

# Visions in Our Heads: Lived Experiences of US Counsellors-in-Training in Study Abroad Programs

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## Aim and Purpose

“One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.” - Henry Miller

Research Question: What is the experience of counselors-in-training (CITs) participating in a study abroad program?

Abstract: The counseling profession is growing increasingly internationalized in response to worldwide globalization (Gerstein and Ægisdóttir, 2007). Many US counseling programs are incorporating international training experiences to address this reality (Gerstein, Heppner, Ægisdóttir, Leung, & Norsworthy, 2009; Mehta, 2011; Platt, 2012). Utilizing van Manen’s phenomenological methodology, the researcher explored experiences of four counselors-in-training participating in international study. Photosharing and photo-elicitation methods were used in two semi-structured online interviews as well as a survey monkey member check for each participant. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes according to van Manen’s holistic and selective approaches. Implications for counselors-in-training and counselor educators are discussed.

## Qualitative Methodology and Design

“What can we do with phenomenological research?” or “Can phenomenology, if we concern ourselves deeply with it, do something with us?” - Max van Manen

## van Manen’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology

This study used van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of four United States based counselors-in-training participating in study abroad programs. Phenomenology aims to understand the world from the perspectives of those viewing the world (Laverty, 2003).

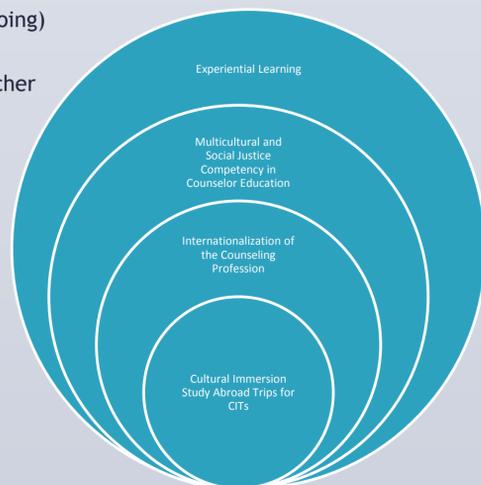
## Visual Methodology

Reflexive photography (Close, 2007; Schulz, 2007) and Photo elicitation interview techniques, or using photography in interviewing (Harper, 2002), were utilized in this study.

## Trustworthiness

- Blogging (Memoing)
- Triangulation with 2<sup>nd</sup> researcher
- Participant member check

Conceptual Framework for Study



## Conclusions

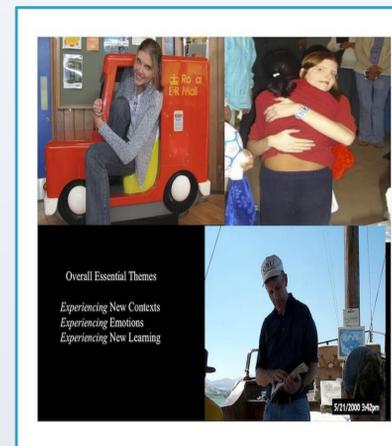
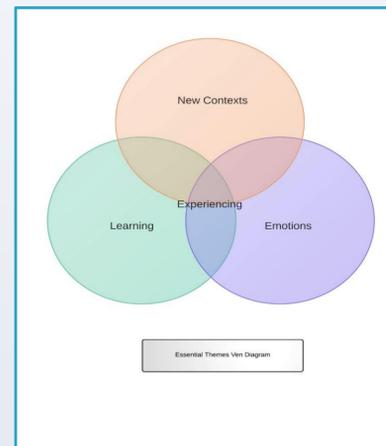
“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.” - Martin Buber

### Essential Emergent Themes from the Study

Experiencing was the word that highlighted the active nature of each participants’ study abroad trip. The CITs were not passively traveling and having knowledge come to them. Instead, they were actively participating, feeling, learning, and connecting while in the different travel abroad trips. Experiencing was core to each theme. The themes that stood out as essential for each participant in their experience as a CIT on a study abroad trip were (see diagram):

- Experiencing New Contexts
- Experiencing Emotions
- Experiencing New Learning

After coding the interviews, the researcher utilized her own pictures to symbolize, share, and describe to participants the overall themes of Experiencing New Contexts, Emotions, and New Learning (see picture).



“Just the fact, I believe that real learning comes when you’re taken outside of your comfort zones and I think that all counselors need to be taken out of their comfort zone at some point, to learn about somebody else.” Participant 3, Western Europe



“It was an eye-opener for me what it’s like for a family or an individual to move abroad or being forced to move abroad or whatever the case may be. But being outside of their own comfort zone and how it affects them emotionally, financially, physically, mentally, and psychologically. The list goes on and on and on. It made me a lot more aware of the areas that I need to be sensitive to for my clients.” Participant 1- South America



“I mean, it was pretty powerful, it just really drove home the importance of having a cultural understanding of the client because, I mean, had we... and we did overcome some of those barriers with the kids, and had we not known about, “Oh, this is kind of a cultural thing...” I could see somebody sitting in session, having a conversation with a client and never really getting to the real issue, because the client doesn’t want to engage in conflict, or be confronted.” Participant 2- Central America



“I really put a lot of it to the training that I’ve had and the schooling that I’ve had, where I’ve really taken time to work on those aspects of me. That then going on that trip, it amplified my experience because I was able to use some of those techniques on myself and really kind of let it all in and be aware of doing that, rather than by chance hoping that you have a great time. I was able to kind of put stuff in motion that made it happen. ...whereas before I might have known what I would get out of it, but I don’t think I would’ve been equipped with tools that make that happen.” Participant 4, United Kingdom

## Implications

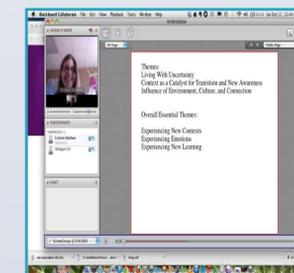
“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” -Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

- 1) Increase CITs’ awareness regarding a Study Abroad experience before they travel:
  - Recognition that expectations may look different than experience
  - Awareness of potential positive and challenging emotions
  - Impact of experiential learning in cross cultural development
  - Importance of intentionality, awareness, respect, and presence in interacting with the culture visiting

- 2) Intentionality, Planning, and Safety in CIT Course Design:
  - Thoughtful reflection for whom, what, where, when, and why when designing a counseling study abroad trip
  - Importance of cross cultural collaborators
  - Intentional planning for course design
  - Importance of pre preparation and post trip integration

## Limitations

- Technology difficulties in interviews
- Participants’ study abroad courses differed in length, design, and culture



Screenshot of online interview and desktop for sharing photos and themes



Screenshot of online blog for memoing

## References

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