."

**Personal relationships.** Studying undergraduates during a short-term international experience in Cuba, Bond, Koont, and Stephenson (2005) found that the single aspect participants cited the most as contributing to their learning was the personal relationships formed with Cubans. The importance of personal relationships emerged as highly significant in the data gleaned from participants as they recalled their adolescent experiences.

Each participant reflected to at least some degree on their personal relationships. Many commented that their circle of friends changed in some aspect, and several described relationships with partners or spouses from heritages different from their own.

Philip reported “My friends are from twelve or fifteen other countries, and live all over the world now.” He described being placed with a roommate from abroad in college, and narrated various anecdotes about spending time with people from a variety of different cultures, including the following scenario:

I remember I went to a party once. We went to a cabin in the woods, and there were two Bulgarians, and a Pakistani girl and an Indian girl and a girl from Zimbabwe and a couple guys from America and my roommate from Peru and a friend of his from Colombia...I was extremely fortunate, and my experience, I had already picked my college by the time I went on my study abroad trip to Mexico, but it definitely affirmed that choice for me. I reinforced that experience with a lot of my experiences after that, so, it definitely had an effect.

Lucy described that as a result of her experiences in Mexico, her friends had “shifted” upon her return. “My circle of friends are very interested in the same types of things as me. They have a worldly..., they have a desire to grow and learn and discover. And my friends that are not as much that way, I am no longer as close with.” Upon returning from Mexico, she spent comparatively less time with friends she had had before she left for the trip, and she became close with many exchange students at her high school. “[Sonya and I] hung out with Latino students every weekend, moving forward, and I just remember being beyond high school at that point. I felt more responsible.” Sonya also related these same new connections:

I became a lot more involved in the Latino community in Minnesota, and all of a sudden was a lot more interested in going to Lake Street in Minneapolis and going to the neighborhood in South St. Paul, to El Burrito Mercado and El Mercado Central, and going salsa dancing on Monday nights at the Quest, and doing all sorts of things in my free time that had to do with cultivating this interest in Latin American culture. That all began my senior year in high school.

Later, Lucy stated, “I have a lot of immigrant friends. I would casually date some of them, too, and so my sister grew to have a low opinion of me and my standards, and then in myself.”

Mali reported first connecting with an LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning) community when she was in Venezuela. She described coming out to those closest to her before her study abroad in South America:

Everybody knew that had to know,...and so when I was in Venezuela, I connected first and foremost with the community there, and so I had a whole group of friends that were Venezuelan who were queer, and so we'd go to the gay bar every weekend, and it was so much fun, because I didn't have that here, in the United States....To build that in a foreign country was really cool.

It was significant that of the eight participants who had traveled with me to Mexico, five of them reported being in a significant relationship, either with a spouse or a partner. Four of those five were in a significant relationship with someone not born in the United States. Sonya married a man from El Salvador. Lucy dated a man from Nicaragua. Philip's partner was Vietnamese American. Katrina had just become engaged to a man from India. Only Mali reported having a partner who was U.S. born, but when I contacted her to ask for feedback on

my findings, Mali wrote that she and her partner had recently had a baby and the donor, who is a significant part of their family now, is Nigerian born and raised. She wrote as part of her feedback, “Despite having a very Latina sounding name and two white mothers, she is Mixed: Black + white, and not just Black + white, but Nigerian, Italian, and Irish” (Mali, personal e-mail).

William reported not being in a relationship currently, but the two significant relationships he had had were with people from other cultures as well. Describing one relationship, William contextualized his interest in building relationships with those of other cultures as an effect of his experiences in Mexico:

I dated a girl from China for six months...I guess as a person, I'm more open to different types of cultures, and I think that's, the Mexico trip was actually my first real experience, and it just kind of built on different cultural experiences over time, where I was actually dating people from different cultural backgrounds and having a good time learning about how China is different from the U.S., and the types of customs, and the different types of dating rituals...If you were to ask me in eighth grade if I were to date a Latina girl, or a girl from China, I would have said no way.

As one of the photographs that most represented the trip, Lucy chose a picture of herself surrounded by girlfriends at a party they held for her just before the trip. For her, the photo symbolized the constant support of good friends through life-changing experiences. “The significance of your friends being there to help you prepare for a big trip like this, but not just the trip...I think on the outside it was just the trip. Little did we know the kind of rich experience that it would be.” Even though she spoke of the support of high school friends, many of whom

are still her good friends, Lucy was unique in reporting that her travel experiences caused her some difficulty in her relationship with her family.

Those experiences also made me feel estranged from my family. Being abroad. And coming home and feeling frustrated, not knowing how to convey my experience. Them not really being entirely open to what I found, because I was young, and would, like, blow with the wind, and in fact, it's been a long journey until recently that I felt more embraced, even those sides of my life have been embraced by my family. I still feel a partition between my sister and me because we're just, we've gone in such different directions, and really a lot of that has to do with the travel decisions I've made, the cultural immersions I've done, so I think in regards to conveying and relating, it's affected me on very deep levels, that I've really had to continue to work through.

Despite her difficulties with her family, Lucy eloquently described what it was like to have deep personal relationships with the people that have come into her life through her experiences abroad:

I think there's such a richness about being involved. Not just getting a taste of culture because that's like going on a mini-vacation, you know. But when this becomes such an active part of your life, it's no longer like going to a museum and watching what's on display. But rather again,...it's sort of woven into who you are and so when you go to a foreign country, it's not really foreign because you have friends there and you do life with them. You're beyond the point of learning about this. I mean, you still learn, but you're beyond the point of observing. And you're in the participation mode. And so, whether it's you and me, two European American women sitting here...or if we were sitting here with a few of our friends from Mexico or Ecuador or India or China, we'd be

doing life together, and it wouldn't just be a cultural exchange. It's having relationships, and I think that's a really rich thing that you get out of taking the time to build relationships, and not just look at, and be in awe by it. It's part of your quilt. Am I getting the point across? That's so significant. Yeah. Doing life together.

**Cultural understanding.** In their interviews, all participants reflected a perception that they had become more culturally aware as a result of the trip. Lucy described travel in general, and this trip in particular, as a mixed blessing: "It's a blessing and a curse, because you'll never be the same, and you'll always have an insatiable thirst for more and for rich discovery of your world." Sonya reported, "The general perceiving of life of the people that I met in Mexico was very inspiring to me....Their perception of life was more amplified, more expansive than my vision of life at the time." Mali described U.S. culture as "fast paced, individuals who are trying to get ahead," whereas she described her perception of Latino culture differently: "I think more laid back, more friendly. I think of bigger women, curvy women, and proud of it, and tan skin, and love." Katrina was able to compare a variety of cultures: "I think of Mexican culture or Hispanic culture as more fun and laid back than a Chinese culture, or Middle-Eastern culture." Jill cited this trip as one reason her interest in a college major "shifted from art to anthropology. Just learning about world history, and thinking about other cultures, and this trip really did change that." Philip demonstrated a cultural understanding when narrating a subsequent experience when he served as an interpreter on a medical mission trip to Mexico: "Trying to explain a little bit, the way you see the situation and the way they see the situation are just very different. It's not opposing viewpoints, but it's just, you see it differently, and they value different things." William described the experience as "probably the first challenge to American

popular culture that I had, because I was a typical American.” James described a change he felt he had undergone as a result of the trip:

There was just more tolerance that I had for other people. With that, I’ve been able to learn more and more, like sitting back with people who maybe had different beliefs than myself, and sitting there and listening to them, seeing what they believe in, and figuring out why they believe that, and maybe joining them on some sort of event that they do, and meeting up with other people. With this trip, you really get more of a sense of wanting to try different things and learn something new all the time.

Similarly, Jill described a deeper understanding of Mexicans, as well as a heightened umbrage when faced with negative stereotypes:

I think I looked at people differently [after the trip]. I mean, a lot of the stereotypes that I had coming in to it really kind of melted away, and I had more of an understanding, and it would irk me a lot more when people would make comments about stereotypes about Mexicans. It was like, hey, I’ve been there, and, they’re not like that. And it would really bother me a lot more.

Mali picked as emblematic of the trip a photograph she had taken of the Mexican flag flying in the Zócalo in Mexico City:

I guess it means....I really like the Mexican flag. I have one in front of my window, at my house, hanging on my window. I almost feel like it keeps me safe, in my neighborhood. It makes me feel more a part of my neighborhood. And, it kind of speaks to that, I guess, to feel a place. Belonging in a place.

Mali’s narration shows that her selection of the photograph reflects a practice she currently held: the value of the Mexican flag, which for her signified belonging somewhere, and by extension,



led her to a feeling of security in her residence. Later, after reviewing the findings chapter, Mali responded with the following clarification:

I chose this photo specifically because out of hundreds of Mexico photos, this one en el Zócolo is the only picture that hangs on my wall to this day. I figured this must have some significance then, right? However, I realize that it is merely a place marker. A symbol. It doesn't capture any of my experience really, but I call it "quintessential" because what it does capture is my connection to this country that I cannot call mine, but with whom I feel solidarity and a sense of belonging, while concurrently feeling completely out-of-place.

William described his memories of the plaza in Cuernavaca, and reported that he viewed its vibrance as a manifestation of a Latino sense of community and family. He then extended this perception and applied it to a recent controversy about the construction of a Mosque:

You have the thing going on with the Muslims and the Mosque that was being built, and people were like, "Oh, look, they're building this for an Intifada, or something, or an uprising." And really, they're just building it for their religion because they don't have a Mosque there to pray, and it's like, unless you really understand their culture and understand the importance of why they build things, or the importance of why they do certain things, you can't really say, "Oh, look, these people, they're...terrible people. They're A) taking our jobs or B) they're terrorists." It's just such a blatant comment that's just so wrong.

While others reported a deeper understanding of the privilege that comes with being a U.S.-born White speaker of English, Lucy reported experiencing cultural tension when she was studying abroad in Venezuela at a time when anti-U.S. sentiment was strong. "I was taken

advantage of on multiple occasions by friends, quote end-quote friends, who invited me to go out and then would suddenly not have a wallet, and would assume I was paying for things.” Trying to take care of everyday tasks was sometimes difficult for her as well. “There were times when the people working there wouldn’t help me. They wouldn’t look at me. They wouldn’t talk to me. They wouldn’t acknowledge me. Those were just unique experiences, being in places where there was a high tension politically.” Reflecting on this experience, Lucy realized that these are problems she never had to deal with in the U.S., but she recognized that her experience was not universal. “It made me feel like I had a better understanding of what it was like to be a minority in the United States.”

Interestingly, some evidence of this recognition of privilege came in recollections about children. Earlier, I discussed William’s experience with children selling gum in Taxco. He recalled this as being instrumental in his recognition of the difference between the rich and poor in Mexico. Children “were hoping that a foreigner would buy a pack of gum,” and when an elderly couple bought a pack, “all the other kids rushed up to them.” William’s recognition of children’s dependence on sales of packs of gum to foreign tourists indicates an understanding of the privileged economic position “foreigners” hold in the eyes of Mexican children who hope to profit from them. Similarly, Jill recounted an experience with child vendors and reflected, “It was kind of hard to deal with, because you want to give something to all these children, and you just can’t do it. And it’s still something that’s hard, when you go down there.” Sonya recalled seeing a child begging: “I still remember vey clearly this little child begging by trying to be very cute and charming, doing a little ‘Look at me, hoo hoo, I’m doing a strip tease.’ And he was like five, and he was taking off his shirt in a very provocative way, and I remember just feeling sorry for him.”

Perhaps the most poignant evidence of personal growth as a result of the Cuernavaca trip and subsequent experiences came while Mali was narrating one of her photographs. Mali's picture shows a little boy of about four or five against a brick wall. The boy is not smiling; he looks rather serious. Mali's description is significant:

The reason I brought this picture is because I think it's....This little boy, I did not know who he was. He did not know who I was, but I felt like I had the right to take him aside and shove my camera in his face, and just take a picture of him. And look at the look on his face. He looks so scared. He has no idea who I am, and I don't know, I just, it just makes me think of, you know when you hear about ignorant Americans that travel abroad, and who give us a bad name. Well, I gave us a bad name that day. And, I mean, he was so cute. That's why I wanted the picture. I was like, there's a cute little boy, and I need to have his picture. But, just the right over somebody else. Who knows. I don't know. If he would have been...I wouldn't have taken his picture if we were traveling to the mountains in Colorado. But we were in Mexico, so I felt like I could. And I couldn't communicate with him, so I couldn't even ask him if it was OK to take his picture. I just did it. I mean, I even pushed him up against the rocks. You know, I'm like, "Stand here." And I had to get really close, because I had a disposable camera. He doesn't look very happy. But I chose it anyway.

Mali chose this picture as one of her five she found emblematic of the trip. She chose it because it represented to her the privilege she felt she had, at age 14, as a visitor to Mexico. The fact that she differentiates her behavior from how she would have acted had she been in the U.S. is significant. She felt she could take his picture without his consent because she was in Mexico.

For another emblematic photograph, Mali chose a picture of children on a day we visited an orphanage. Prior to the visit, our guide had taken us to buy candy to give to the kids. Mali remembers that day, but during the description of the photograph, she revealed:

I kind of don't like that they have bags of candy in their hands, because I don't like the idea that, it's kind of like this child, whose picture I just took, because I felt like I could. In this picture I bring them candy, and then they like me, you know, that kind of, White man brings you candy, and you do whatever for him now. But, they were sweet kids, and I really enjoyed that day. I valued it. A lot. Even with the bribery. And we were being nice, you know. All kids like candy.

Like the child she photographed against a wall, Mali reported this picture in a negative context. Her enjoyment of the day at the orphanage was tinged by her subsequent perception that bringing candy felt like bribery, like a way for the group as Whites to lavish gifts in the expectation of performance in return.

Similarly, Philip selected a picture of children also as emblematic:

The next photo is of me and all the kids and the beanie babies....Before we left, we were asked to bring, to think of bringing things we could donate. We were told we were going to visit a school or an orphanage while we were there, so I packed up all my beanie babies that my siblings and I had been collecting, joking that it was going to be our college fund, and of course, they were worth nothing. So, as I'd just graduated high school and was going to go to college, I decided to get rid of them because I was cleaning out my room, and that this would be a great use for them. So I brought them down to Mexico, and we brought them to what I believe was an orphanage, and handed them out to all the kids. I had done a lot of volunteer work in high school, but it was really more

focused on issues around housing and food, service. There wasn't anything I did with little kids. It was this awesome feeling to see their eyes completely light up and freak out with these beanie babies...Just to see these kids, they were told they could only pick one, by the teachers. They would pick one and just hold on to it, and I have a bunch of photos of them just in awe, staring in awe at their own stuffed animal, and it surprised me when the teachers told me a lot of these kids had probably never had their own stuffed animal before.

Both Mali and Philip chose photographs of bringing gifts to children as emblematic of the experience abroad. Mali, even though she enjoyed the day, expressed regret at what giving candy might be seen to represent; in contrast, Philip recalled giving away beanie babies as a positive experience. His recollection of the event was not tainted by any subsequent sense of race. His contrast between this collection of beanie babies which "were worth nothing" and the faces of the children "in awe" when they were allowed to own "just one" stuffed animal reflected for him something positive.

Both Mali and Philip commented on this experience again when they gave feedback regarding validity. Philip clarified in this way:

The experience with the beanie babies didn't not necessarily represent something positive for me, although I am sure the kids thought it was a good day. It was more of an eye opening experience for me. I felt good about making the kids happy, but also troubled by how hard their lives had been, and how oblivious I was to their experiences.

In the follow-up, Philip characterized the experience in terms of his own previous lack of awareness. Mali's clarification also expressed a more complex interpretation than I originally offered:

The focus seems to be the negativity I felt surrounding the "bribery" of orphan affection. While I do agree in part to this sentiment. I also feel that the candy acted as a bridge to supplement our inability to communicate. Yes, it gave the children this wonderful day to remember...but my problem is it was only one day. No change occurred for these children as a result, and it probably instilled in them another myth of the infinite prosperity of their pale neighbors to the North.

That day was the most positive of days for me because I love children, especially children who do not have the privileges all children should; a family, home, consistency....these should not be privileges, but rights. These children need and deserve extra love so I am drawn to them, but I did find our experience problematic.

Nevertheless, this day sparked for me a desire that I have held onto and always will (until it is fulfilled), to work with orphaned youth...whether orphans of the living or dead, I feel called to them. I have a fantasy of being the "mother" in a place like that orphanage.

In retrospect, I as a researcher neglected the nuances of what these two participants were expressing. For Mali and Philip, these experiences were more about an awakening awareness of their own privilege in comparison to the children they encountered who lack what the participants had taken for granted; this awareness was significant enough for them to recall years later, even to the point of vocational considerations.

**Valuing travel, and traveling abroad again.** An academic educational experience abroad at the post-secondary level often predisposes students to subsequent travel abroad or a higher degree of comfort with unfamiliar situations (Orahod, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008; Hadis, 2005; Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005; Holzmueller, 1974). One theme that emerged as significant is

that each former sojourner who participated in this study reported traveling abroad again at least once; many participants had traveled extensively.

William described the development of his love of travel as having been if not born then at least nurtured by the Cuernavaca experience. “I believe that every experience that I’ve had has been a collective experience that has built on it to push in one path or another....[My travel experiences] have pushed me towards a major that I can use that allows me to do what I love, which is to travel.” He reported that “travel abroad just kind of helped me see how I actually compare different cultures, and how I try to understand people and see why they do things the way they do them.” He cited the trip as the reason for his interest in service abroad in Central America:

This trip helped incite an interest in Spanish culture for me, because I actually ended up doing Amigos de las Américas, which was a service trip, and I went to Costa Rica for six weeks, and helped build a retaining wall for a soccer field and taught English classes...and lived in Costa Rica with a host family.

William reported that, unlike the Mexico experience when he could not communicate initially with his host family very well, when he got to Costa Rica he was able to experience some success when talking with his host family. “I remember sitting down the first day, and actually having a, it wasn’t a completely fluent conversation, but it was...pretty good Spanish that I was communicating.” While in Costa Rica, he and some friends traveled to Guatemala for a week. The year after the Costa Rica experience, he returned to Amigos de las Américas as a project supervisor in Nicaragua.

Mali reported the Cuernavaca trip as something that affected her a great deal. “Everything up until this point has really centered around my experiences traveling in Latin

America, and that was my first time.” She discussed having several opportunities to study abroad while in college. While studying in Costa Rica, she took the opportunity to vacation in Ecuador. When studying in Venezuela, she was able to travel to Peru and Bolivia as well.

Philip reported that since his first experience in Mexico, where he gained confidence and interested in traveling independently, “[The Cuernavaca trip] was the first time that I would consider myself having really traveled instead of gone on vacation... I’ve since done that probably a dozen times to all different parts of the world.” He recalled, “I really wanted to continue on that adventure of Mexico.” He described three months in Europe, several trips to London, domestic trips within the United States, as well as trips to Canada, Argentina, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and eight subsequent trips to Mexico. Additionally, he studied abroad for a semester in Chile.

Katrina reflected that the trip “...was definitely a positive experience....Learning Spanish led to better things in the future.” As stated earlier, Katrina’s mother initially questioned the value of the Cuernavaca trip. Katrina reported that her mother has since come to accept Katrina’s travel habit.

She still hasn’t really gotten it, but now she sees it can be useful, I guess, knowing another language. She understands that there are potential financial benefits to it, too. And it’s not the worst thing to have a child who’s hell bent on studying foreign languages.... I always tell her, I’m not into drugs. I’m not a drunk. I don’t have a lot of boyfriends. There are many worse things I could be doing with my time and my money. Katrina studied abroad for a semester in Costa Rica, spent a summer in Guatemala developing a service learning program for her university, studied in Morocco for a month, and worked for a summer in Haiti. Additionally, she described at length a subsequent interest in Chinese and an



academic year abroad in Beijing, where she studied Chinese while working for a Chinese firm. Anticipating becoming fluent, or at least proficient in Chinese during the experience, she reported feeling disappointed in her language progress: “Before I went to China, I was like, I’m coming out of this fluent. It’s gonna happen. Eight months in a foreign company. Definitely. And I remember when I left China, I was like, thank God that’s over!”

Both Katrina and Philip reported that interest in travel was a life-long lesson they took from the Cuernavaca experience. “Don’t be afraid to travel. If you can do it, if you can afford it, and if you can do it, if you have the time, you should definitely do it” (Katrina). “A real interest in traveling more is another lifelong thing I’d say. A real interest in getting to know more people and more cultures. Which I was super fortunate about, going to my college, which had the highest international student population in the country when I was there, percentage-wise” (Philip).

Jill expressed personal satisfaction after the first trip to Mexico. “I had all of these talents that I didn’t even know I had, and it made me feel good about myself.... It made me feel important that I was learning something...that would make myself very marketable later on.” She reported she had traveled to Mexico for academic purposes twice since her initial high school experience.

Lucy reported traveling extensively and specifically identified travel and interest in various cultures among her personal values: “I’ve chosen to live a certain lifestyle so I can afford to travel. Or, I’ve taken a lower-paying job that sends me abroad multiple times a year or even around the United States and works with various cultures because that’s what I value over the money.” She reported having been back to visit her Cuernavaca host family six or seven times after her initial trip. When I initially interviewed her, she was getting ready to spend six months

in Nicaragua, and was anticipating the possibility of spending six months in Tanzania after that, working on research regarding a pilot program designed for screening for and treatment of cervical cancer. She also reported having worked in Ciudad Juárez with an organization coordinating mission trips. Further, she reported that for one position she held, “they ended up sending me to Latin America four or five times, and Korea even.”

Another participant who had extensive subsequent experience abroad was Sonya. Sonya reported that her parents recognized her interest growing interest in travel after her initial experience in Cuernavaca.

For my high school graduation party, they did a party for me that was all based around international travel experiences, and kind of in that vein of foreseeing I was to become someone who was interested in knowing the world, and I think they definitely saw that in me at that age. And they cultivated that. They supported that and cultivated that in me, because they wanted to offer me the world.

Sonya’s undergraduate experience reflected her interest in internationalism. She studied for a semester in Buenos Aires, and then had an internship at the U. S. Embassy in El Salvador while in college.

My boss was...really great at encouraging me to do all sorts of different experiences, and so as part of my experience, as part of my internship at the embassy I did really fascinating things like going to the prisons in El Salvador and seeing the prison system. Going to *maquilas* and meeting with the owners of free trade zones, and...looking at human rights in free trade zones and in factories....I was involved in reviewing some rehabilitation programs for gang members, trying to look at different strategies for for

dealing with this gang problem in El Salvador....I also worked closely with...[a] council that tried to prevent violence through after school activities for kids and teenagers.

Her undergraduate opportunity to work in El Salvador was eventually followed by a second opportunity when she was pursuing a Master's Degree, when she returned to El Salvador to work with the United Nations Development Program. During this experience, Sonya reported working on projects regarding gender equity "...to share best practices for gender inclusive public policies in the region and to share experiences on implementing gender rights in Latin America."

Through these experiences, Sonya met the El Salvadoran man she later married. She and her husband currently live and work in El Salvador. During her interview, Sonya traced her current life-point back to her experience in Cuernavaca:

I think the trip to Cuernavaca had a lot of influence in my life in ways that I never could have foreseen ten years ago. I never thought that going to Mexico would spark an interest in a region that would then lead to living in that region, and making friends in that region, and having relationships in that region, and now I will be living my whole life, in some extent, in El Salvador, and maybe bouncing back and forth between the U.S. and El Salvador and other places, potentially, too. I think, in a sense, you can trace it all back to the Cuernavaca trip, or to that moment when I met Francisco in the day camp, and wanted to be able to connect with people from a different place. And now I am in every sense, connected to something entirely different that I was ever exposed to if I had just stayed in Minnesota.

**Comparing subsequent experiences to Mexico.** Several participants described feeling disappointed during subsequent study abroad experiences because they were different from the

Mexico experience they had in high school. Philip recalled, “When I got to Chile, I didn’t really realize this, but I wanted to be back in Mexico.” Mali reported, “Every time I travel somewhere, I’m always thinking it’s going to be like Mexico.” She recalled, “I remember being really disappointed when I got to Costa Rica, and I was like, this is nothing like Mexico. There’s no music, there’s no pretty colors, there’s no Indigenous people wandering around. It’s totally different.” Mali’s first impression of Costa Rica reflects her initial contrasting of the country with her previous experience in Latin America. Her association of Mexico with music, colors, and an Indigenous presence couple with her characterization of Costa Rica as lacking those elements speaks to an increasing differentiation regarding the variety of cultures within the term *Latino*.

Jill compared the high school trip with a subsequent study abroad experience in Mexico. She reported her second experience to be much different from the first in one respect because of the food she was served in the host family.

When I went back for a study abroad in 2003, I lived with a family that was very European, and all of the food that they cooked was very European. It wasn’t like, *frijoles*, *masa*, and things like that. And I kind of missed that. I was like, oh, I want my *huaraches*, or something like that, and so that’s something I really loved about [the Cuernavaca] trip. I don’t know how to describe it. It felt more authentically Mexican than some of the other times I’ve been back.

Lucy studied for a semester in Venezuela, and she described her experience in Venezuela as different from in Mexico because, “Relationships were not as solid....They said that people spent approximately 60% of their income on their appearance, so the relationships were a little bit more shallow, so I didn’t stay as close with folks there.”

Student participants, then, reported that the experience in Cuernavaca, either by itself or in combination with other experiences, initiated them into subsequent experiences abroad. Many of them, however, reported that subsequent experiences were significantly different, and the differences disappointed them.

**Academic and professional development.** Potential employers expect students who have studied abroad to demonstrate certain intercultural skills as well as a more cosmopolitan outlook (Alfaro, 2008; Orahood, Woolf, & Kruze, 2008; Place, Jacob, Andrews, & Crago, 2002; Hadis, 1998). Former students reported effects of the trip on their academic and professional lives. Although few students referred to anticipating the trip as a way to differentiate themselves from others on college applications or professional resumes, subsequently the trip emerged for them as significant for their academic and professional development.

Language development was the expressed purpose of the trip, although as discussed earlier, most participants did not recall that as having been a strong motivating factor. Subsequently, however, student participants reported that loving languages caused them to continue their study of Spanish, and in some cases, becoming bilingual was rather a happy accident. Philip reported that, after a month in Mexico, he did not feel confident in his Spanish, but then, “two months later at my first day of Spanish class in college, I realized I was way ahead of just about anybody else, which was great.” He further described taking classes with students that were “ethnically Chicano or Mexican descended, and I spoke better Spanish than they did. Not fabulous Spanish by any stretch....I was clearly the Whitest, the Whitest of the White in their eyes, which wasn’t always necessarily too comfortable in class.”

Jill’s perception was that “I don’t think I spoke a ton of Spanish when I was actually down there, but it was seeping into my head.” She returned to the U.S. and specifically looked

for a job where she could use her Spanish. She described that because of the trip, her college ambition shifted from studying art to studying anthropology; she became particularly fascinated with Chicano studies courses. Later, she described, “I just got into college and kept taking Spanish....It was just, OK, I’ve got a minor on my hands. And I loved it. I mean I loved all the Spanish.” Jill also reported that her experiences in Mexico contributed to a deeper understanding in her subsequent college classes.

When I went I knew very little about Mexican history, and we got little bits and pieces of it, and later on in college, when I was, Oh, I remember that from my trip, and it was kind of neat to be able to tie that to things that I’ve seen.

At the time of the interview, Jill reported being a bilingual case manager for a large firm in Minnesota.

Several participants reported advantages to being bilingual. Katrina reported, “Learning Spanish led to better things in the future.” Mali reported having worked in an after-school program with elementary school children, many of whom came from Spanish-speaking households. “Their parents were somebody I could talk to, and because I spoke Spanish, I ended up going to a lot of family events. I was asked to speak, public speak, in Spanish, because I was the only one.” She reported her language abilities and her travel experience helped deepen the connection she had with the fourth and fifth grade students with whom she had worked.

I could talk about different countries I’d been to, countries that they’re from, and that was obviously a really big connection, because I’m not somebody who says, “Stop speaking Mexican!” And I understand that some of them are from Ecuador. They’re not all from Mexico.

At the time of the interview, Mali worked in the public schools helping primarily English Language Learning (ELL) students gain access to college. She reported that her primary clientele were not Latino but rather other immigrants, mostly Karen students (children of refugees from Burma.)

Lucy reported writing about the experience multiple times when applying for schools or for funding for projects. Further, she disclosed, “Every job that I’ve taken since the age of 19, let’s say 20, has been because, in large part, because I spoke Spanish. They required that I did. And so, almost every dime I’ve ever made is because I’m bilingual.” She also spoke of doing volunteer work within the Latino community, “teaching English or life skills, youth group, Wednesday nights with adolescents, Latino adolescents.” For one position she held with an international firm, Lucy reported, “...I was a direct contact with a lot of our producers because I speak Spanish and with a cultural understanding of how to use it.” She also reported serving with a professor on a research project where she transcribed and translated data. Talking about the influence the trip had on her professional life, she narrated a repeated scenario in which she was expected to act with not only with linguistic but also with cultural competence: “My boss asked me to write e-mails to our producers of origin. He would say, ‘I want you to say..., but do it the cultural way, you like, like that flowery way that makes everybody feel good. You know how to speak Spanish with Mexican culture.’”

Sonya reported several opportunities that arose because of her language abilities. After two internships in El Salvador with the U.S. Embassy, Sonya permanently moved to El Salvador. At the time of the interview, Sonya described her professional involvement as a director of marketing with a non-profit organization whose mission was “to empower senior citizens to live

independently and to live their best life, even in old age, because obviously in El Salvador a lot of people never get the chance to retire.”

**Participant perception of cultural comparisons.** In an attempt to discover how participants compared cultures, I asked participants what they thought were some comparisons in cultural values among the cultures with which they were familiar, and then what our U.S. culture could or should learn from other cultures. In asking these questions I was hoping to discover travelers’ unique perspectives about U.S. culture in comparison to the other cultures with which they had first-hand experience.

In describing what she felt she learned from the trip, Sonya described having a deeper understanding of personal connections, and compared the values she experienced in Mexico with those with which she had experienced in the U.S.:

Prioritizing family and friends, and even things as simple as having large family meals together, and visiting extended family frequently, and keeping alive these connections, and even between parents and child, being very close to one another and very warm. I think just that general mode of being was so different than stoic Scandinavian Minnesota, and it was something I really appreciated.

James echoed this sentiment. When asked what he felt he learned from the experience, James reported that the value of family was significant:

They were always about helping each other out. There was never this sense of “You’re on your own. There’s no help for you.” There’s the sense of family. There’s a sense of family. There’s a sense of “Take your time. Do what you need to do to get things done.” There’s just a sense of getting things done right.



Family cooperation and support was significant enough in James's Mexico experience that he cited it as one of the most important values he learned from the trip.

Mali reported that her connection to Latin America gave her insight into the life experiences of her students:

I'm working with students who are refugees. Students from around the world, so it's kind of cool to make connections with places outside of Latin America, even though I've never really traveled outside of Latin America. It's interesting to find parallels between different types of revolutions that happen all over the world, and that there are connections between all of them. It's kind of interesting how I've been trying not to favor one culture over another, and just kind of open my mind to anyone and everyone.

Recognizing a tendency to favor a familiar culture over one that is less familiar, Mali reported intentionality regarding maintaining an open mind.

Philip reported that his experiences and his knowledge of other histories contribute to his understanding of some U.S. perceptions:

I think it gives people a little bit more of a realistic and modest vision of their place in life. In the U.S., we tend to think we are masters of everything that we see, and to be less able to look back very clearly in your own life and see what were clearly great societies and cultures have existed in this exact same spot and no longer exist, just gives you a different sense of perspective and history that we in the US don't have. Give us another thousand years maybe. We're still pretty young.

Philip's description that a sense of the connection between space and history leads to a more "modest vision of their place in life" reflects a shift away from what he perceives as an ethnocentric perspective, as described in his statement that we in the U.S. "tend to think we are

masters of everything that we see.” Being in the space and perceiving its history broadened his perspective.

One unique view of the effect that travel has had on her came from Katrina. After having traveled abroad twice in high school, Katrina’s academic career led to several subsequent opportunities to study abroad. As a result of the cumulative effect of these travel experiences, Katrina described herself as having changed from being fascinated by cultural differences to being disturbed by them:

I think everybody notices cultural differences, but I think I’m probably even more disturbed by them than I was before. Before, I was like, I remember when I was young, it was just always like, that’s so cool that they eat with their hands and, you know, and they slaughter goats in public, and, you know, everything was just like that’s so fascinating that they do it that way. And now it’s like, I understand what is wrong about your culture. I understand what is wrong about my culture. But, mostly I understand what’s wrong about your culture, I guess. I know it sounds bad, but I’m just being open that I have become more racist. I don’t think a lot of people...I don’t know if a lot of people don’t also become more racist, like if I’m the only one who’s become more racist, because a lot of people talk about, like, having their eyes opened, and being racist is being a closed-minded thing, but, I feel like the more I travel the more racist I become, and maybe that’s just me, but I just wanted to put that out there.

Katrina expressed that she felt that her awareness of cultural differences led to a more judgmental position. Here codicil “maybe that’s just me, but I just wanted to put that out there,” indicated an awareness that her honesty was perhaps not one others would appreciate or of which they would approve. When asked to elaborate, she defended her position with a lengthy narrative

beginning with “We treat women better. We, even, I mean, I don’t want to say that sexism no longer exists, because it obviously does.” She continued by telling a story of her host father when she was studying in Morocco. He spoke Arabic and French, and he knew that she spoke French as well. She remembers twice he spoke French, and she believed it was specifically because he wanted her to hear and understand him. First was when he said something derogatory about the U. S. president. But, the second incident described an incident in which his daughter was painting her nails.

He took the bottle of nail polish and threw it on the floor, which, it was, why would you do that, first of all, like, that’s not thinking ahead, but I guess his wife would just clean it up. And he said, in French, . . . something about her being a slut, and so the fact that he said it in French meant that it was directed at me. . . . I don’t wear nail polish. I’m not a girly girl at all, but I think it was just like, because I was an American, just this idea that, no, you can’t wear nail polish, that’s, to use the word *putain*, which is like slut or whore, and because he said that it was very obvious that he was being derogatory towards me, and I just remember thinking, plus all the sexual harassment I experienced from the locals there, I just remember thinking, it must be so terrible to grow up a girl in somewhere that’s not America, and I was just so happy about. . . my grandfather has never questioned the idea that I want to go to college. It’s so weird, now, that when you have a boy or a girl child, it’s just assumed that that child is going to go to college. It’s not like, oh it’s a boy so he’ll go to college, or it’s like, oh, she’s a girl, so maybe she’ll go to college. Now it’s just like, oh, your kid is going to college.

For Katrina, the incident with the nail polish, coupled with other incidents of harassment she had experienced, represented an oppression of women that we in the U.S. do not experience to the

same degree, an opinion she defended with her perception that in the U.S., it is assumed a child will go to college regardless of gender. Katrina cited her recognition that the status of women in the world is not on par with the status of women in the U.S. as a rationale for describing herself as “more racist” than before she traveled.

Six of the eight former travelers at some point during the interview referred to issues surrounding the issue of immigration. James was perhaps the most general in his reference to immigrants, reporting Spanish as an important asset: “We have a lot of migrants or immigrants that are coming in who have that language, and such a skill is very important in the job force today.” Sonya had personal experience working as a legal aide in an immigration law firm, and she reported being able to leverage that knowledge and experience while assisting friends filing immigration papers.

William described dismay at the difficulty people face when they navigate our immigration system. He reported being “appalled with the way that both the Bush administration and the Obama administration have gone about their immigration policy, in the fact that it is so difficult just for people to become citizens of this country.” Referencing the common rhetoric that we are all immigrants, he further opined:

We were not the first people here, it was actually the Native Americans that were the first people here, and look at how, basically, through our cultural times, we’ve pushed them on to reservations, they’ve stayed there, and we still kind of turn a blind eye, so it’s like, our culture, or the people that were here obviously before, I guess I would say, World War II, are the people that have a right to this God-given gift of being the domineering superpower, and all the rights that come with it.

William's sardonic tone at the end of the quote emphasized his exasperation regarding the U.S. hegemony and its influence at home and abroad.

William was not the only one to refer to a broken immigration system during the course of the interview. Philip reported having had conversations with people who expressed opinions such as "Immigrants are lazy. Immigrants are wrecking things here." Philip reported being somewhat of an immigration apologist when he described responding in this manner:

Think about it from their perspective. They're risking a lot to come here, and they're coming here for a very specific reason. They're not doing this blindly. This is a very big deal. This is why they're coming, and this is why, specifically around language, I think people say "Mexicans are really dumb. They're lazy....You ask them to do something and they'll say, "Yes, yes" and then they won't go and do it. And I was like, they probably don't really understand you, because I remember when I was [abroad]. You put this look on your face when you're trying to understand somebody and you can't, and you don't want to admit that you can't, because to admit that would be to lose face, in a language situation, you often get this look on your face, unconsciously, like I'm understanding you, even though inside you really aren't.

Philip, therefore, reported acting somewhat as a cultural interpreter, intervening in discussions that he believed were based on biased perceptions and language gaps that led to cultural misinterpretations of immigrants.

Echoing the immigration issue, Lucy lamented, "The status quo is not working....The truth is if you come here without documents, it's illegal....So there needs to be some system in place that helps you to become documented." She viewed the immigration as problematic because of the perceptions the dominant culture has of immigrants:

I think it's a problem that we don't view human beings as people with, we all have the same basic needs, and you see the color of skin or status, automatically that person becomes a different type of creature. You know, what gives? ... There's so much stigma in this culture, and it's hard to sift through messages in the media and movies and music and politics. It's a problem.

Lucy expressed the belief that people in the U.S. view someone of a different skin color or social status as "a different type of creature." Similarly but much more vociferously, Mali cited the media as a source for how immigrants are treated inhumanely:

We treat them like crap. You have people who spit at them, and yell at them, and think that they should not be here. Everyone is an illegal immigrant, which I hate when people call undocumented. Underdocumented. Not illegal. It's not illegal to cross the border. It's the equivalent of ripping up your social security card. It's a minor thing. And yet they're deemed illegal. Dehumanizing. And we don't pause to see the humanity in people.

Like Lucy, Philip, and William, Mali expressed frustration about the immigration issue in the U.S. While Lucy held that immigrants without documentation have broken the law, Mali minimized the infraction, equating it with other infractions for which people are seldom punished.

Thus, expressed in six of eight participant interviews, immigration emerged as a common theme for participants to express perceptions about current intercultural relations in the U.S. In two interviews, the reference was neutral: William referred to it in the context of the usefulness of Spanish; Sonya referred to her work as a legal aide in an immigration law firm, and the subsequent personal assistance she was able to give friends filing for immigration status. In the

other four references, or half of those interviewed, participants expressed frustration or anger about the way immigrants are perceived, portrayed, and discussed in mainstream U.S. culture.

As stated earlier, Philip reported acting as a cultural interpreter of sorts when he attempted to challenge the assumptions that immigrants were lazy, attributing that interpretation to perhaps a language barrier rather than to a character flaw. He also discussed serving in this capacity while acting as an interpreter on a medical trip.

I'd hear the other Americans very frustrated about, they're trying to set up this medical clinic and get 2500 people through in three days,...and why don't people want to work with us? And trying to explain, the way you see the situation the way they see the situation are just very different. It's not opposing viewpoints, but it's just, you see it differently, and you know, they value different things, and the American viewpoint is kind of unique in terms of efficiency and time and all these different things.

Other participants also discussed the idea of being a cultural interpreter. James talked about recognizing cultural misinterpretations upon his return: "When you come back from one culture, and then you come back and you hear people saying this or that about another culture, you start realizing, they can't really say that because they don't know what really goes on. You don't know until you walk in someone else's shoes." Regarding feeling ineffective at confronting mistaken perceptions, James lamented, "You sometimes can correct [cultural misinterpretations], and sometimes you just can't. You just have to be quiet." James was the only participant, however, to report feeling silenced, but he was not the only one that expressed how difficult he found it. Earlier, I discussed Lucy's responsibility to write on behalf of her employer to their producers "in the cultural way." She also felt the burden of bridging two cultures: "You can't always, and that makes you a little uncomfortable because that's a heavy weight laying on your

shoulders to mediate this sort of awkwardness of preconceptions, these misunderstandings.” Mali reported that she frequently acts as a cultural interpreter for her partner: “Without me acting as kind of a bridge, there is a piece missing that she doesn’t see, that she can’t understand.”

**Attitudes.** Many participants reported that Mexico taught them a broader perspective in life. Lucy perceived that in Latin American culture, there’s a “frankness, and even a friendly banter, but sometimes that banter helps to resolve conflict, or brings conflict to the surface. I think in our culture we’re just so quick to run the opposite direction, specifically in Midwestern culture with the passive aggressiveness.”

James reported that he had a newfound appreciation for Mexican values because he found them “calming and nice.” Lucy echoes this sentiment when she opined that in our U.S. culture, among the values we could learn from Latinos were “Just slowing down. Appreciating the small things. Living a little more simply.” Sonya reported:

The general perceiving life of the people that I met in Mexico was very inspiring to me. The way in which they were so warm and so open, especially our [host] family, how their perspective on life was just more, it was more amplified, it was more expansive than my vision of life at that time. And I think it helped me to realize to value such as taking things a little bit easier and being a little more laid back, and being more expressing, making real connections with people.

**Work.** Several participants cited differences in work ethic.

Hard work...is a value that the U.S. really has that is in a way unique. The amount of effort and seriousness that people put into their work. In the U.S., you will never find a professional young adult who comes to work drunk, for instance. And in El Salvador, it



happens all the time, like people's personal lives are more important than their work lives, and in the U.S., they're more incorporated. (Sonya)

While Sonya reported that in U.S. culture, work lives and personal lives were more integrated, Mali reported a different perception.

Part of the reason I love Latin America is the busy-ness of it, and the chaoticness of it, and another reason why I like my neighborhood, because a lot of Latinos will create business out of seemingly nothing. I went to a restaurant that was in somebody's home. And the only reason I knew it existed was because [of] that computer class I taught.

Mali perceived that creating a business in one's personal home as evidence of ingenuity, part of the busy-ness of Latin American culture.

Philip referred to the perceptions about work ethic:

I know that people really like to talk about the American work ethic, but I can't say that I've gone to any other culture and watched people be lazy, so I don't think that that is really a valid thing for us to try and think that we should export to the rest of the world. Because I think the rest of the world works as hard or harder than we do, maybe just in a different way.

**Family.** Several participants reflected perceiving a difference in the perception or and practices regarding family. When asked what we in the U. S. could learn from other cultures with which they were familiar, Mali answered "Familial bonds." Katrina answered, "There are the typical ones like family and everything," and then she referred to an incident she had earlier reported in which her host family had waited for her for dinner for two hours, "even though I wasn't even technically their family." James reported, "A big thing was family. They were always about helping each other out. There was never this sense of 'You're on your own. There's

no help for you.' There's the sense of family." William reported the importance of family as well, with an example of a woman who emigrated from Peru and who eventually secured visas and brought her mother and brothers.

And they still live together in Syracuse, under the same house. I remember just thinking how strange it was, how I thought it was strange that they stayed together even while she was 25 and going to college. I had gone to the other side of the country to get away from my family, to get this thing called independence.

To the same question, Lucy quickly answered, "Valuing family. Taking care of each other without it seeming like such a big burden and responsibility. It's just kind of a given in many other cultures that you just take care of your family." Similarly, Sonya's response was:

Prioritizing family and friends, and even things as simple as having large family meals together, and visiting extended family frequently, and keeping alive these connections, and even between parents and child, being very close to one another and very warm. I think just that general mode of being was so different than stoic Scandinavian Minnesota, and it was something I really appreciated.

Thus, participants reported the role of family and the value of prioritizing family was something they remembered as a cultural difference.

## **Conclusion**

Pagano and Roselle (2009) employed the metaphor of light to describe the process students undergo upon their return to their home countries. Reflection implied that knowledge and experience acquired abroad, like an image in a mirror, are simply reasserted without undergoing any transformative process. As participants continued to have time to reflect, they engaged in critical thinking about their experience. The final step in the knowledge development

cycle was refraction. “Refraction is the transformative knowledge that occurs which validates the use of critical analysis and problem solving providing interpretation and conclusions of important issues and situations considering course content and the international context” (p. 221). Beyond simple reflection, knowledge is bent and shaped because it has been processed through the lens of critical analysis of new experience.

Participant descriptions about the immediate consequences of the trip revealed a new awareness of surroundings. Many participants described changed or strained relationships upon their return to the United States. Also, many participants recalled the difficulty in identifying and conveying the significance the trip had for them to their family and their peers.

Participant perceptions of the long term impact of the trip varied. All reflected some degree of personal and/or professional change as a result of the trip. Many reported developing subsequent significant personal and/or professional relationships. Most described continuing interest in Latin America and in the Spanish language. The majority described subsequent international experience in Latin America. Some participants reported professional capacities that contributed to their employment and career development.

While nearly impossible to parse out the exact effects of a month-long immersion experience abroad on the adolescents who experienced it, former sojourners interviewed for this study expressed a belief that the trip impacted their subsequent personal, educational, and professional experiences.

## **Chapter Eight: Theoretical Analysis**

In this chapter, I apply the theoretical frameworks summarized in chapter three to the findings described in chapters five, six, and seven. Broadly and in very general terms, I will show that student perceptions reveal that this particular immersion abroad experience influenced their development, led them to seek similar experiences, and contributed to their formation of critical and significant relationships with individuals who do not share their cultural heritage.

### **Piaget, Cognitive Development, and Student Experience**

In chapter three, I summarized Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development. As a constructivist, Piaget theorized that during childhood and early adolescence, individuals "actively construct qualitatively new structures of knowledge and reasoning, and that the most fundamental such changes are progressive in the sense that later cognitive structures represent higher levels of rationality than earlier ones" (Mosham, 2005, p. 4). Furthermore, Piaget theorized that all species possess two invariant processes: adaptation and organization. (Ginsburg & Opper, 1969). Organization refers to the tendency to systematize or organize processes into logical, coherent, higher-order systems. Adaptation consists of two complementary processes: assimilation, in which the individual categorizes new external input into existing psychological structures, and accommodation, in which the individual modifies existing psychological structures to accommodate new external input which disproved or contradicted their existing psychological structures. Individuals tend toward equilibrium. New knowledge or experience leads to disequilibrium. Individuals, then, automatically undergo adaptation in order to achieve a new equilibrium when reacting to new experience. Actions reflect the psychological structures; when actions become regular, they are commonly called habits. Piaget used the term habit to

refer not only to the ordered patterns of behavior but also to the basic structures underlying the behavior.

Simply put, individuals tend to organize their world into understandable chunks of knowledge. When new knowledge or experience is acquired, the individual either mentally files it into a relevant chunk, or reconstructs an existing chunk so that the new knowledge or experience will fit. Existing psychological structures might be described using the commonly applied metaphor of the “comfort zone.” New knowledge and new experiences that do not fit into an existing chunk might commonly be described as “out of one’s comfort zone” or “being stretched.” When an individual is out of the comfort zone, Piaget’s theory suggests that the individual tends to strive to regain balance, equilibrium, or comfort. Individuals might do this, then, by discerning how the new knowledge or experience relates to something with which they already feel comfortable, or by broadening their comfort zones to include the new knowledge or experiences. As new knowledge is organized, the new structures manifest themselves in new patterns or behavior or habits.

**Organization and adaptation among student participants.** Evidence of “being stretched” and “feeling comfortable,” two codes that appeared frequently in my line-by-line coding, first led me to Piaget’s theories regarding cognitive development. Having subsequently familiarized myself with the theory, I went back to the data to look specifically for other codes or missed elements that appeared to be evidence of pre-existing psychological structures and the subsequent process of organization and adaptation. I found rich data about existing psychological structures being challenged by new experiences.

Beginning with former sojourner’s anticipation of the trip, I found evidence of pre-existing psychological structures. Some participants recalled anticipating the trip as an

interesting opportunity or experience. Using the pre-existing structures and language common in educational settings, these students anticipated this new experience would fit within the existing educational paradigm: “I was a typical, like, high school over-achiever.... I enjoyed learning the language and wanted to learn it better and thought it would be a good opportunity” (Sonya). “I just think it sounded like a really neat opportunity” (Jill). Katrina recalled wanting “to learn as much Spanish as possible in as short of a time.” Words like “achiever” and “opportunity” are common vernacular among teachers and students. Participant application of these words in anticipation of the trip imply the extension of the educational paradigm to the travel abroad experience.

Subsequently, when participants reflected upon long-term impacts of the trip, the educational language was of a different tone. “...[Y]ou’ll never be the same and you’ll always have an insatiable thirst for more and for rich discovery of your world” (Lucy). “The general perceiving of life of the people that I met in Mexico was very inspiring to me” (Sonya). “Just learning about world history, and thinking about other cultures, and this trip really did change that” (Jill). Language like “insatiable thirst,” “rich discovery,” “inspiring,” and the tone of Jill’s “learning about world history and thinking about other cultures” reflects an amplified psychological structure about the trip as an educational experience.

In addition to the pre-existing educational paradigm, five of the eight former student sojourners described a pre-existing travel experience. Jill and James did not report any previous travel. Sonya reported making an intercultural connection with a Spanish-speaking child at a church camp. All other participants reported having previous international travel experience. The majority of participants, therefore, had psychological structures that already included international experiences.

Two participants reported having been to Mexico previously. “I had a new found passion for Latin America....And then you showed us the video of the other students [who had gone the year before] and I knew I had to go” (Lucy). Lucy, then, had already gone through an initial adaptation process that included accommodating her psychological structures to embrace a new found passion for Latin America. She and Katrina were the only participants to report having been abroad without her parents or guardians. Philip also reported having traveled to Mexico before the Cuernavaca trip, but he differentiated between the resorts with which he was familiar with the interior he anticipated: “I’d been to Mexico before, but only in resorts, and to actually go to Mexico...seemed really cool.” Philip already had a psychological structure that included Mexican resorts, but he anticipated the new experience would be different; he eagerly imagined the new experience.

While many participants reported an already existing travel abroad psychological structure, all participants disclosed having traveled abroad again after the experience in Mexico; most reported multiple subsequent international experiences for education or for pleasure. James described a trip to Italy he had taken with his family. William made professional decisions because of his interest in other cultures. “[My travel experiences] have pushed me towards a major that I can use that allow me to do what I love, which is to travel” (William). “Everything up until this point has really centered around my experiences traveling in Latin America, and that was my first time” (Mali). “[The Cuernavaca trip] was the first time that I would consider myself having really traveled instead of gone on vacation.... I’ve since done that probably a dozen times to all different parts of the world” (Philip). Katrina narrated trips to Costa Rica, Guatemala, Morocco, Haiti, and China. Jill studied in Mexico twice more during her undergraduate and graduate careers. “I’ve chosen to live a certain lifestyle so I can afford to travel. Or, I’ve taken a

lower-paying job that sends me abroad multiple times a year or even around the United States and works with various cultures because that's what I value over the money" (Lucy). Sonya lived in El Salvador.

Without exception, then, all former student sojourners demonstrated the significance they placed on travel. This aspect of behaviors reported by all participants perhaps best represents Piaget's conception that newly acquired structures leads to new behaviors, and when those behaviors become regularized, they can be referred to as habits. Indeed, these participants demonstrated the acquisition of the habit of travel. Of course, one cannot assume a causal relationship. I cannot pretend to discern the trip they took in high school was the cause of their appreciation of travel. Indeed, students would not have traveled at all if they did not already value it. I can safely assert, however, that the trip contributed to a psychological structure of a travel paradigm, and subsequently to a pattern of behavior, or habit, of travel.

When participants were asked about what they recalled about their attitudes and expectations leading up to the trip, many reported preconceptions about Mexico. Several used the term *stereotypes*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students who anticipated traveling to Mexico reported having preconceptions about what they would see and experience while there. In Piaget's terminology, they had constructed an organizational system, a system of logical, coherent patterns of language and experience, with which they would eventually compare and to which they would eventually adapt their own expectations and behaviors.

For a few participants, the psychological organizational paradigm of Mexico was romanticized. "I'd seen several movies that romanticized the Mexican culture, and I wanted to experience it first hand" (Lucy.) "I loved that song, 'If you like piña coladas, getting caught in the rain.' I think I thought...I thought about the beach. I thought about piña coladas...I don't



know what I thought about Mexicans. I don't think I had any idea" (Mali). Other participants had organizational paradigms of Mexico that included negative preconceptions. One confessed to having imagined Mexico as dirty: "I'm just thinking what I've seen in movies and things like that. You know, being very dirty" (Jill). Some participants anticipated security concerns: "I worried about whether I was going to be safe" (Philip). "I was a little worried about my safety" (Lucy). "I thought it was going to be a violent-filled place, just kind of full of poverty. Just kind of like a no-man's land..." (William).

While it might be safe to assume that all participants had preexisting psychological structures into which they had placed the idea of Mexico, those who admitted to preconceptions placed them on two rather polarized ends of a spectrum: romanticized as a beautiful paradise or judged as a dirty, violent country. However, when participants were asked to recall the trip itself, these preconceptions were not echoed, except in isolated instances. Only Mali's recollections reflected an aspect of something she had anticipated: Mali anticipated the beach, and one of her emblematic images was of Acapulco. No participant used language describing their experienced impressions of Mexico as being either dirty or insecure. Only Sonya reported remembering "the guards [at a checkpoint our bus stopped at] having big guns." That was the only reference to firearms in the data.

Instead of echoing their preconceived notions, participants described Mexico using primarily if not exclusively positive terms. "I was so thrilled to be there. Going back at seventeen was just a reiteration of OK, this is where I need to be" (Lucy). "When you're in one place for so long, you just want to stay there longer, because it just feels like home" (James). "I did not want to come home, because just as I was starting to feel like I was starting to get it...it was taken all away, and I went home. And I didn't want to be home. I wanted to be in Mexico" (Philip). "I

missed Mexico and the flowers and the mountains and everything. I was just devastated [when I came home]” (Lucy). When recalling the trip itself, then, participants primarily reflected the construction of psychological structures in which they associated Mexico with positive aspects.

Another example of a pre-existing psychological structure emerged during one particular interview. Although this particular example reflects an isolated bit of data, I mention it because it illustrates the experiential vs. academic knowledge, a dichotomy which will also apply when examining student perception through the lens of Erikson, identity, and symbol. James’s comical report of his first impression of Mexico is a clear example of the contrast between education in theory and experiential education: James reported his first impression of Mexico to be “Everyone spoke Spanish!” My observer comment in response to this included the word “facepalm,” a reaction with which almost any educator could empathize. However, this is perhaps a clear and easily understood illustration of an organizational structure that existed before a subsequent process of adaptation. Having studied introductory Spanish and having signed up for a language acquisition trip to Mexico, James knew that they spoke Spanish in Mexico. However, his existing organizational structure only included English as a functional language. His very first experience in the airport in Mexico City required him to adapt: he had to expand his organizational structure of functional language to include Spanish, a language he had only used previously in a very limited educational setting: the classroom.

### **Identity Development**

In chapter three, I summarized Erik Erikson’s work in identity development. “An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 3).

Erik Erikson is a foundational theorist in the field of identity; the preceding definition reflects Erikson's description of the dimensions of identity: "a process 'located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture'" (Erikson, 1968, p. 22). The process of identity formation continues throughout life. "At its best it is a process of increasing differentiation, and it becomes ever more inclusive as the individual grows aware of a widening circle of others significant to him, from the maternal person to 'mankind'" (Erikson, 1968, p. 23).

Identity is neither uniquely personal nor exclusively social. Amorphous and flexible, identity exists and develops within an individual in a social context. Its formation progresses as the individual experiences this expansion of personal spheres of experience, encountering others and thereafter assigning a level of significance to those others. Applying Piaget's hypothesis of organization and adaptation, an individual experiences a new social connection and immediately categorizes the experience. The individual adapts, either by assimilating this new experience into an existing psychological structure or by expanding an existing psychological structure to accommodate the new experience. This continuous process contributes to the fluid concept of identity.

Erikson emphasized the role of conscious interpretations and adaptive choices in development (Moshman, 2005) He wrote of cultural consolidation, a process of action, formation of habit, success or failure, in a way that make individuals become what they do. This cultural consolidation functions in identity formation and can serve to reproduce "entrenched privileges, enforced sacrifices, institutionalized inequalities, and built-in contradictions" (Erikson, 1968, p. 32).

Evidence from the interviews suggests that former sojourners, when going through the processes of organizing and adapting, acquired new psychological structures which contributed to their development of identity. In the analysis, I also encountered evidence that former sojourners and young adults demonstrated a cultural consolidation that extended beyond the cultural heritage from which they had come and included the acquisition of at least some language, behaviors, and attitudes common in other cultures.

When talking about wanting to take the trip, students faced a spectrum of reactions from their parents who would ultimately approve their travel and in some cases finance their expenses. Mali and William had family members who supported the trip in part because they themselves valued travel. William, James, and Sonya reported parental support because of the trip's potential to offer a "more global perspective" (William), because parents "really care a lot about my education" (James), or because they were "particularly interested in that idea of getting to know the world and expanding one's horizons" (Sonya). Philip anticipated opposition, but when approached, his parents "were completely OK with it." It took Lucy six months to convince her parents to let her go. Katrina's mother was against it "because she thought it was a waste of money" (Katrina). Regardless of the reaction of parents, one thread binds all these stories: each participant was proposing becoming an international traveler and needed someone else to accept and approve this new aspect of their identities. In Erikson's theory, all were experimenting with the identity of international traveler. As evidenced by subsequent travel abroad, all of these participants to varying degrees subsequently internalized and adopted the identity of international traveler.

Because identity is at once individual and social, examining the way participants described relationships informs the discussion about identity development. In anticipation of the

trip, several participants remembered initially feeling concerned about the social context of the trip, all of those participants placed their social preconceptions within the context of their anticipated immediate social contexts: the group and the host family. No participant expressed imagining a significant long-term social connection with anyone from the group or with anyone from the host culture. No participant anticipated the trip's affecting existing friendships or familial relationships.

When describing the effects of the trip, however, several participants described changed friendship structures. "It was so hard to go back to school because I felt like I had grown five years. My perspective changed. My friends changed" (Lucy). Philip talked about the trip as the first step in his own personal changing that resulted in his having less in common with his high school friends. "[The trip] helped sever a lot of high school relationships. That way that I'd say that is, when I came back from Mexico I felt like I'd changed, and nobody else had" (Philip). He reported that he has only one lasting friendship with anyone from high school. He reported that this friend "didn't understand what I had been through but at least he understood that something had changed, and was curious to learn more about it."

Having acquired this new experience, then, several participants described themselves or their perspectives as changed. In Erikson's theory, these experiences had contributed to their identities. On a personal level, these participants thought of themselves as different after having traveled. On a social level, participants had expanded their circle of significant others. In Piaget's terms, they had undergone a series of organizational and adaptive changes. Re-entering old relationships triggered a new sense of disequilibrium, requiring them to go through a new process with old friends. Some relationships survived the new scrutiny, while others did not. The aspects acquired because of the experience abroad manifested themselves in behaviors, attitudes,

and perspectives of these participants' continuously evolving identities. The new selves they presented as social objects in their old patterns required that those affected either adapt to or reject these new identities.

Continuing with the theme of relationships and their effects on identity, each participant vividly recalled interacting with their host family. "The family I was with was just very caring" (Jill). "My family was very, very caring....They made us feel very, very welcomed" (James). Mali remembered admiring her Mexican host mother because she was "a very strong woman...She seemed to call the shots." Sonya described their host family as "incredibly friendly" and "warm and welcoming." Lucy said, "my host mom was like my real mom, and she just took me in and loved me well." Lucy and Sonya also vividly recalled their host brothers. As one of her emblematic photos, Lucy chose an image of herself with Sonya and their host brothers. "We just grew so close so fast, and I think for all of us it was a very significant combination of students and host family. And it felt so good to belong to a family and have brothers....To be in that family setting and to be so welcomed and accepted and become part of the family."

Katrina recalled spending a significant amount of time with her host mother's granddaughter: "I actually still talk with my niece....She was like 12. She was 12 when I was 17, but we hung out most of the time, and she would be nit-picky about my Spanish, and [it was] really helpful."

Philip and William were roommates for their homestay, and Philip remember that their host parents were both professionals who were often away from home. In their absence, the house and the students were under the care of their cook and housekeeper, Juanita. "She was

much more comfortable and relaxed around us and friendly to us when the parents weren't home" (Philip).

Erikson (1968) asserted that children experiment with various identities whereas adolescents are often preoccupied with how others perceive them as compared with how they see themselves. In Mexico, adolescents had the opportunity to experiment with various new identities. In general, students' identities as sons or daughters in families were accepted within their host families. Participants generally referred to family members as "*mamá*" or "my mom," "my brothers," or "my niece." Only Philip and William described a family dynamic different from their experience in the U.S. because their host families had a servant who ran the house in the absence of the parents. When Juanita was in charge, everyone was more relaxed, but when the parents returned, "the house became a lot less welcoming" (Philip). Neither Philip nor William ever used the possessive "my" or "our" when talking about members of their host family. Every other participant at least once used the personal possessive pronoun "my". One explanation could be that neither Philip nor William ever accepted the identity of family member because they felt more relaxed around Juanita. Rejecting the surrogate role of sons in the family, they did not "try on" this aspect of identity.

Even though students vividly recalled their host families, only Lucy and Katrina reported maintaining contact with any members of their host families. Losing contact with these connections, however, does not mean participants lost contact with Latinos. Nearly all participants reported significant international relationships subsequent to the trip. Both Sonya and Lucy described intentionally nurturing international friends and relationships upon their return. They developed strong friendships with exchange students at their school, and together they frequented clubs and cafes that had a more international clientele. "I never thought that

going to Mexico would spark an interest in a region that would then lead to living in that region, and making friends in that region, and having relationships in that region, and now I will be living my whole life, in some extent, in El Salvador” (Sonya).

Thus, participant experimentation with identities of son, daughter, friend, and student of Mexicans influenced their relationships with Latinos and with individuals from other cultures as well.

**Symbolic interaction and identity theory.** One explanation of the manner in which former sojourners achieved the equilibrium Piaget described that individuals seek in their process of categorizing and adapting is the acquisition of new meanings associated with social language, objects, or practices. In brief, the acquisition of symbol and symbolic associations contributed to the individual’s ability to adapt and categorize. “The meaning of the things toward which people act is seen as falsifying the behavior under study. To bypass the meaning in favor of factors alleged to produce the behavior is seen as a grievous neglect of the role of meaning in the formation of behavior” (Blumer, 1969).

Attributed to George Herbert Mead and coined by Herbert Blumer, symbolic interactionism represents a sociological perspective that centralizes the thinking individual’s social interaction as the way a person interprets environments and defines meaning. Perspectives influence one’s perception of reality. “Reality is social, and what we see ‘out there’ (and within ourselves) is developed in interaction with others” (Charon, 2010, p. 43).

As described in chapter three, symbolic interaction is closely associated with identity formation. One reason for this is that the self *itself* is a social object. The individual, in interaction with others, becomes a symbolized object, the meaning of which is understood in social context.



**Gringa.** “We are what we are in our relationship to other individuals through taking the attitude of the other individuals toward ourselves” (Mead, 1967, p. 278). The confluence of identity and self as social object can be illustrated in several participants’ referring to themselves as *gringos* during the interviews. A *gringo* or *gringa* is how Latinos, sometimes in neutral terms, sometimes affectionately, and sometimes in a derogatory way, refer to a White person. During the interviews, it became apparent that several participants had internalized the label and used it as part of their common vernacular. “The dining room would always end up being the *gringos*, and the living room would always end up being Latinos” (Lucy). “It was a great experience...being able to try to use my Spanish with them, and I’m sure they were kind of annoyed by it at some times. ‘We’ve got this little *gringa* trying to speak Spanish to us?’” (Jill). “I remember being able to [speak to the congregation in Spanish so easily, and people just looking at me like, “Who is this *gringa* who’s speaking Spanish?” (Sonya). Mali told of a conversation she had with some of the elementary students with whom she worked: “‘¿Eres latina?’ and I’m like, no, but in here I am, in my heart I am, but, no. I’m a *gringa*. I’m from here.” The ease of expression with these four participants used the word *gringa* shows they have acquired the term as part of their vernacular. Sonya and Jill referred to themselves as *gringa* in imagined dialog, putting the descriptor in the imagined voice of the Latinos with whom they were interacting. Mali described herself using the term in a conversation with Latino students.

“First of all, it is through symbols that individuals are socialized--coming to share the rules, ideas, and values of the group as well as coming to learn their roles in relation to everyone else” (Charon, 2010, p. 60). All four of these participants acknowledged the term *gringa* in descriptions of themselves or their peers. Thus, these participants showed evidence of adapting

the term as part of their identities. The self as social object, then, is *gringa*, at least in the presence of Latinos.

**Identity, social constraint, and connection.** Blumer (1967) defined human groups as individuals who are engaging in action. Human society, then, exists and must be viewed as in action. “Put simply, human beings in interacting with one another have to take account of what each other is doing or is about to do; they are forced to direct their own conduct or handle their situations in terms of what they take into account” (Blumer, 1967, p. 8). Individuals act within groups, and individual actions are influenced by and reactive to the actions of others. Group association, then, influences the behaviors of the individuals within a group.

Students and their parents had to sign a behavior contract before students were accepted into group traveling abroad. Certain rules were enumerated, including avoiding alcohol, tobacco, or drugs; never driving a car or motorcycle in Mexico; being on time for all activities and classes; always informing a staff member from Renovar or a chaperone (me) when they leave their host families’ homes; and always having an adult chaperone when leaving their host homes. Failure to follow these rules would lead to consequences, which might include being sent home at their parents’ expense. Compliance with the rules was a requisite for belonging to this group. Deviance from the rules risked disassociation from the group. While that in itself might not have been important enough to deter rule-breaking behavior, rejection from the group meant expulsion from the country. That consequence perhaps served as a stronger deterrent. In my experience of leading various trips throughout the years, I have only had to invoke that radical consequence once, when a student’s behavior put herself and others at risk. Regardless, several participants, sometimes sheepishly even after ten years, confessed to some sort of rule-breaking behavior.

Katrina confessed to driving a car. Jill recounted traveling to a nearby town with three other girls in her cohort. She also confessed that she and others went out drinking on more than one occasion. Lucy and Sonya both confessed to going out with their host brothers and to consuming alcohol on more than one occasion. Philip celebrated his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday while in Mexico and reported being taken out for drinks and partying for several nights in a row.

All of these students were informed of the rules before they left, and had signed documents saying they were willing to abide by them. However, when given the opportunities, many students rejected the rules and opted to accept these invitations. In these choices, I posit that students were rejecting one identity and trying on another. Signing the behavior contract was the way students became part of the group that traveled to Mexico. As a school group, certain expectations were imposed on its members. Members willingly agreed to those expectations in order to have the opportunity to travel. Obviously, travel and not group membership was their primary goal.

However, when opportunities arose that required student participants to make a choice between following the rules of the group and experiencing something new, many students renounced, albeit temporarily, their membership in the group. In other words, they rejected their group identities and tried on new identities constructed in the context of new relationships. In these particular instances of rule-breaking behavior, student participants identified themselves more closely with their Mexican peers, relationships, and practices, than with their U.S. school group. As a group leader, I am appalled. As an educator wanting to see students connect with cultures other than their own, I am thrilled. These students rejected the social structure they did not construct but which they had agreed to and accepted common cultural practices in relationship with others. Perhaps in these actions, students were creating psychological structures

of the *other* as peer, ally, and friend. Allying themselves with their Mexican peers for diversion may have been a step contributing to later critical long-term connections.

Mead (1967) addressed the genesis of self within the background factor of language. Essential to the understanding of the construction of the self as an object is the understanding that the self exists in the context of the other, and that communication between the self and the other relies on symbol. “What is essential to communication is that the symbol should arouse in one’s self what it arouses in the other individual. It must have that sort of universality to any person who finds himself in the same situation” (Mead, 1967, p. 149). The organized social group to which the individual belongs, Mead asserted, is the “generalized other.” If an individual is a member of a team, the team is the “generalized other.” “The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community” (Mead, 1967, p. 154). In the construction of the self, the individual takes on the attitude of the group, and then responds to social activity in a manner consistent with the attitude manifested by that group. “Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed” (Mead, 1967, p. 155).

The self is only the self in the presence and shared practices of the “generalized other,” and that “generalized other” is the immediate social or community group to which the individual belongs and with which the individual identifies. Within the context of rule-breaking behavior among participants while traveling abroad as adolescents, evidence indicates that some participants to varying degrees disassociated themselves from their previous immediate social group, their U.S. born student peers and teacher, and allied themselves to a new social group,

thereby acquiring a psychological structure claiming the “generalized other,” their “team” in the above sports metaphor, as their Mexican peers.

**Physical space as symbol.** Mead (1967) addressed the concept of the self and physical space. When speaking of physical objects, Mead again theorized that the attitude of the individual toward a physical object is the attitude the individual acquired from the generalized other. “We take the attitude of social beings toward them” (Mead, 1967, p. 183.) The individual interacts with the environment using cues gleaned from the social response to the environment. The enjoyment of the physical thing may be an individual experience, but the thing itself is universal. “We isolate a particular locality to which any person may come. We have a set of apparatus which any person may use....In this sense the physical thing comes in to make possible a common quality within which the selves can operate” (Mead, 1967, p. 185). The experience might be individual, but the physical space or object is universal. Thus, the experience is not singularly within one individual but is social. An individual reacts to the object in the manner consistent with the reaction of the group with which the individual identifies.

While I was going through the process of coding, I was surprised by student participants’ recollections of physical spaces. As I sorted through the data, I became aware that physical spaces functioned as significant social objects that led to new understandings and connections for several participants.

Mali was one participant who explicitly connected physical space and symbol. She had chosen a picture of the Mexican flag in the Zócalo of Mexico City as an emblematic photo. In an e-mail clarifying her narration of this picture, Mali wrote:

I chose this photo specifically because out of hundreds of Mexico photos, this one en el Zócalo is the only picture that hangs on my wall to this day. I figured this must have

some significance then, right? However, I realize that it is merely a place marker. A symbol. It doesn't capture any of my experience really, but I call it "quintessential" because what it does capture is my connection to this country that I cannot call mine, but with whom I feel solidarity and a sense of belonging, while concurrently feeling completely out-of-place.

For Mali, the image of the Mexican flag flying in the Zócalo is one that remains on her wall years later. She explained that it is a symbol of her connection to a country which she cannot claim as her own, but with which she feels solidarity. Significantly as well, Mali feels a sense of belonging to this country. The image itself became a symbol for her, a social object displayed in her home after years of experience and various subsequent trips to Latin American countries in Central and South America. For her, the image represents belonging, solidarity, and, paradoxically, feeling completely out of place.

Another emblematic image Mali chose was a picture in Acapulco. For her, the image represented escape from a difficult life to a paradise-on-earth. Remember, Mali had described herself as an "at-risk youth" with "a history of homelessness." In narrating the image, Mali explained its significance in this manner: "Escaping my life, and the idea of paradise. I was obsessed with the beach after that, even. After going to the beach, ...it's kind of what you imagine heaven to be." The physical space of the beach became for Mali a profoundly personal social object. "Escaping" the difficulties of her life to a place like "heaven" led her to become "obsessed with the beach." Coupled with the narration of the image of the Mexican flag in the Zócalo, these two images appear to indicate that during this trip Mali began to ally herself with a new culture in which she found escape, solidarity, and belonging after a history of feeling adrift.

“We overcome space and time through representations of future, past, and other realities beyond the immediate... We are able to inhabit simultaneously the past, ...the present and the future” (Charon, 2010, p. 65). The simultaneous occupation of past and present emerged in the data regarding space as symbol. Philip chose a picture of the *Plaza de tres culturas* as an emblematic image. In his narration, Philip revealed a newly discovered understanding of history, differentiating what he assumed was the Mexican experience with his own regarding a sense of the continuities of civilizations. In the U. S., and particularly in Minnesota, Philip asserted, “we don’t have this sense of history that other completely different societies have existed in this exact same space.” This sense that space is permanent and culture is transient was for him a new realization as an adolescent abroad. The concept that history influences current attitudes and beliefs occurred to him in that moment, or in reflecting later about that moment: “That was the first time I’d really realized that the sense of history that other cultures and locations have really can change their outlook.” This *plaza*, or the image of the *plaza*, became for Philip symbolic of an expanded understanding of the confluence of history, space, and culture.

Sonya had a similar realization at the top of a pyramid in Teotihuacán:

Being at the top of the Pyramid of the Sun and of the Moon, and looking out at the surroundings around that area was just very impressive in terms of associating with a different history and a different cultural history, and just imagining entirely different roots than the roots with which I was familiar as a Minnesotan.

For Sonya, being in the space and contemplating the surroundings led to associate with a different history and to imagine “entirely different roots.” In the interview, she described the memory of that excursion “not just an ‘Aha moment’ but an ‘Aha day.’”

Space as symbol of history also emerged in William's narrations of three different emblematic photos. In the first, William shared an image of him at the top of Aztec ruins with a small pueblo off in the distance. "I like the contrast between modern and the old world, because this whole photo reminded me of a town like the 1900s and how I would have imagined Mexico back then. It kind of represented modern culture and American cultures." Then, he imagined how long it would have taken Hernán Cortés to arrive at the same location. The juxtaposition of modern and historical existing in the same space led William to imagine the historical experience of another "other" who could have visited the same space.

Another image William chose as emblematic was what he described as himself in the gardens of the *Hacienda de Cortés*.

I remember coming across this peacock....I kind of thought that a peacock really represented luxury, and that kind of effect that Hernán Cortés had, a Spaniard, coming over....It was the neatest place, how cool it was. It was so old. It seemed so old, and so luxurious. And especially trying to remember back then, whoever occupied that ground must have lived.

The peacock became a symbolic object representing luxury, as did the space itself. Associating both the peacock and the space itself with luxury, William sought the source of that association, which for him was Hernán Cortés. In William's description, these symbols of luxury had Spanish origins because Hernán Cortés had "[come] over" from Europe to the space in which William had been standing at the moment the image was captured. Again, the space led William to imagine the experiences of those who occupied the same space.



The third image William chose that shows evidence of symbolic objects and space was of him holding a bar of silver in Taxco, a town built and sustained because of its association with the mining of silver.

I remember getting the silver bar and thinking how cool it was that I was holding such a huge chunk of metal, like that was so valuable, and I just thought this was very emblematic of the town, because the whole town was built off the silver mining... Without silver, that town wouldn't have existed and the buildings, or the church that we saw, or the people would have been there.... Showing the power of, I guess, how commodities affect where people end up.

For William, the silver bar he was holding was “emblematic of the town” that would not have existed without silver mining. In his reflection, he assigned the image broader meaning by claiming that shows the power of “how commodities affect where people end up.” That commodities have the power to determine people’s locations is something that is probably addressed in social studies classes; William’s association of that truism with this image shows the association of the symbol of a piece of silver with a cultural practice of economic development.

Evidence of physical space as symbol emerged in interviews with Mali, Philip, Sonya, and William. For Mali, the connections were personal and perhaps due to life circumstances. For Philip, Sonya, and William, the connections were personal as well, but the connection extended beyond their personal association with space to their awareness of the historical. Their descriptions indicated an expansion of their own personal context to include a historical context as well, and to place themselves within that physical as well as historical context. Mead’s (1967) theory would suggest that part of the explanation of this connection with the historical is that

these individuals had at least in part begun to react within the context of the new “generalized other,” the new “team,” with which they were beginning to associate.

**Food and drink as symbol.** Perhaps the most pervasive examples of symbol that emerged throughout the interviews were those elements relating to food and drink. The contexts in which participants described their memories indicated that food went beyond something to fill their stomachs. Participants associated meals with hospitality and relationships. In other words, food and drink emerged as symbols for participants; eating represented an interaction that provoked a change of perspective for each participant.

At one level, food was simply different, and the difference was novel. In the journal posted for parents and interested parties for the 2010 trip, I recounted an event I had not experienced with any previous group. On one group excursion to the *mercado*, our guide stopped at a stand and purchased a baggie full of *jumiles*, a beetle-shaped live bug about a centimeter in length. Our guide said they were a popular snack in some rural areas of Mexico. Some students reacted with enthusiasm, and some with repulsion. After a fair amount of daring, including my saying I would try one if each of the group did, almost all student participants ate a *jumil*. Along with pictures of student faces, some smiling and some wincing, I posted in our on-line journal, “Most students agreed it tasted like cinnamon. Some appreciated it more than others!”

(Wikispace entry, July 14, 2010)

As I recall, James was rather nonchalant about the episode. He tasted the bug, shrugged, and said something like, “Yeah, like cinnamon.” During his interview, James imbedded this experience while talking about various trips to the *mercado*.

One time we would go out to the market and look at different, just look at different foods that they would be selling. We’d eat. We ate...we ate insects at one

point. Sometimes we'd go out just to a different kind of market, say, like where they just sold clothes or something and looked at the different clothing that they would sell.

The fact that, while talking about excursions, James commented on the insects without mentioning other food indicated it made an impression, but the lack of emotion or repulsion surrounding the comment reflected his acceptance of the experience as normal.

Eating an insect is not something within the normal range of experience for most U. S. adolescents; in context, however, the *jumil* was a social object that became symbolic of what would be found in a market. Further, it became symbolic of risk-taking, as indicated by the daring among the group before most of us tried it. The act of eating it might represent students' willingness to overcome the U.S. cultural aversion to ingesting bugs, their desire to experience something unique, or the importance they placed on being part of the group and doing what others did. "Every day we encounter countless physical objects. To make sense out of them, the human actor must isolate, identify, and catalog them. How do we do that? To great extent it is done by social interaction..." (Charon, 2010, p. 44-45). The *jumil* was a physical object that students isolated, identified, but then cataloged differently based on the new social definition of "rural snack" and/or "group dare."

Nearly all participants remembered being served food by their host mothers. Sonya, recounted

...[We] always had papaya for breakfast too, and neither Lucy nor I liked papaya, and we tried to force ourselves to eat it because we felt too bad to say to Mamá, 'Hey we don't like papaya.' She would feed us a big bowl of papaya every morning.

By accepting and trying “to force” themselves to eat this fruit with which the students were not familiar, Sonya elevated the papaya to the level of symbol. “[H]uman beings see objects not ‘in the raw’, but only through a perspective of some kind. We learn what things are and what they are good for” (Charon, 2010, p. 45) In Sonya’s interpretation, papaya was defined differently from her and mama’s perspective. Feeling too bad to confess their dislike of the fruit indicated their recognition that papaya, for their *mamá*, might have represented hospitality, her desire to express affection through food, or at least her pride in presenting the students with a meal they enjoyed. Their trying to eat it despite their dislike of it represented their acceptance of hospitality and their unwillingness to appear ungrateful.

Sonya also recounted eating beans for breakfast:

[We] would get up and eat breakfast, usually of papaya and beans, and I remember that I thought it was so weird to eat beans for breakfast, but then by the end of the month I remember I really grew to enjoy beans for breakfast, and nowadays beans are, like, all I eat for breakfast.

Beans for breakfast was initially “so weird.” In her culture of heritage, Sonya may have occasionally eaten beans maybe for lunch or dinner, at a barbecue perhaps. Being served beans for breakfast, a cultural practice very common in Latin America, was not something with which Sonya was familiar. Interviewed years after the trip, however, Sonya is now a young professional, living and working in El Salvador. Beans for breakfast, now, are a normal part of her daily life.

Beans became a social object whose use changed for Sonya. “Anything can become a social object for the human actor. ‘It’ changes as our use for it changes” (Charon, 2010, p. 47). Thus, beans were symbolic on a number of levels. In the U.S., beans are for lunch or dinner;

eating them for breakfast in Mexico represented an expansion of their social use for Sonya. On another level, beans for breakfast represented a cultural practice that was unusual for Sonya but that eventually became her cultural practice as well. Essentially, then, eating beans for breakfast represent Sonya's integration of a cultural practice and claiming it as her own.

James also recounted his *mamá* serving him an unusual dish. His narration of this episode in response to a series of questions that began when he expressed his memory about the family and "how caring they really, really were" showed the value he placed on their care as expressed in food.

...[We] came in, and [mamá] said she was going to make us fish, and I was like, oh great, she's gonna make like some dish of fish, like cut it up, and then, five minutes later, we have this plate coming out. There's a fish on there. Literally. No, like, the skin was still on there, you could see the eyes, and I was like, OK. I ate it. It was very good, and I was like, "Wow."

In the U.S., we are not accustomed to being served a whole fish. We tend to be repulsed by being reminded that we are eating something that used to be alive; eyes on our food are often enough to turn our stomachs. James' reaction likely typifies a normal adolescent reaction to seeing a whole cooked fish on a plate. Once again, fish is a social object that for the typical U.S. adolescent means something dressed and baked or breaded and fried. When it was served whole, James interpreted the dish as a different form of the social object. His tone delivering the "OK" reflected his initial uncertainty when the dish was served. The phrase "I ate it" perhaps indicated his belief that his eating a whole fish might have been in doubt. Finishing this story with, "I was like, 'Wow,'" affirmed his appreciation for the food, but also indicated his surprise that this social object, despite its being served with eyes and skin, satisfied and even impressed him.

In U.S. culture, students are socialized to the idea of fish served in a certain way. James' role as guest in a home required that he accept and at least taste the social object, fish, as it was served to him, whole. His surprise and approval reflected his acceptance of the expanded understanding of the social object. The definition, for him, expanded to include the new presentation.

Lucy reported a cultural practice she acquired in Mexico and that she linked with a subsequent career.

Another thing that was probably kind of influential was they had this huge custom of *café con pan dulces*, or sweet bread and coffee at night. And, we would do that every night with our mom, and that was my first experience with coffee. And, you know, it was sort of the beginning of my journey of what coffee signifies is building relationships, having fellowship, coming up with ideas. Spending quality time, which is part of the reason I so enjoyed my five years working with coffee.

Lucy was explicit in her associating coffee with the significance of “building relationships, having fellowship, coming up with ideas.” For her, the social object coffee became a symbol for time spent with people and making personal connections. After college graduation, Lucy began a career with a coffee import/export business, a job from which she had just recently resigned at the time of our interview. Her next professional endeavor was working with a non-governmental organization that focused on improving women's health through coffee cooperatives; she left in May for six months in Nicaragua. Coffee, for Lucy, became symbolic of relationship building, a livelihood, and then an avenue for service in the field of healthcare. For Lucy, coffee also came to represent something people in the United States can learn from people in Latin America:

We [in the U.S.] need to learn to slow down. We need to learn to value family. My favorite thing is to sit around the table and be with people that I love. I love to do it over food. I love to do it over coffee. I love to do it over wine. Just put me in a room, around a table, and that table and that food or whatever it is you've got in front of you facilitates community and conversation and long-lasting relationships.

For Lucy, coffee, food, and wine are symbolic of coming together. Those social objects are used, in her perspective, as ways to bring people into community and into lasting relationships. Additionally, they became emblematic of what the U.S. culture lacks, the ability to relax, to enjoy a meal, to value family.

Katrina encountered the concept of meal as symbolic interaction when she inadvertently violated the expectation of promptness for meals. "When I came home, my family, they had people over, and they were all waiting for me to get home before they ate, which I found really sad, because I was two hours late." The idea of a meal as an almost sacred space shared among family members and guests was a concept unknown to Katrina. Meals in the U.S. tend to be quick, grabbed on the go, or heated up in the microwave when one gets home after work, practice, or social activities. However, the newly acquired knowledge was something Katrina found significant enough to recall years later, perhaps because of the emotion of sadness she experienced because of learning its importance belatedly.

Images of food and associating food with caring also emerged when students recalled Dolores. Four of the six participants who traveled during years when Dolores worked at Renovar remembered her little *puesto* and the food she served them. Lucy remembered Dolores making "those amazing *sopes*." Jill remembered "the little lady who would make you whatever. *Sopes*."

She then lamented, “I have not had a good *sope* in ten years!” William confessed, “I don’t remember anything about the class. The only thing I actually remember about Renovar was this woman named Dolores, who made *sopes*, and they were my favorite food, and all they were was just a piece of bread with refried beans and sour cream and tomatoes on top of it.” Philip chose a photograph of Dolores as one of his five photographs emblematic of the trip, explaining “the reason I included her is she was awesome. As soon as you met her, she became, she was like your favorite aunt. She was just this very solid, very familiar, very, very warm and welcoming presence at the school in Mexico.”

Jill used food as a way to differentiate the Cuernavaca trip from subsequent trips to Mexico she took:

When I went back for a study abroad in 2003, I lived with a family that was very European, and all of the food that they cooked was very European. It wasn’t like, *frijoles*, *masa*, and things like that. And I kind of missed that. I was like, “Oh, I want my *huaraches*, or something like that. So that’s something I really loved about this trip, is that it was....It felt more authentically Mexican than some of the other times I’ve been back.

For Jill, the food she was served during this initial experience abroad became elevated to the level of the standard to which subsequent experiences were compared. The *frijoles*, *masa*, and *huaraches* symbolized for her something “authentically Mexican.”

**The trip itself as symbol.** The trip itself emerged as symbol in various manifestations.

Three participants recalled their difficulty in conveying the significance of the trip to their family and friends. “Your family cares, but really they just want you to snap back into it. Like get with it, get over it. You’re here. Snap out of it” (Lucy). “It was a bit difficult explaining



the meaning to [my family]. Probably because it was difficult to articulate to myself at that time, exactly what the significance was” (Sonya).

[My parents] didn’t understand how to listen, or how to ask. I had never experienced that before.... And for me, it was something much more fundamental and important and kind of life changing than that. And so it was really frustrating to hear that sort of nonchalance.... They didn’t really understand what I was going through, and I wasn’t, I didn’t understand it well enough to be able to explain it. (Philip)

Lucy, Sonya, and Philip recalled their inability to convey the significance of their experiences to their families; Sonya and Philip attributed this difficulty to their own lack of understanding of the meaning of what they had experienced.

In describing what the trip signified for her, Lucy responded with a metaphor: “Imagine a ship navigating in the open sea, and my trajectory was shifted a degree or so because of these experiences, and now a decade, over a decade later, I am in a completely different place than I would have been on that original trajectory.” The trip for her was something that impacted her so that her “trajectory was shifted,” not by much, but enough to put her on a different path that led her to “a completely different place.”

### **Critical Pedagogy and Student Perceptions, Attitudes, and Behaviors**

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2003) exhorted that humanization is the vocation of the people, and that the task of the oppressed is to restore humanity to themselves and to their oppressors. The singular path toward this humanization is through dialog grounded in truth and undertaken in love. Through the vehicle of literacy and the process of conscientization, Freire and his students engaged in a process of reading the world and acting to transform it.

Giroux (1981) asserted that schools sustain and produce ideologies that serve to maintain hegemony. Furthermore, schools serve the purpose of reproducing the current social strata, a practice that guarantees a continued systemic emphasis on maintaining the privileged class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Ross & Vinson, 2009).

Throughout the research, I was very cognizant of the question of whether this immersion trip abroad had any counter-hegemonic effect on former sojourners. In this section, I examine the data using the lens of critical pedagogy.

When interviewing staff members of Renovar, I became aware of the deliberate grounding of the school's educational practices in critical pedagogy. According to Daniel Martínez, in the 1960s, Jesuit priest and radical educator Ivan Illich founded the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca as a means to counter two forces that Illich perceived would contribute to cultural imperialism in Latin America: John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress and Pope John XXIII's call for priests and nuns to help modernize the Latin American church. Later, educators trained with this school would establish Renovar Language Institute. Thus, Renovar's parent institution was grounded in a school whose purpose was to counter the hegemonic practices of the U.S. and of the Church.

Renovar emphasized homestays and educational excursions because these avenues allowed students to experience the culture while learning the language. During its history of evolving pedagogies, Renovar leaders became what Daniel described as *Krashenistas*, or subscribers to Dr. Stephen Krashen's Theory of Language Acquisition. One of the five hypotheses Krashen proported was that of the affective filter, or the tendency for students' emotional state to influence the amount of language a student can acquire. If students' affective

filters are high, they feel anxious or worried, and they will acquire less language. If students' affective filters are low, they are relaxed or energized, and they will acquire more language.

Freire's (2003) conception of educator and student as coworkers in the educational in the education process is central to critical pedagogy. In traditional education, Freire describes a banking model, in the teacher makes deposits and the students are passive recipients of the teacher's expertise, beliefs, or knowledge. In contrast, critical pedagogy exhorts that the teacher and the student work together to advance the expertise and knowledge of both teacher and student.

The concept of *convivencia* that emerged during the interviews with the staff and Renovar reflect a modified model of the partnership to which Freirian critical pedagogs aspire. The purpose of the classes is clear: students are in Mexico, and in class, to learn the language. However, the creation of a relaxed atmosphere of parties and social get-togethers as well as the informality described in María's accounting of the cooking classes show an awareness and belief in both Krashen's theory of affective filter and Freire's concept of a less rigid banking model of education and a more flexible peer relationship between student and teacher. During the interviews, the importance staff members placed on this *convivencia* was evident.

Despite this, few student participants remembered anything about the school, their classes, or their teachers. If this deliberate construction of opportunities for *convivencia* influenced the perceptions, attitudes, or behaviors of the participants, those participants were unaware or disinterested in its influence.

However, one goal of critical pedagogy is to draw people of privilege into relationships with people excluded from privilege, or people of the hegemonic group into relationships with the "other," for the purpose of mutual understanding and with the goal of dismantling systems

that perpetuate oppression. Hegemony refers “to an organized assemblage of meanings and practices, the central, effective, and dominant system of meanings, values, and actions which are *lived* (Apple, 2004, p. 4) While evidence did not indicate that any of the former participants were actively involved in radical social movements laboring for political or social change, evidence suggests that personal behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives of participants differ from the dominant systems of the hegemony. In short, student participant perceptions reveal a degree of conscientization about the self, the other, and systems of power and privilege.

Freire (2003) called for the oppressed to restore humanity to themselves and to their oppressors through dialog grounded in truth and undertaken in love. With the exception of James, the youngest participant at the time of the interview, and the one who had most recently traveled, each participant reported subsequent significant personal relationships with people of cultures other than that of the hegemonic group. Nigerian, Indian, Nicaraguan, Salvadorian, Vietnamese American, Chinese, Mexican are among those cultures represented by individuals who have entered into significant personal relationships with seven of these participants in the years following their adolescent immersion experience abroad.

Jill described that as a result of her experiences, she had an increased awareness of Mexican culture and a corresponding sensitivity to negative stereotyping when she encountered it upon her return:

I think I looked at people differently [after the trip]. I mean, a lot of the stereotypes that I had coming in to it really kind of melted away, and I had more of an understanding, and it would irk me a lot more when people would make comments about stereotypes about Mexicans. It was like, hey, I've been there, and, they're not like that. And it would really bother me a lot more.

In this quote, Jill narrated that her personal experience moved her to confront “comments about stereotypes about Mexicans” and to challenge those stereotypes.

William applied his experience to his understanding of the intolerance of Muslims that was manifested during the proposed construction of a Mosque: “Unless you really understand their culture...the importance of why they do certain things, you can’t really say, ‘Oh, look, these people, they’re...terrible people....’ It’s just such a blatant comment that’s just so wrong.”

Philip narrated his role as a cultural mediator of sorts when he served as an interpreter for a medical team in Mexico:

I’d hear the other Americans very frustrated about, they’re trying to set up this medical clinic and get 2500 people through in three days,...and why don’t people want to work with us? And trying to explain, the way you see the situation the way they see the situation are just very different. It’s not opposing viewpoints, but it’s just, you see it differently, and you know, they value different things, and the American viewpoint is kind of unique in terms of efficiency and time and all these different things.

His awareness of cultural differences and his ability to negotiate interpretations in order to avoid potential misjudgment evidences at least an attempt to bring two disparate groups together to work toward a common goal.

Mali demonstrated an increased awareness of privilege in her narration of the significance of a photograph of a little boy. As a young 14-year-old, she took a picture of a small boy she thought was “so cute.” As an adult, she recognized the cultural privilege she was exercising when she was young:

I wouldn’t have taken his picture if we were traveling to the mountains in Colorado. But we were in Mexico, so I felt like I could. And I couldn’t communicate with him, so I

couldn't even ask him if it was OK to take his picture. I just did it. I mean, I even pushed him up against the rocks.

More evidence of Mali's awareness of privilege came in correspondence we shared after I had sent participants my findings and asked for their feedback. Mali wanted to clarify what the significance of the picture of the Mexican flag in the Zócalo. She wrote, "because what it does capture is my connection to this country that I cannot call mine, but with whom I feel solidarity and a sense of belonging, while concurrently feeling completely out-of-place." As a follow-up, I asked her to explain what she meant by "concurrently feeling completely out-of-place." In response, Mali wrote:

I constantly question whether my appreciation for Latin American culture ventures into appropriation. Often times I make myself uncomfortable with the answers to this question. For this reason I can never really truly belong. I am forever out of place. Questioning my spot in the in-betweens of "valid" identities and cultures. Mexican. Latina. White. Gringa. American. USAmerican. So many labels and not enough room for intersectionalities. No matter how much time I spend abroad, at the end of the day I'm still a white girl born in the USA. That comes with a lot of privilege that just can't be tossed aside. It's about time for white people to feel out of place and uncomfortable.

Terms like "appropriation," " 'valid' identities," "gringa," "USAmerican," and "intersectionalities" are evidence of a level of conscientization probably atypical of a White, middle-class woman in her mid-twenties.

### **From New Experience to Conscientization**

"Culture now plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, images, and desiring maps that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think about

themselves and the relationship to others” (Giroux, 2011, p. 138). Cultural hegemony influences in myriad ways the way people think about themselves and others. Cultural and social reproduction guarantees that those with privilege will reproduce systems and structures that maintain their privilege, perpetuating the polarized duality Freire (2003) labeled oppressor and oppressed. Drawing the oppressor into a relationship with the oppressed, through loving dialog, for the purpose of shared social action counteracts the perpetuation of systems of unequal power.

The evidence within the confines of this study shows that participants perceive that a trip they took as adolescents influenced their attitudes and actions and led them to not only an increased awareness of others traditionally marginalized but also to the inclusion of the traditionally marginalized within their circles of others significant to them.

Evidence suggests that during the trip, participants experienced episodes of disequilibrium because of unfamiliar circumstances, practices, and language. Through the invariant psychological processes of accommodation and assimilation, they adapted their own attitudes and behaviors, constructing new psychological organizational structures. During this process, they reached new understandings of social objects as symbols with different meanings. They saw themselves in relation to a generalized other that included their Mexican peers and families, thereby acquiring new aspects to their identities. They subsequently sought new intercultural and international experiences that in some cases affirmed the psychological structures they had constructed, or that caused them to undergo further adaptation and organization. Almost invariably, they established significant long-term friendships and relationships. While no participant showed evidence of belonging to a group working for social or political change, every participant demonstrated some degree of conscientization.

### **Chapter Nine: Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research**

In this phenomenological case study, I invited twelve participants to share their perspectives and experiences regarding a short-term immersion abroad experience. Four of these individuals were staff of Renovar Language Institute, the school which had partnered with me since the year 2000 to provide opportunities for adolescents to spend the summer in Mexico studying, traveling, and living with families. These four served as secondary informants. The other eight primary study participants were young adults who had traveled with me to Mexico in one of multiple trips I led.

The study addressed the following questions: years after their initial educational immersion trip abroad, how do former cultural sojourners feel the month-long journey they took in high school impacted them? What did they take away from the experience that enriched their knowledge, skills and insight? Did they get below the cultural surface? What did they learn, did it change them, and if so, how?

I found no literature that analyzed the experiences of secondary students in a program similar to the one I led hosted by Renovar Language Institute. In a review of the literature regarding the outcomes of postsecondary study abroad experiences, I found that those students reported a variety of outcomes including increased intercultural awareness, empathy, global understanding, linguistic competence, and tolerance for ambiguity. Additionally, students who traveled abroad in college were reported to be more patient, sensitive, mature, independent, and self-confident as well as to have broader perspective consciousness, or the ability to question one's own assumptions. Significant relationships with members of the host culture, or at least significant social interaction with host-country peers, proved important in the development and sustenance of long-term identification with the host culture; students solidly positioned within a



social discourse network experienced higher language acquisition, which is associated with stronger ties to the host culture. Subsequent positive intercultural learning and social experiences contribute to the acquisition of positive intercultural skills and attitudes. Reflection and critical thinking about the experience are important for the long-term transformative impact of the experience.

The literature on postsecondary study abroad experience informed the construction of this study, and the data that emerged from interviews with adults as they reflected about adolescent experiences echoed the findings in the literature. Participants described increased cultural awareness, empathy, global understanding, linguistic competence, and tolerance for ambiguity. Additionally, participants recalled feeling changed: more mature, independent, and self-confident. Many of those that described the most significant personal change were those that had developed the most significant relationships with their Mexican hosts. All participants sought subsequent positive intercultural learning and social experiences in the form of travel; many participants traveled extensively after their Mexico experience. Most participants reported significant friendships and/or other personal relationships with those not of the hegemonic cultural group.

I analyzed the data using the lenses of theories of cognitive development, identity, and critical pedagogy. Here is the nexus of what I assert the evidence suggests regarding student perceptions of a summer immersion abroad experience: these students underwent a series of new experiences in which they acquired new understanding of symbolized social activity and objects; through the process of categorization and adaptation, they created new psychological structures which included newly acquired relationships and habits. These newly acquired aspects of the self contributed to their identity development; the selves they subsequently presented in social

context included the internalized psychological structures acquired while abroad thereby widening their circles of others significant to them. Subsequently, students sought opportunities to repeat and/or expand this process of adaptation to different cultures, leading them to travel again, and to associate with others with similar attitudes or experiences, causing a distancing of some relationships and a developing of new relationships. Because of these acquired experiences, participants underwent a process of cultural consolidation not based exclusively on the hegemonic White middle-class culture in which they were predominantly reared, but rather included a perception of the other within their own identities.

### **Implications for Leadership**

Critical pedagogy asserts that all education is political. Bordieu and Passeron (1990) purport that the education system functions to reproduce current systems of power and privilege. Without deliberate intervention, hegemonic patterns of power and privilege remain unchanged; Freire's oppressor and oppressed continue static. Freire (2003) asserted that it is the task of the oppressed to restore humanity to themselves and to the oppressors, and that this humanization can only occur through dialog grounded in truth and undertaken in love.

Incumbent upon critical pedagogs, therefore, is to seek experiences that facilitate the conscientization of both the oppressed and the oppressor. In a world that has become increasingly interconnected because of globalization and technology, this dialog is simultaneously imperative and urgent.

Therefore, those who practice leadership ought to seek opportunities to further their own awareness of power and privilege as well as to facilitate similar opportunities for those under their leadership. An incultural experience that draws people from the hegemonic group into relationship with those traditionally excluded from said group can be an effective method of

examining experiences, understanding worldviews, envisioning change, and transforming patterns.

### **Recommendations for Practice and Further Research**

Because the scope of this investigation is limited to twelve participants, all of whom know me professionally and personally, the results of this study are not generalizable to apply to all students who travel abroad as adolescents. However, the results of this study should inform the practice of leaders of study abroad experiences.

As a teacher and group leader, I am now more aware of the significant personal change that can result from an experience abroad. The more information students have about their experience before they go, the stronger their cognitive framework will be when they arrive. Providing opportunities for significant intercultural encounters before the sojourn abroad could potentially contribute to students' being more readily able to adapt to the host culture once they arrive. More experiences with Latino communities with a student group's home context, or more active situations leading to cultural disequilibrium while still in the U.S., can lead to students' more easily achieving equilibrium abroad.

Participants described the difficulty conveying their experiences to their U.S. peers and families. Group leaders, then, should be more cognizant of raising student participant and family awareness of that difficulty and should help them devise strategies to more easily convey the meaning of their experiences.

The development of significant relationships emerged as an important element in the positive experiences of students abroad. Group leaders should emphasize the importance of providing opportunities for building transnational relationships. Conveying the importance of transnational friendships to host-country partners in education will be imperative. Their selection

of host families, and their efforts to construct social encounters that lead to conversations and perhaps to friendships, contribute immeasurably to student participant experiences.

Finally, evidence from this study shows that the job of group leader is not finished when all students are safely back with their U.S. families. Subsequent opportunities for reflection as individuals and as a group will help students construct meaning from their experience. Subsequent participation in Latino communities in the U.S. will help students maintain an identification with the host culture. Offering students the opportunity to share their experiences with other students who did not travel abroad will help those student participants in their construction of meaning; this will also help other students to imagine the possibilities so they may be more likely to consider a similar experience in their futures.

Finally, group leaders must be more cognizant of the barriers to participation in study abroad that exist for participants other than White middle- or upper-class. Achieving access for those students who would otherwise be excluded because of financial or other barriers is an important step toward equity.

Research regarding adolescent experiences abroad is limited. I found no research addressing an immersion experience of the kind I led. However, I know that Cuernavaca hosts a variety of adolescent experiences abroad, so I know that similar programs exist. My first and primary recommendation for further academic research would be simply: DO IT!

Beyond that, many questions remain unanswered, several of which I raise here.

The quality of the experience with the host family definitely influenced the experiences of the participants, but investigating specifically the practices, behaviors, and experiences within the family was beyond the scope of the investigation. The relationships established in Mexico influenced the experience of the student participants. The question of how the depth of

connections to host families, friends, and acquaintances, affects the subsequent relationships and experiences of participants is valuable. Research suggests that relationships with host country peers are significant, but I found no research that investigated the characteristics of those relationships.

I was surprised and fascinated by the data that emerged regarding participants' experimentation with and integration of various identities. Particularly interesting was the idea that participants occasionally rejected their cultural group's identity and experimented with a new identity by allying more closely with Mexican peers or practices. I found no evidence of this phenomenon in a review of the literature. The phenomenon leads me to question whether this practice of disassociating with one group and associating with another has any causal effect on long-term perspectives or behavior. Lucy and Sonya, arguably, were the ones who most profoundly acquired bicultural identities. As I write this conclusion, they are the only two participants that, to my knowledge, are living abroad. They are also the two who described the most profound connection with their host family. They narrated with the most enthusiasm, albeit sheepish confessions, behaviors that could have got them sent home, but that definitely integrated them more firmly into relationships with their Mexican peers. Researching these shifts in group identity and their effects on long-term attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors would contribute to an understanding of how one achieves transcultural competence.

Erikson (1968) theorized that an adolescent is at the stage of identity vs. role confusion in psychosocial development. Given this, I have become fascinated with the question of how much does a critical immersion experience abroad affect the identity development if that individual experiences the encounter before reaching young adulthood. How does an experience such as this compare to other experiences in which adolescents experiment with independent living, at

least temporarily, before their college careers? Do similar patterns of change in attitudes, perceptions, and practices emerge among students who have short-term domestic independent experiences?

I found little published research in academic journals regarding the effects of this type of critical encounter among adolescents. When students study after high school, many are already entrenched in patterns that might be difficult to change. They have chosen majors. They have investigated careers. They are already more invested in the paths they have taken. Before college, before declaring majors, before entering into young adulthood, does a trip like this have greater capacity to act as a counter-hegemonic transformational encounter?

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## Appendix A: Former Study Abroad Participant Guiding Questions

## BEFORE the trip:

Central discussion starter: Tell me about your experiences leading up to the trip.

Potential follow-up questions if the participant needs more guidance...

- What motivated you to study Spanish in the first place?
- What about this trip intrigued you? Why did you decide to pursue it?
- Why do you think your parents let you go?
- What were your hopes for the trip? What excited you about the trip?
- What were your fears? What helped you overcome the fears? Or, were they still there when you left?
- Did you know anyone on the trip before you left, a **friend**, maybe, or were you more independent?

## DURING the trip

Central discussion starter: Tell me about your experiences during to the trip.

Potential follow-up questions if the participant needs more guidance...

- Do you remember your first impressions?
- What was your Mexican family like?
- What was that first day / night like?
- Did anything surprise you
- What do you remember about your daily routine?
- What were your classes like?
- What surprised you about the classes?
- Do you remember the teachers? What were they like?
- The staff? What do you remember about them?
- What do you remember about the school?
- Do you remember the excursions or activities? Which ones stand out for you? Why?
- Which excursion / activity did you not like?
- What do you remember about the group? Do you remember the group dynamic?
- What do you remember about your language abilities? Did you see yourself improving?
- Were there any culture shocks for you?
- Do you remember any situations in which you had to develop tolerance or flexibility? What did you learn?
- Do you remember when it was challenging to maintain a positive attitude?
- Do you remember any time when your values were questioned?
- Do you remember any time when your assumptions were challenged?
- Were there any scenarios in which you had to demonstrate resourcefulness, creativity, problem-solving?
- Do you remember getting ready to come back to the US? What was that like? The bus ride back to the airport?
- Anything else about the trip itself you want to mention?

## AFTER THE TRIP: SHORT TERM

Central discussion starter: Tell me about your experiences when you had just got back from the trip.



Potential follow-up questions if the participant needs more guidance...

- Do you remember arriving in Minneapolis? What was it like getting off the plane? Going to baggage claim?
- Do you remember getting back into the swing of things at home? Did anything change for you? What surprised you about coming back?
- Was it hard to convey the experience to your family and friends?
- Do you remember appreciating anything more or in a different sense once you got back home?
- Do you remember having any new insight into your life, culture or values when you came back?
- Do you remember any opinions that were strengthened because of your experience? Do you remember any that were changed?
- Did this trip have an impact on your education for the rest of high school? Did it impact where you went to college or what you studied?
- Did you maintain contact with anyone from Mexico after you got back?
- Did you maintain contact with anyone from the group?
- Do you think you met the goals you had before you went?
- If you had any fears before you left, how were those resolved while on the trip?
- Did you have any regrets about what you did or didn't do while in Mexico for this trip?

#### AFTER THE TRIP: LONG-TERM

Central discussion starter: Looking back, how do you think the trip influenced you?

Potential follow-up questions if the participant needs more guidance...

- What do you do now? What is your vocation? What are your interests?
- Do you interact regularly with a diverse population?
- Do you use your Spanish?
- Do you remember ever being in any situations in which you served as a “cultural interpreter,” maybe challenging another person’s assumptions or attitudes, or explaining the meaning behind an event or an interaction?
- Is your life different now because of this experience?
- Are there “ripple effects?”
- Have you traveled abroad since this trip? To where? Why? How were these experiences different? How were they similar?
- Are there life-long lessons you took from the experience?
- Is there anything our dominant culture should learn from the cultures you encountered abroad or from diverse cultures here? (What do you wish we knew better here?)
- How do you think you changed because of this experience?

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD HAVE ASKED?

## Appendix B: Guiding Questions for Instructors or Staff at Renovar Institute

- ¿Cuánto tiempo lleva Ud. trabajando con Renovar?
  - How long have you been working with Renovar?
- Cuénteme de su papel en la escuela.
  - Tell me about your role in the school.
- ¿Por qué le interesó ese tipo de trabajo?
  - Why did this type of work interest you?
- En ese tiempo, ¿tiene alguna idea de la cantidad de estudiantes con quienes Ud. ha trabajado?
  - In that time, do you have any idea of how many students you have worked with?
- Con Renovar, ¿tiene Ud. mucha experiencia en trabajar con los adolescentes?
  - At Renovar, do you have much experience working with adolescents?
- Dígame de sus impresiones de los adolescentes de los Estados Unidos.
  - Tell me about your impressions of adolescents from the United States.
- ¿Tiene Ud. algunos recuerdos específicos de experiencias interesantes o significantes con adolescentes estadounidenses? Cuéntemelos.
  - Do you have any specific memories about interesting or significant experiences with U.S. adolescents? Tell me about them
- En su experiencia, ¿hay una diferencia entre cómo son al entrar el programa, y cómo son al fin? ¿Puede contarme un poco de sus impresiones acerca de eso?
  - In your experience, is there a difference in what students are like upon entering the program, and what they're like at the end? Can you tell me about your impressions of that?
- ¿Qué es su impresión de algún cambio, desarrollo o crecimiento que los adolescentes experimentan como resultado de sus experiencias en México?
  - What is your impression of any change, development or growth that adolescents experience as a result of their experiences in Mexico?
- En su opinión, ¿por qué es importante que estudiantes estadounidenses tengan este tipo de experiencia?
  - In your opinion, why is it important that U.S. students have this type of experience?
- ¿Qué es lo que más le importa a Ud. de este trabajo?
  - What is most important to you about this work?
- ¿Todavía tiene Ud. contacto de algún ex-estudiante de Renovar? ¿Cómo son esas relaciones?
  - Do you have any contact with any ex-students at Renovar? What are those relationships like?
- ¿Hay algo más que Ud. quiere compartir?
  - Is there anything else you would like to share?

## Appendix C: Consent Form—Former Participants

**CONSENT FORM**

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

<b>Project Name</b>	There and back again: Perceived long-term effects of a high school immersion abroad experience	<b>IRB Tracking Number</b>	333209-1
<b>General Information Statement about the study:</b>			
I am conducting a study about the perceived effects of a high school summer immersion abroad experience.			
You are invited to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant for this study because you were a participant in a summer study abroad experience to Cuernavaca while you were in high school.			
Study is being conducted by:		Nora Flom	
Research Advisor (if applicable):		Dr. John Holst	
Department Affiliation:		University of St. Thomas School of Education	
<b>Background Information</b>			
The purpose of the study is:			
The purpose of this study is to determine how former students feel a summer immersion abroad experience to Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico impacted their cultural perceptions, personal relationships, college experiences, professional paths, and social, community, and political (inter)action.			
<b>Procedures</b>			
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to do the following: Participate in a recorded interview, possibly via Skype, of about an hour, and to provide and discuss any journals, scrapbooks, photos or photo albums, post-cards or e-mails you are willing to share. Additionally, some participants might be asked to participate in follow-up interviews to further investigate any themes or ideas that emerge.			

<b>Risks and Benefits of being in the study</b>
The risks involved for participating in the study are:
First, I want to protect the confidentiality of what you say. Although I will use a pseudonym for you, someone either on the trip or who knows you well might be able to recognize your identity from any of your statements that I might cite in the research. Second, when reflecting on past events, it is always possible that you will talk about events that might cause an emotional reaction, or a new insight. I do not anticipate that any memory or emotional reaction will cause any trauma or harm.
The direct benefits you will receive from participating in the study are none.
<b>Compensation</b>
Details of compensation (if and when disbursement will occur and conditions of compensation) include: There will be no compensation for participation in this study. Note: In the event that this research activity results in an injury, treatment will be available, including first aid, emergency treatment and follow-up care as needed. Payment for any such treatment must be provided by you or your third party payer if any (such as health insurance, Medicare, etc.).
<b>Confidentiality</b>
The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include a Voice Memo on my iPod touch that will be downloaded to my personal computer, transcripts which use a pseudonym for you and which I can share with you upon your request, a master list that contains your name and your pseudonym. Upon completion of the study, I will destroy the list that contains your name associated with your pseudonym and I will delete the voice memos from my iPod and my computer.
<b>Voluntary Nature of the Study</b>
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any cooperating agencies or institutions or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until February 1, 2013. You are also free to skip any questions that may be asked.

Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used.			
<b>Contacts and Questions</b>			
You may contact any of the resources listed below with questions or concerns about the study.			
Researcher name	Nora Flom		
Researcher email	<a href="mailto:naflom@stthomas.edu">naflom@stthomas.edu</a>		
Researcher phone	651-485-0530		
Research Advisor name	Dr. John Holst		
Research Advisor email	jdholst@stthomas.edu		
Research Advisor phone	651-962-4433		
UST IRB Office	651.962.5341		
<b>Statement of Consent</b>			
I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I am at least 18 years old. I consent to participate in the study. I consent to my interview being digitally recorded. By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I give my full consent to participate in the study.			
Signature of Study Participant Electronic signature		Date	
Print Name of Study Participant			
<b>Signature of Parent or Guardian (if applicable)</b>			
Electronic Signature		Date	
Print Name of Parent or Guardian (if applicable)			
<b>Signature of Researcher</b>			
Electronic signature*		Date	
Print Name of Researcher			

\*Electronic signatures certify that::

The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the polities on research involving participants of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity and privacy of all participants.

- The information provided in this form is true and accurate.

- The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior approval from the UST IRB office for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures.
- Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the UST IRB office and to the subjects.
- The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until final approval is granted.

## Appendix D: Consent Form—Staff at Renovar

**CONSENT FORM / FORUMALARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO**

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study. / Favor de leer este formulario and hacer cualquier pregunta antes de consentir de participar en esta investigación.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records. / Favor de conservar una copia de este formulario para su información.

<b>Project Name / Nombre de proyecto</b>	There and back again: Perceived long-term effects of a high school immersion abroad experience / Partida y regreso: Efectos de largo plazo percibidos de una experiencia de adolescentes en un viaje de inmersión en un estudio en el extranjero.	<b>IRB Tracking Number / Número de seguimiento del Comité Independiente de Ética</b>	333209-1
<b>General Information Statement about the study: / Declaración general de información de esta investigación</b>			
I am conducting a study about the perceived effects of a high school summer immersion abroad experience. / Yo hago una investigación sobre los efectos percibidos de una experiencia de estudiantes adolescentes estadounidenses en el extranjero durante un verano.			
You are invited to participate in this research. / Le invito a Ud. a participar en esta investigación You were selected as a possible participant for this study because you were involved as a staff member at the institution in which students studied. / Ud. fue elegido a participar en esta investigación porque Ud. trabajaba en el instituto a que los estudiantes asistían durante un verano o más.			
Study is being conducted by: / La investigación está hecha por:		Nora Flom	
Research Advisor (if applicable): / Asesor de la investigación (si aplicable)		Dr. John Holst	
Department Affiliation: / Afiliación de facultad		University of St. Thomas School of Education	
<b>Background Information / Información al fondo</b>			
The purpose of the study is: / El propósito del estudio es:			

The purpose of this study is to determine how former students feel a summer immersion abroad experience to Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico impacted their cultural perceptions, personal relationships, college experiences, professional paths, and social, community, and political (inter)action. / El propósito de esta investigación es averiguar cómo viejos estudiantes perciben que una experiencia de inmersión en el extranjero en Cuernavaca, Morelos, México, que ellos hicieron durante sus años escolares preuniversitarios, afectó sus percepciones culturales, relaciones personales, experiencias universitarias, desarrollo profesional, e (inter)acciones sociales, comunitarias, y políticas.

### **Procedures**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to do the following: Participate in a recorded interview, possibly via Skype, of about an hour, and to provide and discuss any journals, scrapbooks, photos or photo albums, post-cards or e-mails you are willing to share. Additionally, some participants might be asked to participate in follow-up interviews to further investigate any themes or ideas that emerge. / Si Ud. consiente participar en esta investigación, le pediré lo siguiente: Participar en una entrevista de una hora, posiblemente por Skype, que grabaré, y proveer y explicar unos diarios, libros de recuerdos, fotos o libros de fotos, tarjetas postales, o correspondencia electrónica que está dispuesto a compartir. Además, algunos participantes podrían ser invitados a participar en entrevistas adicionales para seguir investigando cualquier tema o idea que aparezca.

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the study / Riesgos y beneficios de participar en esta investigación**

The risks involved for participating in the study are: / Los riesgos de participar en esta investigación.

First, I want to protect the confidentiality of what you say. Although I will use a pseudonym for you, someone either on the trip or who knows you well might be able to recognize your identity from any of your statements that I might cite in the research. Second, when reflecting on past events, it is always possible that you will talk about events that might cause an emotional reaction, or a new insight. I do not anticipate that any memory or emotional reaction will cause any trauma or harm. / Primero, quiero proteger la confidencialidad de lo que Ud. diga. Aunque usaré un pseudónimo por Ud., alguien o en el viaje o quién lo/la conozca bien podría reconocer su identidad por algo que Ud. dijo que yo incluya en el reportaje. Segundo, cuando se reflexiona en hechos pasados, siempre es posible hablar sobre hechos que causen una reacción emocional o una perspectiva nueva. Hay un riesgo que algún entendimiento nuevo o algún recuerdo olvidado cause una emoción imprevista. No preveo que ninguna memoria ni reacción emocional causará ningún trauma ni daño.

The direct benefits you will receive from participating in the study are none. / No hay beneficios directos que recibirá por participar en esta investigación.



<p><b>Compensation / Compensación</b></p> <p>Details of compensation include: There will be no compensation for participation in this study. / Detalles de compensación incluyen: No habrá ninguna compensación por participar en esta investigación.</p> <p>Note: In the event that this research activity, if done in the physical presence of the researcher, results in an injury, treatment will be available, including first aid, emergency treatment and follow-up care as needed. If this interview is conducted via Skype, the researcher will have no ability to conduct first aid. Payment for any such treatment must be provided by you or your third party payer if any (such as health insurance, Medicare, etc.). / Nota: En caso de que esta investigación, si hecha en la presencia física de la investigadora, llegue a una herida, el tratamiento será disponible, incluso a primeros auxilios y cuidado de seguimiento. Si la entrevista está hecha por Skype, la investigadora no tendrá la habilidad de proveer primeros auxilios. El pago por cualquier tratamiento tiene que ser la responsabilidad del participante.</p>
<p><b>Confidentiality / Confidencialidad</b></p> <p>The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include a Voice Memo on my iPod touch that will be downloaded to my personal computer, transcripts which use a pseudonym for you and which I can share with you upon your request, a master list that contains your name and your pseudonym. Upon completion of the study, I will destroy the list that contains your name associated with your pseudonym and I will delete the voice memos from my iPod and my computer. / Los documentos de esta investigación serán confidenciales. En cualquier reportaje que yo publique, no incluiré información que lleve al reconocimiento de su identidad en ninguna manera. Los tipos de documentos que crearé incluyen un archivo vocal en mi iPod Touch que descargaré a mi computadora personal, transcripciones que usan un pseudónimo por Ud. que yo puedo compartir si Ud. las quisiera, y una lista que contiene su nombre y pseudónimo. Al cumplir la investigación, yo destruiré la lista con su nombre asociado con su pseudónimo, y destruiré los archivos vocales de mi iPod y de mi computadora.</p>

<b>Voluntary Nature of the Study / Voluntariedad de la investigación</b>	
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any cooperating agencies or institutions or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until February 1, 2013.	
You are also free to skip any questions that may be asked. / Su participación en esta investigación será voluntaria. Su decisión de participar o no no influirá sus relaciones actuales o futuras con cualquier entidad o con la Universidad de San Tomás. Si decide no participar, Ud. está libre de renunciar su participación hasta el 1 de febrero de 2013. Ud. está libre de no contestar cualquier pregunta que le haré.	
Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. Recorded interviews and written transcriptions will be deleted or otherwise destroyed. / Si Ud. decide renunciar su participación, los datos coleccionados de Ud. no serán usados. Entrevistas grabadas y transcripciones escritas serán destruídas.	
<b>Contacts and Questions / Contactos y preguntas</b>	
You may contact any of the resources listed below with questions or concerns about the study. / Ud. puede conectarse con cualquier de los recursos escritos abajo con preguntas o preocupaciones acerca de esta investigación	
Researcher name / Nombre de investigadora	Nora Flom
Researcher email / Dirección de correo electrónico de la investigadora	<a href="mailto:naflom@stthomas.edu">naflom@stthomas.edu</a>
Researcher phone / Número de teléfono de la investigadora	651-485-0530
Research Advisor name / Asesor de la investigación	Dr. John Holst
Research Advisor email / Dirección de correo electrónico del asesor de la investigación	<a href="mailto:jdholst@stthomas.edu">jdholst@stthomas.edu</a>
Research Advisor phone / Número de teléfono del asesor de la investigación	651-962-4433
UST IRB Office / Oficina del Comité Independiente de Ética de la Universidad de San Tomás	651.962.5341
<b>Statement of Consent / Declaración de consentimiento</b>	

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I am at least 18 years old. I consent to participate in the study. I consent to my interview being digitally recorded. By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I give my full consent to participate in the study. / Yo he leído la información de arriba. Mis preguntas han sido contestadas a mi satisfacción y yo tengo por lo menos 18 años de edad. Consiento a participar en esta investigación. Consiento que mi entrevista sea grabado digitalmente. Por marcar el cuadro de la firma electrónica, declaro que entiendo lo que me pide y doy me consentimiento completo a participar en este estudio.

Signature of Study Participant / Firma de participante en la investigación Electronic signature / Firma electrónica		Date / Fecha	
Print Name of Study Participant / Nombre con letra de imprenta del participante			
Signature of Parent or Guardian (if applicable) / Firma de padre, madre o tutor legal (si aplicable) Electronic Signature / Firma electrónica		Date	
Print Name of Parent or Guardian (if applicable) / Nombre con letra de imprenta del padre, madre o tutor legal (si aplicable)			
Signature of Researcher / Firma de investigadora Electronic signature* / Firma electrónica		Date	
Print Name of Researcher / Nombre con letra de imprenta de la investigadora			

\*Electronic signatures certify that:: / Firmas electrónicas declaran que:

The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the policies on research involving participants of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity and privacy of all participants.

/ El o La que firma acuerda que sabe de la policía de investigación involucrando a participantes y protegerá los derechos, dignidad y privacidad de todos participantes.

- The information provided in this form is true and accurate. / La información proveída en este formulario es verdad y correcta.
- The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior approval from the UST IRB office for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures. / La investigadora principal buscará y obtendrá la probación anterior de la oficina del Comité Independiente de la Ética de la Universidad de Saint Thomas por cualquier modificación sustancial en el propósito, incluso pero no limitado a cambios en investigadores / agencias cooperativos tanto como cambios en los trámites.
- Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the UST IRB office and to the subjects. / Hechos aversos significantes no previstos y previstos en el curso de esta investigación que afectuen los riesgos y beneficios a la participación serán escritos a la oficina del Comité Independiente de la Ética de UST y a los participantes.
- The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until final approval is granted. / La investigación no será iniciada y participantes no pueden ser reclutados hasta que la aprobación final sea dado.

## Appendix E: Student Participant Recruitment Brochure

Note: The following information reflects an edited version of information given to students interested in participating in the immersion abroad program. Specific details regarding names, dates, prices, and schools have been deleted or replaced by pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

### **THE PROGRAM**

This immersion program will give students the chance to significantly improve their ability to communicate in Spanish as well as to enrich their understanding of modern and historic Mexican culture. Students will live with carefully-chosen families so they will have continuous exposure to the language and culture while they are in Mexico.

Students will attend classes for at least 2-3 hours a day to improve their understanding of Spanish grammar and usage. They will have activities with their class in the afternoons and weekend day-trips out-of-town. They will have opportunities to join with Mexican teenagers in activities like conversation sessions, cooking classes and sports activities. They will visit archeological sites, museums, markets, and resorts. Additionally, students will participate in a service project at a local orphanage. This program offers students a lot of fun with the chance to really practice the language.

Upon successful completion of the program, students will receive a summary of their performance (a grade) from Renovar Language Institute. This summary will include the number of hours of instruction and a summary of the skills addressed.

### **THE COORDINATOR**

Nora Flom, M. Ed., will coordinate the program and accompany the students to Mexico. She is a certified Spanish/English teacher.

### **RENOVAR LANGUAGE INSTITUTE**

Renovar Institute is a well-known language institute in Mexico. Renovar offers immersion programs for students of all ages: elementary, high school, college, and adult. Its language teachers are qualified and devoted native speakers of Spanish. The small class sizes (5 or fewer students) allow for individualized attention to students' needs. Many governments from around the world have chosen Renovar to train their diplomats to speak Spanish. Their recreational leaders have experience in working with adolescents. The director and staff are committed to ensuring a safe and rewarding experience. They carefully select the families high school students stay with to provide both nurture and supervision.

### **THE SETTING**

Cuernavaca, the "city of eternal spring" is a semitropical, cosmopolitan city located about one hour southwest of Mexico City.

### **THE PARTICIPANTS**

All students who will have completed at least Spanish 1, and who are making good progress in their Spanish classes, are invited to attend. Because class sizes are small and classes are offered at all levels from beginner to advanced, any student can benefit. Participants must be serious about improving their Spanish. They must agree to communicate in Spanish whenever possible, to abide by all Renovar regulations (which are strict to ensure students' safety), and to participate in all activities.