

6-2020

## Examining How White College Women Make Meaning of Their Identities and Experiences After Studying Abroad in a Non-European Country

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Examining How White College Women Make Meaning of Their Identities and Experiences

After Studying Abroad in a Non-European Country

Damaris Renee Crocker De Ruiters

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Education

College of Education

April 2020

## **Acknowledgements**

I want to begin by acknowledging those who provided me with guidance and support throughout this entire thesis process. To my partner, Derek, for the constant support and encouragement throughout not only this thesis process, but in everything. Your support continuously pushes me to do the best I can in all I do. To my parents for encouraging me to always do my best, and for listening to all aspects of this process with open ears. I hope to always make you proud. To my cohort mates, especially Arianna Fikse, Tatiana Parsons, and Katie DeRoshia, for listening to me obsess over this process. I am honored to be your colleague. To each of my study participants for your willingness and excitement to be a part of this process. I could not have done this without you. To Dr. Monica Fochtman for telling me to always keep writing after my first semester of graduate school. Your encouragement was what I needed to decide to write this thesis. Finally, to my thesis committee, Dr. Mary Bair, Dr. Karyn Rabourn, Dr. Leifa Mayers, and Dr. Marlene Kowalski-Braun for providing your honest feedback, encouragement, and expertise in this process. To Dr. Marlene Kowalski-Braun for providing your insight and expertise on so many aspects of this topic. To Dr. Leifa Mayers for sharing your expertise on qualitative research methods and helping me find the research methods that fit best with the goals of this study. To Dr. Karyn Rabourn for always providing as much feedback as possible to make sure my work is the best it can be – I am a much better writer because of you. To Dr. Mary Bair for being an incredible chairperson, for guiding me through this process from start to finish, and for continuously pushing me to be a better researcher and writer.

Thank you all.

## **Abstract**

One of the many ways higher education institutions attempt to provide students with an opportunity to examine conflicting identities is through study abroad experiences. The purpose of this study was to explore how White college women make meaning of their privileged and oppressed identities after returning from studying abroad in a non-European country. It focused specifically on issues related to their gender identity, racial identity, and their nationality. This qualitative study was rooted in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The theoretical frameworks guiding this study were the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), the Disintegration stage in Helm's Model of White Racial Identity Development (Helms, 1990), and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997). Criterion for inclusion in this study included the following self-identifications, (a) White, (b) woman, (c) current student at Midwest University (MU) (pseudonym), and (d) participation in a study abroad program to a non-European country through MU. Participants engaged in an in-person individual interview with the researcher for approximately one hour to an hour-and-a-half. Data were analyzed using Charmaz's (2014) analytical approach. This system included initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, theoretical coding, and memo writing. The three main themes that emerged were: (a) Identity understanding, (b) Factors that influenced study abroad experiences, and (c) Coping. Findings provided insight into how White college women make meaning of their identities and experiences after studying abroad in a non-European country.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

A main goal of higher education is to provide opportunities for students to engage in self-discovery. Ideally, higher education institutions would be focused on creating well-rounded global citizens, and students would leave college with a developed sense of self (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012). For many college students, this would mean learning how to simultaneously hold two or more intersecting and sometimes socially conflicting identities. For example, for students who identify as White women, it would mean learning how to reconcile a privileged racial identity with an oppressed gender identity (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017). One of the many ways higher education institutions attempt to provide students with an opportunity to examine conflicting identities is through study abroad experiences. With the majority of college students who study abroad being White women (Open Doors, 2018), the experience of being in a non-European country could be a way for students to begin to reflect on both their privileged and oppressed identities, especially where they may be the numeric minority for the first time. However, according to Dalpra and Vianden (2017), in reality, many college students often focus on only one aspect of their identity, either the privileged or the oppressed. Complicating the dilemma of holding conflicting identities is the fact that there is very little research on the intersections of racial and gender identity in White college women who study abroad.

There are many factors that may contribute to how White college women make meaning of their gender and racial identity after studying abroad. The first factor that may contribute is the notion of White identity, specifically White privilege, and how that may impact their meaning making process (Case & Rios, 2017). Everyone who benefits from White privilege has the option to ignore issues around race (Feenstra, 2017), which could lead to an underdeveloped

racial identity due to lack of racial awareness. White students may simply choose to ignore their racial identity or ignore it without even realizing it because it is not on their radar. Second, even if White students become aware of their racial privilege, whether due to domestic experiences or experiences abroad, it may be difficult for them to move forward towards a well-rounded identity because of the level of White guilt they may experience (Webb, 2018). Webb argued that when White women become aware of their racial privilege, they can experience and be immobilized by White guilt, making them unable to move forward towards racial justice. Because of this, White women may cling more to their gender identity than their racial identity because they are more aware of their gender than their race (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017).

While some research suggested that White women have a difficult time navigating the intersection of oppressed and privileged identities, others have noted that the empirical literature on this topic is sparse (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017). While there are several studies on White racial identity development (Banks et al., 2014; Case, 2012; Helms, 1990; Malott et al., 2019), on study abroad (Hammer, 2001; Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012; Jessup-Anger, 2008; Rose & Bylander, 2006), and on gender identity and feminist thought (Banks et al., 2014; Case, 2012; Jessup-Anger, 2008), there was little research to be found that discussed these intersecting identities within the context of study abroad. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining how White college women make meaning of their identities and experiences after studying abroad in a non-European country.

### **Rationale**

Studying how White women make meaning of their racial identity, gender identity, nationality, and other salient identities after studying abroad in a non-European country was important because of the large number of White women studying abroad. Approximately seventy



percent of all students studying abroad identify as White, and sixty-seven percent of all students studying abroad identify as women (Open Doors, 2018). If a main component of higher education institutions is to create well-rounded global citizens, there ought to be more research conducted on how experiential learning programs, such as studying abroad, impact the way White college women perceived both their gender identity and their racial identity. However, much of the existing research is broad, vague, and limited (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017).

Furthermore, college is meant to be a time of learning and self-exploration (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012). At many predominantly White institutions (PWIs), many White students may not have had to confront their race before. In fact, college may be the first time some students may have ever thought of how their race impacts themselves and their non-White peers (Perry, 2007). While White women may be constantly aware of their gender identity and how they fit in a patriarchal world, they may not have had many opportunities to confront their privileged racial identity (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017). Studying abroad in a non-European country may be the first time a White college woman may have wrestled with how their race and gender identities intersect and relate to who they are and how they make meaning of their experiences and the world. Examining their experiences provides a unique opportunity to contribute to the sparse literature on this topic.

## **Background of the Problem**

### **History of College Study Abroad Programs**

Study abroad has grown to become an increasingly important part of students' educational experiences, especially in the last few decades. A study spanning fifty years of programs by the Institute of International Education (IIE) showed that twice as many students in the 1990's said study abroad was played an important role in deciding which university to attend

as compared to students in the 1950s (Dwyer, 2004). Collegiate study abroad programs have grown in popularity with the demand for a more globalized mindset, and the IIE was founded to encourage these international connections. The IIE aims to advance scholarship, build economies, and promote access to opportunity, and they have over 1,600 higher education partnerships aimed at promoting international exchange (IIE, 2020).

The IIE began in 1919 as a way to encourage international student exchanges (Open Doors, 2018). The IIE was one of the first platforms of its kind in promoting study abroad programs on college campuses. With the rising popularity of study abroad programs among college students, the IIE offered resources to get these programs started in a way that promoted student learning and mutual international benefit. The University of Delaware has been credited with creating the first study abroad trip in 1923, only four years after the IIE was created (University of Delaware, 2019). Today, study abroad is one of the many experiential learning programs on college campuses. According to The Open Doors (2018) report, approximately 67% of college students studying abroad identified as women in the 2016-2017 academic year. That same academic year, of all reported students who studied abroad, approximately 71% of them identified as White (Open Doors, 2018).

The Open Doors (2018) report also provided data on the leading host countries where students chose to study. In the 2016-2017 academic year, the top five leading countries were European countries; the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, respectively. The non-European leading country was China, with 3.6% of all students studying abroad here compared to 12% studying abroad in the United Kingdom (Open Doors, 2018). Fifty-eight percent of all students studying abroad during the 2016-2017 academic year chose to study abroad in Europe, while 15% studied abroad in Latin America, 9% studied abroad in Asia, and

nearly 4% studied abroad in Africa (Open Doors, 2018). While over half of students studying abroad chose Europe as their destination, this study focused on students who chose to study abroad in non-European countries.

### **Outcomes and Critiques of College Study Abroad Programs**

Study abroad is considered a high-impact practice and encouraged critical thinking and intercultural effectiveness and competence (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014). Because there is more to college than classroom learning, high-impact practices are desirable because they strengthen student engagement, provide hands-on learning experiences, and better prepare students for an everchanging career world (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014; Kuh, 2008). Students who participate in study abroad were gain intercultural competence and socially responsible leadership skills, both of which are considered outcomes for liberal arts institutions and promote desirability amongst employers (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014). Students who study abroad in college also tend to have more interest in world news and affairs, and they are more likely to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills compared to other students (Bohrer, 2010; Hendershot & Sperandio, 2009; McKeown, 2009; Paige et al., 2009).

A critique of study abroad programs is the racial disparity among students who choose to study abroad. According to Paige et al. (2009), collegiate study abroad experiences have been found to be one of the most important experiential learning programs in which students can participate, yet there is one population of students who tend to study abroad more than others: White women. Despite the many efforts study abroad advocates have made in making study abroad more accessible, there is still a large racial gap in who participates in study abroad programs (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2010). In part, this could be due to a lack of

representation in study abroad making it difficult for them to see studying abroad as a common possibility (Paras et al., 2019).

Another critique of study abroad is its association with tourism and colonialism. Though study abroad experiences are considered educational endeavors, they still share similar activities associated with tourism (Pipitone, 2018). The issues of tourism and colonialism in study abroad programs glamourize travel and other countries and contribute to colonialism while missing the essential educational outcome study abroad aims to provide. To combat study abroad programs from falling into tourist and colonialist habits, Pipitone (2018) suggests decentering western perspectives in order to produce a more global mindset in students and gain awareness of their own cultural prospective and identities. While there are barriers and critiques of study abroad, the benefits greatly outweigh the barriers, and institutions of higher education are focused on making study abroad more accessible. Many students report that studying abroad provided them with invaluable skills in intercultural communication and critical thinking that helped them land jobs, as well as provide them with life-changing experiences and abilities to think globally (Paras et al., 2019).

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore how White college women make meaning of their privileged and oppressed identities after returning from studying abroad in a non-European country. It focused specifically on issues related to their gender identity, racial identity, and their nationality.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study included:

1. How do participants perceive privilege and oppression, especially with regard to their own identities?
2. How does participation in study abroad programs impact the ways participants perceive their own privileged and oppressed identities?
3. What are some other factors that impact the perceptions participants have of their privileged and oppressed identities, and how do those factors influence the perceptions?

### **Design, Data Collection, and Analysis**

This study was rooted in Charmaz's (2006; 2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory, which seeks to identify the processes underlying a phenomenon of interest. Feminist positionality and interviewing practices were also adopted in order to center women's experiences and prioritize storytelling narratives (Brooks, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2007). The participants of this qualitative study self-identified as White undergraduate college women studying at Midwest University (MU) (pseudonym) who studied abroad in a non-European country. I worked with my chairperson, Dr. Mary Bair, to construct an email that was sent to a selection of faculty who lead study abroad trips through the International Center at MU. The selected faculty then sent the recruitment email to their undergraduate students (see Appendix A). The recruitment email included a brief description of the study, along with my contact information for interested students. The interested students then reached out directly to me and self-identified as being current students over the age of 18, and as White women who had studied abroad in a non-European country while attending MU.

Data was collected through individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that ranged from one hour to an hour and a half in length. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). While the interview protocol acted as a

guide to structure the interview sessions, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for follow-up questions as needed. This approach highlighted the importance of narrative methodology consistent with feminist interviewing practices (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality, and all identifying information was only seen by the researcher and was not published in the results. All data collection took place on MU's campuses, and interviews were conducted in a closed room to ensure the confidentiality of each participant, as well as encourage transparency and honesty. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a third-party subscription service with bank-level security to ensure accuracy.

Based on Charmaz's (2006; 2014) book on grounded theory, the process for this study included generating initial codes by conducting line-by-line analysis. After initial codes were generated, they were consolidated into focused codes to create more manageable concepts. The focused codes were then consolidated into axial codes, and then into the main conceptual theoretical codes. Throughout the entire process, from interview to theoretical coding, memos were taken in a researcher's journal (Borg, 2001; Charmaz, 2006; 2014). This process of memo writing helped to ensure accuracy and limit researcher bias throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

### **Operational Definitions**

**Cultural Competence:** The ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures (Hammer, 2012).

**Intercultural:** something that occurs across or between cultures (Hammer, 2012).

**Monocultural:** only occurs in one culture (Hammer, 2012).

**Oppression:** Systemic unjust treatment or exercise of power (Case, 2012).

**Patriarchy:** A system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it (Snitow, 2018).

**Well-Rounded Identity:** A strong awareness of one's multiple identities, including how they relate and intersect with each other (Feenstra, 2017).

**White guilt:** The individual or collective guilt felt by some white people for harm resulting from racist treatment of ethnic minorities by other white people, both historically and currently in the United States (Webb, 2018).

**White privilege:** Inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice (Case & Rios, 2017).

### **Delimitations of Study**

This study was conducted at a PWI in the midwestern United States, and the population chosen for this study was White college women who had studied abroad in a non-European country. Due to the characteristics of the target population, the demographic variables of race, gender, and experience in a non-European country were used for recruitment. This study was limited to undergraduate students in order to keep the target population consistent. The location was determined in order to be most accommodating for interested participants and ensure that interview location was not a barrier for participants.

### **Limitations of Study**

The experiences that White college women participants had on these particular faculty-led study abroad trips to non-European countries through MU may not be generalizable to the experiences of White college women at other PWI's around the country. Also, the experiences participants had while studying abroad in non-European countries as a part of a faculty-led program may not be the same as other college women studying abroad in non-European

countries that are independent, semester or year-long programs. The intent was not to limit the study to faculty-led programs, but that was the outcome due to recruitment practices. The participants who volunteered to be a part of this study studied abroad in Ghana, Tanzania, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador, which many not speak to the experiences White college women may have in other non-European countries. I had prior knowledge of the experiences of three out of the eight participants, which may have influenced their responses. To combat this, I only asked those three the same questions I asked the other five, I kept a journal to bracket out my biases, and I only analyzed their responses to the interview questions. Finally, participants' ability to reflect on their experiences and answer interview questions may have impacted the accuracy of their recollections and responses.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter one introduced the problem at hand, how the problem is relevant to higher education institutions, and the research questions that guided this study. Chapter two will discuss the theoretical frameworks and literature related to the problem at hand. Chapter three will provide the research design, participants involved in the study, data collection, and methods of data analysis. Chapter four will discuss the findings. The final chapter will provide discuss the implications of the findings, offer conclusions, and recommendations for future research and higher education programming.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this literature review is to provide insight into how White college women create and give meaning to their study abroad experiences in relationship to their intersecting, yet potentially contradicting, identities. This section examined the theoretical frameworks and relevant research that guided this study. This section also sought to critique the literature, articulate gaps, and justify the need for this study. It is important to note that the majority of the literature used *woman* and *female* interchangeably, but I have decided to use *woman* throughout in order to be consistent in discussing gender rather than biological sex.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

In order to understand the effect of study abroad on how White college women make meaning of their experiences, it is important to first provide a theoretical understanding of how meaning making is created in relation to salient aspects of social identity. The reason for this is to highlight the most important information and show the intersectional nature of meaning making, especially for college women holding privileged and oppressed identities simultaneously. The frameworks outlined below are the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), Helm's Model of White Racial Identity Development (Helms, 1990), and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2012).

#### **Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) (Jones & McEwen, 2000) is a conceptual model that aims to simultaneously depict a core sense of self and many secondary and intersecting dimensions of identity. For example, identities related to race, gender, sexual

orientation, and religion can all lead to a core identity, though they may seem contradictory. According to Jones and McEwen, White woman who also identify as Christian and queer can simultaneously hold multiple privileged and oppressed identities centered around a core identity, even though the privileged and oppressed identities may contradict each other.

Jones and McEwen (2000) intended to conceptualize a model which explained the many identities a woman could hold, and also captured the essence of a core identity, which varied based on participant. The model was not meant to be static but is fluid in nature in order to represent the ongoing social construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the process of identity development (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Individuals have a core identity that is based on personal characteristics and attributes, but the individuals' identity is also influenced by sociocultural context which includes socioeconomic status, family norms and values, peer influences, and other factors (Jones & McEwen). The dynamic nature of this model is vital in explaining how individuals' identities are constantly impacted by surroundings, contexts, and experiences. The model was originally created to encourage college women to explore their multiple identities in relation to their core identity and external factors beyond their control, such as family background, and sociocultural experiences, such as study abroad experiences (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Seven years after Jones and McEwen (2000) created the MMDI, they attempted to critique some issues with the model and reconceptualized it to be more inclusive and accurate (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). The reconceptualized MMDI still focuses on the core identity, as well as secondary identities and external factors, but adds a meaning making filter through which experiences are processed in order to create individualized and unique identities. The addition of the meaning making filter provided insight into how women may use their contexts

as a filter as a way to make sense of their experiences, impacting individuals' fluid understandings of themselves. Some of these contexts may include familial background, upbringing, and ways women are positioned within power structures (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). The addition of a meaning making filter reinforced the notion that each student is an individual with unique needs and ways of making sense of their experiences, while also highlighting the contexts through which women make meaning (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). In this study, the focus was on the reconceptualized model in order to emphasize the importance the meaning making filter. See figure 1 to view the original MMDI model and Figure 2 to view the reconceptualized model.

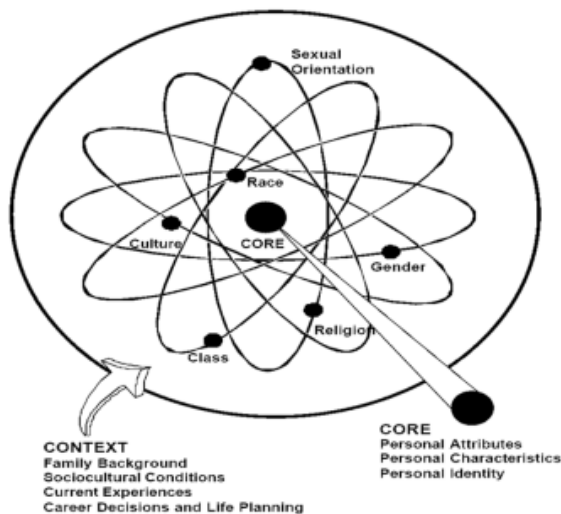


Figure 1

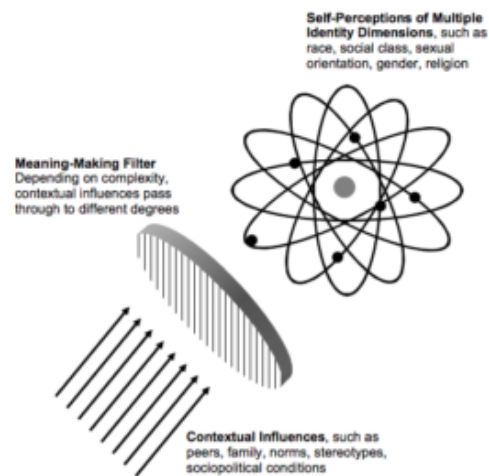


Figure 2

## Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory takes place in settings where students are given the opportunity to critically reflect on their own assumptions and engage in interactions that promote complex understanding, and this type of learning is emphasized in experiential learning programs such as study abroad (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012; Mezirow, 1997).

According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning, “Is the process of effecting change in a

frame of reference... Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” (p. 5). Under experience that promote critical thinking, transformative learning can encourage students to move towards a frame of reference that is more inclusive and self-reflective (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learning consists of instrumental learning, normative learning, impressionistic learning, and communicative learning (Habermas, 1981). The communicative learning component of transformative learning is central to this study because of its focus on understanding purposes, values, beliefs, and feelings in order to recognize one’s own assumptions and biases (Mezirow, 1997).

Communicative learning is difficult to assess and measure, and outcomes can vary based on each student and how they interpret their experience. This form of learning relates to the ways students express and communicate their feelings and desires about what they are learning through discourse with others to understand their own biases and critically reflect on how they came to those biases and assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). This type of learning allows participants to consider the power structures they benefit from and how these power structures may influence the way they make meaning of their identities and experiences through critical reflection. Though this is a more abstract way of student learning, it is still important to practice in order for students to become better communicators in both domestic and cross-cultural settings.

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) paired well with the meaning making filter and how college women make meaning of their identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). The way students are socially positioned impacts how they reflect on themselves, their experiences, and how they view the world. This could provide information on how White college women studying abroad in non-European countries may make sense of their experiences with race, gender, and nationality, and this provided a framework for understanding these dynamic processes.

## **Helm's Model of White Racial Identity Development**

Helms' (1990) Model of White Racial Identity Development is a theoretical framework that many researchers have used while conducting studies on White racial identity. According to the model, the development of identity is divided into six different stages: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independence, Immersion, and Autonomy (Helms, 1990). In this review, I will focus on the Disintegration stage because it is the most relevant for understanding meaning making processes during and after study abroad in a non-European country. The disintegration stage could explain how White college women may be making meaning of their intercultural experiences after being exposed to critical incidents abroad.

According to Helms (1990), in the Disintegration stage, students who are exposed to a critical incident related to race may begin to experience guilt and shame. Cross-cultural and racial experiences expose White students to concepts of power and privilege that may be difficult to comprehend. Because of this, students may take things quite personally and dwell on feelings of guilt and shame regarding current and historical race relations and their social positioning within systemic racism. This stage is important because it allows understanding of how individuals begin processing the new emotions that may arise when they first learn of the harms of systemic racism (Helms, 1990).

## **Synthesis of the Literature**

This section will provide a synthesis of the relevant empirical literature related to how White college women make meaning of their social positions and identities after studying abroad in a non-European country. The literature summarized in this chapter discusses the impact of, race, gender, and nationality in collegiate study abroad programs. It also discusses research on

intersecting identities, and the ways in which White women make meaning of their experiences and identities.

### **Race, Gender, and Intersecting Identities Among White College Women**

The topic of White consciousness has gained attention over the past couple decades, especially as America shifted from the Jim Crow and segregation eras full of blatant racism to more subtle acts of racism and prejudice (Case & Rios, 2017; Fine, et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1990). Because White college students, and White people in general, are able to distance themselves from the oppression of people of Color, they may not be aware of the role their Whiteness plays in broader society, nor may they be aware of the privilege they hold solely based on their skin color (Helms, 1990). White college students today have grown up associating racism with the KKK, Jim Crow, lynching, and other blatant acts without recognizing the ways racism exists in society and on campus today (Watt, 2007). This association allows White students to distance themselves from racism without seeing the very real problem that still exists. Leonardo (2004) describes how White people can be oblivious to their privilege by benefitting from the systems that privilege them while oppressing others. For White men, this may be even more evident due to gender privilege (Banks et al., 2014; Case, 2012; Jessup-Anger, 2008).

According to Helms' (1990) model of White Racial Identity Development and studies conducted on White privilege, it can be difficult for White college students to even recognize ways in which they may benefit from White privilege (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; DiAngelo, 2011; Helms, 1990; Perry, 2007). This is more evident at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) because whiteness is seen as normal, while people of Color are often viewed as 'other' (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Perry, 2007). When confronted with topics of power and privilege, White students can initially get defensive before being open to the conversation

(Helms, 1990; Watt, 2007). This can be due to the phenomenon of *White fragility* (DiAngelo, 2011).

White fragility described the triggering of defensive moves by White people when they perceive any amount of racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011; Fine et al., 1997). DiAngelo (2011) offered some examples of defensive moves such as “the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (p. 54). Racially charged situations may cause White people to feel like they are being attacked when confronted with their unseen privileged racial identity. These confrontations can take a variety of forms, including receiving feedback that their actions have racist implications, acknowledging that an unequal opportunity exists between racial groups, and being presented with the life experiences of racially minoritized groups through conversations and multicultural education (DiAngelo, 2011).

In studies conducted specifically with White women, the level of fear about being confronted about their racial identity by racially minoritized groups decreased as participants’ own level of autonomy increased (Linder, 2015; Siegal & Carter, 2014; Webb, 2018). As they became more aware of themselves and their own identities, they were less worried about being confronted about their identities. Linder (2015) concluded that when White women had a better sense of self, along with an awareness of their own identities and how they relate to others, they were generally less afraid of being confronted by racially minoritized groups on topics of White privilege and racism. Seigal and Carter (2014) found that the more participants were exposed to conversations around White privilege, the more aware they became of their own privilege, and the more open they were towards conversations around White fragility and race (Seigal & Carter, 2014). Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella (2014) found that one of the ways in which college women

could gain exposure to these conversations was through a high impact practice such as study abroad.

According to Dalpra and Vianden (2017), college can present opportunities for college women to examine their identities. However, Dalpra and Vianden found that the way college is set up may only focus on developing one of these identities while ignoring the other. They also discovered that White college women described that they felt uncomfortable with racial identity because their race was associated with racist acts and an abundance of privilege. Over half of the women in their study also expressed feeling a stronger sense of connection with being a woman than they did with being White, and all but one who expressed this felt proud of their gender identity. According to Dalpra and Vianden, this suggested that it may be easier to lean into an oppressed identity than to acknowledge a privileged identity; half of the participants feeling tension with holding both a privileged and oppressed identity.

In Dalpra and Vianden's (2017) study, seven out of ten participants expressed tension with holding two contradicting identities. For one of the three who did not experience tension, being aware and comfortable with both her gender and racial identity allowed her to become involved in anti-racist and feminist efforts on campus as she aimed for social justice. Another participant felt strongly connected to both her gender and racial identity, while the third felt disconnected from both. Dalpra and Vianden concluded that college women want to be associated as part of a group when it comes to their gender identity because they find some sort of camaraderie, they want to be viewed as individuals regarding their racial identity in order to not be associated with the historically racist actions of White people.

While the majority of literature related to women's gender identities is outdated according to Dalpra and Vianden (2017), it is important to highlight common theories and



literature around women's gender development. Gilligan (1982) and Josselson (1996) describe the impact female relationships have on college women's gender identity development. Female relationships helped Josselson's participants feel a sense of community and camaraderie, which led to a stronger sense of self and gender identity. According to Bem (1981) and Evans et al. (2010), college women tend to act in ways that positively reinforce their expectations of expected social gender norms and avoid behaviors and attitudes that encourage gender non-conforming behavior based on how they were raised. In fact, both Bem (1981) and Evans et al. (2010) went as far as to say that gender roles and a sense of femininity are key components of gender identity development. On the other hand, White and Gardner (2008) argued that conforming to gender stereotypes can be harmful to college women. This was reinforced in Dalpra and Vianden's (2017) study, where White college women felt constrained by societal expectations of traditional gender roles, causing them to feel disassociated from their gender identity. More recent critical theories focus on how women can reclaim their gender identity and fight the patriarchal systems while developing a well-rounded gender identity (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017).

Gender identity development has also been reviewed from a more intersectional perspective. Robbins (2016) highlights how additional scholarship has contributed to a more complex understanding of lesbian (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes & Kasch, 2007), African American (Kelly, 2004; Watt, 2006), Latinx (Gonzales, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007), Asian and Asian American (Green & Kim, 2005; Lee & Beckett, 2005), and White women (Frankenberg, 1993). These studies highlighted the importance of the RMMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) for college women to make meaning of their experiences.

Other ways to encourage meaning making were explored by researchers who used transformative learning as an approach to study abroad programs (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012) and White privilege pedagogy (Quaye, 2012). Quaye (2012) conducted a study to better understand how educators could facilitate conversations around the topics of power, privilege, and race in the classroom and in other platforms, such as study abroad programs. Quaye identified the challenge of finding ways to help students understand the structural and systemic nature of privilege, oppression, and racism. Quaye's study echoed the findings of other studies, which showed the difficulty White students may have with acknowledging the ways they are privileged in society (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; DiAngelo, 2011; Helms, 1990; Perry, 2007). When confronted with the fact that they benefit from White privilege, White students tended to become defensive, emphasizing the need for critical conversations in the classroom and other educational spaces on campus (Applebaum, 2010). According to Robbins (2016) and Quaye (2012), White privilege pedagogy was prevalent in other forms of learning, specifically experiential learning programs such as study abroad. Robbins (2016) examined how female graduate students reflected on their racial privilege through exposure to White privilege pedagogy when engaging in critical conversations with faculty, staff, internship supervisors, and peers outside of the classroom. In her study, students reported that these experiences contributed to their understanding of racism, power, and privilege and encouraged them to learn more about these issues (Robbins, 2016).

### **College Study Abroad Programs and Identities**

Study abroad programs have existed for a century in the United States (Open Doors Report, 2018; Stone & Petrick, 2013), and collegiate study abroad experiences have been found to be one of the most important experiential learning programs for students (Paige et al., 2009).

White students may grapple with their racial identities for the first time while studying abroad in a country that is not white-majority. According to Hoffa and DuPaul (2009), study abroad experiences on college campuses aimed to expose their students to learning about their own nationality and how it plays a role in global culture. In many cases, an American student studying abroad was first seen by their nationality before being seen by their race or gender (Dolby, 2004). This showed the power associated with the United States and the way the country may often be viewed globally. In most cases, American college students studying abroad in non-European countries were given special treatment solely based on their nationality (Hoffa & DuPaul, 2009; Jewett, 2010). This can be attributed to the United States' connection to wealth and power, the aid the United States has given to other countries, and the amount of control the United States has in other countries.

This conflation of racial and national privilege can create a complicated set of circumstances for students of Color who study abroad. Morgan, Mwegelo, and Turner (2002) conducted a study examining the dissonance between African American women studying abroad in West Africa and the African women living there. While many of the African American women studying abroad in West Africa sought connection with African women, they were treated differently because they were American; they were treated similarly to their White peers (Morgan, Mwegelo, & Turner, 2002).

Some recent research related to study abroad has focused on race as a variable and has attempted to answer why the majority of students studying abroad are White (Goldoni, 2017; Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2010). Salisbury, Paulsen, and Pascarella (2010) surveyed 6,828 college students from 53 two-year and 4-year higher education institutions. The authors found their participants of Color did not view study abroad as important as their White peers, and

some did not see it as an accessible option for them due to outside factors. This conclusion showed how White college women studying abroad are often surrounded by more White college women in similar situations to them due to the large racial gap in study abroad programs.

There is also some literature that focused on gender and explored the experiences of college women on study abroad trips. Historically, studying abroad has presented gendered issues for women, especially when in public spaces (Rawlins, 2012; Twombly, 2009). Rawlins (2012) interviewed 18 women who had previously studied abroad and found that nearly all of them struggled with issues related to public harassment by men, primarily in the form of catcalling or unwanted touching and groping. Some participants felt they were conflicted between experiencing their trip fully and their own safety, leading to a conflict between independence and risk-taking while abroad. Despite this, many participants returned home more confident in their gender identity and more willing to take risks due to the exposure to sexism in their host country. After experiencing extreme forms of sexism, Rawlins' participants were able to have a better understanding of ways they had felt discriminated against and combat that discrimination back home. According to Rawlins, many participants found their study abroad experience empowering in spite of the harassment they faced abroad.

The literature suggested that studying abroad encouraged White college women to lean into the discomfort of possessing a privileged racial identity with an oppressed gender identity (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017). Many White women view their racial identity as uncomfortable, but they feel a strong connection to their gender identity (Case, 2012; Dalpra & Vianden, 2017; Linder, 2011). This could be because White women feel a sense of solidarity with other women, but they do not want to be associated with the negative implications of their racial identity. These factors could be heightened during a study abroad experience when they are exposed to how

other countries view whiteness, nationality, and gender roles when students are given avenues to properly reflect on what they are learning abroad.

**Reflection.** It is important to note the role reflection activities may have in encouraging college women to make meaning of their study abroad experiences. Students were found to develop varying levels of cultural competence based on where they chose to study abroad, the level of interest they had in learning while on the trip, and their open-mindedness. These factors combined with intentional reflection practices aided the development of inter-cultural competence (Rose & Bylander, 2006) and helped students decenter Western-centric views (Pipitone, 2018). Costello (2015), Paras et al. (2019), Hammer (2012), Rose and Bylander (2006) all highlighted the importance of reflection practices while studying abroad because these practices encouraged self-awareness, critical thinking, and an ability to listen to other perspectives. Frequent intentional reflection practices were found to enable students to thoroughly process the day-to-day of their study abroad experience (Hammer, 2012). According to Rose and Bylander (2006), students who used various forms of intentional reflection practices were able to develop more self-awareness and cultural competence.

Self-reflection and preparation played a key role in how a student reacted to culture shock and reverse culture shock before, during, and after their study abroad experience (Costello, 2015; Paras, et Al, 2019; Weilkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). While the notion of culture shock refers to adjustments to a new culture and country, reverse culture shock refers to an adjustment period upon returning back to a student's home country (Gaw, 2000). According to Gaw, reverse culture shock upon re-entry can have more of an impact on college students than initial culture shock. Symptoms related to culture shock were found to range from frustration with cultural barriers to homesickness, while reverse culture shock presented itself in the form of difficulty in

articulating what they had experienced abroad and reconciling these experiences with life back home (Costello, 2015; Gaw, 2000). Gaw found that college students felt like they led two separate lives – their life in their home country and the life they had while abroad. Students who studied abroad experienced things that their family members and friends back home do not often understand, making it difficult to articulate the highlights and lowlights of their experiences (Gaw, 2000). Researchers found that students can be prepared for culture shock and reverse culture shock through reflection practices and trainings before, during, and after their study abroad experience (Costello, 2015; Paras, et al., 2019; Rose & Bylander, 2006; Weilkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010).

### **Critique**

Much of the existing research has tended to use quantitative methods over qualitative methods and there is little research on educational interventions and support for students. Furthermore, a review of the literature has uncovered the lack of research directed at White college women studying abroad in non-European countries; this is the gap that this study aimed to fill.

The first limitation of the existing research on study abroad experiences is that most studies have been conducted using quantitative methods. The use of surveys and questionnaires were used to gain insight from thousands of students in order to provide a basic framework for this discussion (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2017; Paras et al., 2019; Salisbury, Paulsen, & Turner, 2010). While these methods may be beneficial to assess the basic perspectives of a large sample of college students, such studies have some inherent disadvantages. Because of their closed-ended format, quantitative studies do not allow the researcher to probe the students' responses or to ask additional questions based on the responses that participants provide. I hope to address this

limitation by using semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth knowledge of how study abroad experiences impact White, college women.

The literature also revealed that there was little research on educational interventions and support for students who return from study abroad trips. Even though Hammer (2001), Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, (2012), Jessup-Anger (2008), and Rose and Bylander (2006) all discussed the importance of reflection before, during, and after a study abroad trip, they offered few resources for what these reflections ought to look like and how colleges and universities could provide support for students participating in study abroad programs. In order to shed light on specific practices that may have been helpful to students, I included questions on this topic. I also hope to address this limitation by providing suggestions for future programs and student support based on the outcomes of my interviews.

Additionally, much of the study abroad research did not directly address White students studying abroad in non-European countries. While there is research related to African American students studying abroad in non-European countries (Morgan, Mwegelo, & Turner, 2002), there was a lack of research related to the experiences of White students studying abroad in non-European countries. My study sought to address this gap by specifically interviewing White students who chose to study abroad in non-European countries where they may be in the racial minority for the first time.

Last, and most important, there is very little research that directly related to the specific topic of how studying abroad in a non-European country impacts the way White college women make meaning of their social position and intersecting identities. While there are multiple studies on White racial identity development (Banks et al., 2014; Case, 2012; Helms, 1990; Malott et al., 2019), study abroad (Hammer, 2001; Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012; Jessup-Anger,

2008; Rose & Bylander, 2006), and gender identity and feminist thought (Banks et Al., 2014; Case, 2012; Jessup-Anger, 2008), there is little research that brought all three concepts together. The recognition of this gap in the literature led to the development of the current study.

### **Summary**

The goal of this literature review was to examine how White college women create and give meaning to their study abroad experiences in relationship to the lens of their intersecting, and potentially contradicting, identities. The theoretical framework included the Disintegration stage of Helm's (1990) Model of White Racial Identity Development, the MMDI and RMMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwan, 2000;), and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997). Each of these frameworks provides a conceptual foundation for examining how studying abroad in a non-European country impacts the ways White college women make meaning of their identities. The meaning making filter of the RMMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) is particularly beneficial in allowing exploration of how White women make meaning of their multiple identities, including identities that may contradict each other.

While the research on how White college women develop both their racial and gender identities while studying abroad in non-European countries is limited, the literature addressed many factors related to study abroad, gender identity development, and racial identity development among college women. An understanding of White privilege and fragility paired with study abroad programs encouraged White college women to reflect on how they can develop their racial identity (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014; Linder, 2015; Siegal & Carter, 2014; Webb, 2018). The literature outlined how college women studying abroad can be hyper-aware of their race, gender, and nationality due to being a racial minority in a non-European country (Jessup-Anger, 2008; Paras et al., 2019; Twombly et al., 2012), but few studies



examined how college women make meaning of these experiences. This literature review has helped to identify gaps in the literature that I address with this study.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the literature review was to gain insight into how White college women make meaning of their study abroad experiences as they related to their gender and racial identities. The literature surrounding this topic was limited, indicating the need for more specific research, which I aimed to fill the gap in this study. By merging theories of racial identity development, gender identity development, and the role study abroad experiences can play in creating well-rounded global citizens, this literature review sought to understand how White college women make meaning of their identities after studying abroad in a non-European country. In the next chapter, I outline the research design, the sampling procedure, and the process of data collection and analysis.

## **Chapter Three: Research Design**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore how White college women make meaning of their privileged and oppressed identities after returning from studying abroad in a non-European country. It focused specifically on issues related to their gender identity, racial identity, and their nationality. Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; 2014), the study sought to gain insight into the ways in which White college women reflected on their study abroad experiences as they relate to their race, gender, nationality, and any other salient identities. Charmaz' (2006; 2014) approach to constructivist grounded theory consist of "systemic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves" (p. 1). Constructivist grounded theory researchers adopt a variety of actions including conducting and analyzing data simultaneously, analyze actions and processes instead of themes and structure, and draw on data to develop new conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to uncover nuances in participants' understandings, consistent with feminist interviewing processes (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

The research questions that guided this study include:

1. How do participants perceive privilege and oppression, especially with regard to their own identities?
2. How does participation in study abroad programs impact the ways participants perceive their own privileged and oppressed identities?
3. What are some other factors that impact the perceptions participants have of their privileged and oppressed identities, and how do those factors influence the perceptions?

In this chapter, I explain how participants were selected, the instruments that were used, and the process of data collection and analysis.

### **Sampling Procedures**

The participants of this qualitative study self-identified as White, undergraduate college women currently studying at MU who had studied abroad in a non-European country. Criterion-based sampling was used to recruit subjects for the study. I worked with my chairperson, Dr. Mary Bair, to construct an email that was sent to a selection of faculty who lead study abroad trips through the International Center at MU. The selected faculty then sent the recruitment email to their undergraduate students (see Appendix A). The recruitment email included a brief description of the study, along with my contact information for interested students. The interested students then reached out directly to me and self-identified as being current students over the age of 18, and as White women who had studied abroad in a non-European country while attending MU. I received emails from nine students and ended up conducting face-to-face interviews with a total of eight participants. The sample size of eight participants was justified based on the sample size recommendations of other qualitative researchers (Costello, 2015; Dalpra & Vianden, 2017; Dolan, 2018; Robbins, 2012). I interviewed participants until no new information was being gained from talking to additional participants, thus reaching data saturation (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). By having interested students reach out to me directly during the selection process, I was able to minimize systematic and personal bias in the recruitment and selection of participants. Once interested participants contacted me and self-identified as fitting my criteria, each one was sent a consent form, asked to provide a pseudonym, and given the ability to select an interview time that fit both of our schedules.

## Instrumentation

I served as the interviewer and the primary researcher for this study. As a White woman with experience studying abroad, I had personal experience related to study abroad experiences, White privilege, and gender oppression. While my personal experiences fueled my passion to conduct this study, in order to remain neutral and limit bias, I did not speak of my own experience with my participants until after the interview was over. However, I must note that I was previously acquainted with three out of the eight participants who were students on a study abroad trip for which I served as the graduate assistant. In order to minimize bias, I was careful to only ask these three participants the same questions I asked the other five, and, in my analysis, I only used the data given during the interviews. In order to bracket out potential biases, I took careful notes of my thoughts and feelings in my researcher journal. I also planned to use *member checks* to ensure accuracy of my interpretations (Charmaz, 2006; 2014), however, due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the campus was shut down, and consequently, I was not able to conduct these member checks.

Face-to-face interviews were used to gather data in this study, and I asked the same guiding interview questions to each participant (see Appendix B). While guiding questions were used, a semi-structured interview format allowed for follow-up questions and fluid conversations. Each interview was different, even with the same set of interview questions. This format allowed the interview to be more conversational and open to any and all relevant information. This process was informed by feminist positionality and interviewing approaches that center women's experiences and the importance of storytelling narratives. (Brooks, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2007).

## **Data Collection**

All data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews that ranged from one hour to an hour and a half long. The interview questions were pre-approved by the IRB. The interview questions were developed with a feminist standpoint framework, which centers women's experiences (Brooks, 2007). While the interview questions served as a guide to structure the interview sessions, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for follow-up questions as needed and varied slightly depending on each subject. Each participant was asked to provide a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality, and all identifying information was only seen by the researcher. The interview questions were divided up into five categories: Introductory questions, questions related to their study abroad trip, questions related to their perceived identities, questions synthesizing identity and study abroad, and questions related to the opportunities they had to reflect on their experiences abroad (See Appendix B).

All data collection took place in rooms in the libraries on MU's campuses. All interviews were conducted in a closed room to ensure the confidentiality of each participant, as well as to encourage transparency and honesty when discussing the difficult topics of gender and race. The role of the researcher was to conduct and record the interviews, get the interviews transcribed, analyze the data, and report the findings. The interviews were all audio recorded to ensure accuracy, I took observational notes during each interview, and all interviews were transcribed by a third-party transcription service with bank-level security.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process consisted of two parts: first, analysis during data collection by the means of notetaking and memoing in a researcher's journal, and; second, the use of formal coding procedures guided by Charmaz's (2006; 2014) methods of coding for a grounded theory

study. While interviewing participants, I noted demographic information, nonverbals, emotional responses to the interview topics, and my own personal emotions and biases. After each interview I wrote memos in my researcher journal. This process of memoing allowed me to begin to detect common themes throughout the interviews and note participants' emotional reactions while discussing their study abroad experiences. While the process of memoing allowed me to keep my own emotions, assumptions, and bias in check, it also served as a way to fill the gaps between the interview itself and the final transcriptions. This use of a research journal during the interview process served as a reflection process for me as well (Borg, 2001). The remainder of this section will describe the coding procedures used in the second, more formal, portion of data analysis.

### **Coding Procedures**

In this section, I share the procedures I used to code the data. These procedures included initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, theoretical coding, and the use of memo writing (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). These coding procedures were based in Charmaz's book on grounded theory, and the procedures mirror those used in Robbin's (2012) dissertation.

*Initial Coding.* The first stage of grounded theory data analysis is known as initial coding, where the researcher uses a line-by-line coding method to generate as many codes and stay as true to the raw data as possible (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). This process "fractures" (p. 60) the data in order to generate codes at several levels of depth and detail. I coded 206 total pages of transcripts, generating a total of 817 initial codes. All initial coding was done by hand, one transcript at a time, using sticky notes in the margins to generate the codes. I coded the data word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident. This process generated codes in the data that could be compared within and across transcripts. By doing all of the initial coding by hand, I

was able to become very familiar with my data and develop observations and hunches, all of which I jotted down in the form of memos in my researcher’s journal. While this process was tedious without software support, I was able to dig into the data and get to know it in-depth, preparing me for the next stage of coding. For example, some initial codes related to race included racial advantages, racial expectations, and feeling shame for their race. After generating the 817 codes in the initial coding procedure, the next step was to use focused coding in order to generate a more manageable set of codes before developing categories and themes in axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; 2014).

***Focused Coding.*** In the focused coding stage, I attempted to generate codes that were “more directed, selective, and conceptual” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). During this process, I examined all eight transcripts together and compared them in order to find commonalities, stark differences, and frequencies of codes. Out of the 817 initial codes generated, the focused coding process allowed me to condense the initial codes into 115 more concise and conceptual, focused codes. This process included looking at all eight transcripts together page by page in order to consolidate similar initial codes. For example, the initial codes that included racial advantages, racial expectations, and feeling shame for their race were then put into the focused codes of White privilege and White guilt. Next, I took the 115 focused codes, my observations, and my memos written during interviews, and wrote more memos in my journal in order to narrow down the codes even more. See Table 1 below.

Table 1  
*Coding Process Example*

<b>Theoretical Code (Theme)</b>	<b>Axial Codes (Category)</b>	<b>Focused Codes</b>
Identity Understanding	Gender	“Tomboy” Workplace discrimination Educational access

	Resiliency and strength Feminist identity Gendered double standards Gendered expectations Dress codes Patriarchal systems Proud to be a woman
White Racial Identity	White Savior Complex White privilege White guilt Recognizing their own racism Wishing White privilege didn't exist Gaining exposure abroad Predominantly White upbringings Difficult to think of disadvantages Not proud to be White Lack of cultural heritage Desire to separate themselves from race Numeric minority
Nationality	Colonialism Capitalism US involvement in other countries US status adds another privileged layer US vs. American terminology Wealth Educational access Political affiliations Taking things for granted Global efforts Host country stereotypes of US Less proud to be from US after trip
Other Salient Identities	Sexual orientation Religious identity (or lack thereof)

***Axial Coding.*** In grounded theory, axial coding is used to find links between subcategories and categories (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). In this stage, I took the focused codes and divided them up into groups based on topic to create categories that were even more succinct and conceptual. For this process, I took the 115 focused code sticky notes and placed them on my wall for easy access and grouping. I also utilized my researcher's journal to create mind maps to create conceptual statements based on the focused codes. In the beginning, it was helpful to



return to my initial interview questions and divide up notes based on interview question, response, and broader topic. Out of the 115 focused codes, 15 axial codes, or categories, were produced. Table 1 outlined how focused codes that included White privilege and White guilt were then condensed into the White Racial Identity axial code. Once the axial codes were developed, the next step was to further narrow down my axial codes or categories into the most parsimonious number of theoretical codes or themes.

**Theoretical Coding.** In this final stage of the coding process, three main themes emerged from the categories: (a) Identity understanding, (b) Factors that influenced study abroad experiences, and (c) Coping (see Table 2). Thus, the initial codes related to race (e.g. racial advantages, racial expectations, and feeling shame for their race) led to the focused codes of White guilt and White privilege. The White guilt and White privilege focused codes then led to the White racial identity category, which finally lead to the theme of Identity understanding (see Table 2). According to Charmaz (2006; 2014), theoretical coding is meant to provide conceptual explanation of the data. In this process, I kept the original study intent and the interview questions in mind as I used constant comparison to narrow all of the codes to generate three conceptual ideas for how White college women may make meaning of their experiences after studying abroad in a non-European country. The process included narrowing the 817 initial codes down to three theoretical codes in order to create a big picture “umbrella.” Table 2 below outlines how axial codes were condensed into the three main theoretical codes.

Table 2  
*Theoretical Codes (Themes) and Axial Codes (Categories)*

<b>Theoretical Codes (Themes)</b>	<b>Axial Codes (Categories)</b>
Identity Understanding	- Gender - White Racial Identity

	- Nationality - Other Salient Identities
Factors that influenced study abroad experiences	- Perceptions - Preparation - Course Content - Desire to Learn - Faculty Involvement - Reflection
Coping	- Emotions - Difficulty Sharing Experiences - Desire to Make a Difference - Not Wanting to Forget

**Memo Writing.** I used the process of memo writing to begin to put the focused codes into narrative form and organize all of my data (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). I practiced memo writing throughout the entire data collection and analysis process in order to gauge my observations, note contextual information, and differentiate experiences based both on individual participants and grouped by host country. During memo writing, I created a chart showing demographic information, kept track of initial and focused codes, noted themes and observations, journaled about my personal emotions and potential bias throughout the process, and created mind maps and narratives to aid in narrowing down codes into categories and main themes. As is common in qualitative grounded theory research, I developed an extensive set of memos in my researcher's journal throughout the entire process to keep myself organized and as true to the raw data as possible (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). The use of mind maps, sketches, narratives, notes, tables, and data organization throughout this entire process allowed me to easily take short initial memos and transition them into more conceptual big picture theoretical codes. The process was fluid as I

moved from initial coding to focused coding, focused coding to axial coding, and axial coding to theoretical coding, growing more conceptual with each stage (Charmaz, 2006; 2014).

### **Summary**

In this qualitative study rooted in constructivist grounded theory, White college women were selected and interviewed about their study abroad experiences as they related to their social identities. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used in order to encourage open and honest conversations and create an environment for the participants to share their story. The grounded theory coding process included four main steps: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). I also utilized a researcher's journal to create memos and maps, as well as keep my own bias and emotional responses in check (Borg, 2001; Charmaz, 2006; 2014). My use of a researcher's journal was implemented during the interview process and continued through the theoretical coding process. The entire process began with 817 initial codes and ended with three theoretical codes or themes. In the next chapter, I outline the findings of this study before offering conclusions in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

In this chapter, I present the findings of this study. I begin by providing the institutional context in which this study was conducted, followed by participant demographic information and succinct participant narrative profiles. Next, I present the findings that emerged from the analysis of the data, which are organized around the main themes: identity, factors that influenced study abroad, and coping.

### **Context**

This study was conducted at MU, a medium-sized predominantly White institution (PWI) in the Midwestern United States. MU had approximately 25,000 students, based on data from 2016. Faculty-led study abroad programs at MU generally last between two and eight weeks, and forty-two total faculty-led programs were set to take place during the 2020-2021 academic year. Out of those forty-two faculty-led programs, twenty-four of them are set to take place in a non-European country (PIC, 2019).

### **Participants**

A total of eight participants were interviewed, each provided verbal consent to the entire process, and each demonstrated excitement over the study and an overwhelming willingness to participate. Each participant self-identified as a White woman over the age of 18, a current student at MU. Each participant also created a pseudonym to protect their identity. Throughout the entire recruitment and interview process, I reminded participants of the voluntary nature of their participation, the fact that they did not need to answer any question they were uncomfortable with, and their ability to withdraw consent at any time. To ensure anonymity, the majors of the participants, their class standing, and when they studied abroad are not mentioned. However, half of the participants had some relation to healthcare professions, while the others

were related to education and social sciences. Essential demographic information is outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3

*Demographic Information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Host Country</b>	<b>Duration Abroad</b>
		El Salvador and	2 weeks
Sarah	22	Guatemala	
Maddie	22	Tanzania	5 weeks
	21	El Salvador and	2 weeks
Beth		Guatemala	
Madison	20	Ghana	5 weeks
Jane	21	Ghana	4 weeks
Mary	21	Ghana	5 weeks
			4.5 weeks in Costa
Hannah	21	Costa Rica and	Rica, 10-day break, 6
		Ghana	weeks in Ghana
Melissa	20	Ghana	5 weeks

Next, I provide a summary of the relevant background information for each participant to highlight the unique personalities participants held. This information includes, but is not limited to, family background, how they were recruited to study abroad, and something they loved most about their experience abroad. It is important to note that each participant self-identified as a White woman currently studying at MU.

**Sarah**

Sarah, a 22-year-old, studied abroad in Guatemala and El Salvador for two weeks through one of MU's study abroad programs. Sarah first learned that she wanted to study abroad in college when she was in a class with the professor who led the trip she ended up going on. Conversations with her professor is what made her excited to study abroad. Sarah grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood and had not thought much about studying abroad as an option until she was in a class with the professor leading the trip to Guatemala and El Salvador. Sarah also said that she misses the food in her host country and was on the hunt for both good Guatemalan and El Salvadorian food in the United States.

**Maddie**

Maddie, a 22-year-old, studied abroad in Tanzania for five weeks through one of MU's study abroad programs. Thanks to faculty recruitment, she knew exactly a year before leaving that she wanted to study abroad in Tanzania. One of Maddie's favorite memories from Tanzania was that of teaching a class and watching the girls begin to raise their hands and answer questions more because they were seeing a woman teach their class for the first time. Maddie also loved going on a safari excursion and visiting a coffee plantation. One of the hardest parts for Maddie after returning home was hearing everyone complain so much.

**Beth**

Beth, a 21-year-old, studied abroad in El Salvador and Guatemala for two weeks through one of MU's study abroad programs. Beth came to college with the desire to study abroad, specifically in a non-European country. Beth knew she wanted to study abroad when she first came to college, but she found out about the trip to El Salvador and Guatemala in one of her classes and was recruited by a faculty member. Having traveled to Spanish-speaking countries

prior to her trip, Beth shared how she felt a bit more prepared than other students on her trip. She also speaks conversational Spanish, which also gave her a leg up while abroad. Beth described a favorite part of her trip was all the people she was able to meet. She was excited to learn from people in her host countries because they were all so nice and hospitable. Beth expressed thankfulness that her world got a lot smaller after returning home, and she felt connected to so many people far away from her.

### **Madison**

Madison, a 20-year-old, studied abroad in Ghana for five weeks through one of MU's study abroad programs. Madison decided she wanted to study abroad during Honors College orientation at MU, and she was excited to hear about the Ghana trip when it was advertised. She did not really look into other programs after finding out more information on the Ghana trip. For her, her friendships with people in Ghana have been a highlight from the entire trip. Madison continued to keep a journal about her experiences and she shared how she hopes to someday return to Ghana.

### **Jane**

Jane, a 21-year-old, studied abroad Ghana for one month through one of MU's study abroad programs. Jane knew pretty early on in college that she wanted to study abroad. She looked at a couple different programs, but eventually decided on this particular trip to Ghana because of one of her professors. Jane's study abroad experience revolved around literature and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and she considered herself to be a lover of history and literature. She shared that going on a study abroad experience that focused on both history and literature was a no brainer for her. Jane was most thankful for the ability to work through heavy topics with her peers and professor, and she shared that she still thinks about her trip often.

## **Mary**

Mary, a 21-year-old, studied abroad in Ghana for five weeks through one of MU's study abroad programs. Mary decided she wanted to study abroad during her first year of college. She really only looked into the trip to Ghana she ended up going on because it was heavily advertised at Honors College orientation and during one of her Honors sequences courses. Once Mary heard more about the Ghana trip, she really did not consider any other trips. Mary described a highlight of the trip being the sense of community she felt in Ghana. She was glad to be able to learn a lot and return to educate her family members and friends. Mary said that she strives to make a difference in the world and has been looking into how to best do that.

## **Hannah**

Hannah, a 21-year-old, studied abroad in Costa Rica for four and a half weeks, came home for ten days, and then went on a second trip to Ghana for six weeks. Both trips were through MU's study abroad programs. Hannah is a unique participant because she had two different trips in the same summer to reflect on. She knew she wanted two study abroad experiences in different countries, and she felt having both trips in the same summer was the easiest way to accomplish this. She chose Costa Rica because she wanted to learn something new, and she chose Ghana because it related to her major. Hannah knew she wanted to study abroad before college, and she even made a beeline for the study abroad table at new student orientation at MU. Hannah has always had a travel bug, and she was able to take a trip to Europe with her aunt in high school. In Costa Rica, her favorite memory was learning about environmental action and seeing baby sea turtles. In Ghana, she loved being able to shadow nurses and doctors in the clinics at which she was intern.

## **Melissa**



Melissa, a 20-year-old, and she studied abroad in Ghana for five weeks through one of MU's study abroad programs. Melissa began to feel a pull to study abroad during her first year of college. No one else in her family had studied abroad before, so she was excited to be the first. Melissa described herself as an explorer at heart who loved trying new things. Like many other participants, Melissa saw the trip to Ghana advertised through the Honors College. She spontaneously chose Ghana and did not look into any other trips. Melissa's recounted the favorite parts of her trip as getting off the airplane with all of her preconceived notions about her host country and having them all be wrong. She recalled feeling liberated because she not only learned about stereotypes she had, but also about the beauty of other cultures.

While participants shared similar experiences, it was important to outline their individuality before introducing the findings from data collection and analysis. Each participant brought their own personalities into the interviews, and they all shared their excitement about being able to sit down and share their experience with somebody. This next section will offer the key findings based on data collection and analysis.

## **Findings**

In chapter three, I outlined the entire coding process that was rooted in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Three major theoretical codes or themes were generated out of the initial 817 codes. These main themes emerged from the data and provided an overview for how participants were making meaning of their most salient social identities after study abroad in a non-European country.

### **Identity Understanding**

The first major finding that emerged revolved around the concept of identity. In this study, I utilized the term identity understanding rather than identity development in order to

focus on how participants are perceived and understood themselves and their complex identities. The participants' perceptions of their core identities shifted after study abroad. Many of them became more aware of how they perceive themselves as White women from the United States, as well as how other people in the United States and abroad perceived them as White women from the United States. Under the theme of identity understanding, I discuss each of the main categories: understanding of gender, race, nationality, other salient identities, and the intersections of these identities.

**Gender.** Many participants shared stories of awkward middle school years when they had begun to go through puberty. Several had been involved in some sort of sport, and surprisingly, every single participant described themselves as being a “tomboy” during their adolescent years. For many participants, their gender identity was not something they had thought much about, for they had always felt comfortable with their gender identity as a woman. A few participants also self-identified as feminists, citing that college was a turning point in the awakening of their activism. When asked questions about gender, it was clear that participants felt a sense of solidarity with other women, citing the resilience of women. Participants highlighted feeling powerful and like they could do anything because they were a woman, while also recognizing how women continue to be mistreated as a negative impact of patriarchal systems. For many participants, being a woman meant being a part of something bigger. It meant being a fighter for equality. A common theme across participants responses was the sense of pride they took in their gender. For Sarah, pride in being a woman came from history and what she had been learning in her college courses:

I love being a woman. I feel like I identify as a feminist just because looking back at history, it's been shameful to be a woman. I don't know. Men are on a pedestal

and we're down here, even with pay and all that. I just feel good about being a woman because we're powerful. We can do anything.

When talking about gender and what it meant to be a woman, participants get fired up when they talked about gender inequality.

Participants also shared ways in which they had experienced discrimination simply for being a woman. For Maddie, this discrimination showed up in her original STEM major:

I originally started (in STEM), but that was not for me... I was probably one of three girls in all my classes... So, like my older professors, you could just tell that they were just surprised to see any girls in their classes, let alone three of them... But yeah, I don't know, maybe if I didn't identify as a woman, maybe I would still be doing it, I guess. You never know, maybe I would have got a different vibe from it and felt more like a part of it, I guess.

Maddie was not the only one who faced gender discrimination from her professors. Melissa shared an experience she had with one of her professors as well:

Oh my gosh, I was talking to a Finance professor about impact investing... He basically shut me away and was like, "You're too soft as a woman. If you want to go into impact investing, the stock market is not for you. That was an interaction with a professor, and I was like, okay... I've done my research... I don't know, that was a very difficult moment for me because it made me actually reconsider myself. I mean (faculty) have a really big impact on students' lives, and if they're going around doing this stuff, I don't know. That was really tough.

The experience of having to reconsider one's identity was also evident in other experiences as well. Participants shared how a lack of representation often made them reconsider their abilities.

For many, this came through lack of gender representation and equal opportunities in sports. For others, it came through lack of representation in leadership roles. For Mary, it came through high school dress codes:

I remember I was walking into the school, principal was there, stopped me. I was wearing athletic shorts which were fingertip (length) but on the corner, on the sides, they went up a little bit. He sent me home. At that point, I had a car, so I could drive home, but I missed first hour. I missed AP psychology and we had an exam coming up. Whereas being younger in high school, I would ride the bus, or I would have to call my mom and she would have to come (pick me up), which would be even longer. It was just ridiculous... Someone in authority tells you something and you're just like, "Okay, I guess I'll miss out on my education today."

For many participants, college was where they began to identify incidents of gender discrimination they had faced. Jane and Hannah both alluded to realizing what they had experienced growing up was gender discrimination.

Participants found it much easier to answer the question related to disadvantages they faced as women than the question related to advantages they had faced. Each participant mentioned the gender wage gap and workplace and school gender discrimination as major disadvantages. Hannah shared what she felt an advantage of being a woman was: "I think women are a lot more calculated, and I think that's a huge advantage." Maddie also shared that the ability to bear children was a "huge advantage" to being a woman, and it was something she looked forward to in the future. Madison had a very interesting take on an advantage of being a woman, and it came through in discussing disadvantages she had seen men face:

I think guys think that they're allowed to be meaner and rough around the edges, and that it's bad to have feelings and emotions. I've talked to my friends about it, my guy friends, I'm a very emotional and open person... But they just feel like society has told them, "I have to be this strong man, and I can't break down, and I can't have feelings, and I can't cry" ... (Women) are allowed to be emotional.

For Madison, the advantages of being a woman stemmed from her ability to express her emotions, though she also shared how this advantage was also a disadvantage because she was expected to always be emotional.

**Race.** For many participants, studying abroad was the first time they were able to recognize the implication of their racial identity. Nearly all participants shared how White everything had been in their hometowns. While many participants became aware of the gender around middle school, when asked the same question about racial awareness, many of them had a difficult time articulating their answer. Melissa reported that she had been made aware of her race when she experienced the microaggressions towards her biracial mother. Madison remembered watching her childhood friend, who is biracial, experience tokenism in grade school. Maddie went to a racially diverse high school where she was able to become aware of her own Whiteness. Sarah specifically shared how she was aware of her race, but it was because she, "could tell you every African American person in (her) school just because it was so White-dominated," and she stated learning more about her own White privilege in her college courses and internships. Thus, many participants grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods and went to predominantly White schools before attending a predominantly White institution for their higher education.

For Beth, there was a distinct moment in history when she first became aware of her racial identity. She specifically cited Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 as the moment she realized Whiteness meant something in society. In fact, both Trayvon Martin's highly publicized murder and the Sandy Hook shooting were tipping points for her and fostered in her a desire for feminist and anti-racist activism:

Probably really the first time I started unpacking that stuff was when Trayvon Martin was killed. I think that was when I started to realize... Because something in my core of a person was saying that wouldn't have happened. I've just been trusting that ever sense. Because when you look at something and you just think, "If that was me, it wouldn't have." For me, for my generation, I really believe that for a lot of people who went the path that I did, picking at that stuff, that's a really specific moment. I'm too young to remember 9/11, but I remember Trayvon Martin and Sandy Hook very clearly.

Though Beth could remember a very specific point in time where things began to change for her, other participants also highlighted how the rise in social media had made everything more accessible. Hannah, Melissa, and Mary each commented on how they were looking to social media and new outlets to stay informed, which had also led to them being more critical of where they get their news.

For many participants, studying abroad was a turning point in the way they began to view Whiteness, what it meant for them, and how they began to address their own racism and stereotypes. When asked about the advantages to being White, all participants brought up White privilege. Mary's response was specifically, "PRIVILEGE. In capital letters," and all participants mentioned this very early on in their interviews. Jane mentioned how she saw her socioeconomic

status as middle class directly correlated to benefitting from systemic racism, and she was not alone. Many other participants self-disclosed that they came from fairly well-off families. Participants also shared how they experienced what it felt like to be a numerical minority for the first time. Maddie recalled realizing her group included the only White people she saw in Tanzania:

I knew we were going to be the minority, but when I was there, and I was like, wow, we are literally the only White people here...but you know, that's how people feel here...And so that was kind of when I realized the difference of how it felt to be (in Tanzania) and how it felt to be (in the United States).

Mary, who studied abroad in Ghana, went a step further by sharing what it meant for her to be a minority, albeit without experiencing any racial oppression:

Most of us haven't been in a (racial) minority situation and having that for a short time was very eye-opening. Getting stares all the time or everywhere you went...yeah, I guess just being the minority, it's just such a flipside because we were the minority that had the privilege. We were worshipped upon there where here it's the total opposite. Yes, I felt (like) the minority but not all of the oppression. I felt every benefit...I think that's important to note too.

For participants, experiencing the way a non-European country approached Whiteness was eye-opening and difficult for them to process.

When asked about the disadvantages to being White, many participants struggled to find answers. Many responded by saying there really were no disadvantages. Two participants cited that a lack of culture was a disadvantage to being White. Sarah shared how her race is not something she is proud of:

I don't say, "Make American great again." I don't identify with that. That's something associated with White people... That's not something I'm proud of. I don't know. I just feel like there's so many great things about other cultures that make me jealous because I feel like being White is boring. I don't know if that's bad to say.

Jane also expressed feeling a lack of culture associated with Whiteness when asked what disadvantages she saw with being White. "I've never really thought about it much, but maybe a lack of cultural connection." This lack of cultural connection made participants feel like their race was boring or lacking something bigger to connect to.

**Nationality.** Beth pointed out the need to differentiate between United States and American, for they mean different things. Being from the United States means one is American, but being American encompasses more than people from the United States. For the purpose of this section, I will refer to participants' nationality as being from the United States. Participants shared that they were made aware of what it meant to be from the United States while they were studying abroad. For many participants, this was their first time out of the United States and Canada, and they were not expecting to hear how the United States has done some horrible things in other countries. Participants mentioned learning about United States' involvement in their host countries, leaving many of them feeling shocked to learn about some harm the United States has done to other countries. Students studying abroad in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica, learned about the role of United States' involvement in civil wars. Students who studied abroad in Ghana and Tanzania, learned more about the United States' involvement in the slave trade. Many participants disclosed that nationality was a social identity they were most aware of while abroad, especially while learning about how the United States had shaped their



host countries. Because of this, some participants returned home with critical perspective of their country after hearing about some of its negative involvement. Others felt like they did not know who to trust or believe, especially when it came to news sources. Beth shared that she “learned how to navigate fake news,” and tried to keep herself educated as best as possible. Melissa felt like she had a strong sense of USA pride before studying abroad, but she felt like she was becoming more skeptical since returning home. For many participants, the United States involvement in other countries was hard to swallow.

Participants strongly associated the United States with wealth and privilege. For many, this became evidence when they learned how people in their host countries viewed the United States. Sarah stated that, “Other people across the world, they look at us and think, ‘Wow, they’re really privileged. They have so many opportunities’, but there are so many things in other countries that are better than us.” She then went on to share how wasteful she realized the United States was compared to El Salvador and Guatemala, and Beth and Hannah shared similar sentiments. These themes also became clear during interactions with others, especially related to hospitality. As stated in the context profiles above, many participants highlighted how welcoming and hospitable people in their host countries were, which was something they were not used to in their home country. Maddie shared how excited people in Tanzania were to teach her some Swahili, and she recalled how opposite that is from the United States. “They love to teach you how to speak their language,” said Maddie, “Which to me is crazy because in (the United States), people get pissed when you don’t know how to speak English.” The hospitality and joy participants experienced while abroad was something they were not used to back home, and each participant mentioned their desire to bring some of that hospitality and joy home with them.

*Other Salient Identities.* Though the main identities at the forefront of this study were gender, race, and nationality, it was also important to recognize other salient identities participants disclosed during the interview. Many participants were hyperaware of their racial and nationality identities. However, other salient identities they were made more aware of while studying abroad included religious affiliation; this topic was raised both by participants who described themselves as religious and non-religious. All five participants who studied abroad in Ghana described the role religion played in the country and how it made them aware of their religious identities, or lack thereof. Madison, who disclosed that her Christian faith is a large part of her identity, described feeling inspired by the faith people she met in Ghana:

Their faith is so important to them and just who they are, and their character is more important to them than it is here... I think my (religious identity) was pretty clear just because no matter where you were, people asked if you were religious... and it was cool for me because the girls that I was with in my group, they weren't religious, but I was, and (the Ghanaians) were like, "You should talk to them and get them to know God", and stuff.

Madison went on to talk about how her experience in Ghana and her religious identity encouraged her to become more invested in her faith upon return, and how it has become a positive space for her.

Mary described her upbringing as Evangelical Lutheran, and she grew up in the church. After seeing the slave castles in Ghana, her perspective on religion began to change. She described her approach to self-reflection after religious experiences:

After knowing all the history and seeing all those churches and stuff and then walking in and seeing White Jesus and White disciples and angels, that really got

to me and really pissed me off. Yeah, because looking around the room, we were the only White people.

Mary went on to describe how her experience with religion abroad has been difficult to digest and make meaning of what her religious identity means to her now as an adult after seeing the things she has seen abroad. She also described a conversation with one of the friends she made in Ghana and how her friend was initially scared to talk to her because they perceived her White skin as angelic.

The other students who studied abroad in Ghana also mentioned they were hyperaware of religion while studying abroad, but for them, their experience was different than Madison's and Mary's. Jane, Melissa, and Hannah each disclosed that they either were not religious at all or had very little exposure to religion, specifically Christianity. Many of them felt pressure to abide by Christian principles while abroad, and a few of them even attended a church service to see what it was like. These participants grappled with not knowing how to approach religion in their study abroad contexts because they wanted to stay respectful, but they also acknowledged the strong ties between religion and colonialism in Ghana. For Melissa, there was a clear connection between religion and Whiteness:

The fact that Jesus, that's who's on the cross, right? Jesus, if he had a skin tone, if we're talking historically, he would not be White. But the fact that he's pale White and people came over who are White and built these churches and religion is... I don't know, the religion is huge there but it's frustrating because the religion is from the colonial days... It's all whitewashed, right? And I mean, given they are very passionate about their religion, who am I to go over there and

be like, “That’s wrong. Why are you doing that?” Because that’s their way of life and they’re happy about that, I can tell.

Jane and Hannah shared experiences similar to Melissa’s regarding religious identity. They did not describe themselves as religious but felt a desire to be respectful and learn from the people in their host country. Hannah said, “Everyone was very religious...I’m not. Do I just agree, or do I say what I think? Is that going to offend somebody?” Jane had a similar reaction, “I’m not a super spiritual person. I don’t believe in that kind of stuff. But it still felt like I was being respectful,” when she was asked about her faith. This identity was also evident when participants who studied in Ghana went on excursions to slave castles. Mary remembered seeing verses from the Christian bible that essentially defended slavery. She grew up religious but seeing some of these things in Ghana made her begin to question some things she had been taught growing up.

Another identity most salient for one participant was her connection to the LGBTQ+ community. Beth disclosed in our interview that her sexual orientation is something that is very important to her, and she was hyperaware of this while she was studying abroad in El Salvador and Guatemala. She said:

I’m bisexual and it’s a lot different in El Salvador. We got to go to an organization that works with queer people in general... and they do a lot of activism for transgender security, safety, and medical, which it just doesn’t exist. I asked while we were there, “Can you do hormone replacement therapy when you’re here?” and they’re like, “No, you don’t because people will notice, and you’ll get murdered” ... (Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community) was one aspect of me that (made me feel) not quite as safe there.

Beth went on to describe herself as an activist and ally for other members of the LGBTQ+ community, and she has used her experience abroad to advocate and support her friends on campus to help them feel safer and more understood. She was very open about her sexual orientation and how it related to her other salient identities, as well as how to best navigate how her sexual orientation shapes the way she perceives herself and others.

*Intersections.* While participants found it difficult to think of disadvantages to being White, they also found it difficult to think of advantages of being a woman. Many participants had not yet thought of the implications of being a White woman and the intersection of both privilege and oppression. Beth did mention thinking about how much easier it is to choose gender over race for herself and fellow White women, but the majority of participants had not given it much thought. However, one observation I noted in my journal during the interview process was how participants answered the questions about race and gender with a different mindset. For example, when answering questions related to their gender identity, many participants brought up a shared sense of resiliency and comradery in being a woman. On the other hand, when being asked questions related to their racial identity, participants wished others could see them as an individual rather than their race. Participants felt a strong connection and pride when discussing their gender identity but wished they could be seen as an individual instead of their racial identity. For participants, being White was shameful to them due to negative connotations associated with being White.

Also highlighted by participants was the link between Whiteness and Christianity. As stated above, all of the participants who went to Ghana and Tanzania were exposed to the heavy religious aspects that were rooted in colonialism. Each of those participants were also seen as holy or angelic because of their White skin. Mary even had an interaction with a friend she made

abroad, where he confessed he was originally scared to talk to her because he did not feel worthy enough to talk to a White person. This could be because all of the pictures in Christian churches were of White people, including a White Jesus, like Melissa said. For participants who disclosed that they were non-religious, this connection seemed to be a bit more prevalent throughout the interview process. Madison considers herself very religious, so she focused more on what she saw as good traits. However, for those who are nonreligious, the connection between Whiteness and Christianity was very clear.

### **Factors that Influenced Study Abroad Experiences**

The second theoretical code or theme that emerged is related to the factors, both positive and negative that influenced study abroad experiences, and how these factors aided participants in their own meaning making process. All participants considered their study abroad experiences to be life-changing and eye-opening, and they each disclosed some important factors that contributed to the reasons why they were so impacted by their experience abroad. These factors included the perceptions they had about their host countries prior to studying abroad and how those perceptions changed, the perceptions their parents had about the countries to which they planned to travel, and the perceptions people in their host country had of them. Other factors contributing to the overall study abroad experiences included the intentional nature of faculty involvement and course content, institutional preparation, participants' desire to learn, and opportunities for reflection before, during, and after study abroad experiences.

***Prior perceptions.*** Many participants disclosed their own perceptions about studying abroad before leaving for their trip, they shared perceptions their parents had about the country in which they were planning to study abroad, and they shared perceptions that citizens of their host country had of them and of people from the United States. The perceptions that many

participants had about their host country were shattered upon arrival in the host country. Before studying abroad, the participants' perceptions of their host country and the people living there were based on stereotypes and what was shown in the media. For example, Melissa shared her experience with her prior perception as "the coolest feeling of being wrong" after spending a couple days in Ghana. Her prior perception included stereotypes of African countries being poor and far underdeveloped. Some participants also held the White Savior Complex prior to their trip, with the idea that they would be going to their host country to *do* something to save or help people, rather than solely take the role of the observer. This idea of the White Savior Complex was influenced by Melissa's family:

They were like, "Oh, wow. How heroic of you. Thank you so much for going over there and helping." I was like, "Wait, wait, wait. No, no, no. I'm studying abroad, I'm learning from them. I'm not going on a mission trip or anything like that."

Madison's experience in Haiti was quite different than her study abroad trip to Ghana because she was learning from people in her host country rather than doing charitable works like building a house or distributing food. For her, it was important to learn the difference between a service or mission trip and a study abroad experience; the intent was different.

Participants were thankful as they began to recognize the ways their perceptions were wrong shortly after being in their host country. Sarah recalled being told that, "People (in El Salvador) were involved in gang activity. They often target people from the United States because they assume all of us are wealthy... I don't think I experienced any of that really." Sarah's perceptions were based on information she had been told about the host countries she

was planning to study abroad in. Like many other participants, Sarah's perceptions were rooted in stereotypes that began to diminish the more time she spent in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Others specifically chose their host country because it was a place they would not have otherwise visited due to family biases about the location. For example, parents of some participants expressed fear and concern over their daughter's chosen location for studying abroad. Sarah reported that her parents had expressed concern that El Salvador and Guatemala were too dangerous for their daughter to visit. Similarly, Melissa shared how her mother's anxiety over her trip to caused anxiety in her. Mary shared that her parents' racial bias made them uncomfortable at the prospect of her studying abroad in Ghana. It became clear quickly that the perspectives of family and friends heavily impacted the perspectives participants had prior to their trip abroad. While parents were glad their daughters could have such a meaningful experience, there was also a fair amount of anxiety and fear, leading to participants to experience some of these apprehensions before landing in their host country.

Interestingly, participants reacted to perceptions people in their host country had of them and the rest of the United States. People in host countries associated those from the United States with typical stereotypes such as everyone loving Donald Trump, wealth, opportunities, and the American Dream, which included success and happiness. Hearing these stereotypes left participants wondering how their own stereotypes impacted others. A common theme throughout interviews was the concept of the American Dream, and how people in participants' host countries wanted a piece of that for themselves. Some participants had their international friends come up to them asking how to get into an American college, while others had conversations about how much money they had. Madison was worried that her Ghanaian friends would hate her if they knew what her life was like back home because it fit many of their stereotypes. Being



bombarded with stereotypes about themselves, many participants began to become more aware of their own stereotypes of other people. Many participants brought up the fact that they now try hard to keep their own stereotypes in check because of how bad it felt to be stereotyped by people in their host countries.

***Faculty involvement and course content.*** An important aspect to the success of participants' study abroad trips was the work and dedication put in by faculty leading the trips. By nature of the sample, each participant went on a faculty-led study abroad trip through the university. Sarah, Maddie, Beth, and Jane each shared how faculty were involved in their recruitment process and were a key factor in their decision to select that particular study abroad experience. While every participant did not have direct contact with the faculty leader prior to their decision, each participant shared how faculty members played a role in making their experience successful. Each participant also highlighted how thankful they were that they decided to study abroad on a faculty-led trip.

Participants also mentioned how they appreciated the intentional course content that faculty had put together. According to Maddie this course content "made them feel like they were living what they were reading." In the eyes of many participants, faculty members leading the trip were very intentional in creating readings that corresponded with what they were feeling and experiencing. Faculty also provided other avenues of learning such as excursions and visits to local attractions, guest speakers, and reflection activities. The content for the study abroad courses seemed to go beyond traditional assignments to include reflection activities that promoted personal growth and learning.

***Institutional preparation.*** Each participant highlighted that there was some sort of institutional preparation prior to studying abroad. Many participants reported that were strongly

encouraged to participate in two to three orientation sessions complete with some reading materials. Hannah's preparation for Costa Rica involved an intensive class prior to leaving for her trip, however, this was not the norm for other participants. The majority of participants had some course reading and research prior to their trip in order to familiarize themselves with their host country and some of the topics they would discuss while abroad. Many participants highlighted the fact that they felt adequately prepared, by the university and faculty leaders, for the inevitable culture shock they experienced. While all participants felt prepared to enter a new country and culture, all noted that they felt less prepared to return home. Many faculty members talked about reverse culture shock, but participants did not feel adequately prepared when they returned home. For example, Jane did not feel prepared for the small changes, such as how fast a car in the United States speeds down the highway. She recalled having anxiety over how fast her car was going and not feeling prepared for even small changes like that. Other changes related to reverse culture shock will be highlighted under the *Coping* theoretical section.

***Desire to learn.*** Participants expressed an excitement and desire to learn as much as they could during their time abroad. Many participants felt comfortable asking questions and getting to know the people in their host country as well as they could. Many created lasting friendships with people they met abroad. Participants were invested in their host country, soaking in as much information they could, and they thrived. Each participant shared how their study abroad experience had shaped their entire higher education experience. Mary shared how she was intentional about making as many friends as she could and actually getting to know them. Many of the participants reported that the friendships they made abroad would impact the rest of their lives. Melissa's study abroad experiences fueled her resolve to learn and fulfil her own life goals and eventually led her to switch majors upon returning home. Each participant shared how their

experience abroad has been life-changing and more rewarding than they could have imagined. Participants' desires to learn certainly contributed to the success of their trip. They were fully immersed in their host cultures and they attempted to make lasting relationships. If they had not had such a strong desire to learn, their outcome could have been a little less lifechanging.

*Opportunities for reflection.* During their time abroad, many participants discussed the opportunity they had for self-reflection. This process took many forms for participants, including intentional group reflections, final papers, journaling, and blogging. Participants mentioned feeling grateful for intentional reflection time during the trip because it allowed them to process through some of their emotions with their peers and faculty members. Melissa and Mary observed that it would have been easy for to feel alone on their trips because many of their peers were getting homesick, but they were not. While many participants found a sense of community and comradery during their group reflection times, there was still room for individual reflection and private journaling. Madison shared that she still journals about her trip as a coping practice, and Mary said that she hoped to resume journaling to help her continue to process through some things. Melissa, Jane, Mary, and Beth, all shared that they considered themselves to be reflective people by nature, so they embraced the reflection activities which helped them process through their emotions and experiences.

While they had prepared to travel abroad and had opportunities for reflection while they were abroad, participants mentioned not knowing what to expect upon returning home. Faculty on their trips had discussed reverse culture shock and how it may manifest itself, but several participants reported that they did not feel prepared to enter back into their normal lives in the United States. More than half of participants said that they felt isolated and struggled to cope during their first semester back. All participants mentioned the abruptness with which the trip

ended when they got back home. There were no more formal reflection activities, and participants felt left to try and navigate the return on their own. Thus, participants mentioned feeling well prepared before and during their trip, but there was not much communication or discussion after returning home. Participants expressed wanting and needing more connectedness with their peers and faculty after returning home, this may have helped them feel a little bit less isolated and better able to process through reverse culture shock.

### **Coping**

The third and final theoretical code that emerged revolved around the ways in which participants are coping with their experiences, their newfound awareness of their identities, and adjustment back to life in the United States. For all participants, finding ways to cope has been an integral process to making meaning of their experiences. Many participants disclosed that they were still trying to navigate ways to cope and reflect on their study abroad experiences, despite the fact that they studied abroad almost two years ago. The ways in which participants were trying to cope related to how they processed the many emotions they experienced while abroad and are still experiencing, the difficulty they have in sharing their experiences with others, their desire to make a difference, and the worry they feel in not wanting to forget what they learned abroad and what they continue to learn about themselves and others.

*Emotions.* Throughout my interviews with each participant, it became increasingly clear that each study abroad experience had a wide range of emotions tied to it. Participants reported that when they were preparing for their study abroad trip, they experienced feelings of nervousness and fear about the unknown, while also simultaneously holding feelings of excitement and wonder over their new adventure abroad. For many participants, this was their first experience outside of the United States. However, during their trips and after returning

home, participants felt odd feelings of anger, shame, guilt, and longing. Nearly all participants brought up feeling both angry and ashamed during the trip, especially when learning about the United States' involvement in their host countries. Hannah recalled feeling some tension in Costa Rica and how it made her feel. She said, "I knew that things weren't great. I knew there was a lot of tension across the board. But to hear other people not really have a great image of you just because of where you came from was hard." Hannah shared how she felt shame because she was from the United States after hearing about how the United States was negatively involved with Costa Rica. For Jane, and many other participants who studied in Ghana, this anger and shame came out after visiting slave castles:

That was heavy, very, very heavy. I mean, we all knew going in there's going to be some hard shit to deal with. (I) did have a journal after that. I remember sitting there though, and it wasn't like something I wanted to write about... damn, that was a lot...It was very helpful in accessing everything that was going on there as a whole, all the feelings and stuff.

While each participant wanted to learn, it was painful for some to hear about how the United States had been involved in their host countries. Some participants are still experiencing these emotions, even up to two years after their trip abroad. The feelings of anger and shame mostly stemmed from racial identity and nationality.

Participants also experienced emotions like joy and excitement, especially when being asked about their time abroad. While it has been difficult for some to put their experience into words, others, were thrilled to discuss their experience with anyone who asked about study abroad. Melissa recalled her desire to tell everyone they should study abroad if they could. Participants had a strong sense of adventure. This was especially true for Hannah, who really

wanted two different study abroad experiences in the same summer. Participants became strong advocates for study abroad, and they showed a combination of joy, sadness, and anger while reflecting on their trip. They thought of sweet memories, what they missed the most, and how their experience had changed them.

Another interesting piece was the reverse culture shock participants felt after returning home. While participants felt prepared to experience initial culture shock, they stated feeling less prepared for reverse culture shock upon returning home. Melissa recalled a very specific incident in Gazelle Sports after returning home from Ghana:

I was in Gazelle Sports right when we got back, and I was reverse culture shocking. My mom was like, “Get anything you want”, and I’m like, “I don’t want anything”, looking at the price tags. I was in the changing room, and I just broke down. I was like, “I can’t do this.” I was only (in Ghana) for five weeks and I still was like, “Back to life. Back to life. This is your life.”

While this was a very specific experience, Melissa was not alone in what she called “reverse culture shocking” No participant felt prepared to experience reverse culture shock. Even participants who were abroad for less time had difficulty adjusting back. For Jane, who studied abroad nearly two years ago, some aspects of reverse culture shock are still present in her life. She “still has nightmares” about some things she saw while studying abroad in Ghana, mostly around her experiences at some of the slave castles. Participants wished for more intentional preparation on coping with reverse culture shock, and they returned home feeling isolated.

For many participants, it was the little things that made them emotional and feel reverse culture shock. For Jane, it was experiencing how fast cars would go on the road compared to what she had grown accustomed to in her host country. For others, it was the lack of familial

involvement that made them emotional. Other situations that made participants emotional and experience reverse culture shock included buying items at the store, showering with hot water, their washing machines, and the lack of mountains in their home state. For participants, these experiences made them reflect more and even miss their host countries. Participants also felt that they were alone in the reverse culture shock process, feeling like no one would understand because they had not had a shared experience.

*Difficulty sharing experiences.* Participants shared their struggles with not knowing how to best put their experiences into words that their families and friends would understand. Many participants saw some horrifying things, and some learned things that made them feel betrayed by their own country. Jane mentioned that she “still has nightmares” due to some stuff she saw abroad, and she does not feel like her family and friends will ever be able to understand the weight of things she saw on her trip. Mary tried to educate her family as best as she could, but still felt it difficult to articulate how the trip shaped her. Many participants put together a little spiel to tell people who asked questions about their trips. For Melissa, this spiel changed depending on who she was talking to and how close she was to them. Participants mentioned feeling a sense of solidarity with their peers and faculty they went abroad with, making it difficult for anyone who was not on their trip to fully understand the impact of it all. Participants also mentioned feeling bombarded and annoyed with the questions their families and friends were asking because they came from a place of ignorance.

*Not wanting to forget.* For many participants, part of the coping process revolved around the desire to not want to forget what they learned abroad. This appeared to be an effort to not become complacent and too comfortable in their lives in the United States after witnessing other lifestyles abroad. They wanted to make a difference but did not know how exactly to do that.

This led to the desire to remember their experiences abroad and the impact these experiences had on their lives. For some, this involved looking through pictures to relive emotions and remember the great experiences they had. Others still kept in touch with friends they made abroad. Madison specifically shared how she keeps up to date with her friends in Ghana, and how that helps her remember how great her trip was. Sarah is striving to recreate her favorite meals abroad and find Guatemalan and El Salvadorian restaurants nearby. Each participant had a way of trying to cling to and relive memories they had while they were studying abroad.

While each participant was processing through their experience, one common theme rang true: their experience was life-changing, and they have a strong desire to not become complacent and too comfortable in their current lifestyles. For some, this has been quite frustrating. Mary referred to herself as a “hypocrite” for beginning to fall back into her everyday life, specifically relating to materialism. Many other participants alluded to what Mary said as well. Maddie shared how she felt people from the United States were, “Spoiled... We have so much more than we actually need... There’s always a problem with something... In Tanzania, everyone is much happier.” For many participants, this notion of happiness abroad and the hospitality they experienced abroad was so countercultural to the life in the United States they were used to. The overall joy people experienced abroad was also different than what they were used to. Hannah shared how her trip to Costa Rica made her realize how high levels of consumerism were damaging to the environment, so she has been trying to combat some of the consumerism by educating others and limiting waste in her life.

*Desire to make a difference.* After being made aware of so many things while studying abroad several participants became angry at many of the inequities both abroad and in the United States. While processing through some of this anger, many participants leaned into the desire to



make a difference and educate others on their experiences. For Melissa, this meant changing her major to something more versatile. She shared that she felt she could make a bigger difference with her new majors. While some participants expressed the desire to make a difference but confessed that they did not know how or who to talk to about it, other participants grappled with the desire to do something but did not know how to put their desires into action. A common theme throughout interviews was wondering what to do moving forward and how to best make a difference. The final question in many interviews was, “Now what?” How do students who study abroad, study abroad offices, higher education professionals, and institutions move forward without knowing how to best do so? Participants struggled with navigating how to process all of their emotions. Nearly half of participants got emotional during the interviews because they felt hopeless moving forward, but they knew they wanted to be a part of something bigger than themselves. For participants, studying abroad was an essential step to having a more global mindset and intercultural awareness.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the findings of this study, as well as the unique contexts that shaped how participants made meaning of their experiences. The participants in this study all self-identified as White women; they ranged in age from twenty years old to twenty-two years old, and they had studied abroad in a total of five different countries, with time frames ranging from two weeks to six weeks per trip. Three participants traveled to Central American countries, and six participants traveled to African countries. Two participants traveled to two Central American countries as a part of a single study abroad experience, while one participant chose to enroll in two separate study abroad trips – one in Costa Rica, and the next in Ghana, with a ten-day break in between the two. To ensure anonymity, the majors of the participants, their class

standing, and when they studied abroad are not mentioned. However, half of the participants had some relation to healthcare professions, while the others were related to education and social sciences.

Participants were able to articulate their experiences and share them with me in a vulnerable way. For many participants, these questions were not easy to answer, yet they provided thoughtful responses and did not feel the need to answer questions they did not feel they could to the best of their ability. My participants explained how studying abroad has shaped the way they make meaning of their most salient identities, the way they desire to educate themselves and others, and the way they hope to continue to learn and grow. Their study abroad experiences will remain a significant memory of their undergraduate education, and for many, their experiences have shifted their career aspirations. In the next chapter, I discuss how these findings relate to current literature and how they could be used in future practice and research.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

In this final chapter, I provide a summary of the study and discuss how the findings relate back to the original research questions and literature. I then provide recommendations for future practice and research before concluding.

### **Summary of Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how White college women make meaning of their social identities after studying abroad in a non-European country. The target identities discussed in interviews included race, gender, and nationality, but other salient identities such as sexuality and spirituality came up in interviews as well. Three theoretical frameworks were used as a guide for the research questions, design, and interpretation of the findings. The MMDI and the RMMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) were used to interpret how participants make meaning of their identities and experiences while abroad, the Disintegration stage of Helm's (1990) model of White racial identity was used to interpret how participants were feeling about their race after a critical experience abroad, and Transformative Learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) was used to interpret how participants were learning through their experiences. These theoretical frameworks helped explain experiences participants may face before, during, and after their experience abroad, as well as how they may make meaning of these experiences. The meaning making filter of the RMMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), the storytelling approach of feminist standpoint and interviewing methods (Brooks, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2006) and Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory approach were also used as a guide to the create the interview questions and to conduct the interviews.

The research questions that guided this study include:

1. How do participants perceive privilege and oppression, especially with regard to their own identities?
2. How does participation in study abroad programs impact the ways participants perceive their own privileged and oppressed identities?
3. What are some other factors that impact the perceptions participants have of their privileged and oppressed identities, and how do those factors influence the perceptions?

This qualitative study consisted of collecting data from eight participants through interviews ranging from an hour to an hour and a half in length. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the conversations to be guided by some pre-determined questions, but also provided the opportunity for participants to tell their own story and share identities and experiences they found to be most salient. Participants were recruited by email. I crafted a recruitment email, and my thesis chairperson sent the email to faculty who led trips abroad. Faculty then sent the recruitment email to participants, and participants emailed me directly expressing their interest in participating in the study. All participants self-identified as White women, over the age of 18, studying at MU, and had participated in a non-European study abroad trip that was led by MU faculty. Interviews were audio recorded and sent to a third-party transcription service. After all the interviews were transcribed, I ended up with 206 pages of raw data. Data analysis, guided by Charmaz (2006), consisted of initial line-by-line coding, which generated a total of 817 initial codes. These were reduced to, 115 focused codes, and eventually to three main theoretical codes. The three main theoretical codes that emerged from the data were: (a) Identity understanding, (b) Factors that influenced study abroad experiences, and (c) Coping.

## Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore how White college women make meaning of their social identities after their experiences abroad in a non-European country. Findings revealed participants' discomfort in talking about their privileged identities, but a strong positive association with their gender identity. Findings also uncovered ways in which participants' perceptions of their identities was influenced by their experiences abroad and by other factors such as college course content and involvement on campus.

Related to the first research question guiding this study, an important finding was that participants felt more comfortable answering questions related to the disadvantages of being a woman and advantages of being White than to answering questions about advantages of being a woman and disadvantages of being White. Participants also expressed senses of comradery, resilience, and wanting to be seen as a member of an oppressed social group when answering questions related to gender, but, when answering questions about race they did not want to identify with members of a privileged group, instead they wanted to be seen as an individual. This finding was consistent with the literature that has documented how many White women express discomfort about their racial identity but feel a strong connection to their gender identity (Case, 2012; Dalpra & Vianden, 2017; Linder, 2011), and was consistent with Robbins' (2012; 2016) findings as well. This could also be attributed to the White guilt they were also experiencing, consistent with Webb's (2018) findings. However, when asked about simultaneously holding privileged and oppressed identities, participants shared that they had not given much thought to those intersecting identities. Dalpra and Vianden (2017) reported that studying abroad forced White college women to lean into the discomfort of possessing a privileged racial identity together with an oppressed gender identity, but many participants in this

study had not yet thought much about that tension. Some participants in this study indicated that they may have felt that tension, but it was not something they had given much thought to prior to being asked about it in this study. Participants did mention wanted to explore that concept deeper, and it may show up later as they continue to reflect on their experiences.

The majority of participants had pre-conceived notions of how their identities would be perceived while abroad, including how they would be treated as a woman. However, participants found their race and nationality outshined their gender identity abroad, which caused some resentment among women in their host countries. While participants viewed extreme cases of sexism abroad, they did not experience this sexism themselves because of their race and being from the United States. Participants appeared to face similar, if not better, treatment they would in the United States based on their gender, which was inconsistent with Rawlin's (2012) findings. This can be attributed to how their race and nationality was glorified by the host country they were in.

Collegiate study abroad experiences have been found to be one of the most important experiential learning programs students participate in (Paige et al., 2009). Study abroad experiences on college campuses aimed to expose their students to learning about their own nationality, the broader world, international relations, and the emerging global culture (Hoffa & DuPaul, 2009). The experiences reported in the literature were found to be consistent with what participants in this study experienced abroad and related to the second research question that guided this study. For participants, studying abroad in a country where their race was not in the numerical majority may have been one of the first times they had to acknowledge their racial identity. Participants became strong advocates for studying abroad because of the impact their experience had had on their own lives and future aspirations. Participants all shared how their

experience abroad has shaped their lives, and how their experience were one they would always remember.

Also related to the second research question, reverse culture shock upon re-entry into the United States was a key finding as well. Participants shared how they felt adequately prepared to encounter initial culture shock and adjustments, but they did not feel prepared to face reverse culture shock after returning home. A few participants were almost two years removed from their trips, yet they were still having some difficulty adjusting back home and making meaning of their experiences abroad. This was consistent with the findings of Gaw (2000), who stated that reverse culture shock can have more of an impact on college students than initial culture shock. This appeared to be true for each participant in this study as they attempted to navigate their return home. This reverse culture shock was potentially associated with a lack of support participants felt after returning home and suggested the need for more intentional re-entry programs.

Related to the third research question guiding this study, many participants shared how their college courses began dismantling their perceptions of their racial identity, gender identity, and nationality. For Maddie, this came out in her experience with her previous science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) related major and gender discrimination. For Melissa, this came through during a conversation with a business professor and gender bias. Sarah shared how her internships and course content gave her a desire to learn about other cultures and recognize biases she held. Participants also shared how their involvement on campus impacted their perceptions, consistent with Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, and Swap (2012) and Banks et al. (2014). Beth shared how her involvement in LGBT\*Q+ and feminist activism provided her with a strong gender identity, and Madison shared how her involvement in her

sorority did the same for her. These findings showed how prior and continuous involvement in the classroom and extracurriculars contributed to their understanding of themselves and the ways in which they made meaning of their identities and experiences.

These findings were interpreted using the lens of RMMDI – how participants talked about their identities, and how participants made meaning of their identities and experiences. The meaning making filter of the model helped demonstrate that individuals have varying ways of making meaning that are based on their unique experiences. While many participants came to similar conclusions and shared similar stories about their racial identity, gender identity, and nationality, the lenses through which they filtered their experiences was different. For example, Madison's religion was part of the lens she used to make meaning of her experiences and an integral part of her identity, and she used that as a way to filter through her experiences with Christianity in Ghana. While other non-religious participants saw religion and associated it with colonialism, Madison used her devout Christianity as a lens through which to view her experiences. While Mary had a similar tie to Christianity, her experiences caused her to deconstruct some of the ways she was making meaning of her religion. The majority of participants had already begun to make meaning of their gender prior to studying abroad, but it was not until they were abroad that they began to make meaning of their race and nationality. Contextual factors also influenced participants' identities. The majority of participants grew up in middle class families in predominantly White neighborhoods, providing limited exposure to the implications of their own Whiteness.

Helms' (1990) model of White racial identity development outlined the process by which White people come to terms with their own Whiteness. While the model provides stages of identity development, Helms argues that the stages are meant to be seen as fluid. When



participants' responses are viewed through the lens of this model, it appears that prior to studying abroad, the majority of participants were in Helms' (1990) Contact stage and just beginning to realize the implications of their racial identity. However, when participants reported their thoughts and feelings after their study abroad experiences, it seemed that participants showed signs of moving past Helms' (1990) disintegration stage and into reintegration and pseudo-independence, leading towards a positive White racial identity. Furthermore, many shared that their experience abroad was the push they needed to begin recognizing their own privilege. Some participants, like Beth, who were already involved in social justice activism on campus, seemed to have a better understanding of the privilege they held prior to studying abroad. Beth was heavily involved in anti-racist and LGBT\*Q+ advocacy on campus, citing her sexuality as a major part of her identity. This lens encouraged her to dive deeper into understanding how she holds privilege and oppression, which actually appeared to be more in the Autonomy stage of Helms' (1990) model.

Participants also shared the ways they learned through hands-on experiences and intentional reflection such as journaling, observing, and having group discussions. These findings are consistent with transformative learning theory as well, which stated that students learn through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997). For many participants, faculty involvement and intentional reflection activities allowed them to better understand the emotions they were feeling that were tied to their hands-on learning. According to the literature, importance of reflection practices while studying abroad encouraged self-awareness, critical thinking, and an ability to listen to other perspectives (Costello, 2015; Paras et al., 2019; Rose & Bylander, 2006; Weilkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010), and this was consistent with participants' experiences. The reflection practices faculty set for their students allowed them to incorporate continued reflection

upon returning home, even though participants did not feel adequately prepared to do so. Participants shared feelings of isolation and not being understood by family members and friends, were consistent with Gaw's (2000) conclusion that participants who study abroad experience things they family members and friends back home do not often understand, making it difficult to articulate highlights and lowlights from their trip.

Since the literature on the specific topic of how White college women make meaning of their study abroad experiences in non-European countries was limited, this study was used to address this gap. The findings of this study showed that college women may not have thought much on the dilemma of holding multiple privileged and oppressed identities, though the data alluded to how they lean more into their oppressed identities while simultaneously feeling uncomfortable with their privileged identities. This was even more evident after studying abroad in a non-European country, where many participants felt heightened emotions related to White guilt and shame of their nationality due to the racist and colonialistic histories they were exposed to. While White college women may experience these emotions and gain similar exposure through other avenues such as college courses, political and activist involvement, and other high-impact practices, the specific experience of studying abroad in a non-European country seemed to provide a concentrated exposure to difficult realities.

Another key finding related to participants not feeling like they have the resources or language to articulate how to best move forward after studying abroad. An issue that came through in the findings was the lack of institutional support participants felt after returning home from their trip abroad. While the research showed how reverse culture shock can often be more difficult than initial culture shock students face after studying abroad, the findings showed that participants were still struggling with how to move forward after their experiences while not

forgetting all they had learned abroad (Hammer, 2012). This showed a lack of preparation for reverse-culture shock upon returning home, and students reported strong feelings of isolation with little closure for what they had experienced. The complexity of newfound self-awareness, deconstruction of pre-conceived notions, and exposure to difficult histories paired with reverse culture shock provided insight to the unique experiences White college women experience after studying abroad in a non-European country and how they begin to reconstruct how they make meaning of the world around them.

Based on the findings of this study I offer some recommendations for practice and future research. These recommendations may help further our understanding of intersecting identities and how White women make meaning of their experiences after studying abroad in non-European countries. Findings for this study highlighted the importance of intentional reflection after studying abroad in order for participants to be able to adjust to their return to their home country and to feel less isolated from others.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

One of the major recommendations mentioned by all participants during the interview was the need for more preparation on reverse culture shock after coming home. For the majority of participants, reverse culture shock was far more difficult to process than initial culture shock in the host country. Some participants shared how helpful and intentional pre-tip orientations and preparations were, but they felt isolated upon returning home and had a difficult time processing through their emotions and experiences, as well as difficulty adjusting back to everyday life in the United States. This recommendation was mentioned by participants who went on two-week trips, and by participants who went on trips lasting longer than a month. Many of the participants felt alone in the readjustment process with little support. Many participants reached out to other

students in their group, but it was a difficult transition to go from being in a tight-knit group for two to six weeks and then no longer seeing each other.

A major barrier to implementing this recommendation is the fact that all participants studied abroad in the summer, and they either returned to the United States with the majority of their summer left, or they returned shortly before the Fall semester began. Because of this, students found themselves in a paradox of wanting to be home with their loved ones while at the same time, not wanting to leave their new friends and a host country they had come to love. One way faculty leading trips to non-European countries can prepare students for reverse culture shock is to talk about re-entry and its implications prior to returning home. This will give students some idea of what to expect upon return. However, I also think it would be beneficial for the campus study abroad office to have some involvement in educating students on reverse culture shock and providing an avenue for students to share their experiences with it. This could be an open house at the beginning of the Fall semester, or perhaps even mandatory post-trip debriefs done electronically a few days after returning. Many of the participants disclosed that they are still struggling to process their experiences, even those who have been home from their trip for close to two years. Because of this, ongoing check-ins and meet-ups may be beneficial to help students feel less isolated.

Another recommendation would be to include a more robust curriculum or extracurricular activities that encourage White college women to educate themselves on topics of race, gender, and nationality. The majority of my participants were not aware of the negative impacts the United States has had on non-European countries, nor did they fully grasp the weight of their own racial privilege before studying abroad. At a PWI, my participants felt like they could ignore racial implications because they were always surrounded by White people. A

recommendation would be to guide White racial identity development in programming and course content while also highlighting the experiences students of color face on predominately White campuses. The struggle is finding avenues for White students to gain exposure to the ways they benefit from systems of oppression without forcing the role of the educator solely onto people of color. With non-European study abroad experiences, faculty and students often rely on people in their host country to educate the visitors on the history of oppression that they have experienced. A pre-departure avenue to explore their own racial and gender identities could benefit White women without putting the burden of the educator solely on a person of color.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Consistent with previous literature on the topic, more research is necessary to exploring how White college women make meaning of their social identities after studying abroad in a non-European country. While this study has potential to add to the current research, more in-depth interviewing, and multiple interviews with participants, could create an even richer study. Beyond that, it would be beneficial to conduct group interviews with participants as well. With the nature of the study, it could be interesting to see how participants interact with each other during focus group sessions.

This study was conducted with undergraduate students ranging from 20 to 22 years of age. Since the majority of participants were junior-level status, this may have inhibited their ability for reflection. Doing this type of study with graduate students could provide more answers to the “What now?” question that came up throughout all the interviews. Graduate students may have more time to reflect on their experiences and examine ways of coping that promote change in a way that undergraduate students have not been able to do yet. In a similar

vein, it could also be interesting to do this study with faculty and staff who studied abroad in college as well.

Another recommendation would be to research White college women who do not go on a faculty-led study abroad trip. All eight participants had travelled abroad on faculty-led trips. However, it would be interesting to see the differences and similarities between the ways in which White college women make meaning of their salient identities and experiences while on a trip without direct faculty guidance. Participants mentioned the impact faculty leading the trips had on their own understanding and reflection, so it would be quite interesting to see how students are making sense of their experiences without having that direct connection. It could also be interesting to have a study that examines both students who participate in faculty-led programs and those who do not in order to increase generalizability in the data sample. Having a larger sample might also enable the comparison between short trip and semester or year-long programs.

A final recommendation would be to research other high-impact practices similar to study abroad to see how White college women may be making meaning of their salient identities through other avenues. While studying abroad is a unique high-impact practice, it was evident participants were learning about themselves, their identities, and their experiences through other avenues as well, such as service learning and campus involvement. It would be interesting to see what other ways White women are involved on campus and how those involvements make them more aware of their identities and how they make sense of these experiences and their identities.

### **Conclusion**

The findings respond to the research questions that guided this study. By centering women's experiences and the importance of storytelling consistent with feminist standpoint

theory and interviewing methods, the study was able to uncover participants' individual stories and experiences (Brooks, 2007, Hesse-Biber, 2007). While a structured interview protocol was used, space was provided for participants to share what was most salient and important to them and their own experience. A small number of participants had previously contemplated how they made meaning of their salient identities, but the majority of them began this process during and after studying abroad in a non-European country. All participants learned more about their own country while abroad, especially relating to United States involvement in their host countries.

Overall, studying abroad in a non-European country was life changing for participants, and one they will hold dear for the rest of their lives. Participants were able to articulate their emotions and describe the opportunities they had to reflect on their experiences abroad, and many of them are still dealing with the impacts that their experience have had on their lives. Participants struggled, and will continue to struggle, with how to move forward after such a life changing experience. Simultaneously, they are all filled with a desire to use their experience to help and educate others. Participants were willing and excited to answer interview questions and be a part of this study because they hoped to learn more about themselves, and they wanted to contribute to programs to improve support for students in the future.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Recruitment Email

Dear Student,

My name is Damaris Crocker De Ruiter, and I am a graduate student working on my master's thesis. My capstone project examines how White college women make meaning of their experiences after studying abroad in a non-European country, specifically using the lenses of race and gender.

I am currently looking for volunteers to help me with this study. To meet the requirements of this study, you must self-identify as a White woman over the age of 18, you must be a current student at Midwest University, and you must have participated in a study abroad trip to a non-European country through Midwest University.

Your participation would consist of an interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. If you agree, I may also contact you after the interview to make sure that my interpretations are accurate.

If you are interested and willing to participate in this study, please email me at [deruidam@gvsu.edu](mailto:deruidam@gvsu.edu).

Once I hear from you, I will work with you to set up a mutually convenient time to meet for an interview. I will also send you a consent form, which will explain the details of your involvement in the study.

You may also contact me at [deruidam@gvsu.edu](mailto:deruidam@gvsu.edu) or (231) 730-3029 if you need any additional information. Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Damaris Crocker De Ruiter  
Graduate Student, Higher Education  
Grand Valley State University



## Appendix B

### Questions for semi-structured Interview

**Introductory narrative** – Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your study abroad experiences. I look forward to hearing a bit about your experience while abroad. I will also be asking some questions about your identity and the ways in which your sense of identity may have been influenced by your experiences studying abroad. While this interview has some structured questions, I hope for this to be conversational.

- **Welcoming questions**

- How is your semester going so far?
- What is your major?
- What is your class standing? How old are you?

I am going to begin with a few questions related to your study abroad.

- **Questions related to study abroad**

- When did you know you wanted to study abroad in college?
  - What did you anticipate about your study abroad experience?
- Where did you study abroad?
  - How long were you there?
- What are some reasons you picked this location?
- What experiences stand out for you from this study abroad trip?

Next, I am going to ask you a few questions related to identity. (Emphasize they only have to share what they are comfortable with)

- **Questions related to identity**

- When did you first become aware of your gender?
  - Today, what does it mean for you to identify as a woman?
    - What are some ways in which you feel your life might be different from those who do not identify as women?
    - What are some advantages of identifying as a woman? What are some disadvantages?
  - Can you talk a little about when you first became aware of this difference?
  - How did this make you feel? How did you make sense of this?
- When did you first become aware of your race?
  - Today, what does it mean to you to identify as White?
  - What are some advantages and disadvantages of identifying as White?
  - What are some of the ways in which your life may be different from the lives of those who are not White?
  - Can you talk a little about when you first became aware of this difference?
  - How did this make you feel? How did you make sense of this?
- What do you think are some advantages to identifying as a White woman?
- What do you think are some disadvantages to identifying as a White woman?
- When did you first become aware of what it means to be American?
  - Today, what does it mean for you to identify as an American?
  - What are some advantages/disadvantages to identifying as American?

- What are some ways in which your life might be different from non-Americans?
  - Can you talk a little about when you first became aware of this difference?
  - How did this make you feel? How did you make sense of this?
- **Questions synthesizing identity and study abroad**
  - When you were abroad, what aspects of your identities were you most aware of and why?
    - Can you provide examples? (probe for race, gender, nationality).
    - What did study abroad reveal to you about each of these identities (being White, being American, and being a woman)?
  - Can you tell me a little bit about how your race and gender were viewed by people in your host country?
  - Can you tell me a little about how your American-ness was viewed by people in your host country?
  - Can you discuss some ways in which your understanding of these identities (race, gender, nationality) changed or not after studying abroad? Are they related at all?
    - Can you provide examples?
  - Can you talk a little about key experiences you had while abroad that may have made you re-think about the way you view your race, gender, or nationality?
    - Did your views on your identities change at all?
    - Were there ways you were able to make meaning of your identities in an intercultural context?
    - Do you have any specific examples you would like to share?

- **Questions related to opportunities to reflect on your study abroad experiences**
  - What sort of preparation did you have before you went abroad?
  - What are some ways in which you processed all of your experiences while studying abroad?
    - Group/ Personal reflections, oral/written journals, discussions
  - Could you talk a little about the opportunities, formal or informal, that you had to reflect about your experiences when you returned from you trip abroad?
- **Is there anything else you would like to add?**
- **Would you be willing to participate in a member check once I have analyzed all of my data?**
- **Do you have any questions for me?**

## Appendix C



### Consent Form

Title of Study: **Examining How White College Women Make Meaning of Their Racial and Gender Identity After Studying Abroad in a Non-European Country**

Principal Investigator: **Damaris Crocker De Ruiter, Graduate Student, GVSU**

Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Mary Bair, Educational Foundations, GVSU**

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine how White college women make meaning of their experiences, specifically related to their racial and gender identities, after studying abroad in a non-European country during their college career. Participants will be asked to reflect on their experiences while studying abroad, specifically on how their experience influenced their racial and gender identities. The hope of this study is to educate higher education practitioners and myself on the impact of study abroad experiences and the role of reflection on these experiences.

#### REASON FOR INVITATION

You are being invited to take part in this study because you have self-identified as a current student at Midwest University, over the age of 18, who is a White woman and has studied abroad in a non-European country. **Participants must be physically located within the United States at the time of study to participate.**

#### PURPOSE OF CONSENT FORM

This consent form provides you with the information you will need to help you decide whether or not you would like to be a part of this study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask me questions about the research, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that may be unclear. If you choose to participate, I will need verbal consent from you.

#### PROCEDURES

I will meet with you once during the Winter semester. During this time I will ask you some questions about your perceptions of your experiences while studying abroad and how those perceptions influenced your sense of yourself. Once I have collected all the data and begun to analyze it, I may reach out again to make sure my analysis is accurate. All interviews will be conducted at an on-campus location that is convenient for you and allows for privacy during the interview. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

#### RISKS

There is minimal risk that this study will result in emotional discomfort. Interviews will be conducted in a way that should not inflict harm. However, the interview questions will ask you to

reflect on your experiences, and that may cause some discomfort. All interview questions are optional, and you do not need to answer anything that may make you uncomfortable. In the case of any emotional discomfort, I will stop the interview. If you feel that additional assistance is necessary, I strongly encourage you to contact:

Midwest University Counseling Center 616-331-3266

[gvsucouns1@gvsu.edu](mailto:gvsucouns1@gvsu.edu)

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU

While I cannot promise any benefits, my hope is that you are able to learn more about yourself and benefit from reflecting on your experiences through this process. If you are interested in the results of the study, I would be happy to share them with you.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

This study seeks to address a current gap in the literature related to how White college women are making sense of their study abroad experiences in a non-European country, specifically related to racial and gender experiences. Because of this gap, there is potential that the higher education field will benefit from this study. The information may benefit comparable institutions and may lead to future research developments in the field.

### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not need to participate, and you may quit at any time without any penalty to you. You may also skip any research question that you may not wish to answer. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, you can elect to withdraw your information from the study, or, if you give me permission, I may include the information in my study.

### PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Your personal information, including all responses to interview questions, will not be linked in any way to your identity as a study participant, nor will your identity be included in the final results. You will be asked to provide a pseudonym prior to the interview, and the pseudonym you provide may be used in the final results. All data will be kept in a locked cabinet or saved on a password-protected computer, although federal government agencies and the Grand Valley State University IRB (a committee that reviews and approves research studies involving human subjects) may inspect and copy research records.

Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. These recordings will only be used for analysis by myself as the researcher. After each interview, I will have the data transcribed, double check the transcription against the audio recording, and then erase the recording. The transcriber and I will be the only ones who will have access to the recordings. I will be using a third-party transcription service; the transcriber will not know your identity and will be bound by a nondisclosure agreement. Anything you say to me, or that I have on record, will be kept completely confidential between you and me.

### CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact:

Damaris Crocker De Ruiter

231-730-3029

[deruidam@gvsu.edu](mailto:deruidam@gvsu.edu)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact:  
GVSU Office of Research Compliance and Integrity      616-331-3197      [rci@gvsu.edu](mailto:rci@gvsu.edu)

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

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