The World Is My Classroom

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by

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1. Overview

The purpose of this paper is to use retrospective sensemaking to analyze and dissect my experiences abroad. Retrospective sensemaking can be defined as the act of reevaluating past experiences and attaching in-depth meaning to them. In my case, I will outline different interactions I had abroad, and use other scholars' research in intercultural communication, to form a more educational understanding of my trip. The first portion of my paper will be an introduction to the general themes of cultural identity and intercultural communication. After defining and analyzing these terms, I present a call to action for institutions to utilize intercultural communication training in their study abroad programs. This will educate individuals on intercultural communication and the cultural differences that exist between their host country and the United States. After giving background information about my study abroad program, Semester at Sea, I will interpret my experiences abroad with a scholarly lens. Using the basic concepts within collectivism and individualism, among others, I will retrospectively make sense of the life-changing interactions I experienced.

2. Introduction

Communication is innate. From the moment we are born we use all forms of communication to express our needs and emotions—whether it is verbally or nonverbally. As we get older, we begin to hone our communication abilities to express our thoughts and concerns with the community around us. Our communication style is tailored to fit the culture we preside in. Through school, trial and error, and/or our peers,

we learn what types of communication are appropriate for a particular culture. Each person has their own perception of their cultural identity, or "a sociological or demographic classification, as well as a [their] psychological identification with a particular group" (Y. Kim 238). For example, on a broad base, I am a person who believes family is everything and that strong, trusting relationships with both friends and family are vital to living a healthy and loving lifestyle. On a more complex level, though, I am a fifth-year college student from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo who is currently searching for a new component "or career path" to my cultural identity. Hopefully, this component will converge and grow with my prior base values. I have numerous other niches that my cultural identity effects and each one can be defined in its own unique way. However, within each niche there are attributes that reflect back to my base identity.

Growing up, my family and demographic community was a framework for my initial cultural identity. As a child, I mimicked my mother's and father's beliefs and actions until I became mature enough to develop my own value system. I lived in a Caucasian-dominated community, with little interaction with other cultures. It was not until I went to college that I experienced a diverse group of cultural backgrounds. Rather than replacing my adolescent cultural identity, I simply expanded my beliefs as I experienced new life events on my own. I utilized the life-lessons I acquired from my parents to develop my own set of values. Within our cultural identity we have our cultural value identity. According to Suke Chen, "values are a primary motivational construct that influences almost every aspect of human life, guiding us to consider what is desirable then energizing and directing behavior towards attaining those goals" (42). These values are what drive us to help others, to strive for good grades, to make money,

etc. Each individual creates their own set of values that will be the leading catalyst to acquiring their wants or needs. However, it is pertinent to remember that even though the individual is in control of her/his value system, her/his cultural identity is still affiliated with the culture with which they associate. The perplexing nature of one's cultural identity, then, has many tiers for defining a person's self-image, and it may be impractical to label them based on their image alone. For this reason, one must be aware of cultural differences when communicating with an individual from a different cultural background.

3. Intercultural Communication

With the increase of diversity in America and world-wide organizations, crossing paths with a person from a different cultural background is inevitable. These new interactions mean that educational institutions are, more and more, striving to develop graduates into globally competent individuals. According to Bill Hunter, "a globally competent person must be able to identify cultural differences to compete globally, collaborate across cultures, and effectively participate in both social and business settings in other countries" (283). By having the cognitive ability to recognize cross-cultural interactions, an individual is gaining respectful insight into the possible cultural differences between them and other associates from different cultural backgrounds. For example, these globally competent individuals can be vital to a company's wellbeing because they must recognize and participate in proper cultural norms to avoid any actions that may offend the other party. In social circumstances, these individuals are able to adapt to cross-cultural interactions and present themselves in a manner that is appropriate

for both parties. Therefore, whether the globally competent individual is representing an organization or socially interacting with people from a different culture, they have the cognitive ability to be mindful of any ethnocentric biases when faced with intercultural communication.

For this paper's purpose, I will be focusing primarily on the aspects of intercultural communication present in social situations. Y. Kim defines intercultural communication as "encounters in which individual participants differ, and/or perceive themselves to be different, in group-based experiential backgrounds" (238). I will be using the phrases "intercultural communication" and "cross-cultural communication" more or less interchangeably. Even though these two phrases do have distinct definitions, I feel that, for the purpose of this paper, it will be beneficial to use both phrases as follows: in a broad sense, they will being referring to the positive and negative interactions individuals have with people from different cultural backgrounds. The initial problem many individuals face when presented with a cross-cultural interaction is their ethnocentric stance towards the world.

In the article "The Development of a U.S. and Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale" the authors explain that: "ethnocentric groups see themselves as virtuous and superior, see their own standards of value as universal and intrinsically true, and their customs as original and centrally human. On the contrary, outgroups are seen as contemptible, immoral, inferior, and weak" (Neuliep 386). When an ethnocentric individual is faced with cross-cultural communication they will refer to their culture's norms as the appropriate form of communication. Simultaneously, they will expect the other individual to adhere to these standards. An ethnocentric individual is thus most likely oblivious to

their ignorant actions because they are not aware of the cultural differences between the two parties. If, prior to this interaction, they were educated in intercultural communication, they would have the presence of mind to recognize cultural differences and to use the appropriate manners to behave respectfully. Unfortunately, many collegiate students graduate with little knowledge of cultural differences, which is a vital component of life. By having an in-depth understanding of different cultures' norms, an individual can prepare him— or herself—for any future interactions-whether in the United States or abroad- that may influence the outcome of their encounter. If these individuals are educated about cross-cultural communication they will have the presence of mind to interpret the interactions with an intercultural lens, which in turn will increase the successfulness of the interaction.

4. Call To Action

One of my main objectives for this paper is to posit a call to action for institutions to make intercultural communication a requirement for college graduates. With so many students studying abroad today, it is necessary for these individuals to have prior experience with thinking through what it means to interact interculturally. If a student is studying abroad and does not recognize that their American values and standards may contrast with the host country's, they may be jeopardizing their experience due to the limitations of their ethnocentric perspective. By contrast, individuals educated in the field of intercultural communication, can use their knowledge to interact appropriately with the people around them. Furthermore, they can expand their ethnocentric perspective to gain a better understanding of their experience abroad.

Throughout this paper I have used a negative connotation for the word *ethnocentric* however it is important to realize that it is not a negative term. An individual's ethnocentric perspective can be extremely beneficial to recognizing the possible flaws one might currently have in their global perspective. By comparing the cultural norms and values of their own country to their host country, the individual is able to analyze and interpret the differences, in order to possibly alter their prior cultural identity. There will be a more in-depth analysis of such realizations when I begin to discuss my personal experience abroad.

As a student attending Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in the Communication Studies Department, I have acquired a relatively strong concept of intercultural communication awareness. This does not mean that I am an expert in the field, but I have acquired a solid foundational cognitive understanding of how to be aware in, and how to proceed during, intercultural interactions. Beyond taking intercultural communication, many of my communication courses were a precursor for how to effectively communicate with individuals. By using the knowledge I gained from these courses, in correlation with the theories and practices of intercultural communication, I have developed a mental awareness that allows me to analyze and distinguish the appropriate behaviors to utilize when interacting in cultural settings that are not familiar to me.

To my dismay, though, I have always lived in an environment that failed to yield a culturally diverse community. I have met many people from different cultural backgrounds, yet they still stemmed from a similar American bias. As I kept gaining insight about cross-cultural communication, I began to realize that I have never had the opportunity to apply my educational information in a cultural context outside of the

United States. I recognized that, though I have had practice in the classroom with these theories, I was still blind to my own ethnocentric perspective. Throughout my entire life, I have developed opinions about other countries based on what I have heard in the media; and yet, I have never had the opportunity to try to assimilate to their culture, or to attempt to take into consideration their perspective.

The idea of experiencing cross-cultural communications in a variety of contexts was best summarized by Albert Einstein: "Information is not knowledge. The only source of knowledge is experience." Analyzing this quote with a philosophical perspective, we have to ask ourselves: when does the information we learn become true knowledge? Undoubtedly, everything we have learned during college is useful for the future; however, is this information enough of a credential to claim we are able to use this instruction in any given circumstance? My answer is no. For example, I see information as a blueprint for how to build an object. I am equipped with all the proper tools and directions to construct the item, but without the proper practice, I will never know if I will succeed in my task. However, if I constantly practice with my given tools and instruction, I will continue to hone my skills until I am able to complete my objective. Hence, I will continue to gain more expertise while obtaining more knowledge. This wisdom is what I have strived to achieve in the field of intercultural communication.

Cal Poly San Luis Obispo prides itself on its hands-on educational approach, summarized by the slogan "Learn by Doing." This motto, as I see it, is simply a modern variation of Albert Einstein's quote. Our own institution strives to facilitate their students' education with the proper hands on training for their future occupations. We are a distinguished university because of our ability to develop graduates who are able to

enter the workforce with not only the necessary information to excel, but with prior knowledge of how to achieve their goals. Though I am using the information gained from my Communications Studies classes daily, I feel I never had the opportunity to apply my intercultural communication abilities in a proper environment. I was aware of all of the information I needed to be an effective cross-cultural communicator, but felt I lacked the knowledge of experiencing it. For this reason, I decided to travel abroad and deepen my intellectual understanding of intercultural communication.

5. Semester at Sea

I enrolled in a program called Semester at Sea, which is sponsored by the University of Virginia. This study abroad program is unique because the institution itself is set on a cruise vessel. Over six hundred students have the opportunity to live on the ship and attend their classes while at sea. Each class is accredited by the University of Virginia; however, the ship's faculty is comprised of instructors from all over the world. Semester at Sea's mission statement is:

> "To educate students with the global understanding necessary to address the challenges of our interdependent world. With the world as our classroom, our unique shipboard program integrates multiple-country study, interdisciplinary coursework, and hands-on field experiences for meaningful engagement in the global community."

The program lasts one hundred and ten days. During this time you make port in twelve different countries. Students must attend their classes while the ship is sailing. However, when the ship is in port, students are given the freedom to travel about the country and

experience what the country has to offer. My country itinerary was as follows: United States, Japan, China, Vietnam, Singapore, Burma, India, Mauritius, South Africa, Ghana, Morocco, and Spain. The average length of time spent at each port is about five days. The ship is equipped with all the necessary tools any other institution may have; for example, a computer lab, a library, student advisors, a bookstore, multiple cafeterias, lecture halls, and a limited amount of internet access.

One of the main objectives of Semester at Sea is to cultivate their students into globally competent individuals. Students are required to participate in a set number of Field Labs for each class they take. A Field Lab is defined as an in-country educational trip where students receive hands-on field experience that pertains to the course in which they are enrolled. For example, in my Interpersonal Communication class, we went to a township in South Africa and visited a preschool. We were given the privilege of interacting with young, impoverished South African children. Not only was this a life-changing experience for me, it gave me the opportunity to practice communicating with another culture. Even though there was a language barrier between the students and children, we were able to communicate with nonverbal gestures and universal games such as duck-duck goose and soccer.

Along with Field Labs, before every port we are required to attend a Pre-Port lecture. A Pre-Port lecture is when "the community gathers for presentations intended to enhance cultural understanding and to promote health and safety procedures" (Semester At Sea). The program made sure that each student was made aware of the cultural tendencies of the countries they were visiting to ensure that students would act appropriately. This was a beneficial aspect of the program because it allowed me to

recognize the intercultural communication lessons I had learned at Cal Poly, and to utilize them while interacting with the community in port. Overall, Semester at Sea was the optimal program for me to utilize the information I had learned from my Communication Studies classes, and to finally have the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the world in which we reside.

6. My Experience

This section is where I will take my compiled data, my experiences and observations from aboard, and begin to analyze them in correlation with prior research from scholars. The geographical locations I will be mainly focusing on will be in Southeast Asia. One of the most culturally contrasting countries I visited was China. Before my trip, I had little knowledge of China other than that they were a communist governed nation and were rapidly becoming one of the world's most powerful economic countries. Throughout my life I have been educated on the negative attributes of communism and why democracy is the most fair and equal governing style. From middle school through college we are taught about the Vietnam War, and how the United States was attempting to stop a domino effect in Southeast Asia. The domino effect was the idea that if Vietnam fell to communism every other surrounding country in Southeast Asia would follow, therefore threatening the safety of America's democratic governing style. My bias towards communism continued to grow as I progressed through school, but I never grasped the intensity of this authoritarian form of government, until I visited China.

Coming from an individualistic culture, I was ready to experience a country that derived from a collectivistic standpoint. Even though I experienced a portion of this in

Japan, I knew that China's communist government intertwined with their collectivistic culture would produce an environment completely foreign to me. Individualistic cultures "are more inclined to put their own interests and those of their immediate family ahead of social concerns" (J. Kim 544). On the other hand, collectivistic cultures "are more expected to care for one another and the group. Members tend to put their priority in the group not in the individual's need; thus, the interest of the group prevails over the interest of individuals" (J. Kim 545). These were basic concepts taught in intercultural communication; however, for the first time I was able to take a scholarly approach to interacting with the individuals in China. Little did I know how hard this would be to practice.

From the moment I stepped off the ship, I felt as if I was being watched. We were docked in the Shanghai International Port and had a breathtaking view of the skyline from across the bay. However, the moment we entered the city, we knew we were in a communist country. Every building I could see had at least four Chinese flags flying from their roof. Though we undoubtedly witness the American flag all around our country, I did not gain the same feeling of glory when witnessing the Chinese flag. The overwhelming amount of red and gold flying above one's head was not a symbol of freedom; it was a reminder the Chinese government was in control. I can remember how intimidating it was to see the distinct red flag waving eerily in the sky. The color red in the flag represents "the revolutionary communist philosophy," the giant star in the upper left hand corner represents the "Chinese Communist Party" and the smaller stars represent "the national minorities" (Smith). Overall, the flag symbolized the unity of the Chinese people under the authoritarian leadership of their government. As an American

student, I have my biases, but whenever I attempted to discuss anything about the Chinese flag with the locals, I was simply ignored. These interactions with the Chinese will be further analyzed later on in the paper.

Kemmelmeier cites Michele Gelfand, who draws the following correlation: "The authoritarian emphasis on compliance with social norms and deference to in-group authority has its parallel in the collectivistic attention to in-group expectations and respect for status and tradition" (qtd. in Kemmelmeier: 307). Even though collectivism and authoritarianism differ in theory, the two concepts share the same significance for putting the goals of the group before the individuals. Hence, as I utilize retrospective sensemaking I now realize that my initial bias towards the abundant amount of Chinese flags was ignorant. Even though the flag represents their communist governing system, it simultaneously symbolizes the collectivistic cultural methodology of the Chinese community. I allowed my predispositions about a communist governed community to unfairly pass judgment on a culture I had minimal knowledge of. In the article, "Individualism and Collectivism: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Self-In-Group Relationships," Harry Triandis states: "In collectivistic cultures the relationship of the individual to the ingroup tends to be stable, and even when the ingroup makes highly costly demands the individual stays with it. On the other hand, in individualistic cultures people often drop those ingroups that are inconveniently demanding and form new ingroups" (324).

Once again, as I reevaluate my experience abroad, I find errors in my own logic. For example, I previously mentioned the term "a reminder" as an expression of the Chinese flag. After analyzing the meaning of collectivism, I contemplate the expression

of "loyalty." The Chinese community stands together as one no matter the circumstance. Critics can easily label this unity as "blind obedience" to their government; however their loyalty to their family and friends surpasses any form of political control. The collectivistic ideology stems from the teachings of Confucius. As Phuong-Mai Nguyen explains:

> "Asian countries with Confucian heritage culture (CHC) such as China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea and Japan have been proven to share characteristics of a collectivist society... This forms a *collective goal* in the family, a cooperative environment where everyone is obliged to accept a certain set of commitments, under *shared responsibilities.*" (405)

Therefore, I allowed my biases towards a communist governed country to limit my initial analysis of the Chinese culture. Instead of assuming that the flag represented an authoritarian leadership, I should have recognized that their collectivistic culture was far more complex than simply being labeled as a communist country. The ethnocentric judgments I was passing on the Chinese culture also linked to my defensive stance of being the minority for the first time in my life.

While in China, I was traveling with a group of eight Caucasians- four males and four females- and we clearly did not blend in. In the United States, I have never felt like a minority or majority because we live in such a mixed race community. I have traveled all over the United States and the aspects of being a member of the majority have never been a concern of mine. I ignorantly assumed that every race had a similar perspective of being American and that we all were grouped under this national umbrella. However, while I was in China, it was rare to see any other race other than the Chinese. This was the first

time in my life that I felt out of place. I started to become self-conscious of how I was dressed and the actions both my group and myself elicited. I only wanted to conform to my surroundings and not be seen as an outsider.

As I walked through the busy streets of Shanghai, my defensive nature began to assume every individual was forming a negative opinion about us. Every time my eyes would meet with another individual's eyes, my mind would race with negative thoughts that the person was presumably thinking about our group. This self-conscious mentality became the only lens I could see through. As a defensive reaction, my rationale started to condemn the actions of local individuals as a personal attack against my self-image. Even though I was aware of the differences in self-monitoring skills and power distance between the United States and China, I couldn't stop attributing the lack of communication to being an outsider. I knew personally that I was not secluding our group from interaction with the locals, but I knew I was still labeled by the group's overall ignorance to the Chinese culture

These feelings of negative conclusions were rooted in the lack of my self-monitoring skills among my American peers. The actions they were taking while in China quickly segregated us from any potential positive cross-cultural communication. According to Snyder, self-monitoring can be defined as "self observation and self control guided by situational cues to social appropriateness" (526). For example, whenever my friends and I would take any transportation (bus, train, plane, etc.), they would conduct themselves in a boisterous manner. Coming from the United States, this would be a common behavior. However, in Chinese culture people were always extremely quiet and courteous in the presence of strangers. My group was not trying to draw attention to

themselves, but they were clearly unaware that their actions were considered inappropriate. From their perspective, it was socially acceptable to attempt to start a conversation with everyone around them. They were oblivious to the social cues of everyone politely minding their own business and keeping quiet. Through their ethnocentric perspective, my friends thought the people around them were being strange, simply because they were not talking. When confronting them about their actions, they did not understand how their actions were considered out of character. Even though I continued to explain that their actions were offensive to the people surrounding them, they were not able to acknowledge why. After returning home and further analyzing the experiences I had, I recognized that my group of friends were not being mindful communicators.

Neuliep (2012) defines the process of being a mindful communicator as: " When we are mindless, we tend to assume that strangers interpret our messages the same way we do. Mindfulness, on the other hand, means to *negotiate* meaning with strangers" (4). Therefore, my friends were being mindless communicators when they approached individuals in public. Whereas in the United States it is appropriate to greet someone and start a conversation, in China this deviates from the cultural norm. Chinese culture values privacy and politeness in public areas, and does not find a stranger asking questions to be respectful or kind. Since I had previously been educated in intercultural communication, I recognized our rude behavior and explained to my friends that we needed to try to be aware of our surroundings. Even though these questions we were asking were intended to be educational and polite, it was not common in the Chinese culture. If they had had previous knowledge of intercultural communication, they might have had the presence of

mind to recognize the social cues of being respectful when they were in public. Due to the lack of respect for the Chinese culture, our interactions with Chinese community were, therefore, significantly hindered.

Another reason we were not able to effectively communicate with the individuals in China was because of the difference in our cultures' perspective of power distance. Hofstede defines power distance as " the extent to which the less powerful individuals from institutions expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (98). Therefore, in Chinese culture, individuals act politely in public because they are concerned with the individuals surrounding them. Since they are unaware of the hierarchal status of the other individuals they save face by minding their own business and by not intruding on another individual's personal life. Erving Goffman defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken during a particular contact" (5). In other words, a person's face can be considered the public image they portray. John Oetzel cites GE Gao explaining that "China has a high concern for face in general. An individual's social standing is very important during interactions with others" (qtd. in Oetzel: 240). For this reason, my group of friends jeopardized their face because they were attempting to interact with an assortment of individuals who were strangers to each other.

In Chinese culture, people are less likely to initiate random conversation with strangers because they are concerned with losing face with an individual. "The English expression 'losing face' [is] in the sense of being embarrassed or humiliated. Face becomes established as something that is emotionally invested, that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Al Fattah).

The reason that Chinese culture is concerned with face is because in a collectivistic culture you are integrated within a community far more intensely than in the United States. The relational ties of their social, professional, and personal friendships are all intertwined together. Therefore, if they lose face within one group of their network they are jeopardizing the relationships with the rest of their networks. In the United States, we tend to have separate networks between our social, professional and personal life. Hence, when we lose face with a stranger in public we are not concerned about that interaction affecting our other relationships. If we reevaluate my friends' actions while they were in public, from a Chinese individual's perspective, we would have been losing face and would have been embarrassing not only ourselves, but also any networks we were affiliated with—including our Semester at Sea program and our country.

Even though my friends were acting inappropriately in public, they failed to conform to the community's cultural norms because they were never confronted about their behavior. Rebecca Merkin paraphrases the explanations of Janice Steill by saying "large [power distance countries such as China] show more concern for politeness and use less confrontational communication styles than small [power distance] Americans" (qtd in Merkin: 145). In America, if somebody is acting rude in public, individuals will use a direct confrontation style and tell them they are being offensive. My friends, therefore, interpreted the lack of communication about their behavior as a signal that they were not offending anybody. Merkin ties together explanations of this lack of confrontation from Hofstede and Chi-Ching by explaining, "large [power distance] members use messages that are indirect and dependent on hints because they are more concerned with face issues than their small [power distance] counterparts" (qtd. in

Merkin: 144). While we were in public, I noticed a significant amount of glances and shameful head nods when we were being offensive. My friends, who were oblivious to these subtle hints, never recognized that this was the Chinese culture's way of signifying disapproval. Due to the fact that the Chinese community is concerned with maintaining an appropriate face (including our own), they never directly explained to us that we were breaking their cultural norm of being quiet. If my group of friends had had prior knowledge of this indirect confrontation style, they would have analyzed the subtle hints and been able to adapt to the scenario.

As mentioned earlier, we were not able to have many personal interactions with the Chinese community. Beyond the aspects of my group being inappropriate in certain scenarios, there were times we approached individuals in a polite manner. In one situation, we were drinking tea in a public area, and an adult male was sitting next to our group. I was only with three of my friends, and everyone was either listening to music or writing in their journal. At no point were we acting inappropriately or drawing unnecessary attention to ourselves. I overheard then man next to me talking in English to somebody on the phone and I waited patiently before acknowledging him. Since I had had little luck on previous days interacting on a personal level with individuals, I hoped that this would be an opportunity for me to engage in an interpersonal conversation with someone. After the man finished his conversation, he continued to drink his tea and began to sit quietly and stare into the distance. I felt that this was an appropriate time to greet the man and initiate a conversation. I leaned over and said "Hello, I am a student from the United States. How are you doing?" No response. I waited a few moments to see if he heard me, and then the man stood up and walked away. This scenario is just one of

many that seemed to constantly happen to me. Even though I was aware of the cultural norm of privacy, I could not understand why I was constantly being rejected. All I wanted to do was have a conversation with an individual who could enlighten me about their country/culture. It was not until I returned home that my questions would be answered.

After researching and analyzing different articles, I finally understood that it was not our rude behavior that was limiting our interactions—even though it was still inappropriate—it was simply the Chinese communities view of the hierarchal order. When individuals would ignore my cross-culture communication attempts, they were nonverbally saying that I was inferior to them on the hierarchal order.

> "In large [power distance] cultures where status distinctions reign, hierarchal distinctions can actually be communicated indirectly. For example, a person may indicate his or her status by not answering another's inquiry about a topic because the acceptable amount of personal disclosure in conversation varies by relational status distinctions." (Merkin 153)

When I use the word inferior, it does not mean that I am less of a person than the other individual. In the Chinese culture, a person with less power is considered inferior to the superior. For this reason, many Chinese individuals did not feel comfortable when we approached them because they felt that we were not considered a superior to them. Since I was not a part of the in-group, they used hints, such as not responding, as a way to politely tell me I was intruding on their space. My initial interpretation of the Chinese community being rude was just a cultural difference between our two nations. It was not

until I was able to research and analyze these types of behavior that I recognized that I was missing these cues. In the end, the only times that I was able to converse with the Chinese individuals was when they were a part of a tour guide or owned a hostel.

The reason these types of interactions were able to occur was because we were in a neutral environment. In both situations, it was necessary for the Chinese individual to break the privacy barriers between cultures because their occupation relied on it. For example, the Chinese tour guide we had for the Great Wall of China was extremely extroverted and enjoyed conversing with us. It was a mutual understanding that he was in control of guiding and teaching a group of individuals about the history of the Great Wall of China. He was the first native of China that I was able to interact with on a personal level. He told us about growing up in Beijing and majoring in the History of China. He learned English while he attended college and decided to further pursue the aspects of spreading Chinese history by becoming a tour guide. Interestingly enough, he was more interested in our lives in the United States and became the individual who was asking us questions. He was curious if the movies from the United States were anything like how life was. This happened to be a very popular question from all individuals in the cities we went too. It seemed like such a foolish question at the time, until I started to truly ponder the question. In the United States, we rarely watch films that are foreign; so we would never have the opportunity to contemplate if they were an accurate representation of that country's lifestyle. From his perspective, plenty of movies he has seen originate from the United States. Therefore, he explained that this was his reference point for what the United States looks like and how certain people act. He continued to ask questions about certain cities (Los Angeles, New York, Miami) and if we had been there and experienced

the lifestyle. Overall, this was the first positive interaction I had with a Chinese individual and it was refreshing to discuss the American lifestyle with a foreign person.

During my time abroad and while in port, the most common place for my group of friends to stay overnight was in a hostel. Beyond the aspect of it being very affordable, it was also a beneficial way to interact with people from all around the world. In Shanghai, we stayed on the ship, but when we flew to Beijing we stayed at a hostel in the city. We were expecting a regulated living situation, but it ended up being the complete opposite. Right when we walked into the hostel, the whole lounge area was decorated with flags from all around the world. The woman working the front desk spoke decent English and was extremely open and kind. One intriguing part of the hostel was that they had custom made signs about Facebook and YouTube. This was fascinating because both of these sites are blocked in China. "Regulations governing the ISPs try to limit access to certain sites because of the 'offensive' nature of their content. Rather than Facebook and Twitter, Wikipedia and YouTube are probably considered more important for denying access" (Palit). Technically, using these websites is not considered illegal, however you must have the technological ability to surpass the firewall barriers. In this hostel's case, they had signs that said "Shh, Like Us on Facebook" and "Shh, Follow Us On Youtube". By having a connection through social media, they were hoping to promote their hostel to individuals outside of China. This was the first time I saw any sort of sign of individuals breaking away from their government's control. As mentioned before, these types of occurrences happen when the people recognize that they rely heavily on visitors to thrive.

Overall, I had a great experience while I was in China, but the interactions I had with the local community were not what I expected. It was not until I returned home and

was able to use retrospective sensemaking that I was able to further understand why my interactions were limited. I now have a completely different perspective about my time in China than when I was initially there. This paper has helped me recognize that in order to fully appreciate another culture you have to have personal experiences within them, and take the time to research their cultural norms. Even though I had prior information of the cultural differences between the United States and China, it was not until I lived within their community that I was able to pass fair judgment. I would like to make clear that my opinions of the communist culture were not meant to be demeaning to the Chinese community. I simply was explaining the perspectives I had before my trip, and how I was able to learn from my ethnocentric standpoint about my ignorance. I have the upmost respect for the Chinese culture and after writing this paper I have a newfound interest in their collectivistic culture.

7. Limitations

One of the main limitations I had for this paper was the lack of time I spent in each country. Due to the fact that I was only in China for a short period of time I was not able to fully understand their culture. I was constantly traveling to new cities and never stayed in one location for more than two days. This was the case for every country I visited while on my trip. In the instance of a student who is spending months in another host country they will have more opportunity to interact with that community. After their time abroad they will have more data to analyze about their experience than I did. However, each different culture I immersed myself in allowed me the opportunity to get a taste of their lifestyle. When you look at my overall journey through twelve different

countries, I gained a breadth of knowledge about intercultural communication, even if I lacked depth of knowledge of and experience in any one country. Every country was a new learning experience, and I am now much more aware of intercultural interactions than before. It was definitely beneficial to have the prior experience with intercultural communication classes. Many of the people I traveled with were not educated in cross-cultural communication and they were constantly acting inappropriately in these countries. It was not something they were doing on purpose, but they were not aware of the differing cultural norms between the United States and the host country. I recognized my friend's intercultural communication incompetence as a lack of education on ethnocentrism and cultural sensitivity. However, since I have had an educational background of intercultural communication, I was able to become aware of these misconducts, and help guide my friends to the appropriate behavior within each cultural context. I became a teacher to these individuals and was constantly pointing out certain actions deemed offensive. In the end, I also realized that I was not as sensitive to other cultures as I presumed. This paper allowed me to truly take the time to clearly reevaluate my time abroad with a scholarly approach.

8. The Benefits of Narrative Inquiry and Pre-Departure Preparation

Aimei Yang expands on the findings of Susan Chase and explains: "Narrative is people's descriptions of their experiences, memories, and 'connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (Yang). I used narrative inquiry to evaluate my time abroad from a scholarly perspective. By taking the time to write out and analyze the experiences I had, I was able to make sense of certain scenarios that were

confusing to me. When I was abroad, I never had the time to dissect my experiences into educational lessons. I was aware of these limitations, so I made notes about some of the interactions I had, so that when I returned home I could review these situations and construct an edifying experience. Yang continues to explain, "through the action of narrating a story, narrators construct their experiences in a way that makes sense to themselves. The self is constructed, questioned and demonstrated through the process of telling a story." Nobody else will have the same perspectives and opinions I had while on my trip, but through the process of narrative inquiry I am able to formulate an understanding to which others can relate.

I feel that many students lose this educational learning experience when they go abroad. Even though they learn about their host country and themselves abroad, I feel that it is necessary to reevaluate the experience you had when you return home. This gives your mind the ability to compare your new life at home with the prior mindset you had before traveling abroad. In an article written by Elizabeth Root and Anchalee Ngampornchai, the authors discuss the lack of preparation many students have before they go abroad. They feel that students are not educationally informed about the importance of intercultural communication and therefore recognize that institutions need to develop pre-departure classes for them. Their study involved eighteen students who traveled abroad for a semester and required them to write a reflection paper when they returned home. A few of the main components students were told to address were: students' experience of cultural differences, students' interactions with people from a different culture, and students' skill or knowledge they used or gained through their international experience. Also, there were no requirements for pre-departure intercultural

training. The authors, then, conclude that:

> "many participants' reflexive accounts did not connect surface-level
>
> cultural norms with deeper values and cultural assumptions... students did
>
> not seem to articulate a deep understanding of the meaning of culture or
>
> demonstrate an awareness that observable cross-cultural differences derive
>
> from underlying worldviews." (12)

This article supports the notion that students need to take intercultural communication training before traveling abroad. The students partook in a similar style of narrative inquiry that I did, however they failed to recognize the deeper meanings behind their experiences. The article explains that many students expressed that they were now more open-minded, but failed to give specific incidents that led to this new perspective. These students' accounts were parallel with my friends from abroad. My friends were able to recognize that each country's culture was different than the United States, but they were not inclined to ask why. I was better able to find these connections because I was aware of the possible differences before I went abroad. My narrative inquiry allowed me to reflect on what I had previously learned to develop a new understanding of the cultures with which I interacted.

9. Final Thoughts: Ubuntu as a Guiding Philosophy for Intercultural Comm.

Overall, my experience abroad was something I can never forget. Just trying to explain everything I learned and the experiences I had is overwhelming. By far the most beneficial aspect of Semester at Sea was that I had the opportunity to live with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Desmond Tutu is most notably known for his civil rights

activism and being an opponent to the apartheid movement in South Africa. After the demise of apartheid, Desmond Tutu focused his activism on human rights across the globe. He strives to bring people of all races and cultures together through peace and unity. The man is the epitome of intercultural communication- and I was able to interact with him on a daily basis.

Every morning on the ship, I would wake up and go to the dining hall. As I made my way through the seating area I was always greeted by a friendly hello and a high five from Archbishop Desmond Tutu or as we called him "Arch". He was always willing to converse with students when he was not busy, but throughout the trip he gave several lectures on human kindness. The South African word that became the slogan of our ship was "Ubuntu". The basic philosophy behind *ubuntu* is human kindness. It originated in South Africa and symbolizes the idea of togetherness. Desmond Tutu explained in 2008:

> "One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu- the essence of human being. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality-- *Ubuntu*-- you are known for your generosity."

The philosophy behind *ubuntu* became the guiding ideology of my trip. Every country I visited I would strive to help the other people around me. Many of the countries I visited were extremely impoverished. It was the first time in my life I witnessed slums or heavily populated substandard living areas. For example, in Varanasi, India, a majority of the civilians in the city were impoverished. The city of Varanasi, one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world, lies directly on the Ganges River. Varanasi is considered the spiritual

capital of India because of the sacred ties with the Ganges River. Many individuals believe that the Ganges is the gateway from life on Earth to the afterlife. Every morning, as the sun rises, thousands of people enter the river to bathe in the holy water. The river is a center for pilgrimage for the Hindu culture. It is believed that if a Hindu person's ashes are sent down the river they will be automatically taken to the afterlife. While I was in Varanasi we visited the holy crematorium where you can see bodies of individuals being burned on a fire, and then their ashes being sent down the river by their family. Mind you, this crematorium is only a few hundred yards up river from where people are bathing.

As mentioned before, while I was in each country I attempted to fully embrace the ideology of *ubuntu*. I felt the only way I could feel connected with the individuals around me was to partake in their cultural lifestyle. During my tour of Varanasi, I discussed the spiritual ideology behind bathing in the River Ganges with my local tour guide; and why it was so important to so many individuals. He explained that every morning people take the holy river water and pour it over their head because the water spiritually expunges all of your sins. Since the Hindu culture believes in reincarnation, when an individual bathes in the river all sins from an individual's past life and their current life are wiped away. I was fascinated with this ritual and asked my tour guide if I could take a bath the next morning when we came back for the sunrise. He laughed at me and said, "Sure." The reason for his sarcastic nature was because the Ganges River is considered one of the world's most polluted rivers. Beyond that fact, human ashes are constantly being washed down the river. Indians use the Ganges River as a bath, restroom, and unfortunately a lot of trash collects there. Semester at Sea warns students not to touch the water for health

concerns, so my tour guide assumed I was joking when I asked if I could, but I was being honest in my desire to bathe in the river.

The next morning, at five am, I walked up to my tour guide on the steps of the river, and told him I was ready. He was astonished. He did not believe I was willing to partake in this ritual. People asked: why are you doing this? And I asked them, when in their life have they had the opportunity to partake in one of the oldest religious rituals? When would I have this opportunity again? For me, it was a spiritual journey and a way to participate in India's rituals. So, as the sun began to break over the horizon and cast a heavenly red glow along the buildings on the water, I prepared for my holy bath. Over one hundred students and faculty from Semester at Sea sat and stared from the steps as three friends (who I had to convince to join) and myself walked slowly out into the river. I still remember the red and orange painted sky as I took one final breath and dunked my head under water. For a moment I was anxious because of all the warnings I received from faculty and friends about the health risks. But then, I arose from the water and I did not notice the one hundred scared individuals staring cautiously at me from the steps. I noticed the thousands of Indian individuals around me partaking in the same spiritual journey. I noticed many Indian individuals smiling at me and waving their hands in approval of my actions. I noticed my tour guide grinning from ear to ear, and for those few moments, I felt as if I was one with the Indian community. I was no longer focused on the health risks. From a Hindu perspective, I had just cleansed all of my sins and I felt rejuvenated. As I made my way back to shore, I realized we were the center of attention for our Semester at Sea group. People were taking pictures, clapping, and cheering us on. We were an inspiration for a few other students who quickly undressed and ran out into

the water. My tour guide confronted me as I was drying off and told me how grateful he was that I was willing to experiment with their cultural ways. That morning will remain one of the most eye-opening and spiritual experiences I will have undergone.

In sum, Semester at Sea was an extremely influential four months that will undoubtedly continue to shape my life. I learned so much about myself and the world around me. Not a day goes by where I do not reminisce about my voyage. These experiences have expanded my ability to interact with individuals in the United States. I have met numerous people who are astonished by the adventures I have already experienced at the age of twenty-three. I am honored to say that I have circumnavigated the world. I have met Cal Poly students from Japan that are amazed by my adventures in Yokohama and Tokyo. I still keep in contact with a local businessman from Burma who I befriended during my stay in the country. I've discussed the racial class segregation in South Africa with a stranger in the airport. Furthermore, retrospective sensemaking has allowed me to expand my understanding of my adventures and continue to learn about cross-cultural communication. All of these experiences are what have made me the individual that I am today. I now can consider myself a globally competent individual, who has developed skills to enhance my intercultural communication and an awareness to act appropriately and to take careful note of my surroundings.

My world travels, of course, are far from over, and I will continue to analyze all of my experiences with an intercultural lens. Hopefully, this senior project will be a catalyst for future communication students to pursue an experience similar to mine, to immerse themselves in a culture outside of the United States. In the words of John Augustus Shedd: "A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." We

are all captains of our own ship; and if we do not take the risk of setting sail to explore

the world, we will never discover the mysteries the world and our own human selves

hold. And for this reason, my life journey has only just begun.

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