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## Study abroad: Products, practices, and perspectives of a new culture

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**STUDY ABROAD:  
PRODUCTS, PRACTICES, AND PERSPECTIVES  
OF A NEW CULTURE**

**A Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction**

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University of Northern Iowa  
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Entitled: Study Abroad: Products, Practices, and Perspectives of a New Culture

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation  
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Being interculturally competent is a great and desired skill in today's global world. Bill Richardson, a former congressman from New Mexico, is one man with such competence. After many successful cross-cultural negotiations he was chosen by former President Bill Clinton as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. He successfully convinced North Korea to release the pilot of a U.S. helicopter that crashed in the country. He was able to negotiate the release of three Red Cross workers from Sudan after being detained by the rebel leader, Commander Karabino. However, while attempting to convince Saddam Hussein to release two U.S. citizens after they accidentally wandered over the Kuwait boundary into Iraq, he made one gesture that insulted Hussein so greatly that the negotiations were suddenly in jeopardy. Richardson crossed his legs while speaking, showing the bottom of his foot to Hussein. This gesture in many parts of the world, especially Arab countries, is a major insult, and Hussein immediately stormed out of the meeting. Richardson had to explain his ignorance of the gesture repeatedly before Hussein would finally agree to continue the negotiations. (Rogers and Steinfatt 166)

Even U.S. Presidents are subject to these types of faux pas while communicating with people from other cultures. While touring Australia in 1992, former President George H.W. Bush flashed what is commonly known as the "peace sign" in the United States. This symbol formed with the first and second fingers separated and palms facing in is a vulgar and obscene gesture similar to raising the middle finger in the United States. The appropriate way to show the peace symbol is with the palm facing outward. President Bush unknowingly offended an entire group of local farmers by using this gesture.

These types of cultural misunderstandings and the apparent lack of intercultural competence can seem ironic and even humorous at times, especially when it happens to those in

the political realm. However, these types of misunderstandings can also be small, seemingly insignificant items that tend to smolder like ashes until something larger sets the embers on fire. For example, the United States, like all countries, has several underlying, non-spoken understandings about behaviors. Not cutting in line at a restaurant or a restroom is something that is rarely mentioned in travel books but is essential for foreigners to understand about the American society. In several cultures, cutting in line is not the same type of rude gesture as it is seen in the U.S. Another example is facial expressions. Generally speaking, within the United States, a smile usually indicates happiness, joy, and humor. Surprisingly enough, this is not true in all societies in the world. Several cultures use smiles and laughter to show embarrassment or even shame. (Rogers and Steinfatt 169) Imagine the frustration a teacher could feel when his/her international students begin to laugh when they are scolded for not completing a homework assignment. Instead of mocking the teacher, as it may appear, the students are actually displaying shame and embarrassment in an appropriate way for their home culture.

How does one adapt him/herself to an environment that is so different in almost every way? Noticing exactly how one is forming their gestures and body movements so as not to offend anyone, modifying one's point-of-view on issues that seem so straightforward like cutting in line, and realizing that even facial expressions are partially culturally determined are among countless other topics within the situations that sojourners voluntarily place themselves for months at a time. How do they adapt to these strange new situations? What are some of the difficulties in adapting? What aspects of their home culture do they maintain? This paper examines the products, practices, and perspectives altered by sojourners (namely study abroad students) in order to adapt to a new culture allowing them to gain an overall increase in their intercultural competence as a result.

## 2. Purpose

There is a multitude of information available for students who wish to sojourn internationally. University study abroad offices are packed with books, pamphlets, media presentations, and even first hand accounts from their student workers that show the importance of study abroad experiences. There are also numerous programs that claim they can take students to any country they would like to visit, give them any experience they are interested in (academic or not) and tell them they will be a better person for it. While this all may be true, there are a very small number of resources that explain how these programs can claim to transform a person's life in a matter of months.

How do these programs work? What is it about these experiences that can help a student to better their life? Out of all these resources, there is very little information about what specifically leads to a positive cultural adaptation experience. If this information was available to students, they could use it to better their experiences abroad by knowing what to look for once reaching their destinations.

Identifying the effects of studying abroad can be difficult due to the fact that any previous research has been over generalized. Talbert and Stewart note that "With few exceptions, [they] found that research has tended to generalize students' experiences abroad, giving scant attention to the specificities that can shape their interactions and cultural learning" (Talbert and Stewart 43). Students themselves have difficulties describing what they have learned as a result of their experiences: "Intercultural educators often speak and write about how much students change as a result of living abroad. Students themselves also are conscious that they are not the same persons before their trip. But it isn't always clear how they have changed" (Wagner and Magistrale 132).

A more thorough interview process would help students to self-reflect on how they have grown during their time abroad.

Throughout the research process, a multitude of sources confirmed that study abroad is indeed a valuable resource and can be of great help to students in their learning process, but that is where the research stops. There are very few resources that go in-depth specifically into what modifications to their behaviors and ideas students must make in order to adapt to the new environment. This lack of information was the catalyst for this project which studied these students and examined their experiences, situations, and relationships to see what aspects of the students' home culture had to be changed for full integration into the new culture.

The purpose of this thesis was to research the effects of studying abroad in the University of Northern Iowa Semester in Spain (UNISIS) Program in terms of a student's cultural adaptation process through on-campus and on-site interviews. Certain trends among students emerged allowing the generation of a hypothesis about what products, practices, and perspectives had to change to allow the students to fully adapt to their new environment.

This thesis shows the importance of study abroad experiences in the lives of students both academically and personally but also for their future professional career. It not only allowed students to see what benefits they have gained from the experiences and helped them to personally reflect on their time abroad but now it also opens these experiences for others to see. This in turn shows many more people the benefits gained through these once-in-a-lifetime opportunities and which experiences abroad could help them acculturate themselves to their new surroundings.

### 3. Literature Review

Living in a globalized post 9-11 world, the benefits of learning languages should no longer be underestimated. “In May 2005 Senator Daniel Akaka [stated]: “‘Americans need to be open to the world; we need to be able to see the world through the eyes of others if we are going to understand how to resolve the complex problems we face.’ In the current geopolitical moment, these statements are no longer clichés” (“Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World.”). Learning a second language seems to be a common occurrence to most people in the world, yet, the United States lacks in their development of second language programs. Whether one is attempting to negotiate with the leaders of foreign countries, form a merger with an international company, or just enjoy a meal at an ethnic restaurant, communication must happen and chances are there will be some sort of linguistic barrier.

Even President Obama understands the lack of second language abilities within the U.S. During a town-hall meeting in Georgia in 2008 he said, “I don’t speak a foreign language. It’s embarrassing! It’s embarrassing when Europeans come over here, they all speak English, they speak French, they speak German. And then we go over to Europe and all we can say is merci beaucoup, right?” (Gavrilovic). The nation’s current “cultural blindness puts the U.S. at a disadvantage with other countries in business and political affairs” (Storti xv).

However, “In the last decade, calls for the internationalization of higher education have increasingly turned universities' attention to study abroad programs because they appear to offer an ideal means for the development of students' foreign language skills, cultural knowledge, and international awareness” (Talbert and Stewart 23). International students not only learn the foundations of their new language, but they are also able to learn the culture-specific



idiosyncrasies that go with it. “Most people do not think about their personal culture until something deviates from it” (Wagner and Magistrale 1). This could be part of the reason students learn so much about themselves and their own culture during an international experience. By giving students the opportunity to have these experiences, the nation is equipping its future generations with the ability to facilitate effective and appropriate global communication, one of the necessary elements in today’s world.

The linguistic variety in the world might not have been a problem during the years when there was no means of communicating with someone so far away, but today’s generation is faced with a global economy in a globalized, well-connected world. In fact, the world’s top twenty-five biggest companies are represented by nine different countries: the U.S., U.K., Japan, Spain, France, China, Russia, Germany, and Italy. (DeCarlo) If the United States wants to continue competing in this world market, the nation’s culture must adapt to the increased global demand for linguistic and intercultural competency.

In addition to being globally connected through economics, the technology age is connecting people faster and more reliably than ever before. People in all parts of the world are able to share news through periodicals and television which helps average citizens increase their awareness of global events. Perhaps more than that, though, is the importance and availability of the internet. Suddenly business partners are able to communicate in real time with seemingly face-to-face conversations and family members are able to see their loved ones living abroad in a picture and sound quality that makes them seem like they are next door. All of these improvements in the availability, reliability, and ease of communication through media have continued to lead this generation into a global lifestyle.

Even without leaving the United States, we can see that being interculturally competent is a necessity. Eighteen percent of the population in the United States does not speak English (“Modern Language Association”) and close to twelve percent of the population is foreign born. (Larson) “Teachers [and students] must face the reality that they will continue to come into contact with students whose cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and social class backgrounds differ from their own” (Spring 10).

There are many different ways to improve one’s intercultural competence. Multicultural media has been increasing in the United States over the past several years. This type of literature and film has given exposure to the diversity within the United States. By exposing children to these types of multicultural sources, they are able to see past the façade of the “white majority” concept to realize that there is a lot of diversity just on their doorsteps. Movies such as *Gran Torino* or *Crash* explore the topic of racial tension and work to find ways to alleviate it. Covering international stories in the local or national news is another way to ensure the public is receiving as much international information as possible to prepare them for the global society they encounter daily.

The best way to improve one’s intercultural abilities, however, is through experiential learning. (Sullivan 9) Experiencing another culture forces students to take themselves out of their comfort zones, expand previous beliefs, and look at life from different points-of-view. This experiential learning can come through a variety of ways. Visiting and forming relationships with minorities within one’s own region is an excellent way to understand a new culture. Even traveling to a new country as a tourist would help someone to see the cultural differences and begin to grow as an international citizen. However, one of the best ways to experience a new culture is through sojourning.

A sojourner is a person who is traveling to another country to stay for an extended, yet specific amount of time. Sojourners are characterized by the fact that they maintain their native-culture because of their intentions to return home. (Rogers and Steinfatt 211) A typical sojourner could be a business person, military personnel or a student, however, for the purpose of this paper, only student sojourners will be discussed. The purpose for the excursion of a sojourner differs from that of a tourist who will most likely reside in a hotel instead of immersing themselves with the natives. Sojourners also differ from immigrants who will be looking for a permanent residence. Tourists, sojourners, and immigrants all have different motivations for adapting to the local culture as well. Tourists tend to want immersion into the culture to experience something new and bring back great memories from their trip (Storti 29), whereas immigrants have the option of assimilating into the new culture or maintaining their former culture.

In contrast, the role of a sojourner is very unique. The great stories of cultural misunderstandings that the tourist looks forward to bringing back are true problems for the sojourner. (Storti 29) "...Sojourners know their stay in the new culture is temporary. Regardless of their intent to learn the new culture, they will eventually return to their original culture. This 'escape clause' can affect adjustment to the new culture. The sojourner is a stranger caught between two worlds" (Rogers and Steinfatt 212). Because of this uniqueness, sojourning can be a very lonely and difficult process to live through. Students must use intercultural communication everyday and be able to fit in among natives in their local area while still maintaining their native culture.

Across multiple fields of studies the definition of culture varies. The definition chosen for this study states that culture is "a deep, multi-layered, yet somewhat cohesive interplay of

languages, values, beliefs, and behaviors that pervades every aspect of every person's life, and is continually undergoing modifications" (Ovando, Combs, Collier 180). Within any definition of culture, there are three components to consider: product, practices, and perspectives. Products are considered to be the artifacts used or created by members of the culture. Practices are the behaviors and social interactions in which members of the culture partake. Perspectives, on the other hand, are not usually visible. Rather, they are the underlying beliefs, values, and attitudes held by members of a culture. These three components of a culture may be thought of as an iceberg with the products and practices being the visible part above the water, whereas the perspectives are the large mass of ice below the surface that support and define the artifacts and actions of a culture. (Moran 23)

The immersion experience faced by sojourners includes all three components: the products, practices, and perspectives of the new culture. These include, but are not limited to, food (type, duration and timing of meals), daily schedule, attitude, personality, gender relations, sense of time, getting around, personal interactions, gender roles, etiquette, cross-cultural perceptions, and body language. (Loflin 66, Hansel 15, Kauffman et al. 58)

Students tend to have many resources assisting them in making this transition to life in a different culture. Study abroad programs typically offer preparatory classes at their respective universities. These classes present information about the specific culture the students are sojourning to as well as give the students help with completing the international paperwork, such as visas and passports. The UNISIS program helped students by meeting once a week for the first eight weeks of the semester preceding the students' trip. Information presented in this specific class included cultural products and practices such as food, dress, and greetings.

Knowing this kind of information can help students through their adjustment process and can lessen the effects of culture shock. Culture shock has been described by Bock (1970) as “primarily an emotional reaction that follows from not being able to understand, control and predict another’s behavior” (Furnham and Bochner 49). In general, it is the experience of adapting to another culture which has the connotation of being rather unpleasant. This unpleasant experience is usually lessened when the native culture and the new local culture are similar to one another or when the majority language used in the two cultures is similar or the same (such as sojourning from the United States to Canada). Another way of lowering the effect of culture shock is by expecting the experience. Just being aware of the upcoming shock can help lessen its effects. Also being aware of specific cultural norms can help students to prepare themselves for life in a different country. The preparatory classes, as mentioned above, are a great way for students to build up their background knowledge on the specific culture in which they are about to embark, while raising awareness about the possible emotions they may feel.

Culture shock is caused by a number of issues that can be divided into several categories. Namely there is a loss of familiar signs and symbols of everyday communication. (Rogers and Steinfatt 212) This shock is also caused by the different behaviors exhibited by the natives of the new culture. Crowds of unruly people are not necessarily common to the average American sojourning in different parts of the world. Or are they? At rock concerts, crowds of unruly people are almost expected. Why is this behavior so shocking then when experienced in a different culture? The reason the behavior instills so much confusion in sojourners is not the behavior itself; rather, it is the fact that the sojourner is not expecting it. (Storti 47) Crowds at a rock concert are expected to the American sojourner. Crowds at a post office window, on the other hand, are unexpected to the average American.

Until one experiences a foreign culture, they have no reason to believe them to be different from their native culture. Even if sojourners think there will be differences, they are unable to conceive what the differences may be. (Storti 50) Thus, it is not the differences of the behaviors themselves that are shocking; it is the lack of expectation of these behaviors in the places they occur that most sojourners find uncomfortable. This uncomfortable experience of culture shock comes as a result of the conditioning students have become accustomed to in their native culture. Humans generalize their experiences to be able to function in society. (Storti 52) Can one imagine a world where they were unable to trust that a driver would stop at a red stoplight? Or that money received from the bank was reliable? Chaos and fear would most likely arise. These generalizations allow humans to function within their local culture by trusting those around them that they will continue to follow the pattern that has been set up before them. This same help in local cultures turns into a hindrance while sojourning. Sojourners have been used to having a reliable community for so long and are suddenly without any indication of what can and cannot be generalized. This is the primary cause for culture shock. (Storti 66)

Symptoms of culture shock include three broad categories: language, physical irritability, and role ambiguity. Being unable to communicate one's own personality through language can lead to a feeling of losing one's identity. Even more immediate, being unable to signal help or complete simple tasks such as ordering at a restaurant can lead to nervousness and anxiety in individuals. Physical symptoms tag a large number of culture shock victims. Upset stomach, jet lag, irritable bowels, excessive tiredness, lack of appetite, and issues with drinking the local water categorize the physical ailments someone with culture shock may experience. (Rogers and Steinfatt 213) Finally, role ambiguity could be the most detrimental of symptoms. As mentioned above, it is not the behavior that is shocking to sojourners experiencing a new culture; it is the

fact that the behavior is not expected. In turn, the sojourners are unsure of how to respond causing them to lose their understanding of their role in this new community.

To complicate matters further, the traditional college-aged years of eighteen to twenty-four years are crucial years in the development of one's personal identity and role in the world. During these developmental years, college students progress through the separation-individuation process, which "involves the development of a more autonomous sense of self through reworking internalized ties to representations of one's parents" (Kroger 91). This process involves forming more relationships with people outside of one's family and especially taking responsibility for choices made in one's life. It seems almost coincidental that students would be studying abroad during these years, which forces them away from their families for an extended period of time, allowing them sufficient room to grow their personal independence and self-reliability.

The process of separation-individuation is culturally understood. Society plays a very crucial role in this process by recognizing the adolescent's independence and identity in ways that are culturally determined. In the United States, this process is encouraged by society through several cultural traditions such as moving out of one's parents' home around this age, beginning to financially support one's self, as well as beginning higher education and/or a full-time occupation. In Spain, however, it is natural and very common for one to live at home with one's parents for a longer amount of time. Sojourners are working within this process of identity-formation, all the while attempting to navigate the waters of a new culture, thus perpetuating the culture shock experience.

Culture shock is frequently thought of as a process of stages through which a sojourner experiences various degrees of the shock. The primary stage is an elated, excited, optimistic

stage during which the sojourner plans their excursion to the new culture as well as their first experiences in the new culture. These first experiences are exciting. Everything is new and different, unique and fascinating. Troublesome differences seem so small during this phase and the sojourner is pleased with their decision to travel. (Sullivan 198)

The second phase of the experience begins to decrease the positive feelings the sojourner had just days before. Suddenly the student realizes that the little differences that were going to make great travel stories are actually causing them discomfort. This discomfort usually causes the sojourner to retreat somewhat from the new culture. “What can be more normal than to shrink from unpleasant situations, to avoid that which we fear or dislike, or find embarrassing?” (Storti 32) This retreating may be normal but it leads to less contact with the native culture, which in turn leads to fewer opportunities to understand and practice the new culture, which leads to more discomfort, which completes the circle by causing a tendency to retreat even more. Sojourners at this stage tend to engage in an ex-patriot community. These communities are comprised of same-native-culture-sojourners or immigrants who are maintaining their home-culture instead of integrating into the new culture. Sojourners can find a sense of comfort in these communities and though they are first looked at as a place to ‘catch one’s breath,’ they quickly become permanent residents. (Storti 33)

Making the effort to continue interacting with the new culture is the deciding factor in the sojourner’s intercultural experience. When sojourners force themselves to interact with the new culture, they are able to observe more cultural behaviors, which in turn allows them to have more accurate expectations and finally a lessened culture shock experience. (Storti 58) The illogical idea of continuing that which is painful and full of discomfort can actually bring a sojourner out of phase two of culture shock and into phase three.



The final stage of culture shock arrives when students are able to adjust and integrate themselves into the new culture. Friendships with host-nationals grow and soon the sojourner is able to predict the behavior of those around them. They are able to see the new culture through the eyes of the culture's natives and a form of cultural competency is achieved. At this point, students are able to separate the individuals from the culture, allow their personality to come through their communication, and have a sense of security without the constant tension that was present before. (Storti 92)

Cultural baggage is a term that is used to define the internal and automatic moral beliefs and assumptions that each person carries. (Hansel 33) This baggage can help or hinder one's experiences abroad. Many students will release this baggage during their trip, allowing their minds to be opened to other cultures, which is usually the case in the final stage of culture shock. However, some students may hold on to this baggage for comfort purposes which might obstruct their ability to grasp the new way of life. Sharing one's culture with their host family is one way to bridge the gap between letting go of this baggage and holding on. It can prove to be a transition to learning more about the host country and teaching the host family more about life in America. It can also lead to a deepened relationship with the host family. They will understand the student more, as well as increase their own culture learning about the United States. (Hansel 106)

There are several key ways of coping with culture shock when it is presented to a sojourner during their excursion. First, the ex-patriot community, as mentioned before, is a place where many sojourners find comfort. This is natural because it happens unconsciously. Denying that the culture needs to impact the sojourner is the primary cause for retreating to this community. The sojourner agrees that there are differences, but decides that the differences need

not have a huge impact on them. Avoiding pain and discomfort is a natural force of nature, but it does not lead to successful integration with the new culture.

In addition to the ex-patriot community, building relationships with host-national friends is another way to overcome the debilitating effects of culture shock. When one becomes homesick, usually the homesickness is not for a specific person but for the feeling of friendship itself. (Storti 7) Before students are able to learn the specific cultural skills needed to navigate the new culture, they must have close links with members of the host society who are able and willing to act as culture friends and mediators. (Furnham and Bochner 15)

Host national friends are able to fill in gaps in the sojourners' information. These friends are able to teach specific cultural skills explicitly or implicitly. Mainly the sojourners are able to observe their friends and continue building correct predictions for their behavior and the behavior of those around them. This information helps the sojourner to find their role in the new community. The housing situation for most sojourners can lead directly to or away from creating links with host members of the new culture.

There are several different types of housing available for students that travel abroad to study. Among the most popular are home stays, dorm-style living, or apartments. Students may choose to live with American, native or international friends or by themselves. "Those students who did participate in a home stay tended to be more vocal about the rewards of their experience abroad than those who lived in dorms" (Loflin 14). This could be because students that have the opportunity to choose their living arrangement choose one that fits their personality. People that are more outgoing might choose a more social atmosphere like a home stay or an apartment whereas students with less outgoing personalities may choose a quieter atmosphere such as a dorm-style living.

In the UNISIS Program, students do not get the opportunity to choose their living situation, but are rather placed individually with host families. Therefore students are unable to choose a placement that fits their personality specifically. The experience of living with a family not only helps with one's insight into their culture but they also give the international student support and advice on living in that country. (Hansel 19) This support and advice may lead to the student's improved comfort with the culture and further their culture learning, but there seems to be a lack of research to support this idea.

The degree to which the student is integrated in to the new culture can vary by extremes. Cultural maintenance is the term used to classify those who travel to another country but choose to completely maintain their previous culture. (Rogers and Steinfatt 189) Examples of this would include maintaining one's native food, behaviors and language. On the other end of the spectrum, assimilation is used to label those individuals who leave behind their previous culture and dive in to the new culture completely. (Rogers and Steinfatt 190) Someone who is culturally assimilated may speak the new language instead of their native language, dress to fit in among the new culture, and choose behaviors that match those common to the new culture. Between the ends of the spectrum is acculturation. Acculturation is "the process through which an individual is socialized into a new culture while retaining many aspects of a previous culture" (Rogers and Steinfatt 190). Through this process, the sojourner becomes a mixture of the two cultures.

Several variables can alter a person's ability to integrate into the new culture. As mentioned above, studies show that having a viable host-national network of companions can greatly assist a sojourner in acculturating to the new environment. Also those who have local friends went through a deeper integration phase, but have a higher level of satisfaction after six months than those without any local friends. (Furnham and Bochner 136)

Previous experience abroad is another key factor in determining a person's ability to adapt to a new way of life. Having experience abroad helps one self-assess their ability to be open to a new way of thinking and to how they could handle culture shock. In fact, companies tend to hire those individuals with previous experience abroad so as to ensure they will be able to handle it. The Peace Corps has had to return about thirty percent of its volunteers before their term is ended because of their inability to integrate with the new culture and handle the effects of culture shock. (Rogers and Steinfatt 213)

#### **4. Methodology**

Cultural studies is an area without a specific methodology because it has been shaped by so many different fields of study. (White and Schwoch 1) Anthropology, psychology, and sociology, among others, have all been used to study the concept of culture. This project is focused on the interactions between students and the new culture they are learning. These interactions are difficult to measure and quantify because of the difficulty in isolating and testing social variables. (Silverman 3) Thus a traditional quantitative study using logic and experimental methods is not necessarily appropriate. Rather, qualitative methodologies can be used more effectively for research in cultural studies, such as this one. Even though this is the case, most researchers still go into the field with no idea of which specific method to use. (White and Schwoch 3)

Many scientific methods have influenced the qualitative methodologies used by these other fields of study and so they are still set up as hypothesis-testing research projects. A different approach has been designed by researchers Carl F. Auerbach and Louise B. Silverstein. The hypothesis-generating research idea, designed by these two researchers, focuses on

“developing a hypothesis after the data is collected” and “us[ing] the research participants as a source of knowledge” (Auerbach and Silverstein 7). This idea came about because the researchers were not informed enough to create a reasonable hypothesis with suitable independent and dependent variables. Furthermore, isolating these variables in a social setting is next to impossible and it can also “obscure the contingent nature of interaction” (Silverman 17).

The hypothesis-generating methodology takes the focus off of “investigat[ing] a phenomenon in terms of a relationship between an independent and a dependent variable, both of which are measurable numerically” (Auerbach and Silverstein 5), and instead the “qualitative hypothesis-generating research involves collecting interview data from research participants concerning a phenomenon of interest, and then using what they say in order to develop hypotheses” (Auerbach and Silverstein 8).

Because the research for this project would eventually involve human subjects, the first step was to begin the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. The appropriate education was completed, the application filled out, and the approval granted so the interviewing process could begin in November 2008.

The subjects of this project were twenty students who had contracted to travel abroad during the spring semester (January through May) of 2009 through the UNISIS Program. The University of Northern Iowa Semester In Spain Program is run through the University of Northern Iowa (UNI). UNI is a middle-sized university located in Cedar Falls, Iowa, a town of approximately 36,000 residents. (“Community Profile”) The demographics of the school are eighty-six percent Caucasian with eighty-nine percent of the student body paying in-state tuition. (Moehn, Hart, Kaparathi) The twenty students (seventeen females and three males) in this project are representative of the ethnicities of the university as a whole. Each of the students signed the

appropriate IRB paperwork, agreeing to their participation in this study, and acknowledged full understanding of their rights and risks for the duration of the project.

To fully understand the students' perspectives on the cultural adaptation process, it was determined that the semi-structured interviews would take place before and during their study abroad experience. Interviews were chosen because they can "display cultural particulars" in that they use a "factual objective structure to show a contingent, subjective version of reality" (Silverman 172). Further, "an account is neither naïve nor an apology for behavior, but must be taken as an informed statement by the person whose experiences are under investigation" (Silverman 171). For these reasons, person-to-person interviews were determined to be the most appropriate way to obtain the information desired.

The first round of these semi-structured interviews took place within a two week period in late November and early December 2008. These interviews were brief, only lasting approximately ten minutes per student, and were used to gain an understanding of the students' previous cultural experiences abroad, their expectations of the semester ahead, and their reasoning for joining this program.

The interviews were recorded on a digital video recorder, due to the lack of availability of a quality audio recorder. They were completed in a conference room on the campus of UNI. The students' participation in the interview process was entirely voluntary, though all twenty students did choose to participate. Because the interviews were video-taped, no notes were recorded as to give full attention to the interviewees and their responses to the questions. The interviews were conducted in an informal setting, completed entirely in English, and follow-up questions were asked to clarify, elaborate, or better define the student's answer. After the interviews were

completed, they were transcribed by the researcher using a computer and word-processing software.

The second round of interviews took place in Oviedo, Spain, during the week of March 15, 2009, which was the exact half-way mark of the students' twenty week stay. These interviews were set-up individually between the student and the researcher and took place in various places around the University of Oviedo. Again the interviews were video recorded, with the exception of two interviews which were recorded using an audio-recorder. All interviews were conducted in English and were again informal with follow-up questions asked where needed. No notes were taken during the interviews to ensure that the interviewer's full attention was devoted to the interviewee. The informality of the interviews led to a lowering of the student's anxiety level while building rapport between the researcher and the student. This was done to encourage better conversation between the student and the researcher and allowing for a more honest, unguarded, and consistent flow of conversation.

The interviews were again optional, and eighteen of the twenty students chose to participate. The average length was forty-five minutes with a range of fifteen to sixty minutes. The questions chosen for these interviews focused on several aspects of the students' experiences thus far. Topics included their host family, social life, traveling opportunities, and general thoughts, but they centered on their cultural adaptation processes and any culture shock they experienced. With the previously discussed definition of culture in mind, this particular study chose to use the terms "new/second culture" and "home culture" while asking students about their experiences. This was done to prevent any confusion about American and Spanish culture. The culture some Americans live in differs from other Americans, in the same sense that the culture the students experienced while living in Spain was not necessary a complete view of the

Spanish culture. Spain is an incredibly diverse nation. With four national languages and seventeen autonomous regions, one can only surmise the diversity between various territories within the country. (“Spain”)

After returning to the United States, the fifteen hours of interviews were transcribed. Due to the bottom-up approach of this study, the transcription was completed word for word, so as not to overlook a similarity with another student. There were several interviewees who told multiple anecdotes and gave irrelevant information; however, their anecdotes and irrelevancies were also transcribed so as not to miss any chance for comparison. The final transcription for all eighteen interviews totaled 173 pages. Once the transcriptions were complete, main ideas from each question were summarized to form a data chart. This allowed for easier readability, enabling the researcher to discover trends, patterns, and commonalities between the students.

Once the students returned to the United States, they were asked to complete a voluntary final reflection of their time spent abroad. Eight of the twenty students completed this survey which was sent to them electronically before they arrived at home or during their very first week home to be completed and emailed back to the researcher during the students’ third or fourth week at home. The researcher again saved the information. Because the format for these surveys was a word-processing document, there were no transcriptions needed and thus the surveys were preserved the exact way the students sent them. Due to the lack of a quality sample size, these eight reflections were discarded and not used as data for the analysis portion of this project.

## **5. Research Questions**



The central focus in this study was the students' cultural adaptation processes. In order to determine what experiences, situations and/or relationships influenced these processes; multiple areas of their daily lives were examined. However, to specifically address the process of adapting to the culture, students were asked to describe what aspects of their daily lives they had to change to adapt to the new culture, what aspects were the most difficult to adapt to, what parts of the culture they planned to continue when back home, what aspects of their home culture they maintained while abroad, and what they had learned about their home culture from this experience.

## **6. Findings**

Results were analyzed using the three components of culture selected by the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project: products, practices, and perspectives.

("Special Projects") As mentioned earlier, products are best described as artifacts, practices are known as behaviors and interactions, and perspectives represent beliefs, values, and attitudes.

(Moran 25). As one can see, products and practices are the common manifestations of perspectives.

Within the area of cultural adaptation, five questions were asked:

*1) What aspects of your daily life did/do you have to change to adapt to this new culture?*

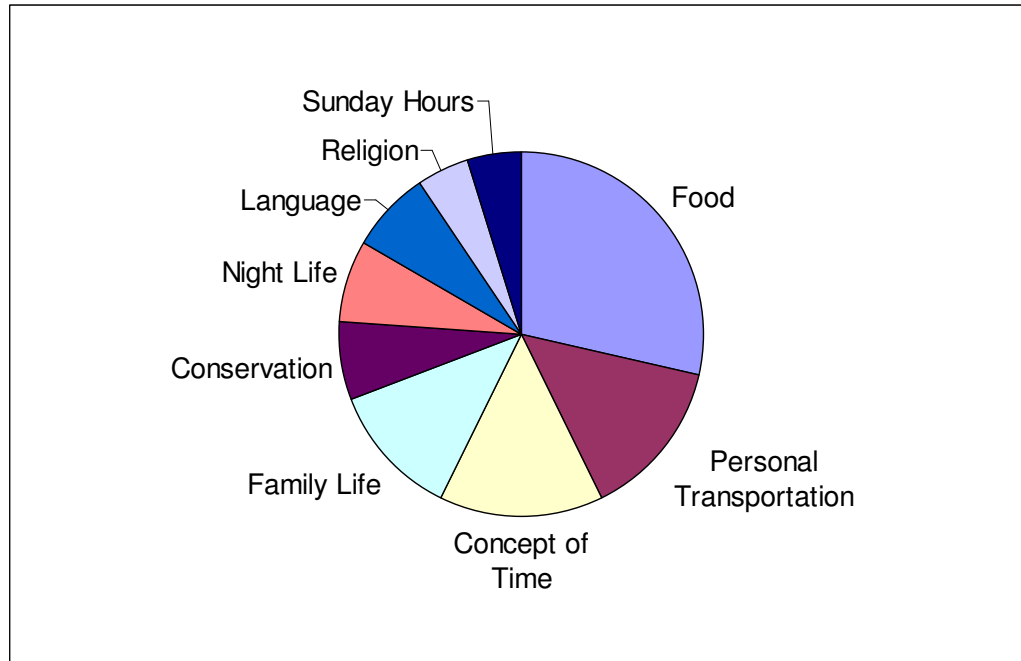


Figure 1: Graph of the forty-two responses to Question 1 (What aspects of your daily life did/do you have to change to adapt to this new culture?).

From the eighteen students interviewed, there were forty-two different responses to this question. The primary answers were food, personal transportation, the concept of time, and the family life. The remaining responses seen in the graph above had three or less responses each.

The most common variable for all students was food. Food was mentioned by twelve of the eighteen students, but what is the most interesting about these answers, is that the food itself was not what most students referred to. Most students mentioned they had to change their eating habits, times, location of eating, and amount of food more than the actual food itself.

According to students:

- “Breakfast is for the most part, non-existent.”
- “They eat so much. I’ve never eaten so much in my life!”

- “The mealtime is definitely different: the times and at home, we wouldn’t eat together that much.”

Food habits, such as those listed above, vary drastically between one country to another. “Culturally based food habits are often one of the last traditions people change when they move to a new country” (Kittler and Sucher 5). This may account for the difficulty students faced when attempting to adapt to the new food. Compared to students who live on their own while sojourning, these students were living with host families and therefore did not have their own input in mealtimes.

Other practices that had to be changed in order to adapt to the Spanish culture included the lack of personal transportation, the family life, and the concept of time. While students were sojourning in Spain, they were left to their own means of transportation. Occasionally their host families had a vehicle, but to get to and from school, students had to walk.

- “I was definitely used to driving everywhere, so it’s really weird to walk.”
- “I miss driving. I want my car. It’s crazy how much we walk.”
- “I probably spend about three hours a day walking which is great and I love it.”

Walking thirty minutes one-way to arrive at the school would not be uncommon for these students. In the United States, however, the physical campus on which the students take classes is approximately fifteen minutes walking time from corner to corner, meaning that students would be required to walk much less than thirty minutes one-way. Walking this much was mentioned as a new practice for seven of the eighteen students.

Generally speaking, most students in the United States leave their parents’ home to attend college, even if they are enrolled in a college within their hometown. However, during this study abroad experience students were required to live with host families. These host families range in

structure from single women to couples with children, and almost all have had students before. Being tied down to a family made some students feel like they had to be less spontaneous than they were used to being in the U.S.

- “I’m way more careful to pick up everything. My room is always clean which it’s not ever at home.”
- “I’m a little less spontaneous somewhat just because of my madre [host mother]...I feel like I have to be very thorough with her to know what I’m doing...”

They felt they were under someone else’s rules and several reported feeling uneasy about their role in this new family. They felt they had to keep clean rooms, tell the family where they would be at all times, but that they did not have any real responsibilities to contribute to the family.

Finally, the issue of chronemics was brought up as a major adaptation to be made in order to integrate into Spanish society. Chronemics is defined as “the way in which time affects communication” (Rogers and Steinfatt 181). Students had to alter their internal schedules to adapt to the daily itinerary of their new surroundings.

- “I feel like the culture in America is really fast paced...The culture [in Spain] is a lot more laid-back.”
- “Everything is timed so differently...They think about times differently.”
- “The hours of the day are a lot different here. The day starts at like nine or ten o’clock, instead of seven or eight, and you have a huge break in the middle to eat lunch or take a siesta [nap].”

These changes the students had to make to adapt to the new environment all fall under the category of practices. Altering one’s schedule to allow for family dinners and walking to class instead of driving oneself are both examples of changing one’s behaviors and interactions to adapt to the new culture.

2) *What was/is the hardest part of the new culture to adapt to?*

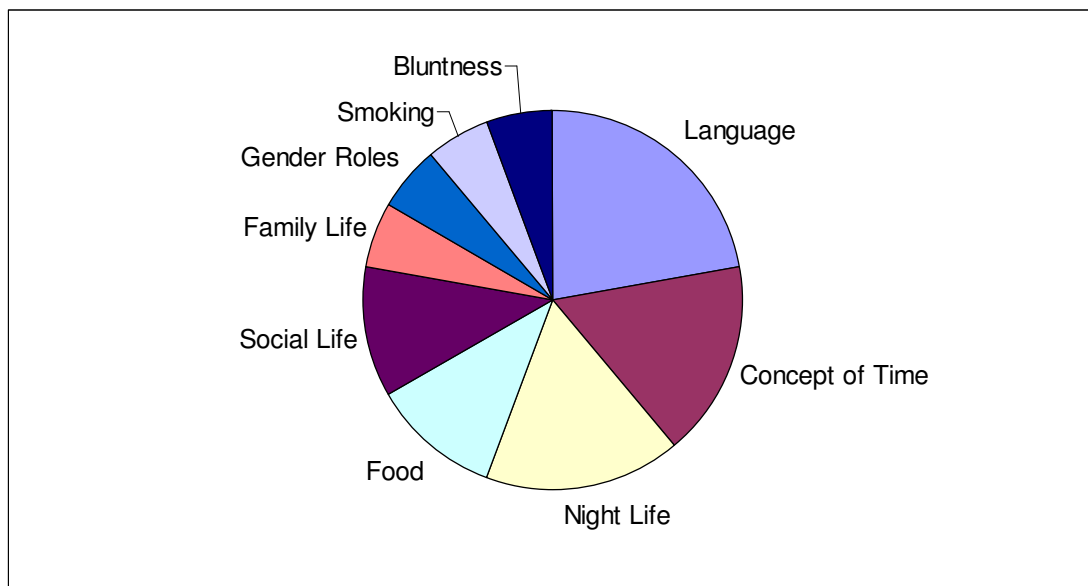


Figure 2: Graph of the twenty-three responses to Question 2 (What was/is the hardest part of the new culture to adapt to?).

This question had twenty-three responses from the eighteen students. The primary responses included the language (four students), the concept of time (three students), and the night life (three students). The remainder responses were mentioned two or less times.

The most difficult part of the culture to adapt to for students was the language, the concept of time, and the active night life. Only four of the host families with which these

students stayed spoke any English at all. Being forced to speak Spanish was a major change for students.

- “[It] is incredibly hard to have to use a language that you are not used to.”
- “Speaking Spanish the whole time is kind of tiring.”
- “The language was a pretty big shock, because my Spanish was pretty rusty.”
- “Conversational Spanish is something that I’ve never really learned before.”

However, according to Moran, language is “a window to the culture,” and so by speaking the language of the native people, students should have been able to delve even deeper into the culture (Moran 35). Unfortunately, at first, many students did not feel comfortable in their language skills for it to be of great assistance to them. Rather, they felt unprepared, especially in terms of conversational Spanish skills, which they needed to get to know people.

Again, the concept of time was considered to be a difficult part of the culture to adapt to, as well as the active night life. In the United States, night establishments that serve alcohol are required by law to be closed by two o’clock in the morning. In Spain, however, because of their different schedule, this rule is not declared. It would not be uncommon for a young Spaniard to begin his/her evening activities after supper around midnight and not return home until 8 o’clock in the morning.

- “...Because at home the bars close at two and you get home at two or earlier and here...you are out until like five or six or seven.”
- “I never ‘went-out’ as much [at home], because I am not legal in the United States.”
- “Their night life here is amazing, you don’t go out until like eleven and don’t come home until like six o’clock in the morning, and if I come home any time before that, my madre thinks I’m crazy...She’s like ‘What are you doing home? Go back out.’”

Traditional college-aged students in Spain are especially expected to take part in these nightly practices, yet several students commented on their inability to stay awake that late, especially while recovering from jet lag. Multiple host-families commented on their seemingly odd behavior when they came home early, concerned that they weren't feeling well, when in all actuality, they were struggling with the culture change.

These cultural differences between the U.S. and Spain again seem to fall under the category of practices. However, it may not be the practices themselves that are so different from the U.S., but rather the perspectives behind the practices. It seems safe to say that most college-aged students would enjoy an 'excuse' to stay up late having fun with their friends, but when that practice is combined with the perspective that people of this age are more or less solely focused on having fun and there are no responsibilities paired with this privilege, it seemed to become more of a difficulty.

3) *In what ways have you kept your home culture?*

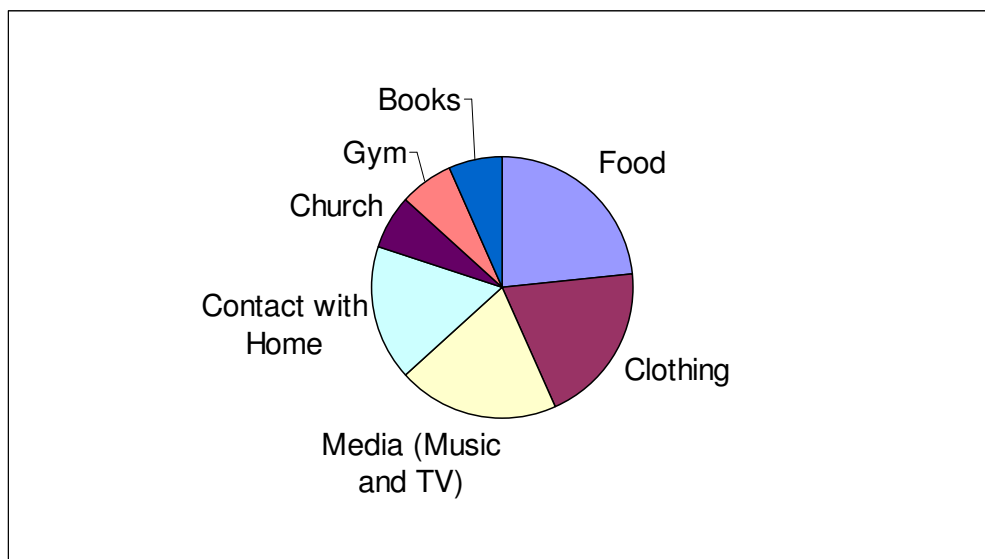


Figure 3: Graph of the thirty-five responses to Question 3 (In what ways have you kept your home culture?).

Thirty-five answers were given for this question and responses ranged from food, clothing, and media to other responses which had only two responses each. Contact with home, however, did have five responses, making it the fourth largest category. While this response was anticipated to a certain degree, a complete analysis of this topic in regards to the products, practices, and perspectives of culture is unable to be completed at this time and would likely be the source of another piece of work.

While answering this question, almost every student mentioned some form of tangible artifact. Answers varied from clothing and food to television and music, and all mentions of food items, which was the most popular answer with seven students choosing it, were related to specific food items.

- “I have peanut butter and jellies, which give me a little piece of home sometimes.”
- “I don’t like to eat whole fish...They do that here. My madre served me a plate full of sardines...they had heads, tails, scales, everything.”

Other ways of maintaining their home culture were through clothing. Six students remarked about not wanting to spend so much money on the expensive clothes found in the city and instead were comfortable with not integrating this area of culture.

- “I have not given in and purchased boots. That is definitely one thing, and I feel like people pick me out.”
- “I feel like I look and talk like a foreigner anyways, so to try and fit in with the clothing wouldn’t be me and I wouldn’t be comfortable with it anyways.”

Seventeen of the eighteen students brought personal computers with them which many used to download American songs, television shows, and movies. This was one aspect of their



home culture that they did not want to miss out on, even though many of the television shows they watched were also broadcasted in Spain, though dubbed in Spanish. Again, six students mentioned a form of technology and media as a way to maintain their home culture.

- “I have my IPOD with me all the time. I have a lot of very American music.”
- “Sometimes I watch things on my computer, like episodes of TV shows. I try to keep up to date on that.”

This area of culture is very clear. The majority of students kept products from their home culture to help them adjust to the new culture. Maintaining their food, clothing, and media choices was a way for students to connect with their previous culture while still adapting to the practices of the new culture.

#### 4) *What have you learned about your home culture?*

This answer brought about a large range of answers that are most difficult to categorize, thus there is no graphic representation for this set of data. Being removed from one’s culture is a first step into objectively observing the various aspects of one’s home culture. (Furnham and Bochner 3) “It’s hard to appreciate the United States, or sometimes even your family, until you’re completely removed from them,” one student reported. Twelve of the eighteen students had been out of the country prior to their experience in Spain; however, the majority of experiences were short-term tourist vacations. No student had been out of the country for longer than three months. While adapting to the new culture for such an extended amount of time, students had the opportunity to reflect upon which aspects of their previous culture they disagreed with or, in contrast, held very important.

Several students again commented on the difference of the concept of time between the United States and Spain. Life in the U.S. seemed rushed, hurried, efficient, and work-focused, once the students were able to compare it to their life in Spain. Several students thought that consumerism plays too big a role in the U.S. and that though they miss aspects of it, it shows how people become obsessed with instant gratification..

- “The United States has so many options...If you go to the supermarket, you have every single kind of coffee you could ever want.”
- “Everything is all nice and pretty in a box for us [in the U.S.]...Here [in Spain], fish doesn’t come in a little cube ready for you to eat. You have to do some work for it.”
- “In the U.S., life is a lot more work-based, I’d say. Like who you are is defined by your job...”
- “People are too stressed...It’s always about individualism.”
- “I can see why all the other countries think that we think we’re better than them...The way that they conserve all their energy and stuff like that; we don’t try to do that at home...”
- “The biggest thing is that I’m probably a lot more prideful about it now: about Iowa and about America, in general.”
- “I guess I’ve gained a lot of pride for my country for the first time in my life.”
- “Definitely through other peoples’ stereotypes of us, I’ve kind of realized more that what we see of other cultures doesn’t necessarily depict their way of life.”

The aspects of their home culture that the students have ‘learned’ or been able to see now that they have been outside of the United States are all examples of perspectives. Now that students have lived in a different way of life, they are able to change their point of view, even if

ever so slightly. This allows them to become more interculturally competent, seeing all situations, including those back home, from a new perspective.

5) *What new aspects of the new culture do you plan to continue when you return home?*



Figure 4: Graph of the twenty-three responses to Question 5 (What new aspects of the new culture do you plan to continue when you return home?).

Results for this question varied wildly: food, night life, language, their adventurous spirit, the relaxed lifestyle, walking, as well as other categories with two or less responses each.

The top answers contained products (food – four responses), practices (walking, the night-life, and their language skills – all three responses each), and perspectives (the relaxed, laid-back lifestyle and their new-found adventurous spirit – both three responses each).

- “I learned how to make [a] tortilla this weekend. [There are] lots of food dishes I’d like to bring back.”

- “My madre is teaching me how to cook, especially croquetas. I love croquetas.”
- “...Thinking about how close the UNI campus is...No matter where I walk, it wouldn’t compare to the thirty minutes I walk here.”
- “I’d like to stay out until six o’clock in the morning and sleep until two o’clock [in the afternoon].”
- “I’m definitely hoping that I can find something to be more involved with, with some kind of Spanish community when I get back home.”
- “When I go home, I’m not going to be feeling as rushed, like crazy stressed out...I’ve gotten rid of all that stress and it’s awesome.”
- “I would like to bring home [with me] a sense of adventure...I want to discover my own country and my own state.”

These results show the importance of all three components of culture. Students struggled adapting to the *practices* of the new culture and they maintained the *products* of their native culture; however, they wish to continue new *practices*, *products* and *perspectives* when their sojourn has ended. Products, practices, and perspectives are occasionally displayed graphically in an equilateral triangle, showing the equal importance of all three components. (“Special Projects”) The information gathered from the students in this study corroborates the importance of the three elements.

## **7. Further Research Needed**

Completing this project sparked a number of new ideas for research. Some are improved examples of this study and others are different aspects of the study abroad experience. It is impossible to isolate social variables and so it will always be difficult to draw conclusions with

this type of qualitative study. Further research can be done, however, in selecting specific practices, products, and perspectives with which to question students about their cultural adaptation experiences.

Another fascinating area of study would be to analyze the use of technology in the adaptation experience. Computers and the use of the internet are shrinking the globe, which makes connecting with one's family and friends back home so much easier than it was even just a few years ago. Traveling across the world may not be as difficult as it once was. Having the ability to watch television in one's native language online or chat with friends as if they are across the hallway are just a few examples of the increased communication and the decreased necessity for using the media of the new culture.

Another study that would prove to be beneficial to the research community would be to investigate the impact of study abroad students on their host families. It is not only the students who go through a culture shock process, but each family must be impacted by the student living with them as well. In addition, studying the role food and eating habits play in the cultural adaptation process would lend itself to being a very rewarding topic.

## **8. Significance**

The significance of this study is great. The resources discussed in the literature review section of this paper claim that students returning from study abroad excursions come back with an improved sense of cultural competency and culture learning. They describe the acculturation experience as one of great progress while students are learning much about themselves, their home culture, and the new culture. (Sullivan 10) However, these same resources do not describe in detail what aspects of culture have been learned by the students. Because students have such a

short timeframe for study abroad experiences, one would assume that it would be very difficult for them to gain a complete understanding of the new culture. This research, conversely, points to the three components of culture and displays culture learning in all three aspects. Though one cannot assume students have mastered each aspect of the new culture, it can be theorized that progress was made in each area which gave the students the desire to continue that aspect once returning to their home culture.

## **9. Summary**

The cultural adaptation experience study abroad students encounter while they sojourn leads them through the process of culture shock, experiencing the products, practices, and perspectives of the new culture which allows them to gain an overall increase in their intercultural competency. Several studies have already shown that intercultural competency increases in students who study abroad. Other studies have shown three main components of culture: practices, products, and perspectives. This study brings these aspects together to show the connection between the cultural adaptation experience (culture shock) and the components of culture (practices, products, and perspectives).

This study shows that students living abroad had to change their ingrained home culture practices in order to adapt to the new environment; they attempted to maintain their home culture by keeping the products associated with it; and by being removed from their home culture, students were able to identify certain perspectives that they were oblivious to before their sojourn. However, while contemplating what aspects of the new culture they would like to continue once returning to their home culture, students identified products, practices, and perspectives of the new culture. This finding shows the importance of all three aspects of culture.

Several may appear to be more prominent at times, but students are internally progressing in all three areas.

This data comes from one select group of students at one university in the United States who traveled to one university in Spain. These analyses are not meant to be generalized, but rather to be a starting point for generating a hypothesis about the components of culture in terms of the cultural adaptation process. This information could assist students in reflecting over their time spent abroad, and specifically on what components of culture they have internalized over their time sojourning.

Generally speaking, foreign and second language teachers focus cultural lessons on sharing products with their students (food, holidays, traditional dress, and music), which is natural because these objects can create a physical display of the culture. Even when thinking of culture outside of a classroom setting, often the first thoughts that come to mind are products. However, study abroad and other experiential learning opportunities are not just about the products. Rather, products are displayed together with practices and perspectives, giving students a full view of the culture, rather than the abridged version with which they begin their sojourn.

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