

BEING TRULY MY AUTHENTIC SELF:

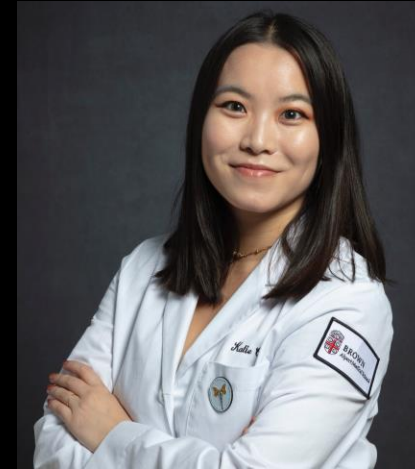
AMERICAN TRANSGENDER
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF
NAVIGATING GENDER, IDENTITY,
AND PERSONAL GROWTH WHILE
STUDYING ABROAD

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Terminology

Queer

**Transgender
(Trans)**

Gender Fluid

Non-Binary

Genderqueer

Gender
Nonconforming

**Gender
Expansive**

Gender-Policing

Prevalence of Study Abroad

- Over 341,000 students enrolled in U.S. institutions studied abroad during the 2017-2018 academic year (Institute for International Education, 2019).
- Study abroad enrollment has tripled in the last 20 years.
- “The demand for international education,” including study abroad, “and the benefits it offers will continue to grow” post-pandemic (Kanwar & Carr, 2020).
- And in Europe, 83,000 youth exchanges in 2019 with Erasmus+



Skills Gained from Study Abroad



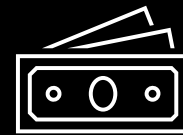
Confidence, independence, global-mindedness, interest in social justice
(Abrams & Ziegler, 2016)



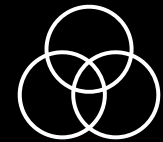
Patience, flexibility, and cultural sensitivity
(Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012)



Creative problem-solving
(Cho & Morris, 2015)



Language, budgeting
(Walsh & Walsh, 2018)



Cultural comparison skills
(Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012)

STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

Discerning community

Exploring identity

Navigating institutions and systems

Interacting with new cultures

Developing relationships

Learning the course curriculum

TGE STUDENTS

Internal experience of self

+

Expression of gendered self



Gender

Findings from 2015 US Transgender Survey



24%
harassed in
college



39%
experienced
serious
psychological
distress in
last month



33% had a
negative
medical
experience in
last year



23%
experienced
housing
discrimination
in last year



57% feel
uncomfortable
asking police
for help

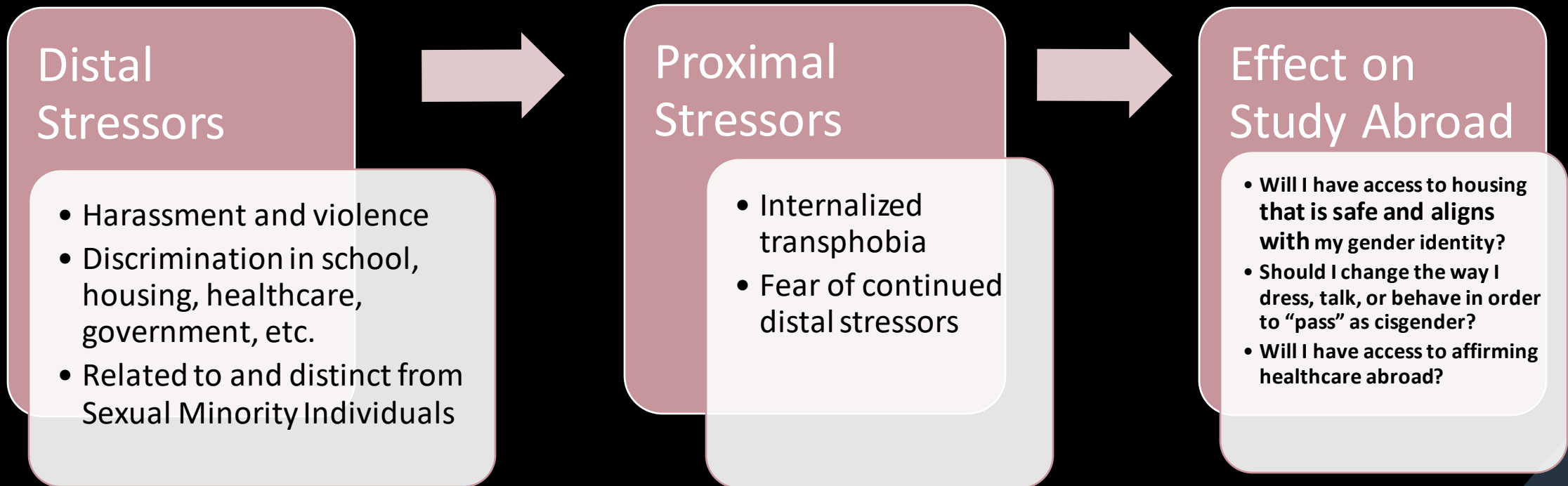


46% verbally
harassed; 9%
physically
attacked in
the last year



59% avoided
public
restrooms in
the last year
due to fear

Minority Stress Model: TGE Individuals



Pilot Study: “Gender x Culture” (Michl, Pegg & Kracen, 2019)

The Process of “Coming Out”

The Significance of Pronouns

Constructing Community

Experiencing Threat and Violence

Managing Others’ Assumptions About Identity

Performing and Policing Gender

Lacking Preparation and Institutional Support

Celebrating their Experience of Studying Abroad

Study abroad offers unique opportunities:

- Build community
- Reflect on gender & culture
- Learn about self & the world

Threats to safety

- Sexual harassment / assault
- Isolation
- Lack of support

Challenges and joy

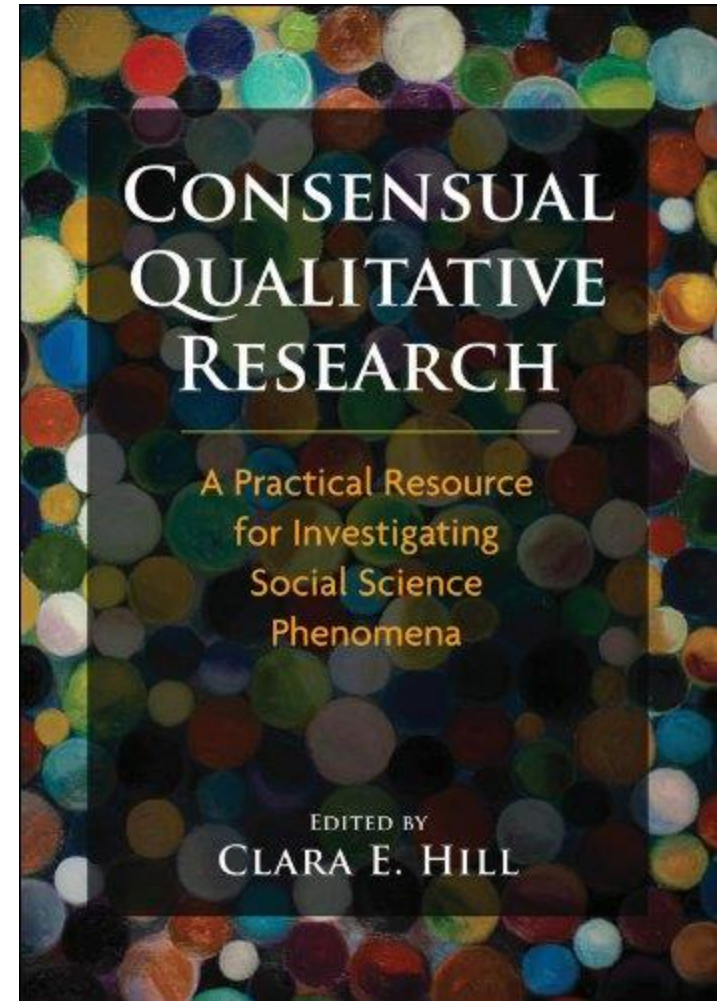
- Having fun
- Feeling connected
- Bouncing back

The Present Study: Research Questions

- 1) How do TGE individuals make sense of their undergraduate study abroad experiences?
 - 2) How do TGE individuals experience gender and culture in the context of study abroad?
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METHODS

- Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR): Rigorous qualitative methodology emphasizing **consensus and bias minimization** (Hill et al., 1997; 2005)
- 5-member research team with various racial/ethnic identities, genders, ages, international education experiences, locations, etc.



Methods

- 15 TGE study abroad alumni.
 - Semi-structured phone or Zoom interviews (audio only) in Summer 2020.
 - Recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling.
 - Directed to a Qualtrics survey.
 - Met eligibility criteria, consented, answered demographic questions.
 - Before interview, participants emailed the interview protocol.
 - Completed semi structured interview (14 questions), then transcribed.
 - Participants reviewed/approved transcript for accuracy.
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Participant Demographics

Study Abroad Location	Europe (9) ; North America (2) ; South America (2); Africa (1); Asia (1)
Gender Identity	Nonbinary (5) Female (2) Male (1) Additional: Nonbinary genderfluid (1); Trans femme (1); Genderqueer (1); Genderfluid (1); Transmasculine / Nonbinary (1); Transmasculine / GNC (1); Black nonbinary person (1)
Race/Ethnicity	White (4) Black or African American (3) Latinx (3) Additional (1): Latinx & Native American or Alaska Native; Latinx & White; Native American or Alaska Native & Chicax; Asian & White & Hispanic; Asian/Pacific Islander
Sexuality	Queer (3) Bisexual (3) Pansexual / Queer (2) Additional (1): Demisexual; Straight; Lesbian / Queer; Asexual Polyromantic; Queer / Gay; Lesbian; Gay
Age	Range 20-29
Education Level	Bachelor's (10); Current undergrad (3); Current Master's Student (1); 2-year college diploma (1)

CQR Data Analysis

- 1. Domain-level coding:** Identifying meaningful and unique themes (domains)
 2. Consensus among team and auditor
- 3. Core idea-level coding:** Constructing summaries of the data that capture participant perspectives in fewer words
 4. Consensus among team and auditor
- 5. Cross analysis:** Identifying themes (categories) across cases within larger existing themes (domains)
 6. Consensus among team and auditor

Domains

1. Preparing for study abroad
 2. Examining factors that influenced study abroad decisions
 - 3. Reflecting on identity and personal growth**
 4. Learning about the external world
 5. Examining cultural institutions and systems in the US and abroad
 6. Developing relationships, discerning community, and interacting with others
 7. Sharing advice for students considering study abroad
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Making identity disclosure decisions	General (15)
Interactions between in/visibility and agency in disclosure decisions	General (14)
Trust associated with disclosure	General (14)
Novel challenges associated with disclosure abroad	Variant (7)
Context elicits identity salience	General (15)
Identities voiced by participants	General (15)
Situational visibility facilitates awareness and prominence	General (15)
Privilege affects identity salience	Variant (7)
Experiencing identity change and personal growth from studying abroad	General (15)
Enduring harm and anguish related to participants' bodies and identities	General (14)
Bearing the weight of anticipated harm	Typical (12)
Experiencing deliberate and unintentional harm	Typical (11)
Experiencing gender dysphoria	Variant (2)
Consequences of identity disclosure decisions	Typical (12)
Positive impacts of disclosing	Typical (9)
Negative impacts of disclosing	Variant (7)
Negative impacts of not disclosing	Variant (4)
Positive impacts of not disclosing	Variant (2)

General: 14-15

Typical: 8-13

Variant: 2-7

Reflecting on Identity & Personal Growth

Making identity disclosure decisions

- a. Interactions between in/visibility and agency in disclosure decisions
- b. Trust associated with disclosure
- c. Novel challenges associated with disclosure abroad

P7: “And sometimes, I had to, both in the US and in Mexico and in Chile, I would just have to closet myself because I knew that there are some battles that just can't be won about being truly my authentic self. And unfortunately, if this kind of fluidity of gender and presentation that I have can work sometimes to my favor in order to pass, then sometimes it has to work like that.”

Reflecting on Identity & Personal Growth

Context elicits identity salience

- a. Identities voiced by participants
- b. Situational visibility facilitates awareness and prominence
- c. Privilege affects identity salience

P3: “I think the most prominent for me was being legally blind because that basically affects how I navigate the world and being able to have access to transportation was amazing. So that was really awesome... being Mexican American and being trans and legally blind were so at the forefront all the time because I was in student politics... But I think that being trans was...actually pretty big for me because it kind of would come up a lot with my trans friends who I hung out with a lot. And then being international would actually get brought up a lot.”

Reflecting on Identity & Personal Growth

Experiencing identity change and personal growth from studying abroad

P2: "I also think now I have way more tools about...even my gender. Like I know [in the future] I would be way more open, and I would be like, if someone misgendered me, I'd be like, "Oh, my pronouns are they." Or, if they say something transphobic, I'll be like, "That's not right, and I'll tell you why that's not right." So I think I have... way more tools in my pocket."

P15: "While being in the U.S., I was taking things for granted because...the people I usually hang out with are really similar to me, but stepping out of that comfort zone and going...abroad to a community that's different in values and beliefs but similar in skin color, it's strange. But it's made me think, you know, basically not take things for granted how I lived in the States."

Reflecting on Identity & Personal Growth

Enduring harm and anguish related to participants' bodies and identities

- a. Bearing the weight of anticipated harm
- b. Experiencing deliberate and unintentional harm
- c. Experiencing gender dysphoria

P10: “If I was a straight, white, cis person, I probably would've felt more carefree...I feel like I'm always kind of hypervigilant about social situations, how people are perceiving me, looking at me. So it's just, that's a part of my experience – kind of being fixated by how people are perceiving my gender.”

Reflecting on Identity & Personal Growth

Consequences of identity disclosure decisions

- a. Positive impacts of disclosing
- b. Negative impacts of disclosing
- c. Negative impacts of not disclosing
- d. Positive impacts of not disclosing

P14: “From the very first introduction with my study abroad program, everyone knew that I was queer... if you were queer, it was, we were all very open about it. In those introductions everyone was like “...my pronouns are they/them.” So it was kind of like we were... making sure that our presence was known and would not be forgotten or diminished.”

P2: “I wasn’t being true to myself... I was hiding who I was.... the relationship wasn’t as intimate as it might have been if I did [disclose my gender identity]. There was fear in telling him about my gender, because I wasn’t sure how he’d respond.”

Discussion & Implications

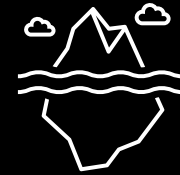
- Variety in self-acknowledged intersecting identities
 - Disclosure decisions can be weighty, exhausting, and important to process
 - Identity development is a nonlinear continuum
 - Harm was viewed as an inevitability, requiring vigilance to avoid
 - Queer experience is not homogenous
 - Need for the ability to safely bring whole selves to study abroad
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Nuances of
accessibility



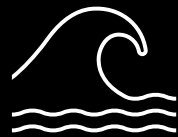
Encouraging agency in
disclosure



Awareness of extent of
harm

An “ethical study abroad program?”

Addressing the
fluidity of privilege in
new cultures



Holding space for the
recalibration needed to
maintain resilience



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