INFLUENCE OF STUDYING ABROAD ON THE STUDENTS' IDENTITY COSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to determine if and in what ways the studying abroad experience affects the students' identity. It also aims at exploring the influence this experience has on the development of the students' intercultural competences. The research is based on eight interviews in total. The majority of the participants were students that completed their education in Greece; four of them studied abroad and four did not participate in studying abroad programs. The qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews was chosen. The same questions were asked to all the participants in order to compare how the personality of the students that participated in studying abroad programs was constructed differently with those that did not participated in study abroad programs. Subsequently, more in-depth interviews were conducted with the students that studied abroad to investigate the influence this experience had on their intercultural competences. Evidence from the interviews confirms other researchers' findings in the research field of studying abroad. Specifically, my study builds on work by a variety of researchers that conducted similar investigations. Brown (2009) conducted research regarding ways in which students' identities could be influenced by experiences abroad. The same results were found in a study conducted by Murphy–Lejeune (2002) who demonstrated that life abroad is a powerful experience of discovery of self and others. Additionally, the theory about identity construction by Bucholtz and Hall (2004), who explain the ways in which identities are constructed through the notions of "sameness" and "difference" or from Holliday (2016), who analyses the idea of cultural threading and cultural blocking and how these concepts are related to intercultural learning, were used to interpret the findings of the research. Finally, the

findings of the research showed that studying abroad has a big influence on the identity of the students. In addition, the results illustrated a correlation between studying abroad and the development of intercultural competences.

Acknowledgements

 My journey through this Master's degree and my experience of studying abroad can be compared to the Journey of Odysseus in Homer's poem, full of unexpected events, inspirational people and foreign cultures. The poem depicts my experience abroad. This journey was the inspiration for my research. I set out for my "Ithaka" some years ago during my first participation in a studying abroad program in Berlin. I left sunny Greece for the cold north, and I ended up in The Netherlands, entering new harbors for the first time. However, the people I met along the journey, the experiences I had, the cultural trading, during the intercultural communication Master's experience filled me with joy and pleasure, enabled me to grow and see through the lens of different cultures and perspectives. I would like to thank all these people that were there for me along the way that was full of Laistrygonians and Cyclops. These people are my classmates, my friends, my family, my professors and my always supportive supervisor. As Aristotle said the average teacher speaks, an important teacher shows the way, a great teacher inspires.

Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka

hope your road is a long one,

full of adventure, full of discovery.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops,

angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:

you'll never find things like that on your way

as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,

as long as a rare excitement

stirs your spirit and your body.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops,

wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them

unless you bring them along inside your soul,

unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.

May there be many summer mornings when,

with what pleasure, what joy,

you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;

may you stop at Phoenician trading stations

to buy fine things,

mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,

sensual perfume of every kind—

as many sensual perfumes as you can;

and may you visit many Egyptian cities

to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

Arriving there is what you're destined for.

But don't hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts for years,

so you're old by the time you reach the island,

wealthy with all you've gained on the way,

not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.

Without her you wouldn't have set out.

She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,

you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

BY C. P. CAVAFY

TRANSLATED BY EDMUND KEELE

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1. Introduction and motivation of this research

Studying abroad enables students to develop a special perspective and see things in a more objective way than many of their compatriots back home or the natives in the new country (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Additionally, diversity in higher education has the potential to transform not only the institutions of higher learning, but also the societies that these institutions serve. Prior research on the studying abroad field has shown that higher education should become a model for the "new" society which transforms multiculturality into a process of cross-cultural learning (Spinthourakis, Lator & Berg, 2012). A way to achieve this goal is by integrating internationalization activities into the university curriculum. One of these activities, and the main concern of this research, is the opportunity for students to study abroad (Deardorff 2004).

Specifically, internationalization of higher education is a process in which an international, intercultural, or global dimension is integrated into postsecondary education (Knight 2003). The main impact of this process is the creation of interculturally competent students (Deardorff, 2004). Deardorff's general program logic model applied to internationalization, which provides a concise framework for addressing outcomes within the context of internationalization, mentions all components of internationalization (Deardorff, 2004). However, this study will focus on one of these internationalization activities: studying abroad, more concretely, how this activity influences the construction of the identity of studying abroad students in general and in terms of their intercultural competences.

Identity construction is the formation of a person's values, beliefs, practices, discourses, and knowledge; influenced both by cultural systems and individual actions (Zuidema, 2008). Therefore, the goal of this research is to investigate if and in what ways internationalization of

higher education can influence the identity of the students who participated in study abroad programs. In order to investigate the aforementioned topic the following research question was formulated:

In what ways does studying abroad influence the way students construct their identities?

The main focus of this research as mentioned will be one of the internationalization activities proposed by Deardorff. An example of an outcome of internationalization could be if and how the students develop their intercultural competences (Deardorff, 2004). In order to research how the identity of the aforementioned students is constructed in terms of the intercultural competency, the following sub-question was also formulated:

In what ways does studying abroad influence the construction of students' identities in terms of their intercultural competences?

The goal of this study is to fill the gap in the studying abroad research field, since there is no research conducted in Greece on this field. Moreover, in this research a variety of theories concerning identity construction as well as previous findings of researches on the field of studying abroad are discussed. Furthermore, this topic is relevant to the educational program, the researcher is currently attending. The studying abroad experience of the students and the effects this experience had on the construction of their personality through their cross-cultural interactions abroad is related to the interdisciplinary nature of the field of intercultural communication. The main motivation regarding this research topic, apart from all the inspiration the researcher had during the Intercultural Communication Master's program is personal experience. The researcher studied in three different countries Greece, Germany and The Netherlands. As a result, she has connections with individuals that completed their studies in these three educational systems. Because of the aforementioned reason, she is eager to learn

more regarding the impact of internationalization of higher education and specifically of the experience to study abroad on the construction of students' identity and also the effect this experience has on their intercultural competency

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research is divided thematically into nine sub-topics. Firstly, the term of internationalization will be analyzed as the framework of the studying abroad experience. Then, a brief clarification on the notion of diversity will be given. Subsequently, a variety of researches on the field of studying abroad and their findings related to identity construction will be discussed.

2.1 Studying Abroad as Part of Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization of higher education is a process in which an international, intercultural, or global dimension becomes an integral part of postsecondary education (Knight, 2003). In contrast to this broad perspective on the topic, Altbach & Knight (2007) give a literature-based overview of internationalization in the global academic environment and examine its motivations and effects in different parts of the world. They show future prospects of internationalization and conclude that it will remain a central part of higher education. Additionally, analyses show that internationalization of higher education might diversify structurally according to different dimensions such as types of institutions and programs, levels of degrees, substantive profiles of institutions and programs, ranks of reputation and quality of the institutions (Teichler, 1998). As a result, every university curriculum deals differently with internationalization.

The main focus of this research will be one of the internationalization activities proposed by Deardorff (2004): study abroad opportunities in higher education institutions. Additionally, it will be useful to mention some of the desired internal outcomes of internationalization such as;

adaptability to different communication styles and different behaviors or the ability to adjust to new cultural environments. Flexibility in selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviors, cognitive flexibility, ethnorelative view as well as empathy are some of the outcomes of internationalization of higher education (Deardorff, 2004).

2.2 Thinking Shift on Diversity

Moreover, it is useful for this research to define the notion of diversity, the experiences of students that go abroad and encounter people with diverse backgrounds will be analyzed. Many researchers have tried to define the notion of diversity. The past few years there is a shift on how scholars think and define the term. Brown-Glaude (2009) claims that it is mandatory to educate students to live and work in an increasingly diverse world, and she introduces diversity in higher education as a conversation among faculty, administrators and students, as the advocates of change. Furthermore, Berg (1985) mentions that diversity should not be restricted to national category and especially in classrooms environments children may be diverse in more than one dimension; for instance they may have different preferences in sports or music. Diversity is also defined by older scholars as attributes (such as race, gender or age) that individuals use to distinguish themselves from others (Ferris, Frink & Galang, 1993). Nevertheless, Cole (2015) claims that despite the fact that we already know that identities are performed, we still define diversity as a concept that occurs within a group. In addition, we are aware of the fact that current scholars have shifted their thinking on what counts as diversity and that they began to problematize diversity discourses as bound up in the neo-liberal economic agendas of institutions, such as universities (Urciuoli (2016). Another researcher Urciuoli (2016) who investigates how identities are constructed and how diversity is perceived in neo-liberal societies, demonstrates that "the messiness of marked social identity is reformulated and tidied up as

diversity" (p.31). Additionally, Urciuoli (2016) introduces diversity as commodifiable diverse skills, that individuals possess as "autonomous market actors": "hard skills", such as languages and "soft skills", such as "modes of sociality" which include social identity" (p.1). However, nowadays diversity is still defined as a notion that occurs within a group of people that represents different social types or as "group level diversity" (Cole, 2015, p.1).

Cole (2015) pushes the shift in how we perceive diversity by providing two visual examples. She claims that diversity is not located within groups, while she introduces a definition of diversity that is located in individuals. Because of this shift in the scholars' opinions regarding diversity, a recent approach and definition of diversity will be cited and specifically the definition of "individual diversity". This definition is derived from the conference presentation of Cole (2015) who draws on Agha's theories of semiotic behavior. This definition emphasizes that "diversity is the performance and recognition of multiple contrary to stereotype diacritics by single individuals to index a previously un-stereotyped identity or a many-in-one persona" (Cole, 2015, p.2)

2.3 Studying Abroad and Students Identity Construction

Many scholars conducted research on the construction of students' identity through the experiences they have during their studies at their home universities or abroad. A number of studies have shown a convergence between studying abroad and the influence of this experience on the construction of the students' identity. Firstly, Ricento's (2005) study is relevant to this research, as it defines identity as "a contingent process involving dialectic relations between learners and the various worlds and experiences they inhabit and which act on them" (p, 895). The aforestated quote supports the view that identities are co-constructed through interactions and through experiences. In other words, students that study abroad and encounter people from a

variety of cultural backgrounds, in foreign environments, co-construct their identity through these experiences. Additionally, internationalized higher education institutions have their own culture and they may influence the identity of their students. Similarly, Lindsay (2008) also supports the view that narratives are integral parts of the self and as a result they influence the construction of identities. The dialectic relations that students have during their stay abroad influence their way of thinking, their beliefs about others and themselves and how they react and adapt to different places and occasions. Additionally, Higgins (2011) claims that individuals are influenced by the social, historical, economic, cultural, linguistic, and political constraints of their environment. Hence, identities and beliefs are co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language (Kramsch, 1993; Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton and Toohey, 2002). This research will provide evidence regarding the influence of dialectic relationships on the students' identity.

2.4 Othering and Identity Creation

In addition, confrontation with the "Other" can contribute to evolution and maturation of an individual and thus it influences the process of identity construction. Othering is the process of reducing Others to less than they are, identifying them only with the preconceived ideas that individuals have (Holliday, 2017). Then, on the basis of these ideas, individuals are identified as belonging to specific social groups: people similar to the self are categorized as in-group, whereas people different from the self are categorized as out-group. This is known as the social identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000). Furthermore, we adapt our behavior according to this distinction, performing for example, support and solidarity within the in-group, while judging or excluding the out-groups (Ellemers, 1997). To conclude, the process of "Othering" is a form of representation, not only about the Other, but also about the Self: by means of forming sameness

and difference, the own identity can be affirmed (Dervin, 2011). In addition, Zarate points out that "within the context of psychoanalytical theories, the principle of otherness could also be called the principle of change'' (Zarate, 2004).

2.5 Identity Construction by Bucholtz and Hall

Also relevant to this research, is the meta-study of language and identity by Bucholtz and Hall (2004) which contains a variety of terms that explain processes of identity construction. These terms are relevant to this paper and will help to form a complete picture of how individuals and students form their identity by facing the "Other" during their stay abroad. This meta-study draws on the two concepts of sameness and difference to offer complementary perspectives on identity. The concept of sameness " allows individuals to imagine themselves as a group, while the concept of difference produces social distance between those who perceive themselves as unlike" (p.369). More concretely, identities are constructed when individuals realize that they are different from someone else. However, "the term identity literally refers to sameness" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p.37. Nevertheless, the process of social grouping shows that in order for an identity to be established, similarities are invented by downplaying the differences (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 371). This theory can also be adopted and used to explain the students' identity construction when studying abroad. More specifically, students understand their own identities better by downplaying the differences between the foreign culture and their own culture. "Sameness and difference are not objective states, but phenomenological processes that emerge from social interaction" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 371), in our case social interaction when studying abroad. This research will investigate if by interacting with the "Other" during their stay abroad students are more aware of themselves compared to those that did not have experiences of studying abroad.

2.6 The Study Abroad Experience

In the same vein, Murphy-Lejeune (2002) with her research findings reinforces that study abroad and participating in new social scenes can influence the construction of identity. The book of Murphy- Lejuene is the first qualitative study in this field. Previous academic studies in the area were strictly quantitative and as a result not much has been researched about the lives of students that studied abroad. Murphy-Lejeune (2002) highlights that the general picture of the study- abroad experience is mostly positive. She also emphasizes that:

> life abroad is a powerful experience of discovery of self and others because it shakes
>
> personal and social representations and introduces into identity processes perturbing
>
> elements, notably the notions of moving identities and flexible cognitive borders. This
>
> challenge of redefining self and others is open to many individuals now that Europe
>
> offers students a new stage on which to position their identity (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002,
>
> p.30).

This is a worth noting quote that explains the thoughts of Murphy-Lejeune (2002) regarding the correlation between studying abroad and identity construction. Similarly, a previous study on the field of studying abroad and its influences on the construction of identity has investigated the study abroad experience of Hong Kong university students that went abroad to the UK for five months through a program named SES (Special English Stream). Some of the goals of the aforementioned program are to refine and enhance the communication skills of the students and to help them become more self-confident and independent. The findings of this research are useful for this thesis, as the students describe confusing, disturbing but also successful intercultural situations and experiences. This research proves that the short-period abroad enhances the students' ability to communicate across cultures: "the students began to see

things in new light. There was a noticeable shift in their attitude as they made more of an effort to understand and appreciate a different way of doing things" (Jackson, 2004, p.272). The analysis of the students' diaries and the post- sojourn surveys showed that the students were more curious and more open to differences as well. "They had become more aware of the uniqueness of their own culture and the impact of different values and beliefs on the communication between people from different backgrounds" (Jackson, 2004, p.275).

Additionally, Brown (2009) claims that the students' sojourn acts as a catalyst for self-exploration similarly to psychotherapy, which involves the undoing of identity that enables people to navigate a variety of contexts. In her 2009 article "The transformative power of the international sojourn" she points out ways in which students' identities could be influenced by abroad experiences. For instance, many students learn more about themselves during their stay abroad, by moving to a new country and culture. Exposure to the new culture gives the opportunity to practice their communication skills and intercultural competences as well. Some of the main findings of Brown's (2009) research are: study abroad experiences help students to learn more about other cultures, to become more independent and confront stress, it also encourages students to change priorities and renegotiate domestic life, while it stimulates changes in the students' perspectives on life. The aforementioned article has shown that the study abroad experience results in a growth of the intercultural competences of the students, as well as in a shift in self-understanding. Such change is the consequence of exposure to diversity and of the geographical and emotional distance from their home country (Brown, 2009). The approach and definition of the notion of diversity is already explored in previous section (2.2). Furthermore, the students learn to understand, respect and tolerate differences. The interculturally competent students are willing to embrace other cultures, while maintaining their

own identity; they are considered to be capable of mediating between cultures and functioning as a human bridge between cultures. The hallmarks of the long-stay abroad experience are openness, flexibility and tolerance (Muzaini 2006; O'Reilly 2006). In addition, Sutton and Rubin (2004) provided evidence that studying abroad contributed to enhancing cultural relativism and to minimising ethnocentrism. In Brown's (2009) research many students were asked to reflect on their year away from home. In order to derive these pieces of information, Brown used the methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews that are part of an ethnographic type of research. Specifically, the researcher observed and interviewed the international students of her home University and thus she was able to observe the students during their entire year abroad. It is worth noting that some of these hallmarks are similar to the outcome of internationalization, proposed by Knight (2007), which is interculturally competent graduates.

Another useful for the research remark is the existence of cross-cultural variations in humor and their relation to intercultural competence. This remark will be used for the analysis of a finding related to humor in the discussion part of this thesis. Appreciation and understanding of someone else' humor, especially if this person is coming from a different country can also be considered as a sign of intercultural competence. Humor often poses challenges, especially between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, since understanding of someone else's humor demands high levels of linguistic and contextual knowledge (Hua, 2004).

2.7 Cognitive Development of Students

In the same vein, McKeown (2009) claims that study abroad experiences contribute to the cognitive development of the students. The findings of this research are also relevant to the construction of the students' identity. Assimilation in the new environment "which is the act of

interpreting new experiences through existing ways of understanding" (p.30) does not contribute to cognitive development, compared to accommodation, the ability to immerse in a foreign culture (McKeown, 2009) that results into cognitive development of the students. McKeown mentions previous researchers (Monalco, 2002) that distinguished study abroad accommodation options into categories that reflect greater amounts of cultural immersion. These categories are relevant to this research as well. Namely, living with host country roommates could contribute to greater cultural immersion. Additionally, students abroad can engage in activities with local people that engage them to greater cultural immersion.

2.8 Cultural Threads and Blocks

Holliday (2016) and his core idea behind intercultural learning is also complementary to McKeown's (2009) research. McKeown highlights that the study abroad experience enhances cultural relativism and contributes to the cognitive development of the student, while Holliday states that the use of cultural threads during interactions with the foreign "Other" is a sign of intercultural competency and a way to develop intellectually. Namely, Holliday (2016) makes a distinction between cultural blocks and cultural threads. Cultural threads are the common characteristics that people from different cultural backgrounds share as human beings and ease the communication between individuals, while they enable cultural travels as well as they carry individuals across boundaries that are encouraged by the cultural blocks. Cultural blocking is related to the essentialist approach to culture, in which individuals are defined as part of their nation or another social group and not as individuals. Thus, cultural blocks hinder cultural travelling and create boundaries, while cultural threads provide connections between different parts of Holliday's (2016) cultural grammar. Holliday states that " cultural threads are carried by the personal cultural trajectories, where we develop different senses of culture as we encounter

different small culture environments through changing life events and pull threads of experience out from the cultural resources provided by the particular structures" (p.320). The intercultural learning could be that studying abroad students "instead of looking for blocks should follow the threads from who we are as people who have something to share to the implications of our circumstances" (Holliday, 2016, p.322). It is useful at this point to give an example of cultural blocking between two people with different cultures:

A: How do people in your culture behave at mealtimes?

B: The whole family arrives on time and eats together; and shows their appreciation of the person who has prepared the meal, who is normally the mother.

A: Oh, interesting. That's a bit different to my culture and others I have been to, where the whole thing is less formal and organized.

B: But we can certainly learn from each other in this respect. (Holliday, 2015b)

Nonetheless, by using cultural threads during their communication with the foreign Other students can adjust to the foreign country easier and enhance their intercultural competency. Cultural threading occurs for instance during an interaction between two people from different cultural backgrounds, and specifically when the interactants focus on the similarities between them and not on the differences. For example, if both of the interlocutors are parents they can focus on their quality as parents and not on their different cultural background. The focus on the potential underlying universal processes and the assumption that everyone is equal help individuals understand that "characters are constructed around the basic humanistic principle that they are people just like us, who we can all therefore identify with, but who might be brought up in different circumstances with different histories" (Holliday, 2016, p.324). This research is relevant to this paper, as it explains the difference between cultural threading and blocking. The

researcher will try to investigate if students with experiences abroad focus more on cultural threading than on cultural blocking.

Additionally, students with experience abroad have been shown to be more knowledgeable about global interdependence and political issues, than students that did not study abroad (Sutton & Rubin, 2004). Sutton and Rubin (2004) in their study proved that the experience of studying abroad helped students them to enhance cultural relativism and reduce ethnocentrism.

2.9 Research Goal

Finally, Ward (2001) and many other researchers in the field such as Brown (2009) and McKeown (2009) argue that there is a need to collect all the findings on the studying abroad field to create new practices concerning international students across the higher education sector. In this way recommendations and suggestions can be provided to university faculty members and they, as the advocates of change, can initiate changes and highlight the importance of studying abroad opportunities for the students. This will be one of the goals of this research.

3. Method

In this section the methodology utilized to carry out this research will be provided. The methodology used was the qualitative method of interviews. Dörnyei (2007) claims that "qualitative data can become bulky and messy" (p.125).The qualitative method of interviews aims at describing, understanding and clarifying a human experience. The researcher was aiming for rich data that function as a reflection of real life studying abroad situations (Dörnyei, 2007) and therefore she decided to investigate the study abroad experience by using this specific qualitative methodology. Namely, short interviews were conducted with both the students that studied and the students that did not study abroad, to discover possible differences regarding

their identity construction. Additionally, more in-depth interviews took place with the students that studied abroad to detect if and how their experience abroad affected their identity or contributed to the development of their intercultural competence.

Moreover, the qualitative methodology of interviews was chosen, since many other scholars in the field of studying abroad research used the same method for their research. Nonetheless, sometimes they combined interviews with ethnographic observations, while some other researchers used mixed methods; a combination of interviews and surveys. For instance, Jackson (2004) in her ethnographic study of an English language and cultural immersion program for students from Hong University used the ethnographic method of observations, in combination with interviews, and additionally she conducted a survey. Furthermore, Brown (2009) in her research regarding the transformative power of international sojourn, in which she conducted an ethnographic study of the international student experience, used also the method of observations in combination with in-depth interviews. However, in this paper due to time limit the only method used is interviews, both short and in-depth.

3.1 Participants

 The sample size of eight participants was chosen to enable the researcher to have an insight and maximize what we can learn regarding the studying abroad experience and its effects on the students' identity construction (Dörnyei, 2007). In addition a "criterion sampling" was taken into consideration, through which the researcher selected participants who meet some specific criteria (Dörnyei, 2007, p.128). Specifically, in this study two criteria were considered before selecting the interview participants. The first criterion was common for all the participants. Namely, the majority of the participants should have been enrolled in Greek universities. Only one Greek participant studied in a Spanish university. Nevertheless, the second criterion was not

the same for the whole interview sample. Specifically, four participants studied exclusively during their higher education in Greece, whereas the other four participants took part in studying abroad programs.

For this research a small sample that consisted of eight participants was chosen, as the interviews were in-depth and the time period as aforementioned was limited. The sample strategy used to recruit the participants was the strategy of convenience sampling, which is the least desirable but the most common sampling strategy, especially at the postgraduate research level (Dörnyei, 2007). Furthermore, it is also useful when there are time constraints regarding the deadline of the research. This strategy is largely practical, as the researcher recruits the participants that are available. Specifically, most of the participants in this thesis were classmates or friends of the researcher, during her studies in Greece. The participants were four students that studied both in their home countries and abroad in one, two or three different countries and four students that started and completed their entire education exclusively in their home country. More questions were asked to the students with international experience. The in-depth interviews gave the opportunity to investigate further the impact of the studying abroad experience on the students' identity. All participants were enrolled in Greek universities, with the exception of one who was enrolled in a Spanish university. Furthermore, the participants were approached personally by the researcher via phone or a Facebook message. The researcher approached the specific participants, since she already was aware of which of her classmates or friends had or had no experiences with studying abroad and additionally which of her classmates or friends were willing to describe their experiences abroad. (See appendix A for more information regarding the participants).

The interviews were conducted via Skype with video call, as most of the participants were in Greece. All the participants were briefly informed about the aim and the content of the research beforehand. Moreover, all of them were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The participants' consent was obtained to record the interviews and use the interview data for the research. Specifically, the researcher informed all participants about the recording of the interviews and she already asked, before the start of every interview, if the participants are willing to give their consent in order to use their interview data for the purpose of the study.

3.2 Materials

For conducting the interviews a laptop with a Skype recorder was used and the interviews were then transcribed on paper, as this was the most convenient way for the researcher to transcribe them. The corpus of the transcriptions can be found in the appendices. The questions used for the interviews were open-ended.

3.3 Procedure

This section provides an outline of the research procedure that was applied to answer the research question and sub-question. To gather necessary data for answering the research question and the sub questions, a total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews offer a compromise between the two extremes of the structured and unstructured interviews (Dörnyei, 2007). "There are pre-prepared interview guiding questions, but the format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner" (Dörnyei, p.127). With this kind of interviews, the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate or focus on issues raised in an explanatory manner.

An interview guide, which included the topics and the questions for each topic, was prepared in advance and served as the main research instrument. Baarda's (2012) interview guide

was used to create the interview scheme, the topic list and the interview questions. Additionally, in order to formulate the topics and the interview questions for every topic, the researcher read articles from scholars in the field of studying abroad research. Moreover, the interview procedure consisted of the following steps; firstly, the researcher arranged an interview appointment with every participant individually and subsequently the interviews took place via Skype. All interviews took place the same week. Regarding the duration of the interviews; the in-depth interviews with the students that studied abroad lasted around thirty to forty-five minutes, whereas the interviews with the students that did not study abroad lasted around fifteen too thirty minutes. Finally, the interviewer ended all the interviews by thanking the interviewees for their time.

Then, coding of interview data was carried out. More specifically the researcher listened to the interview video recordings, read the notes and the transcripts as well, until themes emerged. The first interview questions were similar for both the short and the in-depth interviews. In order to gain a better understanding of the topic, a comparison between the similar data derived from the short interviews and the data derived from the in-depth interviews took place. The interviews were conducted in Greek, which was both the researchers' and the participants' mother tongue. Participants were asked in which language they would prefer to be interviewed and Greek was chosen, since it was easier for the participants to speak about their personal experiences in their mother tongue. Only one interview was conducted in English, as the participant was a teacher of English as a foreign language and therefore she felt comfortable to answer the interview questions in English. Finally, the answers were translated into English by the researcher.

Throughout the whole interview process, "decentring" was one of the researcher's concerns, in order to be able to move away from her own perspective and give weight to different perspectives (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). In a later phase, after the collection of the qualitative data, the researcher analyzed the results, by organizing, interpreting, identifying and then dividing thematically the main themes that emerged from the interviews.

The goal of the interviews was as stated before to derive information concerning the experiences of students that studied in different educational systems and the impact these experiences had on the construction of the students' identity, which is also the ultimate goal of the research.

4. Results

The results chapter of this research provides important insights into the influence that studying abroad experiences had on the construction of the students' identity and also the development of their intercultural competence. Moreover, the results are derived from both the short interviews with the students that did not participate in studying abroad programs and the additional in-depth interviews with the students that studied abroad. Furthermore, the results will be divided into three different sections; general observations, data presentation, and finally a presentation of data from the in-depth interviews will be offered. In addition, every section includes themes that emerged during the transcription of the interviews. In the appendices, tables that contain the additional findings for every section are provided. Additional translated transcripts that provide evidence for the results and discussion chapters can also be found in the appendices (Appendix F).

4.1 General observations

    4.1.1   Study Abroad Motivation

The first set of interview questions consisted of general questions, which offer some basic information about the background of the participants, as well as the reasons why students decided to study abroad or why they decided to complete their studies at their home universities. There is a variety of reasons why students decided to study abroad or not. According to the interview answers, some of the reasons why they participated in studying abroad programs are: to gain a better understanding concerning the political situation between countries, curiosity to study and live in new cultures, and opportunities in the job market after the specific experience. Additional, cited quotations will support these observations. One of the participants, who studied in Greece and went abroad in Germany, mentioned that the main reason he wanted to study abroad was his curiosity to learn more about the German perspective regarding the Greek financial crisis, as the following excerpts from the interview with Participant A illustrate:

2:19: I chose to go to Germany in 2015. It was a period of crisis between German and Greek relations, I wanted to gain a better understanding how the Germans perceive the Greek-German relations.

Participant A also mentions:

2:40: I wanted to study a different culture as well.

In general, all the students that went abroad highlighted that they chose to study abroad in order to get better insights regarding foreign cultures through experiences and through opportunities offered by the universities abroad. Participant C said:

1:40: I was afraid to live abroad alone and to socialize in a multicultural environment I went abroad in order to face my fears.

The main reason why students did not manage to study abroad was lack of financial support from their families or lack of interest in exploring a different educational system. Namely, two of the participants who did not study abroad mentioned that they preferred to study their undergraduate level education in Greece. One of them mentioned that she enjoyed the student life in her home-country, while the second stated that Greek education is as good as the education abroad. (See appendix B: Table 2: General observations)

4.2 Data presentation

In this section a data presentation will be provided. Specifically, both the interview data derived from the students with study abroad experiences and the answers of the students that did not participate in study abroad programs will be presented. As mentioned also in the methodology part of this thesis, both of the groups consist of four participants, eight participants in total. Namely, participants A, B, C and D participated in study abroad programs, and therefore they also participated in the in-depth interviews, whereas participants E, F, G, and H, did not participate in study abroad programs. The presentation of these data is divided into thematic sections. These thematic sections emerged from the topic list of the interview questions and after the transcription analysis. Firstly, the interview excerpts of the participants that went abroad will be provided and subsequently the findings related to the participants that did not study abroad will be also presented.

4.2.1   Findings Related to the Participants with Study Abroad Experience.

Identity description was the first theme that emerged from the interview data. The students were asked to describe their identities and the thoughts they have about themselves. All participants with experience abroad described themselves as individuals or as global citizens.

Participant A mentioned:

4:10: I do not feel that I am Greek, I feel more European, the fact that I studied and lived in four different European countries contributed to feeling European, I prefer to define myself as human.

In addition, participant C identifies as global citizen as well:

5:00: After my experience abroad I identify myself as global citizen, I have many friends abroad, for me there are no borders between countries, the meaning of the word nation is fluid and my identity is fluid as well. I will define myself more like a human than like a Greek or German person.

The second theme that became apparent during the transcription of the interviews was the way students communicate with people they do not identify with. Specifically, the question asked during the interviews was whether the participants feel confident to communicate with people from cultures they do not identify with. Participant C emphasized that communication with foreigners helped her to develop feelings of empathy. Furthermore, participant D mentioned that after the experience abroad she decided to change her career path and focus on tourism, within which she can interact with different cultures.

Participant B stated:

04:34: Yes, is very easy for me. My experience abroad helped me to practice what I believed I was able to do, in this case to communicating with people from different cultures.

Additionally, participant C mentioned:

06:34: Yes I can communicate, and through that I develop the feeling of empathy.

In general, all the participants with experience abroad did not mention encountering any difficulties when communicating with people abroad.

Another topic that emerged from the interview data was related to friendships with people that students, who studied abroad, do not identify with and the differences between friendships abroad and friendships in their home-country. It is noteworthy to mention, that all students that participated in study abroad programs highlighted that they have as many friends abroad as in their home country. Moreover, students that have friends abroad recognize many differences between friendships abroad and friendships in their homeland. Participant A points out:

06:19: I have many friends abroad and indeed I see differences between them and my friends back in Greece. There is a communication gap between me and my friends back in Greece, especially with those that never lived abroad. I have the feeling that my friends abroad are more open-minded compared to my friends in Greece.

The fourth theme that became apparent was related to stereotypes and assumptions that students have about people they do not identify with. Specifically, participants that studied abroad as well as the ones that did not participate in studying abroad programs make assumptions about people from other cultures. However, students after their experience abroad tend to change their mind and become aware of the fact that the majority of the preconceived ideas related to different cultures are wrong as well as they realize that people's cultural background does not define who they are.

Participant A pointed out:

09:45: I made assumptions before my experience abroad. For example I assumed that Germans are very cold people or that the Spanish people are having "siesta" the whole day, I realized that all these are not true. This experience helped me reconsider stereotypes even for my own culture.

Students that studied abroad seem in general more open-minded than students that did not participate in study abroad programs. Even though they are aware of the existence of cultural stereotypes all of them claimed that they try to avoid categorizing individuals depending on their cultural background.

Participant B stated:

14:23: Yes, I make assumptions about others, but I try not to express them, I wait until I meet someone and then I create an opinion about him.

An additional topic that emerged from the interview excerpts was related to foreign environment adaptation and specifically if students are willing to live in different cultures. Specifically, students that studied abroad are open and eager to live in different cultures.

Participant B stated:

17:15: Yes I can adapt in different cultures, I am communicative and sociable and thus I try to communicate with people, in order to make my time abroad more pleasant.

Moreover, some students that studied abroad were aware of differences between cultures and thus they had an opinion in which countries they do not want to live.

Participant D said:

08:30: Yes, I can adapt to different cultures, but not in every culture, for example I could not live in Dubai, where women have no rights.

The last theme of this section is the influence that the foreign "Other" can have on the students as well as if the students are able to realize how the foreign "Other" influences their identity. Students with study abroad experience show appreciation and seem to recognize how the foreign "Other" affected their identities. Specifically, all of the participants that studied abroad realize how the "Other" can affect their identity.

Participant C who studied abroad stated:

15:27: Of course foreigners have an influence on me. When you interact with them you compare yourself with them and in this way you realize that they approach situations differently or a concept about something can be completely different in a different culture, automatically you compare your culture with another culture.

For additional evidence and quotes from the interviews see Appendix F.

4.2.2   Findings Related to the Participants without Study Abroad Experience

In this section the findings from the interview data of the students that did not participate in study abroad programs will be stated. All participants that did not study abroad tend to identify themselves as Greek citizens. However, two out of four participants identify themselves as individuals as well.

Participant F mentioned:

7:45: We as Greeks are very hospitable and pleasant people and if you ask someone abroad he does not have anything bad to say about Greeks.

Additionally, participant G in a similar vein:

06:41: I will start by saying that I am a Greek citizen, my mother tongue is Greek, I am Christian orthodox, I am a kindergarten teacher, and I am a patient and pleasant person.

Nevertheless, participant H stated that her personality is influenced by the Greek culture, but she is not defined by her nationality. (For the specific quote see appendix: F)

The second theme that emerged is related to the students' communication with people they do not identify with. Two of the participants that did not study abroad claim that they think they are able to communicate with individuals abroad. Additionally, the other two participants said they feel more insecure when it comes to communicating with people from other

nationalities and answered that they may be able to communicate, but it also depends on the culture and the language spoken by the other person. In addition, they felt more insecure when it comes to communicating with people from other nationalities:

Participant E:

05:25: It depends on the cultures; I find it quite challenging to bridge the cultural gap between nationalities.

The third theme is related to the topic regarding friendships with people that the participants who did not study abroad, do not identify with. Participants G and F do not maintain any friendships with people from different cultures. Specifically, they emphasized that they did not have the chance to make friends from other cultures or other countries:

Participant G:

09:03: *I did not have the chance to make friends from other cultures or other countries.*

Similarly, participant F:

08:56 I did not have the chance to make friends from other cultures.

However, participant H stated that she has friends from cultures that are similar to her culture. Participant H mentioned:

10:44: The majority of my friends comes from European countries, I do not have friends from the Arab Emirates for example, people from there have completely different culture and mentality. I cannot embrace the Islamic culture.

Another quote that is necessary to be mentioned is an excerpt from the in-depth interview with participant E. This excerpt contrast with the quotes of participant G and F that support the argument that people, who did not study abroad, do not maintain friendships with individuals from foreign cultures.

Specifically participant E stated:

07:45: I have one friend, that we have developed close-knit relationship. The way of living is different, he is different to my way of thinking, to my perspective he is used to different kind of living, the eating habits are different, the religion is different.

The fourth theme that emerged from the interview data is related to the topic of stereotypes and assumptions about people, the students that did not travel abroad do not identify with. Participants that studied abroad as well as the ones that did not participate in studying abroad programs make assumptions about people from other cultures. Participants without experience abroad tend to make assumptions about others. However, some of them understand the uniqueness of every human being.

For example participant E mentioned:

13:20: To be honest I sometimes make assumptions about people before I meet them, but it is not correct. You should not judge other people by their appearance or their culture, if you do not meet them in person.

Two other participants of this category tend to categorize people because of their nationality (i.e. Germans, Spanish, or Italians) or because of their religion (i.e. Muslims).

Participant G, mentioned:

13:02: I make assumptions about people that are both from different cultures and about people from my own culture, their appearance influences what I think about them. However, I realize that I have to firstly meet someone and not assume things before I meet someone in person.

The next theme is related to foreign environment adaptation. Specifically, adaptation in foreign environments is a challenge for people that did not have the opportunity to study abroad. Participants that completed their entire studies in Greece seem more hesitant to live and adapt in

a foreign country compared to the ones that studied abroad. This opinion can be summarized through the quotes of the participants:

Participant H said:

18:51: I believe that I can adapt to a different culture, but I will probably feel homesick and I will miss my family everywhere I go.

Additionally, participant F mentioned:

11:00: I wouldn't choose to live in a culture different than mine, for example in Scandinavia, but if it were necessary I think I would try to adapt

The last theme of this chapter is the influence that the foreign "Other" can have on the students as well as if the students are able to realize how the foreign "Other" influences their identity. Half of the students, who studied exclusively in Greece, did not realize how the "Other" can affect their identity. However, the other half appreciates the influence of the foreign "Other" on their identity.

Participant F mentioned:

12:54: I do not learn more about myself when I interact with people from other cultures, I know who I am and what I am doing in life, the trips I did in the past did not change me.

Additionally, one of the participants that did not study abroad maintains a close-knit relationship with a person from a different country. This participant seems more aware about the influences from other cultures on her identity. The following quote is a statement from the specific participant, who is also a teacher of English as a foreign language:

Participant E:

10:36: Through the discussions with my friend I improved aspects of my personality.

For additional evidence and quotes from the interviews see Appendix F.

4.3 Presentation of data derived from the in-depth interviews

This section will provide the results of the four in-depth interviews. The participants of the in-depth interviews as stated before were only students with studying abroad experience. Several themes were detected and one of them was the changes on the personality of the students after their experience abroad: Students felt more independent, self-confident, more open-minded, and they managed to break some negative and positive patterns of their behavior. For example, one participant mentioned that she was very shy to approach and meet new people before her abroad experience. However, after meeting people and challenging herself abroad she overcame this barrier in her relationships. In addition, study abroad students achieved better understanding of themselves and others. They became more tolerant towards others and more competent in handling difficult situations in their personal and professional lives. Finally, appreciation and understanding of someone else's humor, especially, humor of people with different cultural or linguistic backgrounds was an interesting observation as well. The following quotes will support these generalizations:

Participant A:

19:10: I am much more confident and sociable than before, it is easy for me to communicate with everyone and to build a relationship directly. The experience abroad helped me to feel more secure about myself.

Participant C:

21:05: The experience abroad changed my life, my self-confidence increased, I feel that I can survive in every environment and that I can do whatever I want and go wherever I want and be able to survive there.

Participant D:

24:10: After my experience abroad I stopped being shy, I am more sociable, of course I also remain myself, but I have overcome difficulties I had in the past with starting a conversation.

Participant B:

35:40: My experience abroad was important for my personal development. It helped me not only with my professional career, but also generally to feel more confident and secure for who I am as a person.

Moreover, the following example will explain the observation concerning the understanding of someone else's humor and its relevance to intercultural communication. When the researcher asked a participant if it is easy for her to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds she answered:

04:30: Yes, it is very easy. A sign that I can communicate is the fact that I understand their humor. Sometimes you can even have difficulties with understanding someone's humor even if the other person is coming from the same country as you. However, I feel that I can understand the humor of people I met abroad.

5. Discussion

The findings of the research will be analyzed in this section and connections to the theories will be provided. The results will be analyzed through a comparison between people that studied abroad and people that did not participate in study abroad programs. The discussion part is divided into six different sections and an additional section at the end of this chapter, in which the data from the in-depth interviews will be analyzed. The present study was designed to determine the effect of studying abroad experience on students' identity construction. The analysis of the results will answer the main research question and sub question:

In what ways does studying abroad influence the way students construct their identities?

In what ways does studying abroad influence the construction of students' identities in terms of their intercultural competences?

5.1 Comparative Analysis of data

5.1.1 Identity Description

The first theme that will be analyzed in this section is related to identity description and specifically, how students spoke about their identities. Students that have studied abroad tend to describe themselves as individuals or global citizens compared to students that completed their studies at their home universities. The latter focus more on their Greek identity. However, the former students focus on the similarities that exist between human beings. This finding is consistent with the research of McKeown (2009), who writes that study abroad experience enhances cultural relativism. Additionally, this result is related to Holliday's (2016) research, in which he highlighted the importance of using cultural threads instead of cultural blocks, when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Holliday's (2016) and McKeown's (2009) research helps us understand why students with studying abroad experience introduce themselves as global citizens and individuals, by focusing on the similarities between human beings and not on the differences. An example of cultural threading is when Participant C mentioned that for her there are no borders between countries, her identity is fluid and she identifies herself more like a human than a Greek person. In contrast with participant F, who identified herself as similar to Spanish and Italian people and used "cultural blocking" to highlight the differences between French and Spanish or Italian people (see quote: Appendix F). Studying abroad students "instead of looking for blocks follow the threads from who they are as people who have something to share to the implications of their circumstances" (Holliday, 2016,

p.322), the experience abroad. However, a student who did not study abroad but worked with or interacted with people from different cultural backgrounds in their home country only partially defines herself by her nationality and she focuses on her individuality as well.

The next quote from participant H supports this view:

07:13: My personal characteristics are influenced by the Greek culture, however I am not deeply rooted in my Greek culture.

5.1.2 Communication with People that Students Do not Identify with

Students with studying abroad experience feel more confident and competent when it comes to communication with foreigners, compared to students without experience abroad who seem more hesitant to communicate with people from a different culture. The former students focus more on similarities or the cultural threads between cultures, which enable communication and "cultural travel", whereas the latter focus on the cultural blocks the differences that hinder intercultural communication.

 For instance, participant F stated:

9:42: *I believe that Spanish and Italian people are very pleasant people like us, French people for example with whom I had some interaction in the past, they are very cold people, they do not want to help you, they do not care.*

However, there are two students that did not participate in study abroad programs and feel confident to communicate with foreigners.

For example Participant H:

08:36: I believe that I am able to communicate with people from other cultures, as I am used to live in the Greek society which is a quite diverse society.

5.1.3 Friendships with People that Students Do not Identify with and Differences between Friendships Abroad and Friendships in Their Home-Country

As noted also in the results students that went abroad maintain many friendships with people from other cultures, while students that did not go abroad only have one or no friends outside their home country or they have friends that come from cultures that are similar to their own. In addition, friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds lead to more competence in communicating with people from different cultures. This statement can be supported from all the answers given by the participants with abroad experience.

For example, participant C mentioned:

06:34: Yes I can communicate, and through that I develop the feeling of empathy.

This quote supports the theory of Deardorff (2004) as well, who highlights that studying abroad as part of internationalization of higher education can result in intercultural competent students, who are able to adapt to different communication styles as well as to develop the feeling of empathy. It is also noteworthy, that one of the participants that did not have the opportunity to study abroad, but maintains a friendship with someone from different cultural background, seems to be more interculturally competent than other students that did not study abroad and have no friends from other countries. Perhaps just one friendship with someone from a different culture can have an impact on the identity. The following quote is a statement from a participant without studying abroad experience. The specific participant mentioned:

07:45: I have one friend, that we have developed close-knit relationship. The way of living is different, he is different to my way of thinking, to my perspectives he is used to different kind of living, the eating habits are different, the religion is different.

She continues:

08:50: We have different perspectives, what is moral, what is not moral, what is moral for me maybe is immoral for him. A lot of times we disagree with each other, but his personality has affected me a lot in a positive way. We exchanged a lot of different ideas, I could say that he made me think and to be more open-minded, to accept the difference, even though it was difficult for me to see through his own perspectives, but I really tried.

The fact that she is a teacher of English as a foreign language and she had encountered students with a variety of cultural backgrounds, may have affected and influenced her identity.

5.1.4 Stereotypes-Assumptions about People that Students Do not Identify Themselves with

Another topic that became apparent after the analysis of the results will be analyzed in this section. Both students with studying experience abroad and those without make assumptions about people from different cultures. However, students that went abroad tend to realize after their experience abroad that stereotypes about other cultures are not always true. The participants without experience abroad identify people mostly based on their nationality. It is especially worth noting that participants that did not participate in study abroad programs assume and articulate more stereotypes about cultures that are different from their culture. This is clearly illustrated when a participant mentioned that she does not have preconceived ideas about others. However, she has stereotypes for people with Islamic backgrounds. This result may be explained by the theory of "Othering", in which an individual reduces the "Others" to less than they are, by identifying them only by the preconceived ideas that he or she has about them. Based on this idea, individuals identify themselves as belonging to specific social groups. The social identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) is also related to this finding, as the participant feels that she and

other cultures, similar to her culture, belong to an in-group, while the Islamic cultures are part of the out-group. The participant that did not go abroad adapts her behavior according to the aforementioned distinction between Islamic and non Islamic cultures, while judging or excluding the out-groups (Ellemers, 1997). Another participant with no experience abroad stated:

9:42: *Yes, I make assumptions about people that come from a different culture. For example I believe that Spanish and Italian people are very pleasant people like us, French people for example with whom I had some interaction in the past, they are very cold people, they do not want to help you, they do not care.*

This participant identified herself as similar to Italian or Spanish people. She assumed that her culture is closer to their culture, compared to the French culture in which she does not belong to. Furthermore, this quote is related to the Holliday's (2016) intercultural learning. Holliday describes how interculturally competent individuals focus on the cultural threads, the similarities between individuals, and avoid cultural blocking which hinders cultural travel. The aforementioned finding is worth noting and is closely related to Holliday's theory, as it provides evidence of cultural blocking. The participant used cultural blocking, both when she identified herself as similar to Italians and also when she assumed that French people are different from her own culture. It is noticeable here, that blocking can be either positive or negative.

5.1.5 Adaptation in Foreign Environments

Furthermore, adaptation in foreign environments seems to be a challenge for students without experience abroad, while students with studying abroad experience are eager to experience new cultures. Many of the latter students were aware of differences between cultures and they had an idea of the cultures they could and could not see themselves living in. They undoubtfully, seem

more knowledgeable concerning cultures, for example the political situation or the role of the woman in specific societies. For example Participant D mentioned:

08:30: Yes, I can adapt to different cultures, but not in every culture, for example I could not live in Dubai, where women have no rights. (see more appendix F)

5.1.6 Influence of the "Other" on the Students

All the students that studied abroad realize the advantages of interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, half of the students that did not study abroad are aware of the influences that some interactions with foreigners had on their personality. This finding supports Zarate's (2004) work which points out that confrontation with the "Other" can result in evolution and maturation of individuals. In the case of this research confrontation with the "Other" when studying abroad may have helped students to learn more and gain better understanding about their own identity by confronting foreign cultures. This is also connected to Lindsay (2008), another researcher who claims that the sense of the self is connected to narratives or in other words the self is related to and formed by dialectic relationships throughout the journey of life. Narratives are part of our identity. Hence it can be concluded that the dialectic relationships students had during their stay abroad formed their identity. For example participant A stated:

14:51: I get feedback about myself when I interact with foreigners, whereas when I interact with people from the same culture I think I do not have that, because of our common ground.

Additionally, another quote that supports the theory of Zarate (2004) and Lindsay (2008):

Participant B:

15:27: Of course I gain a lot when I interact with people from other cultures, I

get into a process of comparing myself with others, and something that I have

never thought before or that can be different in a different culture, automatically

I compare this culture to my culture.

In the same vein, the study of Bucholtz and Hall (2004) has noted the importance of sameness and difference in the process of identity construction. Identities are constructed when individuals realize that they are different from someone else. During their experience abroad students perceive the differences between them and the "Other" and in this way they construct and re-construct their identity. "Sameness and difference are not objective states, but phenomenological processes that emerge from social interaction" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, p. 371), in our case social interaction when studying abroad. All the students with study abroad experiences understood the positive influence of the "Other" on their identities. However, it is worth noting that one of the participants that did not study abroad mentioned:

12:54: I do not learn more about myself when I interact with people from other cultures, I know who I am and what I am doing in life, the trips I did in the past did not change me.

While other two participants without abroad experience understood that they can be influenced by others, but they still did not have personal experiences.

(For more quotes/ evidence see: Appendix F)

5.2 Presentation of data derived from the in-depth interviews

The data derived from the in-depth interviews will be analyzed in this chapter. It is worth noting that a correlation between studying abroad, as a part of the internationalization process of higher education and the development of the intercultural competence of the students was observed. The findings of the research support the internal outcomes of internationalization proposed by Deardorff (2004) and by Knight (2007) which are; interculturally competent students,

adaptability to different communication styles, cognitive flexibility, ethnorelative view as well as development of feelings of empathy.

For example Participant A stated:

21:13: This experience helped me more than any other experience in my life to change the way I see myself and the others.

This statement seems to be a sign of development of cognitive flexibility of the participants that studied abroad as well as it shows feelings of empathy towards the others.

Participant B also mentioned*:*

40:00: If I was tolerant before my experience abroad, now I am even more tolerant. I realized that they are different from me, but I am also different from them.

The results of the in-depth interviews are also in accordance with the findings of other researchers that conducted research to discover the correlation between studying abroad and the cognitive development of student. For example, Brown (2009) mentions that participants of studying abroad programs become more independent learn how to confront stress, through the difficulties they experience when studying abroad. This statement can be supported by data from the interview excerpts.

For example participant B stated:

38:07: When I am thinking about the difficulties I overcame during my stay abroad
I say to myself you can now overcome everything.

Brown's findings regarding growth in intercultural competence, ability to learn and embrace other cultures, openness, flexibility and tolerance towards others are confirmed through the in-depth interview data in this study. Through the experiences they had abroad, the foreign people they met and the difficulties they encountered, they indeed became more open, tolerant

and they developed feelings of empathy. Specifically participant C mentioned that she developed the feeling of empathy, when she was communicating with people from other cultures. Additionally, participant A emphasized:

26:31: I accept everything, everything seems normal to me after my experience abroad

Additionally, participant B highlighted:

34:25: I was independent before going abroad, but the experience abroad helped me become even more independent.

Moreover, Jackson (2004) and Brown (2009) supported that students through their experience abroad, manage to enhance their ability for cross-cultural communication. This finding is supported for instance by Participant B, who pointed out:

04:34: Yes, is very easy for me. My experience abroad helped me to practice what I believed I was able to do, in this case to communicating with people from different cultures.

Nevertheless, according to the findings of this research there are students that did not study abroad, but are interculturally competent, for example participant E who works as an English teacher. This finding can support the view that sometimes intercultural competence can be achieved within the culture of origin. However, further research should be done to support this finding.

It is of vital importance to bear in mind the limitations of the research. Firstly, it is acknowledged that due to time limit, this research consisted of only eight participants. Therefore, it is recognized that with an interviewee sample of eight participants it is difficult to draw conclusions. Hence, further research that will include more participants and additional methods, such as ethnographic observations and surveys is recommended. A second limitation is that the researcher translated the answers of the participants by herself. Given the fact that she is not a

professional, trained translator, she encountered some difficulties regarding the translation of some idiomatic expressions. Additionally, styles of expression, such as sarcasm expressed by the participants, were barriers the researcher had to handle when she translated the answers. Another limitation of the research that should be taken into consideration and that also points to possible directions for future research is the time period that students spent abroad. For example one of the participants took part in studying abroad programs three times and he spent more time abroad that a student that went abroad only once during his studies. Moreover, numerous other factors and experiences can have an influence on the students' identity when studying abroad apart from the experience itself. Another important limitation of the study that should be taken into consideration is the researcher's own perspective on the topic that may have affected the interpretation of the data. Specifically, the researcher's personal experience with studying abroad and how this experience affected her identity construction could also have an influence on the interpretation of the results.

Finally, it is worth noting that the rapport between the researcher and some of the participants may have affected the results and specifically the answers given by the participants. Cole in a forthcoming chapter "Looking for rapport in the Metacommunicative Features of an Ethnographic Interview" points out the importance of contextualizing the interview within prior events and texts. Moreover, Cole in the same article followed the advice of Briggs (1986): she looked look at how the interview text is related to prior texts and events leading up to the moment of interview. There is a need and it is also useful for this research to follow Brigg's advice and keep in mind that the interviewees' answers may have been affected by the relationships between the researcher and the participants.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to examine in what ways studying abroad as part of internationalization of higher education curricula affects the construction of the students' identity and especially if this experience contributes to interculturally competent students. There are plenty of previous scholars that investigated the topic but there was not any research on the field of studying abroad that focused explicitly on Greek students. This study incorporated numerous theories from different scholars and focused more in confirming the theories with a focus on Greek students. In order to conduct the investigation and answer the main and sub-question semi-structured interviews were utilized.

Concerning the main research question; in what ways does studying abroad influence the way students construct their identities? The aforementioned findings showed that studying abroad has a big influence on the identity of the student. Some of the many ways the experience influences identity are; students learn more about themselves and their own culture and they learn how to communicate with people with whom they do not identify themselves with. Furthermore, they create friendships abroad and through these friendships they learn to accept differences and be more open-minded. Additionally, they neither make assumptions easily, nor have preconceived ideas about people in comparison to their pre-studying abroad period. Moreover, they develop adaptation skills and they are ready and eager to explore new cultures. Finally, they value the influence that the foreign "Other" has on their identity.

Of equal importance, the sub question focuses more on the development of the intercultural competence of the students: in what ways does studying abroad influence the construction of students' identities in terms of their intercultural competences? The results illustrated a correlation between studying abroad and the development of intercultural

competences. More specifically, these skills are; the competence in adapting easier to foreign environments compared to students that did not study abroad and successful communication with individuals from different cultural background. Additionally students who studied abroad also seem to have learned to understand, respect and tolerate difference as well as to develop feelings of empathy. These skills are also in accordance with the outcomes of internationalization of higher education as proposed by Deardorff (2004).

This research demonstrates the importance of studying abroad programs and the ways these programs can influence the students' identity. Hence, it will be useful for universities in Greece and worldwide to incorporate studying abroad programs as it appears to offer the possibility for students to see life through the lens of other cultures, leading to a much more colorful and accepting world like the image on the cover of this thesis.

7.   **Bibliography**

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8. **Appendices**

Appendix A: Table 1: General Observations

General Observations	
Motivations to go abroad:	**Reasons why they did not go abroad:**
1.Political insights	1.Lack of financial support
2.Curiosity of other cultures	2.Preference of the educational system in their home countries
3.Job market opportunities	

Appendix B: Interview Guide-Interview Questions

GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR ALL THE PARTICIPANTS

1. What is your profession or academic background? What is your highest level of

   education?
2. What is your home-University?
3. Did you ever study abroad? If yes where?
4. Why did you decide not to study abroad?
5. How long was your longest trip abroad? And where?
6. What motivated you to go abroad? (for the students that went abroad).
7. Would you like to go to study abroad/ would you have liked to go and study abroad? Why

   or why not?

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE OTHER

8. How would you describe your identity or identities to someone from a culture you do not

   identify with?
9. Do you find it easy to communicate with people you do not identify yourself? And if yes

   why?
10. Do you have friends from cultures that you do not identify yourself with? If not why? If

    yes, what are those friendships like?
11. How are these friendships same or different from your friendships with people from

    cultures you identify yourself with?

PERCEPTION ABOUT CULTURE

12. How would you describe your own culture to someone from a different culture?
13. What kind of assumptions do you make about people from different cultures? Can you

    please give an example?
14. Do you think you can adapt easily to other cultures? Could you please elaborate?

PERCEPTION OF DIVERISTY

15. How would you define cultural diversity? Do you think there is a value in cultural

    diversity?

16. Do you feel that you learn more about the characteristics of your personality when you

    interact with others, especially with people from other nationalities?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add or do you have any questions for me?

Additional interview questions for people that went on exchange (in-depth interviews)

GENERAL QUESTIONS

18. How would you describe your experience abroad? Please tell me about your experience

    abroad. What did you enjoy? What did you not enjoy?

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

19. When you were abroad did you participate in social/community activities with people

    from the host country like: joined a club/group with mostly host country

    students/community member?

ABROAD CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

20. Can you please describe your experience in terms of studying in a multicultural

    classroom?
21. Did you recognize any difference between studying in a multicultural classroom

    compared to when you studied in a classroom with students that have the same cultural

    background as you?
    ·   If yes, can you please elaborate?
22. What are your experiences with the professors abroad? Did you notice any differences?
23. How interactions with the professors were the same or different compared to your home-

    University.
24. And how do you think these interactions affected your identity?

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

25. How do you think your personal characteristics and identity change after your

    experience abroad? (follow-up questions)

26. Do you think that you are more autonomous after your stay abroad?
27. Do you think it influenced your way of thinking about yourself and the others? if yes

why if not why?
28. Do you feel more self-confident?
29. Do you feel that with your stay abroad you broke a pattern of your behavior?
30. Do you feel more open-minded? In what ways?
31. Do you feel more competent in handling difficulties in your personal or professional life

after your stay abroad?

CULTURAL PERCEPTION WHEN STUDYING ABROAD

32. Did you feel more or less connected with your home culture(s) when you were abroad?

PERCEPTION OF OTHERS

33. Do you think you are more tolerant towards others because of your stay abroad?

Why? Please can you mention an example?

34. Is there anything else you would like to add? Or do you have any comments or

questions for me?