

## Where Does Study Abroad's Shift from Cultural Immersion to Cosmopolitanism Leave the Average Student?

Walk into any major university's study abroad office, and you'll see the phrase "cultural immersion" flaunted on every available poster-board. While preparing for my study abroad semester in Madrid, program representatives drilled this expression into my head - over and over again.

Its prominence obscured the information I actually needed. The program saturated their webpage with anecdotes about the cultural immersion I would undergo, the cultural competencies I would develop, and the cultural relativist perspective I would gain that would allow me to thrive in any situation.

When I needed urgent visa information, or to contact the host family that would supposedly indoctrinate me into an alien culture - I found my program's resources lacking.

I couldn't even get a firsthand account of study abroad without hearing the "I got so far out of my comfort zone" cliché. Every potential source of information about the four-month experience I was set to embark on seemed to contain nothing but the same tired rhetoric.

When I began to settle into my life in Madrid, Spain, I realized this glamorized literature did not come close to approximating the lifestyle I was living. My program didn't mislead me about living in a different culture, they misled me by implying that I'd inhabit a culture that any Spaniard would find familiar.

No one mentions the Study Abroad Culture--the distinct behaviors and customs of college students detached from the lives led by Spaniards, immigrants, and expats. These students lived a distinct and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Cultural assimilation took a backseat to omnivorous cultural sampling. Students wanted to rack up as many diverse cultural experiences as possible.

Coincidentally, I read Shamus Khan's *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School* the semester before I went abroad. Khan's findings leaped to the front of my mind on many occasions. He notes that the most privileged students no longer seek

to get elite, exclusive knowledge (think opera, Shakespeare, and Victorian etiquette) but rather try to omnivorously sample different cultures to compose a diverse portfolio of cultural interests. Khan puts it eloquently: “To be the future leaders of a more democratic world, they must be at ease with everything... from Beowulf to Jaws.”

When I returned home and began studying economic sociology, I developed my curiosity into a research question. Study abroad programs seemed to possess a function closer to elite socialization than cultural immersion. I wanted to know why students choose to study abroad, and what they acquired from their experiences.

Preliminary investigation led me to the concept of Cosmopolitanism; the essential paradigm of my curiosity. I had a rough idea of what the word “cosmopolitan” meant. It was how I tried to appear when I conversed with a wealthy international student, felt romantically interested in a foreigner, or needed to impress a job interviewer. Since the works of renowned French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the field’s practitioners have embraced the concept of cultural capital - the socially defined, cultural toolkit that individuals possess, the symbolic meanings of tangible objects, and the legitimacy of institutionally defined standards.

For Bourdieu, the root of cultural capital (and social capital) is economic. When a parent decides to send their child to private school to better their educational outcomes, they are attempting to convert economic capital into cultural capital. It’s crucial to note that in this example, parents need a certain level of cultural capital themselves to understand how to navigate the educational institutional environment to maximize capital conversion.

Contemporary theorists that consider the effects of Globalization are beginning to consider cosmopolitanism a crucial kind of cultural capital. Familiarity with a diverse range of local and national cultures is now a highly valuable skill in our globalized society. Study abroad programs have become cognizant of that development. While themes of cultural immersion still permeate program websites (to my chagrin of course), advertisements that stress professional development are beginning to emerge.

When I began my research project, the wealthier students I interviewed displayed considerably more awareness of the value of cosmopolitan cultural capital than their less affluent peers. For well-off students, studying abroad fit the model of attempting to converting economic into cultural capital. Middle class and lower-class students,

however, are constrained by their lesser economic resources and insufficient cultural knowledge.

Michael, one of the wealthy students I interviewed, remarked that resume building was his principal reason for studying abroad. When I asked him why he thought employers would value his abroad experience, he replied “I guess they want to make sure you can get off a twelve-hour flight and still meet with a client, you know”. Michael attenuation the value of cosmopolitanism illustrates the inequality in cultural knowledge worsened by study abroad programs. Valeria, a lower class student I interviewed, frequently felt left out when financial constraints inhibited her ability to travel. Her responses revealed that students defined their experiences in terms of *international* travel. Without sufficient economic resources and cultural acumen, Students are unable to reap the full benefits of studying abroad.

If this is troubling, it should be. Institutions like study abroad have the potential to reproduce and accentuate social inequality on a global scale. Not all hope is lost. The potential exists for these programs to democratize rather than exclude. Universities can expand financial aid programs, provide more resources for underprivileged students, and better educate students about how to be competitive in changing labor markets.

Let's make study abroad programs tools to combat inequality, not gatekeeper of upward social mobility.