Queer: Will Travel

The Impact of Experiential Study Abroad on Sexual Identity Development for LGBTQ-Identifying College Students

Emory C. Erker-Lynch

Northwestern University

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Research Question

How do new cultural realities experienced through experiential study abroad programs influence LGBTQ-identifying participants in their sexual identity development, and how can higher education professionals best utilize this knowledge in designing programming supportive of students and host communities?

Data Interpretation

This study sought to explore the factors influencing sexual identity development for LGBTQ-identifying participants of community-based study abroad programs in order to inform higher education professionals in their designing of supports for both students and host communities. The collected qualitative and quantitative data reveal several trends. These trends include a desire for more preparation pre-departure, a heightened salience of sexual identity while abroad, several common challenges and supports in-country, and evidence of a significant and lasting influence of the abroad experience on sexual identity development.

Need for More Preparation Pre-Departure

Both interview and survey participants expressed an interest in more visible and robust resources pre-departure. There was an overwhelming consensus that for this particular program, supportive structures exist for LGBTQ-identifying participants while in-country, but that lacking are visible indicators of this acceptance and support at the program level pre-departure. Artifact analysis results displayed in Figure 7 reveal that while the GESI program makes clear reference to LGBTQ issues in host communities in their pre-departure resources, the Casa Network does not. There is evidence throughout the academic literature that it is the support of institutional policies and trained faculty and staff that can determine how an environment is perceived by LGBTQ-identifying students (Evans & Herriott, 2004; Fassinger, 1998; Rhoads, 1994; Stevens, 2004). LGBTQ students assess environments for cues as to whether their physical, social and institutional environment is open, hostile or null, and from there determine how they do or do not fit into that new environment (Evans & Broido, 1999). According to Stevens (2004), the real or perceived supports or challenges that a student experiences during this assessment provide

context for sexual identity negotiation and formation. Data collected in this study indicated that participants in the Casa program began that assessment and thus that determination of open, hostile, or null environment before they arrived in country. Many more participants recalled concerns pre-departure about the possibility of their LGBTQ identity impacting their safety in country or the possibility of being discriminated against than those who actually ended up experiencing these negative influences, as determined in the comparison between Figure 8 and Figure 9. 62% of survey respondents acknowledged they felt unprepared for the experience of being LGBTQ-identifying in the new cultural context. For many of these unprepared participants the assumption was they would encounter a hostile cultural environment, with several participants expressing their surprise when Salvadorans received them openly upon disclosure of their sexual identity, as evidenced in Table 5. Amongst the respondents who felt very or somewhat prepared, one-on-one conversations with LGBTQ-identifying alumni/ae of the program were most helpful. Based on participants voices, it is the recommendation of this study that study abroad programs, and experiential, community-based programs in particular create visible networks of LGBTQ-identifying alumni/ae for participants to reach out to pre-departure or while in-country.

For interviewee Ida, who as evident in Figure 12 experienced the most concerns and anxieties related to her sexual identity of all the interviewees, “everyone was really supportive but it was all very reactive instead of proactive” (personal communication, March 14, 2015). She expressed a sense of isolation at times, and the feeling that “any knowledge I had of what the culture was like in that country was kind of a guessing game” (personal communication, March 14, 2015). She believed it would have been tremendously helpful to have an LGBTQ alumni/ae network to plug into pre-departure, as “just having resources, and having people that have been

through it, or some form of knowledge of what maybe beliefs are in the country at the moment or who to reach out to when things are getting tough" would have supported her transition and development (personal communication, March 14, 2015). Ida's experience is just one example of an assumed hostile environment, and Ida's development was initially stunted because she "just blocked it out and didn't… just kind of assumed things were gonna be different…I felt like I was kind of on my own in that regard. Because I didn't know who else had been through that experience" (personal communication, March 14, 2015).

The need for visibility of LGBTQ experiences in pre-departure resources is supported in the literature, as Jones and McEwen (2000) in their study found that student voices should inform resources and programming, and student affairs educators must not presume what is most central to individuals but must instead listen for how a person sees herself. Respondents to this study's survey and interview overwhelmingly expressed a desire for representation of LGBTQ student voices in pre-departure resources, with evidence presented in Table 3 and Table 4 supporting the idea that while students may have desired more information pre-departure around LGBTQ experience in-country, they were hesitant to seek it out because it was not visibly and readily available. Data supports the need for visibility in the program resources, because as Otto pointed out, "I like looked up online stuff about LGBTQ folks in El Salvador, and that is beneficial to a certain degree but its so incomplete and so coded in a cultural context that I don't understand" (personal communication, March 29, 2015). For Otto, "a support network would be nice" for helping to place the information that is found online within the context of students' lived experience (personal communication, March 29, 2015).

Heightened Salience of Sexual Identity Abroad

The data from this study upholds findings in the literature that the salience of an individual's sexual identity can intensify when that individual is introduced to a new environment (Fong, 2004, Stevens, 2004). Two significant influences emerged as central to this heightened salience of sexual identity while abroad: the environmental shift, and the cultural difference of *machismo* and rigid gender roles.

Influence of environmental shift. Table 6 provides evidence that for some of the study participants the environmental shift to the host country created a new sense of independence or a clean slate, while for others the influence of cultural differences was significant. Fassinger (1998) and Stevens (2004) noted that students can move through and revisit several stages of development as they explore their sexual orientation within the context of new environments, a finding corroborated by a survey participant's statement, "since coming out in high school, I haven't really critically thought about my sexual identity, or how I express it because I haven't needed to think about it. Being in a place where deviations from sexual norms are a huge deal forced me to think about the ways in which I present/label myself" (anonymous survey respondent, March 2015). The revisiting of earlier processes of sexual identity development due to heightened salience of a particular identity while abroad or because of its oppressed social treatment—a concept to be explored further in the *Machismo* section below—is environment dependent. This is evidenced in Ian's statement, "a lot of my experiences in my praxis site just kind of made me really aware of my sexual identity. Kind of for the first time in awhile since I don't really think about it in [my hometown]. Because it's not really an issue ever [there]" (personal communication, March 13, 2015).

The literature on the learning outcomes of study abroad also illuminates the developmental process that students undergo as a result of this environmental shift. Learning outcomes attributed to study abroad such as increased self-confidence, improved cultural sensitivity and better understanding of values and identity biases are largely a result of being a cultural outsider— a personal challenge students must make sense of (Anderson & Lawton, 2011; Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Meyer-Lee & Evans, 2007). Functioning successfully "in a strange environment and under a different set of ground rules from those found in one's own culture" (Wallace, 1993, p. 14) leads to a greater understanding of one's personal strengths and weaknesses, and thus increases self-confidence and self-identity. This study's findings related to a sense of "otherness," or being a cultural outsider will be discussed further in the Challenges Abroad section to follow, but its relevance is significant in this discussion of heightened awareness of and importance of sexual identity while abroad as well. Participants' experiences of the environmental shift reflected in Table 6 and their experiences of support in-country reflected in Table 11 illustrate the role of this shift in their heightened awareness of and confidence in sexual identity.

***Machismo* and rigid gender roles.** In addition to understanding themselves differently as a result of simply being in a new environment and experiencing themselves as cultural outsiders, participants spoke to the influence of cultural difference on their understanding of self. In their discussion of the most central cultural values observed in the host country, as demonstrated in Figure 10, seven interview respondents mentioned traditional conservative values and all ten mentioned *machismo*. Amongst cultural differences, the affect of *machismo* and the regular reinforcement of a gender binary had the strongest influence on sexual identity awareness and development for survey and interview participants. Though a cultural value of the

host community, *machismo* personally impacted participants, as evident in participant quotes in Table 7 and one survey respondent's remark in particular, "boys/men were embarrassed or shamed for deviating from gender norms…I was questioned about anything I did that did not fit into the stereotype of a typical man" (March 2015). Another survey respondent spoke to the oppression of homophobia: "there were often homophobic remarks about people in the news or members of the community that did not fit in masculine or feminine roles" (March, 2015). This finding on the importance of *machismo* is supported by the literature, which argues the more outwardly oppressed dimensions of identity are often most salient (Abes, 2012; Jones, 2009; Stevens, 2004). Researchers have found that not only does otherness—or difference in social location—prompt identity scrutiny, forcing certain dimensions to the forefront (Abes, 2012; Eliason & Schope, 2007; Jones, 2009; Jones & McEwen, 2000), but specifically Abes (2012) and Jones and McEwen (2000) found identity frequently becomes more salient as it receives scrutiny or oppression from the outside. As the oppression of LGBTQ and gender non-conforming identities, *machismo* as a cultural value had the greatest influence on LGBTQ-identifying participants because it was experienced most personally.

Particularly relevant to this study is Cass's (1979) suggestion that sexual identity issues usually take precedence over other issues during the middle period of sexual identity development, which is for many the most emotional period. Figure 11 and Table 10 display examples of concerns and anxieties related to sexual identity informing participants' emotions abroad. Sexual identity became more salient for participants partly because of concerns related to their socially oppressed identity, including "getting really nervous and scared" (Allison, personal communication, March 13, 2015) when questioned about having a partner, feeling "physically threatened" (Anonymous survey respondent, March, 2015) by those who knew of one's sexual

identity, and "not really feeling like I could be myself" (Ida, personal communication, March 14, 2015) when not disclosing sexual identity to members of the host community. These concerns and other emotional factors contribute to heightened awareness and heightened importance of sexual identity, as evident in Otto's claim, "my sexual identity and development was at the forefront at the point I was studying abroad" (personal communication, March 29, 2015).

The concept that identities are always in flux—a notion central to queer theory— is critical to understanding the shifting salience of sexual identity depending on environmental context. D'Augelli (1994) argued three interrelated and ever-changing variables are involved in identity formation: personal actions and subjectivities, interactive intimacies, and socio-historical connections. Participants' experiences point to this reality, as for some the socio-historical connections in-country, namely *machismo,* negatively impacted self-perception, while their personal actions of more structured reflection and interactive intimacies in a supportive community positively informed their identity development. It is the interplay of these three variables within a new environment that heighten the salience of sexual identity and ultimately influence developmental outcomes.

Challenges Abroad

Survey and interview respondents spoke to various challenges abroad, though most are related to *machismo* and its affects, barriers related to religious or language differences, and the fear that in not disclosing their sexual identity to members of the host community they were being inauthentic, while at the same time fearing that disclosure would jeopardize those relationships.

Barriers of religion and language difference. Like *machismo*, the influence of conservative religious practices and moral beliefs was a cultural barrier for several participants (Table 8). There were some respondents who experienced the religious values of the host country positively, like Emma Jane who noted the importance of "exposure to progressive ideas about Catholicism…seeing that it was possible to identify as Catholic but also have a different sexual identity and how those two things didn't necessarily have to contradict" (personal communication, April 15, 2015). However, several spoke to the barrier of "heavy religion" in that it can be "very exclusive, and there's no way that you can undo all of the messed up things that religion does, especially to LGBT people and questioning people" (Rebekka, personal communication, March 13, 2015).

Likewise, many respondents experienced language differences as a barrier to comfort in disclosing sexual identity or being one's most authentic self, as evidence in Table 9. One survey respondent stated, "I did not really have the Spanish ability to disclose my sexual identity in the way that I would have wanted" (March, 2015), an experience echoed by several other respondents. Language barriers significantly impacted cultural perceptions and thus the anxieties and concerns that respondents experienced while in-country. Because, as was aforementioned, oppressive social experiences generally heighten the salience of sexual identity and force that development to the forefront of one's experience, (Abes, 2012; Jones & McEwen, 2000), the barriers of religious and language difference experienced by respondents in-country were not necessarily ultimately negative. As components of a stretch experience, all of the challenges experienced by participants short of those that threatened and thus stifled self-reflection contributed to the process of self-awareness.

Conflicting feelings on disclosure to host community. Many survey and interview respondents spoke to an inherent conflict in the development of relationships with members of the host community. Figure 11 and Table 10 demonstrate the concerns of respondents in-country, and Figure 9 displays the experiences survey-respondents had while in-country. It is clear from this data that for most who did identify as LGBTQ while abroad, the strongest fear was not related to safety or discrimination from members of the host community. Rather, the most anxiety-inducing experience was that of forming bonds with members of the host community and struggling to feel authentic if not disclosing sexual identity, while also fearing that those relationships would be jeopardized if those friends in the host community found out one's LGBTQ-identity.

The tension of fear of rejection is a crucial finding of this study. Several interviewees spoke to the tension they felt in being received warmly in a culture that prides itself on hospitality and the centrality of community and family (Figure 10), plus participation in a program that places a high value on reciprocity in relationships and vulnerability (Table 11), yet feeling that these external expectations for authenticity did not align with cultural expectations around gender performance and sexual identity, leaving them feeling as though they were inauthentic in not disclosing their sexual identity to members of the host community. Otto remarked, "I remember feeling kind of I had let myself down and wasn't authentic to myself not coming out to Salvadorans" (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Ida spoke directly to the tension in remarking, "Casa is so much about being open and being vulnerable and really connecting each other and with the country, and…to feel like I needed to put that part of myself away whenever I stepped out of the Casa house didn't really jive" (personal communication, March 14, 2015).

Of the interview participants who did identify as LGBTQ while abroad, those who disclosed their sexual identity to at least one member of the host community made far fewer mentions of a struggle with inauthenticity. Addie, Lucy and Reggie all disclosed their sexual identity to at least one Salvadoran, and while they all still experienced concerns while abroad (Figure 12), they grappled less with a sense of inauthenticity than did the other five interviewees who identified as LGBTQ while abroad.

Supportive Experiences Abroad

While challenges experienced abroad frequently heightened the salience of LGBTQ sexual identity for study participants, supportive experiences allowed them the space to reflect on the meaning of this salience and progress in their identity development. Of the supportive experiences referenced by survey and interview participants, some of the most frequent and significant were "safe spaces" in community—which included intentional conversations about sexual identity and visibility of LGBTQ-identifying leadership—and structures for reflection. Because this study sought to provide recommendations to program administrators on not only best practices in supporting LGBTQ-identifying students abroad, but also in supporting members of the host community in welcoming LGBTQ students, responses from participants regarding recommendations for supports of the host community are discussed here as well.

"Safe spaces" in community. Rhoads (1994) and Evans and Herriott (2004) found that inclusion through supportive friends, family, and community positively influenced the awareness of and confidence in sexual identity of lesbian, gay and bisexual-identifying individuals, a finding upheld by the results of this study. Table 11 reflects the supports respondents received in-country from their program, and Table 5 shows the positive experiences that some respondents

had when disclosing their sexual identity to members of the host community. The "incredibly supportive and open and accepting" (Heloise, personal communication, March 29, 2015) students and staff in the program allowed many students to feel affirmed and safe to reflect upon their sexual identities. Allison recalls, "feeling, like, incredibly safe in community with other students…there was a normalcy to it that I hadn't felt in my life before. Where I wasn't going to be like, othered, for my sexual identity. It was just included as part of who I was (personal communication, March 13, 2015). Fassinger (1998) and D'Augelli (1994) suggested environmental factors play a major role in the development of a positive gay, lesbian or bisexual identity, which is clearly upheld by the findings of this study. For one survey respondent, having "such a safe environment within our group that I felt comfortable opening up" directly influenced that individual's ability to "finally [accept] my sexual identity and actually [take] pride in it" (March, 2015).

For Allison, one of the most significant manifestations of this safe space was an intentional conversation where "the program created space for the whole student community to have a discussion on LGBTQ identifying in El Salvador" (personal communication, March 13, 2015). She said, "it was really significant for me, for the first time in my life to have a whole group of people holding space to talk about difficulties and joys and frustrations and struggles for being LGBTQ identifying in general, but also in this context and being in a different culture" (Allison, personal communication, March 13, 2015). Allison was not alone in appreciating intentional conversations and visibly positive symbols supportive of LGBTQ identities. For several respondents having staff leadership in the program that identified openly as LGBTQ was important, as shown in Table 12. Otto said having three openly queer-identified community coordinators in the program "was like all very affirming of who I was as a gay man" (personal

communication, March 29, 2015), and for Rebekka, "the biggest thing for me that helped to start looking at myself was just like being around really great gay men and lesbian women. Just in general" (personal communication, March 13, 2015). LGBTQ-identifying role models in leadership positions that are supportive in creating safe spaces can thus serve an important role in fostering healthy sexual identity development.

Structures for reflection. Besides safe spaces, structures for reflection were most frequently cited as playing a significant role in positive sexual identity development abroad. Study participants' experiences related to reflection are shown in Table 11. Otto spoke to how important it was that "the program was very supportive and offered spaces to reflect and share that openly with other folks in the process" (personal communication, March 29, 2015), an experience supported by many survey and interview participants. One survey respondent said, "the intentional nature of the program gently pushes each student to grapple with who they are," (April, 2015), which for another survey respondent, "helped me come to terms with my sexuality, mostly because of the healing nature of being able to talk so freely about yourself and past experiences" (March, 2015). This emphasis on reflection is rooted in principles of experiential education, which according to Citron and Kline (2001) is critical because by connecting the learning to the individual, experience can be utilized as a means to develop the whole person and present opportunities for self-discovery.

Structures for reflection were not only useful as a means to further develop one's sexual identity, but also to integrate that identity development into the meaning-making of one's experience with difficult realities of suffering and marginalization in host communities. Several study participants spoke to the importance of integrating personal identity with intersecting issues of social and economic injustice being explored through reflection. As Addie remarked,

"if you're wrestling with questions of sexual identity, its extra meaningful to learn about economic oppression, etcetera at the same time," (personal communication, March 13, 2015). Emma Jane also commented that through reflection she was able to start "to understand how so many different justice issues intersect with each other," (personal communication, April 15, 2015) including her increasing understanding of her own oppressed sexual identity. This integration and "conscientization"—or the process of developing critical awareness of one's social reality—through experience and reflection is central to experiential education (Freire, 1970). The primary goal of experiential education is entering into critical analysis of one's own lived experience and that of the host community in order to make explicit humanization of the learner (Freire, 1970; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Structures of reflection are thus critical not only for development of sexual identity, but also for integration of personal identity into critical interpretation of and understanding of social realities. This reflection on the world is the first step in taking informed action in order to transform injustice (Freire, 1974).

Supports for members of host community. Issues of justice are central, too, to envisioning and designing resources to support members of the host community in welcoming LGBTQ-identifying students. According to Stephenson (2006), in order to be considered "fair trade," or mutually enriching learning, both student learning outcomes and impact on host country collaborators must be considered. Survey and interview findings supported this conclusion, and the majority of participants who made recommendations for supports and resources for the host community in receiving LGBTQ-identified students (Table 13) paid equal attention to the needs of students and those of the host community. Emma Jane suggested intentional conversations "co-facilitated by someone working for the Casa program and…one of the Salvadoran partners. I could see that maybe working— so it was like a cross-cultural

conversation" (personal communication, April 15, 2015). Because "LGBT issues exist everywhere and people identify as gay or lesbian in El Salvador," (Emma Jane, personal communication, April 15, 2015) the perspective of the host community is critical to foster greater cross-cultural awareness and understanding. Otto said, "I feel that any sort of conversation around that definitely has to be respectful of not imposing or assuming that the U.S. culture is better, or imposing a cultural bias….it would be ideal if it could be Salvadoran led and initiated" (personal communication, Marc 29, 2015). Otto, like several other respondents, expressed an awareness of cultural sensitivity and the importance of not oppressing the perspectives of members of the host community. There were no specific resources recommended, but consensus was there should be structured dialogue with careful attention paid to seeking and hearing all perspectives. This was considered the most educational and thus beneficial support that programs could implement to support host communities in receiving LGBTQ students with awareness and understanding.

Lasting Influence

The final significant overall trend revealed in the findings of this study is the profound and lasting influence study abroad can have on sexual identity development. In just one example of this influence, Reggie stated, "when I think of Casa, when I think of El Salvador, I think of liberation for my own self" (personal communication, March 13, 2015). This section will first revisit the processes proposed by sexual identity development models in order to frame the developmental outcome findings of this study. The influence of experiential study abroad on acceptance and confidence in sexual identity as well as the influence on integration of sexual identity with other dimensions of identity will also be explored.

Sexual identity development processes. Both Fassinger's (1998) and D'Augelli's (1994) models of sexual identity development proposed processes of development, while also rejecting essentialist notions of a linear identity development progression. The experiences of participants of this study uphold the theory of non-linear progression, as several revisited earlier processes of development as they grappled with their sexual identity in a new cultural environment. This point is illustrated by the survey participant who stated, "since coming out in high school, I haven't really critically thought about my sexual identity, or how I express it because I haven't needed to think about it. Being in a place where deviations from sexual norms are a huge deal forced me to think about the ways in which I present/label myself" (March 2015).

D'Augelli's (1994) model presented six interactive processes that inform progression in sexual identity development, as represented in Figure 2. Three of those processes are particularly evident in the progressions of development articulated by study participants. The processes of developing a personal LGB identity, developing a LGB social identity, and entering a LGB community are all described by respondents as outcomes of participation in an experiential study abroad program, with some examples presented in Table 11. These processes will be explored further in the subsequent sections on acceptance and confidence in one's sexual identity and integration of sexual identity into overall identity.

D'Augelli's (1994) emphasis on the significance of socio-historical connections is evident in the findings of this study, too, as the social context in which students found themselves was highly influential on their identity development. Ida illustrated this point in saying, "I definitely know that having grappled with my identity in those countries has impacted the way I feel about it now. And I think at this point… in really good ways. It was hard at some points, but I think…it allows me to be more mindful and intentional" (personal communication,

March 14, 2015). Ida struggled with *machismo* and other cultural variables that opposed her pre-existing understandings of gender and sexuality, but the challenge of that socio-historical reality ultimately influenced progress in her sexual identity development.

Influence on acceptance and confidence in sexual identity. Consistent with the last three stages proposed by Cass's (1979) Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Development (Figure 1), several participants identified a process of identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis in the mature stages of their sexual identity development. This section explores the findings related to identity acceptance and identity pride. For Lucy, these two processes were interwoven: "it was the first time I was open. I think that impacted my confidence hugely… just like beginning to voice it for the first time, beginning to take ownership and integrate there" (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Lucy was one of many respondents who noted their experience abroad directly influenced not only a heightened awareness of their sexual identity (Figure 13), but also increased acceptance of an confidence in their sexual identity (Table 14). One survey respondent said, "I became comfortable with claiming my sexual identity for the first time," (March, 2015) and Rebekka tied her increased comfort and confidence in her sexual identity to "just in general having an experience outside of myself. Seeing that like people live different ways in the world, and that I can possibly live another way as well" (personal communication, March 13, 2015). Rebekka's experience illustrates several of the profound learning outcomes of experiential study abroad, including an integration of learning into one's own life, (Burns, 2000), increased self-discovery (Citron & Kline, 2001) and greater emotional awareness (Wallace, 1993).

A critical finding in this study is the number of survey respondents' whose sexual identity shifted from pre-departure to the time of this study. Figure 5 reflects respondents' sexual identity

pre-departure and Figure 6 reflects sexual identity at the time of participation in this study. Seven survey respondents did not identify as LGBTQ pre-departure and fourteen participants responded that they identified as questioning pre-departure, while only one identified as questioning at the time this research was conducted and none as non-LGBTQ. The number of respondents who identify as queer nearly doubled from pre-departure to the time this research was conducted, from seven to thirteen, and the number who identify as lesbian doubled from five to ten. While these shifts in sexual identity cannot be attributed to the experience abroad alone, the number of respondents who articulate a causal relationship between their experience abroad and the latter stages of identity development—particularly identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis—does indicate a strong correlation.

One lasting developmental outcome linked directly to identity acceptance and identity pride is an increased interest in social participation in the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ advocacy, as illustrated in Otto's statement: "I know I came out [of my abroad experience] very much more confident in my identity as a gay man, and actually took that on in my last year at school in a very like active political role, very engaging in the queer community at my school trying to push for change" (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Figure 14 and Figure 15 reflect survey respondents' increased interest in the LGBTQ community and advocacy as a result of their experience abroad. Fassinger's (1998) Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Development (Table 1) places personal commitment to the LGBTQ community within the process of deepening commitment to one's sexual identity.

Influence on integration of sexual identity with other dimensions of identity. In Fassinger's (1998) model (Table 1), the most mature process of identity development is internalization/synthesis, or the phase in which one's sexual identity becomes a part of one's

overall identity. Figure 14 reflects 75% of survey respondents attribute an increased integration of their sexual identity with other dimensions of their identity to their experience studying abroad. Heloise said, "I definitely like as a person feel more integrated. So as opposed to having a bunch of different identities—where its like this is gender identity, and this is my sexual identity, and this is my religious identity, and my political identity, and my roommate identity or whatever…that I do feel much more integrated as a person" (personal communication, March 29, 2015). This increased integration indicates a decreased sense of oppression due to one's sexual identity, as our gaze is typically directed towards our oppressed locations (Abes, 2012). Integration suggests that the heightened salience of sexual identity experienced when one first goes abroad recedes enough that sexual identity becomes just another dimension of identity within one's overall identity. This integration does not denote a reduced identity pride however, as evident in Allison's statement, "I left with so much stronger of a language for myself. As an activist, as a young person, as someone who is radically identified as a queer woman, as a woman. I left with the language that I had been seeking. And it really gave me the confidence to continue exploring those things" (personal communication, March 13, 2015). Allison gained confidence in her sexual identity as a queer woman, and also gained greater pride in all other dimensions of her identity. Her experience abroad made a profound and lasting impact not only on her sexual identity, but also on her overall identity development.

Conclusion

The emergent trends in the data collected for this study indicate a real need for more preparation pre-departure, a heightened salience of sexual identity while abroad, several common challenges and supports in-country, and evidence of a significant and lasting influence of the

abroad experience on sexual identity development—all themes supported by the academic literature. The recommendations that developed out of this study, then, are relevant not only for the Casa program or experiential study abroad programs, but also for any and all study abroad programs seeking to better support LGBTQ-identifying participants and host communities in welcoming these participants. Recommendations can be adapted to the purposes and mission of each program, but it is critical that visible and easily accessible resources related to LGBTQ identity pre-departure, intentional "safe spaces" and structures for reflection in-country, and dialogue with members of the host community around sexual identity be adopted by programs in order for participants to feel the support necessary to positively develop their sexual identity.