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“Home Sweet Home?” An Ethnographic Study on the Experiences of Students Returning home from a short Teacher Training Programme

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Abstract

This ethnographic study looks at the experiences of 10 undergraduate students returning home from studying abroad as part of a two-week summer school in Zurich, Switzerland. The study highlights the disruptions and coping strategies of the students settling in the host country and returning to the home country. The research enhances the understanding of these educational experiences and the return to their home country by looking at the impact it had on their mental health in coping with the transition. An interpretive epistemological approach was adopted. Data was collected through face-to-face and Skype interviews in conjunction with the researcher’s field notes. The data was analysed by using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and identified three main themes: 'Homesickness and social support', 'Home sweet home?' with a sub-theme 'Rollercoaster of emotions' split into the 'The Highs', 'The Lows' and 'Talk or not to Talk'. Students experienced homesickness, mood swings and loneliness in relation to their relocation and re-entry. They also reported that their experiences were often undermined, and expressed the need of receiving more support. Future research should focus on how universities may enhance services to support students in their study journeys abroad and in the re-entry.

Keywords

Study Abroad, Homesickness, Re-entry, Culture Shock, Education

Introduction

This paper reports on a study that explored the experiences of 10 European and International undergraduate students returning home after studying two-week programmes on *Preventing Violence in Schools* and *Special Educational Needs* in Zurich, Switzerland. The programme was part of teacher training allowing for the sharing of educational practices with their own country. For the researcher this was an extra-curricular activity, whilst for the participants the Summer School counted as part of their university credits. The topic originated from my personal experiences as an undergraduate student on the trip. The experience sparked an interest in the journey that I had made and the feelings that were associated with it. In particular, after the return home: loneliness, depressing feelings and unfamiliarity. I was then curious as to whether others have experienced the same.

Studying abroad usually enhances the participants' academic achievement (Zimmermann and Neyer, 2013), with more students opting to study in a different country and institution as a result of increased educational offers and the opportunity to experience a new culture (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013). In the last twenty years, studying abroad has become a growing trend in higher education, increasing from 50,000 students in 1986 to over 240,000 in 2007 (Opendoors Online/IIE Network, 2008). In order to be academically successful whilst studying abroad, students have to adapt to the environment of the host country.

Benefits include improving or learning a foreign language, an in-depth view of another society and culture and a wider academic climate. It also builds the foundation to be better qualified for a professional career working abroad (Parey and Waldinger, 2007; González *et al.*, 2011). Summer schools offer participants various opportunities to gain further knowledge and insight into an area in a particular field within a short period. Some offer students the chance to study abroad with other students from around the world. For many students, participation in a summer school – especially abroad – enhances their CV and future career prospects; extra credits may be attained on completion of their degree. Among the other benefits, studying abroad enhances adaptability and personal development. For young people, studying abroad can be an important life event, affecting not only their academic careers by enhancing their

knowledge of other cultures and education systems, but also their personal skills, their confidence and independence.

One of the challenges of studying abroad is the financial cost. Summer schools can be challenging with the cost of travel, school fees and subsistence costs, not to mention the time needed to take part (White and Crowley, 2015).

The purpose of the summer school described here was to bring together students from all over the world to learn and discuss ways in which different educational systems tackle the prevention of violence in schools and special educational needs. Some participants took part for credit towards their degree, whilst others took part for the experience of studying abroad and to further their knowledge for their future careers in education.

However, these short study programmes can also increase psychological distress similar to that experienced in migration. Returning to the home country is also a phenomenon that needs further investigation as demonstrated by Martin (1984) and Thompson and Christofi (2006). In their studies the participants stayed abroad longer than two weeks. This study explored whether a shorter study programme would produce similar results. The researcher attended the summer school in Zurich in June 2018 as a representative from the Education department in Manchester Metropolitan University. The unexpected feelings experienced on return to the UK sparked my interest in this topic.

Given these premises, this study had the following aims:

- 1) To explore the experiences of students returning home after a two-week stretch of studying abroad to see whether the experiences of the researcher were common amongst other students.
- 2) To obtain new knowledge regarding topics of re-entry and return by exploring the feelings of the participants on the trip.

Literature review

The literature review is divided into sections based on recurring themes across disciplinary areas: the psychology of migration and re-entry, health and cultural psychology.

Culture shock and reverse culture shock

Culture shock is a widely studied and richly documented area in psychological and migration literature. Many researchers suggest that 'culture shock' is a normal process when entering a new culture (Adler, 1975). It can occur when individuals experience a different culture from their own (Westwood *et al.*, 1986). Yet, it is expected that this feeling will reduce over time and the individual will adjust (Martin, 1984). Oberg's (1960) definition, 'a disease precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse' (p. 177), highlights the intensity of culture shock. However, far fewer studies have looked at the re-entry of students in their own country. Psychologists, sociologists, educationalists and anthropologists have been interested in the phenomenon of the readjustment home after study abroad, called 'reverse culture shock'. According to Thompson and Christofi (2006), many returnees have trouble re-adjusting to their home country, sometimes more severe and intense than entering a foreign country. Students from the United States undertook a semester or year-long programme of study abroad which was organized by a Midwestern public research university (Thompson and Christofi, 2006). Their study took an ethnographic approach by using interviews to describe the experiences of culture shock in the return of young Cypriot students. Participants spoke out about the culture shock they had on readjusting to life back home. That study of a semester or year-long stay abroad reported contrasting feelings such as the bitter-sweet nostalgia that focuses on their return home in comparison with the time they were abroad. For example, their theme 'Freedom/Restriction' referred to the participants' struggle to adjust to the freedom they had abroad, which was restricted back in the home country.

The transition back to one's home culture is a readjustment after living and studying in a different culture for a significant period of time. Uehara (1986) defines this as the 'reverse culture shock': 'temporal psychological difficulties returnees experience in the initial stage of the adjustment process at home after having lived abroad for some time' (p. 420). The transition to and from a new culture is both characterised by the integration into a different cultural system and the loss of familiar cues. Based on previous research studies into Culture Shock, Martin (1984) identified three major differences between the two transitions. The first is the expectations individuals have of the new culture compared to the expectations, or lack thereof, when they return

home. People do not expect to have readjustment issues due to home being a familiar place. The shock comes when the home culture is seen through a different lens: the experiences and way of life in the host culture makes the home culture feel different (Westwood *et al.*, 1986). Therefore, the transition could be difficult and that does not match the expectations that the individual has on re-entry, which often appears to be an easy slip back into a familiar culture. It is not just the individual themselves who does not expect to have any readjustment issues, family and friends do not expect it either (Martin, 1984). This could result in a lack of social and mental support that is crucial, leaving the individuals to struggle socially and psychologically, and contributing to potential anxieties. Furthermore, adjustment problems on re-entry were found in a study by Raschio (1987) ranging from a mild emotional dissonance to a continuing sense of isolation: feeling alone in a crowded room of family and friends. The second major difference is the internal changes of attitudes, values and behaviours that the individual experiences when they return home. On the transition to a foreign culture, the individual expects the changes in the environment and new experiences. Reverse culture shock is, therefore, hypothesized due to the changed expectations of the individual, because of their experience abroad (Westwood *et al.*, 1986). The third is the awareness that changes have occurred. The internal changes and personal attitudes are often only realised during the re-entry phase, making the adjustment even more challenging (Sobie, 1986).

This study will explore whether our participants experience culture shock or reverse culture shock after spending only two weeks abroad.

Homesickness

A main component of culture shock is homesickness: a 'longing desire for familiar environments and can lead to depressive symptoms' (Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007); its negative effects include sadness, loneliness and adjustment difficulties. Homesickness is an emotion experienced by many international students (Zheng and Berry, 1991). It is a predictor of psychological well-being (Ward and Kennedy, 1993), is a major factor in causing social alienation (Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1994), and is long-lasting (Lu, 1990). Homesickness is the direct loss of a social support network; conversely, those with more social support experience less homesickness (Van Tilburg *et al.*, 1997). Studies show that those who engage in social interactions are

more satisfied with their study abroad experiences, feeling less homesick. Those that struggle to feel connected begin to feel distant and different from those around them and begin to miss the place to which they do feel they belong, which is a strong predictor of distress. Social support plays a large role in the psychological well-being of students abroad (Ward *et al.*, 2001) which has been linked to improved happiness (Jou and Fukada, 1997). This study supports what this researcher felt when studying abroad, and generated a number of questions that were used as part of the interviews to see whether this was a universal feeling.

Returning home

Discourse in the psychology of migration places its emphasis on the challenging side of re-entry experiences. The experience has been described as 'difficult' (Wielkiewicz and Turkowski, 2010), 'painful' (Brabant *et al.*, 1990), 'problematic' (Chamove and Soeterik, 2006), and 'shocking' (Pritchard, 2011). These challenges have been linked to psychological adjustments to the individual's home culture. These range from loneliness, isolation, light anxiety, helplessness, depression and frustration to apathy, hostility and even anger (Allison *et al.*, 2011; Walling *et al.*, 2006). In an American study approximately 30% of students returning from studying abroad reported feelings of isolation and loneliness, rating it as a significant or severe problem (Gaw, 2000). Others told how they were experiencing depression, anxiety, alienation and shyness. Understandably, returning home after an exciting experience might be challenging both psychologically and socially. Yet, at the same time, the experiences that the individuals go through can generate some positives such as 'independence', 'confidence' and 'assertiveness' (Brown and Graham, 2009). This is one of the few studies that reported students feeling at ease on the return home. Participants reported feeling autonomous, particularly those who were under parental control at home. Feelings of disorientations were replaced by a newfound strength.

Research into returning home after studying between a semester and a year abroad has been reported to be both exciting and challenging by Kartoshkina (2015). Within her study, US college students were interviewed about their re-entry experience back home after a year abroad. The students reported a mixture of positive and negative feelings about their sojourns: they were 'Bitter-Sweet'. The 'bitter' side expressed was connected to the loss of new friends, the culture and the environment of the host

country to which they had become accustomed, and an inability to communicate their experiences to those at home. Conversely, students reuniting with their family and friends and the appreciations of elements of their home country and culture were considered positive experiences.

General explanations as to why it can be both socially and psychologically challenging most commonly include feelings of loss, and problems communicating with family and friends who are unable to relate to the students' intercultural experiences. Many researchers indicated that students might experience the feeling of loss after leaving their new friends, and the life-style and experiences whilst studying abroad. Allison *et al.*, (2011) noted that the communication problems seemed to be related to the inability of family and friends to relate to, or be interested in, the experiences of the students (Butcher, 2002). This leads to feelings of loneliness and disappointment (Cushner and Brislin, 1997).

Different cultures and societies specifically draw upon the emotional connections and sense of belonging to a group with a shared history (Manzo and Perkins, 2006). Losing this belonging can result in psychological distress. Cultural studies such as Anzaldúa (1987) look at the influences of culture on a person's sense of belonging. Scholars such as Spivack (2013) question the positive and unifying experiences associated with belonging at home, focusing on the up-rootedness and displacement in both the host country and country of origin.

Coping strategies against psychological distress

The experience of returning home from studying abroad can often be described as 'the re-adjusting period': a difficult time for some, causing psychological distress. Lazarus (1993) conceptualised stress as 'an external load or demand on a biological, social, or psychological system'. This kind of stress is often referred to as 'culture shock' (Oberg, 1960) and many psychological disorders, such as depression and anxiety have been linked to this stress (Iludd *et al.*, 2000). Hunley (2010) looked at the psychological distress and loneliness that students experienced whilst studying abroad. The findings showed that higher levels of psychological distress and loneliness were associated with what they deemed as 'lower functioning' in the students who went abroad.

The literature identifies some techniques for handling reverse culture shock, including treating the return as if they were returning to an unknown culture (Young, 2014). Hess (1994) recommended that upon return students should do the following: identify things in their own culture that now bother them; avoid tucking their experience abroad away; expect that it will take time to feel comfortable again; relax and process their experience by keep a journal of feelings about their experience and the return. Home universities can also help the individuals readjust at home by writing a simple letter welcoming the student home. This can help them acknowledge their feelings and show the willingness to support them. They can also set up discussions and events designed specially to help the students process their emotions connected to the readjustment (Young, 2014).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive epistemological approach (Hammersley, 2012), to understand the experiences of individuals. This paradigm relies on a subjective knowledge between researcher and participants. By adopting an interpretive paradigm to allowed focus to stay on the individual's feelings connected to their experience, allowing both the researcher and participant to reflect and make sense of the phenomenon. By incorporating an ethnographic approach with a phenomenological viewpoint, it allows the researcher to understand the participant's thoughts and feelings of life experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2009). This is a twofold process where the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's interpretation (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Polkinghorne (1995) argued, 'Stories can be viewed as socially situated knowledge constructions in their own right that values messiness, differences, depth, and texture of experienced life'. Using this approach allowed the researcher to gain personal thoughts and feelings that participants went through. Participants were able to analyse and reflect on their own experiences, as they were talking, adding another layer of insight to their experience.

Ejimabo (2015) stated that the ethnographic approach was designed as a way of understanding human behaviours within different cultures. Ethnography focuses on the viewpoint of the individual understanding cultures from experiencing it (Spradley, 2016), or 'to grasp the native's point of view, in relation to life, to realize his vision of his world' (Maliowski, 1922, p.25). As such, it also acknowledges the presence of the

ethnographer/researcher in the way knowledge is produced and represented (Stevenson, 2017). This approach allows the interviewer to use a friendly and informal conversational style with participants; it helps them feel at ease, creating an easy and open dialogue. Ethnographic interviewing also allows the participants the opportunity to be reflexive (Spradley, 2016). The pre-existing knowledge of studying abroad allowed the participants to feel comfortable in sharing their stories. Contemporary cultural psychologists use ethnography to obtain a richer understanding of cultural models of behaviours, using evolutionary and anthropological theory and what that means for cultures across the world. In line with the ethnographic approach, the following section will introduce the researcher.

Research Design

Participants' profile

Purpose sampling was used consisting of 10 students (7 females, 3 males), aged 18-25, all who took part in an education summer school in Zurich, Switzerland in June 2018. Participants were recruited through personal contacts. Recruitment of participants was carried out through personal contacts. The researcher asked participants to share their experiences at the summer school in Zurich. Participants in the summer school were from various countries all over the world, both international and EU students. Participants were given a pseudonym, and their profiles are illustrated in Table 1 below.

Returnee Pseudonyms	Country of Residence	Age
Helena	Estonia	21
Logan	United States of America	18
Paris	United States of America	18
Sateesh	Singapore	23
Quintin	Singapore	22
Dominique	United Kingdom	24
Charlotte	Sweden	20
Hoi	Hong Kong	18
Ashleigh	Sweden	19
Jeoffry	France	20

Table 1

The summer school consisted of 30 International students from different countries in Europe such as Estonia, UK, Sweden, France, Finland and overseas such as USA, Iceland, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Canada and. There were also students around Switzerland who joined the group in Zurich. Some came as twos or threes from the same institution, but did not know each other.

Data collection methods

Qualitative research methods were used in order to explore the experiences of the individuals on returning to their ordinary life and their home country after studying abroad. Using a qualitative method allowed the participant to talk openly and freely going into as much information as they wanted to share. Although the research had interview questions, the participant steered their own interview. Face-to-face and Skype interviews, and field notes were employed for collecting data.

This study utilised ethnographic interviewing using semi-structure interviews, Skype interview and field notes. The study took a phenomenological approach to designing the interview questions, focusing on the participants' emotions and feelings throughout key stages of the trip, i.e. before, during and after the return home.

During the interviews, the participants were asked to share their experiences of the entire trip. The interview plan was split into five sections, 'Before the trip', 'during the trip', 'after the trip', 'emotions throughout' and 'preparation'. Questions were used as a guide to help stimulate conversation and direction if needed.

Interview structure

The interview started by asking the students about their time abroad. Questions were constructed around the following areas: preparation they undertook before they embarked on their trip, the settling in process, about the summer school, post summer school, re-entry, emotions, thoughts and feelings, and what preparation they undertook before they embarked on their trip.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews

Qualitative interviews were chosen as they provide the researcher with the chance to immerse themselves into the stories of the participants, capturing the experiences and the raw emotion of the participants' own words which the researcher gains through

rich and holistic data (Yilmaz, 2013). In order to obtain honest, detailed and quality information, the researcher must create a safe, trusting and coherent research relationship between themselves and the participant. This is built by establishing a successful relationship and allowing the participant to freely share their thoughts and feelings in a safe, non-judgemental space, created by non-structured questions used in the interviews (Sullivan *et al.*, 2012)

The researcher guided the interview, yet equally allowed the participant the freedom to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Semi-structured Interviews (SSI) allow the researcher to follow up on information that arise from the interview and that are relevant and interesting to the research question, items not necessarily stated in the research question, or previously thought of by the researcher. Using SSI draws an accurate picture of the participants' experiences in their own words; their story is completely their own. To accomplish this, a broad interview guide was designed with questions constructed from previous literature. In this research, three interviews were conducted face-to-face, each lasting from 45 to 60 minutes to an hour in a place where the participants felt comfortable. Two interviews were conducted on a university campus and one in the participant's home. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, thoughts and feelings of how they felt and coped on re-entry from the summer school. To maintain accurate information notes were taken and recorded using a dictaphone and later transcribed manually.

Skype interviews

Technological advances in video-based software such as FaceTime and Skype have made communicating with others over long distance simpler and more effective Skype was used to conduct the interviews for those studying across the country and the globe.

For convenience, seven interviews were conducted through Skype, lasting 45 minutes to 1hr 30 minutes.

Field notes

The researcher took field notes throughout the process to record observations, personal thoughts and ideas. Field notes add an additional layer of data, in ethnographic methodology to be analysed.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used etically (the perspective of the observer) and emically (the perspective of the study group); etically by drawing on and bringing the focus back to the research questions and emically to develop code, by distinguishing themes that resonated from the transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998). The data was coded line by line and organised into a list of those recurring themes that emerged across the interviews. Codes were considered as an overall story throughout the data evidenced by excerpts from individual transcripts. Once the codes were grouped, they were then analysed, named and defined as follows; 'Homesickness and Social support', 'Home sweet home?' with a sub-theme 'Rollercoaster of emotions' split into the 'The Highs', 'The Lows' and 'Talk or not to talk'. Subthemes were identified when talking about the Emotions but from opposite ends of the scale.

Ethical guidelines

Following ethical guidelines provided by the British Psychological Society (2019) and University Ethical Guidelines for HSR, all participants were briefed and asked to give written consent before taking part in this project; they were asked to give consent at the beginning of the semi-structured interviews via email. All identifying information about the participants was confidential, precautions were put into place to protect the anonymity of each participant, as well as their emotional wellbeing and safety. All interviews and digital transcripts were password protected and all hard copies were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. No identifying features were disclosed, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect anyone guessing who they were.

Analysis/Discussion

The analysis of the interviews uncovered three key themes listed above. Each theme will be discussed, making links from extant literature to how the participants interpreted them in their interview.

Homesickness and Social Support

Participants revealed their expectations about being homesick before travelling to Zurich for their summer school. They spoke about the social support they received

from those in their home country and from the people they met in the host country during the course, the other participants and the staff running the course.

Homesickness is commonly experienced by many students who study abroad for a long period. However, this research finds that this does not just happen with long-term study. Participants who had been away for only two weeks spoke about how they expected to feel homesick before leaving their home country, but not to the extent they did. As Cox (2004) suggests, the students confirmed that having a supportive network, from those at home and those from the host country, and relationships during the time spent abroad makes the re-entry process easier. This support came from not only the support staff at the host university, but also from those at home.

Support from home:

Dominique (Transcript line (TL): 86-89) "My tutors emailed me at the end of the first week to see how I was getting on, saying that they like to check in as the settling in can be a difficult process. It was the new friends I made that helped me relax and settle in."

Support from the host:

Ashleigh (TL: 41-43) "I knew that being away from home was going to be tough but I never expected it to be that difficult. The intern in charge was so helpful, checked in on me daily to make sure I was ok."

One participant said that their tutors from their home university checked in with them during the trip, knowing about how difficult the settling in process could be. Another spoke about how their family and friends' advice back in their home country was to "stick it out" making the participant feel even worse. What was settling to the participants was the new friendships that they made. There are numerous advantages in making friends with multinational students; one is that whilst abroad they create a sense of commonality, making the individuals feel as though they are not alone in a new environment. Research conducted by Podsiadlowski *et al.* (2013) shows that emotional support from other students studying abroad is critical for successful relocation abroad and for psychological adjustment.

The re-entry phase

Furthermore, participants also relied on their new friends' support on their re-entry at home. Sateesh, reflected the feelings of conversations from 9 out of 10 participants: "I wish someone would have told me how difficult it would be coming back, I might have tried to prepare myself for it." Seven of the participants expressed that they anticipated being sad, but were not expecting the return home to be as difficult as they experienced.

All participants spoke about how they coped, stating that their support network was their fellow students from the summer school.

Charlotte (TL: 173-175) "Most of my support when I got home was from the people I had met abroad, talking to them really helped me readjust, knowing that we could share stories of the past two weeks."

In the interviews they expressed their gratitude for the other participants communication, telling the researcher that although they were on different time zones they all had multiple conversations throughout the day.

Social support from other students is an important part of the emotional support package (Johnson *et al.*, 2003). The support allows individuals to adjust more easily, having experienced similar situations; they can, therefore, understand the situation, minimising the stress and uncertainty (Van Gorp *et al.*, 2017).

Home sweet home?

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, one of the dominant themes that resonated was that of wanting to be home but not wanting to be home, struggling with their sense of home and belonging. Within this theme, participants spoke about the 'Rollercoaster of emotions' that they went through: both the 'Highs' and 'Lows' that they felt being back. This was also found in Kartoshkina's (2015) study in which participants reported feelings of bitter-sweet: excited to see family and friends but not wanting to come home.

Rollercoaster of emotions

Participants expressed that upon their return they had experienced a wide range of difficult and confused emotions. The re-entry can cause psychological distress, often because of loss and feelings of loneliness (Hunley, 2010). Eight out of 10 participants spoke about how they were full of mixed emotions, from being "hysterical", "drained" and "longing to go back". Ashleigh summed it up as being "*up, then down, then up, then down. It was like being on a rollercoaster - never knowing what was next*".

As Ashleigh pointed out, participants expressed their struggles of returning home in combination with more positive emotions. Eight participants reported that it was nice to get back to their home comforts such as "sleeping in my own bed", "seeing family and friends", and "eating proper food".

The Highs

Participants reported that they were happy to be back around their family and friends and that they were glad to be back home and to be surrounded by familiarity.

Quintin (TL: 81-82) "It was great to sleep in my own bed, in my own room without feeling subconscious about sharing it with someone else."

Helena (TL: 49) "I was so excited to see my nieces; I missed them so so much!"

Eight out of 10 participants used words such as "happy" and "excited" to describe how they felt about being back. These feelings were connected to seeing family and friends, returning to home comforts. Four participants expressed "relief" about being back, stating that they longed for familiar food. One participant expressed that being home felt that she had never gone away; this was also found in Chamove and Soeterik's (2006) study where students reported feeling at "ease" about returning to life at home. Six participants expressed joy in returning to the comforts of their own room, especially those who had shared rooms abroad, also seen in Pritchard (2011) with participants finding "comfort" in being back to the home culture.

Despite the feelings of comfort and happiness to see their family and friends, participants reported feeling low, a sense of loss, missing their newly-made friends

and the new lifestyle they had grown accustomed to. Longing to be back abroad is referred to as "The Lows".

The Lows

As previous research has confirmed, many students who have returned home from studying abroad experience difficulties upon the return to their home culture (Thompson and Christofi, 2006). Negative feelings connected to the re-entry have been reported by students in previous studies such as Alison *et al.* (2011) who reported the feeling of loneliness. Participants spoke about how they felt in the first couple of weeks after they returned home. Many reported feelings of nostalgia, wanting to return to the summer school to be with their new friends. Kartoshkina (2015) found that feelings were connected to the feeling of losing people, to losing the environment and the experiences that they encountered whilst abroad.

*Dominique (TL: 91-95) "The only way I can describe it is like being heartbroken; all I wanted to do was cry ... I missed X and O so much, I had gotten really attached to them, saying goodbye was the hardest thing I've ever done"... (TL; 154-155) "In my head I was thinking if I had come home when I wanted I wouldn't feel this s**t now."*

Participants spoke about the intenseness of the feelings they felt at the summer school and the relationships that they had developed. They talked about how they were spending all their time together, both as part of the course and doing excursion trips and evening outings. Highlighting how difficult they felt it was on their return, "*It was like going through the five stages of grief*". Eight of the participants expressed their close relationship with other members of the group, and spoke about how difficult it was to say goodbye to them. This was supported by various studies in which students reported leaving their new friends and lifestyle challenging (Kartoshkina, 2015; Pritchard, 2011; Wielkiewicz and Turkowski, 2010). This is a common theme in re-entry literature, as highlighted by Kartoshkina (2015) who reported that losing new friends resulted in lower functioning and an increase in loneliness.

Participants expressed difficulty in the process of grieving over the loss of their friends and longing to return to the experiences they have returned from. One participant

described the experience as being "heartbroken"; another told that they felt "depressed". Ward *et al.* (2001) echoed these findings commenting that re-entry has been connected to psychological distress, with many returning students suffering from a range of difficulties. Furthermore, loneliness is the most common problem for returnees: they particularly appear to suffer with the loss of interpersonal relationships, with friends, noting that sometimes the psychological distress continues on a clinical level.

Participants were asked what they did to counteract the low moods they were experiencing.

Helena (TL: 137-138) "Readjusting was difficult and with us all being in different time zones it was hard to get support from one another."

Dominique (TL: 218-219) "What worked best for me was just to cry, it was something that I just had to do. I just had to let myself get over it on my own."

Ashleigh (TL: 147-149) "Nights were the hardest but I was able to speak to some of the others on social media which helped."

Nine of the participants expressed that the best way for them to keep their mind off their loss was to keep themselves "busy" and "distracted". All of them found it helpful to keep in touch with those from the summer school. Talking about their trip helped them cope with the re-entry process. Doka (1989) spoke about the "disenfranchised grief" which is defined as a grief that a person experiences when they suffer a loss not socially supported, or openly acknowledged. Returnees spoke about their coping strategies, on how they coped with the grieving process; for some returnees it took longer than others. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, or a definition of when to or not to grieve. One returnee described it as "something I had to do". In order for the returnee to grieve, both the individual and the wider society need to recognise the individual's loss of both friends, experience and culture and to realise the impact it has on the individual.

This leads to the next theme that emerged from the data 'Talk or not to talk'.

Talk or not to talk?

This theme identified the struggles, which participants faced when talking to their family and friends. Disenfranchised grief is argued to exacerbate the grieving process, intensifying the normal reactions of grief, namely, loneliness, sadness, depression, homesickness and numbness. In grief where nobody has died, there is rarely a ritual through which the griever can express their feelings (Dolka, 1989). When talking about their return home participants expressed that those around them did not understand how they felt.

Helena (TL: 167-169) "I also felt like they were judging me for being so emotional. They were like you need to get over it, which wasn't helpful."

Ashleigh (TL: 201-203) "It was difficult to talk to family etc ... they couldn't understand why I was so upset, after being homesick; all they kept saying was 'your home now'"

Paris (TL: 138-142) "I spoke to friends but I could tell they were bored of hearing about it and so I just stopped bringing it up."..."I knew they didn't understand how I was feeling and talking to them just made me feel stupid for feeling like that."

Dominique (TL: 232-233) "In a sea of people I felt totally alone! No matter how hard I tried to explain they just didn't know how I was feeling."

Participants reported difficulty when communicating with their friends and family, expressing that they do not understand the emotional struggle they were feeling. One participant told how they felt they were "being judged". Five of the participants spoke about their families' lack of understanding, struggling to understand their emotions about their return due to being homesick. Several researchers including Kartoshkina (2015), Allison *et al.* (2011) and Butcher (2002) found that participants reported bitter experiences when communicating with friends and family. Their studies found that it was difficult for family and friends to relate to studying abroad. Some participants expressed that friends and family lost interest in hearing stories about the trip, stating, "They were bored of hearing about it" and did not care too much.

One of the consequences of disenfranchised grief is due to the lack of social support and sanctioning, causing the bereaved to become alienated from the community (Kaufmann, 1989), thus fostering to the sense of loneliness. One participant spoke about how the lack of understanding of family and friends led to further loneliness and isolation for the individual, despite being surrounded by a "sea of people"! As shown above, upon their return participants expressed that their social support network of family and friends struggled to understand how they were feeling. Participants expressed negative feelings towards themselves for feeling the way they did, and expressed concerns of how others saw them, saying things like they felt "stupid" or did not want to "appear weak".

Conclusion

This study took an ethnographic approach that looked at the experiences of 10 undergraduate students returning to their home countries from studying abroad as part of a two-week summer school in Zurich, Switzerland. Stemming from the researcher's personal experiences as an undergraduate student on the trip, the study used semi-structured interviews face-to face and via Skype that highlighted the feelings, disruptions and coping strategies of the students from adapting to the culture on their return to their home country after the end of the study programme. This study explored the participant's' experiences and the impact on their mental health in coping with the transition. Three main themes, which were identified, namely 'Homesickness and Social support' which highlighted the difficulties students faced such as missing their home comforts, longing to be amongst family and friends, as well as feeling alone. They also highlighted the support they received from fellow summer school participants, and how reassuring and helpful the summer school staff were in trying to help them settle in to the new environment, along with their continued support on their re-entry home. 'Home sweet home?' presented the conflicted feelings of being home and longing to be with their new friends. This was split into two sub-themes 'Rollercoaster of emotions' split into the 'The Highs', 'The Lows'; students experienced homesickness, mood swings and loneliness in relation to their relocation and re-entry. Participants' sense of 'home' appeared to change from before the summer school to after. What once was their place of comfort, that was longed for in the early stages of the trip, was now a place of unsettledness. Participants also reported that their

experiences were often underestimated and expressed the need of receiving more support. The third theme, 'Talk or not to talk', highlighted the conflict participants felt about sharing their feelings and details of the trip with their family and friends. It was highlighted that, although family and friends were interested to hear about the trip, they could not relate to their experience; this made participants feel isolated and alone. This study hopes to inform students who aim to go abroad on the difficulties that they will be experiencing. Our participants experienced a rollercoaster of emotions, and felt confused; another had mood swings throughout their experience, in particular the return home. I hope that this will allow future students to prepare themselves of what they might feel and to re-assure them that it is something that others have experienced.

This study will also help to inform institutions of the difficulties students have faced, and aid in preparing and supporting future students both practically, mentally and emotionally for studying abroad, as part of a dedicated attitude to preserve the health and wellbeing of students coming abroad to study. Universities should use this research, along with previous studies, to enhance support services for students in their study journeys abroad, and in the re-entry both mentally and physically. Future research could include a longitudinal study capturing the entire experience with a focus on the techniques that universities use to support students in their journey abroad and in the return home.

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