University of Redlands

Reflections upon Return: White American Students and Study Abroad

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Introduction

According to the Open Doors report published by the International Institute of Education (IIE), the number of American students studying abroad increased by 8.5% in the 2007 to 2008 academic year, following a decade long trend of growth. IIE’s impressive database on American students studying abroad and foreign students studying within the United States includes information on the number of students studying abroad, their destinations, fields of study, institutional type and level, length of study, as well as student’s academic level, sex, ethnicity, state of origin, and home institution. The findings of IIE suggest that there is a growing need for continued research in this field. As study abroad increases in popularity, it is crucial to understand the ramifications it has for students and for society at large.

The literature on American students and study abroad covers a variety of topics, including a large section devoted to addressing topics such as study abroad and personal growth, student cross-cultural awareness, and openness to diversity. The body of research seems to conclude that study abroad is influential in these areas. Several articles substantiate this claim and present descriptions. First, by utilizing the eight-question openness to diversity scale developed by Pascarella (1996) in pre and post study abroad surveys, Ismail Bareem’s study, “Effect of Short Study Abroad Course on Student Openness to Diversity,” finds that short term and long term programs have the same change impact on student openness to diversity. Second, Black and Duhon (2006) find that a study abroad program in London England “enhanced cultural awareness and personal development.”

2 Black and Duhon, “Assessing the Impact.” 140-144.
Sensitivity Index (ISI), Clarke III, Flaherty, Wright, and McMillen find that “a study abroad semester helped shaped students into more globally minded individuals.”

An oversight of most of these articles is that they do not mention the race of the students involved in the study or analyze the implications of race. However, some articles seem to imply that they are white students. For example, one article references claims that “…teaching intercultural proficiency in a traditional classroom setting can be quite challenging because students need more ‘concrete experiences’ with other cultures…” This statement seems to imply that the students are white and attend primarily white college. This can be extrapolated because students of color would likely have had “concrete experiences” with other cultures and/or races because “people of color learn about white culture as a prerequisite for education and employment…” On the other hand, white students would more likely have been “insulated” in white suburbs and colleges. However, these articles do not explicitly discuss the significance of race or whiteness in study abroad and personal growth, student cross-cultural awareness, and openness to diversity.

Another area of investigation in the study abroad literature is students’ identity. Nadine Dolby’s article “Encountering an American Self: Study Abroad and National Identity” is particularly insightful in addressing the ways in which “study abroad provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself—particularly one’s national identity—in a context that may stimulate new questions and
new formulations of that self.” In this article, Dolby briefly mentions that American identities and white identities are both prompted identities but she does not further discuss the relationship between the two or whether these identities are related to understanding larger social structures.

This study has a slightly different approach than many previous studies because it directly addresses how whiteness figures into students’ study abroad experiences. This is an important distinction because although whiteness is often not acknowledged, it plays a major role in shaping students’ conception of self and understanding of larger social structures. By integrating ideas from the fields of study on whiteness and study abroad/travel with original research data, this study will address how whiteness influences students’ racial and national identities, attitudes and understandings about America, and systematic inequality in America.

In order to analyze the original interview data and the relevant literature, this study will be guided by the question: What happens when American whiteness travels through study abroad? This question leads to four main follow-up questions: How do students negotiate their identities, both white and American, during study abroad? How does whiteness influence the ways students conceptualize America as a result of their study abroad experiences? What do students learn about systematic inequality and privilege, especially nationally in the U.S.? And, how do circumstances during their study abroad—including race of host country, level of affluence of host country, and living situation abroad—influence the way the students negotiate their identities and ideas on these subjects throughout their time abroad?

The premise of this paper is that students developed racial and national identities and ideas on these topics during their upbringing in the United States that, through study abroad experiences, may come into question. Like other white people from the United States of the same age, through their upbringing, the students learned "colorblindness" to race, belief in the myth of meritocracy, and an appreciation for a system that they believe works well for everyone. Similar to most white people, the students do not have an awareness of these concepts, in addition to being unaware of their whiteness and American identity. Travel can serve to call into question some of their preconceived notions about identity, nation, race and systematic inequality, however, it seems that this growth in understanding is much more likely to occur under certain conditions of study abroad. Therefore, this essay will also investigate the way certain circumstances of study abroad—race of host country, level of affluence of host country, and living situation abroad—influence students' thoughts about these concepts.

This paper will be organized like a bottom heavy hourglass. It will start with a discussion on race and whiteness in the U.S. to give historical background and context of the environment in which students formed their identities and ideas about these topics. Next, the scope will narrow to discuss students' relationships to their white and American identities in the context of study abroad. Then, the hourglass will begin to widen again through a discussion of students' understanding of the U.S. itself in relation to their abroad country. Finally, the essay will conclude with a discussion concerning how study abroad has influenced the students' awareness and understanding of systematic inequality, with a focus on American institutional racism. Throughout these discussions, the way whiteness shapes students' identities and ideas will be tracked, especially in

relation to the way certain circumstances of study abroad influence awareness and development of white and American identities and ideas about systematic inequality.
Methods

The research questions posed above were used to analyze data collected from eleven personal interviews with white American students from a private liberal arts university who had returned from study abroad. The study abroad office of the university conducted an email inquiry of current students who had studied abroad to ask if anyone did not want their name and email provided to another student for the sake of a senior project. Any students who objected were removed from the list by the study abroad office. The revised contact list was then used to find willing participants. The interviews were each about 45 minutes to an hour and a half in length. The interviews are confidential and the IRB approval number for this project is 2009-48.

The interviews were conducted in a conversation-like form of nonscheduled standardized interviews; see Appendix 1 for a list of the questions. This method was selected because it allowed for holistic, in depth, and candid responses from the students in order to capture their thoughts on the topics. The interviews were conducted in an unused study area. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the students by gender, major, abroad country, and by the factors most closely considered in this study—race of abroad country, affluence of abroad country (abbreviated as MDC or “more developed country” and LDC or “less developed country”), and living situation abroad.

Five students went to “non-white” abroad countries including Kenya, Chile, Brazil, and two students who went to Japan. The countries in which the categorized as “white” included: Greece, Spain, Australia, Austria, Scotland, and the Netherlands. When there was ambiguity about what category a country should fall under, it was placed in the category that the student who traveled abroad there thought of it as. For example, while
many of the these countries are in fact multiracial, for the purpose of this study they will be referred to as either “white” or “non-white” because the students viewed these countries as predominantly “white” or “non-white.” This was likely based on a combination of two factors, including the way that students had been taught to conceptualize race during their upbringing in the U.S. and the actual power structures in those countries. This is interesting to note, and is an indicator of way that the students conceptualize “white.”

Three students studied in less developed countries (LDC)—Brazil, Chile, and Kenya. Again, while some may categorize Brazil as more developed it is included in this category because this is how the student conceived the area where she studied, describing it as: “the less developed part, more I guess you would say primitive, its kind of more of a third world nature to it.” The more developed countries (MDC) that students studied in included: Japan, Greece, Spain, Australia, Scotland, Austria, and the Netherlands.

Whom students lived with also played a role in how they understood the themes discussed in this essay. The students who studied in Chile, Spain, Japan, the Netherlands, and Brazil lived in a home-stay while abroad. The students who studied in Australia and Scotland lived with local peers and the students who studied in Japan, Kenya, Greece, and Austria lived with American or other foreign students.

9 interview 11, measure 5 (interviews will be cited as the interview number and the measure in the recording that the statement was made.)
Table 1: Breakdown of Student Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major or Individualized Major*</th>
<th>Abroad Country</th>
<th>White or Non-white Abroad Country</th>
<th>MDC or LDC</th>
<th>Living Situation Abroad**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International Relations</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Am/Intl Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Environmental Management</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Am/Intl Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biology (Spanish &amp; Chemistry Minors)</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Home stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Individualized</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Am/Intl Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Individualized</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Home stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Individualized</td>
<td>Japan (2)</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Home Stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Biochemistry &amp; Molecular Biology</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Local peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Local Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Am/Intl Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Individualized</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>MDC</td>
<td>Home stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Individualized</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Home stay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The individualized majors are not included in order to protect student confidentiality.

** "Living situation" refers to whom the students lived with, rather than the accommodations such as house, apartment, etc.
Where I come from: General characteristics of American whiteness

In this section we will begin to see how students’ identities and attitudes were shaped by the larger discourse on race and whiteness by demonstrating how their study abroad reflections mirrored two main aspects of the current dominant racial paradigm, belief in a meritocracy and colorblindness. The students grew up with location and historically specific influences that shaped their white and American identities, ideas about the U.S. and systematic inequality. There are some general characteristics and beliefs that most white Americans hold which will be outlined in this section.

Although this paper does not argue that students are dependent thinkers and simply adopt the dominant paradigm, it is clear from the research data that students are highly influenced by the current popular discourse. The most prevalent and threatening form of racism in the U.S. today is often referred to as institutional racism, or “a kind of racism that is perpetuated within structural settings, even without deliberate and bigoted intent, due to the normal workings of long-entrenched policies, practices, and procedures.”¹⁰ Institutionalized racism has created a system of racial discrimination that allows numerous advantages for white privilege at the expense of people of color by claiming that it is a fair system valuing individual achievements while ignoring the racially biased unjust system. Overall, the students exhibit that their thoughts and study abroad experiences have been influenced by this system, and that they are generally unaware of the system and its influence on them. Furthermore, in keeping with the design of the system, the students tend to believe that the U.S. is more fair and equal than not.

¹⁰ Wise, *Barack and a Hard Place*, 43.
To understand the way that students' identities and thinking were impacted by study abroad through the specific factors of abroad country race, affluence of abroad country and living situation, it is necessary to understand some basics of the students' background. I will briefly discuss the historical and spatial context in which the students developed "American whiteness" so that its implications during study abroad can be explored. While "white" or "being white" refers to a person's skin color and other physical features, "whiteness" or "white privilege" refers to the undeserved advantages or privileges that a white person amasses, simply because of their race, as a result of the purposeful way society is structured. White privilege is also location specific, meaning that systems of advantages develop differently in different localities or countries. For example, American whiteness functions differently than the British system of advantages. By understanding the contours of American institutionalized racism, we can see that white Americans generally reflect similarly about their white American identities and beliefs about inequality. Two of these beliefs about will be discussed here in greater detail here, these include: the belief in a meritocracy and "colorblindness."

The first characteristic of American whiteness to be discussed here is the claim that the U.S. is a meritocracy, or that the U.S. fulfills the idea that anybody can develop the right skills and work hard enough can achieve their goals, specifically those of material success. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant in Racial Formations in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s, "'merit' is a political construct, by which employers, schools, sate agencies, etc. legitimate the allocation of benefits to favored (i.e. organized) constituencies, and deny the validity of competing claims."11 The supposed meritocracy conveniently ignores the privilege afforded to white people and the

11 Omi and Winnant, Racial Formations, 130.
lack of opportunities and socio-economic roadblocks afforded to people of color. Under the guise of meritocracy, the groups one belongs to, especially racial groups are not considered a significant determinant of one's successes or failures. The myth of the meritocracy allows responsibility for success to be located in the individual, and, vice versa, for blame for lack of success to also be located within the individual. Student 9 in this study gave an example of this position by stating:

*The fact [is] that America does a pretty good job that even you're not super wealthy you can probably get an education if you really try.*

She even provides herself as an example of this “fact.”

*My family doesn’t have a lot of money for being here... But like I guess I did well enough that I was able to continue my education and will still be able to make more than probably either of my parents have done. And like I did that all through scholarships and what not.*

To Student 9, the “American Dream” of greater success than the previous generation and the opportunity to pursue one’s goals, is a possibility for everyone, regardless of their economic background, race, etc., as long as they work hard enough to develop the right skills and characteristics. This thinking, that opportunities are available for everyone, leads to an unrealistically positive image of the U.S.

In addition to ascribing to the meritocracy outlined above, another practice of whites that perpetuates institutional racism is “colorblindness,” a term coined by Eduardo

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13 interview 9, measure 737
14 interview 9, measure 775
Bonilla-Silva in his book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Whites tend to claim that they do not “see” “race” but see other people for their individual achievements and skills.

Student 5 expressed a color-blind position when she said:

*It’s inevitable [to classify people] because we’re like taught socially to recognize differences and then assign values to those differences. But at the same time, my parents raised me to not take those differences into account, as like any type of, um, I don’t know, saying anything about the person.*

This student is a helpful example of a “color-blind” attitude. From her parents, she learned not to “see” differences. At the heart of the colorblindness practice of white Americans, including Student 5, is the thought that if we do not recognize differences, everyone will be equal in society. The downfall of this position is that if one does not “see” differences, then one cannot “see” the unequal experiences and opportunities that people have as a result of those differences, which in turn encourages the current structures of power and privilege. For example, Student 4, who encountered overt prejudice in her abroad country, reflected that it was the first time she experienced prejudice. However, it seems more likely that the student was simply unaware of, or colorblind to, the prejudices in the U.S.

*I guess it was really the first time that I’d really experienced ethnic prejudice.*

15 interview 5, measure 1314
16 interview 4, measure 197
Although to be colorblind ultimately amounts to overlooking and thereby supporting institutional racism, it is often cheered as a nonracist, or even anti-racist, practice just as Student 5 viewed it. According to Bonilla-Silva, “whites use these principles [liberalism and humanism] in an abstract way that allows them to support the racial status quo in an apparently ‘reasonable’ fashion.” Student 5 does not see the importance in addressing the differences among people. She believes, like many white people that grew up in the United States, that to “take those differences into account” is a “racist” practice, while on the other hand; to be colorblind is to “go beyond” race in a reasonable and productive way. As Karyn McKinney discusses, for whites, “to overlook race includes not giving attention to one’s own race, and this is discursively linked with being colorblind to others’ race—and thus being nonracist.” As demonstrated above, the students in the study displayed this mindset.

When the colorblind ideal is applied to liberal principles of acceptance and tolerance, it appears a dichotomy is produced. On one hand, people claim to not “see” any differences based on race while on the other hand; they encourage a sense of multiculturalism in which many races are present in order to “prove,” in a sense, that they are accepting of all people. Unaccustomed to a racially homogenous environment, Student 6 reacts to her abroad country:

*And the other big thing was just the lack of diversity [in Japan].*

*There’s no diversity whatsoever. Everybody looks the same, everybody talks the same, everybody acts the same...*

Student 3 expressed a similar idea that links diversity to physical appearances.

18 McKinney, Being White, 21.
19 interview 6, measure 126
Just there's not much diversity whatsoever. I think I saw like one black person and one Asian while I was there...  
I think I am more a finding the similarities person instead of marking the differences.  

This statement by Student 3 also reflects a colorblind attitude. She thinks although she takes race into account when thinking in the “multicultural context,” in a colorblind way she thinks it is important not to “mark the differences.” As Shannon Sullivan discusses in her book Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege, although the logic behind the strategies of rhetoric multiculturalism/diversity and colorblindness seem mutually exclusive, they actually “work hand in hand to both see and not see racial differences, a contradictory vision that has the ultimate effect of blinding people to issues of racial (in)justice.”  

Most white people do not easily and immediately see the important and powerful role that race plays in shaping everyday lives. Nonetheless, as Bonilla-Silva explains, “regardless of whites’ ‘sincere fictions,’ [of colorblind racial equality] racial considerations shade almost everything that happens in this country.” As an extension of being unaware of the systematic of institutional racism and the general characteristics it bestows upon them, white people are also unaware of their own race, as will be discussed in the following section.

20 interview 3, measure 575  
21 interview 3, measure 797  
22 Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness, 193.  
White identity as a prompted identity

When white American students study abroad, they take with them their identities and ideas about inequality (for example of meritocracy, colorblindness, and rhetoric multiculturalism) that have been shaped by their upbringing under institutionalized racism. These can be represented as “invisible baggage” because the students are unaware that they are bringing it with them. Some experiences and circumstances of study abroad can lead students to recognize the invisible baggage. The first step in this process is recognition of their race/whiteness.

In her book *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism*, Karyn D. McKinney finds that whiteness is a prompted identity, meaning that white people do not think about their whiteness in any detail unless induced to do so by some external factor. This study further validates that point, as seen in the pattern that students who went to a predominantly non-white abroad country discussed their experiences of standing out more frequently and in greater detail than the students who studied in white abroad countries. Studying abroad in a non-white country can serve as a mechanism to highlight characteristics of whiteness such as: whiteness being a prompted identity, whites having varying levels of comfort with people of color, and whites being ontologically expansive or having a tendency to feel entitled to occupy all spaces. Furthermore, negotiating their white identity during study abroad in non-white abroad country has the potential to lead students to be more aware and perhaps even critical of their whiteness, as will be explored further in the section “Turning points.”

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While for almost all the students, "standing out" was a defining aspect of their study abroad experience; students spoke about "standing out" in two main dimensions: physically and culturally. Students who studied in a white abroad country tended to focus on standing out culturally, while students who studied in a non-white abroad country tended to focus on standing out physically. When white American students travel to a place where they are the minority race, their previously held colorblind ideas did not serve them in the same way because they felt isolated. Standing out physically also had implications for the way that students negotiated their time abroad including how they reacted when they first arrived and the way they perceived their status in relation to the locals' throughout their stay.

Although the students who studied in non-white host countries discussed standing out in both the physical and cultural dimensions; they discussed the physical dimension more frequently and in greater detail. Many respondents used the phrase "I stuck out like a sore thumb." Student 1 captured the sentiment of standing out in a very physically obvious way.

_I equated it to living in a zoo for a year. Every time I went outside there was always at least a couple people like, 'Oh look, there it is. What's it gunna do today?'_ 26

McKinney cites that researchers have found that white people have varying levels of comfort with people of color. 27 Many of the students who studied in non-white abroad countries had conflicting feelings about the fact that they stood out physically. These

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26 interview 1, measure 129
students, like Student 2, at once felt scared or threatened by standing out and also wanted to maintain that it was not a “bad” thing to stand out.

I would get comments from people all the time...you [a foreign woman] can’t really walk anywhere without just a lot of noise. But that wasn’t really like that big of an issue. But mainly some like negative comments you’d get from people...

Student 2’s comment shows how the student tried to minimize or dismiss the importance of standing out, however, her lengthy discussion of the topic and the repetitive reference to the negative comments show otherwise. Other students, such as Student 11, more directly addressed the emotions they had about standing out.

...It was a bit scary at times because like I could be picked out from like down the street as someone who probably had more money just because I was white...So it was a little bit scary but I was constantly on the look out...

Student 4 stated:

Just being an American white woman with light hair, the reactions that I would get were pretty intense. If I had one more person come up to me and ask to take a picture with me because I had blue eyes, like, I might have gotten really angry. Six days was long enough. I probably couldn’t have handled it any longer....I didn’t always feel safe.

28 interview 2, measure 302
29 interview 11, measure 422
30 interview 4, measure 549 and 586
These statements display some emotions surrounding standing out, including fear and anger. Student 11 responded to her emotions surrounding standing out by trying to be aware of her whereabouts. Student 4 responded by reigning in her anger and frustrations and by looking forward to leaving that area. Both students felt as though their safety was on the line as a result of standing out.

To resolve standing out physically, the students seemed to have two options. First, they could “give up” and be resigned to standing out, as Student 1 did.

...I tried a little bit to blend in but I realized like that because of my looks [it] obviously wasn’t going to happen so I was kind of like meh, whatever.31

Alternatively, the students could try to fit in “in spite of” their looks by learning the local culture and language, similar to Student 11.

But it was interesting because the longer I stayed there I think the more I started fitting in. And maybe it was just like my feeling inside that I fit in with the culture more because I could speak [the language] and I was wearing the clothes that was normal there...32

Notwithstanding Student 11’s best effort to “fit in,” she still had lingering feelings of being an outcast or isolated which she could not overcome by becoming accustomed to, or even adopting, the local culture. She states:

But it was weird not fitting in. I didn’t feel like I was ever quite at home which made it a little bit difficult definitely at times.33

31 interview 1, measure 533
32 interview 11, measure 598
33 interview 11, measure 621
In contrast, students who studied in white abroad countries did not become as aware of their whiteness and tended to focus on standing out culturally. When they did mention standing out physically, it tended to reflect things about their appearance that they could change, such as fashion. Student 10 recounts:

*I made every single effort to blend right in. I dressed like them. I definitely bought a lot of clothes when I first got there...I picked up on the bike rules really quickly...I kind of learned my way around the city. I rarely had a map. I never wanted to be seen with a map* 34...People started speaking Dutch to me. People started thinking I was Dutch. 35

Because Student 10 is white and so was the dominant group in her host country, she was able “stand out” less by dressing like the locals and picking up on local customs. This led her to feel more comfortable and accepted.

Whether or not students stood out physically and whom they lived with, had a direct impact on their reactions when they first arrived in their abroad country. Stephen Bochner discusses that culture shock occurs because people have in-group bias, or have a preference for and are accustomed to being surrounded by similar people. 36 Culture shock is commonly referenced in discussions about study abroad. Here, what is interesting is to examine culture shock through the lens of whiteness. It appears that whiteness has an effect on the extent to which the students experienced culture shock. Bochner and his co-authors also “contend that over the years ‘culture shock’ has become a widely misused term, both in popular language as well as in cross-cultural

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34 interview 10, measure 588
35 interview 10, measure 608
36 Bochner, “Culture Shock,” http://www.ac.wwu.edu/~culture/Bochner.htm
While acknowledging that the students may have used this term without a high degree of accuracy or complexity, in order to maintain consistency with the students' statements, the following discussion will use the term "culture shock" simply to refer to an unsettling adjustment period upon arrival to their abroad country.

Some students had an easier time adjusting to their abroad country while others had a more unsettling experience. The students who experienced more prevalent culture shock tended to be students who studied in non-white abroad countries and/or lived in a home-stay, as demonstrated by Student 1.

*I was there to learn about the culture and you know that's why I went abroad. I wanted a big culture shock, which I did get.*

In contrast, students who studied in predominately white countries (and MDCs), tended not to experience culture shock. It was even more likely that they would not experience culture shock upon arrival if they did not live in a home-stay.

*Culture wise they weren't a whole lot different from the United States. I mean, I didn't have a hard time adjusting. I mean I didn't experience what some people call culture shock.*

Another student had a similar reaction in that she did not feel culture shock upon arrival in her abroad country.

*There was definitely no culture shock going there. I fit so well into that city... So I definitely wasn't ostracized for the most part. It*

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37 Bochner, "Culture Shock," http://www.ac.wwu.edu/~culture/Bochner.htm
38 interview 1, measure 208
39 interview 7, measure 354
was really easy to pick up on the rituals and traditions and the
culture and stuff like that….40

When students felt as though they “fit in,” they did not experience significant culture shock. They felt more at ease and were able to more smoothly adjust to the local culture.

The pattern of students studying in non-white host countries experiencing a more trying adjustment period than students who studied in white abroad countries is consistent with the findings of Bochner and his co-authors. “Research…has shown that the greater the cultural distance separating interacting participants, the more difficulty they will have in establishing and maintaining harmonious relations…. For instance, Australian sojourners in Britain should have an easier time of it than is the case for Australian sojourners in Mainland China. ‘Culture shock’ defined in this way is a function of the degree of separation between the cultures of the sojourners and their host societies.”41

Another pattern that developed through analyzing the students’ reflections on their experiences of standing out was the way the students perceived differences in status. A little more than half of the students felt that, as a result of the way they stood out, they had an elevated status compared to the local people. Other students felt that, as a result of the way they stood out, they had a lower status compared to the local people. The students who felt an elevated status felt self-conscious about the situation and thought it should be more equal. For example, Student 11 reflected that:

\[ I \text{ was looked at as kind of something special because I was white.} \]

\[ Which \text{ I thought was completely ridiculous.} \]42
It was more common for students to perceive an "elevated" status if they studied in a less developed country (LDC) world country, especially if that country was predominately non-white.

On the other hand, the students who felt a lower status "blamed" the local people and were disappointed. This experience was more common for students who studied in more developed country (MDC) world countries, regardless of the country's dominant race. Student 1 provides an example of this line of thought.

...We're told like when you go abroad like as long as you try people will be accepting and like appreciative and that wasn't so true in Japan because they personally just don't know how to deal with it [people being foreign]... 43

Shannon Sullivan's theory on ontological expansiveness can help explain the students' thinking in this subject. Sullivan writes, "As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish." 44 Student 1 felt that especially if he made an effort to learn the local culture, it was the Japanese's responsibility to "deal" with or accommodate his differences. He felt a sense of entitlement to occupy the space and was surprised, and perhaps offended, when the local people did not seem to agree.

43 interview 1, measure 217
44 Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness, 10.
American identity as a prompted identity

American identity is similar to white identity in that it is also a prompted identity that can be called to attention through travel. In her article “Encountering the American Self: Study Abroad and National Identity,” Nadine Dolby compares American national identity to white identity and argues that it becomes an “active” identity when one becomes the “other” and is forced to examine its meaning. In addition to both whiteness and American identities being prompted identities, they have a reciprocal relationship to one another. Meaning that, a characteristic of American whiteness is a tendency to conflate the identities “American” and “white.” To many white Americans, being American is automatically implies being white. When students travel abroad to non-white countries, the reverse also becomes true to them— to be white automatically means to be American. Dolby finds that in students’ encounters of American self, “American national identity is neither simply discarded nor strengthened, but is riddled with contradictions, as it is actively encountered and constructed outside of the physical borders of the United States.”

There were five main categories or patterns that emerged from students’ reflections on their “activated” American identity during studying abroad experiences. These categories represent the ways students negotiated their American identity once “prompted” or “activated” to some degree. They are:

1) linking American identity to being white,

2) students either becoming closer to or distancing themselves from their American identity,

3) contrasting their behaviors with those of over travelers/tourists,
4) attempting to adopt or integrate their host country’s culture into their own identity in some way,
5) and linking their American identity to the abroad country’s prevailing attitude towards the U.S., especially with regards to the 2008 presidential election.

These categories are analyzed for patterns based on whether the abroad country was predominantly white or non-white country, whether the abroad country was a MDC or a LDC, and what the student’s living situation was during their time abroad. The findings from these five categories indicate that students’ relationships to their American identities were influenced two main factors. These were: whether or not the students felt as though they were in the position of the “other” and by the prevailing attitude towards the U.S. in their abroad country.

Students who studied in non-white abroad countries, such as Student 3, were more likely to more closely or explicitly associate with their American identity and to link it to their physical appearance, including being white.

*I mean of course I had my American identity, you can’t escape the kind of clothes that I had or you know the way that I like walked, stuff like that...*

It is likely students who studied in white abroad countries made similar associations about their American identity race, they just did not verbalize them or were unaware of them because their surroundings did not necessitate awareness. As Joe R. Feagin notes in the foreword of *Being White*, because being white is considered “normal” or “default” in America, most white people do not scrutinize their white identities and

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47 interview 3, measure 740
privileges unless a situation demands it of them. Furthermore, the label “American” evokes the image of a white person for most white Americans. The students so strongly display this association that when they were in a white abroad country, even if it was during a period when the abroad country had a poor political opinion of the U.S., they felt secure enough to distance themselves from their American identity. In contrast, students in non-white abroad countries felt more isolated and clung to their American identity.

Studying in a non-white abroad country caused students to act on their already formed fusion of being white with being American by associating more strongly with their American identity during their time abroad because of a feeling of isolation or “otherness.” The conflation of “American” and “white” is so prevalent in media and so on that it is even common for most people around the globe. Student 2 made this verbal slip-up while discussing Obama, but quickly corrected herself.

> And so for them [Kenyans] seeing someone not of American, you know, what they typically view as American (interviewer: And what do you think that is?) Black, you know, not white. And so, seeing someone who, you know, wasn’t white make it so far, like, was kind of weird to them.

Student 2 notices how people around the world tend to equate being American with being white. The statement also implies that although she gave it a second thought and then corrected herself, she also associates being American with being white. In addition, Student 2 discusses how it was strange or unusual to non-Americans to see a person of

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48 Mc Kinney, Being White, foreword xii.
49 interview 2, measure 1227
color reach a high level of achievement, which calls into question whether she also thought this strange herself.

It was more common for students who studied in white abroad countries to distance themselves from their American identity than students who studied in non-white host countries. This seems to be at least in part because the students who studied in white abroad countries felt less “othered.” According to social-identity theory (SIT), if one is not obtaining positive self-regard through one’s own accomplishments, then one is likely to seek positive-self regard from membership in a social group.\(^{50}\) It has been demonstrated that the students who studied in non-white abroad countries may have been seeking positive self-regard in the group “American” (which was conflated with the group “white”) because they felt isolated and alone as a result of standing out. Whereas, the students who studied in white countries did not feel isolated and the need to so strongly connect with their American identity. For example, as we can see from Student 5, those who studied in white abroad countries distanced themselves strongly from their American identity. Student 5 stated:

\[
I \text{ didn't like being associated with American culture... like, as far as my American identity— I don't want it.}^{51}
\]

Student 9 also studied in white abroad country and stated:

\[
I \text{ felt [my American identity] very slightly. I don't have a lot of, um, American pride I guess you could say... I don't really exude it.}^{52}
\]

Student 10 revealed:

\(^{50}\) Nelson, The Psychology of Prejudice, 47.
\(^{51}\) interview 5, measure 1128 and 1153
\(^{52}\) interview 9, measure 424
I wanted to get away from my American identity and completely reinvent myself...\textsuperscript{53}

Student 7 expressed less of a rejection towards his American identity but conveyed the idea that if he had felt more isolated from his American identity he would have felt a need to display a closer connection to it.

[Australians,] They're pretty culturally similar to us so I didn't feel the need to self-identify [as American] or change the way I interacted with people per say.\textsuperscript{54}

Students 5, 9, and 10 quoted above may also have had different relationships to their American identity if they had felt more isolated or "othered" in their abroad country. However, being prompted to associate more closely with their American identity did not always or only stem from studying in a non-white abroad country. This was also a common reaction if in the abroad country there was a strong prevailing opinion about the U.S. Student 8, who studied in a white abroad country but felt constantly berated and blamed for the actions of the U.S. government responded by defending her country and developed a deeper sense of American identity.

I all of a sudden got really like so much more patriotic when I was abroad... Um, like having to defend our political system a lot I kind of just got used to defending it so much that I was like, yeah, know what, it is the best in the world, like we're pretty awesome.\textsuperscript{55}

Student 3, who studied in a non-white abroad country, gave an overview of the habit of abroad students to either adopt portions of the host country identity or to view it

\textsuperscript{53} interview 10, measure 713
\textsuperscript{54} interview 7, measure 640
\textsuperscript{55} interview 8, measure 593
as the “other” and to distance themselves from it. She compares perceiving the abroad culture as an in-group or as an out-group.\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{quote}
I think a lot of people when you go abroad you either put yourself on one side or the other. You either put yourself like together included, you imagine yourself either included in the culture or you imagine yourself differently. So it’s either together or apart.

And I always imagined myself as part of it.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

More than half of the students seemed to attempt to adopt their host country’s culture as “in-group” and to integrate it into their own identity in some way. This was most common among students who lived in a home-stay or worked and lived with local peers. For example, student 6 stated:

\begin{quote}
Some days I would wake up and I would be speaking Japanese and I would be behaving Japanese and then like I would get a weird look on the subway and I’m just like, “what?” And then I would remember, oh yeah, I’m not Japanese. That’s why they’re looking at me funny.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Student 6 felt such a close connection to her host culture through language and behavior that she all but forgot she was a foreigner. Student 4 felt a similar connection to her host culture and local peers also recognized her connection.

\begin{quote}
By the end of the summer my co-workers in bars would be like,

“You’re too European now. You’re too European. You’re not
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} Nelson, The Psychology of Prejudice, 47.
\textsuperscript{57} Interview 3, measure 740-774
\textsuperscript{58} interview 6, measure 770
Student 4 relished her co-workers proclamations that she was “too European” and repeated the statement several times for emphasis. She was pleased to have been “accepted” into her abroad culture and to integrate this into her conception of self.

Almost all the students contrasted their American identities and behaviors with those of other tourists/travelers; either in their study abroad program or travelers they met along the way. Generally, the students reflected that they had knowledge of the local culture and customs that the other tourists and travelers did not. The students resented the negative images of Americans that other tourists projected. Student 9 described her experiences:

> It kind of pissed me off that you get such a bad rep [for being American]. Because a lot of [local] people will just assume since you're American you're a certain [negative] way. And so I guess it was kind of hard to watch people [in my abroad program] live up to that and then be associated with them in like a group setting...Like, some things that people did I was just like wow, you really shouldn't do that like that is not okay.

Student 9 felt frustrated because she was associated with what she saw as a negative reputation and inappropriate behavior.

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59 interview 4, measure 749
60 interview 9, measure 277
61 interview 9, measure 216
The 2008 American presidential election also played a role in shaping the student's understanding of their American selves while abroad because it had such a large influence on the general attitude towards America worldwide. Student 2 observed that:

_I guess I was prideful that I was American when I was over there._

_Mostly because it was the time of the election and everyone was like “Obama!”_ 62

Student 8 reflected on the way the election impacted her portrayal of American self.

_I was nervous about it [showing my American identity] most of the time because Obama had just been elected, or inaugurated, before I left. So I was aware that there would probably still be a lot of anti-American sentiment like still leftover from Bush._ 63

Some students, such as Student 5, noticed their American identity shift to a more positive light as a result of the election and the responses of people in their abroad country.

_It was from that point on we [the students in her abroad program] began to feel a lot more comfortable because everybody was like so happy that like Obama won._ 64

The abroad countries' current attitude towards Americans and the U.S. in general impacted how the students felt about and portrayed their American identities, which is demonstrated in the shifting attitudes surrounding the election, the students' tendencies to adopt aspects of their host culture, and their tendency to be embarrassed by what they considered to be inappropriate behavior of other tourists. The other major influence on

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62 interview 2, measure 1153
63 interview 8, measure 430
64 interview 5, measure 997
how students conceived of their American identity was whether they felt a sense of “otherness” or isolation, generally from studying in a non-white abroad country.
Understanding the U.S.: Students compare and contrast the U.S. and their abroad country

In addition to prompting or activating the students' American and white identities, study abroad also has the potential to encourage students to think about the U.S. in new and different ways. As already mentioned, one characteristic of American whiteness is to have an unrealistically positive view of the U.S. As students had experiences in their abroad country, they compared and contrasted their abroad country with the U.S. At times, this led the students to question some of their previously held perceptions or beliefs about the U.S.

Students' perceptions of the U.S. changed in one of two main ways as a result of their experiences abroad. Either the students adopted a more critical perspective of the U.S. or they came to appreciate certain aspects that they had previously taken for granted. Adopting a more critical perspective indicates that a student grew in their understanding of the U.S. and began to think more complexly. In contrast, although it is positive that the students are became more aware of the intricacies of their nation, discussing a new “appreciation” does not so much signify a growth or departure from previously held beliefs, rather a furthering of the characteristic white American habit of considering the system in the U.S. to be unrealistically positive. In his book, Between Fear and Hope: Globalization and Race in the United States, Andrew L. Barlow argues that as a result of the rise of what he terms the middle class social order, most white Americans believe that the system is fair and working well for all. “As standards of living rose, as the percentage of Americans owning their own homes doubled, as colleges were transformed from elite to mass credentialing institutions, and as McCarthyism drove the organized left underground, most Americans became convinced that ‘the system’ works well for
everyone. Seeing the U.S. as a meritocracy or place where opportunities are available for all, as Student 9 does, is a trait of believing and supporting the current system in the U.S.

*I don’t know if it changed my understanding. I guess it just made me appreciate more being able to grow up here and have those opportunities that a lot of times I take for granted.*

Student 9 studied in a white MDC and lived with American peers and therefore was not as heavily encouraged to think about the U.S. in a different more critical way than she had before. Instead, she reflected about aspects of the U.S. that she has grown more appreciative. Student 9 was more insulated from political criticism about the U.S. than the Student 7, who lived with local peers abroad, and she did not develop the same critical sense about the U.S. as he did.

In contrast, students who studied in a non-white abroad country and/or lived in a home stay or with local peers generally adopted a more critical perspective of the U.S. For example, Student 7 lived with local peers and voiced how his thinking evolved:

*Being abroad and being from America, one thing you tend not to realize living in America is that we’re kind of a fishbowl. You know all the, every night in the news there’s always something about America...and of course you don’t realize that until you’re abroad. And you start looking at foreign media and you say “Wow. We’re really in the spotlight in the western hemisphere.” And I really didn’t have any idea that was the case until I saw and*

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65 Barlow, *Between Fear and Hope*, 75.
66 interview 9, measure 505
experienced that for myself. (Interviewer: Did that realization make you think about anything?) It definitely kind of reaffirmed the fact that the US is definitely a world power, not only in the military sense but in an economic sense as well and that the rest of the world tends to look to us and whether we like or not that it creates some sort of responsibility. You know that quote from Spiderman, “with great power comes great responsibility.” And it definitely made me think about that a little bit... I think that maybe I’ve become a little more critical about U.S. foreign policy. And just the fact that you know we are the great military power in the world that we can you know, on a whim decide to go invade another country. You know, I think perhaps we need to be more, um, cautious about that and realize that it’s not just about us. I think we tend to have that mentality...  

This student compares the U.S. to a fishbowl in that everyone is looking into it to see what happens. Once he recognizes this, he become more critical of the way the U.S. interacts with the rest of the world. It is through his abroad experiences that he is able to conceptualize the United States’ foreign policy in a more critical way and to call on the U.S. to consider the ramifications of its actions more closely.

When discussing their abroad countries, students immediately juxtaposed them with the U.S. Some students discussed aspects of their abroad country that they thought were better in the U.S., while other students had a more romanticized view of their abroad country and thought it had better features than the U.S.

67 interview 7, measure 686
It was more common for students who studied in MDC, white or non-white, to hold a romanticized view of their abroad country. These students discussed aspects of their abroad country that they preferred in comparison to the U.S. For instance, student 9 viewed her abroad country as more educated on culture and history than the U.S. and she idealized this quality.

*I think overall people [in my abroad country] are a lot less ignorant about other cultures. Maybe that's because it's in the center of Europe. Like I feel like the Austrians knew a lot more about the cultures around them. They're a lot more focus[ed] on history and tradition.*

Student 10, who studied in a white MDC, described her abroad city as the “city of my dreams,” and claimed, “It fit so well into that city.” This student was disillusioned with the U.S. and preferred the culture of her abroad city, even if she saw a romanticized version of it.

Students who discussed aspects of their abroad country that they thought were better in the U.S., often discussed the open or blatant racism or discrimination in their abroad country. As a direct response to the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), which according to Fredrickson in his book *Racism: A Short History* toppled the “overtly racist Jim Crow regime,” overtly racist policies and practices are no longer considered acceptable in the U.S. Instead, coded language has replaced overtly racist statements in the current system of racial discrimination. Coded language addresses policies and topics

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68 interview 9, measure 68
69 interview 10, measure 663
with racist implications without every directly or explicitly mentioning race.71 Thereby preserving and entrenching an unequal system based of racial biases without acknowledging its biases.

Because overtly racist statements and actions are no longer considered acceptable, students were surprised when they encountered them abroad. This aspect of their study abroad experience is another example of the "invisible baggage" that students bring form their upbringing of American whiteness. Even though students were surprised and/or offended by overtly racist statement, often students could not put a finger on why. Most students did not make the connection that they thought they found these statements especially offensive because of being raised in post-CRM U.S. Student 5 commented that:

*Barcelona is really racist. Spain is really racist. And it was shocking how completely free they were.* 72

Student 4 was also surprised by the open prejudice in her abroad country and takes it a step further to contrast the difference between the way people behave in Greece and where she was raised.

...*Woah, like, I've never been in an environment where people were just so openly prejudice against another type of person.* 73

Some of the students, such as Student 4, seemed to have a sense that ideas about race and racism develop differently in different times and spaces. For this reason, although students took offence at the overtly racist words and actions of people in their host countries, they often felt as though they should not speak up about their opinions on the

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71 Omi and Winnant, *Racial Formations*, 123.
72 interview 5, measure 288
73 interview 4, measure 267
matter. In addition, although it will not be explored in-depth here, this indicates that the students were thinking about the tensions and contradictions of cultural relativism and universal human rights.

Student 4 has a sense that because there is less overtly racist behavior in the U.S., that there is more “equality” in the US and that there is less “equality” in her abroad country. However, she feels that she is not in a position to make judgments on the way her abroad country functions. Student 4 comment that:

That [overtly racist behavior] was uncomfortable for me because I’m so used to having equality and expecting equality. But at the same time, I was basically a guest in that culture and trying to sort of observe and understand it as much as I could. So, it was a little bit of a struggle just trying to put myself into the situation as they saw it.74

In addition to showing her tentativeness to address aspects of her abroad culture that she is uncomfortable with, these comments by Student 4 also further demonstrate the habit of white Americans to have an unrealistically positive understanding on issues of inequality and discrimination.

Student 7 draws a more direct and explicit comparison between the behaviors in his abroad country and the history of race relations in the US.

I noticed Australians, they, I can’t remember exactly what they said, but they definitely said some off-handed comments towards Aboriginals. Kind of similar to demeaning comments that people would say towards blacks in the 60s. And so, I guess they’re

74 interview 4, measure 463
perhaps not as far along in uh making peace with their natives as we are. Not to say that everything’s perfect here but I feel like here we are more accepting and maybe just more politically correct when we talk about our native peoples. Um and Australians don’t seem to make as much of an effort to uh do that.\textsuperscript{75}...And I just, I don’t know, that didn’t settle. I didn’t say anything but that just didn’t settle well with me and I didn’t dwell on that of course but that just took me aback saying whoa, that’s, uh, definitely something one wouldn’t say here.\textsuperscript{76}

This student’s comments are similar to the Student 4’s as he also noted the overt discrimination in his abroad country but is not inclined to speak up. In addition to not speaking up, the student noticed the discrimination and then dismissed it or claimed not to be overly preoccupied with it. When student 7 and other students communicate this, it can be seen as a symptom of white privilege itself—since the overt racism does not directly affect him, he was able sidestep its significance and carry on with his daily business.

The pattern of students who studied in non-white abroad countries discussing aspects of their host country that they considered better in the states, would seem to contradict the pattern discussed earlier in which students who studied in non-white host countries and/or lived in a home stay or with local peers generally adopted a more critical perspective of the U.S. However, as Dobly explains, negotiating the American self and one’s beliefs about America and how it relates to other countries while studying abroad

\textsuperscript{75} interview 7, measure 395
\textsuperscript{76} interview 7, measure 440
does not produce a clear dichotomy, rather a complex relationship. The experience of being the “other” and interacting with people of another culture for extended periods of time each day complicates student’s thinking. On one hand the students can become more critical of U.S. policy while on the other, they are more appreciative of “freedoms” and “advantages” in they perceive as available in the U.S.

Turning Points: Students develop an understanding of U.S. systematic inequality in relation to white privilege

We have seen how whiteness plays a role in the way students negotiated their time abroad in relationship to their white identity, American identity, and conceptions of the U.S. and the students’ abroad country. Just as white people are generally unaware of their whiteness and American identity, most are also generally unaware of the system of institutional racism that they operate in. According to Bonilla-Silva, “in general, whites believe that discrimination has all but disappeared…” 78

Ultimately, to answer the question: what happens when American whiteness travels through study abroad— we must address not only the way that students negotiate their time abroad, but if they came away from the experience with an increased understanding of national systematic inequality and privilege, including institutionalized racism in the U.S. As students become more aware of their white and American identities, have changing perceptions of the U.S. and their abroad country; they become increasingly aware of the systematic inequality and privilege that they are living under. Therefore, because they influence students’ awareness, perceptions, and conceptualizations, the circumstances of their study abroad (race of host country, level of affluence of host country, and living situation abroad) play a significant role in students’ ability to articulate their understanding of national systematic inequality, or institutional racism. What circumstances of study abroad lead students to challenge ideas they were raised with of meritocracy, colorblindness, and the idea that the system is fair and works well for everyone?

Studying abroad can serve to call into question aspects of the students' identities that they have not considered before, such as being white, being American and how the two relate. As the students negotiate these identities through traveling in a globalizing world, some students will be able to make a connection between their white privilege and systematic inequality and institutionalized racism.

According to Barlow, “the methodological problem in the study of globalization and race is this: How does the analysis of race on a global level articulate with the analysis of race on a national and even local level? The study of the relationship between globalization and racism must, I believe, start with the recognition of global trends in racism, but must primarily focus on the ways in which the specific national histories of race and current racial structures intersect with the new dynamics of globalization.”

McKinney’s concept of “turning points” is useful in addressing this methodological problem.

McKinney discusses how finding oneself in the minority travel can both serve as “turning points” and lead white people to be more conscious of their whiteness. The students in this study who went to a non-white country had the potential for both of these two “turning points” at once. McKinney finds that the first time a white person is uncomfortable in the minority position can make one’s whiteness evident and later serve as a reminder of the social meaning behind being white. The new surroundings that travel provides, allow white people to question their conceptions of “how things are” and of the social meaning of race.

79 Barlow, Between Fear and Hope, 22.
80 McKinney, Being White, 44 and 20.
81 McKinney, Being White, 20.
For example, Student 3 felt as though she could empathize with people of color in the U.S. after her experience of living as a "minority" abroad.

*I think always the interesting part is being um the one that stands out. And sort of what it feels like to be the minority I guess you would say.*

Some students, such as Student 3, saw a correlation between standing out as a white person in their abroad country and being a person of color in the U.S. This is an indication that having their white identity prompted through study abroad, may lead to a turning point that encouraged students to begin to understand and acknowledge whiteness, and the social implications and privileges that they have received all their lives. In contrast, students who studied in white abroad countries did not become as aware of their whiteness, and therefore did not have as many or as significant of turning points.

Another way this study attempted to address the "methodological problem" posed by Barlow above was through the interview questions. Students were asked open-ended leading questions that brought them from thinking about their abroad experiences on global level to thinking about the national level. Students were first asked to discuss something that they see as unfair or unequal in the world. They were then prompted to reflect if their abroad experiences impacted the way they think about these topics, especially in relation to what they knew about the U.S. The students either held that their views were impacted or changed by their abroad experiences or that their views were not

82 interview 3, measure 302
83 It is important to note that in reality these are two very different experiences.
changed but that they did have an increased awareness of inequalities. Some students made a connection between inequality and a system that privileges white people.

The students who studied in predominantly white MDCs, especially those who lived in with American or other foreign peers, expressed that their views on inequality did not change as a result of their study abroad experiences. Instead, they tended to keep their general views on the subject. They expressed a general belief that inequality is unjust and that their abroad experiences provided examples to reinforce their thinking but they did not articulate a nuanced understanding of institutionalized racism. Student 4 is an example of this.

*I think my views on equality and all that stayed the same. I was just exposed to other views that were different from mine.*

In addition, Student 8 stated:

*I would say it definitely made me understand it and value those values [of equality that I already had] even more when I went abroad.*

Also, Student 10 stated:

*The opinions that I have are still generally the same but uh the references. I guess they're more developed opinions, they're more educated and realistic developed opinions. I definitely learned a lot in that area.*

For these students who studied in white MDCs, studying abroad reinforced the liberal ideal that equality is important but it did not help to illuminate or challenge the
ideas of colorblindness or meritocracy, including the faulty idea that the system is fair and works well for everyone.

On the other hand, students who studied in LDC and/or non-white host countries voiced a shift in their thinking. For some students, including Student 2, the lessons that they learned abroad translated into changed behaviors when they returned to the states.

*I try to use less stuff, just because I've seen the waste after going there and seeing what little they have and coming back here and seeing everything we have.* 87

If a student also lived in a home stay they were even more likely to experience a pronounced shift in thinking. The students who could most clearly articulate their growth of understanding on the topic were students who lived in home-stays in non-white abroad countries, such as Student 6.

*(interviewer: Did [seeing people in your abroad country who did not have a lot of resources] make you think anything about people here [in the U.S.] who might not have those kinds of resources?) It made me more sympathetic towards them. And at the same time it made me have not really an anger but a frustration with the majority of people who do [have resources] because they don't think about it. I mean— I'm guilty of that. I didn't think about it...* 88

Student 6 noticed the unequal distribution of resources in her abroad country and this initiated her thought process about inequalities in the U.S. She reflected that she was

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87 interview 2, measure 412
88 interview 6, measure 1341
more unaware about the system of inequality before her abroad experiences and that she is now frustrated that most people are not aware of institutional inequality. Student 11, in particular, gained a new understanding of the way systems of disadvantage function in perpetuating inequality.

_I would say one of the things that I noticed most while I was abroad was the taking advantage of other people. Just because one group of people feel that they're superior and at that time they do have more power, doesn't mean they're better. And I think once that idea that mindset, that like a certain person is better than another, comes into play then it becomes completely unfair in however someone looks upon another person. Like, the fact that the richer people in Brazil automatically decided that they were worth more and that they were more important than the people who didn't have quite as much money. And so this huge gap developed and is even, it's bigger than any other economic gap in the world right now. Because there's upper class and there's low class and they have like absolutely no middle class. And it becomes completely unfair. And then it's kind of perpetuated through education. Like to be a student there, like, college is free, well that's great but like how do get into college? Well, you have to go to a private school because their public school system is shit. Like it's just horrible. And so I think pretty much everything comes off this unequal distribution of power, of people feeling that they're_
better than others and then taking advantage of others based on that principle, that diluted thinking.\textsuperscript{89}

Student 11 goes on to acknowledge that her understanding of inequality and system of disadvantage was drastically shaped by her abroad experiences.

\textit{It just became incredibly clear to me while I was there. And I think I actually didn’t necessarily have this world-view until I went abroad.}\textsuperscript{90}

The observations and experiences that Student 11 had abroad led her to directly challenge the ideas of meritocracy that she had been raised to believe in the U.S. In reflecting on her beliefs before her abroad experience she states:

\begin{quote}
I kind of had the idea...um what is that like protestant capitalist thinking that if you want something bad enough you can kind of, you can work for it and you can get it and get what you want and then there are the people that don’t work hard enough...there’s always a chance you can climb yourself up the ladder. And when I went to Brazil I realized that that’s not necessarily the case.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

Student 11 gave a thorough and moving account of observations she made and the transformations that they led her through in her understanding of systematic inequality in relation to white privilege. Seeing physical evidence of the system of inequality in her abroad country helped her understand it, and in turn, this student became more aware of the systematic inequality in the states. This led her to come full circle to develop a new understanding of white privilege.

\textsuperscript{89} interview 11, measure 776
\textsuperscript{90} interview 11, measure 840
\textsuperscript{91} interview 11, measure 846
It felt really strange to come back here and be surrounded by a bunch of white people again. It was just normal to be constantly surrounded by a bunch of people that looked like me. Which was really strange because I'd never really thought of it that way...I think it came from my time in Brazil and coming back here and studying more about inequality and stereotypes and racial biases, I realized how much more biased I am towards things and like stereotype. How I stereotype things without even knowing which really kind of disgusting to me but I think its kind of an inborn quality that becomes kind of plastered to use as we’re growing up. So that I didn’t realize before and I don’t think it would have become such a strong thing for me if I hadn’t been to Brazil and seen those things.

Student 11 is perhaps the “model” of transformation through abroad experiences. She acknowledges that her ideas were shaped through growing up in the U.S. Then, when she went abroad, she gained an awareness of and greater understanding of her whiteness and how it relates to systematic inequality.

What led some students to make the connection between awareness of self and awareness of systematic inequality and how they interact with it? What was it that differed about the study abroad experiences of Student 11, as described above, that led her to grow so much in her understanding of systematic inequality and white privilege, especially when compared to other students? As has been suggested in this paper,

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92 interview 11, measure 505
93 interview 11, measure 561
situational factors including whether the abroad country is white or non-white, whether the affluence of the abroad country, and what the student's living arrangements are while abroad are important factors. This student had a combination of the three elements that seemed to stimulate the most growth or change: she went to a non-white and less developed country and lived in a home-stay. In addition she took it upon herself to learn more about these topics and college courses after she returned from abroad served to reinforce and clarify her learning.
Summary

In order to summarize, I return to the original guiding question: what happens when American whiteness travels through study abroad? First we have explored some general characteristics of American whiteness as developed under institutionalized racism. One of the major components is that white Americans, including the students in this study, are generally unaware of their white and American identities and how those stem form and interact with the system of institutionalized racism. Second, we have seen that study abroad can serve call to attention those prompted white and American identities. Third, we have seen how as these identities are prompted it is more likely that students will have turning points in which they begin to understand their whiteness and to challenge previously held ideas about the U.S. and systematic inequality. Through the examination of prompted identities and turning points, we have seen the influence of certain conditions of study abroad, namely: abroad country race, affluence of abroad country, and living situation abroad. In short, studying in non-white less developed abroad countries and living in a home stay increases the occasions and likelihood of prompting or activating white and American identities; which has a direct relationship to the likelihood and significance of students experiencing turning points.
Implications

This study reaffirms previous studies and theories that show that white Americans are generally unaware the system of institutionalized racism and how white privilege both stems from and perpetuates it. Several scholars argue that in order to stop institutional racism white people must become aware and then become an active antiracist. As Bonilla-Silva argues, it is essential that white people do this because white privilege is one of the biggest driving forces of institutionalized racism. “If bigots are not the cogs propelling America’s racial dynamics, who are they? My answer: regular white folks just following the racial script of America.”94 In short, regardless of whether or not they study abroad, white American college students should be encouraged to learn about race, white privilege, and institutionalized racism especially if we hope to combat it.

This study also has certain implications for how study abroad is approached, especially for white American students. Clearly, these students could be better prepared for study abroad and the ways it may challenge them. As discussed above, it is important that white people become more aware and educated about these topics. This would be especially helpful as preparation for study abroad. Study abroad preparation that enables students to examine these prompted identities and issues of institutionalized racism, including how they are location and historically specific, could have the potential to catalyze even more meaningful and deeper learning while abroad.

The question must be posed: what is it that we hope (white American) students learn from study abroad? If we hope student learn about their own racial and national identities and how those relate to systematic inequality, then we should encourage students to study

abroad under certain conditions, namely, studying in non-white abroad country, studying in a less developed country, and living in a home stay.

Although not explored here, this study also implies that by having white American students study abroad without being sensitive to or versed in these identities and issues there is an impact on the local population. Chambers writes "in some cases, tourism might serve to reinforce existing social relations..." Chambers then describes the different ways that local communities respond to tourists and tourism. This study begs the question: what sort of position does it put local people in to be interacting with white American students who are not educated on these topics?

Lastly, as many previous studies have noted, study abroad encourages personal growth. All of the students in this study reflected consistent sentiments. For example, Student 1 stated:

*All in all it was really one of the most rewarding experiences ever.*

*I learned so much in and out of the classroom.*

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95 Chambers, *Native Tours*, 54.
96 interview 1, measure 1119
Limitations

This study was conducted as a preliminary or exploratory study and there are several limitations involved. First, data was only collected post study abroad. If there was also pre study abroad data and during study abroad data, the data could be compared and contrasted to more clearly demonstrate the turning points from study abroad.

There were also some inconsistencies among the respondents. First, all the students were white but one student said that although she is seen as “Caucasian” she often prefers to self-identify as “brown” because of her heritage and specific aspects of interaction in society, such as going through airport security. This student was also raised in Hawaii where there is a different racial hierarchy and characteristics of being white develop slightly differently. However, her responses fit the overall pattern of the other students so this was not highlighted in the paper. Second, one of the students studied abroad in her sophomore year while ten studied in their junior year. This could have an impact on the amount of interactions and growing experiences a student has had before study abroad. Though, again, no major variance from the overall pattern was noted.

Third, nine students studied abroad for a semester while two studied abroad for an academic year. The main differences noted here include that the students who studied abroad for a year had a much higher level of language proficiency and tended to make more of an effort to integrate the local culture into an aspect of their own self-image. Fourth, the students studied abroad at different times between Fall 2008 and Spring 2009. This had an impact on the prevailing political climate and is reflected in the students’ statements about their American identity and the locals’ reactions to Obama. Lastly, there was not an equal gender distribution. Nine of the students were female and two of
the students were male. This has the potential of skewing the data because past studies have shown that women are more open to cross-cultural experiences.

Another limitation of this study is that students were not asked to discuss previous abroad experiences (although most of those who had had previous experiences did at least mention them) or experiences in which they stood out. In short, students were not asked to discuss experiences they had already had in which American and white identities could have been prompted or in which they could have experienced a turning point. In addition, the non-scheduled standardized list of questions could be improved to better reflect the research questions of this study.

There is difficulty in isolating the cause of the way students experienced their study abroad. This study explored the interactions of whiteness and study abroad. There were likely also several different factors that influenced student’s study abroad experiences. Whiteness does not fully explain their experiences and is likely compounded by other factors.
Suggestions for further inquiry

The implications and limitations of this study call for further study on the topic. Aside from improving this study based on the limitations outlined above, there are several suggestions I have for further inquiry. First, as mentioned in the implications section, it is imperative that the affects study abroad has on the local population be further explored and scrutinized. Travel involves a reciprocal relationship and ramifications are not isolated to the traveler.

Second, it would be helpful to compare and contrast the study abroad experiences of American students of color because their relationships to their racial and national identities and understanding of systematic inequality tend to be different than those of white students.

Third, in general, it is important to examine why study abroad is becoming more prevalent. What are the evolving goals of study abroad and what can university study abroad offices and study abroad organizations do to encourage that these goals are accomplished? This leads to a follow up question: how does the information and language in study abroad offices, brochures, websites, etc. influence the kind of experiences students will have abroad? Fourth, in order to understand more about the way that turning points work it is important to know the impact of having debriefing sessions during study abroad and of having classes that follow up on the turning points upon return from study abroad. Furthermore, this study explores how whiteness and study abroad influences students' understanding of systematic inequality in the U.S. but does not address how these students understand global or international systematic inequality.
An aspect of study abroad that was not explored in this study is the role of gender and sexuality. Even though they were not prompted to discuss this topic, all of the female students in this study at least touched on the role that gender played during their study abroad. This indicates that further inquiry is needed to explore this aspect.
Appendices

Appendix A: Pre-Interview Survey

Name:

1. Where did you live the majority of the time while abroad? (Circle the one that best applies)
   a. In an home-stay
   b. With local peers
   c. With American and/or other international peers
   d. Other. Please specify:

2. How often, on average, did you participate in regular activities (i.e. volunteering, classes, work, etc.) in which you interacted with the local population (not including a home-stay if you had one)? (Circle the one that best applies)
   a. 0-3 hours a week
   b. 3-6 hours a week
   c. 6-10 hours a week
   d. 10+ hours a week

3. Who did your main social group consist of while abroad?
   a. Americans and other internationals
   b. Local peers
   c. Local people of other age groups
   d. Other. Please specify:

4. Where did you go? Please be as specific as possible.

5. When did you go? What dates? Please give as specific of dates as possible.

6. When did you go in terms of your college career? (i.e. second semester Junior year)

7. Gender:

8. Race:

9. Major:
Appendix B: Standardized Non-scheduled Interview Questions


1. What did you learn about your abroad country? What cultural/national influences did you observe in your abroad country?

2. What were some differences you noted between your abroad country and the US?

3. Please describe some important or challenging experiences. (Why were these experiences challenging? Did these experiences make you think about what it means to be an American? In what ways)

4. What was it like to be an American in a foreign country? (Were you treated differently, than locals? than other foreigners?)

5. Did you feel particularly American while abroad? (If yes, in what ways?) Was your sense of American-self different while abroad? (If yes, in what ways? In what instances?)

6. Did you look at the US differently while in your abroad country? (And after you returned?)

7. What do you see that is unfair or unequal in the world?

8. Did your abroad experience impact your world-view about what is unfair or unequal in the world?
Appendix C: Statement of Informed Consent

Dear Student,

Suzanne Burdman is conducting this research for her senior honors thesis at the undergraduate level. This study will be a 40-minute interview that seeks to find out about students’ understandings of American identity and global inequality while they are studying abroad.

You may withdraw from the interview at anytime without prejudice. You may choose not to respond to any or all of the items in the interview. All the information from this interview will be completely confidential.

Please be aware that only students 18 years of age and older may participate.

Participation in this interview is voluntary. Whether or not you participate will have no bearing on your grade or standing in any class. This interview is in no way affiliated with the academic institution in which you are enrolled as a student.

By participating in this interview, you are giving consent for Suzanne Burdman to use your responses for educational purposes only. The interview is anonymous; your name cannot be linked with your answers to the question in any way.

If you have further questions about study abroad you may contact Sara Falkenstien, the University of Redlands director of study abroad, at (909) 748-8044. If you should become distressed because of your participation and/or you wish to speak to someone after choosing to participate in the study, you may contact Dr. Lorraine Young, a licensed Psychologist, or, Matt Gragg, a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, at (909) 748-8108 in the University of Redlands Counseling Center. If you wish to contact an impartial third party not associated with this study regarding any questions or to express a complaint you may have about the study, you may contact Gail Oliveira, Associate Director, Human Resources and EEO Officer, University of Redlands, (909) 748-8274 for information and resources.

The Institutional Review Board for the University of Redlands has approved Suzanne Burdman to interview students for her senior thesis. IRB approval # 2009-48.

If you wish to receive a summary of the results of this study, please write to the following address:

Suzanne Burdman
1231 E. Colton Ave #C306
Redlands, CA 92374

Participant’s Name (please print)
Participant’s Signature
Date
Bibliography


http://www.ac.wwu.edu/~culture/Bochner.htm (accessed April 21, 2010).


Interviews (11) with undergraduate students from a private liberal arts university who had returned from study abroad.


