

Developing Intercultural Competency in a Public Health Study Abroad Program: What Does Cultural Learning Mean for Undergraduate Chinese Students?

Sara Bano^{a*}, Qing Xia^b, and John Dirkx^b

^aNorth Dakota State University, USA

^bMichigan State University, USA

*Corresponding author: Email: sara.bano@ndsu.edu.
Address: North Dakota State University, North Dakota, USA

ABSTRACT

In this study, we explored the notions of cultural learning from non-western perspectives by focusing on the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students from the field of Public Health in the United States of America. We used Weick's (1995) Sensemaking theory to understand how Chinese undergraduate students made sense of their experiences of learning about other cultures in both personal and professional spaces. We applied a qualitative research design and used interviews, a focus group, and reflection papers for data collection. We found that Chinese undergraduate students focused on social behaviors and attitudes. They used comparison as a tool to make sense of new experiences. Their sensemaking process shifted from simple to complex concepts, and guided learning helped them understand complex social issues related to public health in the U.S. They did not consider learning related to public health knowledge, English language, or life skills as cultural learning.

Keywords: Chinese students, cultural learning, intercultural competencies, public health, study abroad, undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad has become increasingly popular in nursing and health education in the past couple decades (Kulbok et al., 2012). Many studies claim that there are several benefits to participation in study abroad programs, especially for students in healthcare. These benefits include professional and personal development, cross-cultural understanding, and increased global awareness and cultural sensitivity to diverse populations (Fenech et al., 2013; Guan & So, 2016; Kako & Klingbeil, 2019; Moorhead et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2018; Philips et al., 2017; Witkowsky & Mendez, 2018). Although there is widespread agreement that healthcare professionals need to be culturally competent, Hamilton (2009) argued it is less clear how to teach and measure cultural competence. There is no dearth of knowledge about cultural learning experiences of students during study abroad programs (Edmonds, 2012; Kokko, 2011; Kulbok et al., 2012). However, most of these studies about public health and nursing study abroad programs focus on Western students and studies have consistently presented Western perspectives about cultural learning and global awareness (Engle & Engle, 2004; Kokko, 2011; Paige et al., 2004). In recent years, short-term education abroad programs in the U.S. and other Western countries have become increasingly popular for Chinese students in the fields of public health, nursing, and medicine in part due to recent Chinese policies intended to strengthen their international education components (Yue & Wu, 2013; Zheng et al., 2016).

From our literature review, we learned the term cultural learning is used frequently as an outcome of study abroad programs. However, there is no clarity about what cultural learning means and how it is measured. We argue there is a need to unpack this term to better understand the impact of study abroad programs on diverse student populations. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to address this research gap and to further enhance our understanding of cross-cultural learning experiences from non-Western perspectives. We use Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework to understand how Chinese undergraduate students made sense of their learning experiences during a short-term public health study abroad program in the United States (U.S.). Our analysis focused on cross-cultural learning experiences and the notion of cultural learning. For this study, we define "cultural learning" as learning about a different culture or cultures. First, we analyze literature to understand how cultural learning is researched and presented in the study abroad context. Second, we analyze the theoretical conceptualization of the sensemaking process and cultural learning in a study abroad program. Third, we describe our study methods, findings, and limitations. Finally, we discuss implications for research and practice. We hope the findings from this study will help administrators and faculty create effective study abroad programs, especially for students from public health fields.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Study Abroad Programs in Public Health and Nursing

There are several programs where students from Western countries in nursing, public health, and other medical fields travel to different countries to gain more a holistic understanding and well-rounded knowledge about medical practices (Kulbok et al., 2012). According to Maltby et al. (2016), an abundance of research and case study literature is available on the impact of study abroad on these students' personal and professional lives. Historically, there has been focus on cultural competence as an important skill for nursing and other health professionals. Bentley and Ellison (2007), for instance, argued that culturally sensitive care is important to prepare nurses to deal with growing disparities in the medical field. Bentley and Ellison (2007) mentioned that Leininger introduced the concept of cultural competence in 1970 for nursing students. Later, from the 1980s to the 1990s, there was an extensive focus on developing culturally competent healthcare professionals, and many models and frameworks were developed. In 2000-2014, ample literature was produced about study abroad experiences of health professionals, nurses, pharmacists, and medical doctors (Edmonds, 2012; Gilboy & Bill, 2011; Kokko, 2011; Kulbok et al., 2012; Larson & Allen, 2006; Maas & Ezeobebe, 2014; McComb et al., 2019; Scott et al. 2019).

In our literature review of studies from 2000-2020, we noticed the following trends were prevalent. Most studies' participants were from Global North, usually from the U.S., Australia, Canada, Europe, and Scandinavian countries. Most of the case studies mentioned one destination country; however, a few studies explored students' experiences in multiple countries (Ailinger et al., 2000; Anders, 2001; Carpenter &

Garcia, 2012; Charles et al., 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Gilboy & Bill, 2011; Hagen et al., 2009; Hu et al., 2010; Larson & Allen, 2006; Maltby & Abrams, 2009; Sandin et al., 2004). Edmonds (2012) reviewed the historical development of study abroad programs for nursing and summarized the existing literature, including anecdotal reports and research inquiries. Edmonds (2012), in their literature review, mentioned that diversity in study abroad programs is scarce. In the case of nursing programs, most existing studies are focused on a homogenous sample of single, white females, usually in the final year of their program. Also, these studies do not report an ethnic composition of their samples. Edmonds (2012) argued that research should consider the demographics of the study participants to gain an accurate and representative idea of students' perceptions, insights, benefits, and impediments associated with study abroad programs.

Outcomes of Study Abroad Programs

Another important aspect of study abroad research is its focus on outcomes. Most studies focused on the positive outcomes of study abroad programs. Almost all studies reviewed for this paper mentioned cultural competence as a primary outcome of these experiences (Dixon, 2013; Koskinen & Tossavainen, 2003; McComb et al., 2019; Rew et al., 2003; Sandin et al., 2004). Cultural Competence is used both as a framework and as an outcome in many studies (Carpenter & Garcia, 2012; Gilboy & Bill, 2011; Kako et al., 2019; Ruddock & Turner, 2007). As mentioned above, cultural competence has been considered important for preparing healthcare professionals to serve diverse populations since the 1970s (Bentley & Ellison, 2007). Hamilton (2009) defined intercultural competency as "the ability to operate effectively in diverse (and sometimes unfamiliar) cultural contexts interacting appropriately, comfortably, and in ways compatible with other's expectations, values and communication styles" (p. 862). Other outcomes mentioned in these studies include self-efficiency, the development of global perspectives, and enhanced cultural sensitivity (Carpenter & Garcia, 2012; Charles et al., 2014; Kako et al., 2019). Kostovich and Bermele (2011) mentioned that study abroad is positively related to integrative learning, reflective learning, and personal-social development for nursing and public health students. We came across only one study by Foronda & Belknap (2012) which challenged the transformative nature and all positive outcomes approach in study abroad programs related to public health and nursing. In our literature review process, we could not find any study which mentioned any negative outcomes of a study abroad program.

In terms of duration, study abroad programs for healthcare professionals are often short term, ranging from one week to three weeks' time. We argue that the development of cultural understanding, awareness, and sensitivity in such a short time is probably an inflated claim which needs careful consideration and evaluation. Maltby et al. (2016) shared similar apprehensions regarding the outcomes of study abroad programs and argued that a study abroad trip does not necessarily make nursing students culturally competent but may have the potential to raise students' consciousness so that they realize that there are multiple ways to provide care and support diverse patients.

Sensemaking Process in Study Abroad Programs

Since this study is specifically focused on learning and the sensemaking process, we noticed only a few studies which explained participants' learning processes and how students were able to develop cultural awareness after participating in short term study abroad programs (Charles et al., 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Maas & Ezeobele, 2014; Ruddock & Turner, 2007). For example, Charles et al. (2014) mention that Australian students' sensemaking process was centered in their "self" since they focused their attention on their comfort and drastic changes in environment which they found frustrating. These students focused on the differences between the Indian and Australian healthcare systems. The students' comments reflect that they focused on the negative aspects of Indian healthcare system and considered Australian healthcare practices better and superior. As stated by Charles et al. (2014), "coming from the Australian perspective, students thought of their way as the 'right' way to do things" (p. 70). Foronda and Belknap (2012) also mentioned constant comparison as a part of the sensemaking process for American nursing students who participated in a study abroad program in Ecuador. Most of the comments by the participants in this study reflect participants' egocentric worldviews. Their comments and observations were about different belief systems, healthcare practices, privacy differences, resources, and living conditions in

general. Foronda and Belknap (2012) mentioned shock and surprise as dominant emotions reflected in narratives. Students expressed fear related to their safety and emphasized their fear of insects and other animals in the rain forest, as well as anxiety while touring local hospitals due to language barriers. They were also frustrated during their stay, and the reasons for their frustration included language difficulties, frustration with the inappropriate behaviors of peers, and traveling at length with peers (p. 7-8). An additional study about the experiences of Swedish students in Tanzania noted that comparison with the host culture was an important aspect of cultural learning, and students shared emotions such as anxiety, fear, stress, and feeling of being overwhelmed in the learning process (Sandin et al., 2004).

Ruddock and Turner (2007) studied the experiences of different groups of Danish undergraduate nursing students who participated in study abroad programs in Jamaica, Malta, Greenland, or Australia, finding that students experienced the transition as a bit of a shock while “adjusting to cultural differences and developing cultural sensitivity” (p. 364). These students also used comparison for making sense of their experiences. However, the students’ approach to comparison was more focused on learning about their own cultural values while interacting with other cultures. Ruddock and Turner (2007) argued that “attitudes such as openness, respect and flexibility, enabled participants to appreciate and accept cultural differences” (p. 366). This attitude also helped them adapt to the new culture, develop cultural sensitivity, and experience personal growth.

Maas and Ezeobele’s (2014) study observed that Dutch students compared different aspects of the U.S. medical system, as well as the behaviors and attitudes of nurses. Dutch nurses spoke highly of American peers. They mentioned that the nursing education in the U.S. is a bit better and contended that the main difference is that American nurses are more passionate and prouder of their profession, a distinction which Dutch nurses found inspiring. They also admired the diversity of the nursing roles in the U.S. healthcare system, which helped them to see their role with more creativity and possibility. They had a positive learning attitude and considered American nurses as their role models. Although they focused on positive aspects of their learning experience, they noticed issues of access related to healthcare in the U.S. They wanted to bring back their newly learned knowledge to the Netherlands.

Overall, existing literature indicates that students’ sensemaking process was emotional, they used comparison as a tool, and their positive attitude towards learning about a different culture helped them develop cultural competence or cultural sensitivity, as claimed in the above-mentioned studies. However, these studies did not specifically focus on the learning process. To better understand the cultural learning process and how students develop cultural competence, we also analyzed which theoretical frameworks were used in these studies. Most of the studies did not use any theoretical framework. However, a few studies used Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory and Campinha-Bacote’s (1999) cultural competence model. Foronda et al. (2016) argued that researchers should use cultural humility as a concept to develop cultural sensitivity in study abroad programs. They mentioned attributes such as openness, self-awareness, setting aside one’s ego, supportive interactions, and self-reflection and critique as parts of cultural humility. With the exception of transformative learning theory, it is evident that most of these frameworks are focused on measuring outcomes, rather than in understanding the learning process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper, our focus is on the notion of “cultural learning” that is, how Chinese undergraduate students made sense of frequently used terms such as “culture” and “cultural learning” during their study abroad program in the U.S. As mentioned above, for this paper we define the term “cultural learning” as learning about a different culture or cultures. Since we are interested in understanding the process of sensemaking, the sensemaking framework, particularly Weick’s (1995) idea of sensemaking, seems helpful because it provides characteristics of the sensemaking process. Weick defines sensemaking simply as “the making of sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 4). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is a cognitive activity of framing experiences as meaningful. Sensemaking is giving meaning to actions, behaviors, and situations in a new environment through retrospective interpretations. Weick et al. (2005) argue that sensemaking is the activity that enables us to turn the ongoing complexity of the world into a “situation that is comprehended

explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (p. 409). Weick (1995) identifies the following seven properties of sensemaking:

1. identity and identification,
2. retrospection,
3. people enact environments they face in dialogues and narratives,
4. sensemaking is a social activity,
5. sensemaking is ongoing,
6. people extract cues from the context to help them decide on what information is relevant and what explanations are acceptable,
7. people favor plausibility over accuracy in accounts of events and contexts.

Sensemaking helps to control the environment and use it for one’s benefit.

We used this sensemaking framework as our lens to understand the sensemaking process of our participants in a cross-cultural context.

RESEARCH METHOD

We used qualitative (Glesne, 2016) and interpretive (Creswell, 2012) research methodology because we sought to make sense of actions, narratives, and the way people interact with each other. Merriam (2009) argued that qualitative research helps researchers to understand “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their world, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). As stated by Merriam (2009), “the overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 23).

Context

This paper explores the study abroad experiences of 15 Chinese undergraduate students from China Eastern Medical University (pseudonym) participating in an eight-week study abroad public health program in the U.S. in the summer of 2019.

Program Background and Description

In 2016, American Midwestern University (AMU) (pseudonym) reached an agreement with China Eastern Medical University (CEMU) for academic collaborations. One of the activities was that AMU would host short-term summer programs for undergraduate students in public health. In summer 2019, the second cohort of 15 CEMU students in public health arrived at AMU for an eight-week program. This study abroad program was based on the experiences of a similar program in 2018 with the first CEMU cohort. The objectives of this program were:

1. To help students improve their English language skills, especially speaking and writing.
2. To expand their knowledge in health science and healthcare through professional lectures, learning about American public health practices, exchanging ideas with public health professionals, and learning public health practices in the local community.
3. To gain professional experience in public health at the county level government.
4. To communicate and interact with American people in the local community.

The curriculum was based on the experiences in the previous year and included the following four components: (1) English and American culture, (2) health science and healthcare knowledge, (3) shadowing at the Lake County Public Health Department (pseudonym), and (4) interactive activities with the local communities. The program was divided into two halves. The first four weeks of the program consisted of classes and lectures focusing on learning English language, American culture, and the U.S. public health system. The students spent the remaining four weeks shadowing professionals in the Lake County Health Department (pseudonym) and visited various local public health and healthcare-related organizations.

Participants

For this study, we used purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) because we wanted to understand experiences of Chinese undergraduate students in depth. According to Patton (2002) and Creswell & Plano

Clark (2011), purposeful sampling involves the selection of individuals or groups for study who are knowledgeable or have experience with the phenomenon. Since we were interested in the study abroad experiences of public health students from non-Western perspectives, we decided to invite fifteen undergraduate Chinese students from China Eastern Medical University (CEMU) (pseudonym). These students participated in this program in the summer of 2019. The students' ages ranged between 18-22 years old. There were three students who identified as male and twelve students who identified as female. One student was in her first year of study and the rest of the students were either in their second or third years. The students came from three majors: public health administration, food hygiene and nutrition, and preventive medicine. See Table 1 for detailed information about the participants.

Table 1: Information about Participants

Name (pseudonyms)	Gender	Major	Year	Age (at the time of visit in 2019)
Yu	Female	Food Hygiene & Nutrition	3rd	21
Yilan	Female	Food Hygiene & Nutrition	3rd	21
Feiya	Female	Food Hygiene & Nutrition	3rd	20
Baisu	Male	Public Administration	3rd	21
Tingting	Female	Public Administration	3rd	21
Hong	Female	Public Administration	3rd	22
Fang	Female	Food Hygiene & Nutrition	3rd	22
Tian	Male	Public Administration	2nd	21
Sunny	Female	Public Administration	2nd	20
Bolun	Female	Public Administration	2nd	21
Zhanyue	Female	Public Administration	2nd	20
Binbin	Male	Preventive Medicine	2nd	20
Yuewei	Female	Preventive Medicine	2nd	19
Qifei	Female	Preventive Medicine	2nd	19
Fanghua	Female	Food Hygiene & Nutrition	1st	19

Data Collection

The researchers obtained IRB approval for data collection. We used several data collection methods, including surveys, reflection papers, interviews, and one focus group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All the data were collected in the U.S. from the start to the end of the program over the eight-week period of the program.

Survey

To learn about each student's learning experiences, we conducted two surveys, one before and one after the program. The pre-program survey asked for students' real names and the post-program survey was anonymous to encourage honest comments and criticism from the participants. Both surveys were conducted in the Chinese language and one of the researchers translated the responses into English. No monetary incentives were provided to the participants to fill out the surveys.

Focus group

One focus group was used as a method of data collection. According to Merriam (2009), the focus group is a helpful data collection technique to understand the social construction of meaning. For our study it was important to understand the group's meaning making process since students participated in this program as a cohort. The focus group was conducted at the end of the program. Six students participated in the focus group, and the meeting lasted sixty minutes. The students participated in the focus group voluntarily.

Interviews

The researchers conducted interviews with four students who did not participate in the focus group. These semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasted from 45-60 minutes. As Merriam (2009) contended, interviewing is the best data collection technique to learn what is on participants' minds. The questions were particularly focused on interactions and Chinese students' learning from healthcare professionals in the U.S., medical health practices in the U.S., and cultural differences between China and the U.S. public health practices. The students were interviewed in the Chinese language.

The interviewer and organizer of the focus group was Chinese and spoke fluent Chinese which helped eliminate linguistic barriers in communication. Also, the interviewer was the program manager and worked as a mentor for students throughout the program. The Chinese students had developed a trusting relationship with the interviewer. The interviewer also had a chance to spend long hours with these students from the start to the end of the program and to observe them firsthand and listen to their conversations, impressions, and feelings in both formal and informal situations.

Reflection papers

We used reflection papers as another strategy for data collection. Reflection is important for making meaning of new experiences (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). These reflection papers were focused on Chinese students' experiences with the American health system. The students were asked to write a final reflection paper at the end of the program. They were encouraged to focus on their professional shadowing experiences in the Lake County Health Department in their reflection papers. The reflection papers were written in English, and the average length of the papers was five pages. Students' reflection papers were collected at the end of the program. Writing their reflection papers in English was an intentional pedagogical strategy to foster fluency in English.

The use of more than one strategy for the data collection process not only allowed us to reduce bias and misinformation, but also allowed space and opportunity for different types of participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). For instance, some of our participants were very articulate and enjoyed talking and sharing their thoughts verbally. However, some of our participants preferred writing as a mode of communication. We were able to focus on individual and group aspects of thinking and sensemaking processes through our diverse data collection techniques.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam (2009) and Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative data analysis is an interactive process and starts from the very first interview or observation. The data analysis process included the researchers' monthly meetings which continued over a year. In each meeting, we discussed data collected and our initial impressions to develop our interpretations. We took notes and later used our interpretations to explain emerging themes from the data. Overall, the data analysis process was reflexive and thoughtful, and it continued for over a year.

All the data were subjected to categorical content analysis, through which we identified key themes that helped illuminate the nature of the experience for the participants. We organized all the data in a systematic and organized manner in Excel sheets, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018). We chose thematic analysis as our analysis technique because it is helpful "to identify patterns within and across data in relationship to participants' lived experiences, views and perspectives, behaviors and practices" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 297). After identifying themes, we organized data under specific themes to have a better understanding of each theme in relation to the overall phenomenon.

Merriam (2009) and Creswell and Creswell (2018) have suggested several strategies to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research, such as triangulation, members' check, researchers' position reflexivity, staying on site over a period of time, asking peers to comment on emerging findings, and thick data description. We used several of these strategies. We used researcher and data source triangulation in the data collection process by diversifying the modes of data collection through surveys, a focus group, interviews, and reflection papers and through interpretation by a diverse team of researchers.

RESULTS

Our study sought to investigate two research questions: What does cultural learning mean from Chinese undergraduate students' perspectives? And what are Chinese undergraduate students' sensemaking process of cultural learning? We used Weick (1995)'s sensemaking theory to analyze data. In this section, we will present our findings based on our research questions.

Chinese Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Cultural Learning

Learning about a foreign culture was an important goal for most of the participants during their study abroad program. Of the participants, 10 of 15 mentioned they wanted to learn about American culture and values and "experience American culture" or "experience [a] different culture." For example, Yilan shared in her interview, "I want to understand the American culture and experience how the Americans live and... learn." Similarly, Feiya mentioned in the entry survey, "The main goal is to experience different cultures and learn local English." Tian shared during his interview, "I still want to learn about the culture of the U.S. and China. I think it is more of a different concept. I want to understand the difference in thoughts between China and the United States." Chinese undergraduate students in public health mentioned the following aspects of as part of their cultural learning.

Everyday Habits, Attitudes, and Lifestyle

When Chinese undergraduate students discussed what they learned about "American culture," they mentioned everyday habits, attitudes, and lifestyles of "American people". For example, Sunny noticed that Americans enjoy drinking iced water, while Chinese people usually drink hot water. Yilan compared lifestyles of the elder people in East Town (Pseudonym) and her community in a small city of China. She observed that Americans live a more active life and have an independent lifestyle, compared to their counterparts in her hometown. American elders participate in various classes in the community center and enjoy themselves, as compared to Chinese elders who usually center their life around their families. They also focused on American's attitudes in both social and professional contexts to make sense of the new environment. They mentioned "friendliness," "freedom and responsibility," "discipline and concept of time," and "individuality and respect for others' opinions" when they talked about what they learned about American culture.

Overall, culture was perceived as a set of habits and attitudes in social settings in day-to-day life. However, insights about the health practices, behaviors, and attitudes of health professionals were understood as part of professional development and learning about their field of study, rather than as cultural understanding. Similarly, learning the English language was perceived as a separate goal from cultural learning.

Chinese Undergraduate Students' Sensemaking Process of Cultural Learning

We used Weick (1995)'s sensemaking framework to understand Chinese undergraduate students' sensemaking process. After data analysis, the following themes emerged in terms of Chinese undergraduate students' sensemaking process.

Sensemaking as an Ongoing and Gradual Process

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is an ongoing process. In our study, we found that the Chinese undergraduate students' sensemaking process was ongoing and gradual. Their understanding of the new culture shifted from simple everyday life behaviors to complex concepts related to social and public health issues. The Chinese students moved from a simple understanding of American people's behaviors and daily life practices to a more complex and nuanced understanding of social and cultural norms and issues. This progression is evident from their early observations of the everyday lifestyles and habits of Americans and later from their discussion of social justice issues related to public health. Freedom and the concept of responsibility were the second and third most discussed topics by the Chinese undergraduate students. They learned "freedom or independence is very important in American's hearts," but they also reflected more about what freedom really meant and how freedom and social responsibility are interconnected. Baisu

discussed, “To me, the most outstanding cultural shock is the atmosphere of freedom. Everyone can hold his own values and does not need to worry about people's judgement. So, everyone shows respect to others. However, I also realize the balance between freedom and responsibility.” This shows the increasing complexity of thinking and understanding of American cultural values among Chinese undergraduate students.

Towards the end of the program, the students started discussing issues related to social justice and equity in the field of public health. Often, they provided a robust commentary on social justice and equity issues in the U.S. In the following example from Sunny, it is evident that their understanding of public health issues had gradually increased and they were increasingly aware of social justice issues and developed a more complex understanding:

In America, people who live in low-income communities or communities of color suffer from poor housing stock, poor nutrition, lack of access to healthcare, and lots of other hazards. The Flint water crisis is a typical example to interpret this idea. It is the government's fault that leads to people drinking water with excessive lead undergoing damages which may last for a considerably long time, thus making people living in an environment full of instability and risks. So, for the purpose of achieving equity, the treatment for those communities where vulnerable people live, should be paid more attention and given timely aids.

Overall, Chinese undergraduate students' sensemaking process was social and gradual. They moved from a simple to a complex understanding of social issues and cultural nuances with the aid of provided learning opportunities and support during the program.

Sensemaking as a Social and Comparative Activity

Weick (1995) mentioned that people extract cues from context to help them decide which information is relevant and which explanations are acceptable. The Chinese students derived clues from context, their decisions on which information was relevant and which explanations were acceptable were based on their past experiences in China. The participants in the study used a comparative lens to make sense and express their understanding of American culture. They noticed the friendly behavior of Americans and discussed it from a comparative perspective. For example, participants noted that “residents here are more friendly,” “people seem to be more friendly than I thought before,” “they are kinder and friendlier,” and “Americans are more polite.” Fanghua mentioned, “The difference from previous imagination, the Americans are more friendly than I thought before and they respect cultural differences very much.” It seems that Chinese undergraduate students had a certain image of Americans and American culture before coming to the U.S., and that image changed in a positive direction based on their everyday interactions and observations of Americans' attitudes and behaviors during the program.

Although a few students admitted they did not know much about American culture at the beginning of the program, many compared American and Chinese cultures and pointed out differences in Chinese and American education, healthcare, and daily life. It is important to mention that Weick (1995)'s sensemaking theory considers the sensemaking process but does not mention comparison as a tool to make sense of social interactions. This finding extends our understanding of the sensemaking process in cross-cultural learning experiences.

Enactment of Environments in Dialogues and Narratives

According to Weick (1995) people enact environments they face in dialogues and narrative to make sense of events in their lives. We noticed that Chinese undergraduate students also used storytelling and narratives as sensemaking tools. In their interviews and reflection papers, they often shared stories to make sense of their learning experiences in the U.S. As mentioned above, Chinese undergraduate students compared the Chinese and American public health systems and often mentioned issues which needed improvement in China. They discussed American health professionals' behaviors towards patients, attitudes towards maternity, and cooperation among doctors and nurses. While comparing the U.S. and China, they often reflected on their lives in China and used stories from their past experiences to make sense of their new experiences. Several participants used narratives, especially in reflection papers and in individual

interviews, to make sense of their learning experiences in the U.S. For example, Yilan shared a story of her personal experience in China in hospice care to make sense of the Chinese and American hospice care systems. She mentioned how American nurses treated patients in hospice care as “their family” and “even to the elderly they respect their ideas,” which is different from China:

For example, in hospice care, they (American nurses) treat dying people patiently as they treat their family members. Even to the elderly, they respect their ideas. When I was a freshman, I had an internship in Jiangsu for a month in a nursing home. I felt that for those living in nursing homes, some of them were sick and some were not sick. But the staff only follow routines every day. They took the residents in front of a TV to do some simple stretch exercise in the morning. After the morning exercise is finished, they will take them back to their room. At noon, they take them out again, just like treating a child in kindergarten. If the elder has his own ideas, such as wanting to go out, he must be accompanied. The nursing staff feels very troublesome and very impatient. The caregiver will recommend the elder not go. Yes, the caregiver will not restrict the elder very strictly, but he is very impatient. Moreover, these people who are service providers themselves feel that they have no status, their wages are low, they work hard and are tired, their families do not understand them, and the society does not understand them. So, the caregiver himself goes to work with that emotion every day, which is quite serious in China.

Plausibility over Accuracy in Accounts of Events and Contexts

According to Weick (1995), people use plausibility over accuracy in accounts of events and contexts. This was also true in the case of Chinese undergraduate students since most of them mentioned only positive behaviors of American people and society and highlighted issues which need improvement in China. For the most part, they focused on the positive aspects of American society and the health system. Chinese undergraduate students regarded Americans as “better” or “more likely” to express their opinions openly. They mentioned how much they appreciated “American people’s concept of time.” Tingting mentioned, “There are some real changes from my previous understanding of cultural differences between China and America. For example, Americans are more likely to make schedules for their appointments, so that it is clear to know what needs to be done next” (Tingting).

Identity and Retrospection

As noted above, Weick (1995) claimed that “identity and identification” is one of the seven characteristics of sensemaking. Identity did not appear as a strong theme in the sensemaking process for these Chinese undergraduate students. They did not directly assert their Chinese identity in their conversations, nor did they evince a strong professional identity during their study abroad experience. Time seemed to be another important factor in the process of developing a deeper understanding of a new culture. The nature of time in the sensemaking process for Chinese undergraduate students was retrospective to some extent. They were simultaneously contemplating their past experiences in China, their present lives in the U.S., and thinking about their future to make sense of their experiences. Chinese students reflected on their current experiences during the program and compared them with their past lives in China. Program activities - such as reflection papers, interviews, and focus groups - provided students with a chance to reflect and make sense of their experiences. Overall, their sensemaking process had comparative and retrospective elements, a finding which is in agreement with Weick’s sensemaking theory.

Weick (1995) claimed that people use new learning from sensemaking for “their benefits,” especially after returning to their home country. The students felt that they expanded their perspectives and developed a complex understanding of social and cultural concepts in different cultural contexts. Their study abroad experience helped them to reflect on their past experiences and understand their home country context from a new comparative lens. However, it is important to mention that Chinese undergraduate students’ perceptions were based on limited exposure to American culture and the U.S. public health system during their short-term study abroad program.

DISCUSSION

Overall, based on our findings, we found that Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework explains some aspects of Chinese undergraduate students' sensemaking process. However, it has limitations to fully explain the sensemaking process in a cross-cultural setting. Chinese undergraduate students in public health focused on Americans' social and professional behaviors and attitudes to better understand American culture and the public health system. Although their sensemaking process was social and ongoing, as suggested by Weick (1995), they used comparison as a tool to make sense of their experiences. They used narratives to enact their environments, but these narratives were comparative. Their sensemaking process shifted from simple to complex concepts, and guided sensemaking helped them make sense of complex social and public health related issues in the U.S. and China.

Chinese undergraduate students used a comparative lens to learn and understand the culture of the host country. Their comparative approach also helped them to reflect on their past experiences and understand their home country context from a new perspective. This comparative approach is different than Weick (1995)'s suggested sensemaking framework. However, several studies of public health and nursing study abroad programs mention how participants used a comparative approach for making sense of new cultures (Anders, 2001; Charles et al., 2014; Maas & Ezeobebe, 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Ruddock & Turner, 2007; Sandin et al., 2004). Participants' approaches to comparison varied across these studies. Participants from Ruddock and Turner (2007), Maas and Ezeobebe (2014) and Anders (2001) approached comparison from a learning perspective with an attitude of openness towards different cultures. In these cases, students who travelled to the U.S. considered the American health system better than their systems and appreciated the positive attitude of American nurses and health professionals. However, Charles et al. (2014), Foronda and Belknap (2012), and Sandin et al. (2004) illustrated how students used an ethnocentric approach to compare their home and host countries. Participants from these studies focused on their selves and their comfort. They discussed how drastic changes in their environments were frustrating for them, and most of the comments from these studies reflected participants' egocentric worldviews.

We argue that sensemaking is a subjective and relative process, an analysis which is in agreement with many studies which show that people approach comparisons differently. We agree with Maltby et al. (2016) that merely going on a study abroad trip does not necessarily make students culturally competent, but the experience may have the potential to raise students' consciousness. Students on a public health study abroad trip may realize that there are multiple ways to approach healthcare. We argue that it is important to understand learning about different cultures as an ongoing and gradual process, rather than as a set of competencies to be acquired.

Foronda and Belknap (2012) mentioned barriers to learning about different cultures, such as "egocentrism, emotional disconnect, perceived powerlessness/being overwhelmed, and vacation mindset" (p. 10). However, Turner (2007) and Foronda et al. (2016) mentioned an attitude of openness, respect, flexibility, self-awareness, and egoless behavior as important in developing cultural sensitivity. Foronda et al. (2016) argued that supportive interactions, self-reflection, and self-critique are necessary for moving away from an egocentric worldview to a more inclusive approach to other cultures.

Although Weick (1995)'s theory of sensemaking does not mention the role of guided learning in the sensemaking process, our findings and synthesis of several studies indicates that guided learning is crucial to provide students support to make meaning of their experiences. We define guided learning as planned and organized learning activities which include, but are not limited to, the incorporation of language and cultural instruction, lectures and information sessions about public health, and daily debriefing sessions. Chinese undergraduate students mentioned that different learning activities - such as lectures, shadowing, English learning, reflection papers, and debriefing sessions - helped them in their sensemaking process. During the program, the Chinese undergraduate students had a chance to attend lectures and have shadowing experiences with different departments related to public health. These lectures and guided training experiences helped them to understand the American public health system. Lectures provided Chinese undergraduate students with an opportunity to learn about the American health system and expand their understanding of complex concepts, such as environmental justice and equity. Furthermore, reflection papers provided students with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and connect their new learning with their lives in China. These reflection papers are evidence of a deeper

analysis of notions of cultural learning. As mentioned above, reflection papers were specifically focused on Chinese students' experiences about the American health system.

Some studies highlight language and emotions as important aspects of the sensemaking process in cross cultural contexts (Anders, 2001; Bano, 2020; Charles et al., 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Sadin et al. 2004). However, Weick (1995) did not mention language and emotions in his sensemaking theory. In the case of Chinese undergraduate students, we noticed emotions of fear and anxiety related to language issues and their ability to communicate with their American peers and colleagues. Since the program had a structured and formal English language learning curriculum, students were encouraged to communicate with their peers and engage with the local community. The students were also provided with formal language learning opportunities through regular English language classes. The faculty from the China Eastern Medical University also held frequent debriefing sessions to help students synthesize their learning. The program organizer was a native Chinese speaker and spent a great deal of time with students answering their questions during their visits and in social time. These interactions helped students better understand some aspects of American social and professional culture and the public health system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that guided learning is crucial to the success of our short-term public health study abroad program. As mentioned above, guided learning includes, but is not limited to, the incorporation of language and cultural instruction, lectures and information sessions about public health, and daily debriefing sessions. The lectures and information sessions can provide background knowledge about the issues and problems local communities face. This knowledge can support students' learning and sensemaking processes. Where the language of two countries is different, we suggest providing linguistic and emotional support strategies. Examples of these include English language practice opportunities, group reflections, and mentoring. Daily debriefing sessions can provide students space to exchange ideas, experiences, and ask questions about the host country and local contexts. Program leaders can answer students' questions and can address students' concerns during these debriefing sessions. It is also helpful if program staff from the host and visiting countries are knowledgeable about both cultures and have previous experience in cross-cultural educational programs. For example, the leading faculty from the CEMU had been a visiting scholar at the Harvard University for one year prior to leading this program. The AMU program manager was a native Chinese person, with work experience at a college level in China, and one of the program assistants was an AMU graduate student from China. This helped students have a sense of community and a safe space to ask questions both in English or Chinese from program leaders and staff.

Overall, it is important to provide support and guidance to help students learn about different cultures through conscious program planning with community engaged activities and ample opportunities for self-reflection, and by conducting regular debriefing sessions for making sense of new cultural learning.

LIMITATIONS

We tried to address issues related to reliability and validity of the study by applying data source triangulation, researcher triangulation, and methods triangulation. However, it is important to mention that our study has some limitations. First, the study included participants from only one program from a research university so the findings may not represent a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon at different types of institutions. Second, we understand that the limited English language proficiency of most participants might have affected participants' responses, which in turn might have impacted the findings of the study. Third, the study relied on self-reported data in interviews, the focus group, surveys, and reflection paper, each of which might have issues of selective memory and exaggeration. Lastly, not all participants were interviewed due to lack of time. We believe if all participants could have been interviewed, we could have additional rich data.

CONCLUSION

Chinese undergraduate students paid great attention to cultural differences between China and the U.S. during their study abroad program and focused on social behaviors and attitudes to learn about

American culture and the public health system. They used comparison as a tool to make sense of new experiences, and guided learning helped them understand complex social issues related to public health in the U.S. We recommend that future study abroad programs for professional development should consider giving more weight to cultural components in program planning and curriculum design. Also, future research should further explore the concepts of culture, cultural learning, and professional learning, as well as how they impact students during and after their programs and in their future career development. Perhaps it would be plausible to conduct a longitudinal study and follow up to see how the program participants' cultural and professional learning impact their life within five years of their experiences and how the experiences affect their personal and professional life after they return to their home countries.

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SARA BANO is an assistant professor in the School of Education at North Dakota State University. Dr. Bano completed her Ph.D. in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education program at the College of Education, Michigan State University. She is interested in issues related to comparative and international higher education. In her research, she focuses on international students, scholars, and faculty and studies their international experiences from socio-economic and geo-political perspectives. She is also interested in adult education in a global context and wants to develop a better understanding of teaching and learning in cross-cultural contexts. Dr. Bano serves as a Chair-Elect of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Teaching International and Comparative Education (TICE) Special Interest Group (SIG). Email: Sara.bano@ndsu.edu

QING XIA is an academic specialist at the Institute for Global Health at Michigan State University. She is also a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education program at the College of Education, Michigan State University. She is interested in issues related to Public Health and international higher education and how both fields intersect, and impact China and the USA health fields. Email: xiaqing@msu.edu

JOHN M. DIRKX is a professor and Mildred B. Erickson Distinguished Chair (Emeritus) in Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University. Dr. Dirkx joined Michigan State University in 1996. His current research interests focus primarily on teaching and learning in higher and adult education contexts, with an emphasis on international education. Email: dirkx@msu.edu