# In their own words:

# American student narratives of challenges and struggles while studying abroad

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Professional Doctorate in

Advanced Social Work and Social Research

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

University of Essex

Date of submission for examination October 2022

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Acknowledgements

I would like to first show my sincere gratitude to the students who volunteered to share their difficult narratives; it was not easy. The richness of the information they shared lies at the heart of this project. Their stories will create new knowledge and develop a conversation in this area of study, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Anna Harvey and Dr Sylvia Smith, whose respect, positive regard, and humour encouraged me to enjoy every part of my educational journey. Their professionalism and investment in me as their student were inspirational. I was fortunate to have such genuine support.

To Troy. Thank you for inspiring me to push myself beyond what I thought was possible.

To my friends, your kindness and confidence in me kept me focussed. I will be indebted to you for your support. A special thanks to Karen and Whiskey, who provided friendship and quiet space in their house to finalise my writings.

To Llion. Thank you for your continuing support, and for your extended belief in me.

And to Joseph, Oliver, and Amy, my children. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your motivational messages, love, and belief over the last 6 years.

Lisa Watkins

October 2022

Abstract

This thesis explores the lived experience of American students studying abroad in the UK and is interested in understanding a range of challenges and struggles students face while abroad. One unique challenge for participants was experiencing the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, which resulted in all participants returning to the US prematurely to continue their studies virtually.

Whilst there are numerous studies on students studying abroad, most of these studies seek knowledge via surveys, questionnaires, or semi-structured interviews. This study was an independent doctoral study that sought rich biographic narrative data using a psycho-social interview design with six participants two months after their semester had ended.

A hybrid of Wengraf's (2001) Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was used to capture participants' lived experiences in their own words. Systemic and Psychoanalytic theory was used to observe, contextualise and analyse data. The findings suggest participants' struggles are, at times, displaced by the positive dominant abroad narrative, which unintentionally leaves little space for difficulties to be acknowledged and shared openly.

However, when participant narratives emerged they were conceptualised as surface or deeper narratives. The surface narratives contained easier-to-describe difficulties related to differences between the US and UK educational systems. Deeper narratives contained difficulties related to emotional, psychological, and biographical narratives intersected by internalised cultural, social, and societal demands.

Findings show that participants used defence mechanisms to protect themselves against the anxiety of re-telling stories about their difficult experiences. Rather than isolated experiences, the findings show these participants experienced several intersections of personal, social, familial, academic, cultural, and peer group difficulties, which impacted their study abroad experiences.

Word Count (43,777)

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# Introduction

I qualified as a social worker at Cardiff University in 2007. I became interested in using a systemic approach in social work after studying a postgraduate certificate (level 8) in systemic family therapy while working with children and families known to the Youth Offending Service (YOS). This advanced study illuminated the relational aspects of people's problems and contextualised their difficulties helping me to understand how problems occurred, repeated, and became embedded. This led to an appreciation of individuals and families holistically which served to thicken my understanding of situated family problems.

In 2016, I began a position at an American Study Abroad University in England, not as a social worker but as the university's health and well-being practitioner. This role provided American undergraduate students physical, emotional, and psychological support during their semester abroad. I met with students daily, and in a typical semester hosting 270 students, I met with approximately fifty per cent of students. The service was well used, and students seemed to benefit from having someone to talk to. Over five years, I spoke to hundreds of students and, at times, their parents in the US. The American students seemed familiar with the concept of a talking service, and many students shared that they had previously accessed a counselling service at their home university, or had had private therapy either individually or collectively with their families. As a result, students appeared

to normalise the resource and used it as a strategy to cope with their difficulties during the semester.

The well-being resource was not therapy but positioned by the university as a non-confidential conversational space. Commonly during sessions, students talked about their mental health diagnoses; for example, many students had previous diagnoses of anxiety, depression, or eating disorders. Psychotropic medication was frequently part of discussions, with students requiring their prescriptions refilled in the UK. Outside of mental health conditions, students related their difficulties to family problems, or boyfriend and girlfriend issues, homesickness, and acculturation difficulties. Talking about their feelings created a safe space which helped contain their emotions and made them feel relatively safe. At the extreme, a minority of students expressed thoughts of self-harm or thoughts of suicide while in the UK. When students' difficulties fell beyond my role and responsibility, I assisted students to access external professional assistance, which involved advocating for students during medical and psychiatric consultations and assessments.

It appeared the well-being room heard the unheard stories of studying abroad. I observed that some of the students who used this resource often denied their experiences to others. It is understandable that no one overtly shares intimate narratives, especially if they deviate from an expected

positive narrative associated with studying abroad. However, I regularly observed students who used the service tell others how much they were enjoying their study abroad experience. It was during these accounts I observed what appeared to be automated responses by participants. Typical answers would say ‘how great it was, how they looked forward to travelling on school trips and how lucky they were to be here. The more I noticed, the more curious I became. I started to formulate hypotheses about how students' answers differed so starkly from the conversations they had with me within the wellbeing resource. I accepted the context of who asked and where they were asked influenced their answers. I began to consider how their answers were shaped by a relational context and positive dominant narrative associated with studying abroad. When students had difficulties, this affected their perception of themselves and at times, shaped a personal internalised belief of their inadequacy in coping while away from support systems in the US.

Working at the university, I became sensitive to the wider conversations which impacted many of the students. These conversations included the cost of higher education and study abroad semester, the pressure to maintain a Grade Point Average (GPA), accessing scholarships, and maintaining a positive image among peers and on social media accounts. This also included pressures to have specific experiences while abroad which seemed to place additional pressure on students. Ironically, these

demands were part of a wider educational, social, and political narrative and conforming to these scripts appeared obligatory.

I recognised I was in a privileged position at the university. The centre director was open and interested in my doctoral research. The next steps involved seeking permission from the main university in the US and ethics permission from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) emailing prospective students.

There needs to be more literature on the lived experiences of study abroad students, which illuminates the challenges and struggles experienced abroad. Much of the research that captures student difficulties uses a framework of mental health diagnoses or mental health related language to describe and understand the impact difficult experiences have on students. This sets to simplify the picture.

Working with students, I became preoccupied by the number of students each semester who shared similar but unique, unexpected, and unwanted difficult experiences. The study abroad literature shows that students who study abroad often experience difficulties associated with adjusting to an unfamiliar environment and culture, homesickness, and being too far away from family (Jenny et al., 2015); this is not a new phenomenon. However, working closely with students, my interpretations acknowledged the

contextual influencing factors rather than a reliance or over-dependence on an intra-psychic explanation for student difficulties.

Some students found coping abroad more difficult than they had expected. Unwanted and unexpected challenges were not easily overcome without their usual support sources - parents, friends, peers and professionals such as therapists. Students disguised their difficulties by using their social media accounts to display an idealised experience to others. Students defended against their unwanted lived experiences outside of our therapeutic conversations, which is understandable. Some students internalised their difficulties and experienced them as personal weaknesses which they defended against. Some students who shared difficulties also disclosed a history of complex mental ill-health experiences. For example, in-patient treatment for an eating disorder, suicide ideation and previous suicide attempts, and diagnoses of anxiety disorder, depression, schizophrenia, self-harm and substance use, to mention a few. Despite students in the UK having similar mental health difficulties, international students are less likely to seek help for a mental health problem, a relationship problem or an alcohol/substance use problem (Skromainis et al., 2018).

The reluctance of students to speak freely about their unwanted experiences led me to choose a psychosocial interview method. This methodology allows accessing a deeper narrative, and one that represents

the students' wider contexts affecting their studying abroad lived experience.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the American undergraduate study abroad lived experience in the UK with a particular focus on the challenges and struggles experienced. In addition, this study explored how a psychosocial approach thickened the narrative to include an in-depth story told and a macro-societal perspective illuminated the societal influences.

Despite the increased number of American undergraduates studying abroad, we need to learn more about the students' lived experience, especially the unexpected and unwanted experiences, or challenges or struggles. This thesis explores the range of lived experiences experienced over an 8-week of a 15-week semester cut short due to the covid-19 pandemic in March 2020.

This study is unique in several ways.

- Firstly, accessing study-abroad participants is a unique privilege. It is unique because most research in this field is captured by those intrinsically linked to the university. This study accessed the personal narratives of students

through an existing trusted relationship, the promise of participant anonymity and the study’s independence away from the university.

- Secondly, participants' narratives emerged from a psychosocial interview method, the Biographic Narrative Interpretation Method (BNIM), which influenced the interview design and allowed participants to choose narratives that they felt were significant. And not what the researcher thought to be relevant.

- Thirdly, interview data were analysed using systemic and psychoanalytic ideas with doctoral students within tutorial groups, supervision with supervisors, and lastly, by analysing audio and visual recordings captured on the social conferencing platform, Zoom.

Chapters

**Chapter one:** The literature review describes the context of American Study Abroad, using economic and political contexts that thicken our understanding of the pressure students and parents experience. The chapter then presents study abroad literature focusing on the mental health of students and students abroad.

**Chapter two**: Systemic and psychosocial theory, gives a brief overview of the core systemic principles used to analyse data and, in doing so, reunites the fragmented themes offering a more comprehensive systemic view of contextual and relational dynamics found across data.

**Chapter three**: Methodology describes this study's aims, purpose, and questions of interest. It describes the subjective epistemology – Interpretivism, and ontological positions to explain the inner and outer realities of the students studying abroad. The methodology uses a psychosocial position to understand the inner world of the ‘psycho’ and its relationship with the social or societal.

**Chapter four**: Reflexivity describes the duality of my position as it moves between being a staff member/well-being practitioner and researcher and how moving between these positions of insider/outsider created tensions for myself and the participants.

**Chapter five**: Findings provides brief biographies of participants and offers insight into the difficulties experienced abroad. Verbatim scripts are

presented, giving a voice to participants and their experiences. A description of themes and sub-themes is also presented.

**Chapter six**: Discussion presents a reminder of the research summary, research questions and a recap of the findings. This chapter is divided into three sections examining the difficulties described by participants, the emotional impact and varying contexts which also impacted their study abroad experience. It presents a within and cross-case analysis, offering examples of the similarities and differences between participants. This analysis is reviewed in the context of relevant research and theory, particularly systemic and psychosocial concepts. This discussion focuses on participants' lived experiences, narratives and specific contexts which influenced participants' study abroad semester.

**Chapter seven:** Understanding difficulties using systemic ideas looks at the concept of recursive patterns in participant attempts to resolve their challenges while abroad.

**Chapter eight:** Understanding difficulties using psychosocial ideas examines the use of laughter as a defence which illuminated participants ‘defended positions’.

**Chapter nine**: Recommendations and Conclusion present how the findings suggest an in-house provision for study abroad students to talk through their experiences and the ‘student of concern’ model.

# Chapter One: Literature review

## Definition of study abroad

The first study abroad program was in Delaware when Professor Raymond Watson Kirkbride took a group of eight students for six weeks in Paris in 1923 (Kochanek, 2010). The term ‘study abroad’ describes an educational programme of undergraduate and postgraduate study, work, research, or credit-bearing internships conducted outside the United States, which awards academic credit toward a university degree. US colleges/universities have study abroad offices on their main campus, which organise and oversee study abroad cohorts each semester. Programs are described as education abroad programs that "constitute all educational programs that occur in a foreign country outside of the geographical boundaries of the country of origin, offering student's the opportunity to earn academic credit through international experiences" (Lee et al., 2012, p. 768).

## Types of studying abroad

Study abroad education offers three core semesters per year: fall (Sept-Dec), spring (Jan-May) and summer (May-June or July), depending on the length of the program and academic course. In addition to semesters, there are optional pre- and post-semester seminars known as Signature seminars. These are intensive field studies for ten days and are

credit-bearing towards their final degree programme. The American higher education system also provides varying lengths for studying abroad. Short-term programs last for eight weeks or less, to medium, a single semester, or long-term programs last one academic or calendar year (opendoorsdata.org).

## Why study Abroad?

Overwhelmingly, the ‘paradigm of a college education as a transaction’ (Blumenstyk 2015, 123), or the phenomenon of ‘higher education [being] framed as a commodity and students as customers’ (Thompson 2014, p.16), is what students and their families have come to expect. That is, they are accustomed to seeing the primary gains of going to college or studying abroad defined in terms of personal, individual benefits, not collective, societal ones.

Current educational study abroad directives are underpinned by learning outcomes linked to global curricula and citizenship (Lansing and Farnum, 2017), personal growth (Davis and Knight, 2022), increased cultural awareness (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004), improved study habits and developed confidence (Jenny et al., 2017). A plethora of research suggests that studying abroad can nurture essential knowledge of other countries and cultures, which better equips students’ employment potential in a saturated

graduate global workplace. Studying abroad raises students' ability to stand above an already saturated graduate employment market by achieving international perspectives and higher-order skills (Kirby, 2008).

Studying abroad is acknowledged to be a privileged opportunity. The estimated cost of a semester study (15 weeks) for fall 2022 at a private university where participants attended this research study was an estimated $48,580. This cost includes university tuition, program fee, meal allowance, airfare, student visa, personal expenses, and travel. In addition, the university and US government provide several forms of financial aid to encourage student participation abroad. Typical forms of support are merit-based aid and scholarships, need-based aid, student loans, and private and federal or work-study funds.

One of the prerequisites for funding to attend US colleges and abroad destinations is the student's Grade Point Average (GPA) (Adams and Reinig, 2017). A student's GPA is a number calculated from academic grades at a university. The GPA is on a scale from 0.0 to 4.0, with 4.0 being the highest your GPA can achieve. Maintaining a GPA is related to continuing to study at university and receiving scholarships. A comparison between the UK and US grading systems translates to an A grade = 90-100% being a GPA of 4, a B grade = 80-90% being a GPA of 3, a C

grade = 70-79% being a GPA of 2. Differences in US and UK grading systems can evoke specific stresses in students abroad.

## Benefits of studying abroad

Increasingly, shifts in political, social, and economic trends have supported the benefits of studying abroad. For example, first lady Michelle Obama in 2014 and then Secretary of State in 2011, Hillary Clinton, endorsed the positives of studying abroad. Speaking in Beijing, China, Michelle Obama stated:

'…*studying abroad is not just a fun way to spend a semester; it is quickly becoming the key to success in our global economy* (White House, Office of the First Lady, 2014).

Studying abroad has a dominant discourse associated with positive outcomes. The benefits of studying abroad are connected to experiential learning, global citizenship and development, intercultural maturity, and sensitivity (Deardorff, 2009; O'Reilly, 2015; Costello, 2015; Stebleton et al., 2012). In addition, student confidence and social competence (Lansing and Farnum, 2017; Walsh and Walsh, 2018), increased wage opportunities (Farruquia, 2017) and transformative learning environments (Walters, et al 2017).

## The business of studying abroad

In 2004, William Cressey of the Council on International Educational Exchange wrote to the members of SECUSSA (Section on Education of US Students Abroad), highlighting the purpose of Study Abroad was to deliver experiential learning related to intercultural awareness, academic achievement related to the student's program of studies and enjoyment of social life in a foreign environment. The balance in achieving all the above differs depending on whether you are a student, parent (customer), institution, or faculty member (provider) of study abroad education. Higher education, particularly in the US, has become a multi-million-dollar business, students are customers, and university administrators and faculty members are service providers.

Carlson and Fleisher (2002) acknowledged that treating the institution's American student body as customers have lessened the curricula and teaching methods' rigour. Cressey suggested there is difficulty reaching a collective understanding for participants, their parents, faculty, and programme staff at the host institution about the main goals for study abroad. He stated that without well-defined goals or questions, asking students, 'why do you want to do this?' 'Why are you here?' goals, priorities and expectations cannot be managed. Cressey hoped for students' goals to focus on the world they are experiencing, seeking to understand and not complain about the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, and the problematic aspects of the host culture.

The shift in higher education institutions towards a business model has meant the study abroad student experience has similarities to hospitality and star-rated holiday experiences and expectations. Studying abroad is an expensive opportunity, but it needs to be more than a 'jolly' abroad. It requires, as Cressey stated, evidence of a robust learning opportunity. Positive student experiences are a key promotional asset for universities, and complaints are feared and quickly ameliorated due to the risk of parental escalation to private lawsuits.

The study abroad field has focused on linking study abroad with career ambitions, as seen in conference presentations titled “Articulating Students’ Intercultural Skills to Employers” and “Gaining an Edge with Education Abroad: The International Experience” (NAFSA 2014 Annual Conference).

## Political Directives

In 2005, the United States Congress established the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Commission. It aimed to develop the framework for students' international study abroad programs. In addition, the commission sought to subsidise an infrastructure to send one million American college students to study abroad annually by 2017.

Senator Paul Simon inspired the concept of studying outside the US in the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001, attacks on the United States. Simon believed one of the most productive ways to protect against future vulnerabilities in a connected world was to create a more globally informed American citizenry and build relationships within their host communities.

Initiatives by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in 2014, such as the 'Generation Study Abroad green paper', laid the foundation for US study abroad opportunities. This living document aimed to double the number of American students studying abroad over five years. In 2015/2016, there were 325,339 US undergraduates studying abroad; by 2018-2019, this number grew to 347,099 (opendoordata.org). However, the number of US undergraduates studying abroad fell sharply when the Covid-19 virus emerged in March 2020 147,345. Nearly two decades since the commitment of Congress has been largely unfulfilled.

As student educational mobility becomes more available via scholarships, financial aid, and US government grants, the study abroad programmes develop into sophisticated host satellite centres worldwide. Before the Covid19 pandemic, Study abroad continued to grow and transferred from a marginal opportunity occupied by privileged students to a familiar US higher education instructional strategy (Vander Berg, 2004). Yet, despite the efforts to create opportunities, of the 20.8 million students in 2020/21 in the United

States, only 5.3% of all US undergraduates studied abroad during their degree programme in 2019/20 (opendoorsdata.org).

## Higher Education – context and pressures UK and US

Pitts (2009) contributed to the changing face of study abroad education by examining whether students viewed it in academic terms versus a holiday or travel semester. This study found that abroad students were surprised that their academic responsibilities were equal to their home studies. Students had assumed that their abroad studies would in some way be compensated due to the inclusion of experiential learning derived from exploring new environments. The balancing of being away from home, one's family and friends, living independently and studying academic credits while abroad proved to be an unexpected, overwhelming experience.

## Helicopter Parents

Helicopter parenting has become frequently used in media and schools (Van Ingen et al., 2015, p8). Helicopter parents are overly involved parents who hover above their children, waiting to fix any problems their children may face (Cline & Fay, 1990). While these parents have the best intentions, they can be intrusive and controlling (Locke et al., 2012).

When adolescents become emerging adults and leave home to study, there are expectations of independence and autonomy. However, as parents and young adults negotiate nuanced relationships, the freedom of young adults who are still financially dependent on parents paying for college fees and returning home to live during semester breaks compromises their independence. Therefore, steering the appropriate level of parenting and being a parented young adult can become particularly difficult.

While helicopter parents' information-seeking behaviours (Carr et al.,2021) are seen as parental support, wielding too much control, which inhibits children's psychological and emotional experiences, can negatively impact the emerging adult's psychological well-being. At its most extreme, helicopter parenting has been associated with increased depression and poor psychological well-being in college students (Darlow et al., 2017) and a higher level of burnout in college students (Love et al., 2020).

Helicopter parenting is negatively related to an individual’s self-efficacy and is a growing concern for parental involvement in students’ affairs (Buchanan and LeMoyne, 2019). A newer and progressive term of Snow Plough parenting refers to anxious parents who aim to ‘clear difficulties’ out of the way for their children. Children develop within an overly protective unnatural environment where problems or age-appropriate tasks are swept out of the way. This parenting approach aims to prevent the child from feeling unable

to do things or fail. Ironically, whether we label parenting styles using a hovering or clearing technique, over-protection results in young adults not developing autonomy, leaving them unable to navigate through problems.

When young adults attend university, part of the educational experience is receiving feedback verbally and via academic grades. Healthy mental wellbeing is associated with navigating criticism and using feedback to adjust and improve; young adults who may have been sheltered from developing these skills may find receiving or potentially receiving negative feedback overly stressful. In helicopter parenting, parental control has been associated with increased fear of failure (Deneault et al., 2020). However, the present-day pressure of modernity raised expectations for individual achievements to compete in a global job market (Kwon et al., (2017) has become a phenomenon that has become normalised among middle-class parents in Western culture (Ungar, 2009).

## Cultural and Societal influences

The original ‘American Dream’ was a dream of equality, justice and democracy for the nation and not a dream of individual wealth. The historian James Truslow Adams cemented the concept and phrase in his 2017 edition of The Epic of America, writing, ‘the American dream… is a land in

which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement'.

A more contemporary definition offered in the Pop Cultural Dictionary (2018) defines the American Dream as an aspirational belief in the US that all individuals are entitled to the opportunity for success and upward social mobility through hard work.

The current Biden-Harris White House administration lends itself to the meritocratic American Dream. Kamala Harris was elected Vice President of the United States of America after a lifetime in public service. Born in California, Harris's parents had emigrated from India and Jamaica. She is the first South Asian American to be elected Vice President. Concepts such as the American Dream and perfectionism illuminate the deeper and unnoticed elements that influence study abroad student experiences.

## Bribery

In previous years, the hidden social pressures of getting the best education money can buy have revealed parents who are prepared to use bribery and donations to colleges to guarantee a place for their child. In March 2019, actors Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman were among wealthy parents charged in a university entry fraud scheme that guaranteed privileged children gained entry to sought-after institutions, dubbed 'Operation Varsity Blues' (Davies, 2020). Huffman pleaded guilty in 2019 to paying the college

admission consultant $15,000 to change her daughter's answers after taking an SAT entry test and being sentenced to a 14-day jail sentence. Loughlin was also charged in 2019 and was expected to receive a two-month custodial sentence and pay a $150,000 fine.

## Gen Z

Study abroad students today, born after 1997, are part of a demographic cohort known as Generation Z (Gen Z for short). Students typically aged 25 years and below have grown up with digital technology from a young age and are more concerned with academic performance and career prospects than older generations. (The Economist, February 27th, 2019). A preoccupation with social media accounts being a norm of communication in addition to face-to face communication may also lend itself to a specific group identity. Social media accounts such as Instagram, Facebook, SnapChat and WhatsApp, Tik Tok or other commonly used platforms can aid the illusion and can become a template for perfectionism. The communication and message via these sites are to always look your best and only post successful stories, regardless of their here-and-now reality.

US study abroad cohorts can develop a group identity based on fundamental cultural values and simultaneously being in the same place [abroad]. Ties in groups can be visible or invisible, heard or unheard, known or unknown; a relational unconscious process is co-created by the group

members. Study abroad groups have some common unconscious fantasies, anxieties, defences, myths and national memories (Weinberg, 2007). One such fantasy is that the academic workload abroad is lower than on the main campus. Educational and societal fantasies about how studying abroad can promote a more robust student experience are linked to interrelated concepts of success and perfectionism. Students arrive abroad with unconscious and conscious thoughts about how studying abroad will enhance themselves and help them become better versions of themselves.

## Covid-19: March 2020

The impact of the Covid-19 virus negatively impacted students who were studying abroad in 2020. Uncertainty about the continuation of the semester increased as the virus across Europe unfolded and this created anxieties among students, staff and related stakeholders. Students spoke of their disappointment of their study abroad semester being cut short, feelings of a once in a lifetime opportunity being taken away, alongside fears of contracting the virus and becoming ill in the UK in the absence of family members.

Pederson's (2021) study presents an in-depth look at the impact of Covid-19 on American students studying abroad and describes the negative emotions, including mental health difficulties, because of their experience.

Students described anxiety and fear related to contracting the virus and difficulties returning safely to the US. Students discussed how underlying anxiety disorders were exacerbated due to the stress of living through a pandemic. Feelings of sadness were related to missing out on the experience and exacerbating underlying mental health problems that students had hoped to overcome by the abroad experience.

**Literature close to the subject**

Studying abroad in a different country does require more determination for most students. Challenges include adapting to academic and social environments, developing friendships and changes in food, currency, housing, social support and homesickness. These experiences can result in a strong form of stress that affects both physical and mental health. Research on international students' challenges suggests that adjusting to the new host environment can create intense emotional experiences and other mental health issues (Elemo and Turkum, 2019).

**Narrative of the literature review**

The focus of this review is to consider the unseen influences which shape the student's experiences. These influences are not related to the study abroad program but are aspects of political, social, societal, and cultural external demands. This literature review presents studies that will assist our

understanding of what is known about student experiences concerning their well-being and mental health. The studies presented provide a starting point for understanding the difficulties students experience.

## American Student mental health

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) defines mental health as our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Our mental health, therefore, affects how we think, feel and act and determines how we handle stress, relate to others and make healthy choices. The importance of maintaining positive mental health has seen Mental health week promoted worldwide; in the US, Mental Health week is from Sunday, October 2nd to Saturday, October 8th 2022, and in the UK, it takes place from the 10th to the 15th of May 2022.

Psychiatrists and psychologists have offered several reasons for students' rise in mental health crises. These include the competitive nature of the educational environment, economic and family pressures, distance from support systems such as family members and friends, the desire for perfection, existential confusion, increased use of alcohol and drugs, the dehumanising effects of using social media, and the social challenges that arise when socialising in new circles (Psychology Today, 2014).

The presence of anxiety among college students in the US has been attributed to issues such as 'academic performance, pressure to succeed, postgraduate plans, financial concerns, quality of sleep, relationships with friends, relationship with family, overall health, body image and self-esteem (Beiter et al., 2015) cited in (Francis and Horn 2017, p.31). However, depression continues to be a grave issue on college campuses. For example, the American College Health Association National College Health Assessment, an extensive national survey (n= 67,972), revealed in the last 30 days, many students felt very lonely (14%); very sad (14%), so depressed it was difficult to function (9%), felt overwhelming anxiety (14%) (ACHA, Spring, 2019).

Students who study abroad are typically aged between 19-24 years old. Their age correlates with many mental health conditions (Vander Stoep et al., 2000), and institutions must develop robust monitoring and appropriate resources for students to access while they study at university. One standard campus resource on American campuses is mental health counselling. College counselling centres have seen increasing demand as students report high stress, anxiety, and other mental and emotional health concerns (Centre for Collegiate Mental Health 2018 Annual Report, 2018). In addition, the American ACHA- National College Health's large national research surveyed 41 institutions with 33,204 respondents in the fall of 2021. It revealed that 30.5% of students reported receiving psychological or mental health services, with 50.8% reporting experiencing moderate

distress and 22% serious psychological distress within the last 12 months (Kessler 6 (K6) Non-specific Psychological Distress Score) Assessment (ACHA, Spring, 2019). Unfortunately, these statistics offer only a numeric value of the number of students reporting moderate or serious psychological distress. Identifying the sources of distress may begin to address these troublesome statistics.

In 2007 Dalton and Crosby's study supported previous research by Kitzrow (2003) identifying the severity of college students' psychological problems and the demand for counselling in college have increased significantly over the past decade. In addition to counselling provisions, student programming administrators also report that their time helping troubled students has increased.

The introduction of psychotropic medications to young people is widely accepted in the US. Psychiatric interventions such as antidepressants, antianxiety, and ADHD medications show that medicated students are more successful at their main campus. So increasingly, students with the same issues travel abroad to study (Blom and Beckley, 2005). Alongside medications, many American students have accessed counselling services, on-campus or independently, throughout their lifetime. As a result, they are familiar with therapeutic benefits and invest in this resource. However, the study abroad satellite campus is a smaller sub-system of the larger institution and has fewer resources.

Common difficulties about the student's perception of their mental health and how this impacts their academic performance, ability to integrate with others, conflicts with cohabitating students, being overwhelmed and frozen with anxiety, family and interpersonal problems and more serious conversations around self-harm and suicidal ideation. Students regularly discuss their mental health issues and diagnosis and how they affect them abroad. In collaboration with students who seek assistance, students are viewed as the best experts to illuminate their unique experiences.

## Student mental health abroad

Despite the raised awareness of mental health issues in global campaigns, the stigma of mental health is still prevalent. As a result, American college campuses make available for students' pre-disclosure documentation to complete after securing a place in a study abroad program. Protected under the Disability Act (ADA, 1990) and Rehabilitation Act 1973, federal law, pre-disclosure attempts to capture the needs of students before arrival. However, students are cautious and fearful of disclosing a mental health need before attending an abroad experience, believing that potentially their condition could exclude them (Leggett, 2012, Lucas, 2009, McCabe, 2005). However, the NAFSA: Association of International Educators, a leading organisation in study abroad education, encourages students to disclose mental health illnesses after applying.

Leggett's (2012) paper entitled 'Their baggage goes, too' offers insight into problems accompanying students to the study abroad campus. This article cites study-abroad directors' suggestions on supporting students with mental health issues studying abroad, urging staff abroad to recognise the signs of distress. She recommends nuanced ways to support students; for example, Wendy Settle, a psychologist at the University of Notre Dame, recommends contracting students to comply with their medication, not to binge drink, and to take part in activities on the abroad campus, which aims to support their mental health abroad.

Due to the extant research on student well-being, difficulties or mental health while studying abroad, what is known has been written by centre directors of study abroad centres. John Lucas (2015), residential director and professor in Barcelona, has steadily encountered an increasing presentation of students with mental health issues. Lucas draws on specific case examples of students and their presenting difficulties. He described the case of Michelle, who had not pre-disclosed any prior mental health issues on any documentation. He described that from the day of arrival, Michelle showed behaviours understood as paranoia, anxiety, and distress. Following a series of psychiatric appointments, Michelle permitted Lucas to speak with doctors, psychologists, parents and counsellors at home. Lucas's article describes the hidden experiences of students who experience difficulties studying abroad.

Lucas describes study-abroad students' presentations of destructive coping mechanisms while abroad and highlights the opposing discourses of students and parents. McCabe describes the sensitivity needed when dealing with opposing points of view, family dynamics and interpersonal relationships. For example, he describes Mark's low mood and how he wants to return home but explains that his father would never allow it. Although in Mark's mind going abroad was a way to try something different, his father thought it would be good for him as he perceived his son to be 'weak-willed and needed to grow up. Lucas raises a valuable concern about student vulnerabilities and their presentation abroad. He highlights that many study-abroad sites do not employ mental health specialists and use external professionals when a student is in
crisis.

Clinical social worker and president of Shipboard Education, Les McCabe's (2005) influential article on Mental Health and Study Abroad: Responding to concern highlighted the negative correlation between the increasing number of diagnosed incidences of mental health and the absence of extensive research data on the subject. As president of a study abroad facility McCabe offered anecdotal evidence describing prevalent mental and psychological factors. They included (a) loss and separation, (b) travel stress, (c) cultural shock, (d) adjusting to local living conditions, (e) social

pressure, (f) pre-existing conditions, (g) change in medication and (h) unforeseen events.

In contrast, Bathke and Kim (2016) examined student self-reports of pre-existing mental health conditions emerging during their study abroad experience. Findings of their longitudinal quantitative study show that 28% of participants reported experiencing a mental health issue before going abroad; around 8% said they felt they experienced it abroad. Their results highlight that nearly a third of students who studied abroad in this incidence had previously experienced a mental health issue before going abroad. Although this study has validity concerns due to a low response rate, overall, participants reported improved coping skills, confidence and problem-solving skills gained abroad.

Psychological stress impacts individuals in diverse ways. That said, in the absence of support systems, the effects of this distress can be exacerbated. Calderwood offers insight into the study abroad location and says, ‘Abroad is both vague and resonant: it is where home is not’ (Calderwood, 2011). Hunley (2010) explores the psychological aspects of American students studying abroad, particularly how stress and loneliness impact students functioning abroad. This study found that students who experienced psychological stress and loneliness abroad interfered with their general capacity and motivation to learn. Hunley acknowledged that mental health resources on study-abroad campuses are lacking. However, Hunley's

quantitative design omitted the definition of psychological distress, and with no student narratives in this research, it isn't easy to ascertain examples of student life experiences.

Most studies on the study abroad student experiences are quantitative research; one exception is Walsh and Walsh (2018) qualitative study; despite focusing on the learning outcomes of studying abroad, they highlight some student worries.

Walsh & Walsh (2018) explore the lived experiences of American students studying abroad experiences specifically about learning outcomes, using semi-structured interviews. By eliciting students' accounts before, during, and one month after they studied abroad, this research sought out the lived experiences of American students rather than their responses to circumscribed questionnaires. Student responses before their abroad experience talked about 'Can I handle it? Regarding feelings of anxiety, dependence on others, and the fear of being unable to go back. Students described struggling to balance academic workload with socialisation and sight-seeing and concerns about academic grades suffering due to being obsessed with their location. Half of the students said they were worried about being away for three months and becoming homesick. Although students spoke about trepidation before going abroad, they stated that their overall experiences gave them a strong sense of independence,

self-confidence, organisational skills, and living in the moment with decreased technology usage. Walsh & Walsh highlight that although student experiences were positive, the framing of the questions may have influenced students' responses. Critically, the researcher's specific enquiry about learning outcomes shaped the researcher's discourse during the interview, which may have influenced the student's responses. In addition, the cost and self-selection process of students may shape the student accounts, despite the semi-structured interviews encouraging dialogue.

A deviation from positive outcomes conversation may have been too risky for students to tolerate, which would frame experiences differently, suggesting it may not be the value for money they chose. Walsh and Walsh's study are close to this study. However, there are significant differences. Firstly, the interview method in this study used the biographic narrative interview method (BNIM). This method uses a two session structure which contains a free association-style interview followed by a sequence of strictly formatted questioning revisiting what was mentioned in the first session. This allowed participants to choose what difficulties they discussed in the order that was important to them (see Chapter three). This study adds to the complex picture of study abroad lived experiences as it represents and focuses on participants' emotional, unwanted, and unexpected emotional lived experiences.

Not seeking help

The opposing health systems between the UK (public) and the US (private) may underpin students' decision-making not to seek help if they experience what they believe to be mental health issues when they study abroad. Despite robust insurance coverage such as International SOS, which aids students who become ill abroad, the unfamiliarity with health systems and fear related to lifestyle choices abroad may be enough not to seek assistance if students are aware of a decline in their mental health.

Pederson's (2013) study reported that the most cited mental health conditions are anxiety and depression, with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Feeding and Eating Disorders, Bipolar Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Personality Disorder, Panic Disorder and ADHD also cited. Pederson's study reported that of the 8.3 percent of students who reported a mental health issue while abroad, 91.8 percent reported not seeking treatment while abroad. It is safe to say that students do not leave their mental health issues at home when studying abroad. Studying abroad, being away from families and social capital, raises valuable questions about how students with mental health difficulties cope while abroad. Students who experience problems while abroad may turn toward destructive coping strategies such as alcohol use which can further exacerbate mental health problems.

Ryan and Twibell (2000) examined the nature of stress of American students who study abroad for one or two months. They wanted to understand the relationship between student concerns, stress, coping, health, and cultural adaptation to see if these impacted the study abroad experience. Prominent themes focused on interpersonal relationships and fitting into a new society which focused on meeting people and feeling abandoned and losing everything familiar. Academic achievement was a major theme of concern.

The method of teaching, testing, grading, and university systems differed from students' home institutions. Personal adjustment where students' concern was loneliness, a sense of isolation and specific concerns about anxiety and experiencing depression. This study found that emotional problems or feelings of anxiety and depression limited students' activities compared to physical functioning. Ryan and Twibell point out that students who study abroad are unique in that they must not only adapt to a new setting and culture but function in an academic setting. Their study showed that 20–30 per cent of the students surveyed disclosed emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness and that these difficulties adversely affected students' activity levels while abroad.

Poyrazli and Mitchell (2020) used an anonymous online survey of 111 US students studying abroad in Italy. The online survey focused on

understanding their psychosocial experiences while abroad 3-4 weeks into their study abroad semester and used standardised screening tools for depression, anxiety, and previous mental health history. Students commonly reported depressive symptoms included lack of energy, sleep problems, and anxiety-related symptoms, including anxiety, worrying about many different things, and trouble relaxing. Although this survey reported a low response rate of 20%, it offers some insight into the emotional health of study abroad students. A key finding of this survey was that 20% of participants disclosed having participated in mental health counselling or treatment before and during college. In addition, almost 7% of participants reported taking psychiatric medications, with a similar percentage reporting previous non-suicidal self-injurious behaviour. Although Poyrazli and Mitchell's paper gives us insight into the emotional health of study abroad students, it does not illuminate anything beyond the categorisation of mental health diagnoses or destructive coping strategies such as self-harm. Although this study does not capture how the student's experience abroad related to the abroad experience, it draws parallels with other American college students. Poyrazli and Mitchell recommend an in-depth qualitative method that could provide a valuable contribution to this emerging area of research.

Faculty members at abroad campuses are often the ones who begin to notice when a student experiences difficulty. Niehaus et al. (2020) used a mixed method to explore thirteen faculty members' experiences addressing student mental health issues abroad while teaching short-term courses

abroad. Their interest was not only to identify what difficulties the students presented with but how faculty members could best respond and meet the mental health needs of students while abroad. This research also sought to explore the training and preparation faculty received or not to allow them to support students with mental health needs while abroad. They found that over half of the faculty members (58.1%) had a role in addressing students' mental health needs, whereas 41% felt unprepared to do so. Over a third of participants thought they should not have a role in addressing student mental health needs abroad. Qualitative interviews of the participants described various mental health needs they encountered abroad, including ADHD, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and suicidal ideation.

The intense nature of studying a short-term course abroad did have a typical reaction to international travel, i.e., homesickness and mild anxiety. Faculty members individually defined what they believed to be a mental health need and the student's dialogue. Participants spoke of 'keeping an eye on students and engaging in one-to-one conversations with students with the distressed student. Conversations usually revealed some anxiety, homesickness, or a discussion about the importance of medication compliance. One participant disclosed, 'never has a student come to me on their own and said, you know I'm having a hard time'. More serious mental health needs where students reported thinking of harming themselves or completing suicide included advice-seeking from the campus mental health professional and the student's parents. Although this help was useful, one of

the participants shared, ‘she still was the one having to deal with it’. Although participants felt competent to recognise, report and refer students with mental health needs to outside resources, it considered institutions might prevent crises related to mental health issues.

**Spaces in the literature**

Exploring the literature on the lived experiences of American study-abroad students has shown the lack of narrative research methods which capture the student's experiences in their own words. The current literature goes a long way in presenting the difficulties experienced by students, often using the frame of student mental health to understand difficulties abroad. However, there needs to be more research that explores the student's context and how psychosocial influences impact their abroad experiences.

How I searched for literature

Onwuegbuzie and Frels (2016) suggest that research ethics and rigour can be obtained by following a systematic way of searching and documenting literature that fits into the review. Empirical research literature of previous studies has examined student difficulties, distress, and mental health while students’ study abroad.

A PICO (Population, Issue, Context, Outcome) tool was used to formulate keywords to assist in searching for relevant literature (Fineout-Overholt and Johnson, 2005).

**Table 1:** PICO tool

| | Population | Issue | Context | outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PICO term | Student | Mental health | American | Experiences |
| Alternative terms (synonyms) | Undergraduate<br>Graduate<br>International<br>Study Abroad | Well-being<br>Psychological<br>Emotional<br>Mental Disorder<br>Mental health issues | International<br>American – UK<br>International -US<br>International - global | Feelings<br>Discourse<br>Dialogue<br>Narratives |

Literature was searched using a combination of the words above. However, keywords must be carefully considered to generate the most relevant literature. American databases, CINAHL, were sensitive to differences in American and English spellings and meaning (Younger, 2004). Another strategy used to combine words was ‘Boolean operators. The most common Boolean operators sued were ‘AND’, and ‘OR (Ely and Scott, 2007).

I searched ProQuest central database for papers on American study abroad and students' lived experiences. This database is the largest, multidisciplinary, full-text database available, containing almost forty

databases, each providing a source for scholarly journals, newspapers, reports, and working papers. Additional electronic databases such as ERIC and Google Scholar. Grey literature was used at the Open Access and Thesis Dissertations (OATD.org) website for unpublished doctoral theses. I used RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds within Mendeley reference management software which automatically collected articles about studying abroad and difficulties or mental health in the title (Citrome et al., 2011).

## Conclusion

This literature review included research giving insight into difficulties experienced by American study-abroad students. Many studies use a quantitative design and mental health diagnosis and language to understand student experiences. However, the studies presented here offer a contextualised view of some of the demands that intersect with participants' abroad experiences. The next chapter, Chapter Two: Systemic and Psychosocial theory, explains the theoretical underpinnings used to analyse the findings.

# Chapter Two: Systemic and Psychosocial theory

A systemic and psychosocial theoretical framework helped the research planning and provided a theoretical coat-hanger for data collection, analysis and interpretation of results. This chapter gives a brief overview of the core systemic principles used to analyse data and, in doing so, reunites the fragmented themes offering a more comprehensive systemic view of contextual and relational dynamics found across data. In addition, psychoanalytic concepts are used to a lesser extent to complement and add further insight into participants' narratives.

## Overview of Systemic Theory and Practice

Systemic social work practice developed in the field of family therapy. A basic assumption of the family systems approach is that a family is unique due to variations in personal characteristics and cultural styles. The system is based on interactional processes, whose parts constantly shift boundaries and, to varying degrees, resist change. Families fulfil various functions for each member, both collectively and individually, with each member developing and passing through developmental changes that produce stress affecting all members.

That said, a fundamental viewpoint of a systems approach is the family or individual's problem, which is perceived not ‘in the person ’but between

persons' (relational). This contrasts with a psychoanalytic view of problems arising intra-psychically – in the mind.

In 1952, anthropologist Gregory Bateson, with his research colleagues Jay Haley, William Fry, John Weakland and John Jackson, also known as the Palo Alto Group, studied psychiatric patients and their families using systemic theory. In 1956, the group authored an article entitled, *Towards a theory of schizophrenia*, and presented their famous double bind hypothesis. Defined by the Oxford dictionary as

*'An inescapable dilemma involving conflicting demands that allow no right or satisfactory response.*

The group claimed the double bind hypothesis assumed that disturbed behaviours could result from unfortunate interpersonal communication between two or more people, identified as ('victim' and 'superior(s)'. Instead, the double bind occurs from recurrent experiences and interactions, such as verbal or nonverbal communication. The irony of the communication, often between family members, leaves the victim torn, where demands from the other cannot be ignored or escaped.

These observations changed the group's focus to communication patterns instead of behaviour and individual abilities (Bateson et al., 1956). This article spearheaded a change in basic assumptions from a linear cause-effect model (the focus being the individual) to a circular frame (the focus being the whole/system/family). Using linear causal explanations for

difficulties within the family identifies a specific person who is the problem. This over simplistic perspective of problems within families also locates fault or blames an individual, seeing them as the cause (linear) of the problem (the identified patient principle). A circular causal explanation of problems tries to understand what each person does to maintain the problem and what they can do differently to change the situation.

## The importance of context

Bateson (1972) wrote, ‘I believe that an action or label put on an experience must always be seen…in context’. The context of a different culture, albeit an English-speaking culture, may have tricked participants into thinking their transition to their study abroad destination would be much the same. A systemic approach works with the view that there are no worldwide meanings in our social worlds. Instead, there is an appreciation of uniqueness, local and specific contexts, and a further appreciation of individual narratives about identity, family, culture, ethnicity, colour, race, religion, gender, class and age, to mention a few (see Social Graces below). They also recognise the impact of context on individuals and themselves (Hedges, 2005).

## Milan Approach

One of the most prominent strands of family therapy, known as the Milan team (Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978, 1980), developed systems theory and cybernetics. When the team split, they formed the Milan Approach – Luigi Boscolo and Gianfranco Cecchin (Barbetta, 2017). Boscolo and Cecchin invited their clients to actively participate in their therapy and, in doing so, pay ethical attention to incorporating three key principles of hypothesising, circularity and neutrality, which later replaced neutrality for curiosity.

## Key principles of systemic practice

The word systemic is used to understand participants' lived experiences within various systems. This includes their family, study abroad, and cultural and social systems (Vetere and Dallos, 2003). This approach seeks to understand the study abroad student's challenges and struggles in relation to others rather than in isolation.

## Hypothesising, Circularity and Curiosity

In his paper Hypothesizing, Circularity and Neutrality revisited, Cecchin (1987) states that families are excellent storytellers with exciting scripts.

Unfortunately, these scripts are sometimes written tightly; consequently, they do not help the family function as usefully as possible. The therapist's aim is to invite new or modified scripts based on the therapist's hypothesising, to which the family responds by adjusting their script. The idea of hypothesising is to formulate hunches based on the problem. Brown states,

> Hypothesising was conceptualised as the formulation of systemic 'suppositions' that guaranteed therapist activity, gave order to the interview and oriented questioning (Brown, 2010, p.1).

The term circularity is sometimes more useful to be explained as a spiral (Hedges, p.83, 2005). Circularity, alongside hypothesising, is a technique which fosters curiosity (Cecchin, p.5, 1987) when working therapeutically with families. This technique uses circular (relational) questioning to undermine family belief systems about their problems. It offers a position of difference to develop an awareness of the interrelatedness of their behaviours. This moves people from a position of blame (linear) to seeing the wider recursive interactions between individuals and their problems.

A technique which illuminates patterns and maps the interpersonal, systemic frame is the cultural genogram. As stories are the main interest of systemic practitioners, a genogram or family tree can show the important interconnectedness of family relationships. The genogram provides a visual representation of the family, where known and unknown intergenerational patterns, myths, rules, emotionally charged issues, illness, and critical life

changes emerge (McGoldrick et al., 1999: p.2). In addition, conversations can often fill the room with significant people in one's life (Hedges, p85, 2005).

## Family Life Cycles and Family Scripts

Carter and McGoldrick's (1980) family life cycle model highlights the significance of intergenerational patterns. When patterns emerge in families, they are represented as family scripts. Asking questions and being curious when drawing a genogram begins to identify scripts. They often define how families interact with each other and the outside world. Byng-Hall's (1985) family script theory describes how individuals and families enact patterns of behaviours, just as an actor follows a script. Family scripts can pass through generations (generational script) or define beliefs (religious script), relationships (father-son scripts); abusive scripts (domestic abuse); roles (victim scripts), health (illness scripts). Fraiberg et al. (1980) refer to this phenomenon as 'ghosts in the nursery'. She proposes that without conscious effort to alter entrenched family patterns, family life can become a 'rehearsal' for the next generation.

Byng-Hall (1985, 1995) identifies three ways family scripts may manifest. Replicative scripts in which experiences from the past repeat, often unconsciously. These scripts can be helpful or unhelpful. For example, keeping fit versus drinking alcohol to cope with unwanted emotions. Corrective scripts are how individuals try to alter past (abusive) scripts. For

example, not marrying a violent partner if your parents had a violent relationship. Family scripts can be guided by religion. For example, homosexuality is not accepted in Catholicism. Improvised scripts relate to the ability to flexibly and creatively take the valuable experiences of being parented, and weave these with our current contexts.

Family scripts can be altered. Transitional scripts are when families try out a new script by incorporating it into a new pattern of behaviour. This is a familiar script to children's and adult services that work with others to bring about change. However, families must be safe to change and try new ideas. Attachments between members must be secure enough for transitional scripts to develop and embed. Pre-existing tensions can cause difficulties, bringing an old script to the forefront again.

In systemic social work practice, change is facilitated by encouraging reflexivity or thinking about how beliefs and circular patterns of behaviour within families affect others. Enabling the expression of different viewpoints is a valuable tool for introducing change into the system, creating new possibilities for the future (Koglek and Wright, 2013).

## Social Graces

The systemic theory recognises that people are born into a constellation of stories and scripts, including political, economic and cultural, as well as personal, family and community commitments. Systemic practitioners use the 'Social Graces' framework to understand an individual's uniqueness, particularly to understand aspects of identity and power differentials between people or groups in society. The term was first arranged as 'disgraces' to highlight that inequalities such as racism, gender, age, class, and sexuality, for example, were 'disgraceful'. The 'dis' was dropped, and the social added demonstrates a wider application of these concepts to the community. Burnham and Roper-Hall (1992) Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (SG) use an acronym to list the different graces, which keeps growing. The acronym stands for gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation, and spirituality (Burnham, 2012).

## Problem-maintaining patterns and feedback loops

Any repetition of behaviour patterns can be traced to feedback loops within a system (Vetere & Dallos, 2003). This idea suggests that boundaries between people become rigid to disconnection (Minuchin, 1974). The consequence of this dynamic can lead to a perceived lack of emotional connectedness (Tickle et al., p.132, 2016) between individuals. Arguments

and disagreement develop patterns of recursive loops, where individuals repeat more of the same in the hope of finding a resolution. What inevitably happens is that the problem becomes embedded, and the individual's become stuck in applying the same solutions.

## First-order to Second-order

Developments in systemic family therapy in the 1980s saw a shift in thinking from a first-order (power) to a second-order (co-construction) perspective. The concept of objectivity was challenged; therapists were no longer considered objective observers – holding an expert position. They were encouraged to embrace an 'observing system' position. This perspective encourages the therapist to consider how they affect the system, such as the family or individual. For example, how aspects of identity, familial and societal contexts impact practice (Totsuka, p.87, 2014). Aspects of how my identity and position of power in this research project are considered in Chapter Four: Reflexivity.

## Attachment

Attachment theory is the psychosocial study of the making and maintaining of human relationships across the lifespan (Howe, 2011). The theory originates from Lorenz's work on forming parent-offspring relationships in geese, which was developed by Bowlby, in 1969, 1991, and 1962, with his colleague Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby and Ainsworth categorised infant

attachment behaviours into secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent styles. The attachment style of a child is known to be activated when the child experiences distress or fear. It can become deactivated or not depending on the response of the primary carer. The concept of separation anxiety is included in Bowlby's theory. In his view, excessive separation anxiety is due to adverse family experiences, such as repeated threats of abandonment or rejection by parents. Separation anxiety has also been associated with being a central risk factor underlying the development of anorexia and bulimia nervosa (Armstrong and Roth, 1989).

Bowlby (2012) theorised that these attachment styles inform relationships throughout the life cycle into adulthood (Williams, p. 2, 2022). In times of life cycle transition, for example, when a young person/adult leaves home to attend college, attachments within relationships are tested out. However, attachment relationships in adulthood differ from childhood because they tend to be bi-directional; both parties give and receive support (Williams, p.3, 2022). When young adults are distressed, they often enact attachment-seeking behaviours.

## Psychosocial Theory

Over the past 30 years, Psychosocial Studies have rapidly expanded as a field of research in the UK. Its focus is on understanding emotions and

using psychoanalytic concepts and principles to illuminate issues within the social sciences. Clarke & Hoggett (2009) contribute to developing new research methodologies, mainly focusing on practice-near research and the symbiotic dynamic between practice and research.

The new methodologies in social sciences encourage the use of Free Association, such as Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) (Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.32-34)) and Biographic Narrative Interview/Interpretation Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2008). These approaches offer a nuanced way to explore unconscious communications, intersubjectivity and defences in the research interview.

The presence of unconscious communication within the informed practice research environment is explored by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), who introduced the concept of the ‘defended subject’ in research studies. They propose that applying a psychosocial understanding of subjectivity to research practice involves conceptualising the researcher and the researched group as co-producers of meaning in the research relationship (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The notion of the defended subject indicates that people, researchers and the researched defend against anxieties consciously and unconsciously. Thus, to interpret the interviewee's responses, we should develop a method in which narratives are central. To understand the researcher's defendedness, the concept of reflexivity

encourages an analysis of blind spots and hot spots - what is noticed, why it is noticed and what is not noticed (see Chapter four: Reflexivity).

The BNIM in this research offered free association in sub-session one, where participants chose their narrative and were not led by the researcher. Sub-session begins with a single question (similar to free association) to begin a conversation. In sub-session two, more detail is asked about the participants' story. Contextual narratives always include participants drawing from historical, family, and interpersonal experiences. The researcher expects the use of defences, whether they are conscious and unconscious. It is the noticing of these defences which illuminates something painful or anxiety-provoking about the participant's experience.

## Chapter summary

This chapter introduced systemic and psychosocial theories used in the planning and the collecting of data, used in analysis and interpretation of data. It briefly covered theoretical concepts such as the systemic view and importance of context, hypothesising, circularity, curiosity, first and second order perspectives, alongside psychosocial concepts such as attachment, the defended subject and defensives. The next Chapter: Methodology will describe the aims, purpose and questions of this study.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter describes the aims, purpose and questions of interest for this study. It describes the subjective epistemology - Interpretivism and ontological positions to explain the inner and outer realities. The methodology uses a psychosocial position to understand the inner world of the 'psycho' and its relationship with the social or societal. The research design, data analysis, and ethical limitations are also discussed. This chapter offers some insight to the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic and how the methodology was modified to accommodate the effects of the pandemic. This chapter concludes by offering insight into the study's limitations and a summary.

## Research Aims, Purpose, and Research Questions

The motivation for this doctoral research stemmed from my working practice with US students studying abroad in the UK. As the university’s well-being practitioner, I worked with students who experienced personal difficulties. This research aimed to illuminate the range of participant experiences, focusing on the challenges and struggles participants defined after studying abroad for a semester.

This research aimed to:

- Describe the range of challenges and struggles participants experience while studying abroad
- Provide insight into participants' experiences of challenges and struggles during their study abroad semester
- Add knowledge of participants' challenges and struggles to the study abroad literature
- Inform study abroad programs of participant challenges and struggles to provide future support for study abroad students
- Offer insight into the challenges and struggles by applying a psychosocial lens to illuminate non-linear explanations for difficulties.

## Purpose

This exploratory study looked to begin a conversation about the personal challenges and struggles experienced by US students studying abroad in the UK. Unfortunately, due to the announcement of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, all participants were returned to the US in week eight of their fifteen-week semester. As a result, participants continued their studies virtually, learning online in US homes. This study, therefore, captured participants' views after studying abroad for a shorter time and after leaving suddenly under unprecedented circumstances due to Covid-19.

Once all the students had returned to the US I began to consider how I was going to be able to carry out my research project. With no students now present and with some frantic emotions, I quickly mobilised amending the UK and US ethical board applications. Once the applications had been

made, I re-considered my sampling method, and approached twenty students who had mentioned before they had returned to the US that they would like to take part in the research and would be happy to receive an invitation from me.

## Modifications to methodology

The emergence of Covid-19 and the return of students back to the US resulted in modifications to the research plan. For example; further applications to the US and UK research ethics boards were made changing face to face interviews to Zoom interviews. These changes were to become pivotal in the research being continued. Changes to possible ethical dilemmas involved different time zones between the US and UK, the management of the emotional safety of the participants and more practical issues of storage of interview data, and use of video-conferencing software.

Additional research implications such as if it would still be possible to observe psychoanalytic concepts such as transference and countertransference or would this be interrupted via a virtual interview. The reduced visibility of participants body language would possibly influence what could be observed, the unknown impact of changing the modality from face to face to virtual was a concern. However, a virtual seminar with Tom Wengraf at the Tavistock and Portman in London, confirmed the presence of

psychoanalytic concepts when he examined an excerpt of an interview of the research.

Another modification brought about due to the early return of the participants was to only use two of the possible three interview sub-sessions to carry out participant interviews. The aim of the third session is for participants to have an opportunity to talk about anything they felt they wished to cover that they were unable to cover or had forgotten to talk about during sub-sessions, one and two. The possible effects of not including the third sub-session has lost an opportunity to capture a free formatted script, which would have included more information about their lived experiences abroad. That said, the rationale of not including a third session which would have been scheduled a few weeks after the first interview, was due to the availability of participants and more so about the uncertainty of the impact of Covid-19 on participants and their families. The general global uncertainty at the time influenced my decision-making at this time. It was impossible to gauge if the participants were directly or indirectly impacted by the pandemic.

This research proposed to add practice-near (Cooper, 2014) knowledge about participant challenges and struggles experienced to the study abroad literature. This research focused on stories of life events within a frame of difficulties experienced while studying abroad.

This research aims to inform US study providers, educators within study abroad, parents of students and future students. In addition, it is imperative for study abroad administrators, and student support staff to understand the nuanced intricacies students experience abroad.

**Research question**

*How do American undergraduate students narrate the range of challenges and struggles experienced while studying abroad?*

The research question evolved from working intimately with students as a wellbeing practitioner [social worker] at a study abroad campus in the UK. Working closely with students revealed various challenges and struggles students experienced abroad, and some experiences are documented within the study abroad literature. For example, Hunley's (2010) increased loneliness and psychological distress; Pedersen et al. (2011) negative adjustment measures social interaction, homesickness/feeling out of place; Poyrazli & Mitchell (2020) sleeping and eating problems, irritability and anxiety and McCabe (2005) factors that contribute to mental health issues - loss and separation, culture shock, pre-existing or dominate conditions, changes in medication. However, other difficulties were undocumented and were used as a gateway to speak about biographical and historical problems that affected their abroad experience.

Three sub-questions (Creswell, 2018) underpinned the central research question. These supplementary questions included aspects of psychosocial intersections that affected the participant's study abroad experiences. For instance: Participant biographical narratives aimed to capture and expose the depth of difficulties, how participants spoke about these difficulties and how psychosocial factors influenced their experiences.

Sub questions

- What difficulties do participants describe?
- How does studying abroad impact the emotional state?
- What contextual influences impact the study abroad experience?

Students often refer to their mental ill-health during therapeutic sessions. However, the absence of their usual coping strategies, such as university counselling or family and friends, contributed to their uncertainties and manifested as anxiety - how would they manage conflicting and unexpected difficulties abroad? In addition, students come abroad with a fantasy of how studying abroad should be [in the mind] (Armstrong, 2005). When things unfolded differently abroad, this caused students varying levels of distress.

Student narratives included their internal and external representations of the study abroad experience. Internal representations of how studying abroad should be [the fantasy - in their mind], external representations [the reality - how they experienced it]. Interestingly, students revealed a third position

which said something about envy towards their peers whom they believed had the idealistic experiences [in the mind] experiences they longed for abroad. Participants' internal representations of how studying abroad should be and their envy of others' experiences suppressed and isolated them from talking about their difficulties.

Students openly shared positive experiences and experiential learning opportunities and overlooked negative experiences. As a well-being practitioner, I listened to students' unwanted experiences, which gave me insight into students opposing narratives. The well-being sessions were a place where students would openly share their difficulties. However, outside of the well-being sessions and safe space, students used a uniform response to questions about how they were enjoying their time abroad. The research question aimed to ask students about their challenges and struggles, normalise these experiences, and invite them to share their difficulties anonymously. Please see the paragraph on Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM): Single Question to Induce Narrative (SQUIN) – Pilot, p 6).

I was interested in hearing students' stories of a particular time in their lives, studying abroad. I wanted to learn more about their use of conscious and unconscious defences when things unfolded as they had not expected. The research question wanted to explore students' defences, and one defence

was censoring their experiences, especially their difficulties. To overcome internal conflicts, students would manufacture idealistic responses to questions about how they enjoyed their time abroad. Often their responses were consciously defended, saying ‘Yes, I’m having a wonderful time’ when they were experiencing difficulties or contemplating returning home. Recognising students’ defences intrigued me, and I became interested in other defences used and how defences revealed something different about them. The psychosocial approach would illuminate another edge to the student's experience. The importance of capturing the Gestalt using the BNIM would assist in sharing the person's lived experience.

## Epistemology and Ontology position

My underlying research philosophy used a subjective epistemology - Interpretivism. I was close to the research topic and had insider knowledge of the difficulty’s students experienced abroad. An interpretivist position fits the aims of this research project as it understands social reality as a ‘product of its inhabitants' (Blaikie, 2009, p.99) and is well-suited to exploring reasons behind complex, interrelated, or multifaceted group processes such as the lived experiences of students studying abroad. Furthermore, I wanted to explore the multiple and diverse interpretations of participant experiences rather than seeking a single truth (Guba, 1990). This perspective is also associated with gathering in-depth accounts to build

a detailed picture of how a particular phenomenon [student struggles] is understood by those who have personal experience.

An Interpretivist epistemology [study of knowledge] and how knowledge is created is supported by answering the research and sub-questions using lived experience expressed through student voices (Flynn, 2014a, p.40). Adopting an interpretivist epistemology encompasses acknowledging my biases and multiple identities (practitioner, researcher, staff member, doctoral student). Locating myself in this research project encouraged meanings and interpretations that supplied a solid ground for knowledge (Vandamme, 2021).

An interpretivist ontology [study of being] (Crotty, 1998, p.10) and how reality is subjective and changing supported and underpinned the foundations of this research project. Participants' lived experiences can be understood within a moving subjective frame of time and space, interpreted, and experienced by the person. Reality is related to how individuals experience their world at any given time (Moon and Blackman, 2014). Student difficulties were the students’ reality experienced during their semester abroad (time) and in a different culture (place).

## Psychosocial position

In their book *Researching Beneath the Surface*, Simon Clarke and Paul Hoggett (2009) explored the emergence of psychosocial studies, which used psychoanalytic concepts and principles to illuminate core issues within social sciences and in empirical research and theory building. The psychosocial approach to research has developed methodologies such as free association and biographic interview methods. Basic psychoanalytic concepts inform the psychosocial approach. BNIM research method allows both the inner world dynamics of the ‘psycho’ and the outworld of the societal to be expressed, detected, and psycho-societally interpreted (Wengraf, 2019).

Hollway and Jefferson’s book, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2011), presents a psychoanalytically informed model of qualitative research suitable to explore the subjective and anxiety-provoking nature of study-abroad students' unwanted and expected challenges while studying abroad (Midgley and Holmes, 2018). This research project used the basic psychoanalytic principles of the defended subject by eliciting and paying attention to unconscious communications, dynamics, and defences (Russell, 2015) to help make sense of the emotional dimensions of the research interviews (Bondi, 2014). The emphasis here is on the storyteller, particularly the story told, the manner and detail, and the points emphasised (Reghintovschi, 2018). Psychoanalytically informed research is interested in

and parallels with the analyst and the analysand situation where the therapist shares their observations with the client.

Further developments in psychosocial studies by Hollway and Jefferson (2011) introduced the idea of a Gestalt (a whole which is more than the sum of its parts). This idea encompasses the participant's hidden aspects that make them up as a person. Unfortunately, when we are interested in gaining an understanding, this can become hijacked by researchers' biases, only pursuing their research interests. Therefore, inadvertently missing information that makes up that person. Therefore, the biographic-interpretative method's main theoretical principle is not the defended subject but the idea that there is a Gestalt (Hollway and Jefferson, p. 9, 2011).

The research aimed to hear the participant's voices (Peta et al., 201) and wanted to hear about their challenges and struggles during their semester abroad. A psychosocial approach would help understand the participant as 'psychosocial, bringing together the psycho (individual) and the social (their experience). Hollway (2015) suggested that psychosocial as an ontology and epistemology could stand alone away from traditional psychosocial research associated with critical realism (McEvoy & Richards, 2006). This psychosocial position not only brings together individual and societal

realities but it emphasises the complex interplay between the researcher, participant and the researched (Hollway, 2015).

I was interested in examining myself and my emotional response to hearing about participants' difficulties during this research. Hollway and Jefferson (2016, p166) acknowledged the researcher's biography and how their position guides their orientation. They explained that ‘the emotional experience requires reflection…multiple opportunities to reflect on and write down the emotional effects of the research on the researcher's (see Chapter four: Reflexivity, p. 17).

The psychosocial approach uses a psychoanalytic epistemology, which helped develop my insight as a new researcher. For example, the psychoanalytic terms transference and countertransference (Freud, 1905a) contributed to my understanding of the unconscious intersubjective dynamics between myself and the participant (Duncan & Elias, 2021). Freud proposed that transference is a projection onto another of another’s internal models derived from feelings, images and experiences of previous significant people (Freud, 1905a).

Gadd and Jefferson (2007) clarified the term psychosocial – ‘conceptualising human subjects as the products of their unique psychic worlds and a shared social world’. Therefore, I chose to adopt a

psychosocial position to support the participant's experience within similar shared systems, such as the American study abroad education system and culture.

## BNIM: An Introduction

The biographic narrative interview interpretative method (BNIM) focuses on the narrative expression of the biographic subject situated in a social culture (American study abroad) and a historical period (study abroad semester). BNIM promotes the in-interview expression of lived experience, allowing personal and societal expression to be expressed, detected, and psycho-societally interpreted (Wengraf, 2019).

The BNIM is interested in the participant narration of all or part of a life story. It is not about the story's accuracy, but as Hollway and Jefferson (2011) comment, it is about ‘the stories being a means to understand our subjects better’. BNIM is centred upon concern for three aspects of humanity: the individual’s life story (biography), how the individual says that story (narrative), and the social interpretation (interpretative) (Corbally & O’Neill, 2014).

This method develops an understanding of the participant's storytelling, for example, what is said, how it is said and some historically evolving

psycho-societal reality/period/situation through which they have lived. In addition, the BNIM requires the researcher to be aware of the narrator's conflictedness, defensiveness, and persuasiveness as they are "subjectively situated in the interview (Wengraf, 2019). The researcher's awareness of what and how stories are told conceptualises a co-production of meanings during the interview. This was particularly pertinent during interviews as I had previous relationships with participants.

The BNIM involves three sub-session interviews. The interview's first part opens with a carefully designed open narrative question, referred to as the Single Question to Induce Narrative (SQUIN). The question refers to 'please tell me your story. The researcher does not interrupt, challenge, or comment as participants tell their stories. Instead, the researcher makes notes of cue phrases used by the participant to tell their story. Phrases are revisited in the second sub-session interview, and participants are asked to say a bit more about them. Again, Wengraf refers to asking more about cue phrases, pushing only for details of particular incidents or PINS (Particular Incident Narratives) (Wengraf, 2019). Unfortunately, sub-session three was not included in this research; the availability of participants and the uncertainty and impact of Covid-19 in the US (May 2020) compromised participants' access.

I used the BNIM as an interview method for these main reasons. It enabled participants' inner and outer world realities to be researched, which illuminated a psycho-societal understanding of participants' lived experiences (Wengraf, 2019).

The BNIM captured the expressions of narratives which gives insight into the situatedness and defended subjectivities of the participants competing against the strong positive narrative of studying abroad.

A power differential between myself and the participant would have influenced the participants' answers to questions by the interviewer. I wanted the participant to talk about what felt important to them. Thus, the single opening questioning or SQUIN would support the participant in sharing what they wanted to share and not what I wanted to hear. Finally, my awareness of participants during the interviews and attunement meant that they revealed more of themselves and became noticeable regardless of their attempts to hide them.

BNIM: Single Question to Induce Narrative (SQUIN) – Pilot

My insider experiences outside the well-being room drew me to a research method that would be sensitive to my emotional response and my defendedness as a researcher. An awareness of my anxieties about how

participants would answer the research question meant that I was worried about the strict and specific language used in Wengraf's (2001) SQUIN. I wanted to see if young Americans would be sensitive to the language or if participants would enter a familiar rehearsed script offering a standardised answer saying, ‘Yes, study abroad is amazing’.

I piloted my original BNIM SQUIN (see below) and asked fifteen students who had used the well-being resource how they would answer the single partial question proposed by Wengraf (2001). The question followed the format suggested by Wengraf (2001). I asked,

*'As you know, I am researching students who study abroad. Please tell me about all the **experiences** and **events** which were important to you, personally. Start wherever you like… I will listen first. I will not interrupt’.*

Students appeared confused and suspicious of the question. However, they were answering a question posed by a university staff member and answered in a way aligned with the positive aspects of studying abroad education (Lansing & Farnum, 2017). The students told me how they enjoyed their experience and were grateful for the opportunity. They described the study abroad programme, class subjects, experiential learning outside of the classroom, the new city, and planned trips to Europe. All responses seemed positive and genuine, albeit typical responses to the question. However, I sensed their answers were influenced by what they thought I wanted and expected to hear; therefore, their responses appeared slightly performative. In addition, I was conscious of the interviewer effect (Denscombe, 2007).

My thinking revealed my own defended position. I piloted the single opening question advised by Wengraf and adjusted the question to ensure the defended participant would reveal their difficulties. I had an emotional response to something that had not yet happened. I was fearful of participants not revealing their difficulties. I defended myself against these anxieties by changing the SQUIN (Clarke & Hoggett, p21, 2009). I asked students if the question asked about challenges and struggles, and if their responses were anonymous, would it influence their responses. All fifteen students changed their responses and offered deeper narratives, including difficulties in mental health and interpersonal relationships. Participants offered a rationale for the change in their response, saying they would not confidently tell anyone their truth about experiencing difficulties. Students said they only posted (social media) their best selves and nothing else. It was this insider knowledge that influenced my decision to change the SQUIN. The researcher's position influenced the research, which influenced the research process and outcome (Buckner, 2006).

Students refrained from sharing their difficulties. Their reluctance seemed related to having a privileged opportunity to study abroad. This opportunity was expensive (approx. $48,580), and emotions of embarrassment when they had their difficulties brought about shame, which was experienced as personal weakness. Students engaged in defence mechanisms such as denial or splitting (Youell, et al 2006) to cope with their cognitive dissonance.

BNIM: Modified SQUIN

I modified the SQUIN by changing two words to assist participants in sharing sensitive lived experiences, struggles, and challenges (Hesketh, 2014, Froggett, 2017).

*'As you know, I am researching the challenges of students who study abroad. Please tell me about all of the **challenges** and **struggles** which were important to you….'*

Hollway and Jefferson (2012) recognised the anxieties present in the research interview setting, recognising the encounter was between two anxious defended subjects. After piloting the SQUIN, I made a note of my fears of the participants skipping or minimising their difficulties in my reflexive notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) if I asked about experiences and events. Acknowledging my anxieties allowed me to consider a parallel process to include the emotions of the participants – the interviewer-interviewee interactions (Buckner, 2016) and how important trust was in the research process.

Participants had previously experienced containment in our earlier relationship during the well-being sessions. This may have functioned as a bridge to support the participant in telling their story within the biographic-narrative interview. I felt attuned to the usefulness of reverie

when considering (Midgley & Holmes, 2018) the intersubjectivity between internal role confusion and the transition between practitioner and researcher. A gut feeling to change the SQUIN was to choose relevant criteria within the participants' narrative (Hesketh, 2014, 2019., Farrier et al., 2019).

I used psychoanalytic concepts to understand the experiences of the participants and my own experiences during the interviews (see on Chapter: Reflexivity). Concepts such as transference-countertransference, projection, splitting, recognition, and containment (Auestad, 2011; Duncan & Elias, 2021; Klein, 1946; Midgley & Holmes, 2018; Smith, 2010) allowed me to use a deeper level of analysis. For example, how did my presence influence their narrative? Their perception of me, my perception of them and how this created an intersubjective encounter (Saville & Frosh, p.201). I rationalised the changing of the SQUIN by recognising a second order principle of systems theory (Ochs et al., 2020) that was part of a fluid and interacting system.

BNIM: producing data

The interview method focused on the elicitation of storytelling; the narrative of participants lived experiences. The biographic interview captures an individual's life story or a specific life event: the specific life event being a four-month study abroad semester. As a psycho-societal method, BNIM takes a qualitative narrative approach and assumes that individuals

construct meaning in their lives through narrative (Wengraf, 2010). Wallace, 2018), disabled women (Peta et al., 2019), Kjetil Moen (2018) exploring questions of death and dying, women with breast cancer (Aydin et al., 2012), fathers with testicular cancer (Russell, 2015), life stories of the economic recession (Flynn, 2018). Other research studies have altered the BNIM by changing the SQUIN design to enable participants to respond according to their age, stage of cognitive development (Hesketh, 2014) and awareness of power differentials within institutions (Froggett, 2007). Finally, I was mindful of how students viewed me, potentially as an expert and a person in a position of power. I wanted to use a method to support separation from my therapeutic role at the university to a researcher role.

This interview method looks to understand the inner world of the participants within a particular context [study abroad] situated in a broader social context [American education and culture]. This method illuminates conscious anxieties and unconscious cultural and societal tendencies (Wengraf, 2001). Furthermore, the in-interview expression of lived experience would enable the personal and societal to be expressed, detected, and psycho-societally interpreted (Stamenova & Hinshelwood, p.212, 2018). My familiarity with student challenges and struggles and their use of defences underpinned the BNIM interview technique rationalisation. Therefore, the BNIM interview was essential to reveal the participant's defended narrative and fit the study's aim.

## BNIM: Data analysis method and techniques

BNIM data analysis uses case-interpretation protocols (Jones, 2006; Wengraf, 2018). However, this research used a non-BNIM interpretative technique after generating data through BNIM interviews. So, while the BNIM interviewing techniques were used in this study, the BNIM data analysis was not used (Peta et al., 2019).

## Data Analysis

The process of making meaning and analysing data occurred using three strategies and conjunctions. These included regular doctoral tutorials, doctoral supervision, and informal ethnographic professional immersive (Cooper, 2018, p231) observations during and following the research interviews and reading, listening and watching interview recordings. Importantly, analysis of data used particular ‘capacities of mind’ to make sense of the unconscious processes illuminated within the psychosocial interview method. It is the focus upon these unconscious processes using clinically similar derived methods, such as ‘Free association’ which aligns with sub-session one that are of interest and which frames this research project.

## Doctoral tutorials

Bi-weekly tutorials with the same year doctoral colleagues allowed me to present extracts of interview data, either in written or in audio form to read and think together and discuss our observations and interpretations using systemic and psychoanalytic theory and concepts. The context of the tutorial aimed to align social work doctoral students and use many of the principles of the psychosocial approach in qualitative research. This tutorial of several trained minds supplemented (Cooper, p248, 2018) and supported my individual data-analytic efforts. This group paid attention to what and how participants told their story and how by hearing these stories how they experienced what they heard. This aimed to acknowledge what might be being said, language being used (Freud, 1915e) and especially what was happening at an unconscious level. The interpretative process used concepts or theory to assist to make meaning of the data because the data fitted to the theory. The data lead the way to the selected theory not vice versa (Cooper, 2018, p229).

## Supervision

Monthly supervision with my first and second supervisors continued to support psychoanalytic and psychosocial theoretical concepts to discuss extracts of interview data and to interpret participant told stories. This provided support for an iterative process which spoke to theoretical concepts and similarities with data. A key supervisory suggestion was to

include the use of systemic family therapy concepts and theory in my analysis and combine this with a psychosocial analysis. This thinking is represented in Chapter two – Systemic and Psychosocial Theory.

## Individual analysis

Personal ongoing reflection and self-reflexivity (Chapter Four: Reflexivity, incorporating systemic and psychoanalytic theory was used to make sense of my research experience and the participants' interview data. The use of the above two conjunctions supported and supplemented the analysis of the findings throughout and indirectly aided the creation of formal themes. Themes were created following a lengthy iterative process of reading, re-reading, listening and watching recorded interviews, and supplementary collective discussions within tutorial groups and during supervision. Themes emerged from the content of the interview and were particularly shaped by surface and deeper narratives (*see Patterns in Narratives - surface and deeper narratives*).

## Video-Calling interviews

The international context of the study abroad meant that videoconferencing was a familiar communication tool for the participants. Participants are known as Generation Z, born between 2000 – 2010 and are considered individuals born into a world of peak technological innovation with an

abundance of information at their fingertips. Their Gen Z identity supplemented this interview method. The fast acceptance of social media (Pew Research Centre, 2017) choosing to use video conferencing did not seem to negatively impact participants' willingness to participate in this research, especially when discussing sensitive issues (Sipes, Roberts, & Mullan, 2019; Seitz, 2016).

Participants appeared comfortable speaking about their first-hand experiences. One participant [Edward] stopped the interview after speaking about a profound emotional issue, left the room, and returned when he felt able to. This action suggests that leaving and returning to a virtual meeting may have been less intimidating than leaving an in-person interview.

## Benefits of video calling

Zoom video conferencing interviews replaced face-to-face interviews. Archibald (2019) suggests that the benefits of using Zoom for data collection significantly outweigh the challenges. First, participants took part while at their homes in the US. This also meant no travelling costs (Get al.t al 2020). Participants took part in the interviews from their bedrooms on their MacBook. Interviewing participants over zoom suggested that this flexible approach, where the participants did not have to leave their own homes, may have strengthened them to turn up and participate. Cabaroglu et al. (2013) compared face-to-face versus online video conferencing

interviews and found that the quality of the interviews did not differ from face-to-face interviews (Cabaroglu, Basaran, & Roberts, 2010; Deakin & Wakefield, 2013) and found that online participants were more open and expressive (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Mabragaña et al., 2013).

Zoom interviews were video recorded and offered visual and audio recordings. Both types of recordings offered a way to watch, re-watch, listen, and re-listen to each interview. This modified nuanced interview design meant that the recordings provided 1) a video of the interview where the camera would focus on the person speaking, 2) a video of the interview where both the researcher and participant were viewed side by side on the screen, and 3) an audio recording. In addition, the Zoom software allowed for the observation of both the interviewer and the participant, forming a 360-degree perspective of the interview. This added perspective-certified non-verbal communication, such as eye closing, looking away from the camera or staring into space during the narrative telling. In addition, aspects of psychoanalytic thinking using concepts such as transference and countertransference were matched with the researcher's field notes to assist with data analysis. This enabled an analysis of emotional and non-verbal cues, transference and countertransference between the participant and the interviewer.

Zoom software transcribed the interview data. Data was reorganised manually, grammatical mistakes were corrected, and arranged in narrative order for each participant. Interviews were visually recorded, allowing for analysis to include verbal and non-verbal communication observations. The above-mixed data presentations – video, audio and script were watched and read multiple times, and all forms of the above data extracts were analysed using different mediums. BNIM data can be analysed to illuminate conscious anxieties and unconscious cultural, societal, and historical tendencies (Stamenova and Hinshelwood, 2018).

## Limitations of video calling

One limitation of using Zoom was the restrictive visual element of only being able to see some participants within a small frame, head, and shoulders. During one interview, the participant showed only their head with their MacBook positioned on their chest while lying down. I refrained from asking them to sit up or change their position so I could see more of them. This would have been intrusive. This could be perceived as a limited opportunity to observe the participant's nonverbal communications; however, their limited exposure may have been communicating something.

Paul Watzlawick's axiom, 'One cannot not communicate' suggests that everything we do is a message. "Activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot

not respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating" (Watzlawick & Beavin, 1967, p.4).

The internet connection sometimes dropped in and out and created delayed connectivity in some conversations, sometimes longer pauses and poor audio. The full view of participants was restricted, and therefore the inability to read non-verbal cues because of inconsistent and delayed connectivity (Weller, 2015). That said, all participants kept their cameras on throughout their interviews.

Thematic analysis using a psychosocial lens was used to analyse the data. A recursive process moved back and forth between the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a six-phase guide to qualitative analysis (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2:** Six Phases of Thematic Analysis

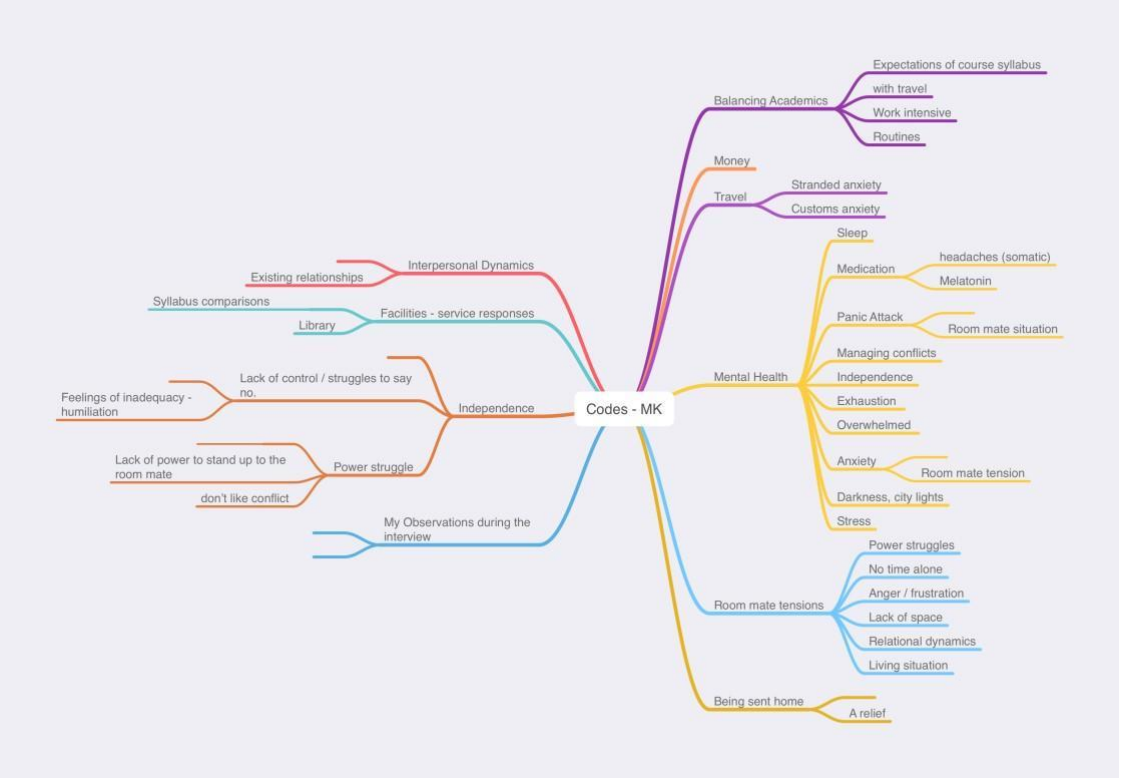
| | Phase | Description of the process |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Become familiar with the data set | This begins with transcribing the data, reading and rereading the data and reflexive field notes, and writing down any notions that come to mind. |
| 2 | Generate initial codes | Code interesting data features methodically across the entire set, organising data relevant to each code. |
| 3 | Search for themes | Organising codes into possible themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| 4 | Review the themes | Check if the themes work in correspondence to the coded extracts (in phase 1) and the entire set (in phase 2) to generate a thematic map of analysis. |
| 5 | Define and name themes | Continue analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the complete story the analysis reveals to generate clear definitions and labels for each theme. |
| 6 | Producing the report | The final chance for analysis. This is the selection of vivid, captivating extract examples and the final analysis of selected extracts relating to the literature and research questions, producing a report of the analysis. |

Note. Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p35).

Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase analysis guidelines focus on the data's immersion, familiarity, depth, and breadth. The process of active reading and making notes are prerequisites to forming themes. The search for latent (interpretative) or semantic (explicit) layers informed data reading. For

example, cue words are used within the BNIM to illustrate participant narrative; latent layers reach below the surface of what is being said in words, intonations, expressions, non-verbal communication, conflictedness, contradictions and subjectivities.

Figure 1: An example of phase two. Generate initial codes of a participant, Michelle




The progression of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021) meant the original research questions evolved as progress with codes and themes unfolded. As a result, an inductive approach analysed the data and coded participant narratives.

Two sub-session interviews were conducted for each of the eight participants; therefore, sixteen interviews were undertaken. First, interviews were analysed using sub-session one and two separately, and then the data was merged. As a result, pen portraits were developed to represent the

participant's Gestalt, the whole person, not just fragmented data excerpts showing parts of their narrations.

## BNIM Critique

Critics of BNIM (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Bornat, 2008) criticise the BNIM process. For example, Bornat in her discussion between BNIM and oral history and narrative analysis, Bornat suggests using a SQUIN to begin every interview and then allowing the participant to answer without interruption; the 'dialogic possibilities' are lost. I noticed this effect during Caroline's and Sandra's interviews. I noticed an absence of their struggles from their narrative. We had previously talked about their difficulties in my role as the well-being practitioner, so I had 'a prior' knowledge of their experiences. An interactive process in the interview could have raised this consciousness by offering the participant awareness of agency (Tonkin, 1992).

Whilst the BNIM interviews did elicit rich data about participants' struggles, such as depression, anxiety and enmeshed relationships, the pushing for PINS during sub-session two felt intrusive and potentially unethical if pursued (Ross & Moore, 2016). This raised questions for me as a researcher, interviewing young adults who were situated in the US, and my inability to contain their emotions in my role as a researcher. As a result, I chose not to push all participants to the extent the BNIM process requires,

and therefore access to the subjective experiences of challenges and struggles may have been denied.

BNIM presented challenges as well as opportunities for me as a new researcher. However, there were genuine benefits. It supported my intention to move away from my role as a well-being practitioner to adopt a nuanced interview rhythm. For example, in sub-session one, the BNIM interview allowed participants to choose their starting point and, therefore, select what to highlight and set the agenda for the interview (Ross & Moore, 2016).

## Research Design

My research question introduced ‘a priori’ [from before] assumptions to the research: which said Participants are likely to have experienced challenges and struggles.  Challenges and struggles have limited representation in the research literature and therefore the way participants communicate their challenges and struggles is of interest and how the participants 'manage' them is connected to how they communicate them (Cooper, 2014).

A deductive approach requires a testable hypothesis and would begin to include ways of proving these assumptions. My awareness of an internal bias drew me towards using an inductive approach. This approach would gather participants' data and let it speak for itself. I wanted to create a

boundary between my preconceived ideas and letting the data speak. This aligned with my research interpretivist philosophy: the data will provide meaning through interpretive analysis further framed using systemic and psychoanalytic theoretical concepts (Trafford and Leshem, 2008).

Research strategy: multiple case studies

Case studies were used for two primary purposes: explanatory and descriptive (Yin 2017). Creswell (2013) defines the case study as an in-depth inquiry of one or multiple bounded system(s) that are "rounded by time and place" (p.97) and to clarify a situation where information is scarce Quintao and Andrade (2020). In addition, the case study would overcome the limitations of fragmenting qualitative data by using both excerpts and a holistic narrative within the same presentation (Hollway and Jefferson, 2011).

There is no ideal number for multiple cases in research, but there are recommendations. For example, Crabtree and Miller (1992) suggest a sample size of six to eight subjects, and Eisenhardt (1989, p.545) believes that between four and ten cases often are sufficient. However, evidence from multiple cases would produce rich data which can help to illuminate the research topic and question. In addition, a cross-case study analysis can help to understand differences and similarities among several cases, within and across situations (Stake, 2005).

I wanted to use an interview method that would be sensitive to the power dynamics between myself and the students and reveal unspoken narratives and defendedness. This interview method would consider the whole person's narrative: The Gestalt. An interview method such as the BNIM (Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method) (Wengraf, 2018) illuminated students' internal realities and allowed them to tell their stories and socially situated experiences and situations. I recognised participants might be "defended subjects" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Defended as they were situated within a broader study abroad narrative, i.e., how others experience study abroad and how they think they should experience it. The complexity of their experience was often verbalised by non-descriptive binary terms, such as good or bad experiences. The psychosocial approach aims to connect the psychological and social contexts to reveal an in-depth appreciation.

## Sampling strategy

I initially approached the whole Spring semester student cohort (270 students) via their university email, asking them to express an interest in taking part in a doctoral research study during week six of their 15-week semester. I informed potential participants of the interview schedule which was planned for week thirteen of the semester. I received no replies. I assumed the absence of responses was related to the rumours of the looming truncation of the program. I modified my sampling process by purposefully inviting students who had used the health and wellbeing

resources during the semester. The central research question asked about student challenges and struggles, this research was interested in hearing their story, in their own words. Unfortunately, in March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the Covid-19 pandemic, and in week eight of the semester (March 2020), the program was suspended, and all students were returned to the US.

Before their departure, twenty potential participants had shown an interest in participating. In May 2020, two months after the students had returned to the US, I emailed twenty participants, and eight agreed to participate.

In purposeful sampling, a researcher chooses a subgroup within another larger group of people with predetermined characteristics (Babbie, 2004). Hays and Singh (2012) purported that sampling should be purposive for the phenomenon being investigated and adequate to ‘gain a depth of understanding about a topic area rather than the breadth’ (pp. 172–173).

Before being interviewed, all eight participants said they had experienced difficulties abroad (Midgley & Holmes, 2018, as cited in Stamenova and Hinshelwood, 2018). The selection of participants was purposeful, "thereby the researcher selects participants based on the 'purpose of the study' (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 204) to help others to understand the study phenomenon (Creswell, 2005). This sampling allowed the selection of

‘people… whom can best help us understand our phenomenon to develop a detailed understanding that might provide 'useful' information' that might help people learn' about the phenomenon, [or] that might give voice in interviews, enable rich data to be gathered and offer a unique insight into the unheard voices of students.

The re-approval from UK and US ethical applications meant in-person face-to face interviews were changed to video face-to-face interviews, allowing interviews in different countries. However, this modification brought added considerations:  Participants would now be situated three and a half thousand miles away with a minus five to minus six-hour time difference to Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). The planning and times of the interviews allowed for the time differences.

Access to participants

The director of the study abroad school and the US director of study abroad permitted access to participants via their university email. Syracuse University Institutional Review Board granted institutional Review Board (IRB) on the 30th of April 2020. approval (see Appendix C). I found students who met the inclusion criteria as I had access to all student health and well-being data studying that semester (see Appendix four for inclusion and exclusion criteria)

## Participants

Participants were recruited from a two-hundred-and-seventy student cohort registered to study abroad in the UK for the spring semester of 2020. All participants were American undergraduates studying abroad at the same US university. Eight participants between 20 and 21 years old volunteered to participate. All eight had met me before the research and had accessed the well-being service while abroad. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) recommend using up to six participants to seek a deeper understanding and reflexive description of experiences.  After interviewing eight participants, I chose only to use six of the participants' interviews.

## Participants motivation to participate

I chose to use a purposeful sample and contacted students who had used the health and wellbeing resource. I emailed twenty students. These students had approached me during the semester, and had verbally expressed an interest in taking part in the research. At this time, I remember feeling grateful to the students and believing at the time and afterwards, it was an act of goodwill on them, to ensure I would have participants to interview especially in the uncertain context due to the emergence of Covid-19. Equally, all the students were interested in sharing their lived experiences, especially their challenges and struggles. It appeared both were possible reasons to take part.

## Alternative method considerations

Before using the BNIM, I considered alternative methods to interviewing. I considered devising and emailing a mixed method, qualitative and quantitative, questionnaire targeting the entire 270 study abroad cohort. However, I decided against this, as students in university settings are often asked to complete feedback questionnaires about study experiences. The context of these questionnaires is like consumer feedback questionnaires and are prominent in US higher educational institutions answered within this context. I wanted to assure participants that this research was separate from the university. I had a passion for supporting participants in speaking about their difficulties. I considered a practice-near approach because of my earlier conversations as a well-being practitioner (Cooper, 2009; Archard, 2020). It seemed important to create a boundary between the research project and the university. Electronic questionnaires would not have, 1) created separateness from the institution due to the use of their university email account, or 2) had the intimacy for defended experiences to emerge.

An alternative option would have been Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.36) Free Association Narrative Interview – FANI, a psychosocial approach used to research defended participants.

BNIM instead of FANI

Firstly, I wanted to begin the interview with a single question used to induce narrative (SQUIN) (see above for rationale). The SQUIN asked for a unified story of the whole person over the specified event (study abroad). This differs from FANI questions, where they push for interviewer categorisations of relevant-to-researcher by asking a multiplicity of six/seven opening questions.

Secondly, the formulation of questions of BNIM in sub-session two asked, 'Do you remember a particular… How it all happened', while FANI asks, 'Can you tell me about it? Can you think of something? This allows a present-time perspective on past events (Wengraf, 2020). BNIM aims to situate the person in the memory of the event to revive and relive past lived experiences.

Thirdly, the formulaic structure of sub-session two questions in BNIM deliberately prevents a dialogue between interviewee and interviewer from slipping into a therapeutic conversation. Given my primary role as a therapeutic practitioner, this structure supported me as a new researcher.

The BNIM interview method would distance me from my original thinking as a systemic counsellor – hypothesising and adopting a relational intersubjective dance with participants (Barbetta & Telfener, 2021). This

data collection method uses free association and a formulaic tight questioning sequence in the interview(s). This method aided my transition from systemic practitioner to a new researcher.

I wanted a research approach to illuminate the complexities of student experiences, ambivalences, and contradictions. Further curiosity arose from students' disclosures before the research project that they would mislead others if asked how their study abroad experience by censoring challenges and struggles. Their experiences felt oppressed within a bigger system of actors/players in the study abroad and societal ideologies – i.e., American idealism. I aimed to unify the personal and the social to illuminate underrepresented narratives of student experiences of difficulties while studying abroad.

I considered using semi-structured interviews, but I was concerned the questions would be biassed towards what I felt was relevant instead of what the participants wanted me to ask and what they wanted to share. The power difference between myself and the participants was a huge consideration throughout this research. I felt the presence of a power dynamic between myself, a senior staff member and a perceived 'expert' on student well-being and the participant. This power differential was also related to an earlier working relationship with students as their well-being practitioners. I already had privileged information about them and felt attuned to them. An interviewer effect (Denscombe, 2007) would mean that

participants may share what they thought I expected to hear. Despite this, some participants' narratives differed from my recollection of how they presented their difficulties abroad.

I considered using an ethnographic approach. My position at the university meant I had multiple opportunities to observe students and build trust with them to disclose information. However, this approach would have been unethical. It would not be easy to separate my work from my research role. I chose not to pursue this approach as I wanted to use a systematic approach which supported the research process. Working within the university strengthened the authenticity of this research project by being able to reflect a holistic picture of the student's lived experiences (Fetterman, 1989) to me before the interviews began. In addition, the core ethical guidelines were documented in (Appendix B - Consent Form).

## Limitations

Despite attending a two-day BNIM training course with Tom Wengraf in 2019 in London, my questioning appeared stunted using the formulaic language advised in BNIM. I felt uncomfortable using it. I wondered if participants noticed. I wondered if Participants were reluctant to share experiences which did not align with the positive narratives often displayed in study abroad advertising literature and student social media accounts. Sometimes personal narratives go against societal meta-narratives

(Corbally et al., 2014) and are influenced by an organisational narrative (Buckner, 2005) supporting an ideal. This research used a psychosocial approach to capture complex participant psychological and social experiences, which are inseparable concepts and include past and current influencing dynamics, representing a holistic picture of the individual.

## Trustworthiness of data

Triangulation of data refers to using multiple sources of data or multiple approaches to analysing data to enhance the credibility of a research study (Salkind, 2010).

Interviews were analysed by viewing and listening to participants' narratives, i.e., video data (mp4 file) and auditory mp3 files. Interviews were also analysed by social work doctoral students within tutorial groups at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. In addition to the above, data were analysed using psychoanalytic and systemic ideas during supervision sessions with two doctoral supervisors (see Chapter 3: **Data Analysis**).

Data were organised using a chronological order format which organised participant challenges and struggles in the narrated order. Methodological triangulation using a research diary added to the rigour and credibility of the study. Lincoln & Guba (1985) Naturalistic Inquiry replaced positivistic terms like validity and reliability with' 'trustworthiness' and set trustworthiness

criteria and techniques for qualitative researchers to assess and ensure quality (Loh, 2013).

Detailed recordings and the concept of data saturation using free association and a structured interview method supported the trustworthiness of the data. In addition, the recordings supported the accuracy of participants' language, concepts, and rich descriptions of their lived experiences. This research focused on the uniqueness of data rather than the reliability or generalisability.

## The importance of hearing student voices

This research emphasised hearing the voices of participants who chose to study abroad. Hearing the less desirable experiences adds an extra dimension to studying abroad. Study abroad planners, administrators, support staff and educators may already know the student's difficulties. However, within the positive mainstream experiences of others, their difficulties may go unnoticed. Illuminating real experiences, good or bad, recognises that life does have its obstacles, which can be worked through with support.

## Ethical considerations

This study received permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the US and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (UK); see appendix three for ethics approvals. IRB approval was needed as participants were American citizens. The duality of ethics approval meant that interviews could be conducted in the UK or the US. However, due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020, revised ethical applications were approved, and interviews were changed from face-to-face to virtual Zoom interviews.

Information about the study in the participant information sheet and consent forms (see appendix one & two) were emailed to participants, signed, and returned. The language used in the strict BNIM formula influenced how participants heard and answered the questions. The format of questioning interrupted a more natural containing rhythm in the interview. This was noticeable when using the interviewing format beginning 'you said… I felt uncomfortable with using a repeated and continuous prose of questioning structure. I added the word 'earlier' to the questions to soften what felt like a finger-pointing script saying 'You said earlier…' at the beginning of each question.

Another limitation would be that the length of time participants spent abroad was shortened due to the outbreak of Covid-19. Participants were interviewed after they had returned home to the US and had time to de-stress and reflect. I wondered if capturing data while students were still abroad, which was the original intention of the research, would have influenced their narratives.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter described the aims and purpose of this research and detailed the researcher's interpretivist ontological and epistemological position. It has explained the BNIM and why it was chosen over other methods. In addition, this chapter has described the research design, ethical considerations, and limitations. The next chapter, Chapter four: Reflexivity, describes my experience and perspective of insider and outsider, practitioner, and researcher moving positions throughout the research process.

# Chapter Four: Reflexivity

## Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to describe the duality of my position as it moves between being a staff member/well-being practitioner and researcher and how moving between these positions created tensions for myself and the participants. I discuss these positions using an insider-outsider positionality perspective while acknowledging the natural fluidity of such positions.

## Duality of Positions – Practitioner–Researcher

I had assumed that working intimately with students gave me an insider's perspective, a 'withness' (Helps, 2017), which motivated me to conduct this research. The transition from practitioner to researcher included a reflective process connected to my practice and doctoral learning at the Tavistock and Portman. I wanted to learn more about the students whose experiences differed from studying abroad's perceived and promoted ideals. I also wanted to build upon and share this knowledge to aid future students, practitioners, and administrators in the study abroad sector (Wengraf & Chamberlayne, 2004).

I contemplated my role as a practitioner and a doctoral researcher at my workplace and how the duality of roles could create role confusion for the participants. Participants were informed throughout the research process

that interviews were research interviews and were not to be confused with any earlier therapeutic conversations. My role as a researcher was communicated to both participants and ethics committees. To help me address the complications and ambivalence (Ochs et al., 2020) of being in two roles on the same day, I carved out time before and after interviews to make research notes and be available to participants if needed to speak with me. As speaking to participants about emotional experiences within the BNIM could have revived emotions, it was essential to safeguard the participants by allowing them to speak with me in a therapeutic capacity.

Earlier research on study abroad students has primarily been collected by programme administrators and academic researchers using quantitative and qualitative questionnaires and survey methods. The starting point for this research was my position as a practitioner-researcher: a systemic social work practitioner. Considering my insider position, I had a strong visible presence at the university. I also had trusted relationships with students. An internal role within the institution ensured a gateway for this group to conduct the research (as described below). These variables interacted with each other at different points in the research process.

## Insider–Outsider Position – Betwixt and Between

In qualitative research, reflexivity, or critical reflection, ensures rigour and improves the research quality and validity as it recognises the limitations of the produced knowledge (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). I had pre-existing relationships and knowledge of this community (of study abroad students), which aided the research process, allowed me access to students as participants and worked with students who used well-being resources.

Therefore, I was familiar with what was to be researched and felt comfortable. However, I moved from a familiar position and took up the unfamiliar researcher's position. As such, I became more familiar with the tensions between different positionalities throughout the research process. The transition between a well-being practitioner and a researcher was easily achieved. However, I experienced a complex fluidity of positionality throughout the research process.

Coghlan (2003) defines insider research as the experience of practitioners, as members of their organisations, making a distinctive contribution to developing insider knowledge about the organisation and the individuals who are part of it. Researchers with implicit knowledge, shared lived experience and a high degree of familiarity with the people they study operate as insiders. Conversely, those without intimate knowledge, shared lived experience or membership in the study community approach their

research from an 'outsider' perspective (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Griffiths, 1998).

I assumed I was an 'insider' when considering Coghlan's (2003) insider and outsider positions. I worked therapeutically with students; I was an Assistant Director at the university. My insider position paved the way to gain access to the participants. Historically, study abroad research has been conducted by programme administrators or academics within the university. However, near practice research was unusual in my research domain as a practitioner researcher. The student well-being practitioner, a role designed to be a compassionate listener, may have functioned as a prerequisite for participants to feel comfortable sharing their problems. I had worked with approximately 30 percent of the student cohort during the semester, and I was already aware of  ten students who wanted to participate in the research. My physical presence at the university also gave me insight into the social contexts and internal dynamics of being an American student in the UK. This insider perspective shaped my epistemology, ontology, and research paradigm.

Folkes (2022) examined the researcher's insider positionality when conducting fieldwork and used the term 'waiting field' to describe a space where observations and informal discussions with participants occur outside the research interview.  Equally, an 'insider' may have caused participants to

exercise caution in volunteering. Sharing sensitive information with the interviewer could raise concerns about where and with whom the information would be shared. Moreover, it could affect opportunities for further academic study, scholarship or career prospects. Thus, anonymity and confidentiality were pertinent ethical considerations. Upon personal reflection, my perceived insider status comforted me and gave me confidence. However, I became uncertain after I emailed two hundred and seventy students (potential participants) asking for an expression of interest to participate in the research and received no responses. The lack of responses catapulted me to reconsider my insider outsider status, role confusion (Sapiro & Matthews, 2020) and their refusal to respond.

As a white Welsh middle-aged woman working in England, I was an 'outsider researcher'. In addition, I had not studied abroad, was not American, and was 35 years older than the participants. However, despite these differences, I was a student studying in a different country, which meant I identified with some of their experiences. According to Berger (2015), the researcher's positionality includes personal characteristics, such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases and preferences. In my case, my characteristics also included my training background and professional experiences.

## The Fluidity of Positionality

Various identities intersected when my role confusion set in. I understood the interchangeable positions between practitioner/staff member/researcher/student and how I ranked their importance of positionality in order. This formation changed to researcher/practitioner/student/staff member, depending on the social context and the task at hand. As such, I was in a constant state of flux. There were noticeable socially constructed power dynamics between me (a staff member) and the participants (students); (Sapiro & Matthews, 2020). In addition to the research ethics and social work code of conduct frameworks, organisational considerations emerged. The potential for the research to reveal something unwanted by the institution had a wavering presence. During the interview sessions, transitioning from therapeutic social worker to a new researcher also brought about ethical dilemmas, as I experienced a juxtaposition between the practitioner and researcher roles. However, practitioner considerations remained prominent throughout the research interviews, especially when considering aftercare for participants, if needed.

The complexities in the researcher-practitioner position oscillated back and forth between the order of preference while planning, conducting and analysing data. Characteristics of my identity, role and donning four hats – practitioner/staff member (insider), researcher/student (outsider) – helped and inhibited my ability to maintain a distinct separateness between roles

and statuses. I realised that occupying an either-or position formed a binary that limited my perspective and did not represent my research experience. Therefore, my position flowed between being an insider and an outsider in the research process, which seemed conditional on the type of interactions within research relationships (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and the intersubjective dynamics between me as the researcher, the participants and the academic provider – the study abroad institution. For example, when a participant shared a highly emotional experience during the interview and left the room, I shifted from researcher to practitioner on their return. I decided not to push for more details (i.e. further inquiry into their narrative).

My ethical responsibility to look after the participant's well-being and safety was integral to the interview. In addition, I decided not to exploit them or their vulnerability because we had discussed the experience previously within a therapeutic session. To revisit such an instance would have been for research purposes only, which felt unethical. The balance between research data and participant safety supported participant safety. I wondered if my response would have been the same had I identified primarily as a researcher. This example shows the conflating insider-outsider position and role identities and how this fluctuated during the research process. Nonetheless, professional accountability was fundamental to my thinking. In practice, a parallel thought process

considered the participant making a complaint, which may have jeopardised the research project.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter offered a transparent account of the researcher's positionality throughout the research process. As a researcher, the importance of reflexivity and conversations about self-awareness were supported in monthly supervision and doctoral tutorial groups. Moreover, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) see the importance of using a wider lens and a psychosocial perspective to understand non-linear factors that lurk beneath the surface but contribute to an individual's behaviours and difficulties. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) also suggest conceptualising oneself as neither an 'insider' or 'outsider' as it imposes reductive and arbitrary expectations of complete sameness or difference.

Practising self and relational reflexivity throughout the research journey allowed me to consider my experiences and how they related to the participants. Due to my insider position, I mistakenly assumed participants would reiterate stories I had initially shared with me in the well-being room. This was not the case. As I interviewed participants, I noticed they narrated only what they felt safe to share. Participants' power in the research process was strengthened by using the BNIM research method. Therefore, I

conceptualised a ‘space between', which includes the complexity and uniqueness of the human experience, as it lent me a more valuable and nuanced perspective.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter reflected on my experience in states of duality and conflictions during the research process. It discussed insider and outsider positionalities and how the realisation of these positions added insight for the researcher and value to the research process. This chapter showed the complexities of qualitative research, the duality of positions for the researcher and the participant and what was researched. The next chapter, Chapter Five: Findings, introduces brief pen pictures of the participants, and the four themes, giving examples using verbatim quotes.

# Chapter Five: Findings

…the amount of anxiety that [studying] abroad gave me as a whole, I do not know if I could go back and redo it. (*Michelle)*

## Chapter Overview

This chapter provides brief biographies of the participants, which offers insight into some of the difficulties experienced abroad. A description of themes and sub-themes is presented, followed by a chapter summary.

This research project used a psychosocial approach to understand participant challenges and struggles while studying abroad for a semester in the UK. The research question evolved from my clinical hunches from working therapeutically with American students who study abroad. The research question and sub-questions also guided the form of this chapter. Data interpretation and analysis (See also chapter 3, P. 76) triangulated theoretical ideas between doctoral supervision, bi-monthly tutorials with Professor Andrew Cooper and doctoral colleagues and by engaging in an on-going iterative process of personal analysis overall. By using an inductive qualitative method, the data fitted with systemic and psychosocial ideas are presented in the next chapter containing the discussion.

This research aimed to:

- Describe the range of challenges and struggles the participants experienced while studying abroad;
- Provide insight into participants' experiences of challenges and struggles during their study abroad semester;

- Add knowledge to the study abroad literature of the range of challenges and struggles experienced by students;
- Inform study abroad programs of the participants' challenges and struggles to provide future support for students who study abroad; and
- Offer insight into the challenges and struggles by applying a psychosocial lens to illuminate non-linear explanations for difficulties.

Six Participants

*Edward*

Edward was 20 years old when he studied abroad. He was excited to go abroad as he had not previously travelled outside of the US. Edward had experienced difficulties with mental health each semester at college in the US. For him, studying abroad brought unexpected challenges and struggles, which related to his fear of what if something reoccurred (such as his depression) while he was abroad. In addition, receiving and responding to his parents' phone calls and messages became increasingly challenging. Edward experienced their phone calls as intrusions, which prevented him from escaping or gaining the freedom he wished for abroad. His

experiences led him to reflect on his relationship with his parents, especially his father.

*Tony*

Tony was 21 years old when he studied abroad. He was a frequent visitor to the study abroad program office, reaching out for several kinds of support. During the interview, Tony was extremely talkative, often answering before I had finished asking the question. Tony shared that he had struggled with the UK's pedagogical approach, which caused him significant concern about maintaining his grades abroad. He reflected on his experiences abroad and acknowledged the presence of anxiety, which affected everything he did.

*Sandra*

Sandra was 21 years old when she studied abroad. Sandra faced several difficulties abroad. One of these difficulties was when she was hospitalised abroad, and the second was when she thought a stranger approached her in the city one evening with what she thought was a gun. This incident led to a police investigation, which resulted in police interviews and appearing in a British courtroom. Despite these challenges, she 'loved studying abroad' and was upset when she needed to return home prematurely due to the pandemic. However, Sandra smiled throughout the interview and appeared to retell her challenges abroad without connecting with the emotions she

experienced at the time. Instead, she said she had used all her challenges and struggles as learning opportunities.

*Michelle*

Michelle was 21 years old when she studied abroad. Michelle was a confident person and a popular member of her friend group, with whom she travelled abroad. However, Michelle found the demands of her roommate particularly difficult while abroad. This situation challenged how she thought of herself, which resulted in her feeling isolated and withdrawn. Michelle reflected on her experience of feeling overpowered by her roommate and said she would not let this happen to her in the future.

*Jeremy*

Jeremy was 21 years old when he studied abroad. Before arriving, he attended a ten-day seminar on sustainability with the study abroad programme. Jeremy portrayed himself as a diligent student interested in the environment and city. However, he struggled with the city's noise and artificial lights. He shared that he felt he could not escape the city space, which challenged him. While abroad, Jeremy seemed preoccupied with the level of surveillance in the city and was worried about being a victim of mistaken identity.

*Caroline*

Caroline was 21 years old when she studied abroad. On the flight to the UK, she panicked, thinking she had made the wrong decision to study abroad. Overcome with anxiety; she said she had fainted on the flight. On her first day at the campus, Caroline called her parents to request a return flight to the US, which her parents denied. Despite her initial feelings, Caroline overcame several obstacles while abroad and completed her stay. During the interview, Caroline seemed reluctant to revisit some of the challenges and struggles she experienced abroad.

## Overview of Main Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes

Data analysis used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis and Cooper's (2014) *Analysing Data* paper to assist with generating themes, sub themes and codes. This thematic analysis can be seen in Chapter Three:
Methodology, Table 1.

Four themes emerged from triangulating (Denzin, 2017) data obtained from reading interview scripts, viewing video interviews, listening to audio-recorded interviews and supervisory meetings and doctoral tutorial groups (see Table 3).

Table 3: Four main themes, sub-themes, and codes across participants

| Themes | Sub-themes | Codes |
|---|---|---|
| Academic Tension | Pedagogy | UK versus US grading, teaching approaches, length of lessons |
| | Resources | Absence of a 24-hour library, LGBTQiA+ groups, counselling centre, well-being centre |
| | Learning Abroad | Travel and work balance, workload, lack of resources, distractions |
| Interpersonal Relationships | Living Together | Roommate tensions, flatmate disagreements |
| | Co-dependency | Missing family, friends, partners, dependency on others |
| | Unexpected | Panic attacks, I want to go home, cannot wait to return home, I cannot escape – I want freedom |
| Emotional Uncertainty | Feeling Monitored | Parental intrusions, CCTV surveillance, smaller class sizes |
| | Mental Health | Anxiety, depression, panic attacks, loneliness, sleep deprivation, isolation, earlier diagnoses, suicide ideation, prior suicide attempt |
| The Gestalt: Contextual Narratives | Contexts<br>Defendedness | Higher educational<br>Study abroad<br>Attachments |

## Description of Themes

### *Theme 1: Academic Tension*

This theme captures the participant's experiences of academic tensions while abroad. Specific factors include experiences of the unfamiliarity between US and UK pedagogies, access to educational resources and clubs, and the absence of a 24-hour library. Moreover, heavier-than-expected academic workloads and the fear of lowered grades were prominent concerns interwoven into the above factors.

An integral part of studying abroad is travelling to Europe on the weekends, which is experiential learning for all study abroad students. However, the competing demands between travel and academic work created unexpected anxieties. Participant expectations of the study abroad syllabus suggested an assumption of the workload abroad being designed to accommodate travel and workload. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Maintaining grades and experiencing experiential activities outside of the classroom created stress for participants. Their anxiety was also related to an interdependency on academic grades, scholarship funding, internship opportunities and future careers.  Re-immersion into interview data showed the influence of specific contextual factors such as the pressures young adults experience in American higher education, the cost of study, graduating on time, success and a fear of failure, especially among peers.

*Theme 2: Interpersonal Relationships*

This theme captures participants' narrations of interpersonal relationships they experienced while abroad. Relationships with roommates, peers, friends and parents back in the US brought unexpected demands that affected the participant's lived experience. The absence of friends and close relationships brought symptoms of anxiety and stress as they navigated through specific challenges alone. Participants experienced a type of separation anxiety, which illuminated co-dependencies on others. Tensions between interpersonal relationships while abroad also impacted the participants' emotional states, and for some, rather unexpectedly.

A meta-perspective emerged by paying particular attention to participants' communication patterns with others, the blaming and scapegoating or problematising of individuals, and their feelings of ambivalence and isolation in interpersonal relationships. Participants also described how the presence or absence of certain relationships impacted their lived experience abroad.

*Theme 3: Emotional Uncertainty*

This theme captures the emotional rollercoaster studying abroad can involve; however, participants' experiences varied. Thoughts of being monitored, fear of doing something wrong despite not doing anything

inappropriate or illegal, and being seen as opposed to not being seen were aspects of this theme.

Some participants hoped that studying abroad would create a space for them to be their authentic selves, where they could escape the gaze of others, to be anonymous and not what others wanted them to be or thought they were. A meta-perspective showed how participants experienced a weird sense of being surveilled, which somehow forced them to think about who they were and how others perceived them.

Participants described feeling anxious, fearful, frightened, lonely and isolated. An ambivalence between wanting to study abroad to fulfil dreams and fantasies was met with an external reality and participants feeling inadequate and dependent on their support systems back in the US.

Most participants framed their experiences using mental health diagnostic terminology when describing their difficulties. This research includes verbatim quotes to show how participants used these terms. However, this research chose to offer an alternative frame and to move from pathologizing language, thus naming this theme *Emotional Uncertainty*.

*Theme 4: The Gestalt: Contextual Narratives*

This theme captures participants' wider social, relational and emotional narratives. Based on the Gestalt principle, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, or the whole is more complex than its parts. The underlying principle is that Gestalt informs an individual's life (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

This theme reveals hidden aspects of participants' lives that affected their experiences but were unrelated to studying abroad. These experiences had a greater emotional impact that participants found difficult to make sense of and share. These narratives were considered beneath the surface narratives.

Patterns in Narratives – Surface and Deeper Narratives

Interview data revealed a pattern or a particular form. Less impactful lived experiences that were directly associated with studying abroad were shared openly by participants. The themes of Academic Tension and Interpersonal Relationships captured challenges connected to comparisons between US and UK education models, resources and workloads, while Interpersonal Relationships captured, for example, roommate difficulties and missing loved ones. These lived experiences, although meaningful, are referred to as surface challenges. The criteria for surface narratives are 1) stories

shared easily, 2) without emotion and 3) appearing to supplement the sharing of more difficult experiences.

In most cases, participants shared surface narratives, which allowed them to share more difficult lived experiences. As the narratives unfolded, participants included situated issues not directly associated with studying abroad but which impacted participants' abroad experiences. For example, the themes Emotional Uncertainty and The Gestalt: Contextual Narratives captured struggles related to family dynamics, identity, mental health and defences.

These lived experiences are referred to as wider narratives. The criteria for these narratives are 1) stories that were difficult to share, 2) emotions related to the event and 3) not directly linked to studying abroad but which impacted lived experiences abroad.

At the beginning of the interviews, participants shared positive experiences of studying abroad, acknowledging how lucky they were to have the opportunity. For example, Edward said,

*So, overall, my abroad experience, like everybody else's, was amazing, you know, you get to go to a new country for a certain amount of months… overall, the time I was there, it was good and it was—I had a lot of new experiences, and a lot of them were positive.*

This is followed by the participants describing their challenges and struggles. These descriptions enabled participants to speak about more difficult experiences. Finally, participants concluded the interviews by reflecting on their challenges and struggles by trying to make sense of them and locating their experiences in positive learning takeaways.

## Psychosocial Influences

Participants shared narratives of enmeshed family dynamics, sexuality, episodes of depression and suicide attempts, low confidence and self-esteem, explorations of self and realisation of over-dependency on others. In addition, these deeper narratives revealed the impact of multiple psychosocial factors that lay beneath participants' surface challenges of experiences abroad, but they seemed implicit in their overall lived experience abroad. The psychosocial influences were related to contextual factors such as the American education system, group social unconsciousness, study abroad and the Generation z's expectations of the self and others.

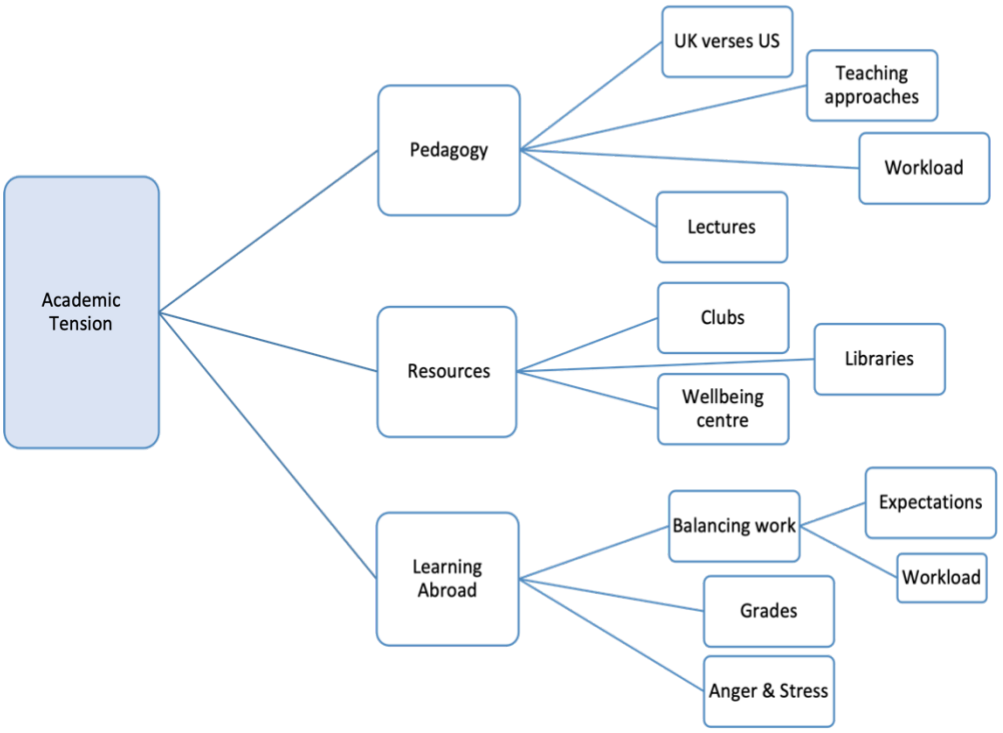
## Defendedness

Cross-case analysis revealed commonalities between participants but also revealed their differences. Despite their difficult experiences, some participants chose not to revisit their experiences at the interview with the

same emotions they had experienced during the incident. When sharing specific incidents or events, participants minimised the impact the experience had on them. Techniques used by participants involved avoiding the conversation by not answering a question, the use of humour and being passive.

Academic Tension

**Figure 2:** Thematic diagram for Academic Tension

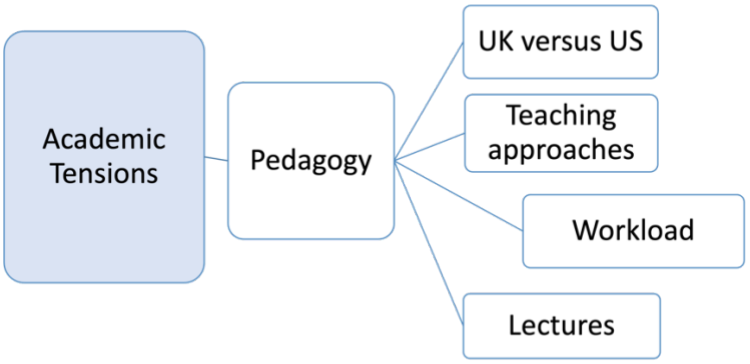



Note: This figure provides an overview of the theme of Academic Tension, showing the interconnectedness between sub-themes and codes (see Description of Themes).

Participants described their challenges and struggles related to pedagogy, resources and learning abroad. Various challenges were underpinned by comparing the US main university and the UK study abroad university campus.

Pedagogy

**Figure 3:** Thematic diagram for Pedagogy




Note: This figure illustrates an overview of the interconnectedness between Academic Tension and Pedagogy and their codes.

All participants discussed specific challenges and struggles related to pedagogy and academic tensions. Most participants had unexpected experiences related to the demands of the UK education system. Codes of UK versus US teaching approaches and lessons emerged as participants gave examples of the challenges and struggles within the study abroad pedagogy.

Tony described asking his professors to examine his work before marking. When one professor refused, he opted for an alternative grading option in the class; rather than risk getting a lower percentage grade, he chose a

pass or fail option. This removed the risk of a lower grade being included on his academic transcript, which would negatively affect his overall GPA. As Tony explained,

*One professor gave me kind of a hard time because they were like, 'That wouldn't be unfair to all the students.' … I felt like if students are trying to put that extra work in and trying to like to be the best and do the best work, the [professors] should help a little bit… that's why I made it a pass-fail … I get worried that I'm just going to fail and just gonna ruin my reputation … wherever it's just gonna, I'm just gonna be marked down.*

Sandra experienced challenges related to her unfamiliarity with the UK educational system.

*Something that was challenging abroad… One professor, like, graded really harshly. We ended up getting A's… which I don't understand, but he graded really harshly, and we learned, like, I think it was the first couple weeks was kind of difficult to adjust to the UK teaching system.*

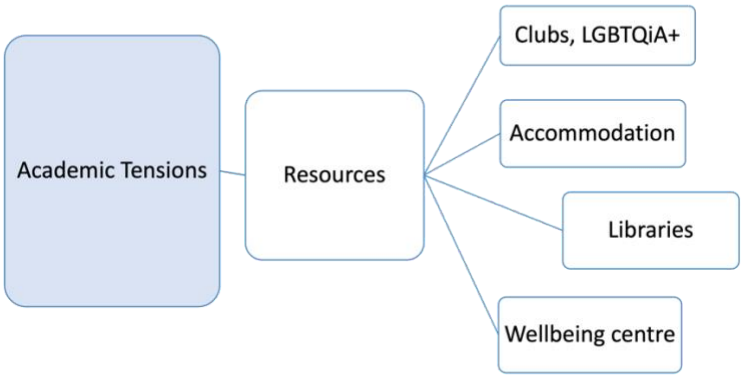
Jeremy found it challenging to balance pedagogy and experiential learning outside the classroom. As an architecture student studying for a five-year undergraduate degree, notorious for its demanding workload, Jeremy explained how excessive workload prevented him from exploring and learning outside the classroom,

*…if I wanted not to work, I wouldn't be in this program—It's more the value of studying abroad. It is in the experience of where you are and what that means, socially, like, different geographic elements play a huge role… That was definitely hard to deal with just because I got a little bit crushed down due to the amount of work.*

Jeremy explained how he felt overwhelmed by the amount of work. He points out that the social and different geographic locations were what he considered to be one of the core values of studying abroad.

Resources

**Figure 4:** Thematic diagram for Resources




Note: This figure illustrates an overview of the interconnectedness between the themes of Academic Tension and Resources and their codes.

Edward spoke about the lack of LGBTQiA+ and other clubs abroad. He described how their absence created emotional challenges for him.

*There are so many centres at the home campus, like the LGBTQiA+ centre and the Barnes centre, where it has all the health and wellness things for physical health and mental health well-being. I think academically studying was a challenge while being abroad um… because you do not have access to academic resources. I mean, there is a library available to students… but it's not as accessible as it wouldn't be back on campus.*

Earlier in the interview, Edward introduced his sexuality by speaking about the absence of an LGBTQiA+ community and well-being centre offering a counselling service. His casual introduction to these challenges was later extended and interconnected with his deeper struggles.

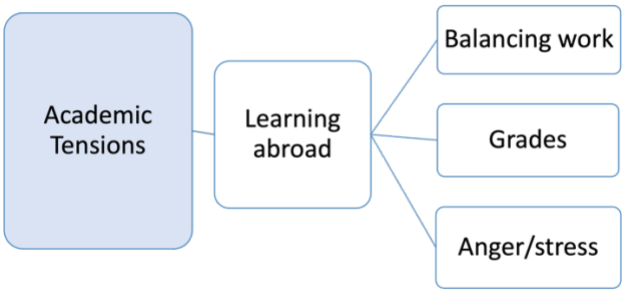
Michelle explained how the absence of a 24-hour library created stress for her in managing her workload abroad.

*In the US, I always need to be in the library, it's quiet, and you could just stay there… my roommate would be on the phone all hours of the night. I could bring something up to her, and she'd get it, but she'd take it personally… a weird, like, work struggle that I had abroad.*

Michelle's desire to use a 24-hour library to complete her work appeared twofold, as she implied she would use the space to escape the conflicts between her and her roommate. Second, Michelle assumed studying abroad would be a 'walk in the park, a joke'. She did not expect to feel homesick and was initially confident about being abroad without serious issues. She had chosen to live with friends; in her mind, everything would be uneventful.

Learning Abroad

**Figure 5:** Thematic diagram for Learning Abroad




Note: This figure illustrates the interconnectedness between Academic Tension and Learning Abroad and their codes.

Michelle described one of the first challenges was realising the academic workload and coursework deadlines needed to be balanced with travelling to Europe on the weekends. She assumed the workload abroad would be much lower than that on her home campus in the US.

*On the first day of class, we read the syllabus. I'm like, this is a ridiculous expectation when I had the desire to go and travel a lot… I got out of the class within the first week, which was a huge relief because my roommate, who stayed in it, drowned in work the entire semester. … I felt like in that situation, I dodged a bullet… (university) in London is a lot more work-intensive.*

A significant part and expectation of students who study abroad in the UK is to explore Europe during weekends and breaks. Michelle's use of language

suggests that staying in this class wouldn't have allowed such exploration, much less any respite. She uses phrases such as *'dodged a bullet'* and refers to her roommate who remained in the class having *'drowned in work the entire semester'.*

Tony's learning abroad experience seemed unintentionally hijacked by his emphasis on strategies to produce his best work. For example, he explained how he found the work challenging, and despite trying to find ways to overcome his difficulties, they did not work:

*I'm having a hard time with it, and I'm trying to find ways, but it's not working. I get very frustrated and anxious about it because I'm worried that I'm going to fail out (inaudible), where I do poor, I'm just going to affect my grade. I'm always worried about the long run… I'm trying my best…it builds up my anxiety.*

The above quote offers some insight into Tony's concerns about failing and how this would affect him academically and psychologically. Unfortunately, in parts of the above excerpt, he sounds helpless and defeated.

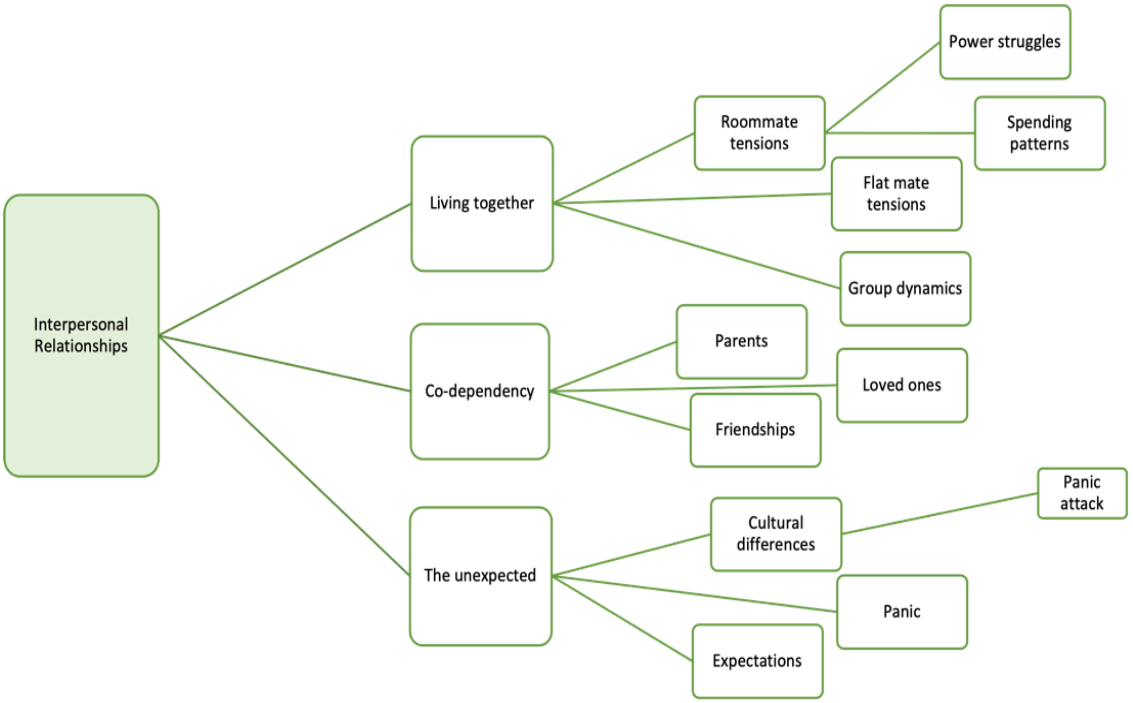
Jeremy was worried about how COVID-19 would change the economy and limit his career options after graduation:

*… the fact that you… I don't know if I'm going to be able to get a job after I graduate. I don't even know if graduating is worth [it] anymore, based on the job market… I don't know. Yeah… waiting, waiting, a bit to sort of see how this pans out. That's definitely stressful, not knowing if, like, I'm going to even have opportunities to make a living.*

As a senior in college, Jeremy was only a few months from graduating. The impact of COVID-19 on the world's economy and the high fees associated with studying abroad, and especially the transition to online learning once he had returned to the US, were intersections that created challenges and struggles abroad for Jeremy.

Interpersonal Relationships

**Figure 6:** Thematic diagram for Interpersonal Relationships

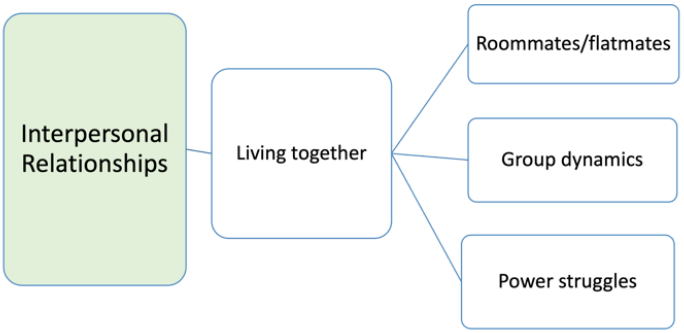



Note: This figure illustrates an overview of the interconnectedness between Interpersonal Relationships and their sub-themes and codes (see Description of Themes).

This theme describes challenges and struggles related to interpersonal relationships abroad with peers and friends, plus family and friends back in the US, and how these interpersonal relationships intersected with the challenges and struggles of studying abroad.

Living Together

**Figure 7:** Thematic diagram for Living Together




Note: This figure illustrates the interconnectedness between Interpersonal Relationships and Living Together and their codes.

Michelle travelled abroad with her friends whom she met at university. She expected the six friends to live together instead of with other students they didn't know. Unexpectedly, Michelle and her roommate initially clashed on mediocre things. They disagreed on most things as time passed, where to travel, what accommodation to stay in and where to eat. Most of their disagreements were related to finances. Her flatmate had more disposable money than Michelle. Their sleep routines conflicted, so Michelle could not sleep at night. Their disharmony grew, and Michelle became reluctant to return to the apartment after school. She explained her situation:

*My individual roommate there gave me a lot of anxiety, like, through the roof, and it's just something where it was more like she (long pause). I never really wanted to like live in the same room with her, but I felt bad because she wanted to live with me. So, it was like, you know what, I'll try it, and it ended up being like my easily my worst and my biggest nightmare abroad… I think like added to any anxiety that I already had.*

Michelle felt guilty and could not refuse her roommate's request to live with her abroad. Although she had reservations about this, she could not say no.

Caroline appeared reluctant during her interview to revisit the challenges she experienced abroad with the same amount of emotion. In sub-session two, I asked, 'You said earlier that you struggled a bunch with people you lived with.

'Can you remember any particular details of that situation?' She replied,

*Yeah (laughs). In particular, there are two roommates who had a very different just lifestyle than there rest of the people that we are living with. It was difficult to kind of navigate… They just didn't seem to care enough to comply with… the like wants or needs of like everyone else who was living there…*

In the above excerpt, Caroline softly positions the opposing lifestyle of her flatmates, skirting over the details that caused her difficulties while abroad. However, I sensed Caroline gave a limited answer and observed a level of passivity during the interview.

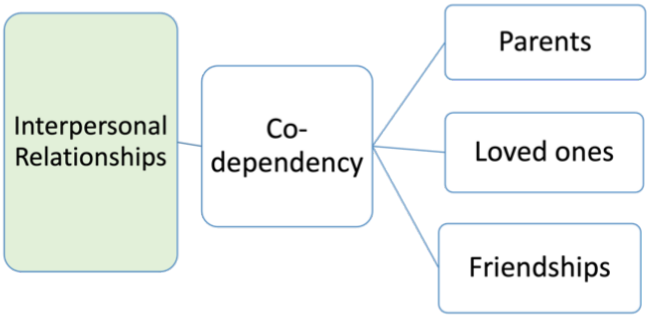
Edward explained how the lack of physical and psychic space abroad was challenging:

*I literally just wanted to be by myself in the flat, but I couldn't get that space because one of them was constantly sitting around… That's exactly how I felt 'just get out of this flat'… It's just hard living with someone who (pause) has problems of their own and I'm not bashing them for whatever they're going through… I wanted to be in this space.*

Edward talks about being alone and wanting to have his own physical space. The pressures of living side by side in a small apartment in London were new for Edward; he had his own room back on the US campus. He recalled his flatmate had problems, too but did not expand on this; it seemed the small physical space invaded his psychic space too.

Co-dependency

**Figure 8:** Thematic diagram for Co-dependency




Note: This figure illustrates the interconnectedness between the theme of Interpersonal Relationships and the sub-theme of Co-dependency and its codes.

Caroline described feeling homesick during the flight to the UK and when she arrived. She panicked about missing her family and boyfriend's support. She surmised that she would not be able to cope abroad without them.

*That was definitely the biggest struggle that I was having when I first got there was just… I guess kind of a shock. They, you know, they're, you know, halfway across the world from me. They can't—I can't just drive two hours and be at home like I normally could from school if I needed something… (laughs, shrugs shoulders and smiles).*

Caroline describes the shock of being away from those she holds closest to her and who support her. However, she recognised her feelings of dependency on her support systems and suggested that this behaviour may

not be reflected in her peers. Later in the interview, she revealed how the situation made her feel.

*I was just scared… scared and overwhelmed, I guess.*

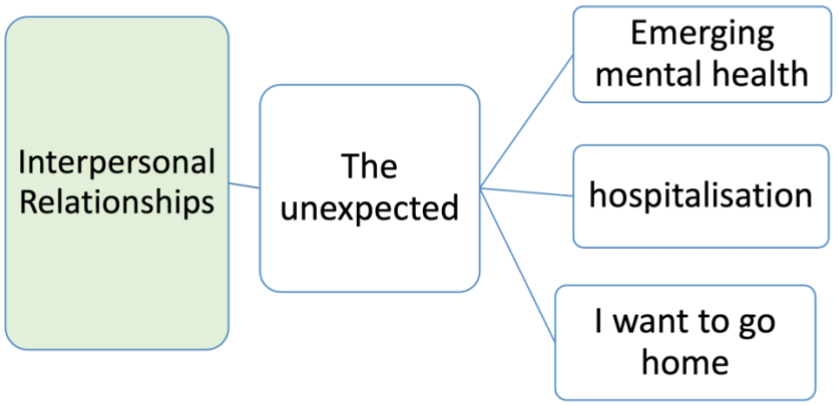
Edward had close friends on the main college campus in the US, but unlike other students, he travelled without friends. In the first part of the interview, he mentioned that being so far away from home created anxiety for him.

*I was more homesick for my friends rather than my family, but at the same time, I did miss my family. So, it's kind of hard because I've liked being away and I liked being so far from home. But at the same time, umm, I was feeling really anxious because I didn't have that support group of friends or like people that I would usually have back home while I was abroad, should anything like that ever happen.*

The above excerpt demonstrates Edward's ambivalence of wanting to be away and being far away from home. However, this meant he sacrificed the safety his friends gave him. Later in the interview, Edward revealed why his friends were important to him and why he believed they kept him safe. Later, he also revealed a context that offers insight into his beliefs around safety, friendships and why he liked being so far away from home.

The Unexpected

**Figure 9:** Thematic diagram for The Unexpected




Note: This figure illustrates the interconnectedness between Interpersonal Relationships and The Unexpected and its codes.

When Caroline arrived in the UK, she became overwhelmed and wanted to arrange a return flight back to the US.

*… I need to go home because I have some social anxiety with like new people, I don't like lots of new people at a time. So, like, it's, it was difficult to kind of like to have, all of these new experiences at once and I just kind of was overwhelmed to like wanting to go home…*

Caroline wanted to go home the day she arrived. However, despite asking her parents to bring her home, they declined. Instead, they offered to see how she took the first week, and then they would review the situation.

Michelle's abroad expectations unfolded differently from what she had in her mind. After eight weeks of the semester, the program was suspended; she said being sent home was a relief. However, the circumstances she faced were related to conflict with her roommate, which made her anxious.

*…what was best for… my mental health was to just leave and like put it behind me. But I also had a huge fear of leaving because, like, you're leaving like this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity over the fact that you don't like the person you're living with. So, it was like, you know, I almost felt like guilty about leaving, about being happy to leave because I was leaving that opportunity. But again, when I got home, I was so relieved.*

While in the city one evening, Sandra thought she had a gun pointed at her, and then, in another unrelated incident, she was hospitalised abroad. However, she described her unexpected experience with humour.

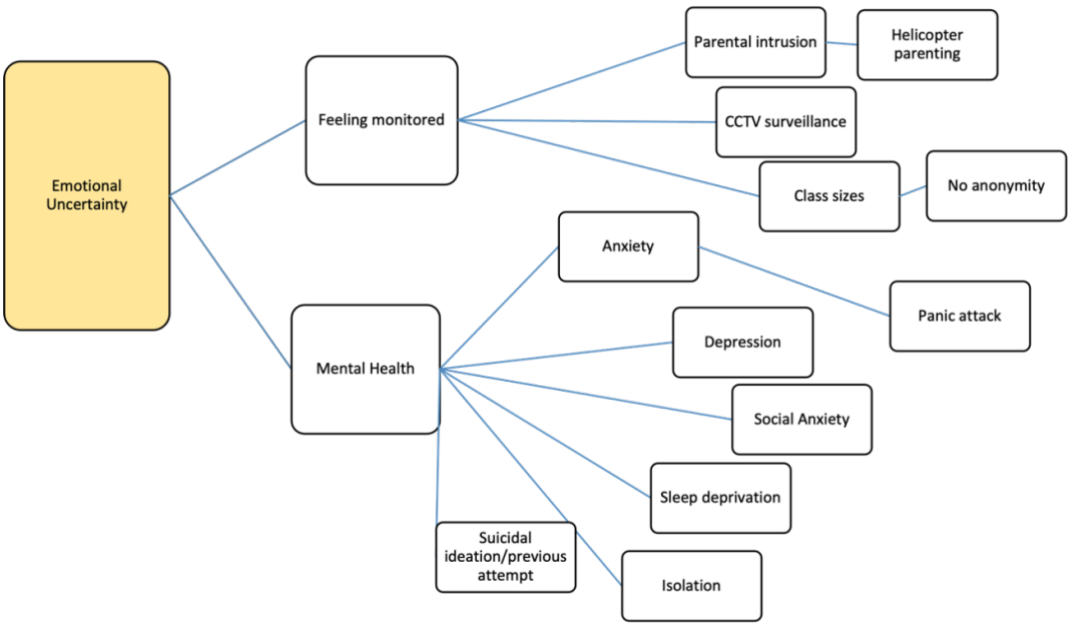
*…then the weird thing with the legal issues (laughs) ended up being a fun (laughs) day in court and a fun brunch after. So, everything, everything kind of, every struggle had a silver lining, I think, except for being sent home. That was just the worst, and I hated every minute of it.*

*I also, like, personally had a (laughs) little medical issue… spending three days and two nights in a London hospital was not my favourite abroad experience... It was really spooky, and I really did not like it. I hated the hospital…*

Sandra's sister flew in from the US to support her when she was discharged from the hospital.

Emotional Uncertainty

**Figure 4:** Thematic Diagram for Emotional Uncertainty

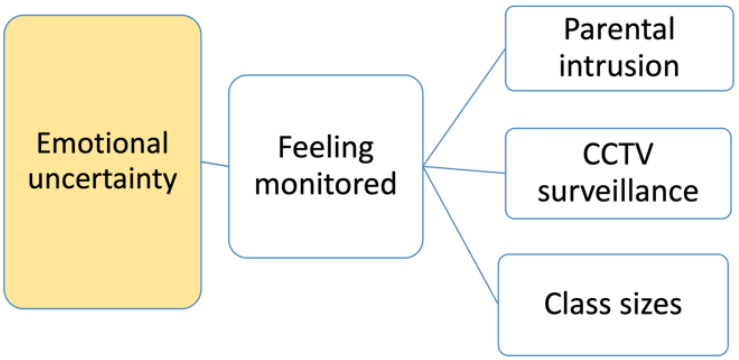



Note: This figure illustrates an overview of the interconnectedness between Emotional Uncertainty and its sub-themes and codes (see Description of Themes).

Emotional uncertainty was related to feeling surveilled or describing their experiences using mental health terms. Mental health was a significant theme understood by psychosocial factors, which provided insight into the participants' lived experiences of challenges and struggles while abroad.

Feeling Monitored

**Figure 10:** Thematic diagram for Feeling Monitored




Note: This figure illustrates the interconnectedness between Emotional Uncertainty and Feeling Monitored and their codes.

Jeremy described how he felt monitored and surveilled by CCTV and the 5G network while travelling. He felt disappointed that the parks were closed at night, denying him a private space to think and relax.

*… the city is very monitored, and it's not easy to escape… I guess it goes back to having the parks closed at night, but really the only escapes I got from the city were two times when I took the Metropolitan Line… CCTV cameras on the tube… I didn't mind them too much, but it was mainly that it was uncomfortable, knowing that if I had done something…*

Jeremy had previously lived near the Arctic circle with his parents and had become accustomed to a rural lifestyle with plenty of space, quietness and darkness.

Michelle said she began to struggle with knowing people in her class. Smaller classes meant limited anonymity:

*There's obviously a significantly less amount of kids studying in London; chances are you have classes with someone you know or like are familiar with, and I really hate that. Like, I don't like knowing people in my classes. I just think it's easier to do work and to speak up in class.* Thus, the move from large theatre-style lecture halls on the US main campus to smaller seminar-style lessons made Michelle uncomfortable.

Edward explained how he struggled with the feelings of being watched by his parents. He hoped studying abroad would give him a sense of freedom, relief from problems at home and an escape from his parents:

*Just that constant feeling of like I'm being watched… No matter what I do, I'm gonna be seen by my family, and I'm not saying this like I'm doing anything illegal… No matter where you are, you always think about what your parents think about… There would be multiple times when I'd simply decline calls from my parents… just because I wanted to feel like I… could live my own life without them constantly watching my every move.*

Edward felt he could not escape his parents even while he studied abroad. He felt overwhelmed by their constant calls. Although he often declined their calls, he felt compelled to answer them. The term helicopter parenting can be used here to understand the overprotective nature of their intrusions.

**Helicopter parenting**

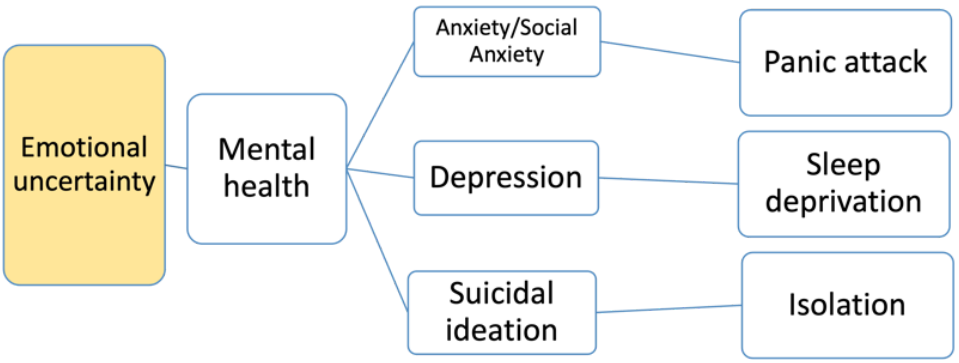
*I have these kinds of parents. I was raised to think that they are watching my every move, so I have to ensure that whatever I do is in accordance with what they think is right for me.*

*I… feel like I can't breathe at times because of how overprotective, kind of overbearing they are. Going abroad is a different story for them… I didn't feel like their hold over me was any less than it is when I'm physically with them, which is strange to me…*

Edward's powerful description of how he experienced being parented shows how he felt he could not escape his parent's gaze or hold despite being in another country and in a different time zone. In his description, he described the stifling effect their intrusions had on him. He implied his parents were hyper-anxious about Edward studying abroad. Going abroad was simply a different story for them.

Mental Health

**Figure 11:** Thematic diagram for Mental Health




Note: This figure illustrates the interconnectedness between Emotional Uncertainty and Mental Health and their codes.

**Anxiety**

Tony elaborated on his experience of anxiety while abroad and how it affected him. Then, he made sense of his experiences by acknowledging the integral future-oriented demands of securing an internship, finding a job and a career.

Finally, Tony explained what he believed was the source of his anxieties:

*I'm just worried … with internships right now, like I'm worried about… not finding an internship for the summer. Then that's going to lead to not finding a job in the future because we don't have the opportunity to get an internship before senior year. So, like, I'm worried… how it's going to affect me career-wise.*

In sub-session two, Tony explained how he tends to overthink things, which builds his anxiety. For example, he revealed that when he presents at college, he gets butterflies, grows nauseous and physically shakes and bounces his leg. He worries that he will mess up, and the pitch of his voice goes up and down. This bothers him, and he wants to fix it so he can be more confident and outgoing:

*[I] will discuss this with his family and do something with my family first because I want to keep them in the loop… it's slowly increasing to a point where I'm going to [have to] do something about it.*

Michelle's abroad experience gave her insight into herself and how someone else's (her roommate's) actions overwhelmed her completely. This shocked her because others saw her as strong and independent.

*I do miss aspects of London, but the amount of anxiety that abroad gave me as a whole, I don't know if I could go back and redo it. And for me, like, I don't really know how to deal with my anxiety. It's not like something that's either been diagnosed… I will have, like, random panic attacks, but they're not like I never think it's enough of an issue to, like, to bring it up as a real concern in my life.*

Michelle describes experiencing random panic attacks while abroad. However, she recognised that these had not been formally diagnosed.

**Panic Attacks**

Caroline began to regret choosing to study abroad while on the flight to the UK. She explained her feelings of loneliness and how her thoughts became unmanageable:

*… it was just basically being alone and not really having anyone… I got up to just like walk around a little bit, and I ended up walking into the back of the plane and just kind of falling to the floor and… I passed out (laughs).*

Caroline describes feeling alone on the flight and her attempts to distract herself by walking around on the plane. Finally, she described passing out, laughing at herself while explaining what had happened.

**Depression**

Edward described his fear of a depressive episode reoccurring while he studied abroad. He shared an emotional experience of trying to take his life while in his dorm in the US and how his friends stopped him.

*Given my knowledge of my own personal mental health journey, umm, that was something that I was kind of expecting to happen while I was abroad.*

The following quote illustrated the value of the PIN in BNIM when I pushed Edward to say more:

*I don't have the best mental health record umm (pause). There have been… really low dips in my mental health every year since I went off to college… I wouldn't even want to get out of bed in the morning, and I be depressed.*

Another PIN in BNIM followed, and I asked, 'Does any of that remind you of anything else? So, you are in your bunk worrying that you haven't got your friends around you and wondering if that reminds you of anything else?' He replied,

*This is going to get kind of deep (laughs nervously). I almost committed suicide in my [first] year. My friends, like, burst through my door and took the pills out of my hand (deep sigh, takes a breath) So… I wasn't expecting to get that low… but I mean, it's definitely a possibility and (sighs) (pauses). Yeah, I just never wanted to get to that point and feel like I didn't have anyone by me to help me or stop me from doing something really bad to myself.*

Edward's distressing story of the possibility of him dying while abroad made him miss his college friends and revealed a specific dependency on others to save him if he found himself in a similar situation.

*Field note:* I decided not to ask for any further details on this subject, as I was mindful that I was 3,500 miles away, speaking remotely and unable to contain or safeguard any potential re-enactment of what Edward had talked about. However, I emailed Edward the next day to offer to speak further.

**Nightmares**

After dreaming about dying twice in two consecutive nightmares, Edward reached out to his mother, asking her to defend him against his father by stopping his machine gun-like messages:

*I dreamt that I literally died twice, like two nights in a row (nervous giggle), and it was horrifying… I just remember calling my mom the following morning, umm, and just crying, literally in tears and bawling. Because I was, like, 'Mom, I dreamt that I died two nights in a row'*
*(laughs) and like, 'I'm actually fearful for my life and um this whole time'.*

Edward was increasingly struggling with his father's repeated calls and text messages asking him if he was safe and advising him what he should do to keep himself safe in the wake of the pandemic.

**Sleep Deprivation and Anxiety**

Michelle said she became exhausted abroad by the lack of sleep and reliance on melatonin. Although Michelle had sleep difficulties before she arrived in the UK, being unable to close her curtains at night because her roommate wanted them open compounded her inability to sleep:

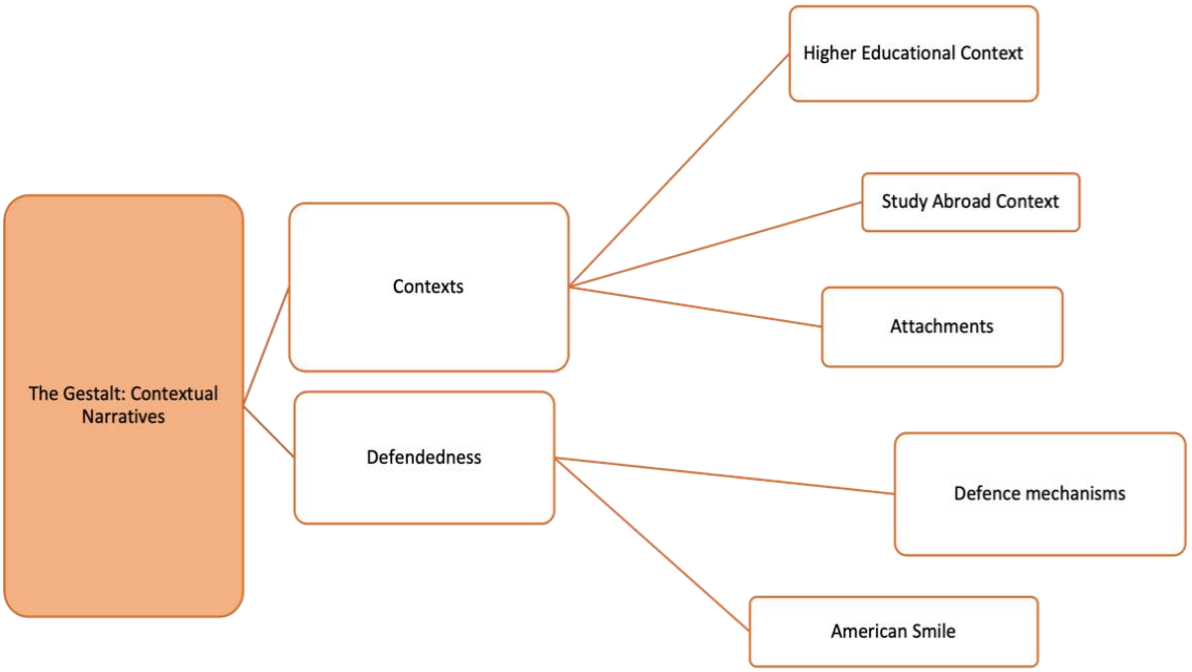
*I can't sleep through the night unless I take like a melatonin or something that will just at least like ease my anxiety and just like let my head, like, stop whining around but something. Like, I just also need like darkness and silence and, like, it's something that I can't compromise on. It's something that, like, me and my direct roommate also couldn't compromise on because she wanted, like, the blinds partially open so that, like, the light would wake her up [in the morning].*

*I ended up being extremely sleep-deprived. I just stocked up on melatonin because if I can't sleep, I get frustrated. When I get frustrated, like, you just get worked up over something. So, like, my solution, which isn't a great one, would just be like, okay, take another melatonin and like hope that it works. … some nights, it would, but like when it didn't work. I will just be up all night.*

Michelle describes her sleeplessness while abroad and how it impacted her. Then, she provides a solution in addition to her taking melatonin medication, which is being able to draw her blinds.

The Gestalt: Contextual Narratives

**Figure 12:** Thematic diagram for The Gestalt: Contextual Narratives




Note: This figure illustrates an overview of the interconnectedness between The Gestalt: Contextual Narratives and its sub-themes and codes.

The Biographic Narrative Interpretative (Hybrid) Method (BNIM) encouraged students to discuss study abroad difficulties and life experiences.

The research findings offer a unique opportunity to hear about the difficulties of American undergraduate students studying abroad in the UK. While this group is not considered marginalised, independent access to these participants was unusual. This was a privileged opportunity given to me by the program director and as a practitioner at the university.

This research offered participants an opportunity to talk about their experiences safely. Participant anonymity was essential because of the strong cultural norms associated with the positive outcomes abroad study promotes. A deviation from this narrative may be risky and perceived by participants and others as a personal weakness. Participants balanced what studying abroad offered positively with various challenges and struggles. The most pressing difficulties were related to contextual factors, not the abroad program per se. Therefore, this theme represents the mostly unheard narratives of study abroad participants.

**Contexts**

Participants described how studying abroad produced academic tensions, interpersonal problems, and emotional uncertainty. As described in theme one (Academic Tensions), participants described how differences between US and UK systems and their inner and outer expectations created challenges. It became evident that difficulties produced anxiety. Participants' worries were also represented across all themes: academic tension,

interpersonal relationships and emotional uncertainty. It became apparent that study abroad experiences illuminated stressors connected to various contexts, which also caused participant anxiety. For example, the contexts of study abroad and higher education revealed attachment-seeking behaviours such as separation anxiety.

**Study Abroad Context**

Participants arrived in the UK with fantasies about what studying abroad would offer, and when their fantasies unfolded differently from what they had expected, this created tensions and worries. The concept of studying abroad is sound. It incorporates academic and experiential learning opportunities wrapped within an educational program with experienced and diligent corporate parents supporting students. However, students are under pressure to be their best selves and to meet requirements connected to a capitalist society, i.e. getting the best career to be paid well in the future. The cost of the study abroad program and the four-year undergraduate course place significant pressure on students to get good grades throughout their education. The grading system in the US accounts for all the grades for each module and averages them for the student's final overall grade. A lowered grade could affect the student's overall GPA, affecting the classification of the degree.

Compared to other higher education systems worldwide, the American educational system is highly independent of federal government funding, making it unique. It is also incredibly diverse; public and private, small and large, secular and religiously affiliated educational institutions in the US.

American students study a major or main subject at university and must take classes outside their major. As a result, the American education system supports a breadth of knowledge in various subjects. This contrasts with higher education in the UK, where the emphasis is the depth of knowledge of a chosen subject. Participants described the pressures experienced while studying at university and abroad.

Caroline described how taking classes that differed from her major pushed her out of her comfort zone.

*…I was taking classes that did not really go with my major. So as, again, out of my comfort zone with that…*

Caroline mentioned the above quote to illustrate one of her experiences that became difficult. However, her overall difficulty was feeling frightened and isolated abroad, especially without her family nearby.

Tony described the pressure he felt over a particular assignment he struggled with abroad. He explained

*…I was stressing over this assignment. But, like, I try not to do that as much…I tried to take it one step at a time; when I'm under a time constraint and I don't know what I'm doing…, I get worried that I'm just going to fail and just gonna ruin my reputation and my grade…it's just gonna be marked down…*

Tony's difficulties were underpinned by a constant presence of fear, a fear of not being good enough and of others finding out. His underlying fantasy was to get good grades and a good career where the expense of studying at a private US university was financially rewarded. His thinking was also influenced by the negative effect of failing a class, which would add extra cost to his education. In the extreme, failure could delay his graduation date.

Edward spoke about the difficulty of balancing his academic work with experiential learning opportunities in the city. He struggled with not being a 'good' student. He carried the expectations of his parents and his own, being the first generation in his family to go to university.

*…I kind of found it hard to balance my work and my enjoyment time away from school… But I'm not a bad student, and I did end up getting good grades in my classes…*

The pressure to be successful in all things was evident in Edward. He was mindful while abroad not to take his eye off his studies, although he said this was difficult to do when living so close to tourist areas in the city.

Jeremy described his disappointment with the amount of work being given by his professors. This prevented him from doing what he had set out in his mind to do while abroad.

> …the value of studying abroad is a lot less in the actual work being done abroad. Rather, it's in the actual experience of where you are and what that means, socially…

Michelle compared her experiences to her friend's experiences studying in Europe.

> *…our friends in Italy, for example, and they'd have like nothing. They would be like watching movies about the mafia every day…*

Michelle fell a bit short-changed when she compared the pressures she felt to her friends in Italy. However, unfortunately, this pressure, alongside her other challenges, became a spiralling reality. The emergence of the global pandemic also impacted participants' experiences. Participants had booked trips to Europe and could not visit due to their early return to the US. Sandra, who maintained her positiveness throughout the interview, spoke about her disappointment with cancelled trips.

> *…the biggest struggle that we had because we had so many trips planned and, like, we were all also out the money that we spent on those trips, (laughs) which was really frustrating…*

**Attachments**

Participants spoke about how the separation from their families, loved ones and support systems impacted their abroad experiences. Participants did not expect feelings associated with loss, isolation, ambivalence, vulnerability, and fear—the realisation of being unable to be close to attachment figures manifested in attachment-seeking behaviours.

Caroline's experiences revealed her dependency on her support system at home. Caroline also noticed this and appeared to feel embarrassed. Attempts to show attachment-seeking behaviours (fainting on the plane, calling her parents via WIFI on her flight to the UK requesting to go back). She explained,

*I know some people are less bothered by leaving family and stuff like that and are independent, but I've grown a very strong bond with all my family and friends, my boyfriend, and everything like that. So, that was very difficult for me. It was just basically… like fear of being by myself without my support system close by.*

Caroline's statement that people are *'less bothered by leaving family and stuff'* revealed how she perceived herself among her peer group. She attempts to offer a rationale for her dependency on her family. Their proximity and limited availability due to time zone differences became a daunting reality, which she ruminated about constantly while abroad. Their absence produced insecurities which resulted in her wanting to return home soon after arriving.

Edward experienced ambivalence towards his parents; he acknowledged how much they loved and did for him but then described them as persecutory. This also felt like an unconscious attempt by Edward to lure me into a transaction to rescue him from a hypothetical Drama Triangle (Karpman, 1968). He described below how his thinking became entangled with his parents thinking. He said;

*…I wasn't doing anything wrong, but it did feel like it kind of had that overprotective strict parent mindset…*

Edward's love/hate relationship with his parents sometimes made him feel guilty. He experienced them as 'good parents' – whom he loved, supported him, and allowed him to study abroad. However, he hated them because they monitored him and treated him like a child.

Edward has a sense of duty to be a good son. Despite being an excellent student and confident with his sexuality. He feared his parents finding out he was gay and not the son they would want. The absence of communication on this subject fuelled his thoughts. While abroad, Edward reflected on and considered his relationship with his father. He said,

*…I was kind of thinking if my sexuality had anything to do with the reason, me and my dad and have been so distant in the past… my sexuality is kind of a barrier between me and my relationship with my dad. I haven't dived deeper into this since I've been home just because I've been too afraid to test the waters, to be honest.*

Tony's realisation that his emotional state was linked to the pressures he experiences has motivated him to get help. He describes a dialogue with his mother below as a stepping-stone to getting professional help.

*… I'm still talking to my mom…about talking to someone about my anxiety to see if we can do something about it….*

Tony dreaded being different to his peers. The study abroad setting illuminated these differences when his strategies to produce excellent work needed to be revised. Tony felt exposed. Tony's parents accompanied him to the UK. and stayed for a week. During his flight, Tony became sick and needed medical care on his arrival and a few weeks later. During this time, I got to know Tony, arranged medical appointments, and supported him through this time.

## Defendedness

Participants showed various defences, including the use of humour to protect and minimise experiences of difficulties. In contrast, others diverted their conversation away from the topic, shrugged their shoulders and smiled, saying, 'that's it, really, nothing else to say', or stopped the interview and left the room before returning to the interview. Some participants held their laptops close to their faces, which offered a limited view. In addition, narratives contained inconsistencies and contradictions, describing their experiences and then u-turning on their experience, more so when the context [returned to the US] had changed.

## Avoidance – the American Smile – Humour

Sandra smoothed over the impacts of her hospitalisation experience, thinking she would be attacked by a man with a gun and her court appearance in the eight weeks she studied abroad by smiling throughout the interview. She maintained that the only difficulty she experienced while abroad was being sent home early due to the emergence of the pandemic. She framed her experiences by saying,

*…everything kind of every struggle had a silver lining…*

Throughout her interview, Sandra refrained from connecting her experience to the original emotions in which she had experienced the above incidents. Instead, she offered a descriptive account while smiling throughout the

interview. I re-immersed myself in the data and noticed that when I opened the interview with my first question, she said under her breath, 'Oh Christ' while smiling; the smile gave an incongruent message from what she uttered under her breath. Sandra's view of her study abroad experiences seemed to deny her experiences. Instead, she held on to a positive view of her experiences which seemed to wipe away the unwanted impact which she experienced.

Caroline also showed a nervous smile and slight delay when answering questions throughout the interview. Each time she spoke, she often minimised the content of her experience. The short duration of the interview, which lasted 5 minutes 57 seconds and then, after a prompt, extended to 7 minutes 17 seconds, seemed to reflect an uncomfortable aspect of the interview. During the interview, Caroline's dog entered her bedroom just before I asked, *'You said earlier that your biggest struggle was the shock of being halfway across the world. Do you remember any particular details about that time particularly strongly?'* She replied, *Can you hear my dog, Alfie?*

Caroline's dog jumped up on her, and for a moment, she looked relieved. Then, she answered and repeated what she had said earlier about feeling like she could not get home to see her family and being overwhelmed by this. I asked if she could recall anything else, and she replied, 'Not really' then a silence occurred.

I asked another question, and Caroline concluded by summarising what she had said earlier and added that she felt worse when she was alone or when she was not distracting herself. She looked at the camera, laughed, then stared away from the camera for a moment and then returned her gaze to me. The interview ended at 36 minutes 51 seconds.

Tony held his laptop close to his face, which offered a limited view of him during the interview. He framed his difficulties as gentle complaints followed by suggestions on how the study abroad could improve their service for future students. He described his anxiety, and when he spoke, he became animated, running his hand through his hair, holding his hand on top of his head, and further running his hand over his head and down the back of his neck. He finished by pulling his hair to the front of his head. These animations became noticeable while he narrated a difficult narrative, mainly the pervasive impact of his anxiety. When he stopped talking, he rested his index finger on his cheek, stared away from the camera and paused for ten seconds. He appeared to reflect and consider what he had expressed and documented in the interview. After the long pause, he introduced another topic unrelated to his anxiety and reverted to mediocre complaints about the program.

Michelle referred to not telling anyone if you experience difficulties while abroad. Like the other participants, Michelle belongs to Generation Z, a

generation familiar with technology and uses social media to communicate and show others their lives.

*…I think that, well, obviously, when someone goes abroad, you don't sit and tell your friends or anyone else who's going about all of your struggles there and you only like put on social media at your good times…*

Michelle's conscious defence for only showing others a life that demonstrates perfection and idealism was pertinent across all participants. While all participants did share a personal narrative of their difficulties, their stories were sandwiched between positive experiences and reflections on how they would put their experiences to positively shape future scenarios.

## Summary of Findings

This chapter's findings reveal similarities and differences in participants' narrated experiences. For example, participants spoke about surface difficulties with ease, referring to educational system differences between the US and UK and interpersonal relationships abroad and at home that produced unexpected challenges. However, the BNIM interview revealed the deeper narratives of participants; these included references to mental health symptoms and wider contexts such as the higher education system and separation from their families.

The study abroad context per se influenced participants' expectations of the opportunity. When their expectations did not materialise, participants'

thinking conflicted with their realities. During the interview, participants showed conscious and unconscious defences to protect their prior illusion of what studying abroad entailed. Their use of defences, such as humour, denial, and avoidance, for example, was used to protect themselves against feelings of personal weakness and shame. Although participants were transitioning between late adolescence to early adulthood, their dependence on their loved ones emerged when challenged abroad.

Most participants showed attachment-seeking behaviours when faced with personal difficulties. However, below the surface, narratives revealed participants ongoing mental health issues, ranging from anxiety to previous suicide attempts. These findings demonstrate the pressures experienced from wider contexts and how these impact participants' emotional states, especially while away from the containment of their families.

These findings have implications for study abroad programs striving to understand and meet the needs of future students. Therefore, the next chapter elaborates on the findings using systemic and psychosocial ideas and concepts.

# Chapter Six: Discussion

## Chapter overview

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. The discussion presents a within- and cross-case analysis, offering examples of the similarities and differences between participants. This analysis is reviewed in the context of relevant research and theory, particularly systemic and psychosocial concepts. Finally, this discussion focuses on participants' lived experiences, narratives and specific contexts which influenced participants' study abroad semester.

## Research summary

Research interviews were originally planned to take place at the semester's midpoint to capture data in the here-and-now whilst participants were experiencing difficulties. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns starting in March 2020, only eight weeks of the semester went ahead; and on 13 March 2020, all students were repatriated to the US. As previously mentioned, this was an unprecedented time which involved heightened anxieties about individuals health and safety, practical arrangements related to repatriation to the US, continuing education and what would be possible, and my own trepidation of continuing my research project alongside protecting my health and returning home safely to my

family (two hundred miles away) in Wales. Shortly after the return of the students I returned home. Not long after travel and borders had begun to close, movement between countries and across the world became restricted.

This study aimed to explore the narratives of American study-abroad students with a particular focus on challenges and struggles experienced abroad. A key consideration of this research was for participants to feel comfortable sharing their difficulties without their stories identifying them. For this to happen, participants were told at the outset that this research was an independent doctoral study and was unrelated to the university. In addition, participants were told that their stories would not be shared with the main institution in the US.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model generated loose themes. As the data began to take form, Cooper's (2014) inductive method, asking questions about the data, developed higher-order, 2019 meanings and conceptualisation of the data.

Theme one, Academic Tensions, revealed difficulties linked to pedagogy, resources and learning abroad. Theme two, Interpersonal Relationships, revealed participants' difficulties in living with others and the co-dependent relationships between participants and their families in both directions.

Theme three revealed difficulties described as Emotional Uncertainty linked to identity, escapism, and the pathologizing of experiences. Theme four revealed difficulties linked to and termed The Gestalt. This theme widened the participants' narratives to include their experiences, circumstances, situated difficulties (Wengraf, 2019) and the concept of the defended subject (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.17). Higher-order analysis revealed the impact of social and cultural contextual influences on participants' lived experiences.

Participants openly shared their stories within the themes of Academic Tension and Interpersonal Relationships. These narratives were conceptualised as surface narratives (link to where this is explained). However, a higher-order analysis revealed contextual influences, which influenced participants' thinking to feel pressured to succeed and fear failure within academia.

On the other hand, stories captured in Emotional Uncertainty and The Gestalt themes seemed more difficult for participants to narrate. Consequently, these narratives are conceptualised as deeper narratives, which means narratives provide particularly rich and deep information about participant difficulties that were not linked to the study abroad provision.

## Research questions and researcher context

The central research question asked how American students narrate the challenges and struggles they experienced while studying abroad. When participants were asked to discuss their difficulties confidentially, I sensed an initial apprehension in them. Having worked within the study abroad setting, I had often overheard conversations between staff and some students enquiring how students were enjoying studying abroad. What I sometimes heard followed a predictable pattern; students would reply saying how fantastic their experience was, what they loved about it and what plans they had to travel across the UK and Europe. Everyone was happy and satisfied, and these types of conversations repeated every semester. As such, I began to hypothesise about the differences between public and private conversations I had had with students in the health and wellbeing room. I began to consider the concept of the defended subject and how this felt particularly relevant as the students' narratives appeared to be influenced by social and cultural idealism.

Dominant narratives suggesting that studying abroad should be the best time of your life can be displaced when students experience unexpected difficulties. This can lead to conflicts between inner and outer realities related to studying abroad. Defences against unexpected experiences are managed with defence mechanisms which protect against anxieties. These defence mechanisms aim to project anxieties onto someone or an organisation, or they can protect and maintain original fantasies.

Well-being sessions at the university campus gave students a safe space to talk about their difficulties. This service was used for emergencies or regular chats with students. There was no waiting list. Students could walk in or plan regular weekly sessions. As a safety precaution for everyone, including the organisation, students were told that sessions were not counselling or confidential. Despite this, students used the service to share their difficulties. Their concerns ranged from adjustment issues to being part of different systems and environments, tiredness and homesickness. In addition, this space contained their emotional state. It was common for students to disclose mental health diagnoses relating to anxiety, depression, eating disorders or alcohol substance use (Lucas, 2009; Poyrazli, 2020, Pederson et al., 2010).

In the extreme, students experienced thoughts of suicide, attempts to commit suicide, substance-induced psychotic episodes, and detainment under the Mental Health Act 1983. Karen Leggett's (2012) paper highlights that mental health issues accompany students when they study abroad. Her paper urges study abroad facilities to prepare to support students with varying psychological problems. According to data from the American College Health Association Spring 2019, 30% of students (n = 67,972 students) had experienced overwhelming anxiety in the last two weeks, with only 6% being diagnosed and treated with medications and psychotherapy.

Students used the non-counselling safe space as a therapy room. In addition, the senior management team at the university met once a week to discuss 'students of concern'. The concern was defined as students who used the service and had emotional–mental health problems impacting their ability to study or the safety of themselves or others. When a student presented as a significant risk to themselves or others, a meeting was immediately convened with senior management at the university in the US.

A central underlying principle of this research was my simultaneous role as the well-being practitioner / social worker employed to look after students' physical and emotional well-being. I have worked closely with students and parents in the US and professionals for over five years. During this time, I have witnessed several students' difficulties, and as such, this research feels close to me, a practice-near (Cooper, 2018, p. 192) project. My previous encounters with students in study abroad education changed me, and this current research continues to change me by furthering insights into the twirling emotional experiences of young adults who study abroad.

**Research question**

How do American undergraduates narrate the challenges and struggles experienced while studying abroad?

The research question introduces an 'a priori' assumption. It assumes that difficulties are likely to be experienced, that they are significant and of interest, that the way participants narrate them is of interest, that how they affect participants' emotional state is of interest (Cooper, 2014), and that they include psychosocial influences that illuminate connections between things in the system represented in lived experiences. The sub-questions below support the above assumptions.

**Sub questions**

- What difficulties do participants describe?
- How did studying abroad impact the emotional state?
- What contextual influences impact the study abroad experience?

Sub-questions for this research were interested in participants describing what difficulties they experienced. For example, how relational (interpersonal relationships) affected their experiences and how social and cultural societal narratives (for example, the dominant positive study abroad narrative) sometimes inadvertently silenced them from seeking or disclosing details about their difficulties. The overall aim of the questions wanted to illuminate Cooper's (2018) concept of the 'persons-in-situation'. This research seeks to understand the dynamic, interchanging lives of young people who study away in a different country for a period and the pressures that influence their lived experience.

## Psychosocial position

The definition of psychosocial in this research project is taken from Andrew Cooper's article 'Hearing the grass grow' (Cooper, 2018, p. 189) and the influence of Florence Hollis's text, Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy (Wood & Hollis, 1990). Cooper writes that this approach to social work practice uses a framework for working with 'persons-in-situation'. This term explains endless binaries of interactions. It explains not just a person or a context but both and, crucially, the third entity produced by the conjunction of the first two. Utilising Cooper's point, this research wanted to understand the student's lived experiences, in a transitional space (study abroad), in difficult spaces between people, between people and their circumstances and histories, between inner and outer worlds of experience, between the individual and the family and wider influencing systems and the interaction between the past, present and future (Cooper, 2018, p. 3).

## Recap of findings

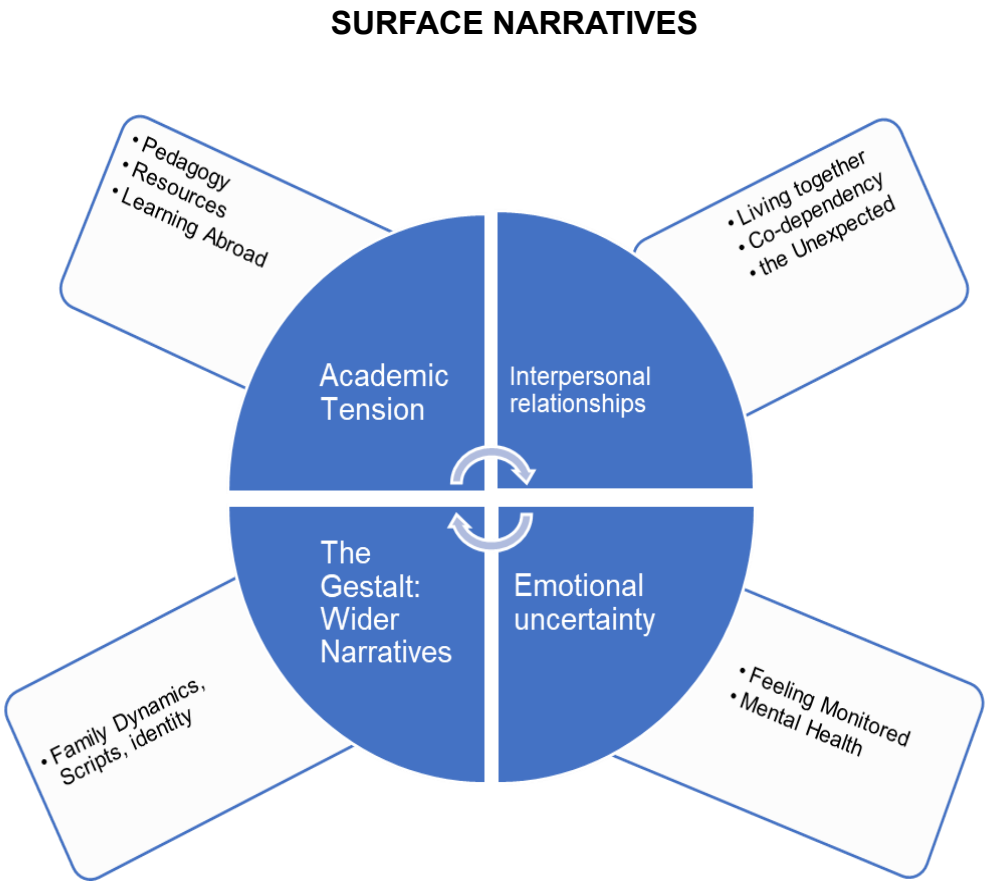
The findings of this project sit outside a positivistic research frame in which truths are said to be discovered. Instead, participants' narratives are stories captured at a specific time in their lives after a specific experience. The findings of this research have answered the question(s) that sought the student experience(s) outside of the well-documented positive frame usually associated with studying abroad. Educational benefits from study abroad

experiences are well documented (Salisbury, Paulsen & Pascarella, 2011; Trower & Lehmann, 2017).

Students' experiences were favourable. Instead, this research wants to integrate and open a dialogue about students' vulnerabilities, seeking to understand the participant's experiences through psychosocial and psychosocietal (Wengraf, 2019, p. 211) lenses.

Participant narratives described challenges and struggles, categorised into four main themes – Academic Tension, Interpersonal Relationships, Emotional Uncertainty and The Gestalt: Contextual Narratives. The organisation of data into themes served to simplify the findings for the reader and assisted in the data analysis to establish core themes and higher-order themes. In addition, this arrangement established a meta-perspective and included unseen factors that affected the student's experiences.

**Figure 13:** Four main themes and their sub-themes



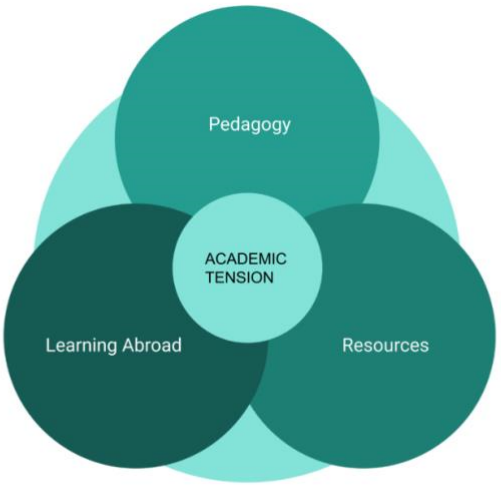

Note: Participants' narratives are framed within the surface and deeper narratives. The themes of academic tension and interpersonal relationships contained stories that seemed easily shared; therefore, they were called surface narratives. As the name suggests, a deeper narrative contained more emotional narratives that were not easily shared and contained wider contextual issues. The next three sections explore the sub-questions using systemic and psychosocial concepts and ideas.

SECTION ONE: What difficulties do participants describe?

Present: challenges in transitional spaces

The transition from the US to the UK brought unexpected challenges linked to learning abroad. The challenges included unfamiliarity with the UK pedagogic system, workload, study abroad distractions (Walsh & Walsh, 2018) and returning early due to COVID-19 (Pedersen et al., 2021). In addition, participants' accounts revealed challenges linked to differences between the US and UK educational systems, which fuelled worries about maintaining grades abroad. Furthermore, the pressure to maintain grades was intrinsically linked to participant academic funding, scholarships, internships, degree classification and graduation date.

**Figure 14:** Academic Tension and its sub-themes




Note: This theme revealed participants' descriptions of the difficulties experienced related to the academic infrastructure on the abroad campus.

Michelle opted out of a class at the first opportunity due to the heavy workload. She explained how she felt as if she had 'dodged a bullet' when she stated how her roommate, who had remained in the class, had 'drowned in work the entire semester'. Michelle's descriptive language about the possibility of being shot ('as an American') describes a life-or-death situation, where she explains how she survived by anchoring a plan. Although assumptions about the amount of academic work were shared across participants, participants showed resourcefulness and confidence in discovering a way through their
difficulties.

Sandra felt they needed to learn how to produce excellent work in the UK. She initially blamed her professor for the ambiguous feedback she received in class. She had anticipated he would grade her harshly. Combined with the new learning environment, her feelings of inadequacy developed. However, despite her concerns, she achieved an A grade in this class and was thrilled. Sandra's mention of her experience confused me, and I wondered why she had included it as an example of a challenge. I hypothesised that she wanted to fit her narrative around what I was interested in. At a less-than-conscious level, this suggested the idea of projective identification (Klein, 1946), where thoughts and feelings from one part of the system emerge in other parts of the system through projective and introjected processes.

Overall, participants had not anticipated encountering academic difficulties. They assumed the academic systems and workloads would be the same or perhaps less than the academic demands in the US (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). For example, Tony asked his professor to check his work before submitting it for assessment. When his professor refused to collude with Tony, he panicked. Tony often asked professors in the US to check his work, which he said was never a problem. I sensed the impact on Tony; his usual safety net had been removed in the UK. Panicked by the possibility of his grades being lowered, which formed part of his academic transcript, he switched to a pass/fail option in the class. By switching, he relieved the worry and safeguarded his GPA, which is impacted by his degree classification/grade.

Participants were bewildered by the heavy workloads abroad (Pitts, 2009). They had assumed that all the curricula for studying abroad would be adjusted (Walsh & Walsh, 2018) to accommodate the extracurricular and experiential learning opportunities. Jeremy resented spending so much time completing assignments and group tasks, which, in his eyes, prevented him from experiential learning in the city. His expectations of studying abroad as a final year architecture student conflicted with his study abroad idealisation. He became disillusioned and stressed. His grades might be lowered because of the difficulty balancing academics with experiential learning opportunities, including travel. In another case, Michelle assumed studying abroad would be 'a joke, a walk in the park'. When she experienced challenges related to her learning, she considered how concrete solutions

such as a 24-hour library available in the US would have allowed her to complete her work. Her fantasy about accessing a 24-hour study facility would also help her to study harder during the week, which would free up time to travel on weekends. When she realised there was no resource, the demands of coursework deadlines and travelling each weekend became stressful and overwhelming. In addition, when her relationship deteriorated with her roommate, Michelle wished for a safe space, which she suggested could have been a 24-hour library.

Participants were also concerned about the absence of specific resources, such as an LGBTQiA+ club, a well-being centre and a 24-hour library. They feared the absence of clubs would negatively impact their ability to produce excellent work and maintain academic standards and well-being. It suggests that participants viewed non-academic avenues as complimenting other facets of student life, ensuring overall well-being. Edward shared his past experiences of anxiety and depression. He explained how he visited a counsellor at the home campus each week, which he believed was crucial to managing his mental health while studying. Bathke and Kim's (2016) study offers insight into how unexpected difficulties abroad can prompt the onset of anxiety or depression. Worryingly, this study revealed that 8.3% of students reported experiencing a mental health issue while abroad, and 92% reported NOT seeking help.

Participants' expectations of the studying abroad facilities and resources were related to what they had been accustomed to at their home campus and at times to what they had expected. Participants studied at a private university, which demanded high fees. Expectations for resources, teaching and facilities were commensurate with what they expected for the cost of the study abroad semester. Private universities in the US are multiple billion-dollar businesses, which explains the similarities in participants' expectations and behaviours. Jeremy had expectations about the school refunding his fees due to the course being suspended due to the pandemic. He argued he had paid for a specific experience, which had not materialised; therefore, he felt his views were justified in his mind.

When participants compared their home university to the study abroad satellite campus, they appeared disappointed that the facilities differed significantly from the main campus. Negotiating these transitions appeared to destabilise participants' inner thoughts about how they would cope abroad. Participants' narratives contained a discourse similar to a service provider and a consumer's dialogue and expectancy.

Participants' accounts indicated a fear of failure. Not achieving the required grade was linked to personal shame. Expectations from parents and peers seemed interwoven with these fears. Participants spoke about reputations being ruined and ‘dodging bullets’, while others ‘drown in work’ and being

unable to gain internships or employment after graduation weighed on their minds. The opposite of failure was success. Attending a private university may hold implicit expectations linked to success, especially when well-known celebrities and politicians have studied at the university.

For example, Tony mentioned that his reputation would be ruined if he was 'marked down'. His frustration with different academic systems created anxiety that complicated his linear perspective of how to be successful in producing good work. His fear eclipsed his plan by introducing another possibility: failure. Failure would jeopardise his internship after the semester and his later job opportunities. Everything was sequentially linked; therefore, there was no space for diversions or complications. Ironically, Tony's focus on grades also seemed to steal the joy of learning, but he did not appear to notice.  At times, Tony appeared to be lost, his anxious state was observable. His focus on success appeared to play a part in his internalised persona and his fear of failure appeared to be an external reality if he didn’t get good grades

Aspirations associated with the developmental stage - adolescence to early adulthood, can often mean a separation from family home and parents, sometimes physically, or psychologically or emotionally or at times all of these. This type of separation is associated with transitions from late childhood into early adulthood. This period can be associated with discourses and narratives related to self-discovery, independent thinking

and decision-making. Decisions may include selecting a university or choosing to study abroad or a chosen career pathway.

A life course perspective Glen Elder, (1986) helps us to understand the psychological, social and physical factors that are affected by life events. One of the basic concepts of the life course perspective is the concept of transition and life events.

Erik Erikson is an influential theorist of emotional development. He viewed the process of development as a series of crises where individuals are faced with negotiating difficult, often conflicting demands to maintain a developmental trajectory, which he called the epigenetic model of development. Erikson looked at adolescence as a period of identity formation and separation from adults, parents or caretakers (Hazen, et al, 2008).

Margot Waddell (2002) offers a psychoanalytic perspective to understand the developmental stage of adolescence. She suggests the constant presence of anxiety as young people attempt to discover who they are, and to define themselves in the world, can arouse defences such as splitting and projection.

The student's aspirations to achieve and be successful in education appeared to be part of the academic fabric of a private, high-cost institution's script and perhaps supported by the university’s professors and students. Socially unconscious projections of anxiety and uncertainty by

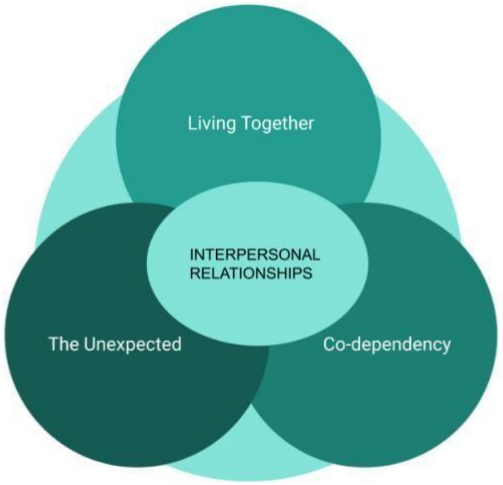
students can create a vacuum of wants, needs and desires relating to academic achievement and success. When participants' experiences are incongruent with what is in their minds, they experience internal conflicts. These are intensified by being away from home, homesickness, academic demands, interpersonal relationships, and previous or new experiences of mental ill health. The absence of usual networks and usual ways of experiencing and doing things are now inverted.

When participants' external reality materialised and differed in their minds abroad, they introduced unthought and unknown possibilities related to not managing grades. For example, failing or lowering grades revealed a fear of failure among peers, linked to personal shame.

Present: Difficult spaces [voids] between people

Participants revealed that their interpersonal relationships with friends, peers and parents created unexpected challenges and struggles abroad. Problems varied among participants. However, the core of the participants' difficulties stemmed from co-dependencies, homesickness and problematic interpersonal relationships with others. In addition, living together in small spaces tested their ability to compromise and respect differences.

**Figure 15:** Interpersonal Relationships and their sub-themes




Note: This theme represented aspects of interpersonal relationships experienced while studying abroad. Relationships between roommates, parents and loved ones were examined.

Edward described feeling homesick for his friends rather than his family. Later in the interview, Edward redacted his above statement saying that he did miss his family and that, on reflection, he had felt mean for saying what he had earlier. He explained he feared an episode of depression recurring, particularly in the absence of his friends. Edward explained how his friends at college saved him from taking pills, and since then, he has relied on them to keep him safe. Edward's worry about the absence of a counselling and wellbeing centre abroad became clearer. I wondered about Edward's reasoning for relying on others to keep him safe when he had travelled without his friends. Studying abroad offered Edward something liberating, a change from dependency to developing his agency to keep himself safe. For example, through conversations, he used what was available on the abroad campus (me) to rid himself of his distress.

Michelle's unexpected struggle with her roommate became unmanageable; she stopped returning to the flat and limited activities with her flatmates. Michelle said this experience revealed something unfamiliar to her about herself. She described how she had become passive. Her openness to exploring life abroad with her friends reduced, and she felt she mentally withdrew. She developed a gross disappointment in herself, disheartened by not doing what she had set out to do abroad and what came to fruition. Her study abroad experience was not enjoyable, and she had not told anyone. I sensed Michelle and the other students acknowledged the opportunity to study abroad was a privilege. Complaining about their

experiences felt disrespectful and ungrateful, which certainly was not the case.

Aware that her peers viewed her as a strong individual who would not be thrown off guard, Michelle did not want to reveal how she was not coping with her experiences. Michelle's poor experiences centred on the problematic dynamic with her friend and roommate. The study abroad space and context changed the rhythm of their interactions, and their problems spiralled when they could not unpack their disagreements or reach a compromise.

Returning home after eight weeks of the semester, Michelle felt defeated. The power dynamic between her roommate affected everything. For example, her sleep pattern and inability to stay in the flat conflicted with planning trips to Europe. In the paradoxical situation, when she did not follow the demands of others, she felt guilty, and when she complied, she felt weak. The overall situation became ego-defeating. Michelle modified her original fantasy of studying abroad, being a 'walk in the park, a joke' to refocusing on returning home and removing herself from what became an untenable situation.

Past: Difficult spaces [voids] between people

Co-dependencies and separation anxieties between participants and their loved ones created unforeseen difficulties. Separation anxiety has historically been an issue in childhood; the DSM-V (2013) has since updated the diagnosis to include adults. General symptoms include a fear of being separated from loved ones or people we perceive as a source of safety and connection. For example, being 3,500 miles away from home created an escape for some, but for others, including parents, the space created a void. Sometimes adjusting to an unfamiliar environment is described as culture shock, a normal developmental phase of adjusting to a new cultural environment (Prince, 2015, p. 5). Most adjustment issues are overcome within a few weeks. However, the semester's suspension after eight weeks may indicate that an interruption may have impacted participants' lived experiences too.

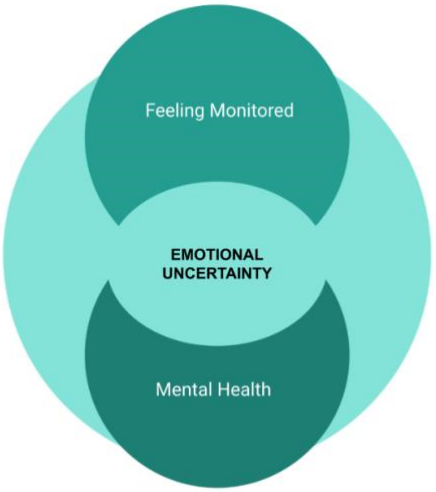
## SECTION TWO: Does studying abroad impact the emotional state?

This section considers the participants' experiences concerning their challenges and struggles and how their experiences impacted their emotional state.

### Vulnerable states

Participants described their emotional states by using mental health terms and diagnoses. Mental health terms such as anxiety, panic attack, depression, sleep deprivation and worries about thoughts of and attempts of suicide re-emerging were used by participants. Participants were familiar with these health terms and used them to pathologize their emotions. The familiarity with mental health allowed participants to make sense of their experience and did not seek any other rationale. Participants appeared satisfied with the certainty of their linear explanation (mental health) for their difficulties. The strength of their simple rationale limited conversations and thinking about other possibilities.

**Figure 16:** Emotional Uncertainty and its sub-themes




Note: This diagram shows the intersections between mental health and feelings of being monitored, which impacted participants' emotional states.

When participants' experiences were poor or unwanted, there appeared to be a sense of uncertainty about whether their experiences implied a personal weakness. Mental health terms, like a coat hanger, were used to hang participants' distress descriptions. For example, Michelle described how she stocked up on melatonin when she arrived in the UK, knowing her history of a poor sleep regime. She described her roommate's refusal to close the bedroom curtains at night, which exacerbated Michelle's sleeplessness, physically and mentally depleting her. She described her experiences of difficulties related to her roommate and said she had 'random panic attacks'. Confused by what she had expected and how her reality differed, she has, on the one hand, 'missed aspects of London', but

stated, 'with the amount of anxiety it [study abroad] gave me as a whole, I did not know if I could go through the experience again'.

Tony became animated when he began talking about his anxiety, running his hand through his hair as he held his arm on the top of his head. He paused, looked away from the camera, and stared into space as if thinking about his situation. When he narrates the word anxiety, he finds it difficult to pronounce and cuts the word in half. It sounds like he is saying 'anx, to see'. After a pause, he quickly described a positive experience when he went on a school trip to Spain. Tony struggled to talk about the realisation and presence of anxiety in his life. It was too painful to sit with during the interview, displacing his previous story with a positive one.

At times, Tony presented as if he was unready to venture beyond the home, beyond his familial comfort zone. His emotions centred on success and failure, as he described his relationship with anxiety and how he overthinks things but never speaks about his situation to anyone. His dependency on his parents at his age is not unusual (Elder, 1986) and looping his parents into deciding to get help for his anxiety may be connected to insurance policy coverage and the private health care system in the US. Ironically, Tony describes a conversation with his mom about seeking outside help for his anxiety. 'I am still talking to my mom…about talking to someone about

my anxiety'. Interestingly, Tony's solution for his anxiety is immediately located outside the family, not within the family.

I found it challenging to hear Tony's story and how he had pathologized and internalised his problems. In attempting to understand his problem (anxiety), he drew on memories of middle school. There appeared to be little confidence in him besides succeeding in a semester abroad. I began to consider Tony's distress as an attachment-seeking behaviour. And I wondered how he experienced being parented. Tony had located his anxiety in him; therefore, he had not considered a relational aetiology. The transition to university is a transition for all members of the family. I hypothesised about Tony's situation and how he attempted to negotiate his autonomy away from his parents, experiencing difficulties as he searched for assistance from others regularly.

The social construction of what young people need to do to be successful is familiar with family scripts and broader cultural and social expectations. I wondered if Tony's parents projected their fantasy of an American Dream onto him. Tony's situation seemed connected to a broader 'American Dream'. I drew parallels with Arthur Miller's play The Death of a Salesman. The main character, Willy Loman, projects a fantasy of fake dreams to his children that anyone can become a superstar. First coined in the book Epic of America (1931), the concept of the American Dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their version of success in a society in which upward mobility

is possible for everyone. Unfortunately, the faith in the American capitalist system of hard work resulting in success sometimes eclipsed Tony's joy of learning.

Tony felt immeasurable pressure to succeed; a relational hypothesis may suggest that sending their son to a private university and attending a study abroad semester, these experiences would produce experiences and opportunities greater than if he had not had them.

Edward described a previous suicide attempt and, while retelling his story, became upset, took a deep sigh and breath, and then, unexpectedly, requested to leave the room. He was worried that he had been overheard talking about his suicide attempt. His parents were unaware of the incident. He was still experiencing his experiences of being watched. I wondered how to make sense of Edward's narrative about his suicide attempt. Early psychoanalytic interest in suicide focuses on the context of the dyadic relationship and its failure between the suicidal young person and their parent. The quote below illuminates how the act of suicide has a purpose, both manifest and unconscious (Hale, 2008, p. 14).

> The child wants to rob his parents of their greatest and most precious his own life. The child knows that thereby he will inflict the greatest pain. Thus, the punishment the child imposes upon himself is simultaneously a punishment he imposes on the instigators of his suffering (Friedman 1967, p. 87 cited in Hale, 2008. P14).

When Edward returned home, his relationship with his father improved significantly. Despite this improvement, Edward still felt unable to disclose his sexuality to his parents. He wanted to enjoy the current harmony in the relationship, stating that 'things had not been that good in ages'. Worryingly, Edward showed aspects of vulnerability while abroad. His core difficulties were entangled in relational expectations and the transgenerational beliefs of his parents. He knew his parents loved him, but their love oppressed his autonomy to be a young gay man.

Edward's parents had emigrated to the US before he was born. His family had strong family values constructed by their heritage and religion. Edward's superego may reflect his parents' ideals. By hating his parents, he removes his perceived 'sexual' self. Ironically, Edward's dependency on his parents appeared gratifying only when he presented his compliant false self to them – a good boy as a defence against parental intrusiveness (Dallos, 2004). Edward's parents' ideals represented their cultural and religious identities; their attempts to transfer these to Edward made him feel like an inadequate son. Despite being an A-grade student, Edward sometimes felt inadequate, creating confusion and ambivalent feelings toward his parents.

Edward's way of dealing with his difficulties, abroad or at home, was to not speak about them to his parents. As a result, his parents were unaware of his attempt to take his life or that he was gay. Edward had decided to deny

his family the possibility to respond to his difficulties. His decision was based on experiences of the family script. He feared the catastrophic response this would create, and he could not bear the possibility of his parents' rejection. Again, the presence of the American Dream was influencing his experience, as it influenced his parents' desires for success for him. His parents had allowed him to study at a top university, which made him emotionally and financially dependent on his parents. The pulling away from family belief systems, although causing him distress, was something that would come later in his life.

In contrast, Sandra, Caroline and Jeremy did not include any emotional states in their interviews. This was despite previous conversations discussing such states at well-being sessions. Before the interview, Jeremy had commented on a mental disorder diagnosis. Medicated for this illness, he wanted to know my thoughts about individuals who cease pharmaceutical medication to use alternative substances such as shrooms. The expected utopia of study abroad education can result in students stopping their medication, which is well documented.

Participants were familiar with using mental health terms as they described their experiences. However, what seems to have occurred is that dormant or under-control symptoms emerged and amplified when participants were exposed to increased stress abroad. A combination of unexpected incidents triggered feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about an ability to stand

independently of support networks, friends and family. The context of the new educational pressure within an unfamiliar education system was an ingredient in the mixture of confused participant states.

## The Gaze

An unexpected finding was that participants felt monitored while they were abroad. Although participant experiences varied, there was a fundamental similarity of 'being surveilled'. Moreover, participants' thoughts of being watched affected their behaviour, restricting their movements in the city, whom they socialised with and what clothes they wore to lectures.

Edward became preoccupied with thoughts of his parents watching him. Even though he rationalised these experiences, he believed that if his parents could see what he was doing, they would disapprove. His desire to study abroad was motivated by wanting to escape (McCabe, 2005) the hold and gaze of his parents. Edward's father texted and called him all the time. When the COVID19 pandemic emerged, the frequency of the messages increased and became like 'machine-gun messages'. A recurring nightmare where Edward dreamt that he died abroad suggested his father's projections had penetrated Edward's dreams. His attempted separation and individuation from his family did not materialise.

Edward's parents, especially his father, were always anxious and overly present in his life. The term 'helicopter parenting' refers to the excessive engagement of parents hovering around their children to rescue them from hazards and prevent them from experiencing failure. Research has shown that extreme parenting disrupts natural development, leading to behaviour and psychological maladjustment (Ganaprakasman et al., 2018).

Edward responded to his father's projections by angry blaming. During the interview, I sensed Edward felt victimised and oppressed. Edward's position reflected the concept of the Drama Triangle: the victim, the rescuer and the persecutor (Karpman, 1968). The drama triangle maps the destructive interaction between people, and the actors become unconsciously role dependent. Relationships between the victim (Edward) and the rescuer (his mother) can develop into a co-dependency, both becoming enablers of each other in their assumed role within the triangle. Resisting the temptation to be sucked into this narrative vacuum, I considered Edward's experience and the intense demands he experienced from his father. Edward internalised a view of his parents as controlling. He lacked the psychic space or strength to create alternative opinions, especially abroad.

Edward was desperate to transition into adulthood. He may have had a fantasy that suggested adults have more control and stronger decision-making skills. However, he had internalised something significantly

constricting, his 'super ego', which invaded his internal capacity to live out his desires while abroad. So, while he makes progress and 'gets abroad', something happens externally, be it phone calls/intrusion or COVID-19, and this takes him back to being a child again, impacting his progress and resulting in a regressed state.

Systemic theory uses the concept of the family script to make sense of family situations where enactments of parental and child states emerge. For example, Eric Berne describes in his book Games People Play (2016) that the Ego States are the Parent, Adult and Child. He explains the enactment of scripts whereby the communication between individuals reverts to unconscious reactions from internal scripts developed in childhood.

For example, Edward was a first-generation American and the first in his family to attend university. Edward's parents may be living their dreams through their son and overprotecting him was linked to protecting their investment and a desire to feel successful as parents via their son's success. Alternatively, Edward's parents' beliefs represented their experiences of growing up outside America and, therefore, were culturally divergent.

Michelle spoke about lower class numbers compared to large lecture halls in the US and how this exposed her to being seen. Her visibility brought about differences in her daily routine and preparation for attending class, which placed unexpected demands on her. For example, she became conscious of what clothes she wore and what makeup she used. She said this was different from how she usually attended lectures at the main campus.

Jeremy became preoccupied with the surveillance of CCTV and the 5G network while in the city. He feared being a victim of mistaken identity or being caught up in something illegal while travelling. Jeremy explained how he felt monitored by CCTV and the 5G network while walking around his host city. His preoccupation with feeling surveilled made him feel vulnerable and exposed.

Interviewing Jeremy, an architecture student, I thought of Jeremy Bentham's (1786) controversial prison structure, a simple architecture known as the 'panopticon'. The prison design placed prisoners in separate transparent cells around the outer ring of a circular prison built around a central inspection tower. The structure allows a constant and perfect view of all inmates, while blinds at the tower's windows make it impossible for prisoners to see when they are being watched (Harris-Birtill, 2015).

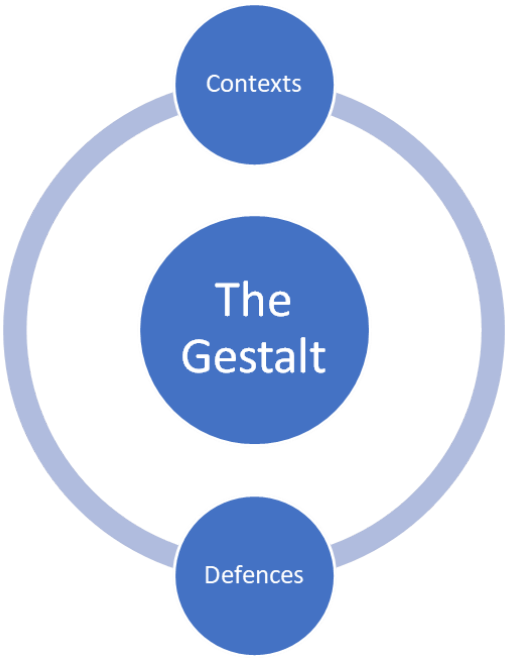
Michel Foucault's interpretation of Bentham's panopticon structure focuses critically on the prison's architecture and how panopticons could lead to a dehumanising method of control. In Discipline and Punish (1975), Foucault uses the term panopticism to warn how 'the Panopticon presents as a cruel, ingenious cage' whose surveillance-based discipline and control 'spread throughout the whole social body' (pp. 205–209).

Somehow, participants had internalised the fear of being watched. Michelle's experiences were at a self-conscious level, Edward's were constructed by a mystical Old Testament teaching, and Jeremy's were brought about by a broader societal constraint, a Big Brother-like control. As such, participants' identity was linked to their perceptions of their confidence and agency.

SECTION THREE: What contexts impact the study abroad experience?

This section discussed the wider influencing factors that impacted participants' abroad experiences. Factors include dominant narratives about studying abroad, perception of self within a different context, the influence of family scripts and personal narratives related to separation from significant others.

**Figure 17:** The Gestalt represents the emergence of contexts and defences from participants' deeper narratives




Note: Participant narratives were shaped by wider influencing systems, such as dominant positive narratives of study abroad education.

**Study abroad, dominant narrative and cultural discourse**

This section considers the impact of wider influences, such as dominant positive narratives on studying abroad shared by previous study abroad students, research, university marketing literature and political derivatives. Set against the backdrop of study abroad positiveness, this study paid particular attention to participant narratives that support and undermine some of the dominant discourse found in established research and commentary on study abroad (refs). The idea of the social unconscious assumes that hidden myths or dominant narratives guide the behaviour of groups such as students who study abroad.

Studying abroad is a specific context which has a dominant narrative. According to this narrative, there are diverse benefits to studying in a different country, which include global competence, learning about cross-cultural sensitivity (Dwyer & Peters, 2004) and adaptability (Sutton & Rubin, 2004) mentioning a few. However, when narratives differ from the dominant narrative, it is important to represent a counter-narrative so that students' lived experiences are included. The presence of a counter-narrative allows deviations from a stronger narrative, creates a balance and represents the minority. However, like buying clothes off the shelf, we attempt to fit our experiences into available narratives (Dallos & Draper, 2015, p. 96).

Foucault (1975) proposed that society contains a repertoire of dominant narratives that shape our thinking and experience, how we think about ourselves and inner conversations and how we interact with one another. This study found that dominant narratives shaped participants' expectations of studying abroad, which then aided in silencing participants when their lived experiences differed from what they believed should happen and when compared to what everyone else was experiencing. Furthermore, the absence of a counter-narrative (alternative or contradictory) meant that when participants experienced difficulties, they struggled to make sense of their experiences.

Whilst going abroad with her college friends, Michelle did not expect to feel homesick and was excited to explore the unexplored. However, despite other students' strong positive narratives and cultural discourse, Michelle needed help to implement all of what she had hoped to do abroad. First, she described feelings of oppression and disrespect from her roommate. Her inability to cope was amplified by how she thought others perceived her; they saw her as a strong character. This experience frustrated and confused her, resulting in her questioning her identity. Michelle's confusion continued when she received the news of the study abroad program closing. Overjoyed by the news, she felt guilty for feeling happy for wanting to go home. This ending was markedly different to the one she had anticipated at the beginning of the semester. Again, the more an ideal

narrative does not materialise as expected, the more guilt and distress individuals experience (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

Michelle's experiences revealed something she was unfamiliar with, a more sensitive and passive self who differed from how others saw her. Michelle attempted to figure out a way through her difficulties using linear strategies. Her roommate was the problem (not her) and attempts to resolve or compromise on situations leaned towards her roommate making changes. The conflict between Michelle's internal representations of what life abroad should look like and her subjective reality dominated her lived experiences. Her attempts to reconcile the two depleted her energies. This resulted in repeating more of the same to resolve the difficulties between her and her roommate. As such, this strategy sustained and maintained their differences and problems.

In the absence of interviewing Michelle's roommate, I considered hypothesising about the roommate's behaviours and actions. Michelle disclosed how her roommate missed her family, had terrible homesickness and spoke to her family for extended lengths of time on the phone to alleviate her distress. In attempts to surround herself with others, her roommate would ask flatmates to accompany her on trips and stay in expensive hotels, always suggesting that the reason was linked to her parent's requests to protect herself. This, at times, placed financial strain on

others as their disposable funds differed. Furthermore, this created additional tensions within the whole flat. A psychosocial lens would suggest that Michelle's roommate projected her feelings of inadequacy and weakness onto Michelle. The interplay of transference and countertransference (Duncan & Elias, 2021) communications may have also revealed other unwanted feelings, which had become projected into each other. Freud (1910) would assert that these dynamics are features of relationships and not only relatable to the analytic situation.

Goffman's book Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959) describes the 'dramaturgical approach', which presents his idea of viewing the self within the social context. Goffman's self-presentation theory proposed that people consciously and unconsciously represent themselves to others in various ways to control their image. According to him,

*We are just actors trying to control and manage our public image and act based on how others might see us (Goffman, 1959, p. 22).*

Goffman's insight into who we are and whom we choose to be within different social contexts seems particularly relevant to students who study abroad. And to participants in this study. The familiar presentation of American citizens is represented globally as confident, articulate and happy individuals. I wondered about Goffman's theory with young adults, or Generation Z individuals, who publicly share their lives on social media. The pressure to display perfect selves and circumstances is a phenomenon of

the 21st century. Undeniably, the positive frame is the one shared on social media. Difficulties eclipse the benefits, but this is infrequently shared on social media or with peers.

While at the beginning of their interviews, most participants stated how they had enjoyed studying abroad, stating positive experiences, participants were keen to discuss counter-narratives and how they had impacted their sense of self and identity.

Context: Study abroad, individual and family systems

Participant narratives emerged as fragmented parts of themselves instead of a holistic picture of the participant's life. However, the fragmented pieces did reveal specific family dynamics/scripts, problem-saturated relationships, co-dependency and mental health diagnoses, which participants described impacted their study abroad experiences.

This study considered participants' problems in a related period regarding family life cycle transitions and changes and stresses from developmental and familial influences (Green, 1986, p. 383). Participant difficulties were viewed in the present, while the interpretation of data may orient toward early experiences of similar problems. This perspective also requires the context of an expected cultural trajectory and timeline for adolescents and

young adults to be prepared physically and emotionally to study abroad in a different county.

Data analysis aimed to combine the fragmented parts of participants' narratives to represent a more holistic picture of the individual and their lived experiences. A cross-case analysis of participants' narratives (Stake, 1995) reveals the presence of anxiety linked to the education system and studying abroad. In addition, the presentation of self and identity and participants' ability to separate or stand-alone from parents and support systems was also considered to be an underlying feature of the presence of anxiety.

Participants' lived experiences were unexpectedly influenced by others, both present and absent. However, all participants viewed studying abroad as a privileged opportunity and a once-in-a-lifetime chance to study and travel outside the US. Linked to the dominant narrative associated with studying abroad, this contextualised view added specific pressures to an already high-pressure education system. Whilst pressures may not have been specifically referred to by participants at the interview, the analysis suggested that participants' hopes for studying abroad were connected explicitly to employment (Tony, Jeremy) within a globalised economy.

Family life cycle transitions

Carter and McGoldrick's (1980) family life cycle model highlights the significance of intergenerational traditions. They propose that patterns of relating and functioning are transmitted down the generations in a family and include all the family attitudes, taboos and expectations.

Caroline's disclosure regarding separation anxiety from her family had previously occurred when she first went away to college. Her experience had repeated when she studied abroad. Caroline's similar experience repeated something similar. I wondered if this was Caroline's plan to overcome her anxieties about being away from her loved ones or if it was her loved ones encouraging her to become more independent. Although Caroline disclosed two incidents (fainting on the plane and requesting to return home), she did not share anything further during the interview. This contrasts with when we met during the well-being sessions. As our roles changed, this produced different data.

Despite her difficulties, Caroline did overcome her struggles and remained abroad. It was evident that Caroline felt embarrassed about her dependency on her family. She also wanted to isolate her unwanted experiences to maintain an unconscious belief and shared fantasy that the study abroad experience, especially for the majority, is positive (Weinberg, 2007). It was

vital for her to be part of the majority as this made her the same as others and nothing different.

Edward's experience of being parented and the relational dynamics between him and his family shaped an inner world with power differences. Edward questioned his complex relationship with his father and wondered if his sexuality had anything to do with it. Edward complained about feeling fearful of his father phoning when he was on a date. The context of Edward making sense of his experiences could be understood using his family life cycle model (Carter and McGoldrick, 1980, p.10). Edward's family script revealed something about the transactions between him and his parents. His parents had emigrated to the US and had religious beliefs that denounce homosexuality as a sin.

Given Edward's parent's migration to the US for a better life, they had made a significant investment in their son to fulfil their dreams and to give him the opportunities they didn't have. What was fascinating was Edward's compliance in answering his parent's phone calls. Although Edward did not always answer their calls, he was frequently compelled to answer. This was despite the phone calls causing him distress. American students still depend primarily on their parents to assist with college fees, which blurs parent-child boundaries. Ordinarily, young adults separate from their parents, but the cost of the education system extends this dependency for both parties. This scenario was particularly relevant for Edward.

Without a chance to meet Edward's parents and hear about their experiences with Edward, including their love and care for him, I hypothesised the reasons for their multiple attempts to communicate with Edward while he was abroad. I hypothesised that this was because he was their only son, whom they had invested in significantly, sending him to a private US university. I wondered if they had suspected anything about his desire to study abroad, gain independence from their gaze, and explore his sexuality. In addition, Edward's potentially life-threatening health condition increased his vulnerability to contracting COVID-19. And so, this reframed view considers his parent's worries and attachment dynamics with their own families, how their attachment needs were responded to and what corrective or replicate scripts they enacted into their current family (Dallos & Draper, 2015. P.143).

Michelle's experience changed her. When she arrived abroad, she was confident and independent. She had anticipated not feeling homesick at all. Instead, after her experience, she longed for the safety and comfort of her home and family life.

## Defences

Participants used a variety of defences throughout their interviews, be it conscious, unconscious or something in between. Familiar defences such

as denial, avoidance, use of humour and distraction techniques were used to protect them against the effects of anxieties linked to the difficulties they experienced while abroad.

Weinberg's (2007) development of the concept of 'social unconscious' seems applicable when considering American study abroad students' experiences in this study. Weinberg suggests that groups behave as if their members have similar elements in their unconscious. These similarities are culturally embedded values and reactions.

Cross-case analysis revealed a common thread where participants opened their conversation with what they enjoyed first, then introduced specific challenges, followed by their struggles and then concluded with a reflection on the positive learning from experiencing difficulties. With their new knowledge, they hoped they could prevent similar situations from repeating or changing their thinking or approach to problems. The order of their narratives, i.e. opening their interviews with everything they enjoyed, was connected to their gratitude and acknowledgement for having gained the opportunity. They seemed conscious that narrating their challenges may be interpreted as a complaint, so they wanted to document the definite positives first.

The above shows how all participants defended against framing their study abroad experience as anything other than compliant with the dominant narrative associated with the study abroad experience. Alternatively, the interviews took place approximately three months after they had returned home, and their narratives reflected this 'out of situation' sentiment.

Oh, Christ!

Continuing to defend against unwanted lived experiences, Sandra reframed her study abroad difficulties as learning experiences. She refrained from telling her story with the same emotion she had experienced at the time. When I asked the opening question at the beginning of the interview, Sandra said the words 'Oh Christ' under her breath while smiling. Neither of us referred to her utterings during the interview. A psychosocial analysis indicated Sandra's nervousness, which she was trying to suppress. Her unwillingness to revisit her struggles during the interview felt performative to adhere to the cultural ideology of positiveness, which transmitted to her study abroad narrative.

Despite being hospitalised, believing a stranger pointed a gun at her and giving evidence in court, her biggest disappointment was going home prematurely. My self-reflexivity drew me to think about why Sandra felt unable to reveal more of her vulnerable narrative in the interview. Her situation had passed, and I was hoping she would relive it so I could document her experiences, which would support a counter-narrative I

seemed eager to show to others. On this occasion, though, Sandra used her agency and autonomy, and the BNIM interview respected her ability to do so.

### Blaming others

Jeremy sat at his PC in his bedroom during the interview. I had suspected that he might be under the influence of cannabis. This was a working hypothesis related to my previous conversations with him. And this narrative began to influence my thinking about why he felt surveilled. Jeremy reported feeling surveilled by CCTV, and he also experienced an intrusion of privacy that impacted his ability to concentrate. Jeremy blamed educational systems and city environments for the difficulties he experienced abroad. However, I was also aware that he was curious about the effects of exchanging prescribed medications for depression for illicit psychoactive drugs. Like most students, Jeremy remained cautious when talking about specific topics, despite the legalisation of cannabis in many US states, because of the fear that such statements could potentially paint him in a negative light down the line.

### Inner and outer experiences

The use of defences seemed prevalent across participants' stories. However, two participants stood out as they tried hard to maintain their fantasy of the ideal study abroad experience. The examples below highlight

inner and outer experiences, defences as strategies to cope with anxieties related to fear of loneliness, homesickness, feelings of inadequacy (Hunley, 2010; Brown & Holloway, 2008) and interpersonal relationship issues (Pavlova, Uher, & Papezova, 2008).

Sandra smiled, nodded and looked performatively engaged throughout the interview. She used humour and laughter to lighten the retelling of her story. As she omitted the painful aspects of her experience, I hypothesised that laughter and humour might have been used as a defence. Sandra's overall description of her abroad challenges reflects Pollyanna's principle. Taken from Eleanor Porter's book of the same title, Pollyanna's principle refers to an absolute sublimation of positivism. In the book, Pollyanna is a cheerful and optimistic girl who always looks on the bright side. Despite Sandra's negative experiences, she expressed that 'every struggle had a silver lining'. It was as if she could not verbally pair anything negative with her study abroad experience. Again, there were similar representations of turning negative experiences into positives when participants offered their reflections on their study abroad lived experiences. Matlin and Stang's study (1978) explained that 'cognitive processes selectively favour processing of pleasant over unpleasant information' (Matlin & Stang, 1978, p.4).

I noticed a dominant strand of discourse that supported the wholly positive narrative of studying abroad. Despite her difficulties abroad, Sandra refrained from sharing her stories as she experienced them at the time.

Instead, she glossed over them. The omnipresent American smile is mentioned in Jean Baudrillard's (1986) book *America*, where he describes the permeating American smile that 'signifies only the need to smile. Like a Cheshire Cat's grin: it continues to float on the face log after all emotion has disappeared.' Baudrillard's sarcastic quote embodies this quickly mobilised defence, a distraction from something that someone does not want to show, instead using a front to discourage any piece of what lies behind. I sensed Sandra's smiles and laughter changed the external reality of her relationship with the present, the past and the future. The interview space had an intersubjective presence of something unknown.

I questioned why I had noticed what I had noticed. Sandra mentioned her struggles and minimised how they had affected her. During the interview, I accessed 'about-PINs' but did not get beneath the surface to access 'in-PINs'. I began to consider my feelings and what I was experiencing. Sandra denied that her abroad experiences had been problematic or had caused her distress. Her smile and light-hearted rendition of her study abroad experience did not appear authentic. My thoughts were influenced by my access to earlier accounts of her experiences. She told her story about her hospitalisation and how she thought a stranger had approached her with a gun. Both stories described the facts and omitted the emotional impact of the experiences. Her study abroad experience reflected a successful fantasy, and revisiting difficult experiences worked against this proposition.

Erving Goffman (1959), a Canadian American sociologist and social psychologist, summarises my thoughts in the quote below.

*'Choose your self-presentations carefully, for what starts out as a mask may become your face'.*

This infamous quote suggests that we offer only the selves we are happy to show and that this may risk changing our personal beliefs to align with the ones we present to others out of force of habit. Although participants had anonymity in this research, they may have been cautious about revealing too much. I noticed a fear among American students about disclosing personal information; they feared it might be used to disadvantage them in the future. For example, students with mental health issues feared disclosure out of fear of being refused a place in the study abroad semester.

That's it, really – smiling

Caroline's narrative was guided by conscious and unconscious desires to protect herself against retelling and reliving the story. I sensed that retelling the story was embarrassing for Caroline rather than involving reliving a traumatic experience. Her embarrassment was linked to the difference between herself and others, as she acknowledged that 'the others were less bothered being away from their family'. My experience with Caroline brought about a puzzling feeling – my countertransference (Duncan & Elias, 2021). I was perplexed by her reluctance to talk about her difficulties when she had

previously shared her experiences with me. I thought this may have supported her in documenting her story, but it did not. I remember feeling disappointed, not with her, but with myself for not encouraging her to feel safe enough to recall her difficulties. Understanding the different contexts, the research interview brought an alternative dynamic that differed from a therapist-client system and clarified the situation.

The confusing aspects of the communication between myself, the researcher, and the participants are explained by Bateson's (1972) theory of double binding communication. This theory describes the confusing and frustrating experience of communication when the intersubjectivity between two people sends ulterior messages which are dissimilar from what is being said and how it is being said. I sensed her reluctance to speak about or document her difficulties. Moreover, she wanted the interview to end, and in some way, so did I. Recognising these tensions as frustrations, I was in a conflicted state of mind. I wanted Caroline to share the difficulties she had told me about in the well-being sessions, and when she chose not to, I felt surprised and disappointed.

Caroline wanted to protect her study abroad experience in her mind by externalising her difficulties to cleanse her inner state. Initially fearful of leaving her loved ones in the US, she demanded to return home the day she arrived. Finally, however, Caroline had completed a partial study abroad

experience, which was to be celebrated; she could now share it with others and document her achievement.

Hollway and Jefferson (2001), in their paper *Free Association, Narrative Analysis and the Defended Subject: The Case of Ivy*, provide a critical perspective on the coherent subject and highlight the contradictions and inconsistencies in narratives. Caroline's narrative seemed inconsistent and confusing during the interview, as I had previously collaborated closely with her, and my memories of our previous meetings influenced my here-and-now perspective. Her situation reflected Cooper's 'persons-in-situation'. Caroline's context had changed, which changed how she narrated her story.

Hollway and Jefferson's (2001) theory of the defended subject suggests it is essential not to iron out inconsistencies, contradictions, and puzzles, as the form of a person's account becomes visible by concentrating on these fractures. Caroline was now home with her support system (her family) and felt safe. Her previous need to seek reassurance and containment from me had expired; therefore, our recursive dance had ended. Then, under my doctoral supervision, the psychoanalytic principle of unconscious intersubjectivity, Froggett and Hollway's (2010) transference and countertransference were discussed. I realised Caroline might have projected my feelings of bewilderment and frustration onto me and then

back to her via my countertransference. I sensed a mirroring effect within the research interview.

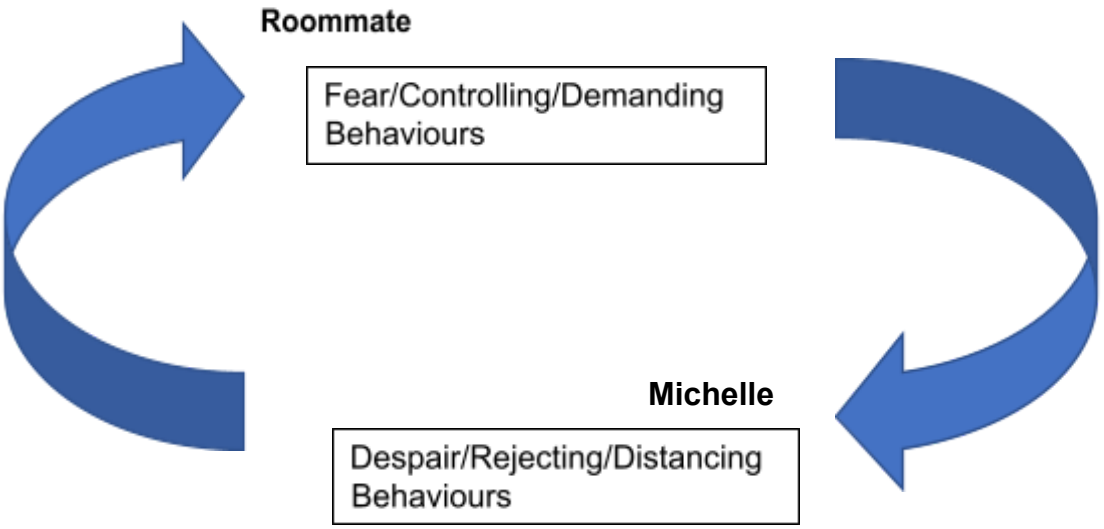
I also sensed intersubjective dynamics (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, pp. 41–9); hidden pressures were associated with academic tension abroad. The irony was that I had had previous conversations with the participants, and participants had spoken about these pressures. Our gaze represented an intersubjectivity. Participants became restless and animated at points in the interviews, diverting the conversation by introducing humour, smiling, and limiting their dialogue. Nevertheless, the analysis revealed wider influencing factors. What emerged were considerations related to perfectionism in education, self, and others; fear of failure, pressure to succeed and the high expense of higher education and study abroad in America. These pressures intersected, were intrinsically linked to the themes, and answered this research project's research question and sub-questions.

# Chapter Seven: Understanding difficulties using systemic ideas

## Recursive loops

Participants attempted similar solutions to alleviate problems. Participants' patterned responses evolved, which sometimes became part of the problem. For example, Michelle's problematic relationship with her roommate resulted in a recursive loop, as illustrated below. The more Michelle experienced her roommate's behaviour as demands. The more Michelle despaired and rejected her. This looped communication maintained their problems and created a downward spiral for them both. In Michelle's view, the only way to punctuate her situation was to return home. When she found out she was returning home prematurely, she felt guilty because she was overjoyed to leave. A systemic perspective offers an understanding of the recursive nature of the communications between Michelle's, Caroline's and Edward's roommate and parents (Greenwood, 2016, p.16). The diagram below sees the push-and pull rhythm in relationships.

**Figure 18:** Illustrating a problem-maintaining loop of communication




Note: The above diagram shows communication's circular dynamic or pushes and pulls, maintaining problematic behaviours.

The above figure shows the circular nature which maintained Michelle's and her roommate's problematic relationship. When individuals are locked into problematic communication loops, they often make sense of the problem by blaming or scapegoating others or systems. For example, participants blamed educational systems or others for their difficulties abroad and themselves for their problems. However, it is striking that by locating the problem in others or self – intrapsychically, participants could not see the problem was related to the flow of communication or information between parts of a system (Selvini Palazzoli et al., 1980). Paul Watzlawick's first

axiom of communication states, 'One cannot NOT communicate'. This statement recognises that lots of communication is at an unconscious level, and as soon as people perceive each other, they start communicating. At times, communication between Edward and his parents felt like a game of cat and mouse. The more they hounded him by calling and text messaging, the more he pulled away and refused to speak to them. Ironically, despite Edward not wanting to answer the calls from his parents, he generally did answer. I sensed that what he wanted to do and what he did were different, suggesting that the power differential between them emulated Parent to Child and Child to Adult and not Adult to Adult ego states (Berne, 1957).

The concepts are based on a general systems perspective, and the second cybernetics implies a reciprocal process involved in the interaction between individuals and other parts of the system and subsystems. The idea of a problem being part of a system means that problems are viewed as circular. i.e., the cause of a problem cannot be traced backwards, in a linear or reductionist way, to a source. Instead, interactions between parts of the system are influenced by their respective social network, i.e., studying abroad. Therefore, each singular person-to-person problematic interaction cannot be predicted solely based on one or the other; in participants' multiple reactions to demanding situations, the characteristics of the problems neither show in quite the same way in different contexts (Elkaim, 1985, 1986). As in this study, participants' perspectives of their problems

tend to have a unidirectional view that blames others rather than considering how both interactions may elicit and maintain their perceived difficulties. Thus, the central notion of the 'second cybernetic' is of a co-created reality in which one person, the observer (participant) and the other (student, family member, professor) are so intertwined interactionally that the observer-objectivity is not possible (Boscolo et al., 1987; Watzlawick, 1984).

# Chapter Eight: Understanding difficulties using psychosocial ideas

## Laughter and defences

Caroline acknowledged her dependency and *'strong bond'* with her loved ones and said that other people might be less bothered by this situation. However, she feared being by herself without her support system close. Below is an excerpt from Caroline's interview, which shows her reluctance to talk about her experience with the same level of emotion she experienced when it occurred. Nevertheless, her reactions could be understood as a defence mechanism to alleviate her anxieties.

Caroline's most significant struggle was being halfway across the world. So, I asked her if she remembered any precise details about that time. She replied by saying.

*Umm, (laughs) Can you hear my dog, Alfie?*

In her bedroom, her dog entered and jumped up on her. She continued and repeated what she had said earlier,'

*The only thing I remember was just the feeling like can't go home and being overwhelmed with that feeling.'*

Despite my attempts to use the BNIM in-PIN (particular incident narrative) questioning process, I noticed Caroline's defended position. Digging beneath the surface to re-connect the emotion to the incident was avoided

by smiling and shrugging her shoulders. Wengraf (2019) distinguishes between two types of PINs. The first is an 'about-PIN, and the second is an 'in-PIN'. The 'about PIN' is the narrative of a particular incident but told from the present state of mind. Stories associated with this type of PIN seemed easily accessible, defined in this research as surface challenges. On the other hand, the BNIM aims to reach below the surface by accessing the 'in-PIN' narrative, which reconstructs the participant's experiences of the incident.

Caroline's non-verbal communication showed her smiling, laughing, shrugging her shoulders, and saying that there was no more to say on the matter. Her silence, smiles and shrugs of her shoulders signified a discomfort with the content of the interview and situation. A central psychoanalytic term, transference, plays out in Caroline's absence of verbal responses and nonverbal enactments during the interview. Freud (1914) originally used the term 'acting out' to describe a patient carrying out an action that, in symbolic form, represents an unconscious wish or fantasy which cannot be experienced or expressed in any other way. More recently, it represents an individual relieving themselves of intrapsychic tension by physical action (Hale, 2008, p.15).

My reflexivity helped me consider my presence as a female maternal figure. I wondered if Caroline's submissiveness in talking about sensitive material

revealed more about who she was, notably how she experienced being a daughter and being parented. Her struggles abroad illuminated her inability to occupy a space in her mind where she felt safe without the proximity and presence of her family and boyfriend.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses the findings by asking questions of the data. The questions focused on identifying difficulties, how difficulties impact participants and how contexts influenced their lived experiences. The context for this discussion uses a counter-narrative approach which aims not only to balance the study abroad narrative per se but to encourage a dialogue for those who feel silenced by less than normative experiences. For example, those that felt uneasy sharing their difficulties spoke of feeling guilty for not enjoying the experience as much as had been unexpected or for how others (parents) expected them to enjoy it.

Participants responded in several ways when their expectations differed from their reality. A particular interest was in participants' defences used to alleviate the anxiety of retelling or reliving an unwanted experience during the interview. This revealed various defence mechanisms, both conscious and unconscious techniques.

# Chapter Nine: Conclusion & Recommendations

This study reveals the rarely captured personal narratives of six participants. Their narratives increase our understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and add to the current study-abroad literature. Their personal narratives offer insight to the demands the six participants experienced in higher education and with interpersonal relationships. This rich data illuminates the participants' internalised pressures related to expectations of themselves, how they perceived and managed the expectations of others, and how wider systems such as social, societal and cultural expectations associated with studying abroad impacted their experiences.

Participant choice of words describes painful fears and experiences they did not expect to occur abroad. The pain and shame of these experiences are defended against using defence strategies but are nevertheless observed using a psycho-analytical oriented interview. The data offers robust evidence that there are hidden struggles faced by participants which do not emerge in ordinary conversations. By far the majority of students who study abroad share conversations dominated by positive study abroad stories mainly detailing what they have done and what they plan to do next. The context of this extra-ordinary time has cut short many plans, which some

participants feared they had lost unique opportunities related to time and space.

However, the most illuminating finding was intersections between the personal, social, societal and cultural contexts and how these affected the student experiences. Participants personalised their difficulties using mental health terms to understand why they felt the way they did. The data confirms that both holistic and relational difficulties are amplified when students study away from home, especially in another country.

This study has implications for how we provide services for students who feel such pressures and how we listen and observe what is said, especially when participants are away from what makes them feel safe. In their own words, capturing participants' views has created a space where counter-narratives to dominant study-abroad narratives are heard.

## Recommendations

A key recommendation of this research is to make available a trained in-house practitioner to engage in conversations at the study-abroad venue. In addition, a designated well-being room for conversations to take place is crucial.

The benefit of placing a practitioner in a study abroad program is their familiarity with the differing and moving contexts, which can become amplified while studying away from home. As discussed in this research study, specific contexts must be considered when working with students. A lack of understanding of the context will affect the intervention and decision-making around safeguarding students. External sources of support are sometimes needed for students, and study abroad programs should identify local professionals who can assist them in a crisis. The Student of Concern model below describes a framework to implement a decision-making process to assist regular conversations among key stakeholders.

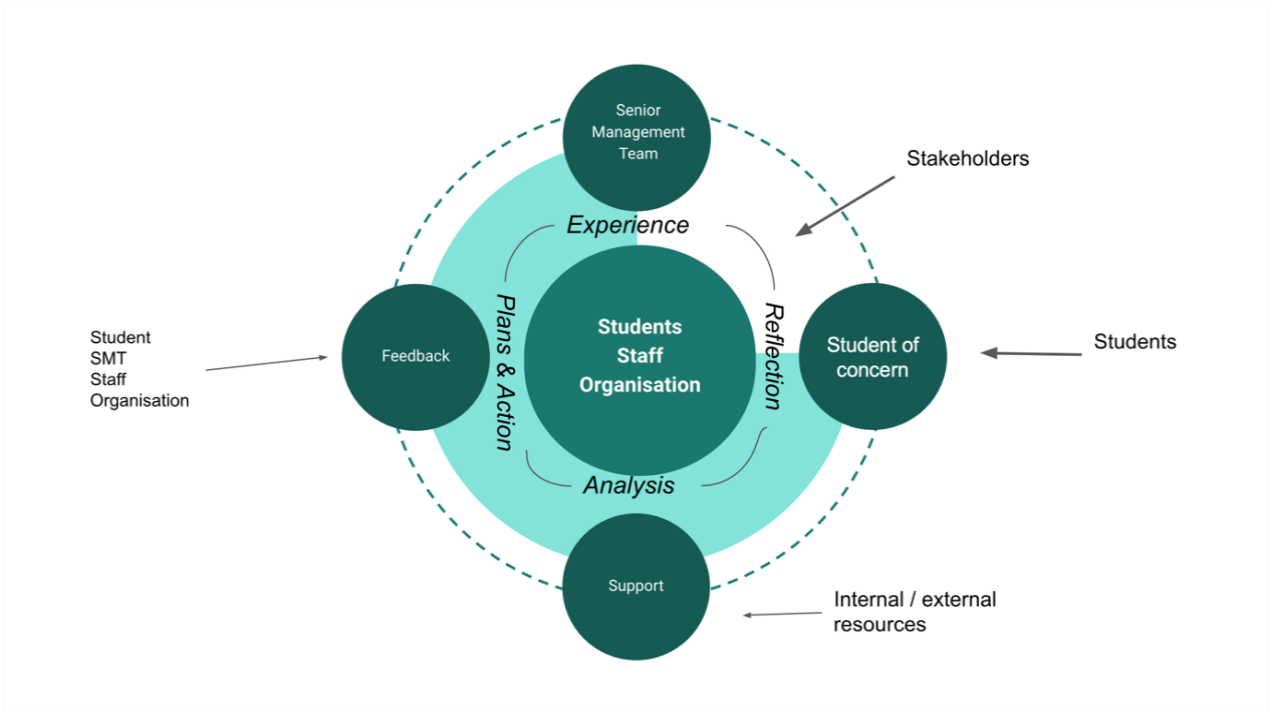
## Student of concern model

The model below demonstrates how an in-house dialogue can form part of a decision-making process where managers within the abroad program offer their experience, reflection, and analysis to students of concern scenarios. The model has implications for study abroad centres, staff and professors who teach and look after students. The professional meeting brings together a unified dialogue about the student of concern in different contexts, i.e., academic feedback, social engagement and information from well-being sessions. The model offers a platform for conversations to qualify the

presentation of risk using a dynamic consideration that risk is constantly changing.

The proposed model should be used weekly during semesters and used immediately when a student in crisis unfolds.

**Figure 19:** Visual representation of the student of concern model




Note: The model offers a framework for the study abroad program designated staff or managers to discuss students of concern within a weekly meeting. Feedback is shared with the student, staff (where appropriate) and the organisation.

The model aims to provide a framework and creates a space for senior managers to discuss students who experience difficulties while abroad. The scale of a student's difficulties should not adhere to strict parameters, dictating what and what not to present at the meeting, but should notice both small and more major presentations of student difficulties. A common sense and professional analysis approach should consider what student is being discussed. However, multiple presentations of smaller student difficulties may have a cumulative effect and therefore should be considered in the context of being away from their usual support systems.

**Senior Management Team (SMT)**

The SMT comprises senior managers or key decision makers with regards to the health and safety of students while studying abroad. Each individual will be a key person in the study abroad centre where others can notify or share concerns about students. For example; a health and wellbeing practitioner may have direct concerns after working with students within the university's wellbeing resource. Alternatively, professors who are concerned about a student in their class, may contact a manager in the academic programming office. In my experience, information about students who showed varying aspects of vulnerabilities on school trips, classroom observations, direct disclosures from students or friends, information from housing professionals, or at times from pre-arrival health questionnaires where vulnerabilities were disclosed and anonymously discussed.

A key benefit of using a purposeful arena is to bring together the expertise and experience of the professionals within the study abroad centre. At times, cultural differences of the location of the study abroad centre may influence what action or what direction can be taken.

**Student of Concern**

The discussion of a student with either significant concerns or multiple smaller concerns within this model, gives SMT members an opportunity to share their concerns, or to become aware of these students, this is primarily to raise awareness and to offer support to the student if needed. This allows a triangulation of information but more importantly it begins a conversation about risk and the perception of risk and safeguarding of students. Often, information about students of concern may not be shared among staff, this model begins to formalise members thoughts as an assessment, and intervention of what to do next. This weekly meeting observes the dynamic nature of risk and how it shifts over time. Knowing about a potential risk and what has been done to reduce or alleviate the risk can be included when an incident that places a student at risk occurs. This meeting also works by considering and including the impact of the risk on individual members of the SMT, and thereby places ownership of knowing about the students' situation among the team.

A key benefit of beginning and continuing a conversation about a student of concern is for the managers to have a reflective group space, in which anxieties can be held and thinking can be slowed down and held by others.

**Support**

Most study abroad centres are smaller satellite centres and as such tend to have fewer resources compared to their main university campuses. Despite there being fewer resources at study abroad centres, this is mainly related to the number of visiting students as compared to the total number of students studying at the main university site. One such reduced resource at the study abroad centre where this project was undertaken was the absence of a physical 24-hour library compared to the main campus in the US. That said, the university hosts an extensive online library, giving access to literature at any time.

The attendee's experience, reflection, analysis, and action planning support the model. Students of concern are discussed, and questions about the student's well-being, the risk to self and others, learning, etc., are discussed. Different types of support, internally and externally, can be offered. If external assistance is needed, university advocacy and assistance are offered to further support the student. For example, accompanying students to appointments.

**Feedback**

A key aspect of this model is feedback to students, staff and the organisation. Maintaining transparency throughout the process limits the impact of decisions being made by the study abroad program. For example, all study abroad students are adults and sharing information with others [parents] is prohibited and would require the student's consent. In situations where the student feels unable to give consent, and their capacity and safety are compromised, the centre directors seek advice from the home institution, and legal advice is obtained.

The importance of feedback as a central component of good communication is used within this model. Continuing previous conversations, about what actions and plans have been undertaken and by who supports a robust response, which can ensure any gaps or misunderstandings by members can be further supported.

Again, this formal setting may exist as a part of a SMT meeting, either way once embedded into the weekly meeting schedules, it can provide a space for collective thought and collaboration.

## Strengths

A strength of this study was hearing the participants' narratives in their own words using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method. This allowed participants to describe their lived experiences with their choice of words. This method captured

future, present and past narratives, and the qualitative approach captured nuanced details about the complexities of lived experiences.

## Limitations

The most significant limitation is not being able to generalise from the limited sample size. The aim of this research was to give students who had experienced difficulties abroad an opportunity to share their lived experiences. However, the intent of qualitative research, as Creswell (2007) claims, 'is not to generalise to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon' (p.173).

In addition, the participants were American citizens, with some participants having a mixed family heritage. For example, one participant identified as a first generation American, born to Southeast Asian parents. Unfortunately, the participants' ethnicity or religion was not formally collected. This was purposeful, to help maintain the participants identity, especially as the thesis identifies the specific semester and year of study. Nevertheless, participants' ethnicity included southeast Asian parentage, all of participants were middle class, with some participants being of the Catholic and Jewish religion. And one participant identified as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

However, collecting data from students with different racial, ethnic, religious or gender identities (Chiocco, 2021) could provide different findings and interpretations., especially for marginal groups that may have greater vulnerabilities.

**Reflexive thoughts** (also see p.178)

This project began with a clear vision of how I intended to execute a qualitative research study. However,  the study was modified when Covid-19 emerged in March 2020. The personal impact, on reflection, was mixed. Frightened by the possibility my research would be sabotaged by something no one could control, I altered the original research plans. All interviews were moved to online Zoom interviews. Although I was familiar with using this software, I was more familiar with speaking and working with students face to face. This change, especially while using the tight sequence of interview questions dictated within the BNIM interview structure, felt stressful. I could no longer rely on the subtle cues usually present during an in-person interview. My first interview was messy. I asked the single question to induce narrative (SQUIN), and I incorrectly worded the question. This resulted in the participant's answer focussing on only her experiences in the present, and while abroad. This conflicted with asking about the biographic narrative. I decided to not include this interview as a result of this experience.

During the interviews, I became attuned to the difference of the virtual room, and how this influenced the communication of what was said, what was not said, how things were said and how things were avoided being said. Interviews also included a loss of connection of signal which interrupted, at times, the flow of conversation. On reflection, the impact of the virtual interview has changed how individuals communicate, this may have influenced what was communicated. It is difficult to establish the extent of how the context impacted myself and the participants, as this study is of its time and place, and could possibly not be replicated.

Given my hypothesis, that students took part to share lived experiences related to challenges and struggles, it may be that students who declined to take part, may have done so because their lived experiences were markedly different or opposing. For example; that the students who declined to take part had not experienced challenges and struggles while abroad. I can only speculate that an absence of challenging experiences motivated students to decline to take part.

## Future Research

The findings suggest further research into specifically hearing and acknowledging the difficulties of participants who study abroad and for this to take place alongside the positive narrative. For example, further research could blend interviews and mix face-to-face and Zoom interviews or develop longitudinal or follow-up studies to capture participants' reflections on their difficulties studying abroad. This study has important implications for

students, parents and professionals studying abroad. Further research is needed to hold space for this dialogue to continue. By doing so, we will tailor resources to support students holistically.

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# Appendices

Appendix A - Participant Information Sheet

In their own words:

American student narratives of challenges and struggles while studying abroad

## WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

Hello, my name, which you may already recognise, is Lisa Watkins. I am currently the Assistant Director for Student Life and Wellbeing at Syracuse University London. I am undertaking this research project to improve my understanding of the experience of students who study abroad for a semester, in particular, the challenges and struggles students experience while abroad. The research is part of a Professional Doctorate in Social Work at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Centre, based in London. The research is self-funded and not funded by the university. The themes and patterns of this study will form my Doctoral Thesis for examination with the possibility of publication in a peer-reviewed journal and related conferences. This research project has been approved by the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC) and [redacted] University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Participants are invited to participate in an interview via Microsoft Teams with the researcher. The interview will last approximately 30-90 minutes. Another, optional interview will be offered if the interview does not cover things you wish to discuss, which will take place a week after the first interview. Both interviews
are offered via Microsoft Teams. Interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis by the researcher/research panel discussion. You will be free to decline the audio recording as you should feel comfortable with the recording process at all times and are free to stop recording at any time. If you decline this part of the research procedure, the interview will not be able to proceed.

## WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You have been selected to take part in this research project as you are studying abroad in the UK for a single semester. The researcher is known to you as she is a member of staff at the university and is conducting this research project to learn about the lived experience of study abroad students, in particular, the challenges and struggles experienced while students are abroad.

## DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Your participation is completely voluntary and will have no bearing on your academic grades. You have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

## WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

One of the perceived benefits of taking part will be an opportunity to talk about your lived- experiences of studying abroad. It is considered beneficial for you to be given an opportunity to feel heard and listened to and to make known your experiences so that others may learn from.

If you experience any adverse response while being interviewed, you will be asked if you would like the interview to continue or stop. You will be offered to speak with the researcher immediately after the interview, or at another convenient time. An alternative to speaking with the researcher will also be offered by a member of the home campus study abroad staff member if necessary.

## WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

When you agree to take part, your information will be kept safe.

- Your personal information will be replaced and pseudonymised (real name only known by the researcher) and this will be the process throughout the study, during transcription and while discussing your story in the panel during analysis.
- Confidentiality will only be broken if the researcher believes there is a serious risk of harm or danger to the participant or another individual (e.g. physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed.

## HOW WILL THE INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

- The video files will be stored safely as a computer file with a two-factor protected password. The recording will be deleted within 12 months once the interview analysis is complete. The above information adheres to the data protection law which protects your rights, for this study, this process is necessary for research purposes.
- You can request a copy of the information we hold about you this includes the video recording.
- The researcher will be transcribing the interviews. Once transcribed, specific excerpts of the transcriptions (written) or recordings (audio) will be shared with the analysis panel.
- Your non-anonymised data in the signed consent forms and video recordings are retained as part of the research process on my computer within the university, whereby only I have access.

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The outcomes of this research project will be disseminated in the final doctoral thesis, peer reviewed journals and conferences.

## WHAT IF YOU HAVE A COMPLAINT?

**UK Ethics** - If you wish to direct your complaint to someone within the research team, you should contact the supervisor Anna Harvey at AHarvey@Tavi-Port.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact Simon Carrington, Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance at Tavistock and Portman (academicquality@taviport.nhs.uk).

**US Ethics** - If you have any questions regarding your participant rights or if you have questions, concerns or complaints you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, you can contact the [redacted] Institutional Review Board at [redacted]

## WHOM SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

If you have any queries about the study or if you are interested in taking part, please contact the researcher **Lisa Watkins Tel: +44 (0) 7539142918 Email:** lwatkins@syr.edu. Supervisor contact details. **Anna Harvey email: Anna Harvey AHarvey@Tavi-Port.ac.uk.**

**THANK YOU**

Appendix B - Consent Form

**Title:**

In their own words: American student narratives of challenges and struggles while studying abroad

**Name of Researcher**: Lisa Watkins

## Purpose

Hello, my name, which you may recognise is Lisa Watkins. I am the Assistant Director for Student Life and Wellbeing at Syracuse University London. I am currently studying for a Professional Doctorate in Advanced Social Work at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, and part of this degree is to design and conduct a small research study. This project is overseen by a Principal Investigator – Anna Harvey, who supervises this research project. The findings of this study will be disseminated in my thesis for examination. This study seeks to interview eight participants from the Spring 2020 semester in London using a Microsoft Teams video call connection. The interview seeks to know more about your lived experiences, challenges and struggles, while studying abroad.

## Description

You are asked to take part in a video-recorded interview which will take approximately 30-90 minutes.  At the beginning of the interview, you will be asked a single question which invites you to speak about any challenges

and struggles experienced while abroad. I will then ask you to elaborate on some of the key points you discussed. A second interview will be offered to allow an opportunity to talk about anything important to you that you didn't get the opportunity to talk about at the first interview. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions during the interview for any reason.

## Potential harm

There is minimal harm associated with your participation in this research, it asks you to tell your story about the challenges and struggles you have had while abroad. However, talking about emotional experiences can evoke feelings of uncertainty. If you feel that after the interview you would like to continue to talk about your experiences, I can arrange a time for you to talk to a member of staff in the student life office, or a member of staff on the home campus or external professional.

## Benefits

There are no known potential benefits (monetary reward, no bearing on your academic grades, etc.) in participating in this research study. It is seen as an opportunity for you to share your lived experiences of being abroad.

## Confidentiality

All records of participation will be kept strictly confidential as only I and the principal investigator (Anna Harvey) will have access to the interview data. All data is stored electronically on Syracuse University London computer systems which comply with GDPR data protection guidance. Microsoft

Teams will be used to record your interview and you will have a copy of this recording immediately after the interview. The interview will be transcribed for analysis and excerpts of your conversation may be presented in the final thesis. Once the interview is recorded the data be stored in a computer file which has a two-factor protected password. The recording will be kept for 12 months to allow for complete analysis and then it will be permanently deleted.

## Identifiable Private Information

All of your identifiers will be removed from any private information during this research project, after such removal this information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another research investigator for future research studies without additional consent.

## Participation

Your participation is voluntary and will have no bearing on your academic grades. You are free to withdraw at any time or to withdraw any unprocessed data for any reason without explanation and without penalty. The interviews will take place at a convenient arranged time for you, incorporating different time zones between the US and the UK.

## If you have questions

For questions, concerns or more information regarding this research you may contact

Lisa Watkins at +44 (0) 7539142918 or the Principal Investigator Anna Harvey at AHarvey@Tavi-Port.ac.uk

**Concerns about your treatment in the research**

**US Ethics** - If you have any questions regarding your participant rights or if you have questions, concerns or complaints you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or you cannot reach the investigator, you can contact the [redacted]-University Institutional Review Board at [redacted]

**UK Ethics** - If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact Simon Carrington, Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance at the Tavistock and Portman academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk.

All of my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and by signing this consent form, I agree to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this form for my personal records.

| Please read the statements below and **tick to agree**, please clearly state your name, provide your signature and date below | |
|---|---|
| I understand this is a professional doctorate research project | |

| | |
|---|---|
| I consent to taking part in this research project as a study abroad student | |
| | |
| I understand the interview will be video-recorded and transcribed for the purposes of this research | |
| I understand my data will be anonymised for the purposes of the discussion at the panel discussions, and in the final thesis submission | |
| I understand the findings of this research project will be disseminated in peer reviewed journals and conferences. | |

**Printed Name of the Participant** Date: --/--/--

Signature of the Participant

**Printed Name of the Researcher**

Date: --/--/--

Signature of the Researcher

Appendix C - TREC Approval (Email) and IRB Approval

**From:** Paru Jeram <PJeram@tavi-Port.nhs.uk>

**Sent:** 04 May 2020 15:27

**To:** 'lisa watkins' <lisacymraeg@hotmail.co.uk>

**Cc:** Andrew Cooper <ACooper@tavi-port.nhs.uk>; Anna Harvey <AHarvey@Tavi-Port.ac.uk>; Academic Quality <academicquality@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk>

**Subject:** Ethics Application Updates

Dear Lisa

I can confirm that I have received your updated TREC documentation in light of the current crisis and that the changes have been approved. You may proceed with your research.

For information governance purposes and in line with the Trust policies, please be advised that in order to conduct research/interviews using online video conferencing you must contact TEL (copied) to set up a zoom account. With regards to privacy, please ensure that meetings with yourself and your participants are conducted in a safe environment and that confidentiality is maintained.

Your updated TREC form is attached

Kind regards,

Paru

**Mrs Paru Jeram**

Senior Quality Assurance Officer
(Research Degrees and Research Ethics)
Academic Governance and Quality Assurance (Room 259)
The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**
**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Anna Harvey
**DATE:** May 1, 2020
**SUBJECT:** **Expedited Protocol Review - Approval of Human Participants**
**IRB #:** 20-080
**TITLE**: *Study Abroad: 'It Differs to What I had in-the-Mind': How the Biographic Narrative Interpretive (BNIM) Narrates the Student Voice*

The above referenced protocol was reviewed by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) and has been given **expedited approval.** The protocol has been determined to be of no more than minimal risk and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation; 2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and 3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

This protocol is approved as of **April 30, 2020.** An Expedited Status Report will be requested annually, until you request your study be closed.

It is important to note that federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate through the informed consent process and be provided with a copy of the consent form. Regulations require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years after your study is closed.

Your consent form has been date stamped with the approval date. If at any time during the course of your research, a revised consent document is submitted to the IRB via an amendment, it will be stamped with the date the amendment is approved.

Formal amendment requests are required for any changes to the initially approved protocol. It is important to note that changes cannot be initiated **prior** to IRB review and approval; except when such changes are essential to eliminate apparent immediate harm to the participants. In this instance, changes must be reported to the IRB within five days. All protocol changes must be submitted on an amendment request form available on the IRB web site at: Amendment-Request-Form.doc.

Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB within 10 working days of occurrence on the Report of Unanticipated Problems form located on the IRB website at: Report-of-Unanticipated-Problems.doc.

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

Katherine McDonald
IRB Chair

**DEPT:** FALK Social Work, 120 Belsize Lane, London NW3 5BA **CC:** Lisa Watkins

Appendix D - Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

**Inclusion Criteria**

- Participants were undergraduate students
- Studying abroad was a UK-based experience
- Participants were aged 20,21 and 22 years old
- Participants who identify as male, female or non-binary
- Participants had a good command of the English Language and comprehension skills equal to undergraduate education
- Consent to a video-recorded interview

**Exclusion criteria**

- Participants who are not students studying abroad in the UK
- Participants aged 23 and above
- Refusal to give informed consent
- Participants who have acute or had been unwell abroad - psychiatric illness
- Consent to be video recorded declined

Appendix E - Ethical guidelines

**Avoid harm**

A core consideration in this research was for participants not to feel coerced into taking part, mainly because they were students at the university. The participant information sheet clearly said that participation was voluntary and had no bearing on academic grades. Participants had the right to refuse participation, refuse any questions during the interview, and withdraw without consequence

**Informed consent**

There were no perceived benefits for participants in this research project. Participants received and signed the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A) and Consent Form (Appendix B) before being interviewed.

**Confidentiality and anonymity**

All participant names and personal information were pseudonymised throughout, during transcription, and when discussing their story with doctoral students and supervisors.

**Data protection**

The integrity of the data was kept by transcriptions of the data being kept in a locked cabinet and following GDPR guidance for protecting data. Copies of interview transcripts were offered to participants following interviews, but none were taken up. Data files were stored as computer files and protected

using a two-factor protected password. Recordings were deleted once the analysis was completed.

All students were offered a copy of their interview transcript and video recording. Video files were stored as computer files with a two-factor protected password and recordings deleted after the analysis.

**Supplementary support**

There was minimal harm associated with participation in this research, as it asked participants to tell their stories about the challenges and struggles they experienced while studying abroad. However, it was acknowledged that talking about emotional experiences could have evoked feelings of uncertainty. Therefore, participants were offered to speak with me or someone else at the university following the interview process, especially if they had any concerns relating to their narrative and wanted to speak after the interview.