Understanding and Experiencing American Identity In The Context Of A One-Semester Study Abroad Programme In London

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The people and incidents that led to this work being possible are myriad and sometimes unlikely. When my adoptive parents took me home on a cold spring day in 1982 they never dreamed that the baby they were warned would likely have significant learning difficulties would ever finish school, let alone, one day, pursue a Doctorate. So, firstly, I want to thank my parents, Jane and Francis, for their tenacity and faith in me that I could always do more and go further, no matter what the “experts” believed.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

Throughout the 21st century, US Higher Education institutions and successive US governments – through reports such as the Lincoln Commission (2005) and bills such as the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act of 2022 (and subsequently 2023) – have sought to increase the number of students studying abroad, with the UK remaining one of the most popular destinations (Open Doors, 2024). With growing numbers studying abroad, there is increasing pressure on institutions and other Study Abroad providers to deliver tangible benefits. To do so effectively, it is imperative that practitioners understand the many factors that could influence and impact students' experiences of studying abroad so that they can plan pre-departure preparatory activities, programming and on and post-course support accordingly. One aspect that has the potential to impact how students engage with living and studying abroad is national – in this case, American – identity. While many studies and commentaries included or commented on the relevance and impact of American identity both on students' experiences and their ability to make meaningful intercultural gains from studying abroad (Edwards, 2000; Dolby, 2004, 2007; Donitsa et al. 2005; Souders, 2006; Pitts, 2009; Jewett, 2010; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Wolcott & Mokyta, 2013; Karthoshkina, 2015; Young et al., 2015; Goldstein, 2017; Willett, 2018; Streitweiser & Light, 2018; Davis & Knight, 2021; Grieb, 2023) or have viewed it as a hindrance to studying abroad (Kinginger, 2010; Breen, 2012; Zemach-Bersin, 2012; Moreno, 2021), in-depth, qualitative studies that seek specifically to understand how students experience their American identit(ies) abroad are lacking. This study, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, seeks to fill this gap in knowledge and provide long-overdue insights and recommendations for practitioners as the sector continues to expand.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Researcher Background and Motivation for the Study

Both personal and professional motivations led me to this research topic. As an adoptee, I have always been interested in the construction of identity and the significance of different factors in forming it (Grotevant, 1997). Working within International Higher Education for over twenty years, most recently for an American university in the field of Study Abroad, led me to think about identity within a professional context, and its relevance to students' overall experience. As the Associate Director for Student Services for a US university's UK campus, I oversee pastoral support, orientation, accommodation and co-curricular activities and excursions for around 1000 students each year – predominantly US nationals drawn solely from US universities. Of these, most study and live alongside other Study Abroad students on a version of what is often referred to as an "island programme" – Norris and Dwyer (2005) define an island programme as one that "replicates most aspects of the American college/university learning context in a self-contained context, a bubble, within the host country" (p. 121). My experience is replicated at other institutions: American Study Abroad in the UK (and specifically London) is so significant an industry that there is an organisation – the Association of American Study Abroad Programmes (AASAP) – to represent professionals working in this area, and which describes its mission as "a forum for directors and administrative staff to discuss and respond to common issues in order to meet the needs of the present and anticipate the demands of the future" (AASAP, n.d.).

My institution's stated mission is to "prepare students for lives of meaningful contribution in an increasingly complex and interrelated global society" (Arcadia University, 2023), and in designing and delivering support and activities I am expected to keep this in mind. Much of my job is reactive, responding to student crises and providing support "in the moment". Other aspects, however, involve tailoring orientation, events and support to students based on what is known about them. Following up on student feedback (a survey which is sent to students after their studies have finished), it became clear that many

struggled to accept that, where something in the UK might be different from the US, this did not necessarily make it “wrong” (students cited smaller washing machines and lack of air conditioning as particular sources of frustration!) While we are all products of our own cultural upbringing, and it is both understandable and usual for us to adhere to thoughts and values which are consistent with core values that, within that culture, are accepted and unquestioned (Adam et al., 2018), I began to question whether such core values were particularly strong among Americans – perhaps so strong as to impede or negatively impact experiences outside of that culture. Upon exploring this further (see Chapter 2), I was surprised to find that, while this initial hypothesis indeed appeared to be supported by much of the literature, very little qualitative research has been conducted to date that focuses explicitly on the experiences of American students in the UK, despite the consistent popularity of the UK as a Study Abroad destination and the increase in students and providers (Open Doors, 2024) and support from the US government to grow Study Abroad still further (United States Department of State, 2022).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

National identity is an important component within personal identity as a whole (Schildkraut, 2014), so its significance in how students experience and make sense of a period of study abroad can be assumed and has been observed (Dolby, 2004 & 2007) yet is not wholly understood. Dolby (2007) asserts that “critical reflection on national identity is both obtainable and an important step toward global citizenship” (p. 141). With practitioners and governments alike invoking cross-cultural competence and the importance of global cooperation as key benefits of Study Abroad, it is important to comprehend the role played by national identity. It is hoped that this research will do so, thereby inviting future research and providing data that will empower practitioners to change their programming in a way that better supports their students.

1.3 Major Themes and Definitions

While Study Abroad has a long history which is discussed briefly in Chapter 2, this thesis focuses on Study Abroad as it is currently understood: The Lincoln Commission (2005) defined Study Abroad as “an educational program for undergraduate study, work, or research (or a credit-bearing internship) that is conducted outside the United States and that awards academic credit toward a college degree.” (p. 14).

Students in this study were participating on two types of programme. Some were on a version of an “island” programme, living and studying alongside others, with courses broadly taught in a familiar US style. Others were on more traditional programmes (Engle & Engle, 2003), studying and living within a UK university.

Finally, the study focuses on the concept of national identity (and specifically American identity, discussed in more detail in the literature review) as distinct from other identities: in a Study Abroad context, Willett (2018) defines it thus:

> National identity refers to belonging to a set of inherited values and beliefs that form one's sense of their own culture. National identity is inherited based on upbringing, citizenship and international experiences… Global identity, on the other hand, delves into how students see themselves in relation to the world, as a citizen of humanity rather than a citizen of a nation. This identity includes "seeing one's own uniqueness" in relation to the rest of the world.

American Study Abroad (as opposed to Study Abroad more generally) is a unique industry, with many providers (such as Arcadia) exclusively serving the (growing) American market, and doing so with government backing (United States Department of State, 2017; Lincoln Commission, 2005). Understanding the complexity of students’ experiences and the role of national identity is therefore a timely concern.

1.3.1 A Note on the Term "American".

The terms "America" and "American", when applied to the United States and its people, are problematic and the subject of much debate, particularly at the time of writing, where US President Donald Trump has just signed an Executive Order to rename the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America", referring to the country of the United States (Karni, 2025). It has been argued that, for those from the continent of America but outside of the United States, "America" is a "loaded term" with imperialistic overtones (Martinez-Carter, 2013), and was among terms slated for a ban by Stanford University in 2023 "to avoid insinuating the US dominates the Americas" (D'Agnostino, 2023). Despite ongoing debate, Resnick (2019) notes that:

> The very name, the United States of America, has come to be associated with the noun "America" as is true for the adjective "American" in many languages, to the chagrin, no doubt, of the hundreds of millions of inhabitants of the Americas who do not live in the United States (p. 114)

I would agree with this assertion. At the time the study was conducted these terms remained in common usage, particularly within the field of Study Abroad – many of the texts cited in this thesis routinely use the terms to discuss the country, its people, and even critique its policies and attitudes – Goldstein (2017), for example, discusses "American identity", Woolf (2011) talks about the "American mind" and Breen (2012) talked about privileged migration among "American undergraduates". All are referring to students from the United States, not the continent more widely. Paul (2014) explains his conscious choice to use the terms, explaining that "Americanness" itself is a recognised discourse: "Even if America obviously is "a continent, not a country", in this study I will follow the convention of using the signifier 'American' to refer to the United States", he explains (p. 12). In their *Introduction to American Studies* (again the very subject uses this controversial term), Temperley and Bigsby (2014) consistently use the term "American" to refer to the culture and peoples of the United States and "America" to refer to the country.

I have therefore made a conscious choice to use the term “American” in framing questions to my students, such as “What does being American mean to you?” In a recent speech, President Biden (2024) addressed his audience as “my fellow Americans” and used the term “American” 18 times, and “America” as shorthand for the United States 15 times. In the context of a study looking at students’ perceptions of identity and day to day experiences, it seemed appropriate to use a term that is still in dominant (if disputed) usage so as not to cause confusion or even defensiveness among my interviewees. I have, however, when referring to the country, tried to use the term “United States”, since this is a factually correct term in equally common usage as “America”, and used on government websites, to which I refer periodically – writers such as Goldstein (2017) made a similar decision, so this was not deemed a term that could jeopardise the content of interviews by clouding the aims of my study or the purpose of my questions.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

Streitweiser and Light (2018) purported that students’ experiences are a:

> product of the multiple identities they bring from their home cultures, the host country they are encountering and their own human agency through which they have the capacity to act and to make choices within the possibilities open to them (p. 487)

Dolby (2004) maintained that “study abroad provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself— particularly one’s national identity — in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self” (p. 150). It was surprising, then, that while national (in this case, American) identity was referenced in many studies, discussed further in Chapter 2, it was not the sole focus of any qualitative research, despite its significance.

Of further potential significance is the rise in the types of programmes that attract the most Study Abroad students: “island” or “bubble” programmes (Ungar, 2016). Goldstein and Keller (2015) cautioned that students who opted for this model often scored more highly on

ethnocentrism, with such programmes and potentially the mindset of those who chose them limiting opportunities for intercultural development. My institution offers both island and direct enroll programmes, allowing for some comparison between both.

The US government itself puts “Americanness” at the heart of Study Abroad, stating that:

> When young Americans study abroad, they gain important skills and develop personal networks that enhance their prospects in the world’s marketplace and their potential as global problem-solvers. They also act as citizen ambassadors by building relationships within their host communities, demonstrating American values, and debunking stereotypes. (United States Department of State, 2017).

I believe that if practitioners better understood the relevance and impact of “Americanness” (I use this word to encompass everything students might understand as being pertinent to their American identity, from cultural values to behaviours) they could structure student activities differently, helping them to engage more meaningfully with their host culture. My hope is that the results of this study will give a genuine insight into students’ experiences of studying abroad beyond the superficial “Jumping, horizon gazing, and arms wide” (Miller-Idriss et al., 2019) to interrogate the true benefits of Study Abroad and whether existing national identity is a potential barrier to receiving these benefits – as Kinginger (2010) warns, “Professional folklore would have us believe that the benefits of Study Abroad are evident to all, and they are not.” (p. 225). By understanding how national (American) identity is experienced in a Study Abroad context, providers would be better placed to structure preparation, pedagogy and support in a way that maximises any benefits and enhances the experience for those students.

1.5 Geographical and Temporal Context

Lincoln and Guba (2016) note that, “Constructions are necessarily based on local circumstances and experiences, and hence have applicability, strictly speaking, only in the

local situation" (p. 72). It is important both for the validity and understanding of a study to note the context in which it took place.

The UK is especially significant within Study Abroad since it is the second most popular destination globally for US students, after Italy (Open Doors, 2024), and remains especially popular for full semester study. However, it brings with it its own unique challenges in delivering the much-promised benefits. Institutions and third-party providers advertise these many benefits irrespective of the destination and without differentiating between the range of locations on offer. CIEE (2024), a non-profit provider based in Maine and boasting opportunities in over 30 countries, lists "7 top benefits of studying abroad", all of which are general and unsubstantiated, for example "you'll enjoy best-in-class academics" and "you'll go on unique cultural excursions". Others are, at best, misleading, such as "you'll form new friendships that last a lifetime" or "you'll meet locals who help you feel at home". In fact, literature over many decades (discussed in more detail below) has been questioning the veracity of such statements: Adkins and Messerly (2019) concluded that "Much education abroad programming that occurs in Western Europe offers students superficial engagement with the host countries, essentializes local cultures, and packages an experience for students to consume" (p. 48) and Kinginger (2010) likewise fears there is a danger that the experience will be "reduced to a constellation of superficially appreciated landmarks and shopping outlets" (p. 225). She concludes that "We need studies moving beyond description and into analysis of student experience in relation to sociocultural contexts" (p. 225), which is what I hope to do here.

The UK poses a particular challenge in achieving many of Study Abroad's much-flaunted benefits. Often chosen for its perceived prestige (Çiftçi & Karaman, 2018), or because of its common language and assumed similarities, Edwards (2000) fears it can become an "autopilot immersion experience" (p. 88). She further warns – contrary to CIEE's promises – that students who come to the UK on programmes managed by US organisations, such as mine (where students live and study alongside other Americans) are

at risk of becoming “socially isolated (particularly in London) and not even potentially part of any recognizable local community, and thus cut off from much of the experiential learning that comes from interactions with their British peers.” (p. 94). My institution and location are therefore very well placed to explore the phenomenon of American identity within this potentially problematic context.

Bayeck (2021) cautions that “Places, spaces and contexts have meaning, and inform the actions and narrative of the interviewees.” (p. 2). While this study seeks to understand students’ experiences within a specific context – a single-semester Study Abroad programme in London – the temporal context in which the study happened to take place, and which was beyond the control of the researcher, cannot be ignored. Interviews were conducted between January and June of 2024, at a time of significant political polarisation in the United States, with an impending election between current and former presidents Biden and Trump (and the thesis was written following the subsequent withdrawal of Joe Biden, election between Trump and Harris and eventual Trump victory and inauguration). Indeed, this was referenced in several of the interviews, and influenced some of the students’ answers and particularly their concerns around Americans being perceived negatively – this is in line with findings from Goldstein’s (2017) study, which highlighted students’ increased concerns around being negatively stereotyped following Trump’s election in 2016. In 2021, a Pew Research Center article highlighted that, following the Capitol Riots and the murder of George Floyd, respondents from outside the US had a negative view of American democracy, and felt the country had a serious problem with discrimination (Wike et al., 2021). It should be acknowledged, then, that data obtained from a study such as this will be influenced by contemporary politics and events both in the US and globally.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Study Abroad is now a multi-billion-dollar industry backed by government departments and institutions (Dietrich, 2018). The number of American students studying abroad has risen from 154,168 in 2000/2001 to 347,099 in 2018/19 (Open Doors, 2024).

This dropped in 2020 due to the pandemic, but numbers are now returning to pre-pandemic levels and are expected to continue to rise as before. The US government's growing interest in Study Abroad, including several attempts to pass a bill that could potentially be lucrative to institutions by providing funds to assist in Study Abroad expansion (118th Congress, 2023) provides institutions with further incentives to expand the programmes they offer. Conversely, any expansion in opportunities in turn gives students more options to choose from. It is therefore imperative that institutions offering such programmes can deliver what they promise. Perhaps more than before, then, when studying abroad was more a rite of passage reserved for the elite (Thelin, 2017), institutions need to develop a deeper understanding of what drives their students if they are to compete within what is becoming a crowded field.

In recent years (as I shall discuss in the literature review), Study Abroad has come under fire, with many questioning its purported benefits and criticising how American students engage with it, viewing it as "a celebration of American exceptionalism" (Breen, 2012, p. 84) or a "modern-day Grand Tour" (Kinginger, 2010, p. 225), and how US institutions operate in this sphere. Kortegast and Kupo (2017) warn that, if this is not addressed, this "may result in experiences where students reify American dominance, superiority, and perpetuate a sense of being "good Americans"" (p. 217). An understanding of how students perceive their "Americanness" is central to addressing this problem.

Natalia and Garcia (2018) noted that "There is also growing recognition that students shape as much as they are shaped by experiences abroad." (p. 64.) Acknowledging this to be true, this study has the potential to change the way we, as providers, think about studying abroad, re-evaluating how programmes are structured, as well as making recommendations for future research. In 2005 the Lincoln Commission set a target of 1 million Americans studying abroad by 2016 (p. v). While that target proved too ambitious, it is a figure that continues to be cited, including in the 2023 Senator Paul Simon bill. If Study Abroad is to continue to expand – numerically but also in terms of the destinations and types of

programme on offer – it is surely imperative that the interplay between identity and that study is better understood.

1.7 Research Questions

To better understand and serve the needs of my students and broader purpose of my industry, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do American students experience their national identity before, during and after a one-semester period of study abroad in the UK? In particular:

    a. To what extent does their perception of “American” identity change following a period of studying abroad?

    b. How does their perception of national identity impact how they experience studying abroad and what they obtain from it?

It was expected that the data obtained from focusing on these questions would show a correlation between students’ American identity and experience, and that students’ perceptions of their identity (both their American identity and the salience of other aspects of their identity) would change during and following their studies – the questions are deliberately broad so as not to try to predict how that change would manifest itself, or to suppose that any change would be the same across all students in the study.

1.8 Overview of the Thesis

In order to answer these questions as fully and effectively as possible, the thesis has been ordered as follows:

Chapter 2 is a detailed literature review, examining contemporary criticisms and assumptions around Study Abroad seeking to develop a detailed understanding of what is meant by “American identity”, and examining the interplay between the two and how this is addressed in recent research. It also includes an overview of theoretical frameworks commonly applied to Education-based studies of this nature, in an attempt to isolate the

most appropriate frameworks within which the results can be interrogated and best understood.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology used in the study and discusses the many ethical considerations and potential dilemmas and how these were addressed.

Chapter 4 outlines the main findings of the study, isolating and examining themes that emerged from the data and creating a narrative to better understand them.

Chapter 5 discusses the themes in more detail against the theoretical frameworks: the MMDI (Jones & McEwan, 2000), which provided a useful basis for understanding multiple and competing identities, particularly in young people, and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1981; 1997) to assist in understanding how adult learners develop and change in specific situations and environments – in this case, a period of Study Abroad in London.

Chapter 6 returns to the research questions and findings to make recommendations for further research and professional practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

My proposed research topic requires significant background knowledge to ensure the focus and structure of the subsequent study could elicit original and useful data and conclusions. In conducting this review, I sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the myriad elements at play in the current field of American Study Abroad programmes in the UK, namely:

- The nature of contemporary Study Abroad
- Study Abroad in an American context
- US culture and American identity, and its relevance to Study Abroad
- Theoretical frameworks pertinent to a study of this nature

2.2 Scope, Purpose and Strategy

Leite et al. (2019) assert that a strong literature review lays the groundwork for a robust thesis by "scrutinizing the main problem examined by the academic study; anticipating research hypotheses, methods and results; and maintaining the interest of the audience in how the dissertation/thesis will provide solutions for the current gaps in a particular field." (p. 1). Hart (1998) further defined the purposes of the literature review as:

- To identify what research has been performed and what topics require further investigation in a particular field of knowledge;
- To outline the context of the problem;
- To recognise the main methodologies and techniques that have been used in the past;
- To provide a historical, methodological and theoretical context for the study;
- To identify significant aspects of the topic, including those that would benefit from further examination;
- To offer alternative perspectives;

- To provide specialist vocabulary related to the topic;
- To link theory and practice.

So, in conducting my review I sought to answer the following research questions:

- What is understood by “American identity”, and how is this reflected in the literature?
- What is the significance of American identity to Study Abroad, and how does it manifest itself?
- What learning and identity theories could be applied to help frame the study and provide a deeper understanding of the data obtained?

To identify relevant literature, I first looked at key peer-reviewed journals that focus on this field – *Frontiers: The International Journal of Study Abroad*, the *Journal of Studies in International Education* and *Intercultural Education* – initially limited to issues published within the last five years. From that I identified key figures in the field and sought out their research. This initial reading also helped me refine my search terms to allow me to conduct more specific, manageable searches via the University library, Google Scholar and ERIC using the following terms:

Table 1: Database Search Terms

American identity	American identity study abroad	Study abroad identity
American values	American values study abroad	Study abroad identity change
Americanness	American study abroad	Study abroad transformation
American culture	Purpose of study abroad	Cultural change study abroad

These databases were selected as, between them, they include a broad range of academic material, and their user interfaces allow users to search within date range and

include/exclude certain types of material. As such, a comprehensive range of relevant literature could be efficiently and reliably obtained.

Following my search, extensive notes were made on each item, and colour coding used to identify common themes. To ensure I did not allow my own biases or preconceptions to influence what I believed the findings to demonstrate (Randolph, 2019), I highlighted articles and findings that seemed to contradict those established elsewhere and sought to establish if such articles were outliers and if there were flaws in their methodology that could have led to anomalous conclusions.

2.3 Results of the Literature Review: Study Abroad

There is a vast amount of literature on Study Abroad, and it is constantly evolving in the face of world events, be that the coronavirus pandemic (Pedersen et al., 2021), changes in government (Goldstein, 2017), attempts to make Study Abroad more accessible (Bivins, 2021), understand the experiences of particular types of students such as Sol's (2013) study of black woman or Michl et al.'s (2019) research into trans and gender expansive students, or calls to decolonize the curriculum (Moreno, 2021 and Adkins & Messerly, 2019). With the vast expansion of study opportunities, attempts have been made to categorise and assess the relative value of different types of programme: Engle and Engle (2003) and Norris and Dwyer (2005) distinguished between integrated, island, hybrid, and field-based programmes.

2.3.1 Study Abroad: Purpose and Benefits

Much of the literature on Study Abroad focuses on, or seeks to evaluate and quantify, its purposes and benefits. Within this, many focus on intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Pachmayer & Andereck, 2019; Stebleton et al., 2013; Wickline et al., 2020; Williams, 2017) or the value of Study Abroad for those training for professions such as teaching or psychology (Mikulec, 2019; Lantz et al., 2020). Others explore how the type or length of studyaffects its advertised benefits (DeLoach et al., 2021; Strange & Gibson, 2017; Norris & Dwyer, 2005).

Pachmayer and Andereck (2019) assert that the desired outcome of Study Abroad is a “long-term change in attitudes and behaviours,” (p. 166), and Rose et al. (2021) agree that the main aim should be to enhance intercultural competency. Until recently, there was a broad consensus that studying abroad led – at least to some degree – to improvements in students’ intercultural skills, as well as individual benefits such as improving confidence and enhancing employability: Turos and Strange (2018) found that studying abroad can benefit future employment, though cautioned that success is dependent both on the type of programme attended and the importance of adequate preparation, and Dorsett et al. asserted as recently as 2019 that “Research demonstrates a positive and significant relationship between studying abroad and cultural competence” (p. 565). Looking at perceived outcomes of short-term experiences by interviewing over 2000 American students following study abroad, Chieffo and Griffiths’ research (2004) resulted in several valuable findings, notably that students reported perceived personal growth, with 30% viewing the US differently than before, “indicating a greater awareness of global interconnectedness, and in some cases openly criticizing U.S. policy” (p. 173). The study does not acknowledge that this percentage could be viewed as relatively low, or state whether other students had an opposite reaction, nor does it provide sufficient context on the level and type of preparation students were given prior to their trip, which could influence the findings.

Dwyer and Peters (2004) highlighted several benefits of Study Abroad, including increased self-confidence, changes in world view and intercultural development. However, their study has some limitations. Firstly, it relied on students self-reporting, so students may have perceived greater improvements in themselves than could have been ascertained by an independent, more scientific measure. Secondly, the staff conducting the study were senior staff within the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES), and their findings were based solely on interviews with IES students. There is therefore a strong possibility that students would – knowingly or unknowingly – exaggerate or emphasise any positive gains, believing that this was the outcome their questioners were seeking. The study

did, however, appear to show greater benefits for those on longer programmes, and this understanding remains among researchers and practitioners. Other studies, however, found that even short-term programmes could produce positive results: Anderson et al. (2006) found that even a short (four-week) period of study abroad in England appeared to show notable improvements in intercultural competence when using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) as an assessment tool, though did acknowledge that the sample size (16) was very small, and made several recommendations for future research. Dwyer and Peters' study highlights the difficulty in quantifying something as intangible as intercultural "gains", which are subjective and rely on self-reporting and self-evaluation. Recent researchers have approached the issue with caution, caveating findings and trying to develop ways to measure such gains more effectively.

Broadly accepting that intercultural development is at least possible, a further strand of research considers interventions to maximise such gains. By understanding what factors hindered intercultural growth, practitioners could better structure preparation and programmes to remove those obstacles. Spenader et al. (2022) discuss the particular challenges of study abroad in a "familiar", English-speaking nation (in this case, Australia) and conclude that intercultural sensitivity can be enhanced by requiring students to undertake targeted writing assignments designed to help them reflect on cross-cultural issues. Chwialkowska (2020) addressed the problem that most US students do not achieve the cultural development expected of them. Her study utilised self-reflection amongst a large group (719 students) to measure their development and concluded that detailed preparation and mentoring throughout the programme improved intercultural growth. Highlighting the link between culture and development, she notes that: "Before students can become culture savvy, they have to have theoretical understanding of basic cultural concepts.... Cross-cultural competence requires acknowledging one's cultural norms, motivations, and characteristics" (p. 538) and cautions that, "without proper guidance, some of the cross-cultural experiences might reinforce existing stereotypes." (p. 539). Studying abroad, then,

could have an actively detrimental effect on one's conception of culture. Others agree: Tovar and Misischia (2020) warn that when "individuals encounter different cultures they rely on existing frame of references to make judgements which can reinforce embedded beliefs and perceptions about ourselves and others" (p. 8). Bain and Yaklin (2019) likewise assert that "Participating in a study abroad requires students to mentally challenge their cultural and social norms" (p. 4) and recommend that programmes are carefully crafted to incorporate engagement activities, and even screen students to select those who would most benefit from the experience. Schenker (2019) was more negative: her study of 42 students on a short-term Study Abroad programme found that intercultural gains were far more limited than was often posited, with some students making only limited gains in some areas and showing a decline in others, referencing other studies that had similar findings (Bloom & Miranda, 2015; Root & Ngampornchai, 2013), though these studies focused on short-term study abroad, rather than semester-long programmes.

The role of student expectations and the importance of preparation has been the focus of much study, particularly in recent years as opportunities to study abroad continue to grow. Students often have preconceptions and expectations about a particular destination and the experience they will have there, and this could inhibit their development. Edwards (2000) noted that "When we send students to the U.K., if they take with them no discriminating expectations that they will in fact be in a foreign society, it seems over-optimistic to expect that this can possibly be such a meaningful encounter." (p. 91). With the UK remaining one of the most popular destinations 24 years later, this warning should be heeded.

Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay addressed issues around preparation and understanding one's own culture in 2015, but their study is problematic in several ways. Investigating why students choose to study abroad, it briefly recommends "understanding one's own culture" (p. 91) as a means of preparing for study abroad, yet it does not interrogate any underlying – even subconscious – notions of American superiority and

entitlement which other researchers at that time were citing as hurdles to true intercultural competence. Moreover, the integrity of the study is potentially compromised by its ultimate aim of increasing the number of participants on programmes, rather than fostering true intercultural competence among those participants. They claim that “A high level of intercultural communication apprehension will have a negative impact on students’ intentions to participate in Study Abroad, so college advisors must try to allay such apprehension and focus on the positive outcomes of intercultural awareness” (p. 91), but a focus solely on the “positive” could in the long-run prove counterproductive and furnish students with unrealistic expectations, which in itself can have a negative effect on the longer-term experience.

Kortegast and Kupo (2017) purport that, far from dispelling unrealistic expectations, institutions sometimes create them, leading to an environment where intercultural development is almost impossible. They note: “Marketing materials contribute and reinforce U.S. superiority and frame the experience as an opportunity to disengage and judge other cultures through a lens of U.S. dominance” (p. 156). Miller-Idriss et al. (2019) also criticise Study Abroad marketing for creating unrealistic expectations, “commodifying” Study Abroad and present it as “a time of fun and liberation” (p. 1099), implying little effort is needed on behalf of the participants.

Gaudelli and Laverty (2015) likewise fear that a lack of clarity at the outset of a programme renders the experience superficial, with US students “seeking an experience of otherness that is not altogether different from their current lives” (p. 14), and that institutions should plan programmes to allow for spontaneous encounters. Their conclusion is an indictment of contemporary Study Abroad: “Placed within a particular culture”, they say, “students observe it from afar, putting their own lives on hold while engaging an artifice presumably curated for them” (p. 14).

There is a consensus that one’s identity and culture are pivotal to how, and how far, they can develop better intercultural skills. Hunter et al. (2006) note that:

> the most critical step in becoming globally competent is for a person to develop a keen understanding of his or her own cultural norms and expectations: A person should attempt to understand his or her own cultural box before stepping into someone else's (p. 278)

While the above largely focus on enhancing participating students' skills and development, for governments Study Abroad offers other benefits and acts as a form of soft power. The US government and Lincoln Commission before it framed students as missionaries for America (Campbell & Kean, 2016), "spreading American values" (United States Department of State, 2022). This is important as it could be argued that the desire for students to spread American values stands in opposition to, so is irreconcilable with, the assertion that Study Abroad is about enhancing intercultural skills and learning from other cultures. Criticisms of this trend are discussed further later in this review.

This part of the review, then, highlighted that the benefits of Study Abroad are far from assured; that identity and culture are key to the success or failure of studying abroad to deliver these benefits; and that research in this area is crucial to the continuing development of programmes. With this in mind, I turned my focus to American identity, what that meant, and what research has already been undertaken on its impact within Study Abroad.

2.3.2 American Identity

In his 2023 study, Woolf highlights the inextricable positioning of the notion of American culture within Study Abroad, noting that many college websites aimed at preparing students to study abroad refer to "mainstream American culture" (p. 200), thereby suggesting both that there is such a thing, and that it should be self-evident to their readers what this is. "What and where", he asks, "is the mainstream culture to which our students belong?" (p. 200). This question has proved difficult to answer – the US government likewise refers to "American values" in the context of Study Abroad without elaborating on what these are. (United States Department of State, 2024).

Weil (2017) states that “A nation is not a geographical entity. Instead, it is a group of people with a shared identity.” (7.6). He goes on to comment: “American identity is complicated, and current public discourse suggests a sharp divide among American people.” (7.7.1). Part of the difficulty in defining American identity could be its lack of a long, shared history – Whybrow (2006) comments “whereas much of the cultural cohesion of Europe is drawn from a communal sense of place and history, America’s national identity is held together by dreams of individual freedom” (p. 9). Indeed, Schildkraut (2014) notes that “For as long as the United States has existed, Americans have grappled with understanding what being American is all about” (p. 442), and Uscher (2021), an international student at American University, observes that “being an American for most within the U.S. is more than just being part of a piece of land; there is a sentiment and a symbolism behind the term” (para. 4).

The World Values Survey (2020) highlights the USA as being “deviant” among industrialised societies in terms of its traditional values, noting “the United States ranks far below other rich societies, with levels of religiosity and national pride comparable with those found in some developing societies.” (para 17). That a country of apparent outlier status has undeniable global influence – the Lincoln Commission (2005) openly asserted that there was a “consensus among most Americans and many people abroad that the United States should be a global leader. If the world is to be a place in which Americans and their values can be secure, America must lead” (p. 8) – suggests that these “values” should be explored, interrogated and understood, since their influence in all spheres, including Study Abroad, is inevitable.

Despite the polarisation Weil observed, there is some consensus over what constitutes “American values”. There have been attempts to catalogue, define and explain these (Kohls, 1984; Althen, 2005; Althen & Bennett, 2011) and they have periodically been tested to see if they remain accurate, both by asking Americans themselves (Violante et al.,

2020) or asking non-Americans how they viewed American culture (Gmelch & Gmelch, 2016; Nanda, 2016).

In 1984, Kohls laid out his *Values Americans Live By* and illustrated how these differed from values in "some" other countries – he does not provide a definitive list of other countries used as a comparison, though the document refers in places to "Western Europe" (p. 5), "third world countries" (p. 1) and "the traditional Moslem world" (p. 5):

Table 2: Values Americans Live By

US Values	**Some other country's values**
Personal Control Over One's Future	Fate
Change	Tradition
Time and Its Control	Human Interaction
Equality	Hierarchy/Rank/Status
Individualism/Privacy	Group's Welfare
Self-Help	Birthright Inheritance
Competition	Cooperation
Future Orientation	Past Orientation
Action/Work Orientation	"Being" Orientation
Informality	Formality
Directness/Openness/Honesty	Indirectness/Ritual/Fate
Practicality/Efficiency	Idealism
Materialism/Acquisitiveness	Spiritualism/Detachment

(Kohls, 1984, p. 7)

Althen's subsequent article (2005) and collaboration with Bennett (2011) expand upon these vales, giving examples of how such values may assert themselves. Updated for a 21st century educational context, Althen and Bennett's guide is designed to help international students in the USA, so a useful reference point for this study. The book

discusses in detail many of the values isolated by Kohls, in particular equality, individualism, efficiency, consumerism and competition. However, it also acknowledges a sense of superiority at the heart of American culture which is significant to students seeking intercultural development, stating:

> If Americans consider their country to be superior, then it cannot be surprising that they often consider other countries to be inferior. The people in those other countries are assumed to be less intelligent, hardworking, and sensible than Americans are. Political systems in other countries are often assumed to be inadequately responsive to the public and excessively tolerant of corruption and abuse; other economic systems are regarded as less efficient than that of the United States (Althen and Bennett, 2011, Introduction)

They further highlight aspects of American thinking that could act as an obstacle of intercultural development:

> Many Americans are so convinced that their daily behavior is “natural” and “normal” that they suppose only people from other countries have customs. Customs, in this view, are arbitrary restraints on how people would behave if they were free to act naturally—that is, the way Americans act (p. 85)

In 2017, Joe Biden listed the following American “values” in an opinion piece for the *New York Times*: “inclusivity, tolerance, diversity, respect for the rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of the press. If these are the democratic principles we wish to see around the world, America must be the first to model them” (para 2). However, in October 2024, a YouGov/University of Cambridge found that 73% of Americans felt it was important to preserve “American values” (these were not defined in the study), and 65% believed American values were under threat. (YouGov, 2024). Writing in November 2024 after the election, one opinion writer lamented:

> the majority of voters were prepared to look the other way on what used to be core American values. They shrugged off the rule of law, freedom of the press, support for democracy at home and abroad, and basic civility in the nation's public discourse. (Harris, 2024)

Defining contemporary Americanness, then, is far from simple. However, there are historic terms that are still used even today and are commonly referenced in the literature.

Two common phrases that are often associated with American culture are the "melting pot" and the "American dream", which Cullen (2003) believes "remains a major element of our national identity" (p. 6). The "dream", he says, is built on the notion that "America is the nation of self-made men" (p. 69) and that it is possible for anyone to achieves success if they work hard enough. This construct has, however, faced criticism among college students in recent years: a 2022 study showed that, while many still had faith in the idea of an "American dream", many felt it needed to be redefined, and associated it with values such as material wealth that did not always align with environmental and other values (Scott et al., 2022).

The notion of the "melting pot" is equally problematic. Like the American Dream, it is an ideal that does not necessarily live up to itself when interrogated. Teague and Beechey (2020) note that "Becoming an American is a conscious act, an ideological commitment to a set of values and a way of life" (p. 46) rather than being an accident of birth. They define the US as a nation of individuals united by a common set of beliefs, and this is partly achieved by the notion popularly known as the "melting pot", whereby immigrants from all over the world have combined to form one, "united" nation. While on the surface this may sound laudable, Paul (2014) describes it as an "ambiguous symbol of American unity... Who is in the 'pot' and who is doing the 'melting'? What exactly is melted down?" (p. 260). The "melting pot", he argues, is in fact a "repressive concept" (p. 276), favouring and reinforcing the dominant culture. To thrive, this society built on the notion of individualism requires newcomers to assimilate, a process Rumbaut (2015) describes as a "non-violent,

uncoerced, more or less unconscious form of “ethnic cleansing.”” (p. 6) which results in a “thinning of ethnic identities” (p. 12). This, in turn, gives rise to many values identified as uniquely American: assimilation “stressed the denial of ethnic difference and the forgetting of cultural practices in favour of Americanisation,” (Campbell & Kean, 2016, p. 52), but even now this is not necessarily seen as a negative, since Americans believe their country is superior (Althen and Bennett, 2011). Assimilation, then, is a small sacrifice to gain coveted American nationality, and continued immigration surely supports that view (Althen & Bennett, 2011).

In looking at conceptions of American identity among adults and children, Violante et al. (2020) concluded both that the United States was an Anglo-dominated culture, and found that respondents placed expectations on others to “prove” their Americanness. In particular, participants rated those who “love” America to be more American than those who did not. Abascal and Angel Centeno’s earlier (2017) study looked at patriotism and arrived at similar conclusions, with an ostentatious demonstration required to prove one’s Americanness: “behaviour”, they wrote, “is central to popular understandings of patriotism, which stress the role of service to the nation–state.” (p. 835).

For the melting pot ideal to even be possible, the US had to have its own, distinct culture and set of beliefs and values which immigrants could then adopt. Yokata (2010) suggests the uniqueness of American culture stems from its consciously separating itself from the UK following independence, effectively curating its own distinct culture that stemmed from, but was self-consciously different from that of its former rulers. The resulting culture was therefore heavily influenced by the Anglo-Saxon cultures from which its founding population originated. She posits that a level of defensiveness (also noted by Gmelch and Gmelch) could remain deep in the subconscious of Americans, stating “Americans’ unflattering defensiveness and repeated national boasting was a consequence of their inferior position via-a-vis the British” (p. 18). This, perhaps, could account for the effort that

still goes into ostentatiously asserting these values within the national culture to this day: Macia (2016) observes:

> National pride in the United States of America…is omnipresent and intensely stimulated. Flags are present everywhere you turn: in public buildings, in malls, on trucks, on sweaters. Children pledge allegiance to the flag daily, the national anthem is sung at the beginning of most important gatherings, and many national holidays are strongly American. Out of ten national holidays, at least five seem to reinforce national identity and pride (p. 110)

Again, it could be argued that such values are therefore so pervasive as to create an obstacle to any intercultural growth sought through Study Abroad, while serving the government's desire to maintain American dominance.

This section of the review highlights an active intention to create a unified identity – something Woolf (2023) writes off as an "illusion" (p. 203). It demonstrates that there are identifiable values that could be said to be uniquely American, and have remained part of the American psyche for decades, if not centuries, due to its self-conscious attempts at creating a culture (Yokota, 2010). As such, the US is a nation of contradictions that often finds itself at odds with nations of similar standing (World Values Survey Association, 2020) while still wielding unmatchable global power, and incredible self-confidence (Althen & Bennett, 2011; Teage & Beechey, 2020), and a statistically diverse nation (Eller, 2015) that nonetheless seeks to blunt this diversity to remain as a "society characterized as overwhelmingly European and white, Protestant, and English-speaking. "American" essentially meant an offshoot of English society" (p. 27), leading many (non-white) Americans to experience "identity denial" (Violante et al., 2020, p. 54). DeVos and Banaji's 2005 study led – for the most part – to similar findings, with even Asian Americans strongly associating "American" with "white", leading the researchers to conclude that "these studies provide evidence that to be American is implicitly synonymous with being White." (p. 447).

In conclusion, much of the literature suggests a deeply embedded culture rooted in myths (Paul, 2014) and dreams (Cullen, 2003) that appear difficult – if not impossible – to shake. Is it reasonable, then, to expect that they might be shaken in a temporary period of overseas study?

2.3.3 Americans and Study Abroad

This research takes place at a time of enormous growth in Study Abroad, encouraged by the US government. Study Abroad has often been seen in the context of the benefits it provides to the US, with the Lincoln Commission in 2005 aiming for one million Americans to study abroad by 2016, (though this was not achieved), citing global diplomacy and national security as key drivers for its expansion and concluding that "Making study abroad the norm and not the exception can position this and future generations of Americans for success in the world in much the same way that establishment of the land-grant university system and enactment of the GI Bill helped create the "American century."" (Lincoln Commission, 2005, p. v). Now, in 2024, numbers are returning to pre-pandemic levels – prior to the pandemic, both numbers and the range of destinations had been rising through the 21st century (Open Doors, 2024) - though as both Sol (2016) and Bouldon (2022) noted, despite previous attempts and rhetoric to make Study Abroad more diverse, the number of ethnic minority students has changed little in the past decade. Data (Open Doors 2024) shows the percentage of Study Abroad students who are black has wavered between 5.3 and 6.4% over the last decade, and actually dropped as a percentage of the whole during the pandemic. Likewise, participation of community college students in study abroad has remained negligible despite the recommendations of the Lincoln Commission (Amani and Kim, 2018).

American Study Abroad should be understood in the wider context of American Higher Education. In his overview, Thelin (2017) warns of national self-interest often fuelling government intervention into Higher Education, citing the 1944 Serviceman's Readjustment Act, often known as the G.I. Bill, as an example of this – while this bill increased accessibility

and affordability of Higher Education for ex-servicemen, its primary political motive was to stem immediate discontent by seeming to provide generous and proactive support for those leaving the armed forces, who were also held in high esteem by the general public, making the bill popular among voters. The Lincoln Commission and official government support of Study Abroad, then, with their explicit emphasis on participants spreading “American values”, could be viewed, if not with suspicion, with the acknowledgment that there are always broader factors at play. Study Abroad also operates within a broader educational culture that could create obstacles for students and programmes aiming to foster intercultural development. Thelin (2017) notes that educational institutions are bound by regulatory obligations and internal policies that make them very risk-averse, as an inadvertent breach could risk losing federal funding – this could impact the expansion of Study Abroad. Indeed, this approach was highlighted by institutions’ responses to the pandemic, when the US government’s designation of many popular destinations, including the UK, as level 4 (Do Not Travel) – the highest travel advisory – meaning that many institutions, whose internal health and safety policies stated students could not travel to destinations ranked as level 3 or higher, would not allow their students to travel (Fisher, 2021). Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) highlight similar constraints: Higher Education, they claim, is driven by what students demand, not what they need. A culture of “safetyism”, where institutions are afraid of legal and reputational ramifications if their students are allowed to feel “uncomfortable”, is, they claim, preventing students from developing resilience. In a Study Abroad context, where discomfort is a “necessary step” to learning about a new culture (Althen & Bennett, 2011, p. 244), it could be argued that safetyism renders the experience pointless. Finally, some believe that broader American values pervade Higher Education to such an extent as to have a detrimental effect on Study Abroad: Gore (2010) states that “nationalistic biases continue to pervade American education… serious academic work can be done best in the US” (p. 285); indeed, Nolan (2018) suggests the reticence of faculty towards Study Abroad hinders its effectiveness. Many believe that nationalism holds a strong influence over Study Abroad, which “operates in a politicized world, subject to the

clash of open and closed ideologies, internationalism, and nationalism". (Woolf, 2023, p. 194).

In recent years, a trend has emerged whereby commentators and researchers have been far more critical of American Study Abroad and questioning of its motives and values. Several focus on how the USA's global dominance shapes how American students view the very act of studying abroad, and the impact this view then has of how they experience it. They argue that US study abroad is a form of "privileged migration" that amounts to academic tourism (Breen, 2012) – Kinginger's "modern-day Grand Tour" (Kinginger, 2010, p. 225) where "American students use the world to his or her advantage" (Kortegast & Kupo, 2017, p. 156).

Zemach-Bersin (2012) considers Study Abroad to be an inherently nationalistic act, and that in the US "claims to global and national citizenship are widely imagined as irreconcilable and mutually exclusive" (p. 89). She believes that Study Abroad is a form of American diplomacy, with participants "assumed to actively combat anti-Americanism, disabusing foreign "natives" of their misconceptions and prejudices towards the US" (p. 99). Ultimately, she believes, "the globe is something to be consumed, a commodity that the privileged American student has the unchallenged and unquestioned right to obtain as an entitled citizen of the world." (p. 100). Her 2009 study focuses more on the marketing around Study Abroad, and again shows a focus on the world being a passive place that Americans can explore. This study has been included here as it involved interviews with students at a Liberal Arts college following a period of study abroad around their reasons for choosing their destination and their thoughts afterwards. Some of the responses are striking and appear to dispel traditional claims around intercultural competency and instead support concerns expressed by Kinginger and others that it reinforces American dominance. She notes that none of the twenty-five interviewees described themselves as "global" citizens, but identified primarily as American, in many cases more strongly than they had done prior to studying abroad. While it is clear Zemach-Bersin seeks to support a particular, strongly-held

viewpoint with limited qualitative research (conducted with a small sample at a single institution) these results are not anomalous when examined alongside more detailed studies in this review, and she raises valid concerns around the marketing of study abroad, the preparation of students ahead of it, and the attention given (very little) to reflection upon their return. In 2021, Moreno was still bemoaning the uncritical use of terms such as “global”, imploring practitioners and students to adopt a more critical mindset, and particularly to question assumptions around their experiences if they are to truly benefit culturally and not merely compare their experiences, often unfavourably, to those at home. Again, I found this was the reality reflected in some of the few studies conducted in this area.

Even before Zemach-Bersin, Reilly and Senders (2009) had cautioned that contemporary Study Abroad was moving away from its Fulbright ideals and taking on a more political role with American national interests and global dominance at its heart, even going so far as to support the war on terror and increase US competitiveness. They suggest Study Abroad has the potential to be a force for good, and lay out a series of recommendations for practitioners to reframe and change the language around study abroad so it can more honestly meet its objectives. For example, they recommend students viewing their time abroad as a means of solving contemporary problems. Using Denmark as an example, they suggest that students studying abroad there could consider its approach to the welfare state and to environmentalism to encourage a wider public discourse in these areas, while also asking in turn if there is anything Denmark could learn from the US to inform public discourse there.

These criticisms provide a useful backdrop for contemporary Study Abroad and help inform how the students in this study might experience Study Abroad and negotiate their American identity throughout it, and thus provide a helpful background against which to study the research questions – where studies have already addressed, to some degree, identity (such as Zermach-Bersin’s students still defining strongly as “American”, it will be useful to see if a more focused study obtains similar results, or more nuanced sentiments.

2.3.4 American Identity and Study Abroad

As early as 2004, Dolby stated that “study abroad provides not only the possibility of encountering the world, but of encountering oneself— particularly one’s national identity — in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of that self” (p. 150). She is even more explicit in her 2007 follow-up article: “Although universities often promote Study Abroad through paradigms that emphasize global awareness, national sentiments and identity are still fundamental elements of how Americans see and position themselves in the world, particularly in the post–September 11 context.” (p. 141). Dolby’s work was so fundamental in embedding ideas around nationality and its relevance in study abroad that it is both surprising and disappointing that, despite her work being cited in many later articles, few directly address or build upon her ideas.

In considering the role of (American) national identity in Study Abroad, articles were sorted into the following categories:

Category 1: Articles, reflections and literature reviews (rather than original studies) that interrogated and discussed aspects of Study Abroad where American identity was given significantly included or given particular focus

Category 2: Studies which sought to understand aspects of Study Abroad where the participants’ American identity was touched upon in the data and analysis

Category 3: Studies and articles where American identity was a significant or primary focus

Table 3: Studies Referencing American Identity

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Breen (2012)	Davis & Knight (2021)	Dolby (2004, 2007)
Kinginger (2010)	Donitsa et al. (2005)	Goldstein (2017)
Kortegast & Kupo (2017)	Edwards (2000)	Jewett (2010)
Moreno (2021)	Grieb (2023)	Kartoshkina (2015
Reilly & Senders (2009)	Pitts (2009)	Savicki & Cooley (2011)
Ungar (2016)	Streitwieser & Light (2018)	Souders (2006)
Woolf (2011)	Walsh & Walsh (2018)	Willett (2018)
Wolflink (2018)	Wolcott & Mokyta (2013)	Young et al. (2015)
Zemach-Bersin (2012)	Zemach-Bersin (2009)	

It has been established that there is broad agreement that intercultural competence is a desired outcome of Study Abroad, and that understanding one's own identity is a necessary step in developing true, meaningful intercultural competence. Grieb's (2023) study focuses on Study Abroad outcomes and touches on the impact of American identity, noting that studying abroad has the potential for both "identity-affirming and destabilising outcomes" (p. 76). Wolflink (2018), interrogating the notion of studying abroad to benefit the USA as a whole, purports that understanding the US's role in the wider world should be a primary aim of studying abroad, and that "communal self-criticism and identity formation" is crucial in achieving this, concluding that, "The proposal championed here is to get students to think about their own citizenship and the power they experience because of it, rather than merely to help them maximise that power." (p. 111)

Savicki and Cooley (2011) sought to demonstrate the changes in students' attitudes toward how they viewed their own national identity. Their research addresses how studying abroad instilled changes in the ways in which students interrogated their own identity, noting

that “Americanness becomes more salient in non-American settings... they may have noticed aspects of their American identity that were not salient or commented on in the US” (p. 347). This hypothesis was tested by comparing study abroad students with those who remained in the US but were enrolled in a class covering some of the concepts relevant to an exploration of identity, such as stereotyping. Using the American Identity Measure (Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2008) to question both groups, they found a marked difference in how each group perceived and interrogated their American identity. The study is especially useful in providing evidence (using the AIM) of a notable difference between the two groups, rather than data obtained purely from Study Abroad participants. The researchers noted that Americanness was more salient in non-American settings, whereby students noticed aspects of their identity that would not be commented upon at home – this supports Souders’ (2006) earlier assertion that “The only way to understand our American culture is to step outside of it.” (p. 26) They also suggested that students may come to value certain aspects of American more where they experience dissatisfaction as part of their abroad experience. This supposition is partly supported by subsequent qualitative studies considered in this review, particularly Kartoshkina (2015).

Given such findings, it seems surprising that relatively few qualitative studies focus largely or purely on the role of American identity within the Study Abroad experience – the articles identified as fitting into categories 2 and 3 above are exceptions to this, providing a range of useful insights into students’ lived experiences abroad. In a qualitative study using unstructured interviews, Kartoshkina (2015) concludes that American students develop a “critical” or “appreciative” lens to the US after studying abroad. Most students in the study showed elements of both, contrary to Zemach-Bersin's findings, which perhaps did not explore fully the complexities of emotions upon return. On the contrary, Kartoshkina found that 85% of those interviewed became more critical of some aspects of the US (a focus on monetary success, fast pace of life and a lack of attention to environmental issues were some of the examples given), and 75% became more appreciative of certain aspects

including the quality of education and individual rights. The study both highlights the significance of American culture within a study abroad context, but also offers a more positive picture of how students negotiate it.

Goldstein (2017) indicates that specific circumstances or contexts can influence the lens through which students view their national identity. Researching American identity during Trump's presidency, she questions whether students who encounter negative reactions and are stereotyped by members of their host culture are less likely to engage positively with it, hypothesising that "Student sojourners with a strong attachment to an American identity may be most vulnerable to stereotype threat when exposed to stereotypes focused on the U.S. and Americans." (p. 95). However, the results did not show this, leading her to conclude instead that "It is possible that students who very strongly identify as U.S. Americans are better able to dismiss stereotypes or make external attributions for their content" (p. 102), and recommending more extensive, longitudinal research. Studies such as this are useful for focusing how and to whom preparation and on-programme support should be targeted.

Goldstein draws heavily on Dolby's earlier research, which again emphasises the importance of context. Conducting research soon after 9/11, Dolby (2007) observed that students were acutely aware of their national identity while studying abroad due to the US's role in the world at that time, and that in some cases "For some students, it became important not only to criticize Americans who were displaying bad behaviour but to actively try to counter the American stereotypes." (p. 148) This was especially salient at the time of my study, with the 2024 Presidential election approaching. Dolby devotes much time to defining "national identity", something neglected by other studies to their detriment, and which she describes as a "passive fact" for many students (p. 163). In this context, Dolby's qualitative, interpretive results are insightful and powerful, concluding that study abroad can lead students to adopt a dual identity, displaying "membership in a nation and a national

imaginary, while at the same time questioning the assumed equivalence of state and nation." (Dolby, 2004, p. 152).

Walsh and Walsh (2018) build on Dolby's and Kartoshkina's research, again showing students emerging with a negotiated, nuanced identity, able to appreciate certain aspects of American life while gaining new perspectives on American culture – for example, one student cited a more relaxed attitude to life, as witnessed in Italy, as preferable to the American need for constant activity (my study was later to find the same among some participants). Again, this study encouragingly counters those that fear that study abroad merely reasserts American dominance and superiority, inspiring practitioners to develop programming which enhances this type of reflection and personal development. Pitts' study likewise looked for patterns and themes in adjustment among students studying in Paris, and found that every participant "experienced a shift toward a more complex, multifaceted understanding of what it meant to be ''American,'' (Pitts, 2009, p. 458).

Finally, Willett (2018), studying students in South Africa, takes time to define not only national but also global identity, which she describes as identifying one's own uniqueness in the context of the wider world, suggesting this could be the aim of Study Abroad. Vocalised in this way it is an aim that does not sit in opposition to the American value of individualism. Using a qualitative methodology, Willett found students reflected heavily on their home culture, developed an enhanced appreciation for aspects of it, but also reflected critically on issues such as poverty, which they had not considered in relation to the US before. This study is especially interesting as it pertains to study in South Africa, so is different from studies in more traditional locations such as Paris (Wolcott and Motkoya, 2013; Pitts, 2009) or Australia (Dolby, 2004; Spenader et al., 2022), yet shows a similar outcome, including development of a more global identity.

Several studies explain changes in identity as a "negotiation", with students increasing in affinity with some aspects of their (American) identity while recognising alternatives as being as or more desirable. Young et al. (2015) describe identity as in a

constant state of flux, and that “identity negotiation occurs when one’s secure image of themselves is threatened when faced with difference or unfamiliar contexts” (p. 185). Focusing on lived experiences and their associated emotions, the authors’ findings support those of earlier studies, particularly a tendency for some aspects of American identity to be strengthened. The study also addresses the changing nature of identity in a global context and the simultaneous need for group identification whilst still being open to influences from the host culture. Interviewing students after they have returned from studying abroad, future studies might benefit further from interviewing students at different points before, during and after their studies to capture the full journey of identity change.

Streitweiser and Light (2018) note that students’ international experiences stem from the range of identities they bring from home. Through a qualitative methodology, they identify four responses to identity within Study Abroad, from a complete conservation of one’s own identity to an identity “transformation” where one questions their values and norms and then embraces the new culture on its own terms. Providing rich, first-person data, this study, while it does not look as deeply into what it means to be American, provides an encouraging response to fears of American dominance, showing that multiple reactions to cultural difference are not only possible but demonstrable.

While many articles above saw students negotiating between their American and a more global identity, other studies went further to consider the interplay and significance of nationality against other aspects of students’ identities. Donitsa-Schmidt and Vadish (2005) focus on students with competing identities – American, Jewish and Israeli – and whether studying in Israel would strengthen any of these. Investigating the importance of different aspects of identity that make up the whole, the study found students identified primarily as Jewish, then American, then Israeli, and that this did not change as a result of studying abroad. The study is limited in that the methodology used questionnaires, whereas interview-based qualitative research might have achieved more nuanced, more meaningful results. Jewett’s (2010) study used a qualitative approach, studying students with Irish heritage who

chose to study abroad in Ireland, and the impact of this on their identity as Irish/American. She found that students who described themselves as Irish while in the US found that studying abroad “affirmed their Americanness” (p. 649). Many of their findings reaffirmed Dolby’s studies, where students saw their (in this case multiple) identities viewed from the outside and even challenged. It demonstrates the complexity and multi-facetedness of identity and again underlines the need for continued, detailed research to explore and understand it. Understanding the role of heritage identities for students who study abroad is also a growing sub-field of research in identity as study abroad becomes more diverse and expands to a wider range of destinations.

In the same way that Jewett focused on the interplay between perception and reality of identities in relation to students’ heritage, Woolf’s (2011) study noted the importance of how the destination was perceived in how the students experienced their identity, noting that “Europe is perceived as a place where American students may remake and reform their identities.” (p. 293). This article is significant since Western Europe remains the most popular destination for Americans, but that it is represented and constructed within American culture in ways that are “simultaneously true and untrue. Within that paradox resides a great learning opportunity” (p. 289). Addressing the myths and realities of the concepts of “American” and “European” and how they interact, his ideas are useful for incorporating within curricula to help students understand the sort of changes and experiences – good and bad – that Jewett, Dolby and others demonstrate. Wolcott and Motyka’s (2013) qualitative research illustrates this in practice, where students who chose to study in France precisely because of how it was portrayed in American culture found the reality different and unsettling. The study, again benefiting from its use of interviews to obtain rich, relatable data, encompasses many of the findings discussed here: once again, the students returned with a more nuanced understanding of their identity (with one describing herself more as Californian than American) and their exposure to stereotypes of Americans in turn helped them understand their own tendencies to stereotype others.

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks

This study could not be designed, or its results sufficiently understood, without situating it within existing theoretical frameworks that help explain and understand the phenomena being studied. Several theoretical frameworks focusing on identity and personal development, and their application within an educational context, were explored ahead of this study.

2.4.1 Theoretical Frameworks Focusing on Identity

As national identity is central to the research questions, theoretical frameworks pertaining to both identity and identity development were a focus.

Other studies around study abroad and identity have used a range of theoretical frameworks. Savicki and Cooley's 2011 study – one of the most pertinent here given its focus on American identity – employed Erikson's theory of psychosocial development to explore whether contact with another culture would increase students' explorations of and commitment to their American identities. This theory can be useful as it situates an individual – and therefore their identity – within a social context, recognising contextual influences in the creation of identity, which he purported occurred over a series of eight identifiable stages. During the fifth and sixth stages – adolescence and young adult – Erikson believes asking "Who am I?" is central to an individual's development. (Erikson, 1968.) College students fall into this stage, and this theory therefore has potential value in this study: in his analysis of Erikson's contribution to the field, Maree (2022) notes: "This is a time when young people strive to undertake key developmental tasks and, especially, validate their sense of self, who they are, their self-concept or self-view, as well as their self-image." (p. 127). Maree acknowledges that much of Erikson's work – particularly concepts like "identity crisis" and his insistence that identity development continues throughout one's life (though is largely consolidated through adolescence) – are still significant today and inform much of modern psychology, and are used in present-day counselling. Maree's analysis ultimately focuses on the continuing significance of Erikson's work on career counselling (Maree's own

specialism), and the importance of forming a “career-life identity” (p. 131) noting that it “underscores the importance of considering the nature and impact of people’s idiosyncratic identity crises during career counselling.” (p. 131). This is not to say his theories are not still relevant elsewhere, and his stages of development still have the potential to form at least a broad backdrop to help researchers understand students’ challenges, motivations and processes at the time in their lives when they are studying abroad.

In their book exploring identity development and college students, Jones and Abes (2013) note that while Erikson’s conceptualisation of identity laid the groundwork for many later theorists, much has changed since then. Applied in a modern day context, his theory is limiting and at times problematic: Jones and Abes note that his writing specifically had men in mind, demonstrates at times a dismissive approach to women, and it does not take into account intersectional identities that are the focus of more recent theories.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) purports that a person’s self-concept of their identity results in part from their membership of different social groups, that these groups are myriad – they could include social class, religion, family, sports team, etc. – and that social identity provides a sense of belonging, purpose and self-worth (Tajfel et al., 1979). This has particular pertinence to a study focusing on a specific aspect of identity – American identity – and how that might interact with and evolve from and within new groups and contexts. Furthermore, the theory stresses the tendency of labelling of one’s own group as the “in-group”, necessitating the need for an “out-group”, and thus impacting how the two interplay (Hogg et al, 1995). In this way, SIT has the potential to provide a useful framework for examining students’ relationships between their own identity groups (nationality, for the purposes of this study, being the most salient) and other – potentially opposing – groups (“British people”, for example).

In his detailed examination of national identity, Tartakovsky (2011) bemoans the fact that there is no theory exclusively dedicated to national identity, and suggests Social Identity Theory as an option. However, he cautions that this theory has some limitations, particularly

with its assumptions. Specifically, he is concerned that it views national identity as passive, and "does not explain how identification with a nation is formed, what factors affect this process, and why people differ in the extent to which they identify with their nation" (p. 1854). With regards to my own study, in addition to these concerns, I worried that a Study Abroad programme was not the best place context within which to use this framework – its emphasis is on group dynamics, yet one of the criticisms levelled at Study Abroad (particularly island programmes, from which some of my volunteers would be drawn) is that it offers only superficial engagement with other cultures, and many students would primarily continue to socialise with others of the same nationality. As such, it would not be reasonable to assume that any significant changes in their perception of national identity were down to active social interactions with those from "other" groups.

There is also an argument for taking an intersectional approach to this study. Jones and Abes (2013) note that intersectionality is now popular in educational contexts researching student development due to its ability to capture the complexities of individuals and take into account the multiple identities each possesses. An intersectional approach has been employed in similar studies, most notably Willis (2015), also a qualitative study which looked at meaning-making among African American women studying abroad and used interviews to obtain data, and as such it had many similarities to the study planned here. This approach can be illuminating as it first assumes multiple identities and looks at them not in isolation, but in terms of how they impact – and are impacted by – one another. As this study sought both to recruit a diverse cohort and to look at the impact of American identity (assuming this to be just one of many identities whose salience may change throughout a period of study abroad) such an approach is valuable. At the same time, at the core of intersectionality is an acknowledgment of inequality, "locating individuals within larger structures of privilege and oppression" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 136). For my study, while elements of power and privilege were expected to arise and have great pertinence to the study – indeed, power and privilege emerged as a sub-theme during the analysis – there

was a concern that an explicitly intersectional approach could take this study in a direction that was not intended from the initial research questions, or heavily influence the analysis in ways that would hinder answering those questions accurately.

Harris and Patton (2018) caution against the misuse of intersectionality, and the potential pitfalls for researchers attempting to use it. They warn that it is often used ineffectively as little more than an “ornamental buzzword” (p. 359). They also note that “in defining intersectionality, higher education scholars consistently focused on the intersections of social identities” while failing to “connect these everyday identity specific experiences to intersecting structures of oppression.” (p. 361). Again, as this was not the purpose of my study, using intersectionality as my framework could have been disingenuous and even unhelpful. They conclude that it is a “powerful framework to guide transformative higher education research, but it must be used thoughtfully and with great caution to ensure it does not become further diminished throughout the research process” (p. 366).

It is fair to say that, while an intersectional approach was rejected for the myriad reasons above as a framework for this study, its assertions influenced the researcher during the analysis stage: the study does not look explicitly into the experiences of a marginalised group(s), but some students within the study fall into such groups, so a knowledge of intersectionality and its intentions and thus an awareness of how different levels of marginalisation interact were useful to interpret and understanding the findings, while not actively directional.

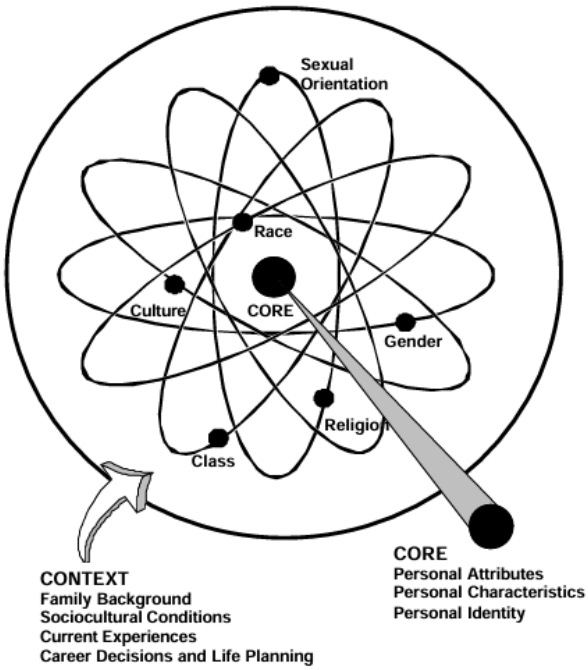
Jones and McEwan’s (2000) conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) combines aspects of several theories discussed above and provides a potentially useful theoretical framework for this type of study. The model grew partly from the recognition that “most developmental models and related research have addressed only a single dimension of identity, such as race or sexual orientation” and “do not address how an individual may simultaneously develop and embrace multiple minority statuses.” (p. 405). The model is particularly pertinent due to its development with college students in mind, and

was developed due to there being a lack of a model of multiple identities that “suggested a process by which multiple identities are developed and negotiated” (p. 406). As this study looks at the impact of one particular aspect of identity – American identity – on students’ experiences of studying abroad, and assumes multiple identities will come into play during their time abroad and potentially impact students’ conceptions of their “Americanness”, such a model could have direct relevance to understanding those experiences and their interplay. The model was created to illustrate the following key findings in the construction of identity:

1. Identity was defined and understood as having multiple intersecting dimensions
2. Contextual influences such as race, culture, gender, family, education, relationships with those different from oneself, and religion play a role in the construction of identity
3. The particular salience (the importance applied to a particular element) of identity dimensions depended upon the contexts in which they were experienced.
4. Difference and privilege are acknowledged as playing a role in the salience of different aspects of identity.

This was then illustrated as follows, with a core (“inner”) identity at the centre, and external identities (those often named/defined externally) on the outside:

Figure 1: Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity



(Jones & McEwan, 2000, p. 409)

Jones and McEwan's original study used a phenomenological approach and focused on the "identity stories" of participants (Jones & McEwan, 2000, p. 408). While the initial study alone had limitations (it focused on a limited number of participants, all of whom were female), later work has expanded upon the framework and illustrated its use in college-based studies that focus on aspects of identity: Jones and Abes (2013) cite several studies including Rumann and Hamrick, (2010), that focuses on veteran students. As with Study Abroad, Rumann and Hamrick's study in particular focuses on students undergoing transition and uses the adapted RMMDI (explained briefly below) to make sense of their experiences.

Jones and Abe's subsequent research took the MMDI further, leading to the Reconceptualised MMDI (RMMDI), which illustrates the connection between multiple identities and meaning-making using an analogy of a "filter" through which meaning is

created. However, as my study is looking at experiences within a specific educational context (the Study Abroad programme) and seeks, as a result of the findings, to make practical recommendations that can be enacted within the sector to maximise both student development and the student experience, I rejected this more complex framework as I wanted to situate the study within a framework of learning. I therefore have used the original, simpler MMDI to provide a basic framework through which to understand and situate participants' identities: it provided a constant, visual reminder that identities are complex and myriad, with different aspects taking centre stage at different times. This influenced how certain questions were framed, particularly in the first and third interviews – for example, students were asked, before the notion of "American" identity was explicitly mentioned, which aspects of their identity was most important to them. This helped me form an understanding of each individual and their personal concepts of identity so that I could understand the context within which each was then experiencing their American identity.

While the MMDI was crucial in forming an understanding of individuals and how identity is experienced, I also sought to find a theory of learning through which my students' development could be mapped and understood.

2.4.2 Learning Theories

Broadly, this study uses a Constructivist framework, as is common with qualitative research. Mogashoa (2014) describes it as a theory of knowledge

> that argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas… Learning activities in constructivist settings are characterised by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving, and collaboration with others (p. 52)

and discusses its applicability to qualitative research in education. With a focus on experiences, it is especially pertinent to learning in a Study Abroad setting. Hein's (2007) basic principles for constructivist learning are a useful starting point for studies focusing on

Study Abroad. Emphasising that learning is contextual, he also stresses that it is social and that it is active, requiring engagement and motivation from the participant in order to be achieved. One could look at the data in this study, then, and ask how active students had been in engaging with opportunities and how motivated they were (though motivation is a difficult concept to quantify, and it is unlikely any participant would consider themselves to be unmotivated!)

While it was tempting to use Hein's principles as a framework in itself, there are many theories of learning that fall under a constructivist umbrella and that focus specifically on university-age students, or students in particular types of setting, and which therefore had the potential to offer a more solid, tailored theoretical framework for this study.

There are numerous learning theories that seek to explain both how students learn and how they then develop a sense of self. Arnett (2000) developed Emerging Adulthood Theory in response to changing trends in the USA, such as people marrying later, resulting in late teens/twenties as being "not simply a brief period of transition into adult roles but a distinct period of the life course, characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions." (p. 469). He proposed a new theory of learning that focused on 18-25-year-olds, arguing this was a unique period where a person is neither a dependent child nor a fully-fledged adult, and where

> many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (p. 469).

Drawing on the work of Erikson, and with a focus on identity, this theory was initially of particular interest as it applies to the demographic being studied and seeks to explain why this age group is unique in terms of its development. While the theory has been criticised for over-generalising and not taking into account differences between social classes that may mean it is not applicable to all in this age group (Côté, 2014) it is a useful framework for

situating those being studied, who, as university students, do appear to meet the Arnett's criteria. Beyond this, however, it offers nothing more, and I would argue that university practitioners often view their students in this way, even if they are not familiar with "emerging adulthood" as a theory.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) has also been used extensively in studies that focus on Study Abroad. Briefly, it is a constructivist theory that purports that learning should be viewed as a process, rather than in terms of outcomes, and that learning involves relearning. It emphasises that learning relies on an individual's interactions with their environment, and that "learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person - thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving". (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). As such, its applicability to Study Abroad is striking. However, it is often applied in studies focusing on the effectiveness of programmes and teaching, rather than on students' mindsets and influences that could impact the level and extent of their intercultural learning. While I am hopeful that this study will lead to recommendations for practitioners designing programmes by gaining a deeper understanding of student experiences, its purpose is not to interrogate a particular style or structure, but to have wide applicability to Study Abroad, with an initial focus on the UK (since, again, it is hoped it will lead to wider studies). Mikulec (2019) used ELT to demonstrate the effectiveness of short-term study abroad, and Strange and Gibson (2017) used ELT in a quantitative study into the transformative power of Study Abroad, combined with another theory – Transformative Learning Theory – that has some overlap with ELT, but with a focus on individual learners more applicable to this study.

2.4.2.1 Transformative Learning Theory. Works cited in this review take a range of theoretical standpoints, and many have worked within Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory framework (Dorsett et al. 2019; Walters et al. 2017; Grabowski-Faulkner et al. 2017; Stone et al., 2017;), where new experiences help widen and develop more inclusive frames of reference. This was potentially applicable to my research questions due to its emphasis

on identity and reflection: Mezirow noted that, “to facilitate transformative learning, educators must help learners become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions” (Mezirow 1997, p. 10). Mezirow’s emphasis on ethnocentrism and example of it as something that can be changed through this process makes it potentially relevant to the experience of the socially-dominant, “neo-colonial” American students highlighted above. (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learning is an attempt to provide a model that explains to others (including educators) how adults learn in particular cultural settings (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011). With its focus on adult learners and emphasis on cultural context, it is especially applicable to Study Abroad. Initially stating that Transformative Learning required three elements – individual experience, critical reflection and dialogue – Mezirow later expanded this to incorporate ten phases (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011). While the term “transformative” could be daunting to practitioners, Brinson, in a user-friendly summary, reminds us that “When you change your mind, even if it’s just slightly, your life takes on a new direction.” (Brinson, 2022).

Not dissimilar to this study, Mezirow’s original study sought to understand how learning takes place, and what might hinder it. At the core of Mezirow’s theory is the concept of the “disorienting dilemma”. DiAngelis (2022) defines this succinctly as “Disorienting dilemmas may be thought of as times when new information causes a person to call into question their values, beliefs, or assumptions” (p. 585). It could be argued that the mere act of Study Abroad itself has the potential to represent a disorienting dilemma (Bain & Yaklin, 2019).

Kitchenham (2008, p. 105) summarises the ten phases as follows:

Table 4: Ten Phases of Transformative Learning

Phase 1	A disorienting dilemma
Phase 2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt and shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning a new course of action
Phase 7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
Phase 8	Provisional trying of new roles
Phase 9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

(Mezirow, 1978, in Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105)

2.4.2.2 Application of Transformative Learning Theory in Higher Education

Research. Academic studies prior to this have applied Transformative Learning theory to a Study Abroad context. Dorsett et al. (2019) considered it to be the dominant framework for understanding the transformative learning process within Higher Education, noting that Study Abroad programmes "aspire to be transformative" (p. 567). However, their study examines Australian students studying in India – two cultures of great contrast where it could be argued the mere displacement from one to the other would be disorienting. Furthermore, my research questions whether US nationals are unique in how their national identity is experienced, necessitating research amongst this group specifically.

Many others have used TLT as a framework for observing student learning, or have undertaken studies within Higher Education to assess the validity of TLT. Cavander et al. (2020) used TLT to design a programme specifically intended to foster transformative learning during a short trip to Greece and found it to be effective even within a limited

timeframe, with students reporting that the trip altered how they saw themselves in relation to the wider world, realising that, prior to travel, their views had been shaped by those in immediate proximity to them. The transformative potential on a short trip (though to a more contrasting destination, where speaking a different language also impacted students' experiences) emphasised the power of TLT and underlined its applicability in the context of a longer programme where students would have even more time for transformation to take place, but arguably fewer obvious opportunities to do so given the absence of an additional language. Gambrell (2018) likewise explored the idea that language learning had the potential to accelerate transformation, providing first the disorienting dilemma for students with the potential for liberation when a level of language acquisition is achieved. At the same time, his conclusions expressed criticism both of Study Abroad and Mezirow's theory, which he felt was too simplistic in places, particularly its emphasis on students needing to be willing to face a disorienting dilemma, asking "How can study-abroad programs design opportunities to serve as a catalyst for transformation in less permeable students?" (p. 11). While his concerns relate largely to students studying abroad in what he terms "other-ed" locations, fearing that "study abroad may serve to reify colonial ideologies without acknowledging the contexts of power and privilege of the traveler as well as members the host culture." (p. 10) He concludes that both Study Abroad and Mezirow's theory continue to be "White-centred", and Study Abroad remains a "pedagogy of the privileged" (p. 12).

2.5 Conclusion

This extensive review, then, has shown that there is both a need for, and a gap in, current research which focuses explicitly on American identity and the role it plays within Study Abroad. Furthermore, the MMDI and Transformative Learning are useful prisms through which to view and make sense of this research, since the pervasiveness and certain characteristics of American identity have the potential to both help and hinder the possibility of transformation taking place. Bain and Yaklin's (2019) audit of different elements of Study Abroad programming alongside a framework of transformative learning concludes

confidently that “When faculty and university administrators properly design the study abroad trip, connect it to course-specific learning outcomes, emphasize and carefully craft cultural engagement activities, and screen for those students who will glean the most from these travel-abroad experiences, a transformational study abroad experience can be expected” (p. 4), yet some of these stipulations, particularly screening participants or the suggestion that students should not seek “fun” while abroad, are not realistic in a market-driven environment (Henry et al., 2013).

My study, then, seeks to investigate the reality of what American Study Abroad students are experiencing and feeling, and the impact of those experiences, against a framework of the MMDI to understand the complexities of identity, and Transformative Learning Theory to understand the process and extent to which students develop – specifically with regards to their identity – within the context of Study Abroad.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Aims

Against a backdrop of conflicting yet equally confident assertions of the transformative powers and failings of Study Abroad, the acknowledgement of the significance of identity within it, the potential for transformation to take place, and the careful and powerful cultivation of an American "identity" over centuries whose significance has nonetheless, thus far, not been the main focus of research on Study Abroad, I wanted to focus on the impact of American identity – and students' understandings and experiences of it – in a Study Abroad context. To answer my research questions accurately required a robust and thoughtful methodology that could obtain rich data through which I could interrogate real-life experiences of students undertaking study abroad.

3.2 Research Paradigm

My ontological and epistemological viewpoints stem largely from my professional experience, whereby I have often witnessed students undertaking the same opportunities but experiencing and understanding them in vastly different ways. It is my belief, therefore, that a relativist position must be taken in the "search for truth" (Cohen et al., 2002, p. 3) where human experiences are involved. Braun and Clarke (2013) caution that, in qualitative research, a "universal truth" can rarely be found, and, rather, "what is "real" and "true" differs across time and context, so that what we know reflects where and how knowledge is generated." (p. 27). This study therefore neither seeks nor expects to find a single truth, but rather a multitude of experiences that are true for each participant and potentially across multiple participants within their specific context – indeed, the temporal context for this study has already been discussed at length. Cohen et al. (2002) likewise reject a more positivist approach, where science can lead to what they define as "the clearest possible ideal of knowledge", (p. 9) as unhelpful and impractical in educational contexts, noting: "The immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena contrast strikingly with the order and regularity of the rest of the world" (p. 9).

They further note that this is particularly the case “in the contexts of classroom and school where the problems of teaching, learning and human interaction present the positivist researcher with a mammoth challenge.” (pp. 9-10).

A relativist ontology can, however, pose challenges for the researcher in terms of the validity and strength of claims in a study. Braun and Clarke caution that the central concern of epistemology “is what counts as legitimate knowledge in a world where all sorts of knowledge exist…how do we know which to trust, which are meaningful?” (p. 28). They define epistemology as being “about the nature of knowledge… What is it possible to know?” (p. 29). They argue for a constructionist approach, that is to say, that “knowledge” can be constructed and understood from data, and therefore there are “numerous ways to create truth.” (p. 30). They caution that this does not mean knowledge can merely be invented, but rather that “knowledge of how things are is a product of how we come to understand it.” (p. 30).

3.3 Research Methodology

In choosing a research methodology, I wanted an approach that would elicit rich and meaningful data which would allow me to learn from students’ personal experiences, and that would be participant-centred. I also needed a methodology that would be accountable, that is to say, that was rigorous enough to withstand criticism given the ontological and epistemological assumptions above that knowledge is subjective, changing and the result of interpretation rather than one universal truth.

Tracy (2019) describes Phenomenology as “the reflective study of pre-reflective experience, concerned with how people consciously experience specific phenomena” (p. 65). She believes that “the approach is particularly germane if you are interested in questions such as… “How do people experience _____?”” As my study is asking how students experience their American identity while studying abroad, phenomenology seemed an ideal approach to effectively answering this question. Laverty (2003) stated

> Its emphasis is on the world as lived by a person, not the world or reality as something separate from the person. This inquiry asks "What is this experience like?" as it attempts to unfold meanings as they are lived in everyday existence (p. 22).

Summarising the development of Phenomenology, Frechette et al. (2020) differentiate between Husserl's original descriptive approach, which sought to discover the "essence" of phenomena, to Heidegger's later interpretive approach, hermeneutic phenomenology, where a researcher is seeking for something that is hidden. Laverty (2003) summarised hermeneutics as "illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding." (p. 24). Comparing Husserl's conception with Heidegger and others' evolving approach, Laverty considers the former to tend towards positivism, while he notes that interpretive phenomenology has a tendency to go too far the other way. While phenomenology was initially largely descriptive (observing and describing phenomena), in interpretive phenomenology "reality is not something 'out there', but rather something that is local and specifically constructed", and "knowledge is seen as the best understandings we have been able to produce thus far, not a statement of what is ultimately real." (p. 26). Epistemologically, then, this resulting knowledge is created as the result of a partnership between the subject and the researcher, and therefore all the biases and knowledge the researcher brings with them. It is therefore an approach that can be both powerful, illuminating, but also open to criticism, and disciplined reflexivity and a focus on reliability, validity and quality (discussed in more detail later in this chapter) are crucial to its credibility. (Laverty, 2003; Urcia, 2021; Tracy, 2010).

Phenomenological approaches are common in educational research where researchers are seeking both to describe and explain lived experiences. They were used in many of the studies discussed earlier in this review, notably Cavander et al. (2020), which also used it in the context of a programme designed to facilitate transformative learning and therefore has some notable similarities to this study in terms of its aims.

3.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is described by Smith et al. (2022) as being “concerned with exploring experience in its own terms” (p. 1). It is participant-oriented, allowing participants to express themselves as they see fit rather than constraining them (Alase, 2017), accepting that “Participants are experts on their own experiences and can offer researchers an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings through telling their own stories” (Reid et al., 2005, p. 20). Furthermore, it aims to investigate what happens when “everyday lived experiences take on a particular significance for people” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1). Its aim is to capture meaning and explore it further, rather than testing prior assumptions (Reid et al., 2005). It is an approach that “allows for multiple individuals (participants) who experience similar events to tell their stories without any distortions and/or prosecutions” (Alasce, 2017, p. 11) and which has furthermore been used extensively in Higher Education research and in research involving identity (Reid et al., 2005). As such, it has been shown to be an effective method in answering research questions such as mine which rely on understanding experiences and their impact upon participants.

3.3.1.1 IPA in Higher Education Research. The value of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Higher Education research is well established. In arguing its applicability to Higher Education, Noon notes “the educational experience is inherently subjective. IPA explicitly recognises the utility of subjective experience as scientific data” (Noon, 2018, p. 81). Noon concludes that it is a

> powerful tool in helping researchers to understand the lived experiences of those within the education system. Through appreciating said experiences, it is possible that the findings of IPA studies can contribute in assisting educationalists in shaping future policy and practice around the needs and expectations of both students and educators (Noon, p. 82).

Indeed, it is hoped that the outcome of this study will influence practitioners in the field of US Study Abroad to re-evaluate how Study Abroad programmes are packaged, from marketing and recruitment to preparation to co-curricular learning and pedagogy to reflection post-study. IPA has been used successfully in studies with a similar focus on personal student experience, with similar aims in mind, including Roop (2014), which looked at the experiences of transgender students, Denovan and Macaskill (2012), which examined how first year undergraduates handled stress, and Liu and Winder (2010), who used IPA to investigate the experiences of international undergraduates studying in the UK.

In IPA, “findings should convey a story” (Nizza et al., 2021, p. 4). To be able to present real stories of real people makes the material more relatable and persuasive to other practitioners – a Professional Doctorate is not a mere theoretical exercise, but should have a practical application and influence within a professional sphere (Taylor, 2008). It is important, then, to consider throughout how any findings could be communicated to influence developments within Study Abroad, and make them as accessible and persuasive as possible.

3.3.2 Data Collection

In choosing a method of data collection, I needed to ensure I chose a method that would both elicit rich data to ensure in-depth and reliable interpretation could take place. As such, the method needed to allow my participants to share relevant information, and make them comfortable doing so, and yet not be too onerous on the participant, so I needed to think carefully both about the research instruments and how they were conducted.

The primary chosen method of data collection for an IPA study is semi-structured interviews (Reid et al., 2005; Eatough & Smith, 2017). Smith et al. (2022) describe a qualitative research interview as a “conversation with a purpose” (p. 54) in which both interviewer and interviewee are active participants. Braun and Clarke (2013) believe that interviews are “best suited to exploring understandings, perceptions and constructions of things the participants have some kind of personal stake in” (p. 81). Alshenqeeti (2014)

discusses the advantages and disadvantages of interviews as a research tool, noting that they are an efficient way to answer research questions that involve personal experience, but cautioning that they can be onerous on the researcher. Indeed, while they have been shown to be an efficient data collection tool in similar studies (Walsh & Walsh, 2018; Kartoshkina, 2015; Young et al., 2015) their effectiveness in answering research questions is largely dependent on the interviewer's skills. Armstrong et al. (2022) urge researchers to be aware of the importance of trust throughout a study, noting that interviewer-interviewee dynamics can change and that focusing on this relationship should be something that occurs throughout a study and not just in the planning stages. They also emphasise the importance of demonstrating benefits to the individuals in order to both maintain trust and to encourage them to share freely – in this study, students were informed of potential personal benefits (see Appendix 1). Lavee and Itzchakov (2023) likewise stress the importance of good, active listening in maximising the use of interviews for data collection.

Cohen et al. (2002) list "quality criteria" that assist researchers in conducting effective interviews, including the importance of following up and clarifying or expanding upon answers to ensure accurate and rich data, as well as cautioning against common researcher mistakes including being too rigid in sticking to a structure and changing topic before a full answer has been obtained, and being tempted to offer advice – in my role as an internal researcher, where my day-to-day role involves helping students, this was a potential risk of which I need to be mindful. While this is discussed later as part of general ethical considerations, particular care was given to mitigating any potential researcher bias. There were some benefits in being an internal researcher, particularly already having an understanding of the programmes on which students were studying, meaning I did not have to interrupt students' flow in interviews to ask practical questions to add context to what they were saying. However, I also had interactions with participants on a daily basis outside of the study, meaning I formed a relationship with them and, as such, could naturally (even subconsciously) form opinions about them or feelings towards them (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Given this risk, one student who volunteered for the study was turned down for participation because I had already had extensive interaction with them as regards their mental health and would be meeting with them weekly in my pastoral role. This would mean that I knew more about this student and their identities (which influenced their need for in-depth mental health support) outside of the research, and was in danger of bringing information to my results that had not been volunteered by them in the context of the study and the interviews, which would form the basis for data and knowledge gained from other participants. Aware that I would get to know all participants well during the study I also kept a research journal – a portion of which is included in the appendices – to record and check my thoughts and feelings regarding participants and, as far as possible, minimise the dangers of my bringing my own biases in at the analysis stage.

Several other methods of data collection were considered. Focus groups were excluded as they serve primarily to look at the interactions between participants (Bayeck, 2021; Cohen et al., 2000). There was also the potential that participants would be reluctant to voice personal or unpopular experiences or feelings in front of their peers (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Personal journals were also considered as they would allow students to reflect in their own time and words. However, this had the potential to become too burdensome, with participants failing to submit entries, as well as limited opportunity to further probe interesting content. It also had the potential to influence the data by requiring students to actively reflect upon their experiences, since studies such as Spenader, Ruis and Bohn-Gettler (2022) have shown that this improves intercultural growth. I wanted to obtain a snapshot of students' experiences and reflections "in the moment" without any such additional measures having been put in place to test the impact of American identity where there has been limited intervention – students all had access to similar resources such as a workshop on Culture at the start of their programme and the option to volunteer or participate in excursions during the programme, but these were not compulsory. I therefore

felt that, to require study participants to undertake additional reflection from other students would not provide accurate data.

To be able to demonstrate credibility, it is important that data collection methods in qualitative research can show that data is both sufficient and accurate for interpretation and analysis to take place and conclusions confidently reached – this can be especially difficult with small samples. Smith et al. (2022) stress that the purpose of IPA is to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of individuals, and then explore similarities and differences between participants. It does not seek to make conclusive statements applicable to large groups, however it does have the potential to highlight themes that could then be investigated further in later studies, qualitative or quantitative – in this study I hoped to isolate experiences that could lead to recommendations for further and larger-scale research within the sector.

Many cite “data saturation” – the idea that, in interview-based studies in particular, “the point in data collection and analysis when new incoming data produces little or no new information to address the research questions” (Guest et al., 2020, p. 2) – as a way both of determining sample size and a study’s validity. However, this is not applicable to an IPA study in which the “process which could theoretically continue ad infinitum.” (Brocki et al., 2005). Triangulation (use of multiple methods of data collection to corroborate findings) can also enhance validity (Lincoln & Guba, 2016) but for the reasons above adding additional methods of data collection were felt to offer more disadvantages than advantages. As such, a series of three semi-structured interviews – at the start, during and after students’ study abroad – was decided upon as a data collection method that would capture changes in students’ perception and experience, obtain both rich and thick data to enhance credibility in the resulting analysis. (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

3.3.3 Sampling and Participant Recruitment

IPA is a method that seeks both to understand how individuals make sense of the world, but also to identify themes and patterns across small samples. In recruiting participants, I wanted to ensure the following:

1. Participants met basic criteria which would qualify them for the study – to address the phenomena in question I therefore sought students who held a US passport, studied at a US university and were enrolled on a single-semester programme in London in the Spring of 2024 – I wanted participants to study in the same semester to ensure they had broadly the same experience (Cresswell, 2013), particularly in terms of external events, as these can impact perceptions of identity, as previous studies have shown (Dolby, 2004; Goldstein, 2017). Additionally, I required participants to be over 18, since the need to seek parental consent adds a further layer of complexity (Skelton, 2008; University of West London, 2008).

2. Participants would feel sufficiently committed to the study to provide rich data and remain on the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

3. If possible, participants would broadly reflect the demographics of the wider cohort, providing a range of insights and experiences.

Noon (2018) advises that there is no “right or wrong” sample size for IPA, but suggests 4-10 for Doctoral studies; Smith et al. (2022) suggest a maximum of 10; Alase (2017) states that sample size can range from 2-25. I sought to recruit 12 participants, ensuring I would still have a sufficient sample size should any drop out or disengage during the project, but also ensuring that the volume of data remained manageable. In their IPA study of stress among undergraduates, Denovan and Macaskill (2012) interviewed ten participants, explaining: “the emerging consensus is to use smaller samples, as the difficulties exploring testimonies in-depth from large samples can lead to superficial understanding” (p. 1006).

Initially, criterion sampling where participants met the core criteria was employed: a poster was shared as part of students' online pre-departure Orientation inviting those who met the criteria to email their interest to me. I then shared details of the project at an online pre-departure meeting, sharing my student account and making it clear that the research was independent of Arcadia. I aimed to accept the first 12 who applied. While a more purposive approach (Cohen et al. 2002) was considered, as this could have ensured there was diversity amongst the participants in terms of their backgrounds (a mix of male and female students from different regions and ethnic groups), this could also have the disadvantage of manipulating the research too much – even of being "unashamedly selective and biased" (Cohen et al. 2002, p. 104). Furthermore, with a small sample used in a phenomenological case study, trying to accurately represent the diversity of a particular population would neither be possible nor meaningful (Smith et al., 2022). Following this approach, 9 students volunteered, and to attract the remaining volunteers a "snowball strategy" (Alase, 2017) was engaged, with those who had already signed up offering to encourage others. As a result, 13 students were selected rather than 12 – this was because the final volunteer was male, giving the study a better, natural gender balance. The final subjects consisted of 8 female and 5 male students, of whom 4 defined as "students of color". This is in line with broader trends across the sector, where roughly 68% of Study Abroad students are white and 68% female (Open Doors, 2024).

3.3.4 Interview structure and question selection

Individual (one-to-one), semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research tool, taking place at the start or just ahead of the programme, within the two weeks after the mid-semester break, and between one month and six weeks after the students had returned home. This was deemed the most efficient way of answering the research questions, capturing the chronology around changes in participants' perceptions, including whether these changes were temporary or continued after a return to the US. Together, the three interviews capture each interviewee's full experience abroad. Similar studies, such as Young

et al. (2015) and Kartoshkina (2015), have used interviews, collecting meaningful data and highlighting trends and patterns among a small number of participants over a series of interviews. Wolcott and Motyka (2013) used a similar structure and obtained interesting insights into the interplay between their different identities and Study Abroad but did not conduct an initial interview at the start to capture students' initial thoughts, to the detriment of the final findings.

Questions were designed to capture experiences and changes over time. Initial questions focused on students' self-perception and understanding of what it means to be "American" (in itself a complex, problematic term with many meanings, and students' perceptions of it are central to the findings); the second interview focused on experiences in the UK; the final interview encouraged students to reflect on if – and how – their perceptions about their own identity, especially "American" identity, had changed (if at all). Many of the questions mirrored those asked in the first interview, to capture where change has taken place. A maximum of 12 questions were included in each interview, excluding demographic data (Smith et al., 2022). The semi-structured approach allowed follow-up questions where an answer needed to be explored further, as well as allowing for a more natural conversation (Braun & Clarke, 2013) where it was hoped students would feel comfortable in revealing their true feelings and experiences. The study design of three interviews aimed to capture students' attitudes, feelings and experiences at particular points in time which it was hoped, when taken together, would illustrate any changes in attitude and identity salience and thus answer the research questions, addressing if and how national identity impacted and was impacted by studying abroad. The three points were chosen carefully based on my professional experience of the programmes of study: the first interviews were planned before any classes or excursions had started, thereby (it is hoped) capturing students' existing feelings about their identities and their expectations about living abroad; the second was taken after the mid-semester break. Research by Viol and Klasen (2021) show that the vast majority of students divided their Study Abroad into three distinct phases, and labelled the

middle phase “the routine phase” (p. 17) where students are most settled. At this stage, students have had around seven weeks in the UK so should have experiences to draw upon, but will not yet be thinking of going home – this therefore seemed the best time to capture experiences and feelings during the programme of study itself and potentially identify any “disorienting dilemmas” that had occurred and subsequent transformative learning as it was taking place. It therefore seemed important to capture students’ impressions during this period. Finally, the third interview was conducted 4-6 weeks after students had returned home – this allowed students time to return to familiar surroundings and reflect upon their time in the UK in order to capture any changes in attitude that had occurred, but was not so long after the end of the programme that students would have forgotten about feelings and events experienced there. It was also feared that, should final interviews be scheduled later, students would have moved on to other challenges, such as their next year of study, and so be more reluctant to continue to participate with the study – indeed, all participants remained on the study for all three interviews. This proposed schedule was deemed sufficient to answer the research questions, however were this a more longitudinal study further interviews – perhaps one year after return and again after students had graduated – could have gleaned more data and insights into long-term impacts of studying abroad.

The first and final interviews were conducted on Teams. The second (where all students were in the UK) were either conducted on Teams or in person, at the participant’s choosing: it was recognised that many people find video interviews more convenient and more comfortable, as they are in control of their surroundings (Oliffe et al., 2021).

3.4 Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted using the steps recommended by Smith et al. (2022), treating individual interviews on their own terms and identifying themes within each, before identifying common themes across interviews. This was done by transcribing each interview (interviews were recorded on Teams when conducted remotely, and through Voice Memos when conducted in person), reading and re-reading to encourage familiarity, noting potential

themes then constructing experiential statements. This process was repeated with each individual interview. Connections across statements were then sought to develop “Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 94). After each interview, common PETs across a collection of interviews were sought. Smith et al. (2022) state the aim of this as “to highlight the shared and unique features of the experience across the contributing participants” to “understand and explore points of convergence and divergence” (p. 100). IPA requires a constant process of checking and rechecking themes as interviews are added, and a colleague not involved in the study was provided with a sample of the interviews to check that themes are grounded sufficiently within the data – this approach has been employed by other studies including Denovan and Macaskill (2012) and is a valuable way of ensuring trustworthiness in a study susceptible to researcher bias.

A summary of the steps of analysis adapted from Smith et al. (2022) is below.

Table 5: Steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Stage	Action	Purpose
1	Read and re-read texts	Familiarisation with text. Opportunity to make unfocused notes reflecting initial thoughts and observations of the researcher
2	Exploratory noting	Labelling major themes that emerge within the text, and make notes of anything of interest within the transcript
3	Structuring the analysis	Grouping themes found in (2) as they relate to one another, identifying themes and sub-themes
4	Producing a table of themes, with quotes that illustrate each	Reviewing themes, discarding themes which are not well represented. This assists in finalising themes.
5	Constructing a cohesive narrative	Using the table in (4) to create a narrative of the themes and sub-themes identified
6	Repeat stages 1-5 for each interview	To ensure a consistent approach across interviews, and begin to identify common themes across narratives
7	Integration of cases	Identifying common themes to answer the research questions and illuminate shared experiences
8	Interpretation	Seeking to understand and explain the experiences identified, while being aware of the role played by the researcher's own experiences

Stage 8 is taken from Willig (2013) who, while not an IPA specialist, states that such interpretation "critically interrogates the participant's account in order to gain further insight

into its nature, meaning and origin" and "takes the researcher beyond the participant's own words and understanding" (p. 64) so was deemed beneficial to this study.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Maxwell (2008) cautions that "ethical concerns should be involved in every aspect of design" (p. 216); Husband (2020) warns against addressing ethical issues merely as "adherence to the ritual of procedure" (p. 7). Several ethical concerns were considered here and measures suggested in response to these and outlined in the Ethics application.

3.5.1 Conducting Internal Research

From the outset of this research I was aware of my role as an internal researcher, and the advantages and disadvantages this posed. The relationship between participant and interviewer is typically hierarchical, with participants viewing researchers as "experts" (Braun & Clarke, 2013). While my role within Arcadia is a pastoral one, which I hoped would help me build a natural rapport with students, I nonetheless hold a senior position, so there was the potential that interviewees would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear or respond in a way they believed showed them in a "good light" (Cohen et al. 2002, p. 124). McGrath et al. (2019) acknowledge that it can be easier to build a rapport with subjects with whom you are already familiar. My subjects knew me prior to the project (having met me and seen materials written by me in their pre-departure orientation) – indeed, the depth of information and emotion participants shared with me during the interviews, particularly the second and final interviews where we had had more time to build that rapport, demonstrated to me that this was correct, and that choosing to conduct research internally had been the right decision.

I considered using a different institution for conducting my research, but decided that the advantages of using Arcadia students as research subjects outweighed the disadvantages, namely having an "established intimacy" both with the participants and institution (Unluer, 2012, p. 1), easy access to subjects (Greene, 2014) and detailed background knowledge within which to contextualise the research (Unluer, 2012; Greene,

2014). Shenton (2004) includes familiarity with an organisational culture prior to collecting data in a list of criteria contributing to a study's credibility, and disadvantages such as potential bias, assumption of knowledge and role duality, can be overcome with careful, constant reflection and critical input from my supervisor (Unluer, 2012).

BERA (2018) defines a stakeholder in research as "any person or body who has a direct interest in its framing and success" (p. 27). While my employing institution agreed to my using their students as research subjects, there was the potential they could seek to influence the course of the research, so I set clear boundaries, agreeing what would and would not be shared with my institution (see Appendix 1).

3.5.2 Consent and Confidentiality

Many researchers question what constitutes truly informed consent, or indeed if it is possible for consent to even be fully informed (Cohen et al., 2002; Husband, 2020; Smith et al., 2022), particularly in qualitative research. It is in the researcher's interest for consent to be as informed as possible (Tracy, 2010), as this will increase confidence on the part of the participant, and thus a greater willingness to share. Cohen et al. (2002) talk of "reasonably informed consent" (p. 51) citing several guidelines that must be followed to ensure this, including an explanation of what procedures are being used and why, a description of any potential discomfort, a description of any benefits, availability to respond to any concerns, and the freedom to withdraw, which were each covered in the participant information sheet.

Steps were taken to ensure confidentiality as far as possible. Braun and Clarke (2013), however, warn that, when handling "actual words of real-life individuals, identification becomes more of a possibility" (p. 64), and researchers must be sensitive to what could be identifying information. In seeking real-life, unique, experiences, Cohen et al. (2002) go so far as to say that "a subject agreeing to a face-to-face interview...can in no way expect anonymity" (p. 62) and that researchers can at most only promise confidentiality. They advise that it is therefore crucial to be explicit in what is meant by "confidentiality" and what steps will be taken, allowing participants to make a truly informed decision over taking part.

This, in turn, is important for both the quality and validity of the research, since respondents may reluctant to cooperate or go into detail if assurances are weak (Cohen et al. 2002). As participants are part of a small cohort of around 250 students, they are potentially identifiable by staff or students who chose to read the thesis, so it was crucial to assure participants that the project was independent of the university, that no raw data would be shared within the institution, and no results made available until students had completed the programme (students only study for a single semester, and results of any analysis would not be completed until after they had left and received grades, so genuine assurances could be given that participation would not disadvantage their studies): participant fears to the contrary could reduce the quality of data if participants were anxious about straying from an established narrative.

The following measures have been taken to protect participant data and limit the likelihood of participants being identified:

- Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym by which they will be referred in this thesis.
- Other potentially identifying information has been limited – crude reporting categories were used, for example “a small town in the Midwest” rather than the participant’s hometown.
- Participants’ home institutions were not named
- All data has been stored securely on platforms provided through the University of West London and accessible only via my personal username and login.

3.5.3 Participant Distress

Researchers have a responsibility to avoid causing harm to participants (University of West London, 2021), and even just talking about sensitive issues might constitute “harm” for some participants (Smith et al., 2022). When discussing a topic as broad as identity, focusing on lived experience, one cannot reasonably predict everything that may arise. “Distress protocols” (Draucker et al. 2009) were therefore planned in advance, such as

warning participants about the potential for harm, and having support available throughout. While these were not needed at the interview stage, Husband suggests that ethical considerations should be “extended to consider the consequences of the possibilities for real and tangible personal and professional change brought about through reflection and discussion” (Husband, 2020, p. 3): encouraging participants to reflect on identity and experiences could have consequences after the study has ended, so participants were warned of this in the final interview.

3.5.4 Participant Withdrawal

A further ethical dilemma was participant withdrawal. Where a participant withdraws, removal of their data in a qualitative project can harm the overall results, particularly where patterns and themes are being sought (Thorpe, 2014). Smith et al. (2022) suggest a time-limited right to withdraw to avoid such disruption, as well as giving participants the chance to review transcripts, giving them a sense of ownership of the data which they have supplied. Mero-Jaffe (2011) discusses several disadvantages to this, such as participants wanting to rephrase large sections of data, potentially affecting the credibility of data that was collected “in the moment”.

A time limit was set – participants were able to withdraw up to one month after the final interview, and if they did so a conversation would take place about what – if any – data could be retained. This was explained on the statement participants signed, and repeated to them in each interview. Considering Mero-Jaffe's concerns, I did not actively share the transcripts with participants during the study as I did not want them to review these ahead of each interview – this would compromise the data as I wanted to capture students’ reflections at each stage of the research, and did not want them to remind themselves of what was said or experienced previously, though participants were free to request transcripts and in each interview I was clear to remind them that if they had questions afterwards they could contact me.

3.6 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Validity

IPA is, by definition, interpretative. As such, there is both a temptation that researchers' findings will be based on strong examples within the data rather than a critical examination of the data as a whole and that, furthermore it can be difficult to convince readers of results' validity (Silverman, 2013). Smith et al. (2022) define validity as "the degree to which a study is meaningful and credible as a piece of quality research" (p. 147). There have been many attempts to define trustworthiness in qualitative research, and to establish criteria for doing so (Guba, 1981; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Flyvjberg, 2006; Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 2016). In recent years, researchers have sought to apply criteria to ensure high quality IPA studies (Alase, 2017; Nizza et al., 2021). Broadly, Lincoln and Guba purport that a study must be credible, dependable, confirmable and transferable. Briefly, these can be defined as follows:

- Credibility: "establishing confidence in the findings and interpretations of a research study." (Lincoln and Guba, 2016, p. 105). In other words, a researcher must be able to demonstrate the steps they have taken to establish confidence in their findings.
- Dependability: the ability to show that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Amankwaa, 2016), that is, that they are the result of a consistent and reliable process (Lincoln & Guba, 2016).
- Confirmability: similar to credibility, this is where the researcher must demonstrate their interpretations are the result of "dependable process of inquiry as well as data collection" (Lincoln & Guba, 2016, p. 105) and not the product of researcher bias.
- Transferability: showing that the findings could be applicable in other contexts

Noble and Smith (2015) warn that qualitative research is often criticised for its lack of transparency and rigour, and note that researchers must "make judgements about the 'soundness' of the research in relation to the application and appropriateness of the methods undertaken and the integrity of the final conclusions." (p. 34). In designing and conducting the study, and in subsequent analysis, I combined Guba's (1981) criteria for assessing

trustworthiness in research – truth value, consistency, neutrality and applicability (Guba, 1981, p. 80) – and Amankwaa's subsequent protocols (2016) with Smith et al.'s (2022) and Nizza et al.'s (2021) markers for good quality IPA studies to produce the following guide to revisit at all stages of the study – given my professional experience, this served as an academic version of a risk assessment that one might follow in planning a practical event.

Table 6: IPA Risk Assessment

Criteria	**Risk**	**Researcher action taken**
Explain and acknowledge the context of the study	Qualitative studies are rooted in a geographical and temporal context that will necessarily influence participants' responses	The context in which the study took place has been explained here and was acknowledged in interviews
Ensure rigorous selection criteria	Particularly with low numbers, there is a danger that participants could be selected who would reinforce or represent a certain viewpoint, and so not deliver meaningful results (Smith et al., 2022)	Selection criteria was carefully considered, with advice from more experienced practitioners followed; a conscious decision was made to include slightly more than the recommended number of participants (13) to allow for drop-outs and enhance the chance for themes to be identified across participants
Consider triangulation (use of different methods to obtain more comprehensive findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Amankwaa, 2016: Noble & Smith, 2015; Alasce, 2016)	Using different methods (e.g. journaling and focus groups in addition to interviews) of data collection can help with confirmability	Additional and alternative methods of data collection were considered, but the disadvantages were felt to outweigh the advantages, as the project was designed to capture what students experience on a Study Abroad programme. Requiring students to reflect on their experiences would therefore not be representative of the

		experience being studied (where students do not routinely do this) and would produce less, rather than more, credible results
Ensure strong data and interpretation (Nizza et al., 2021)	Data that is not convincing will destroy the credibility and reliability of the study	A pre-determined set of stages for analysis recommended by IPA specialists (Smith et al., 2022) was followed meticulously, and provisional results were shared with supervisors and colleagues via institutional seminars and conferences and later the transfer viva, inviting criticism
Be aware of personal biases and assumptions and how these might impact findings and interpretation (Noble & Smith, 2015)	As IPA is interpretative, researcher biases and assumptions can influence both results and conclusions	I kept notes throughout the project, reflecting on my own responses, skills and potential biases as an interviewer and researcher, and read widely to find evidence that would support or refute what I found; findings were shared with colleagues, and criticism invited
Ensure rich and thick data are obtained to enable more reliable analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000)	Limited data can compromise the validity of conclusions drawn.	Three interviews across 13 participants will elicit both rich and thick data for analysis.

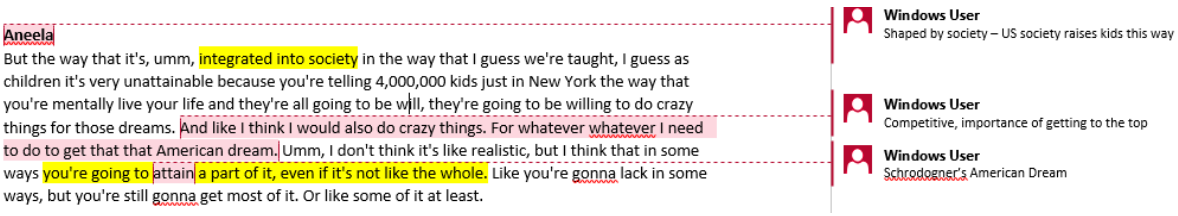
3.7 Applying the Steps of Analysis

To analyse the data, I followed each stage of analysis outlined in 3.1.6, based on Smith et al., (2022).

3.7.1 Reading and Re-reading

For interviews conducted over Teams, the automatic transcription was used. This was then read and, where necessary, corrected (where the transcription was incorrect), then the corrected version read through a second time, making further corrections where necessary. Recordings were also played alongside the second read to assist with familiarisation with the interview and again check for accuracy. Interviews recorded in person were manually transcribed – this in itself assisted in increasing familiarisation with the text (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At this stage, interesting comments or word choices were highlighted and initial notes made:

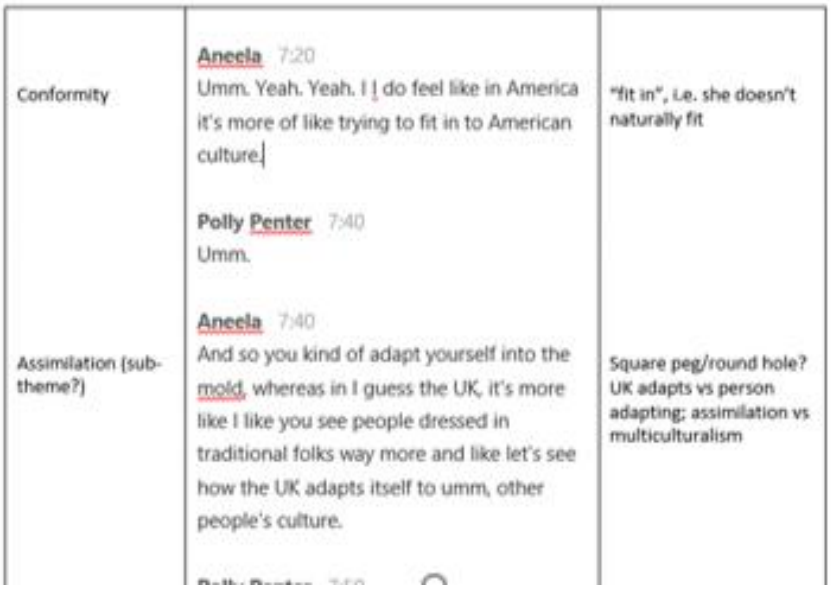
Figure 2: Extract from Interview



3.7.2 Exploratory Noting

Once the transcripts were correct and complete, they were transferred to a grid to enable the exploration and identification of potential themes, and more structured comments, which would help identify final themes and subthemes.

Figure 3: Exploratory Noting



Conformity	**Aneela** 7:20 Umm. Yeah. Yeah. I I do feel like in America it's more of like trying to fit in to American culture. **Polly Penter** 7:40 Umm.	"fit in", i.e. she doesn't naturally fit
Assimilation (sub-theme?)	**Aneela** 7:40 And so you kind of adapt yourself into the mold, whereas in I guess the UK, it's more like I like you see people dressed in traditional folks way more and like let's see how the UK adapts itself to umm, other people's culture.	Square peg/round hole? UK adapts vs person adapting; assimilation vs multiculturalism

3.7.3 Structuring the Analysis

To test and consolidate initial thoughts, this step involved constructing experiential statements in order to produce a concise summary of the subject's experiences (Smith et al., 2022) and first identify Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) – these are themes that are pertinent to the individual. Some themes will appear in multiple cases and become Group Experiential Themes (GETs).

3.7.4 Producing a Table of Themes

To help organise and pinpoint themes, key statements identified in each interview were organised into a table, and colour coding employed to see if and how they were connected. For example, in Aneela's final interview, the following statements were deemed to be connected:

"And so you kind of adapt yourself into the mold"

"I do feel like in America it's more of like trying to fit into American culture."

"you tend to forget yourself to become American."

3.7.5 Conducting a Cohesive Narrative

At this stage, patterns were sought across PETs to put together a cohesive narrative. Smith et al. (1999) note that, following this stage, an individual participant could be written up as a case study, and indeed the depth of data obtained in this study makes individual cases significant and interesting in their own right. However, in terms of answering my research questions, I then needed to continue with the analysis across all cases.

3.7.6 Repetition of the Above Stages for Each Interview

As each step was repeated for each interview, repetition of themes began to emerge, highlighting GETS that were common across cases. As a starting point for this, Smith et al. (1999) suggest using the "master-theme list from the first interview to begin your analysis of the second one, looking for more instances of the themes you have identified from the first interview but being ready to identify new ones that arise" (p. 225). As I had three interviews for each participant, this was a useful framework for handling large amounts of data.

Aneela's statements above come from her third interview, by which point it was clear that Conformity would be a major theme within my findings. In her first interview, Aneela was critical of what she considered many American characteristics, stating: "as an American, you're not satisfied with the position you're in and you're always gonna strive for more and more and more." Despite this, she described herself as a "typical American", stating that, if you're not constantly striving for success, "you're not an American". These revelations in the first interview introduced initial themes of the notion of hard work as central to the American way of life, and the need to conform and behave in expected ways.

Likewise, similar experiences and feelings were related by other participants. As each interview, then set of three interviews, was analysed, recurrent themes began to emerge.

3.7.7 Integration of Cases

The final list of themes and subthemes should not necessarily be based on their prevalence within the data, but also on their richness (Smith et al., 1999) – participants sometimes made passing reference to potential themes (for example, the word “freedom” cropped up in several transcripts, but was central to others) but where participants then moved on, even if probed, it would be manipulative of the analyst to try to contrive a theme from a comment that does not hold personal significance for the interviewee.

Following analysis of all interviews, then on all three sets, experiential statements were entered into a table under their provisional GETs to check their validity. Final themes were chosen on the basis that they were a significant focus for multiple individuals within the study – this is based on Smith et al.’s (2022) advice that, as a rule, a GET should be inhabited by at least half the participants in the study, however sometimes GETs “might arise from the distinctive concerns of a small subset of participants” (p. 105). Some of the sub-themes identified below revolve around the experiences of non-white or otherwise marginalised (for example, queer) participants, and were significant enough that they could not be ignored.

3.7.8 Interpretation

IPA, as its name demonstrates, is interpretative. Themes will emerge from the data, but the researcher will also need to consider what is unsaid, what is implied, and what is perhaps not even understood by the subject. The researcher in IPA is also central to the research, recognising at all times that their prior knowledge, biases and experience all influence the research. (Smith et al., 2022). This step involves reviewing the findings alongside research notes made at the time, and actively questioning interpretations prior to drawing firm conclusions from the data being analysed.

3.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have explained my methodology and choice of research instruments and justified the decisions taken in planning and conducting my study, as well as the steps

taken to ensure trustworthiness. Finally, I have demonstrated how the steps of analysis were applied in order to determine the themes and subthemes, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

The next chapter introduces the participants in this study and their salient identities, before introducing the themes that were identified using the process outlined above. Each theme is then discussed in detail, and their pertinence to the research questions explore.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter summarises the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and sub-themes identified as a result of the analysis. Each theme is then discussed in detail and interpretation given of the significance of each theme and how they interact with one another. The significance of these themes will be discussed further in Chapter 5. To help follow students' development through their experience, I have indicated the interview where each quote was from:

Table 7: Interview Key

KEY	INTERVIEW	TIMEFRAME
I1	First interview	End of December/beginning of January – before the start of the programme
I2	Second interview	Late February – after the mid-semester break
I3	Third interview	4-6 weeks after returning home (dates varied depending on programme)

Below is a summary of the students who participated in the study. To minimised the chance of identification I have used broad demographic information, however it is reasonable to expect that a student from a similar type of environment (in fact, both students from New York City mentioned in their first interview that they expected London to be somewhat familiar) will have experiences that differ from someone from a contrasting environment so it was important to record this information. I have also included salient aspects of identity that students mentioned in their first interview when asked what aspects of their identity they considered most important, as this then allowed me both to understand the students' personal contexts at that point, and to observe any changes that took place over time, with other parts of their identity gaining saliency. Many students highlighted

multiple aspects of their identity as being especially salient – for example, Greg highlighted both his race and his gender – in line with the MMDI (Jones & McEwan, 2000).

Table 8: Participant Summary

Pseudonym	**Home state/city**	**Salient identities**
Aneela	New York City	Indian-American, left-handed, female
Brennan	Ohio	Caring, hardworking, honest
Caroline	South Dakota	Midwestern, working class, queer, female
Ella	Kentucky, mid-sized city	Role within the family (“the big sister”), queer
Ellie	Ohio	Struggled to answer, eventually said Christian and female
Elliott	Suburban Wisconsin and Nashville	Hobbies and “the people I choose to hang out with”
Greg	St Louis, Missouri	Black man
Jasmine	Philadelphia	Black, Christian faith
Jeremy	Washington D.C., and has lived in India and Argentina	“I’m a white man who looks pretty masculine”, privileged
Jordan	New York City	Being easygoing
Julia	New Jersey	Had difficulty answering, eventually answered “openness”
Miranda	Small town in Kansas	Gender and sexuality, Midwesterner
Sunny	Small town in Iowa	Position in family (older sister), first generation student

All students in the study were aged between 18 and 22.

4.2 Themes and Sub-themes

The aim of the study was to understand the impact that American national identity has on students studying abroad in London during a single-semester programme. Therefore, the final themes and sub-themes relate to the research question, and their significance will be examined further in the discussion section.

Kohls (1984) and later Althen (2005) highlighted key American values which were evident within the themes and how students approached the world and others in it. Initial findings, then, support the notions discussed in the literature review of strong – potentially, for some, unshakable – values and mindsets – again, this is examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Following the detailed analytical process described above, I settled on the following themes and subordinate themes. Often all or most of these themes were present within single cases, suggesting that American students studying abroad are navigating complex emotional challenges as they reconcile their deeply-held beliefs and values (which broadly match those cited in the literature review) with their new environment.

4.3 Summary of Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes

Each interview and set of three interviews resulted in numerous Personal Experiential Themes. Many of these recurred across participants and were identified as Group Experiential Themes. Within this, subordinate themes were identified as different ways in which the group theme manifested itself. Many of these are connected to one another and together make sense of students' experience and go some way to understanding a study abroad experience as a whole.

Table 9: Summary of Themes and Subordinate Themes

GET	**Subordinate themes**	**Quotes**
Pride and privilege	Pride	"Everybody [in America] kind of has to band together and be like, I don't care. Be like, "we have each other", and I think I… I have pride in being part of this thing with other people that other countries don't like" (Elliott)
	Privilege and power	"I won the lottery with this, this US passport" (Jeremy)
	(Dis)loyalty	"It feels un-American to… To find to find great joy in being somewhere else." (Jasmine)
Freedom	Sets the US apart from others	"[in]England, I feel like it's kind of not the same because, like, I feel like in America we have like, the right to freedom of speech and like, bear arms and all that" (Brennan)
	Safety and its impact on freedom	"What is freedom without safety?" (Greg)
Conformity	Assimilation and conditionality vs multiculturalism	"you tend to forget yourself to become American" (Aneela)

	Attitudes to diversity and difference	“it's hard to appreciate your own culture when you can't have access to it. Or maybe you're…left out of it." (Sunny)
	Attitude as a benefit to studying abroad	“if we hadn't been so out there, maybe we wouldn't have made any friends” (Sunny)
Achievement and hard work	Life is work	“To Americans, life is work” (Jasmine)
	Importance of personal development as a constant goal	“Just being so alone is definitely gonna help me achieve that goal of learning more about who I am and the world." (Elliott)
	Studying abroad as a break	“A chance to take a break and re-evaluate life.” (Greg)

4.3.1 Theme 1: “I’m very proud to live in America, and very grateful to live in America”: Pride, Privilege and Loyalty

From the first interview onwards, many respondents reported that they felt proud to be American. In the first interviews, many expressed this outright, like Elliott: “[We’re] very patriotic in the sense of… we have a certain pride of who we are”. This sense of pride was very important to Elliott, who repeated: “at the end of the day, most Americans are proud of uh America, and I think every American wants to see America better.” Likewise, when asked what being American meant to him, Brennan responded: “being prideful is definitely the most biggest thing.” He elaborated that:

> we're very like die hard like pride for our flag, which I think is really good, like especially like for like voting, getting presidents, like people will go like die hard, like fighting for what they think's right, which I think is what America's for.

Brennan felt that there was a lot to be proud of, but that "people don't really see the best values of Americans". His hope for studying abroad was that he could change this, "making sure people know that Americans aren't all that bad" through his interactions with locals.

Ella believed that pride for the country was something that was "instilled in you from a very young age". However, she felt that this pride was both central to being an American, and was justified:

> The pride that people have in being from America, that I feel is a very crucial part to being an American, is a lot of people…feel very strongly about like the, the… the… what this country has to offer the world and what it provides for its citizens.

She viewed national pride positively, stating that: "I think… it's a really beautiful thing to have so much love for the place that you're from and to care for it so much. And to think that it's so wonderful."

Even students who expressed reservations about the US, particularly its political climate, demonstrated a level of pride for the country. Miranda accepted that there were "negative" and "nationalist connotations" around expressing national pride. However, she still felt this nonetheless, situating national pride to a more proactive, rather than passive, act:

> I think being an American is about having, even though I just said like, I don't like saying I'm proud to be an American, it is about having pride in my country and wanting to improve things about it that I don't like or that I don't support so that other people – so that myself and then my friends and other people that I care about – can have like a country to be proud of.

Miranda also expressed pride in particular national achievements, citing NASA as an example. Caroline, likewise, did not actively state that she was not proud to be an American, but did state that she did not want to say this at the current time: “I don't wanna say I'm proud to be American erm… just because of, like, everything that's going on in our country currently.” Instead, she expressed pride in particular achievements, saying, “we have some awesome athletes. I really take pride in watching American Sports.”

Many students seemed unwilling to criticise the US directly, suggesting an underlying or in some cases conscious national loyalty. When asked what the “worst” thing about the US was, several students were unable to respond. Others cited aspects that they believed were the fault not of the US, but of outsiders. Miranda, for example, answered this question by stating, “I don't really like the perception of Americans as like being stupid or intentionally ignorant like that. I think some other countries have that wrong.”

Ellie was bothered by negative attitudes between Americans of one another, but then seemed to minimise the question, stating: “You see people with positive and negative views of others in American culture, but in the same way there are positive and negative views in the UK as well.”

Others did offer aspects of American life or culture they considered to be negative, but balanced these by noting or speculating that other countries faced similar issues. Jeremy said:

> I don’t know how unique to America they are but I think, you know, issues with race and gender, all of those… but I think every culture and community to some extent has those enmeshed issues that…that.. I don’t know how sort of specifically American they are.

In his later interviews, Jeremy reinforced the idea that the US faces many of the same challenges as other countries, seeing this as a bond between nations. Citing

inequalities in the American health system and underfunding in the NHS, he reflected that "the UK and the US are peers in many ways" (Jeremy, I3).

4.3.1.1 Subtheme: Privilege. Jeremy, who had lived abroad before (in India and Argentina), was one of only a few students who articulated an acknowledgement of the privileges that came with being American, describing merely holding the passport as an "immense privilege". Recognising his individual privilege as a US national was a PET for Jeremy, and counterbalanced interviewees who expressed pride only. In his first interview, he used the word "privilege" five times. Musing on American character, he considered the natural optimism he believed to be inherent in American culture to be a privilege, as it ultimately led to success, saying,

> I feel this privilege to be American, it…it just….having been born into the circumstances I was born into, I mean probably there are terrible situations in America, but…. I think there is a sort of opportunistic mindset[…] most Americans, I would say, are able to conceive of opportunities that might be accessible to them in a way that is not the mindset of other nationalties. (Jeremy, I1)

In his final interview, Jeremy recounted, with profound sadness, his experience of returning to the US and noticing the different way in which he (a white, male American, referenced in much of the literature above) was treated compared to non-US passport holders:

> the way that the person at the Desk spoke to me versus the person in front of me who's clearly from Central America somewhere, spoke Spanish, was having a little bit of trouble understanding, and the tone used with them versus me was incredibly different… she was frustrated with them. She was not happy. She was like, "you don't understand! You have to fill it out!" Blah blah blah. And you're clearly not understanding because those kinds of environments are tough and stressful, and

> English is not their first language. But I get up there and it's a smile and "Good morning! How are you?" (Jeremy, I3)

Concluding, "I won the lottery by having a US passport", he summed it up thus: "Being American, I think means having extraordinary privilege and extraordinary responsibility" (Jeremy, I3). For Jeremy, it could be argued that the "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1978) occurred on his return to the US, with his experiences in the UK contributing to his ability to then understand, reason and try new roles, rather than providing the dilemma itself. His experience, and experiences described by Ellie when we discuss diversity, serve to remind practitioners that the greatest changes can take place after, rather than on, the programmes.

4.3.1.2 Subtheme: Loyalty It is significant that Jeremy expressed an understanding of his privilege in his first interview, with his final experiences strengthening his sense that, as an American, he was also subject to great responsibility. This stands in sharp contrast to students who had expressed the most pride for the US in the first interview but did not mention privilege or good fortune. On the contrary, those students returned home with both their pride in and loyalty for the country cemented to a greater degree than when they arrived. Studying abroad and encountering what they perceived as negative opinions led to defensiveness and strengthened their sense of loyalty upon returning home. Elliott stated:

> learning more about how other countries view Americans has given me more of a pride in being American...I didn't realize how culturally important and relevant American pop culture is to other countries… Well, I think if everybody we're on this island and if everybody outside hates the island, everybody in the island kind of has to band together and be like, I don't care. Be like we have each other and I think if I I have pride in being part of this thing with other people that other countries don't like. (Elliott, I3)

Other students experienced very different sentiments on returning home. Jasmine, who was critical about the US from the start and particularly aware of its limitations for people of colour, felt despondent upon returning home: like Elliott, studying abroad had reinforced feelings she had held before travelling and enhanced them. Upon landing, Jasmine reported that:

> I landed on American soil and I immediately was like, how do I get my visa? [back to the UK]… Because I landed and I saw the smog and I saw the factories and I saw the little people, it was like, umm, I guess I'm American. How do I become something else? (Jasmine, I3)

However, the depth and perceived importance of national pride meant that she felt a sense of guilt and disloyalty at expressing negative sentiments about the US. She stated:

> It feels un-American and I was not expecting that to come out… But it feels un-American. It feels un-American to… To find to find great joy in being somewhere else. And I feel like, particularly if I were to gain citizenship in the UK, you're supposed to go to all these places and then come back and say America is the best. And I'm like, but I don't wanna say that America is the best, and that feels like, feels icky. It feels like I'm breaking some sort of law or something. It feels like I'm like, betraying and like, and… like we have freedom of speech, so I can say that, but it feels so wrong. (Jasmine, I3)

Greg was more pragmatic in his criticisms, and comfortable in his lack of patriotism:

> I can think that the United States is a great country, but after going to the UK and Ireland and Northern Ireland, you know, to think that it's the best because of this or that or the other thing is kind of arbitrary because… we both know that it's not… Universities are the best in the United States and the United States has the largest military on Earth. But all those things don't necessarily make America the greatest nation on Earth. They just make America a country of people. (Greg, I3)

Elliott and Jasmine's strong reactions were noteworthy for their strength of emotion, but are outliers in this study. This could partly be explained by Jasmine's unique experience whereby she was able to make deeper connections with locals in a way that other students in the study did not. She became a member of a local church and made friends who became "like my second family" and with whom she is still in touch. As such, she was able to gain a level of insight into the UK that was not available to others on the programme.

For others, studying abroad helped them to put their nationality into context, giving them a more nuanced view where they were still able to express pride, for example in achievements (Caroline, for example, expressed excitement about watching the US compete in the upcoming Olympic Games), but to see their national identity from a new angle. Caroline, critical of many aspects of the US at the start, spent her time in the UK interning alongside a Member of Parliament, so witnessed people in difficulty seeking government assistance. After returning home, she stated:

> I had gone into studying abroad like knowing that, like, you know, America wasn't the perfect place and that there are a lot of things that, like could be done better, and I came out of the experience knowing that, like, you know, England is not necessarily the perfect place either. (Caroline, I3)

While not enhancing her national pride, then, studying abroad gave her a more pragmatic view of the US. Similarly, in her final interview, Sunny saw being American as more of a passive act rather than something actively positive or negative: "it's a part of my identity that's always going to be there, whether I like it or not. And I don't think that's a bad thing." (Sunny, I3).

4.3.2 Theme 2: "The only country on earth that has absolute freedom": Freedom and Individuality

Freedom established itself as a theme in the first set of interviews and was often linked to the pride students felt in being American. They felt that freedom was something that

was unique to the US and that this justified their pride in being American. For many, it was the first word that came to mind when asked the question “What does being American mean to you?” Jordan, for example, responded:

> the first word that comes to mind is like having a sense of freedom. So… what I identify as being American is being able to do whatever you want. I feel like in America you can get away with a lot of stuff. (Jordan, I1)

Jordan believed that this was why people gravitated to the US from other parts of the world:

> a lot of people just gravitate towards America to get what they want out of their life whether that’s in like fashion or like business or… or like, like any other dream that they have. America like promotes itself as like “hey, we give you the freedom to do whatever you want and live out your dreams.” (Jordan, I1)

Others were even more explicit about the perceived uniqueness of freedom to the USA. In the first interview, Ellie commented, “we have a lot more freedoms than a lot of other countries do." While Ellie did not elaborate on this, others were quick to give examples. For Julia, the freedoms granted to her in the US were central to her identity as a woman:

> I feel like a lot of there's a lot of other countries to that woman don't have that type of freedom, so I am grateful. I'm grateful that I can go get an education. I'm grateful that I can... go buy my own house. (Julia, I1)

Here, Julia links a core aspect of her identity (being a woman) to her understanding of another aspect (her nationality) (Jones & McEwan, 2000).

Ella saw freedom as at the heart of American values, explaining, “at its core at for me, I'm… being American means like wanting success for all people and wanting freedom for all.” When asked to define “freedom”, she elaborated that:

> I think just the ability to live your life as you would like and not…and being supported by your country and the rights that you receive… just being able to live your life in a

> safe and manner and being able to pursue any form of happiness like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (Ella, I1)

The notion of safety is one that came up in later interviews, so has been identified as a subtheme for the way it impacted on interviewees' freedoms and notion of freedom.

Jeremy, who had studied abroad before (in India), took a more nuanced approach to the notion of "free speech". He considered it a core value, along with democracy and political freedom, but was realistic about where it was an ideal, and its limitations:

> democracy, and political freedom, of course, free speech. I hesitate like I think that's such a complicated and loaded term, I hesitate to say "FREE SPEECH", but the idea that you can have a conversation with somebody who might have very different values from you and walk away having learned something while also recognising that there are limits and boundaries to that and hate speech is not the same thing as free speech. (Jeremy, I2)

For Greg, freedom was intertwined with the notion of individualism, and the right of every American to be themselves. In his first interview he stated, "American values are very… it's very individualistic. But willing to be open to people. Ohh it is free. It's a loud, wild…It's basically do what you want within the boundaries of the law." Greg, however, immediately highlighted a contradiction of this, stating, "it's very wild and free, but it's also…It can also be very systematic as well, the sense of career and in the sense of societal expectation."

Both observations featured in other interviews and were isolated as themes within their own right. Despite these potential contradictions, when asked what he considered the "best" aspect of being American was, Greg reasserted "freedom".

The importance of freedom was central to Greg's second interview, where he recounted: "I was trying to explain to my Uber driver that the United States is the only

country on Earth that has absolute freedom of speech, freedom of religion, all of these things."

Greg passionately believed that laws in other countries, including the UK, restricted true freedom of speech, which was protected in the US even where it constituted hate speech, affirming that: "I believe in a free speech and free ideas, I believe in people being able to talk to one another." (I1)

However, Greg was one of several students who, by the second interview, had begun to reflect on ways in which his freedom to express his identity was actually enhanced in the UK, noting that, at his home school, as a black man, "I'm not free because I'm a man in a space that is not catered towards my identity." In his homeschool, he stated, "other people are pressuring you to think a certain way, you can't be who you wanna be inside." Despite his repeated assertion that the US was the only truly free country, this is consistent with one of the reasons for his choosing to study abroad: "I'm not expected to be anything other than who I am, which is a black man, and racially I'm not expected to fit other people's stereotypes of who I am" (I1).

Greg was proactive in exploring, in particular, his male identity, attending a cigar club where he befriended generally older, British men. The conflict between his belief in freedom in the US versus his ability to express his identity more assertively in the UK highlights an underlying societal expectation for conformity within US culture that would seem to contradict the notion of "freedom", and which has been isolated as a GET in its own right.

As with national pride, some students' views of freedom changed upon their return to the US, where they were able to compare how they experienced freedom in the UK compared to the US. Brennan's belief of freedom as central to the American character was strengthened upon his return:

> People in America don't walk on eggshells. They feel like people will say how they feel. Say what they think is right. Well, like England, I feel like it's kind of not the

> same because, like, I feel like an America we have like, the right to freedom of speech and like, bear arms and all that.

Brennan did not elaborate on this or offer any particular experience in the UK that had made him feel this way – for Brennan, who had expressed these sentiments throughout, it felt that his belief in certain American ideals was extremely strong and, unlike other (particularly marginalised) students, nothing – "disorienting dilemma" or otherwise – had occurred to allow him to question these beliefs.

4.3.2.1 Subtheme: Safety

Greg was one of several students who spoke about personal safety in the UK and the US, and the impact it had on individual freedoms. For several students in this study, a feeling of comparative safety in the UK both allowed them a varied experience, where they felt safe to explore alone, and in some cases actually made them feel safe enough to explore and express elements of their identity in a way that they could not in the States.

Julia said that, as a woman, feeling safe was a "culture shock" – these words were interesting and suggested that, for Julia, her "disorienting dilemma" was something positive (feeling safer) rather than something negative, but was no less impactful for that.

Jasmine described the feeling of living in London, as compared to her home city of Philadelphia: "I feel like my brain is in a blissful state of safety, even if it's not actually as safe as it is in my brain… I feel like I've never gone outside in the dark by myself so many times." (Jasmine, I2). For Jasmine and others, knowing that guns were illegal contributed to her feelings of safety. She said, "I still… at the sound of certain sounds I still jump. I still duck. I still move and I'm like that's very it's very American of me. It's so very like Philly of me." (Jasmine, I2). Certain self-protection responses were instilled in her, and in the UK she considered those to be particularly American. Brennan also felt noticeably safer in London:

> When you're walking around by yourself, like at night or like in areas you don't have to worry about like someone coming up with you with a gun and like at that point you can't really do much to protect yourself. (Brennan, I2)

However, Brennan's answers upon returning home suggested that, for him, this did not amount to a disorienting dilemma as it did not lead to reflection or change in the longer-term. (Mezirow 1978).

Aneela felt similarly about London compared to her home city, New York:

> Coming here, I think that… like I find it so safe…Like it's in comparison it's so… I haven't been to like Brixton or anything but like even if I went to like the ghetto, I feel like I'd be far more safe than I would be if I went to like Upper East Bronx or, like, Upper East Harlem. Even Queens is getting very dangerous. So I think in that way I feel like I'm, yeah, I'm very content with the choice that I made to come here. (I2)

In her final interview, Aneela reflected on this with some nostalgia: "I know that London's unsafe, but to me I was like… I just… I could roam around the streets and I feel like so not threatened, but here I never step foot outside of ten." Finally, she expressed directly these two different types of freedom: "Here [USA] I feel free because I can do what I want, but there I felt freer because I felt safer." (Aneela, I3)

Sunny felt that her freedoms as a queer woman were restricted in the US, declaring that:

> I feel like if I walk around over here [US] and I were to have like a flag or something I could get like…like actually hate crime and like beat up and things (I3)

The relative safety she felt in the UK led to her being able to express her identity more openly, revealing, "I put pins on my bag and that's the first time I've ever done that in my entire life. And it was just really nice. Like there's more freedom." (I3) For Sunny, her

queerness became more salient in an environment where it could be expressed (Jones and McEwan, 2000).

Greg experienced a profound change in his worldview upon returning to the States. His period of Study Abroad led him to a feeling of profound disillusionment which is discussed further below, after the relative safety and the freedom to be himself in the UK. A strong proponent of free speech throughout the study, in his final interview he asked: “What is free speech without safety?”

4.3.3 Theme 3: “You tend to forget yourself to become American”: Conformity

With an early and consistent emphasis on freedom from participants in the first set of interviews, it was surprising for conformity to also emerge as a strong theme early in the research. Jasmine’s anguish at her perceived disloyalty to the US itself suggests there is a level of conformity and expectation that stands in contrast to the freedom espoused above, and indeed several participants, including those who highlighted freedom as being central to what it meant to be American, either alluded to or directly referenced areas of US culture where conformity was expected or required in order to be a “good” American. Ellie, for example, suggested being American was conditional on conforming to certain behaviours, stating, “as long as you live in this country and…and work and like… try to be a part of this country, then you're an American." (I1)

Brennan was critical of what he viewed as social conformity amongst Americans, believing that, “I feel like a lot of people go towards trying to be like a typical or like… the average or like the expected, which I don’t personally agree with. I think everybody should be their own and like unique person” (I1).

He echoed these feelings in his second interview, expressing discomfort at the statement from the US Department of State that students should spread “American values” – while he had continued to express a desire to show people, through interactions with them, that “America’s not that bad”, he felt he would not be a good ambassador because “I'm more

of myself than what they like." That is, he felt he did not conform, but believed himself to be very much an individual, in line with Althen's (2005) and others' assertions.

4.3.3.1 Subtheme: Attitudes to Diversity and Difference. Like Greg, several students became increasingly aware of the impact of conformity within US society as their studies progressed, partly as a result of witnessing diversity within London and the UK, and how this differed from diversity in the US.

Ellie self-reported that her study abroad had been "eye-opening". In particular, the diversity she witnessed in London led her to consider how minorities are viewed and treated in the US: "whenever I hear people in America talking negatively about either other countries or other cultures, it feels a lot more uncomfortable to me now than it did, mainly because in London everyone talked about it so openly". (I3). She observed that:

> While over here it's kind of yes, America is a very diverse culture country, but there are people out there who are like "ohh these people should go back to their own country." If they mean like America should be for Americans, as in only those who are native born to America, who have always been here, who live…their lives are set up here with other cultures mixed in, then that basically eliminates practically every single person that lives in America to this day. (Ellie, I3)

Like Jeremy, Mezirow's steps for transformation – while not necessarily followed in order – can be observed here, and tested upon Ellie's return – what Ellie witnessed in the UK led her to fundamentally re-evaluate her views.

Ella, in her first interview, stated that she did not believe there was such a thing as a "typical American" because the US is a "melting pot" – to her, the idea of the melting pot symbolized diversity and allowed Americans to be individuals. In her third interview, however, she described the US rather as "reluctantly diverse" (I3). While neither student explicitly articulated that incomers to the US were expected to conform in order to be

accepted, the negativity they encountered towards “outside” groups in the US suggests this. Julia demonstrated an awareness of this concern ahead of travelling to the UK, confiding:

> I'm hoping that I tend to fit in when I'm abroad because I don't wanna have, like, I don't want people to look on me like I'm an outsider when I'm abroad… I don't wanna fit in to lose my identity, I just wanna fit in. (Julia, I1)

Upon travelling to another country, Julia displayed an understanding of the importance of “fitting in” – Julia considered herself to be a “typical American”, who played sports, has one sibling and two cats and was a Girl Scout, saying “I feel that’s what people think about”. When probed, “so you’re a typical American as far as the outsider looking in, like you appear as the typical American?” she nodded. Ellie likewise responded confidently, when asked if she considered herself a typical American, “I would say so, yes.”

Ellie, Ella and Julia’s observations, particularly after returning, were supported by the lived experiences of Jasmine, Greg and Aneela, and to a lesser extent by Sunny and Jordan. All five students experienced an increased level of personal freedom in terms of exploring their identities in the UK, and with it a deeper understanding of the levels of subconscious conformity they had each undergone to fit in at home. This experience was particularly striking for Aneela, who in her first interview described herself as a “typical American”, in part due to her pursuit of the “American Dream”. Critical of aspects of the American attitude towards constant achievement (discussed in the final theme and consistent with much of the literature, particularly Kohls, 1984, and Althen and Bennett, 2011). Aneela nonetheless acknowledged a level of personal conformity by internalizing this attitude herself in order to belong:

> I would say that I am a bit of a typical American because I feel like if you don't, if you aren't a go getter, you… you won't be able to succeed or not succeed, you just won't be able to, like, be here. (I1)

Aneela's Indian identity was important to her throughout the interviews, but her attitude towards it changed dramatically and increased in saliency to become central to it (Jones & McEwan, 2000). In her first interview, when asked what aspects of her identity were most important to her, she initially cited her Indian identity, then corrected herself: "I would say my Indian identity or specifically my Indian American identity." To the researcher, this suggested a self-correction and a need (if subconscious) to show loyalty to the USA.

In her second interview, Aneela recounted encounters with British Indians that had initially made her feel uncomfortable, and began to reflect, hesitatingly, on the difference between the US's assimilationist approach to immigration, and the UK's multiculturalism:

> I feel like the Indians here [UK] are very similar to the Indians back in India… not in a good way though. But like… It's like they're very like… especially the… the men. Like they just like stare, which is very different from like the Indians at in America. (I2)

She went on to say:

> the Indians… Indian American population, I feel like it's very far from India. I think also another culture shock like, you know, Ramadan has started a lot of the guys wear their traditional clothes, which is, like, amazing, slay. But in America, they don't do that as often… like the guys don't dress up for that the way that they do here, which I think is also very different like in the way they assimilate. (I2)

For Aneela, this could be seen as the start of a disorienting dilemma that was impacted by and explicitly impacted on her sense of identity. Pressed on assimilation, Aneela reflected:

> in America it's more like the way that you like…wanna assimilate is also by kind of assimilating from your race or your whatever, whereas here I think they want to embrace it a lot more.

Aneela went on to discuss the American side of her identity, feeling that she reverted to positive stereotypes, such as smiling at strangers, which gave away her "Americanness".

Towards the end of the interview, she expressed a desire to explore her Indian identity further, stating:

> I do wanna like go to a temple here just to see how it would be like, like if they're different, how they teach is different. I mean, I never went back home, but I don't know. Like why? Like I just want to see if it's different, but I think that if anything I feel more Indian here. (I2)

The topic of identity exploration was revisited in her final interview, where she confirmed that, while she did not end up visiting a temple, she actively explored her Indian identity, stating: “I did […]go to events and stuff and I went to places where a lot of Indians are. And it was just nice to be there.” When asked again what aspects of her identity her most important to her, she responded “being Indian”. When pressed on what being American meant specifically, she responded “it’s just a label. It doesn’t define me.” This demonstrates a profound change from her first interview, where she actively corrected her identity from Indian to Indian-American.

Aneela was one of many students who was deeply affected by the diversity she witnessed in London. Upon returning to the US, she was able to appreciate the differences in cultural integration between the two countries:

> I do feel like in America it's more of like trying to fit in to American culture. And so you kind of adapt yourself into the mold, whereas in I guess the UK, it's more like… you see people dressed in traditional clothes way more and like let's see how the UK adapts itself to umm, other people's culture. Here you tend to forget yourself to become American if that makes sense.” (I3)

This stood in contrast to comments by Brennan and others around the importance of individualism in US culture. Asked what impact this had on the American part of her identity, she revealed: “[It] humbled my American side a little bit more than it has, like, made it

stronger…My love for America has come way down because it's like, what is this if not just my home for like temporarily?"

For Jordan, the order and conformity he became aware of – and was able to break free from – in the UK was more practical. A fashion student, Jordan found the British education system encouraged students to "learn in their own, in their own way" rather than imposing rigid stages of learning and assessment. The result was that he felt he was able to develop creatively in a short space of time. He felt that this reflected the US more widely, feeling that in the US,

> you kind of get rewarded more for following the structured system. I would like to have more of that freedom to kind of guide myself through that journey instead of uh, having someone else tell me what is right to get to where you want to be. (Jordan, I3)

Jordan, then, experienced more freedom (in his case, creatively) in the UK than the US.

Also a black student, Jordan was clear from the first interview that he did not consider himself an American, and this did not change significantly during or after his period of study. Geographically, his identity as a New Yorker was more important, and he often compared New York and London in his interviews. His lack of emotional attachment to a broader, US identity was reaffirmed in his final interview:

> you have an American passport and like you live in America, to me, it's like, yeah, it's that. It's not that big of a deal, but to some others that that might mean like a very that might be a very big part of their identity. (I3).

A deeper understanding of the weight of conformity in the US had a big impact on Greg. Like Jasmine, he returned to the US with a desire to leave again as soon as possible. Feeling that he had been able to more fully embrace his identity as a black man in the UK, he lamented:

> All the people here are the same, the roads are the same. Getting readjusted was very easy because I've known this my entire life. Uh, but you come back and nothing's changed and you've changed and you're like, I want my life to keep changing… Seeing the life that you could lead if you believe makes you kind of want it. If your home is a string, it makes you wanna cut the string and be like, "I'm done with this." (I3)

Like some other students, Greg's biggest disorienting dilemma could be said to be that experienced upon returning, leading to realisations and understandings he was able to come to as a result of his experiences abroad. For Greg, while his salient identities (black, male) remained the same, the change in context allowed him to step back and view how he experienced them at home differently (Jones & Abes, 2013). Reflecting on both his earlier answers and US history, Greg concluded:

> there's no history of – uh in England – there's no history of slavery… There's history of oppression. There's no history of that institution that enslaved people for generations upon generations. Like I'd probably be happier in a society where, uh, you know, my ancestors didn't bleed for this nation, and got nothing in return afterwards… I was saying about freedom of speech, that you don't value that as much when you live in a society that accepts you for who you are. (I3)

Both the content of this statement and the emotion with which it was delivered were striking and showed a considerable change from Greg's first interview. While it could be argued that he presents a positive view of British history that is not entirely accurate Greg's omission of this could be argued to be as relevant as what he chose to say: his faith in the ideals of the US, which he once defended so vociferously, has been so dented as to arguably make the faults of his host nation appear insignificant in comparison. The potential for Study Abroad students to reframe history in this way could potentially be a phenomenon that could lead to further interesting examination in future studies.

4.3.3.2 Subtheme: American Characteristics that Help Study Abroad.

Many respondents touched upon shared characteristics that they considered to be typically “American”, and which proved beneficial to their Study Abroad experience. I have included this as a subtheme since these were shared across all demographics, even amongst students who returned home more critical of their national identity. Aneela described Americans as “naturally inquisitive”, and believe themselves to be “invincible”, enabling them to explore new situations more confidently. Miranda joined a dance class alongside fellow student Sunny while in London and made many British friends. She put the ability to do this down to the following: “I do think the friendliness and like openness and excitement about trying stuff is a very big, very big part of like my, like, American identity." (I3). Sunny agreed, saying, “if we hadn't been so out there, maybe we wouldn't have made any friends because I don't know." (I3). Jasmine attributed the depth of her emotions to the deep connection she had made with members of her church, and attributed this in part to her open nature.

Perhaps unknowingly, the students are referencing recognisably American characteristics cited by Althen and Bennett (2005) and Teague and Beechey (2020).

4.3.4 Theme 4: “To Americans, Life is Work:” The Need to Succeed

The importance of hard work and continuous self-improvement, particularly economic improvement, emerged as a theme mentioned by almost every participant from the first interviews onwards. Of all the themes, this was the most universal, mentioned in some form in almost every interview. The theme both had positive and negative connotations – some expressed pride in a hardworking attitude (Brennan, for example, cited his hardworking nature as an important aspect of his identity), while others felt the weight of pressure and expectation, and some linked it to negative characteristics such as selfishness or ruthlessness. Some statements linked to earlier themes, particularly conformity, with students feeling that there were certain expectations placed upon them in times of success – particularly economic success – in the future. For Jeremy, work and achievement were inextricably linked with the notion of the American Dream. He said:

> There is a real sense of being able to advance and there is like career mobility that I… you know obviously that's a very – I'll say that with a caveat cos that's not true of people that belong to a minority – but having spent a lot of time in a small town in India I think in looking ahead most Americans, I would say, are able to conceive of opportunities that might be accessible to them in a way that is not the mindset of other nationalities. (I1)

As recounted earlier, Ellie, too, positioned hard work as central to what it means to be American, and she demonstrated this attitude herself. In her final interview, she recounted that one of her UK professors had expressed an opinion that Americans were "success-driven". She agreed with this, then went on to say that her grades were at the centre of her experience, to the extent that she had sacrificed some experiences as she was working "super-duper hard" to achieve good grades, even though her family was encouraging her to travel more as "this might be the only chance that you're ever gonna get to do these things." In this sense, the pressure to succeed – a pressure Ellie continued to put on herself – and the pressures to "do" and make the most of her time – which came from other people – collided to cause her stress. She said:

> I knew to continue keeping up good work in my classes and putting in the best amount of effort that I could. So it was just kind of outside high pressure peering in on my experience that just kind of messed it up for me, I guess (I3).

Many students in the study were motivated to study abroad by the potential career and therefore economic benefits it could bring. Sunny, working towards becoming a librarian, believed that meeting new people in an unfamiliar place would help her to do well in her future career:

> Studying in an area I'm not used to or just seeing like meeting with a bunch of people from different backgrounds than I will make my ability to, umm, like care for people

> and understand maybe being more empathetic to people who I'm not as similar with in my workplace (I1)

Jordan was hoping to “make connections” that would help him pursue a career in fashion. When asked what he wanted to get out of studying abroad, he replied:

> my main goal is to really learn how to design clothes, the process from start to finish, how to design clothes. Cos that’s really why I want to come here. My goal after this is to start making clothes for my own brand. (Jordan, I1)

Despite this, Jordan was one of several students who were looking forward to what they viewed as a more relaxed culture, believing that, in the US, there was an emphasis on constant achievement, whereas in Europe he believed there was a better work/life balance: “in America there’s a tendency to promote working hard, like you just accomplish what you need to accomplish…” (I1). Beliefs about the UK having a more relaxed work culture were verified by Caroline’s experience in her internship. She appreciated

> having a better work life balance and enjoying my job and not feeling like, I don't know, pardon my French, this might not be like, you know, politically correct, but not being a slave to the job (I2.)

In her first interview, Jasmine was very critical of Americans’ attitude to work, saying “If they [Americans] don't work hard they don't know who they are…To Americans, life is work.” In her second interview she declared: “America sucks, in terms of work culture.” It is perhaps surprising, then, that Jasmine found that one of the things she missed most about the US was her job. She recognised the contradiction, stating:

> working is a lot better of an experience here, although funnily enough, one of the biggest things I have missed is work…. I literally missed work so much. I'm like, “take me back. Let me work a shift, please.”

When pressed about what it was she missed about work back home, she connected her future plans to her study abroad, expanding:

> I just love being challenged and just constantly working on projects and stuff. I also love my job. I got an interview for a job to start back home. And I was so happy because it's also if I do get it, which I think I did because she was like, I can't wait to hear about your time in Paris and London. I'm like, “well, you can't hear about it without me actually being hired.”

In her final interview, having indeed been hired, Jasmine talked in detail, enthusiastically, about what she called “my first corporate American job”, but against a backdrop of how she had developed as a person as a result of studying abroad. Early in the interview she proclaimed that “everything in my life has changed because of my experience there.” She particularly cited an increase in confidence and ability to set boundaries in both her personal and working life as huge gains from her study abroad.

4.3.4.1 Subtheme: Self-Improvement and Self-Development. Jasmine was not alone in seeking self-improvement. Self-development was a central aim for most participants, and most felt, afterwards, that they had achieved this. In his first interview, Jeremy stated: “I absolutely know that I will learn and grow and know more about myself at the end of this.” In his final interview, he articulated how this was the case:

> Without a doubt it… it has made me grow and made me a better person and being in in that kind of environment and being independent and being forced into challenging situations all has made me grow and become more aware of myself and the world around me and what I care about.

When asked in the first what they wanted to gain from their experience, many students wanted to develop life skills which would help them in the future (several mentioned that they would need to cook for themselves and navigate public transport). Others wanted “new experiences” – again there was a practical element to this: Ellie noted: “I know that the

older you get and the more further you get along in life, it gets more and more difficult to travel, so I'm looking forward to taking this opportunity now" (I1).

In line with much previous commentary, some initially seemed to be using Study Abroad as an extended holiday – Jasmine wanted to visit Disneyland Paris, Brennan wanted to go to sports matches and Miranda wanted to visit the locations of British TV shows she had watched. In this sense, students often saw self-development as practical and experiential rather than psychological/attitudinal. For others, like Jeremy above, studying abroad was an opportunity to challenge themselves and experience personal growth. Ella's response encompassed a mixture of these elements:

> I'm just hoping to grow as a person and just, you know, have new experiences and being able to like prove to myself that I can move to a different country and, you know, be fine and find my way around (I1)

Ella articulated in her final interview how she had achieved this, saying her experience had impacted her "very, very positively". She explained:

> I keep telling people that it was some of the… one of the most, like, transformative periods of my life…I feel like I learned a lot about myself and what I want out of life and about other people, and like my relationships with other people… And I became more confident in myself. I just…I learned so much about like myself and the world around me that, yeah, it was incredible. (I3)

For Ellie, self-development was both practical and attitudinal. She had not expected the transition to be onerous, having moved state to go to university, saying: "I've experienced being far away from home before and going to school. So I just kind of feel like London's gonna be a slightly more extreme version of that." As well as becoming more aware of racism and societal attitudes she had previously not noticed, she expressed pride both in practical achievements such as:

> …further adulting but with a slightly smaller safety net. And I came back from the experience completely proud of myself, that I was able to go out into the world, do this, and I would say did it pretty well, I was able to handle getting to classes. I was able to handle meals and I was able to find my own way to to make my own self happy while I was in another country. (I3).

For some, like Greg, self-development meant a complete re-evaluation of priorities, often contrary to previously-held values. Greg had spoken in his first interview of his intention in the future to gain qualifications to enable him to thrive financially. In his final interview, he said: “I'm not the same person that I was just a few months ago…I'd rather make 80 [thousand dollars] and live in a different country than make 170 and be in the States."

What Greg perceived as a better quality of life was now more important than financial – and by implication, personal – success. This is notable as it suggests Greg’s experience was so transformative (Mezirow, 1978; 1981; 1997) as to lead to his rejection of typical, recognisable values (Kohls, 1984; Althen & Bennett, 2011; Scott et al., 2022). Summing up Study Abroad, he defined it as “a chance to take a break and reevaluate life. That should be, like, the slogan: a chance to take a break and revaluate life.”

4.3.4.2 Subtheme: Study Abroad as a Break from Life. Greg articulated the notion of Study Abroad as a break from “normal” life and was not alone in feeling this. Some were consciously avoiding American news, enjoying both the physical and psychological distance. Reflecting on gun violence after returning to the US, Ella said “it just was kind of nice to be removed from that a little bit and not be faced with that all the time.”

Similarly, of her internship, Caroline joked: “they [work colleagues] would always like ask me questions, ask me about American politics, to which I'd give my “I'm on my American politics sabbatical” answer.” (Caroline, I3)

Brennan agreed: “while I’m here I don’t have to worry about politics. Like, I feel like politics here is not as big as it is in the States, which is nice.” (I2).

Ella also recognised the learning benefit of being outside US culture: “Maybe it was nice to get kind of away from it, so I can remove myself a little bit from the equation and look at it with more like a critical eye.” (I3)

For others, the more independent pace of study in the UK gave them more space both to explore physically (all students in the study took time to travel independently during their time in London) and develop personally. Caroline was critical of what she called “busy work” in the US, and, like Jordan, appreciated the ability to manage her academic work herself rather than complying with constant deadlines. Likewise, Aneela, who arguably experienced the most profound development in terms of understanding her own identity, enjoyed the emphasis on long-term projects, stating: “I also don't have any tests in any of my classes, so that's what's been like easy for me. But I think because I have so much free time, I'm kind of like, what do I do with this time?” As can be seen from her other answers, it could be argued her time was used wisely to find out more about herself and the wider world.

4.4 Chapter Summary

Each participant in this study recounted a unique experience that could warrant a case study in itself. Taken together, themes emerged which give us an insight into aspects of both the individual and collective experiences, and which have the potential to change our understanding of the American Study Abroad experience and the relevance of American identity within that experience, and, by extension, our practices around them. Working with more than 1000 pages of data, the students’ statements and resulting themes can now be examined alongside existing theory and literature in order to more conclusively answer the research questions with a view to informing the work and even mission of this growing sector.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss my findings as they relate to existing literature in the field, and against the frameworks of the MMDI and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. In doing so I hope to be able to fully answer the research questions, allowing me to make recommendations for professional practice further research.

5.2 Salience of National Identity

This study resulted in several important findings. Firstly, the unique perception of each individual participant's national identity impacted aspects of their Study Abroad experience. However, while some patterns could be observed and have been explored below, there is an extent to which the interplay between national identity and other aspects of students' identities such as race, sexuality, geographic identity (with students identifying strongly as New Yorkers or Midwesterners, for example) resulted in significant outcomes for individuals, rather than national identity alone.

It was nonetheless possible to observe common themes linked to national identity that resulted in notable experiences and mindset changes: it is significant that, despite their different backgrounds and diverging experiences throughout the study, participants set out with similar ideas and ideals around their national identity which were subsequently questioned or cemented.

Lantz et al. (2020) assert that multicultural competence is hindered by socialisation within a dominant culture, and that these beliefs must be "unlearned". They further argue that privilege within that culture plays a role in determining how difficult it is to "unlearn" previously-accepted cultural "myths" that encourage national loyalty, such as the "meritocracy myth", discussed below. Sol (2013) noted that "Every person is unique and brings various aspects and experiences to his or her entire self-concept…The experience of

study abroad may be a time when students must (dis)associate with particular identities to negotiate their experience." (p. 48). Throughout the study, students were shown to be identifying in some cases more strongly (Elliott) and in other cases (such as Caroline) deliberately dissociating themselves from specifically their "Americanness". Others began to view previously-accepted and dearly-held beliefs – such as the emphasis on freedom – from a different angle (in particular Greg, Ella and Sunny).

Young et al.(2015) observed that "individuals find themselves simultaneously immersed in multiple cultures and juggling a self-identity that is in flux." (p. 185). In this study participants can be seen first attempting to define what was meant by being American (and often finding that question difficult to answer) to displaying typically American traits which subsequently impacted their experience (positively, negatively and neutrally) and finally negotiating between different elements of their identities (such as race, sexuality, gender) to situate these within their new culture and, in doing so, reflect on their life in the US. The result is a new and nuanced understanding of the personal significance of American nationality to each student, sometimes with far-reaching results. For some, such as Elliott, this process resulted in a renewed and strengthened loyalty to the US, for others a new appreciation of some aspects of the US (for example, Miranda). For others, it led to a disillusionment with elements of the US that were previously held in high regard (such as Ella, who in her first interview valued diversity in the US, but when comparing it to the UK after returning home described the US as "reluctantly diverse"). This is consistent with previous studies – Pitts (in the context of his study) describes this as a "complex, multifaceted understanding of what it meant to be ''American,'' and in a few cases, a better understanding of what it was to be a ''global citizen.''" (p. 458). With American identity as the study's explicit focus, the results highlight potential areas of concern for practitioners, and conflict or discomfort for students.

Having observed and acknowledged that American identity is significant in students' framing of their experiences, I will go on to address aspects of the research questions in more detail.

5.2.1 National Identity and the Benefits of Study Abroad

The research questions are interested in whether students' perceptions of American identity impact the benefits of studying abroad, asking how they impact what students obtain from their studies.

In his examination of rhetoric in Study Abroad, Woolf cautioned:

> We believe that international education is a social good with benefits that transcend individual interest and those of any single country. Yet, if we scratch beneath the surface of the rhetoric of education abroad, we unearth ideas that, inadvertently and unconsciously, mimic neo-conservative elitism and ultra-nationalism. (p. 188).

Heeding Woolf's concerns, this study has aimed to scratch further beneath the surface of students' individual and collective experiences, allowing us to test many of the claims made with regards to the benefits of Study Abroad, with a view, as practitioners, to helping to ensure those claims become the reality and, where they do not, replacing them with more honest promises.

Encouragingly, many of the participants' assertions and accounts of their experiences do support that, to some extent, students made demonstrable intercultural gains as a result of their studies – this supports and expands upon Pitts' findings that "Toward the end of the sojourn and upon return, students articulated an identity shift toward a more nuanced and complex American identity and, for some, a movement toward a world citizen identity." (Pitts, 2009, p. 458). Students demonstrated an ability to compare home and away in an often nuanced fashion, recognising difference and making personal judgements around those differences: Greg, for example, a vociferous defender of the US's approach to

free speech, recognised that, while it could be argued that the UK is more restrictive, the fact that he felt safer in the UK brought with it other freedoms that he had grown to value more.

One of Woolf's (2023) criticisms of contemporary Study Abroad rhetoric is that preparatory materials simplistically talk about a "host culture", and thus "reinforces the illusion of a unified identity, rather than the fragmentation and diversity they are likely to encounter." (p. 203). While this may be true, a major finding of this research was that, following a period of study abroad, many students were, at least, no longer under the illusion that their own identity sat comfortably within a single, "unified" culture – experiences such as Aneela's (viewing her Indian identity in a different way), Greg's (experiencing freedom in different ways) and Ellie's (comparing how diversity is manifested in the UK and, as a result, being more critical of prejudice against minority groups upon returning home) show that they had gained a level of intercultural awareness as defined by Deardorff (2006) and others, whereby they were able to identify and reflect thoughtfully upon the differences between two cultures. At the very least, they had learned a "very important truth: that there are people beyond the shoreline who think just as well as they do, but who think somewhat differently." (Nolan, 2010, p. 292.)

Some of the students supported more pessimistic claims by Kinginger (2010), Breen (2012), Zemach-Basin (2012), whose study of students from Wesleyan University found that all returning students identified more positively with the US and their US identity after returning from studying abroad, and Kortegast and Kupo (2017), who feared that study abroad students would have only superficial experiences and "might interact with host cultures in ways that promote U.S. superiority [and] fail to examine their own culture bias." (p. 158). However, they were in the minority. While Elliott in particular, and Brennan to a lesser extent, appear to have had their sense of national pride reinforced by studying abroad, and did not display evidence of meaningful encounters either with others or themselves (in terms of how they understood or experienced aspects of their own identity) one should be cautious in asserting incontrovertibly that Study Abroad therefore failed in its

aims. The nature of such a study means there are necessarily limitations: the researcher obtains data from a limited number of participants, then relies on those participants both to remember and share openly and honestly experiences and feelings with them at a point in time. So, while one can conclude that, for these students, the personal impact of Study Abroad was limited and short-term, one cannot say conclusively that this indicates a grave problem within Study Abroad. The disparities in experience, however, between the experiences and (in some cases) strong emotions of different participants, certainly warrants a need for further study and helps us to consider future research questions that could be answered through much larger, quantitative studies, posing particular questions to students around their experiences, and comparing the answers from different demographics. Most notably, this study has potentially highlighted differences between white students and students of colour, and larger, longitudinal studies into the experiences of these cohorts with regards to the potential negative impacts, emotionally, on these students would be advisable, as this could highlight areas where better preparation, support and post-study follow-up is needed. With such a small cohort it is difficult to generalise, however Greg and Jasmine's extremely negative emotions upon returning are difficult to ignore, as was (if to a lesser extent) Aneela's reflection in her final interview that "my love for America has come way down because it's like, what is this [the US] if not just my home for like temporarily?". While most of the students (with the exceptions of Brennan and Elliott – both white and male and so arguably support Violante et al.'s 2020 and DeVos and Banaji's 2005 assertions around white dominance in American society) returned home with a more nuanced attitude towards the US (Kartoshkina's "critical lens", 2017), all of the students who exhibited what could be considered distress upon return were non-white students. As a practitioner with a focus on wellbeing, this troubling finding cannot be ignored.

5.2.2 American Values: Help or Hindrance?

The students in this study persistently displayed core American values and beliefs highlighted by Kohls (1984), Althen (2005) and Althen and Bennett (2011), and reasserted

by Violante et al., (2020), Gmelch and Gmelch (2016), Nanda (2016) and others. Many students resorted to these traditional values when trying to articulate both what being American meant to them, and what the most positive aspects were of being American, and it became clear that such values were ingrained and had a significant impact of how students processed and understood their experiences. However, the final interviews showed that it was possible for students to re-evaluate these values as a result of encounters during their experience. As such, one could argue that Study Abroad impacts perceptions of national identity (as its proponents have long claimed) rather than one's preconceived beliefs directing how study abroad is experienced.

Some common American values and beliefs could be said to predispose American students to Study Abroad and make them ideal candidates for the experience. Several students (such as Sunny and Miranda, above) believed that Americans' tendency towards friendliness and openness assisted them in engaging with London beyond the classroom. Students also cited their inquisitiveness and commitment to hard work as central to the success of their study abroad.

Other well-documented characteristics considered to be particularly American are double-edged in terms of their potential influence on Study Abroad. Nanda (2016) discusses the US's peculiar brand of optimism and unshakeable belief that the future will always be better stating that, "In America, our eye is on hopes for the future" (p. 12) – on the one hand, this could suggest that students would participate in Study Abroad without being too cautious, believing that anything that does not go well today will be history tomorrow. This, one might suppose, could help students to take risks and, leading to deeper experiences. On the other hand, an emphasis on the future could point to a lack of reflection: if one is already looking forward, it is more difficult to look back and reflect what past experiences might mean – this could hinder the success of Mezirow's transformative learning, discussed in more detail below. Indeed, while students reflected on their experiences within the study as a result of being asked direct questions that encouraged them to do so, many had already

moved on: Elliott stated of returning home: “It all just seems like it all reverted back to normal, but now there's just like an extra chapter in my book that's very long” (Elliott, I3). While he reflected positively on his experiences, they were already very much in the past, and the word “just” implies they were not of huge significance. Others, however, were actively looking to the future with their new experiences potentially playing a part in that future. Many planned to live abroad – something they would not have considered prior to studying abroad – and even Brennan, who also felt that everything had returned to normal after returning home, stated that he would now consider living in the UK in the future. This aspect of thinking common to Americans, then, could potentially be harnessed in a Study Abroad context, perhaps encouraging more and ongoing reflection that is not general and unguided (as reflective exercises sometimes are) but actively asks students to consider the present with a view to how it might impact the future.

Other values likewise posed a potential hindrance. Resnick (2019) bemoans the importance of wealth accumulation, raised by several students in their first interview and quickly becoming a theme for this study: “Self-reliance, thrift, work, and wealth accumulation have been built so powerfully into the American body politic that they have become almost unchallengeable”. (p. 54). Kasser and Ryan go further, purporting that the powerful “myth” of the American dream has a darker side which necessitates financial success, putting pressure on Americans and even negatively impacting student mental health. While mental health did not come up explicitly in this study (which could tentatively be deemed an encouraging, if inconclusive and partly speculative, finding – that students are in fact more resilient than we fear) its weight was evident from start to finish, with participants talking about future earnings, the need to succeed academically, personally, and even in the intangible field of “personal growth”. Even while recounting positive experiences, students such as Ellie always had an eye on grades or career prospects, potentially limiting their experiences (though again, the material gained from this study was not sufficient to determine this conclusively).

5.2.3 Assimilationism, Diversity and the Impact on Study Abroad Students

Patton et al. (2016) noted that “Higher education can be a location for acculturation and the construction of an “American” or a “hyphenated-American” identity as students come to understand themselves and their national identity/identities.” (p. 269) and this is certainly evidence from this study.

One of the most troubling aspects of this study was the confirmation among participants of a dominant, “Anglo-centric conception of US identity” resulting from an “assimilationist conception of identity is significant in privileging those who meet identity standards and disadvantaging those who do not” (Violante et al., 2020, p. 54) and the impact upon students who did not meet this “standard” at home and subsequently encountered a different experience of this identity abroad.

Rodriguez et al. (2010) state that “In terms of how American one feels, ethnic minorities felt less American than Whites…Responses suggested that participants believed that to be American, one must sacrifice a connection to family and community.” (p. 324). This supports the experiences of several participants, summed up by Aneela believing she needed to “forget” a part of herself. While Aneela welcomed the opportunity to explore the Indian side of her identity more deeply during her time in London, Greg and Jasmine exhibited distress upon returning. Keen to promote the benefits of Study Abroad, institutions do not routinely warn of identity disruption on this scale, and certainly not to those students who are already under-represented on Study Abroad programmes and who they are keen to attract (Boulden, 2022; Covington, 2017) but whose experiences they do not seek to understand (Sol, 2013). The disparity between these students’ experiences and the post-study reflections of some of the wealthier, white, students supports Gambrell’s (2018) fears that a student’s mere willingness to participate in Study Abroad activities would “not necessarily change students’ perceptions of dominant culture ideologies, especially concerning their beliefs about power structures within the United States” (p. 11). Studies have bemoaned the lack of guided reflection following a period of Study Abroad or

emphasized the need for ongoing mentoring to cement intercultural gains (Goldstein & Keller, 2015). Kartoshkina (2017) discusses “repatriation distress” (p. 35) – this is certainly a term that could be ascribed to Greg and Jasmine, yet institutions display a lack of structured, targeted support for student returnees experiencing this.

Kohls noted that “although Americans may think of themselves as being more varied and unpredictable than they actually are, it is significant that they think they are.” (Kohls, 1988, p. 2) – indeed, Brennan’s insistence that he was not like other Americans in the second interview encapsulates this observation. The study demonstrated to the researcher the similarities between participants, while studying abroad brought home to many of the participants the limits of the diversity and individualism they so cherished. While students of colour came to terms with their own American identities, and the potential that it had the effect of stunting aspects of their identities, other students (notably Ellie and Ella) became aware of a different way of approaching diversity, and, with it, the view that the “American way” was not necessarily the best – or only – way. The majority of participants demonstrated a growing awareness of conformity on the part of American culture in the face of visible diversity in London and were able to reflect upon this even – in some cases especially – after returning home.

For the researcher, this noticeable increase of awareness also argued the case for London specifically (as opposed even to the rest of the UK) as a Study Abroad destination. Its perceptible diversity is often harnessed as a marketing tool: websites such as GoAbroad.com assert: “No matter where you are in London, you’ll have the opportunity to experience many different cultures. You’ll become a better and more experienced person because of it!” (Rosa, 2024, para. 9). For the students in the study, witnessing such diversity was often what led to transformative learning, in turn dispelling some of the concerns about London being popular for its ease of transition and its famous sites. While both were reasons participants cited for choosing to study here, the depth of awareness gained by students as a result of a brief immersion in London dispelled the fear that England was presented as,

and therefore often thought of as merely “at the very least as a close cousin of the full-blooded American.” (Edwards, 2000, pp. 83-84). On the contrary, it was the differences London was able to showcase, not the similarities, that made a lasting impression on many of the students. Again, London’s potential transformative power is often utilised in Study Abroad programming, and this study would encourage practitioners to continue to do so, and enhance its explicit inclusion in syllabi and co-curricular activities as much as possible.

5.3 Using the MMDI to Explain Identity Experiences within Study Abroad

Patton et al. (2016) noted, “More evidence is needed to create something like a model of how study abroad or other international experiences influence national identity development among U.S. students, but it is clear that these experiences do have some effect on national identity.” (p. 269). The MMDI was used in the absence of a more specific model, and proved useful in providing a general framework for understanding identity.

In line with much research that refers to the MMDI, students often presented themselves by describing aspects of their “core” identity, that is, personal attributes which they considered were key to them as individuals. Sometimes, these touched upon characteristics that we now understand to be particularly “American” in nature, such as hard work and openness, discussed at length above, though no students made reference to their nationality in ascribing these characteristics as individual to them. Students’ most salient identities, in line with the MMDI framework, tended to be those that set students apart from others, or through which they felt marginalized. Greg and Jeremy, for example, both mentioned their gender, stating that they were in a college where there were more female than male students, whereas the other male students in this study did not do so; all non-white students mentioned their race, and queer students mentioned their sexuality, which heterosexual students did not – this was in line with Jones and Abes’ (2013) findings. It was notable that Aneela did not initially place great emphasis on her Indian identity, evidencing the level of integration in an assimilationist culture.

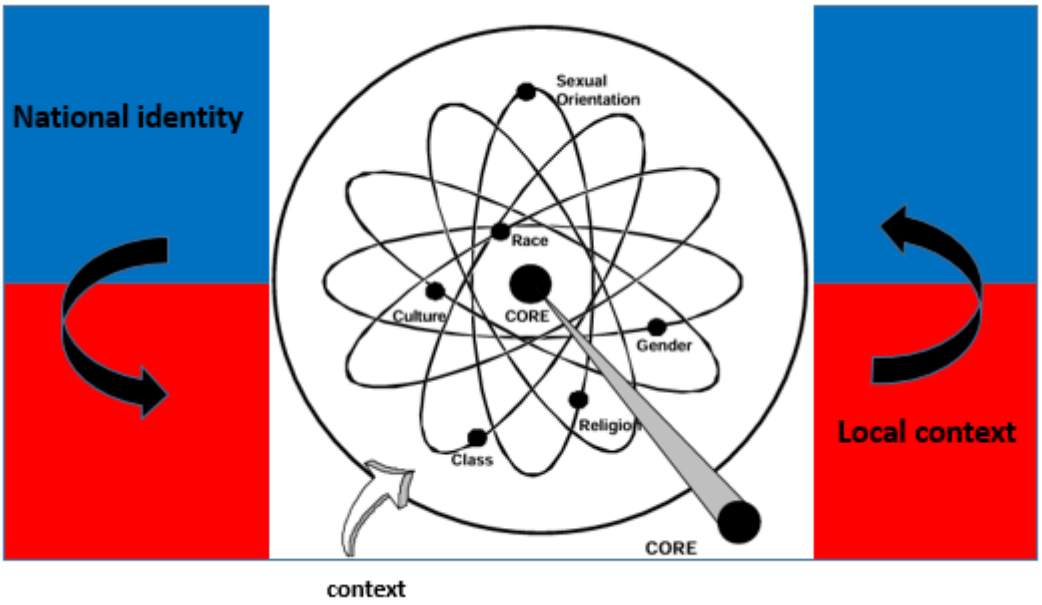
The MMDI is striking in that it does not mention national identity, and there is little discussion of it in Jones and Abes' work. However, as the results showed, national identity became more salient for participants towards and after the end of their studies, with students become more aware of it, and in some cases feeling a stronger affinity with it (notably Elliott), more greatly valuing of it (Jeremy, in recognising the strength of privilege it offered) or feeling a reluctant prisoner of it (Jasmine and her feelings of disloyalty, Greg and his conscious lack of enjoyment of being back home, and others). In particular, the impact of their national identity on their most salient identities (most notably Aneela's "loss" of part of her Indian identity in order to "become American") was realised for the first time in the context of Study Abroad. Furthermore, looking back at the literature review, Aneela perhaps demonstrated that the conscious historical act Yokata (2010) described as "unbecoming British" remains in the contemporary USA, where immigrants still need to undergo a ritual "unbecoming" before they can become truly American.

Such findings were in line with Patton et al.'s (2016) observation that "National identity may not be especially salient for most White domestic students who are legal U.S. citizens and who study on a U.S. college campus" (p. 265) and with the limited research on national identity and Study Abroad, notably Dolby (2004, 2007), who noted that "Students became acutely aware of their American identity as they traveled outside of the United States, and this realization and struggle shaped their encounter with the rest of the world" (Dolby, 2007, p. 141) and, as a result, saw their national identity as something that was open to re-examination and improvement. National identity became an active reality rather than a passive fact. In the current study, we see national identity brought to the fore by being placed in a new context. This newly-highlighted part of identity then both influences and is influenced by the new context in which it is transplanted (both geographical and cultural).

It might be helpful, then, to add a backdrop against which the MMDI can be viewed when used specifically in a Study Abroad context. This places the existing MMDI within a broader context where national identity and location are both present at the same time, and

constantly feeding into one another and, in turn, influencing the identities in the original model.

Figure 4: Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity Adapted for Study Abroad



(Penter, 2025, adapted from Jones & McEwan, 2000)

In this version of the model, national identity is not merely added as one element of identity that has become more salient and so moves closer to the core during a period of study abroad, but rather a backdrop that is always there, and against which other aspects of identity are created and understood. By “context” Jones and McEwan talk broadly of “current experiences” and “sociocultural conditions”, but make no mention of location or nationality, despite the fact that someone will always have a nationality and will always “be” somewhere (local context), so form a permanent backdrop that I have tried to illustrate here. Jones and McEwan’s other examples of context remain, of course, but are more fluid and personal, and, as such, sit well just outside the individual’s circle.

Savicki and Cooley (2013) noted that “Americanness becomes more salient in non-American settings” (p. 347) but cautioned that students do not necessarily reflect consciously on American identity abroad. They concluded: “If we seek transformative

learning as a goal of international education, we need to facilitate the exploration and search aspect of American identity." (p. 348). Finally, then, let us examine these results against a framework of Transformative Learning Theory.

5.4 Applying Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) was used as a framework due to its focus on learners and how they learn, rather than on the environment within which they learn. While the students' programmes were designed to encourage engagement with London and the wider UK (through excursions, co-curricular activities and, sometimes, course materials) they did not actively facilitate reflection specifically on American identities, and the level of engagement for students was optional.

At the core of Mezirow's theory is the "Disorienting dilemma" – where students experience this, the other steps can appear to follow almost organically. I have illustrated this below using Aneela as an example:

Table 10: Aneela: An Example of Transformative Learning

Stage	Example
(1) A disorienting dilemma	Aneela realised that people she assumed were Indian were in fact British Indian
(2) Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame	Aneela initially felt negatively towards these people, before considering that this was just a different way of inhabiting aspects of two cultures
(4) Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared with others	Aneela expressed in her second interview her intention to visit a Temple in the UK
(5) Exploration of new roles and relationships	Aneela chose to forefront different aspects of her identity – Indian, American, New Yorker – depending on the context
(6) Planning a course of action	Aneela actively chose to attend events where she could meet British Indians
(7) Acquisition of new knowledge and skills	Aneela reframed her understanding of Indian (and other immigrant) identities in the UK vs in the US
(8) Provisional trying of new roles	Aneela began to refer to herself as Indian American without the hesitation expressed earlier
(9) Building competence and self-confidence	Aneela proudly embraced her Indian-American identity in her final interview, and confidently defined herself as a New Yorker.
(10) A reintegration of changed perspectives into one's life	Aneela is open to moving to the UK, but in the meantime embraces her identity within the US while

	recognising that this resulted from an assimilationist perspective rather than a multicultural one

However, it is clear that while some students followed this trajectory fairly faithfully, others emerged without experiencing any transformation – Brennan, while valuing his experience, related how unexpectedly easy it was to return to “normal” even after a potentially disorienting experience. Reflecting on the difference in gun laws in the UK, he noted: “I was kind of more worried about the gun thing [coming back]… But being back, I guess kind of like you don't realize that that's even a thing here. It kind of feels like the same.” (Brennan, I3).

DiAngelis (2021) suggests that another way of thinking about a disorienting dilemma is “when new information challenges what one has known to be true.” (p. 590). One could argue that Brennan’s experiences cemented what he already believed (he later cited the right to bear arms as one of the US’s core freedoms, restating that freedom was central to his understanding of American identity) whereas students such as Greg and Aneela were confronted with realties they had not before considered. Aneela witnessed immigrants in the UK expressing their identity in a different way to immigrants in the US, and in turn this allowed her to reconsider her own identity and led her to a profound conclusion that immigrants in the US “forget” a part of themselves. Greg’s experiences as a black man in the UK led him to question the very notion of what freedom meant to someone with his identities in the US.

Mezirow and Taylor (2011) caveat the original theory, outlining pre-requisites that must exist in order for students to fully participate in a process of transformative learning. Students must be free from coercion and distorting self-deception, open to alternative points of view and willing to seek a deeper understanding, agreement, and a withholding of judgement until new perspectives and arguments are encountered. Students who experienced transformation exhibited this, but the question – raised at the start of this thesis

– lingers as to whether some aspects of American identity are so entrenched as to be almost coercive, preventing participants from fully taking part in such discourse, preventing full transformation. The contrast between Greg's second and third interviews demonstrates the importance of these pre-requisites in allowing for transformation: his insistence in the second interview that "America is the only country that is truly free", even after eight weeks in the UK, suggested that transformation was unlikely, and had the study been limited to two interviews one would have concluded that the centrality of freedom to the very notion of what it means to be American was so pervasive as to hinder meaningful transformation. His revelations in the final interview, then, were as surprising as they were moving – it was as though Greg, in his final weeks on the programme and return to the US, had allowed himself to consider alternative viewpoints, and had then followed each stage of Mezirow's theory leading to a complete change with wide-ranging implications, including a reconsideration of future career plans and an intent to leave the USA.

The disparity between my participants' experiences leads me to disagree with two of Bain and Yaklin's (2019) assertions. Firstly, they stated: "Participating in a study abroad requires students to mentally challenge their cultural and social norms" (p. 4) – some of my students completed their Study Abroad programme successfully (in that they passed the academic components) without doing this. Secondly, they purported that strong programme design alone will lead to transformation, stating:

> When faculty and university administrators properly design the study abroad trip, connect it to course-specific learning outcomes, emphasize and carefully craft cultural engagement activities, and screen for those students who will glean the most from these travel-abroad experiences, a transformational study abroad experience can be expected (p. 4).

All of my students had access to the same resources, teaching and experiences, yet some notably did not appear to have achieved transformation in any real sense. A suggestion that institutions should screen participants is unrealistic (after all, Study Abroad is an industry, as

outlined elsewhere here), not to say counter-productive, defeatist and exclusionary: it would seem to suggest that we simply should not bother to change those who, perhaps, would benefit from transformation the most – they are a lost cause.

Mezirow et al. (2011) stated that, in order to successfully foster transformative learning, one should develop an awareness of the context and understand the sociocultural and personal factors that influence the transformative process. A combined understanding of the adapted MMDI above (to explain context and the role of identity) and an understanding of the potential for TLT to occur (with an acceptance that it is unrealistic for this to be an expectation for every student) could help practitioners to consciously construct experiences that lead to genuine growth – something, after all, that many students cited in their first interviews as being something they wished to take away from their experience – but also be more aware of those students for whom such transformation had the potential to lead to painful revelations.

While this study attempted to use Transformative Learning Theory to understand students' experiences, and is not intended as a critique of TLT as a framework, its striking applicability to the non-white students in this study led me to disregard Gambrell's criticisms of it in that sense. However, Gambrell did seem to be correct in warning that a student's willingness alone will not result in transformation, as demonstrated particularly by Miranda, Brennan and Elliott, and to a lesser extent others, who had an enjoyable, even valuable, experience, but arguably not a transformative one. TLT alone, then, was a useful framework for this study, but is arguably, as Gambrell feared, too simplistic a framework to use when constructing meaningful Study Abroad experiences, or, at least, it should be informed by studies such as this one which highlight its potential limitations.

5.5 Significance of Findings

The findings have potential implications both in directing future research, and potentially impact several areas of Study Abroad, from how it is marketed to how programmes are developed to how students are supported upon their return. While more

research, including larger-scale, quantitative studies, would be recommended before significant changes were to be implemented, it nonetheless provides many questions for serious consideration, and individual and collective experiences observed here provide useful ideas for practitioners – including academics and Student Life professionals – to bear in mind when designing activities. These are discussed briefly below.

5.5.1 Marketing of Study Abroad

The range of experiences within even this limited study suggest that the marketing of Study Abroad is simplistic and has the potential even to be damaging. The US government, in marketing Study Abroad, tacitly implies it will benefit individuals in terms of their status and earning potential, beginning “As a future global leader, you need to feel at home in a fast-changing world.” (United States Department of State, 2017, para 1). It goes on to list vague benefits, including the ability to navigate different cultures and work with diverse peers. A tool to encourage Study Abroad, like many university websites, it does not mention the potential for negative disorientations of one’s identity.

5.5.2 Impact on Programme Development

If we start in agreement that programmes are being designed with some form of intercultural development in mind, the study’s findings are useful in seeing where such development takes place, and where some experiences seem to be counter-productive to development (reinforcing students’ beliefs rather than providing space for those beliefs to be re-examined).

The study’s results lead me to speculate whether institutions are approaching programme design from the wrong direction: we have long held the belief that a carefully-constructed programme can in itself glean the results (such as increased intercultural development) that we are seeking. However, I fear this approach over-estimates the power institutions have to impact students over a short space of time, and underestimates the power of other forces in shaping students’ experiences: the students here had access to the same opportunities and similarly-structured programmes (with the exception of Caroline,

who also undertook a work placement), yet the impact on each individual varied hugely, from Elliott's reassertion of loyalty to the US in the face of (what he perceived as) outside opposition, to Greg's complete re-evaluation of his life goals and future plans. Bliuc et al. (2017) instead caution that

> students' sense of who they are and where they want to be (i.e., their social identity, along with the values, beliefs and behaviours that it encapsulates) will shape their learning experience and outcomes in ways that are perhaps more powerful than teaching interventions that are not conceived from the student perspective. (p. 220).

It is imperative, then, that we understand the possible identities our students bring with them, tailor our programmes accordingly, and, perhaps as importantly, tailor our expectations of ourselves as practitioners.

The findings provide some support for Gristwood's (2019) proposed model of education: "The most effective education abroad programs take a holistic approach to both the student as subject and the locations they encounter, and intentionally facilitate opportunities to investigate the ways in which those locations are glocally constructed." (p. 71.) By "glocal", Gristwood is talking about using the students' location to encourage reflection in a global context. This focus on the local and, by extension, its relationships beyond that locality, forces students to focus on cultural and (by implication) national differences, fostering constant reflection in a way that, when done carefully, students should find non-threatening.

The notion of threats – perceived or otherwise – can influence how students experience Study Abroad, and, in turn, they impact how we, as practitioners, approach students. Institutions such as mine are ultimately a business, and Study Abroad a billion-dollar industry (Dietrich, 2018), and there is pressure on staff to keep students happy, and, as such, a reluctance to place them in situations where they could become uncomfortable. In a sense, this is an amplification of trends within American Higher Education where

discomfort is sometimes equated with danger (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018). When considering the results in their context and deciding what to do next, we would do well to remember Butler's warning: "When students are underchallenged or undersupported, they may disengage, retreat or regress, or stagnate in their current development stage... Maximum growth occurs when the appropriate amount of challenge and support exists" (p. 84). Certainly in this study, students who engaged with aspects beyond the classroom (Greg joining a cigar club, Aneela engaging with Indian peers, Sunny attending a dance class away from the university and Jasmine attending a British African church) were among those who showed the most growth and more nuanced questioning of their cultures. At the same time, the programme allowed other students to remain within the familiar, giving them limited opportunities for experiences that might prompt self-reflection. For example, Brennan experienced discomfort in Paris, finding the people rude and commenting that it was not the Paris he had seen on TV (Brennan, I3.) However, as he visited on an organised trip along with his peers, he was able to immediately relate this discomfort to a sympathetic response which, it could be argued, reinforced his initial impressions. As Study Abroad institutions often pride themselves on providing broad and holistic support, from an in-depth orientation to on-course mental health support, they should be confident in their ability to support students who might experience discomfort, and even promote potential discomfort as part of the Study Abroad experience, as CIEE does, stating:

> Study abroad is fun—only it's an immersive situation, which implies putting all of yourself at stake! Just as you prepared your trip in practical terms, my invitation is to prepare your heart and mind for the experience, specially, be prepared to face discomfort (CIEE Santiago [website], 2022, para 3).

The experiences of those who engaged actively with the wider community versus the experiences of those who didn't supports Vande Berg's (2007) belief that institutions should be actively interventionist, having also observed that those who "creatively" sought out opportunities made the most observable gains – her fear is that students often fail to engage

meaningfully with locals because they “simply do not know how to go about learning in a new and different cultural environment” (p. 394). I would argue that the research demonstrates a need for students to participate in such opportunities, but suggests that such opportunities could be more successful in helping students to develop where those students have taken the onus upon themselves to find them, arguably giving them more autonomy. It could be argued that where opportunities are “curated” for them (Gaudelli and Laverty, 2015, p. 14), they could be considered synthetic, and have less impact than more authentic, self-sought examples, and more research into whether this is the case could be beneficial. One option could be to require students to engage in a community activity within set guidelines, potentially providing some contacts and examples but requiring students to make arrangements themselves, and engaging constructively with them at pre-agreed points during the programme to foster continuing engagement.

The many competing considerations that go into building a Study Abroad Programme – from student safety and comfort to meeting academic requirements to facilitating growth (intercultural and personal) – mean it would be naïve and unrealistic to suggest a complete overhaul of programming. Even if this study were large and longitudinal enough to be conclusive in its findings, significant change is expensive and difficult. Indeed, even the US government remains far off its ambitious aim of seeing one million students studying abroad by 2016 (Lincoln Commission, 2005), so major and swift changes are unlikely. That said, one recommendation resulting from the experiences of the students in this study and the findings of previous research would be to require those participating in study abroad programmes to undertake activities outside of the university environment, perhaps for credit so that students would perceive a tangible benefit in exploring them. Mezirow and Taylor (2011) noted that “without individual experience, there is little or nothing to engage in critical reflection” (no pagination), and without this, transformative learning cannot occur. At the most basic level, then, institutions cannot simply provide opportunities for students to

engage with the local community should they choose to but, if we are truly going to meet our promises as educators, must ensure that students actually have those experiences.

5.5.3 A Different Purpose to Study Abroad: A Space to Breathe

Perhaps controversially, students' acknowledgment of the pressures they faced and the need to constantly look to the future and work hard (an acceptance, perhaps, of two entrenched American traits identified by Kohl), along with students' enthusiastic articulation of what they had gained from studying abroad (for many, self-confidence, self-growth, fleeting but enjoyable encounters, the opportunity to see more places – all gains which benefited them as individuals) suggests that, for all the rhetoric around study abroad and its benefits to both nation and individuals, ultimately for many students it is a welcome break from a demanding culture and a path towards constant achievement and attainment that was set for them before they were even born. While both institutions and the US government may be eager to cite benefits in order to justify the expansion of study abroad, they would do well to acknowledge that, while students might well leave with a greater understanding of other cultures and of themselves, or with the ability to view the US through a more critical lens (Kartoshkina, 2015), ultimately they will leave with memories of an experience that they were able to view as beneficial, but that was enjoyable and, momentarily, free from some of the pressures of the life ahead of them. At a time where student mental health is often described as being "in crisis", with Faculty and professional staff alike feeling overwhelmed by the demand (Abrams, 2022), there is surely a demonstrable benefit in students taking a break before they embark on a pressured – perhaps quintessentially American – life that will be focused on achievement and constant improvement. It would be interesting to see the results of longer studies, with larger numbers, to investigate the validity of this idea. Should such studies support what has been suggested here, this could provide Study Abroad with a refreshingly new – and honest – purpose.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter demonstrates the significance of American identity in a Study Abroad context and the myriad and complex ways in which this manifests itself and, in doing so, the challenges it poses to practitioners. These implications are discussed in the final chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Chapter Introduction

While this study presents a snapshot of student experiences studying abroad in the UK, it provides a potentially useful starting point for future research and has implications for both pedagogical and professional practice.

6.2 Researcher Reflection

Throughout the project I remained aware of the potential conflicts and biases that could arise from being an insider researcher (see 3.2.1), the role of the researcher within IPA as "an inclusive part of the world which they are describing" (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 107), and my own limitations as a researcher and interviewer in the early stages of their academic development. Throughout the research I kept a researcher journal, as recommended by Nadin and Cassell (2006) where I reflected on each of the above, as well as my own effectiveness as an interviewer, what worked well and what skills I needed to develop. This also served as a tool for me to check my potential biases and acknowledge their potential impact, helping to ensure my analysis remained objective, protecting the validity of the study (Ortlipp, 2006). When re-reading and analysing transcripts I added occasional "researcher reflection" comments.

Braun and Clarke (2013) encourage researchers to share aspects of their identity and experience which could help students feel more comfortable – I studied abroad myself and share some of the identities espoused by my students (for example, I define as queer), however, at the same time it is important to remember that participants' experiences do not necessarily mirror my own, and believing otherwise could bias my analysis (Maxwell, 2008). Throughout the research I believe that sharing my experiences contributed to my being a "good listener" and creating a non-judgemental and empathetic environment (Lavee, E., & Itzchakov, 2023), enabling a more natural conversation and encouraging subjects to be open about their emotions. At the same time, I was aware of my inability to do this with all participants, as this interaction with Jasmine showed:

Figure 5: Researcher Reflections While Reviewing Transcripts

6.3 Revisiting the Question of Trustworthiness

Efforts were made to ensure trustworthiness and validity throughout the study, and the steps outlined in 3.6 were revisited regularly to ensure as far as possible the reliability of results as they were being obtained. Early on, some potentially interested participants were rejected from the study due to concerns that a conflict of interest may arise due to the researcher-practitioner crossover: one student, for example, had complex mental health needs, so was had already had considerable contact with me ahead of arrival. This increased reliance on and familiarity with the researcher, and potentially a concern that she may (consciously or otherwise) tailor her answers to give me what she perceived I may want to hear, or may not have felt able to withdraw, meant she would not have been a reliable participant. (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Likewise, I was careful to outline at the start of each interview – and include in the recording – the fact that participants were free to withdraw at any time.

Professional input was obtained from academic colleagues throughout. This was useful both for the development of the study and as I undertook analysis. Emerging themes were shared with colleagues within the Graduate School at a presentation in February (after the second set of interviews) and at the Graduate School Conference after interviews had all been completed, giving others a chance to challenge any findings or assertions. This allowed me to test – and develop confidence in – the robustness of my findings.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

IPA is a method used in small-scale studies with the aim of providing detailed insight into individual experiences, and not to provide generalised findings or purport to have isolated a single truth – indeed, it rejects a positivist approach. Furthermore, this study is necessarily limited to students studying through a particular provider, within London, at a particular moment in time. While the study can highlight interesting phenomena and recommend areas for future studies – both qualitative and quantitative – it cannot lead to conclusive findings.

While significant efforts were made to limit researcher bias within the analysis, IPA is a method that acknowledges the role of the researcher as central to meaning-making. In choosing and interpreting some of the statements included in this study, it should be acknowledged that other studies could reach different conclusions, or put more weight on other areas of data.

For a truly longitudinal study I would have liked to follow up with students further in the future, perhaps a year after their Study Abroad, and again after they had completed their studies. While data obtained from the final set of interviews produced interesting findings and in some cases showed a significant change in attitudes and understanding among participants when compared to earlier interviews, it would be both interesting and valuable to see if these changes were temporary or had more significant implications for the future. A similar study conducted over a far longer period, using data from this study to help shape the interview questions, could be useful.

6.5 Recommendations for Professional Practice

The findings have clear implications for professional practice, both in terms of how programmes are structured and in terms of the support we provide to students before, during and after studies. In addition to pedagogical recommendations made above, the study highlights an urgent need for more honest preparation and a more structured debrief and support system once students return. For programmes run by third parties – which now

accommodate the majority of Study Abroad students – students may receive preparation in the form of a pre-departure (and post-arrival) Orientation, and support while on the programme, but this stops immediately once the programme has ended. Arcadia's website, for example, has a detailed section on Culture Shock that includes some sage advice for the very situations students recounted in these interviews. For example, it states "You are seeing (and judging) from the American perspective. Instead of judging what you see as better or worse than what you know in the U.S., try to focus on the differences and ask why they exist." (Arcadia University, 2024a, para. 12) It even states:

> When you are abroad, you will discover important aspects of the American culture that you were unaware of before you left. Since you will be viewing your new culture from the American perspective, it is helpful to have a good grasp on the American perspective and understand how it shapes you. (Arcadia Abroad, 2024a, para 18).

However, a page aimed at students returning from their time abroad entitled "Welcome Home: What Now?" focuses instead on practical matters such as obtaining a transcript, explaining Study Abroad on a resumé, and encourages students to join the Alumni Association. It dedicates just two sentences to "reverse culture shock" (Arcadia University, 2024b). While it might not be practical to hold in-person (for example, remotely-taught) sessions for returning students, at the very least this study highlights a need for better and more detailed resources dedicated to identity, reverse culture shock, and revisiting those warnings that were so carefully highlighted to students initially to address how students were "shaped", and the impact this may have had on them. Where an institution might have numerous students studying abroad, there may be both an appetite for and a benefit of having support or discussion groups for students to address aspects of identity that may have been impacted by studying abroad. With students such as Jasmine returning with feelings of guilt at feeling negatively towards the US, and Greg wishing he were anywhere but there, this would surely seem to be a basic duty of the American institutions where they are studying.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Research

While this study draws some interesting conclusions, it raises several areas where future research would be beneficial. The limitations of this study, particularly in terms of its scope (focusing on students in a single location) also mean its findings are necessarily narrow. However, they lay important groundwork in terms of guiding the focus for subsequent research.

The depth of experience gained from this study alone suggest that similar studies could be replicated in other locations, and among students of other nationalities, and the results compared. It could be useful to see how the significance of national identity – and how it is experienced – differs in English and non-English speaking countries, between countries that could be seen as similar (for example the UK and Australia, which are both English-speaking and with largely European heritage) and even between different cities within the UK. The study focused deliberately on US nationals studying in London as this is the area of the researcher's professional practice, and it was felt to be a useful topic for what is a large industry within London, attracting tens of thousands of students every year, and with thousands of staff engaged in its operations (Opendoors, 2024).

The roles played by marginalised identities – particularly race and sexuality – and how they impacted one's perceptions of one's place within a national context and how that perception both influenced and was influenced by a period of study abroad was arguably the most significant aspect to emerge from this study. The visceral impact on participants after returning home and reconsidering their position there (in some cases going so far as to wish they were elsewhere) could and should significantly impact professional practice, and as such more research in this area is urgently needed. I would purport that sufficient data has been gleaned from this study to shape quantitative studies that could cover far higher student numbers and pose questions at different periods of their study relating to their self-perception, sense of belonging, and aspects such as sense of safety within different environments – again these would ideally be conducted across a range of locations. It is

possible that such research could confirm a need for different and more tailored pre, post and on-course support for students from particular cohorts. In the weeks before the final thesis was submitted, Trump signed executive orders which suspended indefinitely many grants relied upon by students undertaking Study Abroad programmes, many of whom are from marginalised backgrounds (Diaz & Hollingsworth, 2025). As such, the study carries even more relevance than first thought, and its findings could be seen as an urgent call to action in this new context.

6.7 Sharing Knowledge

Following the completion of the data collection and analysis, findings and implications were/will be shared through both professional and academic networks as follows:

- Presentation of a paper at the Workshop for Intercultural Skills Enhancement (WISE) at Wake Forest University (February 2025), where feedback indicated the session to be especially useful within the heightened political context discussed above
- Presentation to Study Abroad professionals at the Forum for International Education Annual Conference (March, 2025)
- A keynote address to members of the Association of American Study Abroad Programmes in summer, 2025
- A paper has been submitted for consideration to the Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education

6.8 Conclusion

Students who took part in this study exhibited demonstrably American values and traits (Althen, 2005; Kohls, 1984) which in turn influenced how they approached and experienced their period of study abroad. Some of these tendencies, such as being friendly, open, outgoing and confident, were a benefit to their experience, enabling them to make connections beyond their immediate circle. Others, however, such as a deeply-felt loyalty to their country, may serve as a barrier to making significant intercultural gains or inhibit their

abilities to reflect more deeply and critically on their Americanness and its implications (in the case of Brennan and Elliott) or lead to feelings of guilt or fears of being “disloyal” when grappling with and voicing negative feelings towards the US (in the case of Jasmine, Aneela and Greg). The study found that, in line with much of the marketing of Study Abroad, the experience of studying abroad in turn impacted how students viewed their identities, allowing some to re-examine both themselves and their views. However, some of the outcomes did suggest that aspects of American identity are deeply ingrained, making the role of study abroad in inviting different outlooks difficult.

While this study did not set out to examine the differences in experiences between white students and students of colour, the contrast in the experiences and personal responses to these experiences by these students suggests a need for urgent further research that looks more deeply at this angle. Currently, much Study Abroad research on students of colour focuses on their reasons to participate (Perkins, 2020), the barriers to doing so (Ecker-Lyster and Kardash, 2022; Salisbury et al., 2011), or experiences of racism (Lott and Brundage, 2022), and few are in-depth, qualitative studies (with some notable exceptions, including Sweeney’s extensive 2014 PhD study). This study highlighted a significant contrast in the experiences of white versus non-white students, as well as, to a lesser extent, other “minority” students such as those who defined as “queer”: that students who considered themselves “other” were more likely to find a study abroad experience “transformative” (Ella, who is queer) or “life-changing” (Jasmine, who is black), following the revelation that US culture is deeply assimilationist (Violante et al., 2020) and that, in terms of expressing their identity, true “freedom”, once considered a central American value, can, for them, be more easily found elsewhere. The markedly different experiences of white and non-white students could indicate a need for resources to prepare each for the experiences they will encounter, encouraging them to reflect on their identity and be open-minded and proactive in encountering difference, and being realistic about the potential that the experience could result in negative, complex and challenging emotions post-study.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheet

Information about this study

Title: UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCING AMERICAN IDENTITY DURING AN ARCADIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMME IN LONDON

We would like to invite you to participate in an investigation. In order to help you to understand what the investigation is about, we are providing you with the following information. **Be sure you understand it before you formally agree to participate**. If you would like any clarifications before you start, please contact us using the details below.

What is the purpose of this study?

The study is being undertaken as part of a Doctorate in Education at the University of West London. The study is looking at perceptions of American identity among US study abroad participants.

Why have I been asked to take part?

The study looks at how US nationals studying abroad on US programmes in the UK perceive and experience identity. You have been asked to participate as you are a US national, over the age of 18, studying on a one-semester programme in London through Arcadia University and so are part of the target group for this study.

Do I have to take part?

You have no obligation to take part. It is up to you to decide. If you would like to take part, we will then ask you to sign a consent form before participating. If, after reading the information, you decide you do not wish to participate, then you do not need to do anything further. You are also free

to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. If you choose to withdraw before the project is completed, we will discuss with you how much of the data we have already obtained from you can be used in the study, and will only retain data with your permission.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to complete three one to one interviews lasting 30-50 minutes each and focusing on your experiences at the start, during and after your studies in the UK. Each interview will be recorded.

Possible benefits include:

As a student, you will get to take part in a research study as a participant. This can be a useful learning experience and give you an insight into the research process, which may help you with your own studies in the future. As the research focuses on US nationals studying in the UK you may find the experience, and the results, interesting and pertinent to your own development as you reflect on your study abroad experience.

Possible risks include:

While we do not anticipate that any issues will be raised that would cause any distress, there is always the potential that speaking about personal issues could trigger difficult memories or emotions. As we will be discussing issues of identity there is the potential that discussions could lead to further self-reflection. Should any distress arise during or following the research we can share resources with you of where you can access further assistance. Interviews can be paused at any point at your request.

The data resulting from your participation may be used for purposes of publications and/or presentations, but no personal identifying information will be used for these purposes. This research is independent from Arcadia University and no identifying information will be shared with Arcadia,

nor would your position in any way affect your standing with Arcadia University (or your home school, if different.)

What do I get for taking part?

After the second interview you will receive a £10 Pret a Manger gift card as a token of appreciation for giving up your time. If you are interested in viewing the research, this can be made available to you after the study is complete and the data has been analysed.

What will happen if I begin the study but then no longer wish to take part for any reason?

If you withdraw from the study, all data and information collected from you will be destroyed, unless you give consent for data up until that point to be retained and used in the research. Please note that you are free to withdraw for any reason at any time, up until four weeks after the final interview has been completed. Doing so will not impact in any way your participation at Arcadia University, which is independent of this research.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Voice recordings (and video recordings, if you opt to undertake interviews by video) will be transcribed, and the original recordings – and therefore your voice – will not be shared with anyone. Data will only be made available to the researcher team directly involved in this study and will be stored securely on a personal University of West London drive. All identifying documents will be destroyed in accordance with the UWL Research Data Management Statement and all data will be anonymised. Your real name will not appear on any subsequent published materials or shared with anyone outside of the research team, and other identifying information, such as place of residence, will be kept vague. The research is independent of Arcadia University and no raw, complete data will be shared with Arcadia University. The final thesis will be shared with Arcadia University only after all participants have completed their studies in London.

Who has reviewed the study?

Our research has been looked at by an independent group of people, the School Research Ethics Panel to protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity.

Further information and contact details

For general information about this research and/or further information about this study, please contact Polly Penter - 21497321@student.uwl.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: EXPERIENCING AND UNDERSTANDING AMERICAN IDENTITY DURING A SEMESTER-LONG STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMME IN LONDON

• I have fully read the previous page which contained information about the study and have had the opportunity to ask any questions that I may have had.

• I understand what is being proposed.

• I understand that my personal involvement and my particular data from this study will remain strictly confidential. Only researchers involved in the investigation will have access.

• I have been informed about what the data collected in this investigation will be used for, to whom it may be disclosed, and how long it will be retained.

• I understand that the data resulting from my participation may be used for purposes of publications and/or presentations, and that no personal identifying information will be used for these purposes.

• I hereby fully and freely consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me.

• I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time until the researcher's dissertation is submitted, without giving a reason for withdrawing.

• I agree to take part in the study.

Signed_____ Date_____

Appendix 3: Interview Schedule

First interview – to be conducted within the first 2 weeks of the student starting their programme in the UK

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. The research looks at study abroad and participant identity. The study will consist of 3 interviews lasting between 40 minutes and 1 hour and taking place in the two weeks after your arrival in the UK, towards the middle of your semester, and after you have returned to the US. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time until one month after the final interview is complete, even if you have already completed one or more of the interviews.

After the interviews your data will be anonymized, and you will not be referred to by your real name in any of the published materials. The interview is going to be recorded, but the recording will then be transcribed so the recording itself will not be shared with anyone. Do you consent to the interview being recorded?

Finally, as we will be discussing your own experiences there is the potential that you may experience discomfort or distress if sensitive issues arise. If this happens, please let me know and we can pause the interview.

Can you confirm that you understand the information?

Are you happy to continue with the interview?

Do you have any questions before we start?

I'm going to start with some general demographic questions.

Age:

What state do you currently live in? (City/Rural etc.)

Have you been outside the US before?

1. What aspects of your identity are most important to you?
2. What does being “American” mean to you?
3. Do you consider yourself a typical American?
4. What, in your opinion, are the best and worst aspects of being an American?
5. Why did you choose to study abroad in the UK?
6. What do you expect London to be like?
7. What do you expect the British to be like?
8. What are you most looking forward to?
9. What challenges are you expecting?
10. How have you prepared for studying abroad? (E.g. have you read UK newspapers or websites or watched UK TV?)
11. What are you hoping to get out of studying abroad?
12. Is there anything else you’d like to share?

Second interview – to be conducted around half way (6-8 weeks) through their programme in the UK

Thank you for your participation in this study so far. As a reminder, the research looks at study abroad and participant identity. The study will consist of 3 interviews lasting between 40 minutes and 1 hour and taking place in the two weeks after your arrival in the UK, towards the middle of your semester, and after you have returned to the US. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time until one month after the final interview is complete, even if you have already completed one or more of the interviews.

After the interviews your data will be anonymized, and you will not be referred to by your real name in any of the published materials. The interview is going to be recorded, but the recording will then

be transcribed so the recording itself will not be shared with anyone. Do you consent to the interview being recorded?

Finally, as we will be discussing your own experiences there is the potential that you may experience discomfort or distress if sensitive issues arise. If this happens, please let me know and we can pause the interview.

Can you confirm that you understand the information?

Are you happy to continue with the interview?

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. Tell me how things have been going for you so far.
2. Have there been any instances where you have felt particularly "American" in the UK?
3. How do you think others around you perceive Americans? Has this affected the way you behave in certain situations? (*Sub-questions: you expressed concern in our last interview about Americans being negatively stereotyped. Has this matched your reality?)* In the first interview a lot of students were concerned about stereotypes. Have there been any times where you've made a conscious effort to dispel such stereotypes?
4. Have you faced any situations where you have experienced culture shock?
5. (How do you feel about living alongside other Americans? What do you see as the advantages or disadvantages?)
6. Has your view of the US changed since you've been here? Has your view of the UK changed?
7. To what extent do you feel your identity as an American has changed at all during your time in the UK so far?
8. To what extent do you feel any other aspects of your identity have changed since you started studying abroad?
9. Which activities or situations have made a deep impression on you so far while studying abroad? How?

10. How does being in the UK make you view American news differently?
11. The US government wants to expand Study Abroad, stating that students "act as citizen ambassadors by building relationships within their host communities, demonstrating American values, and debunking stereotypes." What do you think about that statement?

Third interview – to be conducted within 2 months of the student completing their programme in the UK

Thank you for your participation in this study so far. As a reminder, the research looks at study abroad and participant identity, and this is the final of three interviews. You can still choose to withdraw from the study at any time until one month after the final interview is complete.

After the interviews your data will be anonymized, and you will not be referred to by your real name in any of the published materials. The interview is going to be recorded, but the recording will then be transcribed so the recording itself will not be shared with anyone. Do you consent to the interview being recorded?

Finally, as we will be discussing your own experiences there is the potential that you may experience discomfort or distress if sensitive issues arise. If this happens, please let me know and we can pause the interview. You should also be aware that in qualitative studies such as these sometimes reflect on their answers and experiences after the interviews are complete. Please feel free to contact me if you do experience this and want to discuss it further.

Can you confirm that you understand the information?

Are you happy to continue with the interview?

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. Now that you have returned home, how do you view your study abroad experience?
2. What aspect of studying abroad had the greatest impact on you?

3. Now that you've done it, what do you think are the main benefits of studying abroad? Are any of these specific to the UK?
4. Are there things you appreciate more about the US, or are more critical of, now you're back?
5. What aspects of your identity are most important to you?
6. What does being "American" mean to you?
7. Has your experience in the UK changed the way you view other Americans?
8. Has your experience influenced how you think about yourself as an American?
9. Reflecting on your experience in the UK, do you think it has changed the way you think about any aspects of your identity?
10. How has studying abroad affected what you will choose to do in the future?
11. Universities claim that studying abroad will increase intercultural competence and global awareness. Do you feel this was the case with your experience?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Appendix 4: Example Transcript

Emergent Themes	Transcript	Exploratory Comments
	Polly Yep, there we are. It started recording! So thank you again so so much for taking part in this study. **Aneela** Umm. **Polly** It's really appreciated. Um my research is looking at Study Sbroad and participant identity, so it will consist of three interviews. This is the first one. This will probably be the shortest, and they last, well, it'll depend on how long you talk, but I think the next one will probably be a bit longer. **Aneela** Umm-hmm.	

	Polly That will be in the middle of your semester and then the later one will be after you come back and you can choose to withdraw it anytime. You don't need to give me a reason. **Aneela** Umm. **Polly** So up until four weeks after the final interview, so even if you've done all those interviews, told me all sorts of things, you can go, “Actually, I don't want her to use that anymore,” and you can you can withdraw it all, that's fine. And after the interviews, I'm gonna anonymise all of your data. **Aneela** OK.	

	Polly So the recording with your face on it and your voice on it, only I will see and hear that I'm gonna transcribe it with the help of the computer. I will also anonymise it so if there's a pseudonym you've always secretly wanted to be known by, let me know and I can…I can use that pseudonym. **Aneela** Yeah. **Polly** So you'll know when you read the final thing, who you are and that…. and then finally, because we're discussing your own experiences, depending on what you choose to tell me, there's always the potential that you know you might experience distress or discomfort or anything like that. **Aneela** Umm.	

	Polly And if that happens, let me know, we can pause the interview, stop the interview, or just move and talk about something else. **Aneela** Umm. **Polly** So can you confirm you're happy for me to record this? **Aneela** Yes, I'm happy. Glad to help. **Polly** Alright. Wonderful. Thank you so much. And are you happy to continue with the interview? **Aneela** Yeah. Yes.	

	Polly All right. And have you got any questions before we start? **Aneela** No, I don't have any questions. **Polly** OK, brilliant. And then just a few demographic questions that I need to to check for the purposes of the study. Are you a a U.S. National US passport holder? **Aneela** Yeah, yeah, yes. **Polly** And where is home in the US at the moment?	

	Aneela New York City. Queens. **Polly** Wonderful. You're in a place that I know – I've been to New York many, many times. **Aneela** Yeah. **Polly** Uh. Wonderful. And this sounds like a personal question, but there's a reason I'm asking is how old are you at the moment? **Aneela** I'm 20 years old. **Polly** 20, oh wonderful, because I got a bit of a range, you see, I have some freshman, I have some seniors and	**Researcher rapport attempt**

	some people in the middle, so that's great. So again, I'm not gonna identify you by your name, but I'm…I'm it may be relevant for me to know, like, where you're from, how you compare with other people that are from like the Midwest or California or wherever it may be. That's brilliant. **Aneela** Umm. **Polly** OK, now I'm gonna get onto the real questions of the reason that we're we're chatting so and you can answer these in as much detail as you like and interpret them however you like. So the first one is: what aspects of your identity do you consider to be most important to you? **Aneela** First, I would say my Indian identity or	***Researcher reflection:*** ***nervous, over-explaining***

Difference **(uniqueness?)**	specifically my Indian American identity. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** Umm my experiences are very different from like the Motherland kids and I have a lot of like international students from India, from that go to my College in the US, but sometimes we don't see eye to eye. So because I think that I have this American thing also in me. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** And it's like it's also because I'm also a girl. So it's a it's, there's just so many different like specific things that like trickle down into different parts of me.	**Still American** **Sees herself as different? Not one of them. Them and us.** **Talks about it like it's a parasite/unwanted ("thing")**

Difference	**Polly** Umm. **Aneela** I would also say I mean also just like I feel like being a girl is just an in itself like a own category erm. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** I would say also this might be like some weird but like I being a left handed person really does shape my identity like a lot of people like don't understand the struggles that come with it. You know when you're writing a book or just like the pen slabs and stuff, I think that's just like it's very it's just a different way to like my parents. Like they put their stuff like I put my glasses on the left side.	**Gender** **Identity is what distinguishes you from others; minimising Indian identity? Left-handed "as important"?**

	Polly Umm. **Aneela** So whenever I'm like setting up a table or like setting up just anything, I put everything and then moving. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** Everyone just feels funny a little bit, so I think it's like I've always felt a little bit funny because people do it the opposite for me. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** Umm but yeah, I think those two are the ones that just came up to come came up in.	

	Polly The world is so geared to right handed people I'm….I'm ambidextrous, so I'm not…I'm not left handed, but people think ambidextrous means like, ohh you can just use your hands interchangeably, and what it means is I've got a dominant hand for some things and that a different dominant hand for other things and for the sort of other things you really notice. Like for me the I'll get my tube card out and I'll put it on the and then the gates are open over there and I'll be, "Oh no, I'm in the wrong because it's designed that you're doing it with your right hand." **Aneela** Yeah. **Polly** So like I totally get that. **Aneela** Yeah.	**(*Researcher reflection: trying to build rapport, but talking too much?)***

	Polly So but with with your Indian identity. I'm…I'm interested. I'm gonna dig into that. When you say you don't always see eye to eye on…On what? On what sort of things and also what sort of generation are you then of of you know, what's your background?	
Self-improvement/hard work/selfishness?	**Aneela** I guess I'd… I… there's like two ways. There's like the old, older just. In terms of values, because here it's very… America's very focused on self preservation and self guiding like you like do do it yourself.	**Individuality. Typically American traits**
	Polly Umm.	
	Aneela And then in India, it's very oriented, which for me I've I guess struggled to like, uh, merged together with my own	**Is naturally comparing the two countries. V different cultures – see literature**

Individualism	parents and stuff because they're very family oriented. But then what I'm learning in school is so different where it's like you only have yourself. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** And then for, I guess, like, just like peers, like people that are my own age, it's hard to see the way that they build relationships based on the way I build relationships. I don't know. I I think I can like… I mean, I could say this case I'm in the I feel like Indians just stick with Indians a lot, especially international Indians. So for me, all my friends, I don't have that many Indian friends. **Polly** Umm.	**"Learning" individualism in school** **Individualism** **Tentative?**

Diversity	**Aneela** But like a lot of my friends are a mixed ethnicities and mixed races, and it's just different to see how… it's different to see how their experiences are different from mine, but also similar to mine, because they also have they have something and American with them. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** But I feel like the people that Indians that I've met, that are international, they like to stick to what they know. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** Because also I mean I understand why they wanna stick to what they know.	**United in Americanness?** **Americans more open?** **Accepting?**

	Polly Umm. **Aneela** Because it's like you never know if you're gonna say something that's offensive, but you don't think it's offensive or like, just like there might be something that you just don't know how it's gonna…You're someone that you don't know is gonna react to. So it's not their fault of their own, but even with me, because I, I guess like I'm a little bit more sensitive in America. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** It's just a little bit, so I'm… I kind of like turn eyes to what they say, even though it's not like technically, it's not like offensive.	

	Polly Umm. **Aneela** It's just like I don't know the right thing, but it's just kind of like values and the way you talk is different. Or... **Polly** Umm, now that's a really interesting perspective. Now that's really good. **Aneela** Yeah. **Polly** So my next question you've already touched on when you talked about, you know, the the self and the and the US, everyone's "do it yourself". So what… if you could expand for me on what…What does being "American" (I put that in inverted commas). What does that mean to you?	**values**

Self-improvement/ competitive	**Aneela** For me, I think the way that America is, I feel like this design. It's very like the way I see a marriage, like and I'm self guiding and like... I don't know. Like get to a better position. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** It's like you're not satisfied. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** I feel like as an American, you're not satisfied with the position you're in and you're always gonna strive for more and more and more. **Polly** Umm.	**Interesting imagery - evocative** **Hamilton!** **You will never be satisfied – v American trait?**
Competitive/greed?		

	Aneela And like, that's why I guess I kind of wanted to go abroad because I feel like, I mean, everyone has a different perspective of a different country and like, I guess Europe as a whole for me, it's like people are just satisfied with what they are like. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** There's not that much…I mean, I don't know. Yeah, like from here. That's what I think it is, like everyone just like likes to sit around and do whatever and they're happy with whatever they have. But I feel like in America it's more like you can't be happy with what you have because you are lacking. And maybe someone thinks…You're always just doing and doing and doing and you're not really just sitting with yourself.	**Open-minded. Curious** **Is this true? View of "Europeans"** **Implies UK not ambitious** **This is quite sad.** **US guide for int. students said this** **Which is better?**
Self-improvement/always trying to get more/ hard work		

Ambition	**Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** I don't know what the word is for that like a go get….It's like very go getter. Very… something I don't know….And yeah. **Polly** But I think the way you've described it is great and I I know what you mean, but I'm not sure there is one word that quite encapsulates what you've managed to encapsulate. **Aneela** Yeah. **Polly** So no, that's great. So then I think I know the answer to my next question, but I'll ask it anyway. The next question is so would you	**To be American have to be competitive/hungry for success** ***Researcher reflection: don't presume/predict an answer!***

	consider yourself a typical American, or would you in some ways and not others? I mean, how would you…?	
Success/need to succeed	**Aneela** Yeah, I would say that I am a bit of a typical American because I feel like if you don't, if you aren't a go getter, you you won't be able to succeed or not succeed, you just won't be able to like, be here.	**Unexpected answer**
	Polly Umm.	
Self-improvement	**Aneela** You know, it's like you have to be like, even like when you think of like, you know, people that come here legally, like, they're doing things very proactively to, like, better themselves. Like if you are kind of stuck, I think that you're not… I'm…I'm not gonna. You're not American, but it's just like we	**(Distinguishing between legal/illegal?)** **"Proactive" is a positive word**

	aren't really living that American dream or like pursuing it. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** Actually, like the best way to, you know, live my life and stuff. **Polly** Umm so. **Aneela** I'm like, yeah, yeah. **Polly** So…So what…What does…What does the American dream kind of mean to you? And I mean how…How real do you think it is to do? **Aneela** Yeah.	**American dream – buzzword?** **Used esp. by SoCs?**

Financial success	**Polly** What do you think about it? **Aneela** Umm for me, when I think of the American dream, the only thing that really pops into my head is money and being financially well off, set off building, building things for your children. And then also taking care of your parents and stuff. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** Umm. And I think it's realistic. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** But the way that it's, umm, integrated into society in the way that I guess we're taught, I guess as children it's very unattainable because you're	**Success=financial success (see literature)** **Interesting – still believes in this. Immigration-related?**

Competitive/success-driven	telling 4,000,000 kids just in New York the way that you're mentally live your life and they're all going to be will, they're going to be willing to do crazy things for those dreams. And like I think I would also do crazy things. For whatever whatever I need to do to get that that American dream. Umm, I don't think it's like realistic, but I think that in some ways you're going to attain a part of it, even if it's not like the whole. Like you're gonna lack in some ways, but you're still gonna get most of it. Or like some of it at least. **Polly** Umm so, and this is my last question, sort o,f around the American aspect, but what in your opinion and I know these are very loaded terms, what in your opinion are the kind of best and worst aspects of being American? You can interpret that question however you like.	**Acknowledging background influence** **Dreams – repeated word** **American Dream tied up with ambition** **Unrealistic, still worth pursuing** **Very honest/self-knowing**

	Aneela OK, I think socially being American has is really diversified my perspective. Umm, you know again, if I was like, just a kid in India, I feel like I'd have such a different way of treating people in interacting with people. But here I, you know, people call us like sensitive here. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** I think that I think it's a little bit important to be sensitive because at the end of the day, you never want to hurt anyone's feelings. And I think that's socially like America has been very well or like very open in like understanding others and like triangle little bit. I mean, depending on where you are in the country. And then I think a negative would be that we're very selfish.	**"Just" is interesting word. Internalised that America better and other places lacking?** **Does America understand others?** **Honest/humble attitude. Does she regret this slightly? Guilt?**
Self self self/ individualism		

Self-improvement	**Polly** Umm. **Aneela** Umm…in the way that we the the connections that we make are even in my school like apps in like they talk about making connections and connections are the way that you're gonna push yourself up in the world and it's not really like friendships. It's not really like like romantic like. **Polly** Yeah. **Aneela** It's just like connections is the way that we describe relationships with one another, which is I think, a negative. **Polly** Hmm.	**Again v. honest, relationships transactionary; importance of improvement**

Competitive/self-improvement	**Aneela** It's very I don't know…Like you just want to get to the top of whatever the top is. **Polly** Again, it's that part of that narrative, isn't it, of always striving to be better and how can I…How can I achieve that and who can help me achieve that? It's a means to an end, I guess. **Aneela** Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Yeah. **Polly** So talking about Study Abroad, then, finally I'm talking about Study Abroad. Why did you choose to come and study in London? **Aneela** London? I think again, this is like I think it's an Indian thing. I just feel like it's like some place I need to be… just to	**Repetition** **Indian thing – different (dismissive?)**
Diversity		

	see it. I know that the UK or – I don't know – yeah, the UK, their like national dish is like chicken tikka masala. I was like, this is so interesting to me. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** Umm, you know, and I think that I think I also really love history and I love London is like the oldest city in the world, like you have to see it once or like especially like the side... But I just also I wanna live in London after I graduate. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** We're like, like, settled at least. If not like after.	**Being pulled in two directions. Looking to explore Indian side?** **Common reasons**

Testing self	**Polly** Umm-hmm. **Aneela** So I I kind of just wanted to see if I would like it, see if I could like actually like see myself there for 20 years or something like that. So I just wanted to do that. **Polly** Wonderful. Yeah, we've definitely got lots of history and in your orientation we'll be taking you to some kind of sites where like the Tower of London and things where you can do all of that as well. So yeah, we'll be we'll be working in lots of history. So what…What are you expecting Londoners, and also what are you expecting the British to be like? **Aneela** I OK. So I think that being from New York, I'm I'm kind of in a net	**Using UK – consumerist?** **Stereotyping regions**

	advantage, I think that people like New Yorkers more than like you know someone from Arkansas? Or like I don't think that it's some geographically… I don't know that much about London but like geographically the only thing that people would know in London is like New York. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** So I think that in making friendships or like kind of understanding each other, we have a little bit more umm to go off of because like we're both major cities and we have our own slang and we have our own culture. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** And then you what was your…? um	**Assuming Brits have had geography/know less about the US – is this because Americans know less about countries outside the US?** **Has put a lot of thought into this. Self-aware/well prepared** **Common to assume similarities – will this be a shock?**

	like…What do you think... I think that from this like experience for like just being there, I'll be able to like umm… I just wanna see if I can also like live on my own…The way… what was your question? I don't know. I don't remember. **Polly** Umm, so my question was, I mean these are all just guiding questions to anything you tell me about your experience and how you're feeling, what you're thinking is is valid. So it's not this is not like a job interview. My question was what…What are you expecting the British to be like? You know, British people, or how are you expecting those interactions to go? **Aneela** I honestly think that they're gonna go pretty well in terms of I feel like I'll be able to…Yeah, I feel like I'll be able to understand them a little bit more	

Stereotypes	because of where I'm from. Umm, I know that they're very… I don't know. Like you know, there's common perceptions that they're kind of snooty, but then also they think Americans are, like, stupid. And like I think it'll like go hand in hand or we'll both like, uh, trickle out the stereotypes and stuff and just kind of understand each other a little bit more, yeah. **Polly** Umm-hmm. Excellent. Yeah. So one of the things I've been looking at actually is, and I was talking about it today, we had some arrivals today. So I I was talking about Study Abroad is meant to be a cultural exchange, so it it does I II love that you've said about things going both ways and it's a conversation it isn't, you know, "I'm gonna come over and learn all about the Brits" or "British people are gonna learn all about America from me," kind of thing.	**Stereotyping** **Assuming stereotyping**

Testing self	**Aneela** Yeah. **Polly** So no, that's great. And So what are you most looking forward to in your study abroad experience? **Aneela** I also I so when I'm abroad I wanna see like first like see if I can handle being in another country far away from my parents and far away from everyone I know. I have other friends like that are abroad, but they're not in London at all. Uh. And I also like, you know, I also want to see if I can get like jobs as an American student. Like you wanna just, like trickle into the little? Like, just like as a cockroach, I'm just move my way in there like systems and stuff? And, like, meet people that are in positions that I wanna be in and see if I can	**Testing self, using UK to do it** **Negative/strange analogy** **All about moving ahead** **Strong word, negative connotations; selfish reasons for everything she is doing (but aware of this!)**

Getting ahead/self-improvement	hopefully getting maybe like get an internship over the summer like get the visa sorted, um, and then I wanna...I I just want to like learn about the culture like I just really like history. It's something that's so fascinating, and I feel like, especially in America, like when I think of it like London, there's like, I think of the color red. And I think of like art history. I don't think of like science. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** And when I think of American I think of like business like Corporate and I think I just want to like shimmy my way into like the red, like the blue and the green that I see in America. **Polly** That's so evocative. That's really lovely. I'm. I'm I meant to ask you, when you	**Idealised/romanticised view of Europe. Grand Tour?** **Interesting analogy. Already knows UK different. "shimmy" – implies some level of stealth?**

	when you were saying about, you know, coming over here and and kind of exploring and stuff have you are you well travelled? Have you traveled like outside of the US before or not?	
	Aneela I've been to India and I've only been to Canada, so no.	**More well-travelled than many; contrasting locations**
	Polly Oh gosh OK. So you been a kind of a long way. I mean, this is the thing I'm I'm talking to people, some of whom have never left the US, but actually they're quite well travelled. But the US is huge and Britain is apparently about the size of Michigan? It's it's tiny, comparatively.	
	Aneela Yeah.	
	Polly So. So no, you have you have been to	

	to more places than some, but you've got all of Europe to explore. Are you gonna explore kind of beyond the UK then, when you're while you're here, are you gonna travel a bit in Europe? **Aneela** Yeah, some of my friends from like Babson are going to come for their study. Not… like their spring break. **Polly** Umm-hmm. **Aneela** And then I have friends in Paris, Italy and Spain. So I'm gonna like hopefully go there as yeah. **Polly** Wow, excellent. And you'll have locals to show you around then. That's perfect.	

	Aneela Yeah. **Polly** I'm…So what…What challenges are you expecting to come up in your study abroad? **Aneela** Umm, I think I don't want to bite off more than I can chew in terms of, you know, I I say I wanna travel a lot, but it's like I need to be realistic. I'm like there for school and I think that the class structure is something that I'm kind of scared about just cause. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** I don't know. I, it's said like in my thing it's a lecture and then workshop and then that's it.	**Focusing on practical issues**

	Polly Umm. **Aneela** I was like, I don't even know what this means, so it's just I wanna be able to, like, academically succeed. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** And then another challenge I think is like I don't know, like I feel like I can navigate the roads well. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** Umm, I need to get the card for the train and stuff, but like I I can do that later. I don't…I'm not going in with expectations that I'm gonna be like in another city. Like when I moved to	**Again, practical focus/ achievement**

	Boston for school, I was like, I'm… even though I'm in another city, it's like I feel like you'll just figure it out as you go along. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** So it's not a challenge. **Polly** OK. Yeah, there's a lot of practical things. And by the way, with my quickly putting my Arcadia hat back on, we will tell you about all of that and orientation and we'll give you a free travel card for the first few days as well. So there's no, there's no stress with all of that. So what kind of preparation have you done? How er…er… aside from kind of our orientation and stuff, have you been reading UK papers or anything like that? What have you been doing?	**American confidence?** ***Researcher reflection – blurring roles, be aware of this***

	Aneela Umm, no. I've really just kind of from like, I guess movies or stuff. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** I watch a lot of like British shows and I watch a lot of British Youtubers. **Polly** Hmm, OK. **Aneela** And I've kind of just, like, gotten a sense of the way that they move and the way that they talk to each other. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** And I, uh or like, I'm trying to understand it more so like socially or the things that I want to be the best at.	**Common answer**

Consumerism	Like I don't know about the political climate. I mean I've I've read a little bit about it, but I'm not like, I'm not. I'm not actively trying to learn more than what I wanted to figure out when I'm there and stuff. **Polly** Mm-hmm. And what are you hoping to get out of studying abroad? You've answered this in some of your answers, but but what is a if, as a broad snapshot, you know what…What is it you're trying to get? **Aneela** So first I wanna see if I like London or not as like a as a city I can live in or not. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** Two: I wanna see if I can get a job there as a US student, I'd have to apply	**Should she? Part of preparation?** **American trait? Efficient use of time?** **Consumer of London**

Self-improvement	for visas and everything, so I'd have to like meet with professors and all that jazz before I, you know, actually like figure out if I can actually live there. I wanna see if I like the people. If I don't like the people, I wouldn't want to live there. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** Umm and stuff and I wanna see if I can take care of myself in a city alone. Travel alone by like I've never traveled without my parents and stuff, so I just want to see if I can do it, yeah. **Polly** Umm, you'll have loads of support, so that's great. **Aneela** Yeah.	**Consumer – UK as product** **Repetition of "I wanna see" – all about self-development/self-challenge**

	Polly And then the the final final question is just that, do you think that being an American will give you any particular advantages or disadvantages in doing all of those things? **Aneela** I I mean I think that, you know, I don't know, like there's like some things that are so American to me like, you know, like the the way that we tip is different from I feel like the way that I mean in India it's you don't tip at all. **Polly** Umm. **Aneela** It's like I there's just like some different things that you just have. You're gonna have to, like, learn as you're there. **Polly** Umm.	**Travel experiences mean she already knows the US is not the "only way"** **Open-minded**

Americans pre-disposed to study abroad	**Aneela** Like I you know, it might be an advantage that I tip a lot, but maybe it's like Oh, like it's also a disadvantage, so it's like everywhere you are, you're going to kind of have to like just see and just view and just understand the way that the customs are. I think as an American, umm, because we're so like, I feel like people that go abroad at least are like, very open to the culture. **Polly** Mm-hmm. **Aneela** So they're just wanting to know and learn and experience, but also I think it's like a disadvantage of being like toooo open. Like, it's like Americans are like, so, like, willing to do anything. **Polly** Umm.	**"buying" way to being treated better? Again, consumerist?** **American traits as beneficial** **Inc to get ahead (earlier comments)! But here US openness/adventurousness as a positive**

	Aneela I feel like it's also a disadvantage where it's like you could get robbed, like there's really no ins and outs, yeah. **Polly** Umm great, that's that's all of the questions. Was there anything else you think I didn't cover that you'd like to share or anything you wanna you wanna say? **Aneela** I think for now that's like it.	**Sees UK as inherently dangerous?**

Appendix 5: Excerpt from Reflective Journal

I have taken out students' names below due to the personal nature of my reflections.

27/02/24

Incredible second interview with […] – realise that reference to resources, MH and distress etc. in info sheet could have relevance as students could experience genuine distress, especially being asked to reflect. Worried about my role in that distress.

14/03/24

Second interviews mostly complete, and range of different viewpoints and experiences now evident, and some themes emerging. Students more homogenous in first interview and now diverging. […] interview was FASCINATING and also upsetting – aware of my own discomfort in hearing what she had to say, which I did not expect. On re-reading/listening I'm relieved this didn't show in the subsequent questions or how I interacted.

Aware I still sometimes take tangents/chats too far, maybe? Realised this re: tangents with […] as I was transcribing sections about the West Wing. I think it helps build the rapport and keep the conversation flowing, but very aware I could take this too far.

Final interview with […] – as with interview 1 very aware that he is not saying what I expected – discomforted by my own feelings about this as I find him almost dislikeable, which is not a helpful or fair emotion to have towards one of my subjects.

18/03/24

Themes becoming clear – aware I must not become too rigid and should be prepared for these to change. Thought consumerism might be a theme but mentioned less than expected. Stereotyping mentioned in first interview more than the second, so again discarding – this also doesn't quite fit with the research question as to how AMERICAN IDENTITY impacts study abroad – I guess this was more about a collective fear than an identity? Re-reading all transcripts and aware of emotions

towards individuals – this is to be expected both in terms of my role in the university but also simply as an empathetic person, but again very aware of it in terms of not letting it impact how I determine the results or how I conduct the final interview. Feel almost protective towards […] and aware of the roles the study could play in her wider experience, and should include this in final thesis.

21/3/24

Last of the second interviews is an outlier as her term is longer so wanted to still ensure it is roughly half way through. Feel out of practice as the others were conducted in a cluster, and again emphasises the different circumstances of […]'s participation as an intern, DE and student who has been here before. However does not seem to impact her responses as much as I expected – she is not radically different from the other students and this in itself is really interesting.