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Amanda Miller  
*Illinois State University*

William Shaw  
*Illinois State University*

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IMAGINED AND ACTIVATED CAPITAL WITHIN STUDY ABROAD: ETHNOGRAPHIC  
AND AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS

Amanda Miller

William Shaw

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ABSTRACT

Through ethnographic interviews and auto-ethnographic reflections of Illinois State University students about the meanings and experiences of study abroad, demonstrates that students imagine the study abroad experience as that which is individually transformative, advantageous within the employment sector, and an experience that increases cultural competence and global citizenship. Study abroad participation is influenced by race and socioeconomic status; individual habitus is argued to factor into how study abroad is perceived. Focusing on how class and race determine the ways in which study abroad is constructed through analysis of the meanings of the study abroad experience through imagined, transformed, and activated cultural and social capital will answer larger questions about the state of study abroad programming in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Keywords: Study Abroad, Ethnography, Cultural Capital, Social Networks, Habitus, Socioeconomic Status

## CULTURAL CAPITAL, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND STUDY ABROAD

Cultural capital is regarded as the cultural background, knowledge, dispositions and experiences that are transmitted generationally (Bourdieu 1977). "Cultural capital functions as power in particular institutional settings and is invested in these same settings to attain specific advantages...widely shared, high status cultural signals used for social and cultural exclusion" (Simon and Ainsworth 2012: 3). Bourdieu (1984) emphasizes that all types of capital can be derived from economic capital through transformation and can be reproduced in its identical form and/or converted between different types of capital. As it relates to study abroad, students with cultural capital are more likely to successfully negotiate the study abroad process. According to Lareau (2000) as cited by Simon and Ainsworth (2012), there is a three stage process for transforming resources into cultural capital and ultimately social benefits: cultural resources must first be possessed, the value must then be recognized and converted into cultural capital, and finally cultural capital must be activated so benefit is produced. Individuals have different levels of cultural resources and this is argued to be shaped by race and class. Higher educational institutions are not neutral but instead reproduce inequality through privileging particular race and classes.

Previous studies suggest that study abroad programming may possess standard requirements that disadvantage people of color. Fordham (2002) found that study abroad programs chose students for their programs based on culturally biased criteria favoring white, middle- class students. Class and race shape the students ability to negotiate advantage (Simon and Ainsworth 2012). Low income and minority students are less likely to have a familiarity with institutional standards that privilege white and higher income students. "Social relationships between minority youth and institutional gatekeepers are often marred by social distance and

distrust...students must have a level of comfort to approach faculty and staff about study abroad, and they must have a familiarity with communication channels for the transmission of information...not every student is equipped with the cultural capital considered normative in institutions of higher education” (Simon and Ainsworth 2012: 4). Study abroad continues to largely be restricted to white, affluent, female students who study humanities and social sciences. African Americans and lower socioeconomic students do not often participate in study abroad programming due in part to factors such as lack of support and access to information, financial instability and institutional factors. It is argued then that those who are from the middle to upper socioeconomic classes have access to the advantages and resources that make it more capable for them to participate in study abroad programs (Simon and Ainsworth 2012).

Simon and Ainsworth (2012: 3) write, “Social class may be viewed not only as the economic position people occupy in a society but as “attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of one’s social world” or what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls “habitus”. The argument is that students choose to study abroad but these choices are constrained by habitus. Those students that have a high socioeconomic status background possess a habitus less constraining than those students from a lower socioeconomic status.

“Going Global: Understanding the Choice Process of the Intent to Study Abroad” (2009) by Mark Salisbury, Paul Umbach, Michael Paulsen, and Earnest Pascarella looks at the factors that influence intent to study abroad through research that analyzes the effect of various forms of capital that students accumulate before attending college when considering the possibilities of studying abroad. The socioeconomic status of the family is positively related to the intent to study abroad in that students coming from higher income families are more likely to plan to study abroad during their college attendance. This suggests, according to the authors, “that

insufficient financial capital significantly inhibits the likelihood of participation in study abroad even in the earliest stages when the beginnings of predisposition, plans or intentions to study abroad are first being formed” (Salisbury et al. 2008: 133). Further, findings indicate that the level of parental education relates to the likelihood of studying abroad. Both findings suggest as class-based indicators of habitus, that socioeconomic status can discourage the development of intentions to study abroad. Manifesting as institutionalized racism and embedded in everyday practices, study abroad staff may neglect minority students because of their perception that Blacks are not interested in study abroad. Biased gatekeepers of the study abroad process limit the development of programs and discourage minority participation.

Students coming from a low-income background with low pre-college social and cultural capital, even with full financial assistance, are still unlikely to study abroad because, “a low level of pre-college social and cultural capital could very likely prevent them from valuing the potential educational benefits enough to invest the time and foregone earnings (either from employment during college or by delaying entrance into full-time employment upon graduation) to ultimately enroll and depart for a study abroad program” (Salisbury et al. 2008: 137). This suggests that the accumulation of pre-college social and cultural capital is influential in the study abroad planning process for all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Yu-Jung Chang (2011) analyzes in “Picking One's Battles: NNES Doctoral Students' Imagined Communities and Selections of Investment” how non-native English-speaking, doctoral, international students in English-speaking graduate schools analyze how their past and envisioned future affect their selections of learning investment. Findings indicate that where and how they were willing to make investments were guided by personal academic goals before, during, and after their doctoral study in the United States. The students anticipated that by

participation in the challenges associated with graduate school in the United States, their cross-cultural investment would yield a high return - the benefits of academic training such as resources and wealth were desirable. The choices of investment were influenced by perceptions and by future aspirations. The findings indicated that the students were selective in investing in skill areas that could generate the most value in their imagined communities. Relevant to study abroad, Chang's study suggests that students leave their home countries and invest time, energy and money in anticipation of a good return – in Chang's case a professional degree that will further resources.

As stated by Simon and Ainsworth (2012: 2), "Developing a full understanding of the factors that ultimately influence study abroad participation requires an appropriately nuanced understanding of the way in which students make decisions about educational opportunities". Student choice study asserts that the first day a student attends class in his or her first semester is not preceded by a singular or simple decision but by a long and complex sequence of choices that shape and reshape the likelihood of enrollment in college. Further, each pre-college decision expands or inhibits future opportunities. Applying this into the study abroad experience, from initial consideration to study abroad to actual departure is not a simple, short process but one that may take years and begins with cultural capital accrued before attending college. The choice to study abroad is influenced by factors such as previous travel, individual resources, perceived importance of studying abroad, language proficiency, and social networks.

This research seeks to address the following questions:

- How is capital imagined, transformed, and activated within study abroad?
- What do students expect to get out of participation in study abroad programming?

- What does the understanding of student capital and habitus mean for study abroad programs?

## METHODS

Our data consists of interviews conducted with Illinois State University students and an auto-ethnographic reflection. Interviewees include a white male who participated in a study abroad program in Limerick, Ireland through an exchange program within his major of exercise science (RJ), and a white, female art education student who desired to study abroad within an art education program in Australia but was unable to do so due to financial, social, and education factors (JW).

An analysis of the interview with JW will demonstrate the notion of cultural and social capital as imagined capital. Then, through an analysis of RJ's interview, the forms of capital activated and transformed will be demonstrated through identifying his pre-existing forms of capital before study abroad and his experience during studying abroad. His interview will then be compared to an auto-ethnography written from the perspective of a black, male Anthropology student in an independent study abroad program in Rio, Brazil through the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) in the summer of 2014.

## IMAGINING STUDY ABROAD AS CULTURAL CAPITAL: JW

Cultural capital is influential in the determination of how students understand the meanings of study abroad and subsequently the choices that are made. Important to study abroad programming is the concept of "imagined" capital. If cultural capital is the cultural background,

knowledge, disposition and experiences that are transmitted generationally and functions particularly in institutional settings as previously demonstrated, then important to understanding the meaning of study abroad is understanding how students imagine study abroad as cultural, and ultimately, social capital.

JW is a senior, art education major and has attended Illinois State University since the fall of 2012. She is working towards completion of an art teaching license for kids K-12. In the interview, JW discusses her interest, but inability to, study abroad in Australia's art education program. She identifies money, lack of family support, and her status as a senior as problematic for studying abroad. She touches on the importance of study for her as an opportunity for growth in self and teaching through networking with international teachers and learning how to teach conceptual art at a young age. She shares her jealousy of people who get the opportunity to study abroad and describes what she believes the goals of study abroad to be and how she would utilize the experience.

Imagining the study abroad experience as that which will enhance your career and future opportunities as well as to diversify your cultural experiences is directly related to how we equate the study abroad experience as cultural and social capital. For example, JW identifies that observing teaching styles in Australia will make her a better overall teacher, more marketable, and an experience that is socially advantageous. Her desire to study abroad but inability to go is reflected in her feelings of disadvantage of not having access to this source of social and cultural capital and a middle-upper class notion of having to travel in order to be "cultured". JW states,

"I feel like study abroad is always a good thing to have on your resume and anybody is going to find you impressive if you have gone anywhere in the country [pause] but especially to have the study abroad in Australia on your resume saying you networked with teachers from Australia who've done projects in Australia. I feel like that's a good thing to have under your belt academically and it makes you more marketable - especially during a time where we're trying to reform our education to kind of try to get kid's to think about more conceptual stuff rather than just teaching them how to draw. It's kind of like being at the fore-front of a revolution of art education."



Students coming from a higher socioeconomic status have the opportunity of a privileged view of “finding themselves” and “individual strength” when traveling abroad as seen by JW’s comment,

“It’s important to know how other cultures teach and I definitely think it would be nice to see a culture that values education... but it’s also important to work with any other teacher especially from a different area because it really builds your character and your strength of who you are. I think America is pretty, what is the word I’m looking for, is pretty, well [pause] Americans don’t tend to really like to think about other cultures. I feel like that might be generalizing but I know a lot of people who can’t point to Europe on a map. So, I think study abroad is trying to get kids out of their comfort zone and to kind of learn that we aren’t the only thing on this planet. There are other people who think differently and have different values and there’s a lot more to the world if you just get out there and see it. But, for the most part I think, when everyone comes in to talk to us about study abroad they really try to push growth as a person, and that’s the best way to do it [studying abroad]”.

Social networks are defined as, “social relationships from which an individual is potentially able to derive institutional support, particularly support that includes the delivery of knowledge-based resources” (Simon and Ainsworth 2012: 3). White students are more likely to come from families with a background of study abroad participation and therefore an informative and supportive environment where participation is encouraged. JW, from a lower middle-class background, responds to her families feelings about her traveling abroad stating,

“They don’t want me to study abroad. They are kind of a factor in why I’m not studying abroad...they don’t really think about things outside of central Illinois, so they think I’m too far away in Bloomington...they don’t see the merits in studying abroad”.

Beyond family networks are the existences of peer networks which prove to be very influential in shaping JW’s understanding of study abroad. She states,

“So I know a lot of people who did this (study abroad) program and really, really liked it and I feel it would be the best route for me as it directly relates to my major...A few are too poor to go but a lot of my classmates have already gone abroad. A couple of them have gone to Europe a few times and one of the grad [graduate] students in my class has gone to Australia twice so she’s been there and she’s going back again, I believe. So, my class has, like, twelve people and I think a majority of them are going or at least are thinking of going”.

With networks beginning even before university attendance, social circles including family, friends, and teachers influence and assist in the study abroad process. The more available and variety of networks, the more accurate and more influential social networks will have on the decision to participate in study abroad.

#### ACTIVATED AND TRANSFORMED CAPITAL: RJ AND WILL

RJ is a white, male at Illinois State University in his early twenties who is currently studying exercise science. RJ had no conscious desire to study abroad until he was handed an in-class sign-up sheet to apply to the exercise science exchange program that swapped two students from ISU with two students from abroad.

After being selected for the program, RJ started the process for studying abroad in which he had no previous travel knowledge. He sought out assistance with the study abroad process by talking with a sibling who had taught English in India. Not having prior knowledge of the city where he would be studying RJ not only did research about the place, but was also able to ask his “second mother” that had previously traveled to Ireland about desirable travel destinations. RJ did have access to the Illinois State University study abroad office that assisted him with help, but he also acknowledges that this was insufficient at times causing him to contact the school in Ireland himself to understand more of the process. His pre-existing social networks, once activated, became informative networks that assisted him in collecting information about navigating the study abroad program.

The Limerick, Ireland study abroad program was an exchange between two schools so RJ was able to keep his tuition at a similar cost as if he were studying at Illinois State University. Ineligible for applied scholarships, his parents paid for the remaining half of his tuition not covered by financial aid and his plane ticket. The remaining costs of living abroad fell to him; he

collected a total of \$7,000 to cover personal expenses while he was in Ireland. He earned the money primarily through working, but also from friends and family, for example identifying that one of the previous jobs was gained through a connection his mother had through the company. He also recounts a moment where a friend gave him \$100 just to help him out on his trip. The social connections he made through friends and family were able to be transformed directly into monetary capital.

RJ reflects on the experiences in Ireland that were really impactful for him. He describes a time where he was stuck at a train station because he misunderstood the train information but luckily after some help from three different people in which the final spoke three different languages, he was able to travel to his intended destination. Another experience was socializing at a local pub, where he was able to buy drinks for one person who would later in turn buy him a drink on another day in reciprocity. He had even decided to budget money for drinks intended for women that he wanted to talk to and visiting other countries in his free time that allowed him to see more than his program offered. Through these experiences he replied that he gained “maturity, the importance in budgeting, and how to understand situations more from a “cultural perspective”.

Reflecting on my own experiences studying abroad, I would say that I had a more arduous journey, compared to RJ, in even being able to make traveling an option. The idea to go to Brazil was instilled in me from the time I started Capoeira in 2008. My teacher, Denis Chiamonte, who is a native Brazilian, visiting professor at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana with 25 plus years in capoeira, tells his students that visiting Brazil is just as important as Muslims visiting Mecca. Whenever I heard my teacher say this I heard it through, what I then thought was a nonexistent reality, of me going because of the money needed to travel

internationally. After enrolling at Illinois State University in 2012 as a non-traditional student, I was instructed to use study abroad to achieve my goals as a student of the university. However my first semester wasn't very successful leaving me below the GPA requirement for the program.

During my first semester at Illinois State University, I created a connection with the independent program director of CIEE's Rio de Janeiro program after realizing that ISU didn't have an affiliated program and I wanted to act on potential professional opportunities in Brazil. The director had granted me permission to join the program despite not having the GPA requirements because I had created a social connection with him. Despite this, ISU's study abroad office told me they could not allow me to travel with my current GPA below their 2.0 requirement, and upon raising my GPA, I was allowed to apply once more to CIEE. Part of the study abroad program requirements include two letters of recommendation, which was difficult for me to access because I had just transferred to ISU and didn't know my professors. Thankfully, my first Anthropology professor and Sociology professor assisted me.

The financial aid aspect of studying abroad was the most difficult hurdle for me. The semester program came to \$49,000 (our school was not affiliated with the Brazilian program) so I withdrew my application. After the news that I couldn't afford the semester program, I spoke with the assistant provost of Illinois State University whom I met during a previously-taken Portuguese class. I informed her that I was disappointed that I was borrowing a lot of money just to be at ISU and could not even plan my education because of money. When I left her office she called the vice president of financial aid and the head of the study abroad program who found a grant that I was eligible for worth almost \$2,000. I was able to get a plane scholarship through CIEE worth \$1,500, plus the \$2,000 from the aforementioned grant, and then maxed out my

loans by taking \$3,000 to pay the \$5,000 school expense and travel. The remainder needed was for food, local travel, and personal expenses that I was able to obtain \$1,100 through the Trio program, and the rest of the \$3,000 that I raised came from working a gymnastics day camp at my job back in Saint Louis, MO up until two days before my trip.

Even with the financial aspect taken care of, some of the logistics were not completed until the very last minute before the trip. For example, I didn't learn until the last week of the semester that my advisor needed to sign a paper to give me credit for my classes. After scheduling a meeting with a study abroad advisor, I was told to take this to a language department to get credit, who then in turn told me that I didn't need to see her because I wasn't a language major. The initial study abroad advisor thought that I needed that credit for language but told me my general advisor could take care of the paper. I feel as though this part happened because of going to the boss of a department to get something done normally causes that department to not want to help you as much. I had little experience in traveling abroad so I was scared and trying to cover all of my bases. The last hiccup in my trip was my visa application which was denied at my first attempt. I learned of the non-refundable reciprocity fees that exist between America and Brazil because America charges Brazilians that amount for their visas so it is done so in return. After burning the last of my money on the second attempt, paying \$320 total for one visa, I didn't receive a visa until the 10<sup>th</sup> of July when my leave date was on the 14<sup>th</sup>.

So taking into account all of the hurdles encountered, my process was difficult to say the least. My study abroad experience almost did not happen because of so many circumstances that occurred and though I looked forward to an easy trip once abroad, I found that there was a general American student population that appeared in the Rio study abroad program. One student was a Chilean international student who attended the University of Pennsylvania and another

student admitted that her parents paid for her trip and education so she did not have to worry about debt or funds. A majority of the students had a native Spanish speaking background and a majority had parents that helped them with their trip. I felt out of place as the second oldest student who, at times, didn't feel a part of the group dynamic and did not have access, for example, to a smart phone which left me out of several last minute plans.

While my study abroad trip itself was definitely a memory of a lifetime, I found myself not meeting the expectations I worked so hard to achieve. By the time I arrived in Brazil, the contact that I wanted to meet to create professional, circus-art connections with had an injury that kept her from physical activity. Also, the circus was out for seasonal break only to return after my leave. The program was cut short because of the world cup and when I tried to network through local CIEE staff to see other circus schools or find local companies potentially to work for allowing me to have a visa to come back after graduation, time did not allow for it. I found myself feeling low at times during my trip as I felt socially awkward among other American students. Vaguely understanding my language class because of a faster pace due to a class majority of Spanish native speakers, and being in Brazil but sometimes experiencing American culture through the program outside of the excursions added to this. Now that I am back in America I am at least happy to have the experience of going abroad, but wonder if I missed something to make my trip what I wanted to be or if timing is everything when it comes to taking advantage of an opportunity.

Comparing the information gathered from my interview with RJ and with my own study abroad experience I am able to show several ways that individual's activate and transform capital through the study abroad process. RJ had pre-existing capital readily accessible due to his social connections that allow him to access monetary capital more easily. His parents helped with his

experience by paying the remaining tuition not covered by financial aid converting social capital to financial. His connection to his sister and “other mother” allowed him to have cultural capital in the form of knowledge about traveling and destinations within Ireland. The money he earned from employment was derived from his mother’s social network.

In comparison, my attempt at study abroad started at the beginning stages at ISU but fell short due to my inability to understand my new environment and lack of cultural capital as a first generation student. While establishing social networks, I completed the required GPA requirement needed to apply to my study abroad program which took until the spring of 2014. My social capital, while newly built and established within the institution governing study abroad, was not enough to help me to prevent or quickly remedy my current predicament. Once I had the academic requirements, financial capital was still a hurdle at ISU which cost me a semester for a more affordable summer program which wasn’t finalized until right before my trip. The journey I made in order to study abroad was significantly more difficult than RJ due to my lack of social networks, cultural capital, and financial capital

## RECOMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Study abroad programs should be organized and staffed in a way that recognizes and responds to race and class accessibility issues. For example, lack of minority staff sends a subtle message to minority students that study abroad is not applicable to them and as a consequence minority students may be unwilling to seek assistance from staff perceived as not understanding of their particular social constraints, meanings, and goals. We also recommend going beyond just the First Step Sessions as initial contact information about study abroad programs to increasing encouragement and in-depth information about study abroad programming to address perceived

constraints from the student body. If a goal of study abroad programming is to expand the number of student participation then it is useful for the OISP office to identify and meet the demands of more a more diverse student body. I also recommend revising the current study abroad requirements in order to address the issue of pre-conceived assumptions of who is appropriate for study abroad as a reflection of white, middle-class privilege. Simply offering financial aid, increasing advertising, and broadening the demographic profile will not increase the numbers of students dramatically; understanding the factors that contribute to study abroad participation and meaning of the study abroad experience is necessary.

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