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Two-Way Cultural Transmission in Study-Abroad: U.S. Host Families and Japanese College Students in Short-Term Homestay Programs

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This study addresses a gap in the study-abroad literature, examining both student and host family experiences of two-way cultural transmission. Interviews, participant observation and reflective journals revealed both parties sought authentic cultural experiences, but implicit forms of cultural transmission in homestay rendered preconceived notions of authenticity elusive. This discrepancy held potential for growth in cultural understanding. The authors explore implications for program design and interpretation of outcomes.

Study-abroad is a key strategy for *internationalization* of higher education (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012): “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). While the sense of urgency that elevated interest in study-abroad during the Cold War has since shifted, its advancement of the public interest has remained constant. Today, the cultivation of *intercultural competence*—“cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts”—remains a focus of study-abroad (Bennett, 2008, p. 16). According to Deardorff (2008), “one way that intercultural competence is developed is through meaningful interactions with those from different cultures” (p. 45). Resultant developmental change in students cannot be easily separated from concurrent effects on those with whom they interact in the host country. Whereas study-abroad is an element of internationalization of higher education in which student affairs professionals play a key role (Rader, 2014), student development research must address the interactive nature of study-abroad and its mutual benefits.

Homestay—students living with local families while studying abroad—is potentially critical to internationalization of higher education yet has remained comparatively marginal in the student development literature. As short-term programs have become a popular alternative to

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semester- or year-long study-abroad (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015), even brief homestay experiences have been found to enhance social capital among participants (Castaneda & Zirger, 2011), thereby counteracting what might otherwise appear as a tourist endeavor (Engel, 2011). Nevertheless, research on study-abroad has devoted less attention to homestay than other elements of the experience (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). In this context, the perspectives of host families have remained “conspicuously absent,” despite their central role in the reciprocal, interdependent nature of these particular cross-cultural experiences (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p. 190).

This study builds on prior investigations that have moved toward examining homestay from host families’ perspectives (e.g., Engel, 2011; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Radomski, 2008; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Weidemann & Bluml, 2009) and argues that since cultural exchange is a two-way process between students and host families, homestay must be understood from both perspectives simultaneously to capture the complexity of cultural transmission and its impact on both parties. The study expands the literature on homestay, most of which has focused on families in other countries, by offering insight into forms of two-way cultural transmission in the United States.

Within student affairs, increased recognition of multiple dimensions of identity, which account for variation within culturally defined groups (Jones & Abes, 2013), raises important questions as to how cultures are represented in the homestay experience. By unveiling these embedded facets, we highlight their importance in program preparation and debriefing for both students and families, echoing recent calls for avenues where participants can articulate and process the meaning of study-abroad experiences beyond the veneer that they were “good” (Kortegast & Boisfontaine, 2015).

Contextualization in the Study-Abroad Literature

Research has shown that study-abroad helps enhance students’ international experience, language skills, and cross-cultural understanding (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Martin, Katz-Buonincontro, & Livert, 2015), but examinations of homestay have tended to foreground students’ perspectives (Castaneda & Zirger, 2011; Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014; Tanaka, 2007). The comparatively limited literature on host perspectives has addressed the role and experiences of hosts (Engel, 2011; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002); reasons for hosting (Engel, 2011), advantages and disadvantages of hosting (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002), and the impact of cross-cultural experiences on host families (Engel, 2011; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002). A few studies have included perspectives from both host families and students, focusing on such facets as the quality of the homestay experience and concerns expressed by both parties (Akbar, Van Bael, Hassan, & Baguley, 2004; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004). This avenue of inquiry has contributed to deeper understanding of homestay, yet these studies have generally not delved into the dynamics of two-way cultural transmission in depth. While much of the literature on study-abroad focuses solely on *outcomes*, such as second language acquisition (Marriott, 2000) or shifts in identity (Suehiro, 2000), we argue that it is equally important to examine the *processes* by which these outcomes emerge, based on multiple data sources.

Theoretical Framework

Identity formation has long been a unifying theme across psychosocial theories of college student development, while cognitive theories have emphasized progressively more complex

intellectual understandings, resulting from experiences of cognitive dissonance (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Proponents of a more integrated view have subsequently advanced a meaning-making framework that encompasses maturation across both domains concurrently. Social identity theorists have, in turn, applied this framework to the interpretation of multiple dimensions of identity, accounting for both their relative salience to the individual and the social context in which they are experienced (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Applying this theoretical perspective to study-abroad and homestay, we would anticipate growth in understanding of both self and other, as a consequence of dissonant encounters with the complexity of cultural identity as manifested in both parties. For example, a puzzling encounter with American notions of patriotism might prompt a Japanese student to reflect on her notions of loyalty to Japan, as she concurrently develops a more nuanced understanding of American patriotism.¹ As student affairs professionals seek to promote both global understanding and identity development in their work with students, the scholarship of multicultural education becomes an important companion to the more familiar developmental theories on which the profession has traditionally relied. Therefore, in theoretically grounding this study, we bridged the aforementioned examination of study-abroad (Engel, 2011) with works by multicultural education scholars on the complexity and fluidity of culture.

Multicultural education scholars warned about the perils of merely celebratory multiculturalism that provides superficial exposure to cultural manifestations without genuine communication across difference or efforts to understand cultural complexities and contradictions (Hoffman, 1996; Noel, 2008) and cautioned against promoting notions of fixed, essentialized identities (Dolby, 2003; Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Hoffman, 1996; Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008). Analyses of cultural transmission in study-abroad necessitate interpretation informed by such critical engagement with multiculturalism. These approaches illuminate how culture is often reduced to categories that can be presented and consumed—cultural artifacts, for example—while identity itself becomes a Western-informed notion that can be possessed and become highly individualized (Hoffman, 1996). In such views, persons are expected to project particular identities that fit wider understandings of cultural narratives, often determined by groups that have historically held disproportional power. To engage critically with more nuanced aspects of culture and identity would require more reflexive forms of cultural exchange and multicultural learning in both national and global arenas. Study-abroad programming carries tremendous potential for such engagement when it resolves to resist the more easily achievable notions of *culture* as an experience to be consumed or appreciated as different from one's own.

Study Design

The study focused on a well-established short-term homestay program between a large private university near Tokyo, Japan and a small, private liberal arts college in Eastern United States, where 92% of the rural college town's 5,600 inhabitants were White. Host families received no financial compensation other than a small stipend to offset costs. Students took English language and American culture classes, audited college courses, took part in on- and off-campus activities, and engaged in service-learning in local schools.

Data was collected during a six-week spring session in which 11 Japanese students and 11 local families participated, all of whom were invited to participate in this study. Seven students and seven host parents agreed to participate. All seven students—four females and three males—

¹ Here and throughout the article we use "American" to mean from the U.S. exclusively.

were of traditional age, ranging from 19 to 21. Five host parents were native-born White, while two were of Southeast Asian immigrant descent. The seven host parents' ages ranged from late 20s to mid-60s, with half over 60. Their previous experience in hosting Japanese students varied from none to more than 25 times, and the majority of family members were college-educated, some with terminal degrees.

The study was epistemologically anchored by constructivism and informed by an interpretative theoretical perspective, which afforded insight into how individuals generated their own meanings regarding the same phenomenon—the study-abroad homestay experience (Creswell, 2005). We employed ethnographic approaches due to their suitability for the examination of *culture* with its encompassing “beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people” and their interpretations (Merriam, 2009, p. 27). Acknowledging that people act as interpreters and symbol readers in their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997), we accessed participants' defining process through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which are well-suited for uncovering how social categories, such as race, class, ethnicity and citizenship, organize social experience and personal narratives (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, the first author engaged in participant observation of program activities and meal-time interactions in four families, deemed one of the most exchange-rich times of day in homestay programs (Cook, 2006). The combination of participant observation and interviews generates the type of insightful *thick description* that is the aim of ethnographic research (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

The study also aimed toward triangulation as one of several “elements of goodness” in the process of research design (Jones et al., 2006, p. 121), corroborating data from seven student interviews with concurrent data from (a) seven host interviews, (b) observations in four host families, and (c) seven students' weekly journals. Interested in how both families and students perceived, projected and enacted the cultural transmission embedded in their experiences, we employed an inductive approach with open coding (Charmaz, 2006), which allows “research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238), which were then used to organize the data and to identify and report the findings.

Research Findings

Amidst a complex interplay between the intentional transmission of culture through structured activities and the equally valuable, implicit transmission through the close interactions of homestay, two main themes centered our findings: (a) a quest for cultural authenticity among participants—seeking and projecting the “truly” American or “truly” Japanese—found in how families and students perceived each other's cultural manifestations and in how they attempted to share their own; and (b) participants' oscillation between *idealization* of cultural practices—both theirs and those newly encountered—and subtle *resistance* to and *reconsideration* of them, when such practices were in tension with previously held perceptions and practices. The quest for authenticity and idealization led some participants to feel slightly “cheated” out of what they expected to experience as “authentic,” yet close encounters with enacted culture also offered them opportunities to engage in reflection and critique, considering the impact of these cultural manifestations on their development and understanding, choosing elements they wanted to pursue, while distancing themselves from other elements. This process was further enriched as experiences with cultural transmission intersected with structural social locations—among them

ethnicity, race, class and citizenship status—which generated fissures in what might otherwise have been more monolithic interpretations of cultural positioning by the participants.

The Quest for Cultural Authenticity and Its Discontents

Experiences with food were central in this exchange, as participants expressed and shared of themselves through cuisine, echoing other findings of rich cultural exchanges at meal time during study-abroad (Cook, 2006). Beyond the comforting sharing of nurture, such exchanges seemed to unearth a desire for cultural authenticity both for families—who wanted to experience authentic Japanese culture through cuisine—and for students—who wanted to delineate and defend its authenticity in a global context while also expecting what they thought to be American food in their host families. When families included ethnic heritage meals in their menus, however, they challenged assumptions about the “typical American diet” that students had expected. Yosuke² admitted: “I told my host family that I had an image of Americans who love only hamburger and fast foods They said that some people are like that, but others are not.” Even so, Japanese students expressed the comparative superiority of Japanese food practice, contending that it was “indeed great,” and citing its inclusion in the UNESCO *Intangible Cultural Heritage List* due to its contribution to long-life and prevention of obesity. Students went beyond “food nostalgia” (Kendall-Smith & Rich, 2003), establishing their cuisine on a spectrum of competing positions, based on values that reached deeper into national identities for which food practice was only one facet.

Host families and students also went to Japanese restaurants in the area and what was intended as a light exchange over one facet of the students’ culture—cuisine—became laced with unexpected disappointment or tension. Mei, for instance, wanted to clarify that the decorations were Chinese, not Japanese, while Naruto was disappointed to learn that there were not only many Americanized Japanese meals on the menu but also Chinese ones. He commented that he “realized Japanese culture is not prevalent in the U.S. and China has a stronger cultural influence,” consistent with prior literature on U.S. adoption of Asian cuisine (Liu & Jang, 2009). Food culture does not exist in a socio-political void but reflects political or economic dimensions, and this exchange occurred against the backdrop of deeply embedded geo-political and cultural dynamics—longstanding cultural ties between Japan and China, with volatile political, economic, and military rivalries (Davis & Meunier, 2011). These may seem irrelevant during a dining experience but attention to these exchanges allows us to peer into deeper, often unintended, levels of cultural transmission and understand the context of students’ efforts to establish authenticity and singularity and consider implications for students’ and hosts’ preparation for study-abroad.

Mei’s host parents, Bruce and Amanda, expressed surprise at this dynamic:

[What] really bothered her [was] that what Americans call the ... hibachi [a hot grill to prepare meat] is not a hibachi, it’s a teppan-yaki. That really bothered her. She was flipping out. That was the most worked up I ever saw her, when she was with us, because she was relatively easy going, very easy going, but that really worked her up. She showed us the picture of a hibachi, and it’s like a little fireplace. She wanted to tell everyone in America “This is wrong!”

While Mei was uncharacteristically upset over perceived inauthenticity in the U.S. representation of Japanese culture, embedded in Bruce’s surprised commentary about Mei’s “worked up”

² All names are pseudonyms.

reaction is a theme that emerged throughout the interviews: All host families stated that the Japanese students were very polite, confirming their expectation of Japanese virtues of silence, conflict avoidance, and indirectness. A host mother, Jayme, captured this sentiment: “They were just very polite and trustworthy. It seems like a part of their culture, at least in the program.” Although the politeness of the Japanese students was one of the values that all of the American host families perceived and recognized as a positive aspect of Japanese culture—confirming for them that they had experienced an authentic Japanese cultural facet—this same trait sometimes created confusion in their interaction and, in the everyday dynamics of homestay, it began to generate tension. Tracy, for example, found that her students suffered one cold night without a heating device because the space heater in their room was broken. She recalled with slight irritation: “They just stayed in the cold and they didn’t tell me. And that was embarrassing, later on, when I noticed.” Puzzled by their silence, she echoed previous findings about the distinctively Japanese “frequent concern of appearing impolite” (Chen & Isa, 2003, p. 89), which tended to affect Japanese students’ willingness to ask for help or to complain about issues (Akbar et al., 2004). Conversely, several of the students realized they need not ask permission to use the home’s facilities, and as Yoko put it, “I sensed that [my host mother] was becoming a little annoyed. Since then, I’ve done [many things] without asking her permission.” The idealized frame of Japanese politeness was challenged when the practical implications of everyday living conflicted with the American families’ emphasis on independence and self-reliance.

Openness and kindness were the values most frequently observed by the Japanese students as they admired their hosts’ ability to speak to restaurant servers openly or, as Mei observed, “Americans can kiss and hug naturally, but we can’t and I think it’s nice.” Although Mei’s enjoyment of this aspect of American culture was not unique to her, it was contextual, as others commented on the same American norms of openness and raised critical questions. Regardless of their initial admiration of American “openness,” inviting people who were only acquaintances into one’s home, as their host families were doing, was a source of discomfort and perceived by Aiko and Ken as “letting strangers into the house too freely.” Similarly, Satsuki marveled in disapproval at her host mother’s tendency to talk openly about family affairs, such as her daughter’s divorce, adding the contrast: “In Japan, we don’t talk about these issues to someone new to us, right?”

The contrasting reactions to American norms of openness and affection, as well as American families’ reaction to the Japanese norm of politeness, illustrate the significance of these “disorienting dilemmas” in homestay settings (Hunter, 2008), which prompted participants to delve under the idealization or perceived authentic experiences of “the other,” in order to also engage with their own self-positioning, norms and values. As Satsuki marveled at her host mother’s behaviors, she highlighted the contrast between that level of openness and a shared sense of Japanese guardedness, which she stressed through her use of “we,” “in Japan,” and the question tag “right?” in addressing her Japanese interlocutor. Satsuki sought confirmation of her interpretation, but was simultaneously prompted by the experience to scrutinize it more closely.

Just as students tried to clarify and enact the authentic Japanese experience for their hosts through cuisine and souvenirs, American families attempted to expose their guests to what they perceived to be American experiences. Host father Bruce explained, “Within the first three days, she got the American treatment; we energized her that way with classic American pastimes.” Their intentional cultural transmission occurred through visits to Hershey Chocolate World, Super Bowl parties, country line-dancing, and “maple sugaring”—representing, according to host mother Sarah, “the type of culture in the area.” Overlapping with sports, entertainment and

shopping, these aspects of cultural transmission reinforced students' media-informed expectations of what is authentically American. *Projections* of accurate cultural representations—Mei's animated hibachi explanation or the pressure of “one chance” to offer students the “American treatment”—as well as *perceptions* of accurate cultural manifestations—the admired Japanese politeness that may become mildly irritating—carried intellectual and affective dimensions for homestay participants, especially when tied to notions of desirable, authentic cultural experiences and expressions. The cultural immersion that occurred through sharing living space over an extended period of time was distinctive, insofar as it prompted discordant feelings of both *idealization* and *resistance* toward the other culture and prompted both students and host families to delve under the veneer of a possibly misconceived cultural authenticity.

Fruitful Fissures in the Quest for Cultural Authenticity

As hosts highlighted their perceptions of Japanese values around family and childrearing, politeness, hard work, collectivism, and conservative attitudes, Japanese students reflected on American values related to close family interaction, openness and kindness, affection, and individualism and independence. Such broad terms obscure the question of whose culture was transmitted at the micro-levels of the homestay, and what versions of American and Japanese cultures students and families, respectively, perceived themselves as having experienced. We found that the everyday cultural exposure and practice during homestay generated a dual process of dialogue and reflection, which countered monolithic interpretations of American and Japanese cultures. Moments of dissonance prompted the students, particularly, to ask difficult questions of themselves and others, and to reflect on what they had experienced and how their own cultural positioning had influenced their worldviews.

Beneath the categorical veneers of “American” or “Japanese,” students' experiences with food practices, for instance, seemed to correlate with social class divisions. Previous research suggests that class-based identities are constructed, displayed and reproduced through everyday eating practices (Wills, Backett-Milburn, Roberts, & Lawton, 2011). Satsuki, who stayed with a working-class family, struggled with their diet of “only meat and potatoes” or meals that were “very salty and greasy,” as did another student who expressed surprise at finding only one dish served at dinner. Conversely, Yosuke's assumptions of “typical” American foods were challenged, prompting reflection directly on this experience of cultural transmission as perhaps associated with class:

I heard from friends [in the program] that some families eat mostly pasta. My host family eats various types of foods. They don't eat fast food very much. I feel that my host family is different because the host parents are well educated and their kids are very nice and cheerful. I feel that they have a higher standard of living than average Americans. So, I feel that I really did not experience common American people's lives through this program.

In a multi-dimensional reflection, Yosuke brings together class positioning, educational attainment, culinary choices, family manners and child-rearing approaches, only to conclude that this was, perhaps, not the experience of “common American people.” The inability to experience the “common American” life—just as students tended to refer to their families' particular practices as those of “Americans” in general—highlights a paradox of cultural transmission during homestay. Namely, the tendency toward generalization of what “Americans” do is continually held in tension with the realization that some families' cultural practices do not conform to anticipated American norms. When challenged through these experiences, the search for the average or

“true” American cultural experience becomes an opportunity for students to reflect on its contingent, embedded nature.

Varied experiences with parenting styles, communication patterns, and family dynamics often prompted such reflection on self and others. Students commonly remarked on their hosts’ comparatively close family interactions. Yosuke, who stayed with the family of a professor with four teenage children, commented that they spent more time together than his family in Japan, and concluded that Japanese families should communicate more. Similarly, Satsuki felt that modeling her host family’s communication patterns would help her to communicate and support her opinions, since “We don’t express our opinions very much in Japan, right?” The extrapolation from a particular host family’s home dynamics to American culture in general, and then, by comparison to Japanese culture overall, was common among participants and hinted at feelings of inadequacy. Ken, who stayed with a family with two children, ages 11 and 8, observed a difference in childrearing between the United States and Japan, positioning his host family’s approach as favorable to a child’s intellectual and educational development. He remarked,

I felt ... [my host family] has some kind of fundamental concept about family They tend to discuss many things in the family. It seems that they share their opinions over many things because of the concept. A simple example is ... even when they are watching TV, [my host mother] asks kids “What do you think?” I don’t see Japanese share opinions that much in the family, but [my host family] values sharing their opinions in the family. I think that’s why American college students are good at discussion and debate in class.

In referring to a “fundamental concept about family,” Ken alluded to an anchoring principle that is seen as deeply American. Ken saw a similarity between his host siblings and the American college students whom he encountered at the host university. Sensing that American youth had been encouraged by their parents to express their opinions from an early age, he astutely observed that this practice would likely benefit them academically. Ken’s observation is, in fact, supported by linguistic and sociological research correlating parenting techniques, parent–child communication and approaches to schooling and leisure time with social class and, ultimately, with varied levels of academic success (Lareau & Weininger, 2008). What students observed as the American family’s open dynamics, highlighting children’s opinions and expression, was actually a facet of American family life that correlates highly with education and socio-economic status.

Allusions to the chimeric “true” American cultural expressions were not confined to cuisine, communication practices, and family dynamics but also transcended to reflections on the “true” American person. Aiko’s stay with three different host families—two from India and a White family whose members were all native born—exposed deeply seated notions about who is considered a true member of a nation and what characteristics they must embody. Aiko’s initially simple comments on home decor variation among the homes swiftly turned to grappling with the very nature of American national identity amidst racial, ethnic, and national origin diversity:

It is a melting pot of race. The parents are Indians but their children were born here and they are Americans. The children do not have any American blood in them, but they are Americans. I wonder what the country’s national character is We are Japanese because we were born in Japan, we speak Japanese, and we live in Japan. Some people over here were born in a Chinese family, and they speak Chinese, but they consider themselves as Americans This country is really complicated.

On the background of Japanese demographics where only 1.6% of the population of Japan was registered as non-Japanese in the 2013 census, Aiko’s perplexed commentary echoes the notion

of an essentialized Japanese identity that distinguishes the Japanese from other populations. She appeals to genetic markers of authenticity such as “blood” as the threshold of American identity, while place of birth, domicile, and language spoken mark the making of the truly Japanese. Paradoxically, however, in Aiko’s view, the place of birth and language spoken were not sufficient to make the Indian-origin family American, absent “American blood.”

Aiko’s casual comment on her host families correlates with the notion that immigrant families may not be “authentically” American: “The first and the third host families [I stayed with] are Indians and they are not Americans.” So while Aiko was glad to benefit from the cultural transmission bestowed by her Indian host families through Indian cuisine and exposure to Hindi language, she was not ready to include them in Yosuke’s categorization of “common American people” even if they were naturalized citizens.

The examination of authenticity and belonging in the United States is further complicated by the comments surrounding her experience with families who are people of Color:

Japanese tend to have an inferiority complex toward Caucasians, right? ... To be honest, I was happy that my host families were Indians because I learned new culture such as Hindu language. It was interesting! I think that it is a mistake to expect to interact with only White people in this culturally diverse country. The U.S. and Canada are the countries where racially and culturally diverse people live in. I think that Japanese who are disappointed to encounter non-White people are rude. I don’t like Japanese who want to interact with only White people.

Referring to the experience of acquaintances who were hoping for a “Canadian experience” and were disappointed at the number of Korean–Canadians with whom they interacted during their study-abroad experiences, Aiko contrasted her own openness to cultural diversity even if while doing so, she paradoxically implied that White people are indeed the authentic Americans. Instead of contrasting families who are originally from India with those of other possible national origins in the United States, Aiko referred directly to race—not national or ethnic origins—reiterating the long-established research findings that in popular imaginaries both in the United States and across the globe, the mark of an “authentic” American is Whiteness (DiAngelo, 2012; Tatum, 2003). Compounding this racialization of national belonging, Aiko also contextualizes her assessment with how historical and contemporary forces such as the media have contributed to the Japanese internalized inferiority relative to Whiteness (Arima, 2004).

Discussion and Recommendations

Investigating detailed forms of two-way cultural transmission between the American host families and the Japanese students highlighted the complexities that emerge when cultural transmission occurs implicitly, beyond the scripted intentionality of planned events, and when the culture that is “transmitted” is positioned at important intersections of social class, ethnicity and race, immigration, and the widely held discourses of national identity. Based on these findings, we posit that there are both conceptual and practical implications for the role and performance of study-abroad among college students, implications that build on the valuable existing work in this growing area of inquiry.

Student and Host Family Orientation

Our findings provide insight into how institutions sponsoring short-term study-abroad programs might enhance students’ experiences and better prepare host families. As study-abroad and homestay programs increase and more is understood about their dynamics, the

importance of high-quality preparation for students prior to going abroad is now recognized at many institutions (Donnelly-Smith, 2009), along with the need to focus not only on technical issues related to planning, but also on inter-cultural aspects of the intended locale. Nevertheless, “pre-departure orientation content has generally come to focus more and more on student health and safety while abroad” (Engel, 2011, p. 216) and mainly includes students, while host families receive “how to” hosting instructions (Engel, 2011). Building more nuanced awareness and expectation for cultural exchanges can deepen study-abroad experiences and reduce disappointing or superficial experiences of disconnect and misunderstanding (Kim & Goldstein, 2005; Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014).

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Programs structured around the promise of authentic experiences may not always prepare students and host families for the results of the close and, at times, unexpected exchanges that arise in homestay. Careful framing of expectations and reflection opportunities are important and could benefit from perspectives offered by cultural studies or multicultural education scholars, who have advanced a view of culture as fluid and adaptive, allowing individuals the agency to decide how they wish to engage with cultural manifestations and warning against promoting notions of fixed, essentialist identities or superficial forms of multiculturalism (Dolby, 2003; Nieto et al., 2008). These practices must be recognized as an essential element of preparation for study-abroad in general and homestay in particular. Such preparation would prompt participants to confront the ways their experiences frame their expectations and performances of cultural transmission. These practical implications, however, depend on simultaneously advancing the underlying theory in study-abroad literature through interdisciplinary dialogue with specialists in anthropology, cultural studies, multicultural education, and migration studies. These exchanges would foreground increasingly nuanced perspectives on the nature of culture, power, borders, and national identities, and might, in turn, inform both student affairs research on study-abroad and the practice of preparing program participants for international cross-cultural exchange.

Facilitated Dialogue

Echoing suggestions for additional, purposeful conversations concurrent with the study-abroad experience itself (Radomski, 2008), we argue for concerted exchange and reflection among students and families in intentional settings where conversations can be guided toward deeper mutual engagement and understanding. Incorporating various cultural learning activities more seamlessly into the program—such as mutual interviews between host families and students followed by facilitated debriefing—would deepen both host families’ and students’ cultural learning through immersion in more profound layers of exchange that counter misunderstanding, trivialization and the exotification of others. Rather, the analytical lens would be turned inward to afford participants the opportunity to reflect on their structural positions of race, ethnicity, class, or nationality.

Guided Reflection

To this end, formal opportunities for reflection after program completion have also been advanced as a way to solidify the positive effects of the experience whose immediate impact may gradually dissipate after the return home. Although some colleges have offered credit-bearing reflection courses to study-abroad students (Young, 2014), reflection programs are still significantly neglected (Brubaker, 2017), even if they are powerful for drawing deeper meaning from a general

sense that one's experience of study-abroad "was good" (Kortegast & Boisfontaine, 2015, p. 826). Similar initiatives, we posit, would be equally valuable to families, beyond current suggestions for use of evaluation forms for program improvement (Engel, 2011). Our findings suggest that guided opportunities for preliminary, concurrent, and post-homestay programming for both students and host families would enhance the cross-cultural learning, self-understanding, and relationship-building necessary for nuanced engagement with a complex world.

Collaborative Organizational Structures

These programmatic implications are not limited to the level of "orientation meetings" anchored in study-abroad offices but have possible ramifications for the organizational structure of student affairs in institutions of higher education. Attuned to the particulars of local institutional dynamics and the history of organizational structure, colleges and universities could advance intentional collaborations between offices for international education, international student services, and multicultural affairs, rendering their work, as often as possible, mutually-challenging and informative. Given that often these organizational units work with and serve distinct student populations, such collaborations could affect how we consider and expand questions about intersecting social identities in our nation and world, about national borders and their impact on such identities, and about the flexible nature of culture and its manifestations beyond artifacts.

Further Research

In light of the characteristics and circumstances of our participants, we recommend that future studies engage larger samples with greater geographical and demographic diversity to provide insights into different forms of cultural transmission and counter tendencies toward oversimplification of culture. Future research might also study both host families' and students' changes in cultural values and personal growth as a result of homestay experiences, especially since family perspectives are comparatively limited in the current literature.

Analysis of the dynamics of cultural exchange, as we have aimed to undertake in this study, reveals the ways in which homestay programs are necessarily contingent on both the hosts and the participants, who inevitably represent only segments of their own cultural contexts and identities and, evidently, of the wider cultural context that they are meant to represent in the exchange. This necessary positioning is reflected in and affects the nature of the cultural transmission enacted, experienced and interpreted by both hosts and students. Our findings present the homestay setting as a fruitful site for critical engagement with culture as fluid. The growing number of students and hosts involved, as well as the lasting impact of study-abroad programming will continue to benefit from conceptual and practical dialogs that forefront these facets of cultural exchange.

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