

Canadian University Student Experiences Participating in a Health Promotion Without Borders

Excursion to Mongolia

by

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## **Abstract**

Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) has facilitated International Service Learning (ISL) excursions for Canadian students at Laurentian University (LU) since 2001. During this time, over 80 students have received academic credit for their immersive work promoting health in developing countries. Despite the number of students that participated in the HPWB Program over the years, no research has explored the experiences of these students during their ISL excursions. Furthermore, there was a gap in the ISL literature related to the experiences of participants during their immersive international excursions. Therefore, I participated in a HPWB excursion to Mongolia and analyzed my own experience using an autoethnographic method, and I then thematically analyzed the journals of three of my fellow HPWB group members using a case study method. Overall, although both my group members and I found the excursion to be positive, we experienced a process of navigating different instances of cultural dissonance that emerged during our immersive excursion. I wrote six narratives that explored some of the cultural dissonances that I experienced while in Mongolia. Four themes were also identified within the participants' journals related to their experiences of cultural dissonance. The results of this research may benefit the HPWB Program Coordinator, other similar ISL programs, and future students, as they plan their excursions through enhanced training, preparation, and field techniques related to cultural dissonance.

**Key Words:** International Service Learning, Health Promotion, Autoethnography, Cultural Dissonance, Experiential Learning

## **Co-Authorship Statement**

This thesis contains three manuscripts (Chapters 2-4) that were prepared for submission to the *Journal of Experiential Education*.

### **Manuscript One**

Manuscript One was conceptualized by Shelby Deibert, who also wrote the first draft. Dr. Stephen Ritchie, Dr. Bruce Oddson, Professor Ginette Michel, and Ms. Emily Tetzlaff reviewed Manuscript One and provided feedback.

### **Manuscript Two**

Manuscript Two was conceptualized by Shelby Deibert, Dr. Stephen Ritchie, Dr. Bruce Oddson, and Professor Ginette Michel. Shelby Deibert wrote the first draft of Manuscript Two. Dr. Stephen Ritchie, Dr. Bruce Oddson, Professor Ginette Michel, and Ms. Emily Tetzlaff reviewed Manuscript Two and provided feedback.

### **Manuscript Three**

Manuscript Three was conceptualized by Shelby Deibert, Dr. Stephen Ritchie, Dr. Bruce Oddson, Professor Ginette Michel, and Ms. Emily Tetzlaff. Shelby Deibert wrote the first draft of Manuscript Three. Dr. Stephen Ritchie, Dr. Bruce Oddson, Professor Ginette Michel, and Ms. Emily Tetzlaff reviewed Manuscript Three and provided feedback.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **Introduction**

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide important background information relevant to the three manuscripts that follow in Chapters 2-4. The relevant literature and information is related to International Service Learning (ISL), the Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) Program, and autoethnography. This first chapter concludes with a thesis outline, summary of findings, and an integration between the three manuscripts (Chapters 2-4).

## **1.1 INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING**

Many post-secondary students are seeking out *International Service Learning (ISL)* opportunities to enrich their education with immersive experiences in a global context (see Fechter, 2014, p. 1; Pagano & Roselle, 2009, p. 228). Crabtree (2008) defines ISL as integrating classroom-based knowledge, community service, and international travel, with the aims of “increasing participants’ global awareness, building intercultural understanding, and enhancing civic mindedness and skills” (p. 18). Additionally, ISL experiences incorporate self-reflection to enhance student learning, which makes it unique from other travel-abroad programs (see Seifer, 1998, p. 274).

### **1.1.1 Pedagogical Roots of ISL**

Many Service Learning (SL) and ISL related publications identify these types of excursions as forms of experiential learning (see Crabtree, 2008; Fechter, 2014, p. 4; Hayward & Charrette, 2012, p. 79; Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Seifer, 1998, p. 274 for examples). *Experiential learning (EL)* can be viewed as a cyclical process of constructing knowledge while moving through the following stages: having a concrete experience, reflecting on the experience, conceptualizing the experience, and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2012, p. 1216; see

also McCarthy, 2016, p. 92-93). According to Pagano & Roselle (2009) this process, “can facilitate and guide some of the learning that takes place during the international experience because .... [it] considers both experience and reflection” (p. 219).

Additionally, ISL is connected to transformational learning (see Kiely, 2005).

*Transformational learning (TL)* is “the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives)- sets of assumption and expectation- to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2006, p. 26). Kiely (2005) proposes a “Transformational Service-Learning Model”, which describes five transformational learning processes that students experience during ISL excursions: contextual border crossing, personalizing, processing, connecting, and dissonance (p. 8). *Dissonance*, which is defined as “incongruence between participants’ prior frame of reference and aspects of the contextual factors that shape the service-learning experience” (Kiely, 2005, p. 8), is shown to have a strong impact on the experiences of participants both during and after their ISL work (p. 10-12).

### **1.1.2 Relevant ISL Literature**

The focus of this thesis was on the experiences of ISL participants as they completed their international health promotion work. Looking at the experience-related research in the ISL literature, Abedini, Gruppen, Kolars, & Kumagai (2012) found the following three meanings that students took away from their experiences during a short-term ISL excursion: (1) explicit benefits of their ISL work, (2) implicit insights and lessons learned from further reflection, and (3) perspectives on their future directions (p. 823-825). Another study by Fechter (2014) explored how students interpreted their ISL experience after returning home (p. 29). Six themes were drawn from the stories of the participants, which together provide some understanding of

the experiences of ISL participants; these themes include: “Exploring Poverty”, “Exploring Privilege”, “Global Citizenship”, “Power of Education”, “Helping vs. Serving”, and “Fraternity Connections” (Fechter, 2014, p. 65; see p. 38-56 for a description of the six themes). More recently, Taylor et al. (2017) explored developmental readiness and students’ experiences of dissonance within an ISL context. Also, Johnson & Howell (2017) investigated the experiences of students participating in a combined ISL and interprofessional education excursion, and found that both cultural and interprofessional factors sparked personal and professional learning and growth. However, there is still a need for more research that explores the experiences and perspectives of participants throughout various types of ISL excursions (Fechter, 2014, p. 6; see also Abedini et al., 2012, p. 825).

Therefore, one objective of this thesis was to address that literature gap and further the research on student experiences during ISL excursions. Additionally, a northern Canadian university has been implementing an ISL program entitled Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) for the past 17 years. Thus, a second objective of this thesis was to explore this unique ISL opportunity from the HPWB participant (student) perspective.

## **1.2 HEALTH PROMOTION WITHOUT BORDERS (HPWB)**

The HPWB Program provides students at Laurentian University (LU), a Canadian University in northern Ontario, with the opportunity to engage in an ISL experience. This experience involves practicing health promotion in developing countries, and then receiving academic credit for the international work. This program is an example of a short-term ISL experience since it enables students to travel on a two-to-five week immersive excursion, through which they apply their classroom-based learning to help rural and remote communities

(see Pechak & Thompson, 2009; Seifer, 1998 for ISL definitions). Daily journaling while abroad is an important part of the HPWB experience, in order to foster reflection and growth amongst participants (see Asfeldt, Hvenegaard, & Purc-Stephenson, 2017; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004 for research on the importance of reflective activities).

### **1.2.1 Key HPWB Concepts and Rationale**

Before further exploring HPWB, it is important to define two foundational concepts of the program: *health* and *health promotion*. First, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2018a) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Thus, health is multidimensional; caring for, and maintaining a balance between the levels of the dimensions of health contributes to an optimal quality of life (Corbin, Welk, Corbin, & Welk, 2011, p. 3). Second, health promotion is “the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. It moves beyond a focus on individual behaviour towards a wide range of social and environmental interventions” (WHO, 2018b). Health promotion is an important approach to holistically improving well-being (Bhuyan, 2004, p. 4). The importance of health promotion was also recognized in a recent paper exploring ISL projects, which called for more “collaborative efforts to promote health” (Dalmida et al., 2016, p. 524). Thus, there exists the need for more ISL programs that provide health promotion.

### **1.2.2 HPWB Program Background**

HPWB was originally established to create an EL opportunity to put student leadership into practice and further the development of classroom-acquired skillsets in an international context. Excursions facilitated by HPWB were initially intended to provide “something special” for students from the Health Promotion program within the School of Human Kinetics (SHK) at

LU, but were extended to include students from all SHK programs. The inaugural HPWB excursion was to Costa Rica in the year 2001, where students worked with the community to establish a water system and a local health clinic. As the interests of students shifted, the HPWB Program began providing opportunities to teach and/or assist in health clinics in countries such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Ghana, and Kenya. Ultimately, the program has enabled approximately 80 students to travel internationally to disseminate health knowledge. Most recently, HPWB facilitated two excursions in May and June 2017 to Malawi and Mongolia.

### **1.2.3 HPWB Program Structure**

The HPWB Program is comprised of the following organizational structure: (1) the HPWB Program Coordinator, who oversees all program-related activities and excursions, (2) the excursion leaders, who represent LU while leading students on their ISL excursions, (3) the LU students that participate in the HPWB excursions, and (4) the organization or person in the host country that coordinates and facilitates the visit. Prospective students undergo an application process, which involves submitting a Curriculum Vitae and Statement of Interest to the HPWB Program Coordinator. Successful applicants are chosen by the HPWB Program Coordinator and a HPWB Selection Committee to travel with a HPWB group. Participant selection usually occurs 8-12 months before the excursion departure, and normally four or five students are selected per excursion. After selection, the HPWB Program Coordinator and the excursion leader guide the students in their pre-excursion preparations. During the international work, the excursion leader travels with the students and the HPWB Program Coordinator oversees the excursion from LU.

Students are able to receive academic credit for their HPWB work, based on satisfying several requirements. Once selected, students meet weekly with their excursion leader and the HPWB Program Coordinator to: make travel arrangements, prepare for their health promotion

work, organize fundraising events, and learn about the culture of their host country. During the excursion, students are expected to keep a daily journal in which they document events and reflect on their experiences. Post-excursion, students compile and submit a report of their experience to the HPWB Program Coordinator for the required evaluation. This report includes an introduction to the program, a detailed plan of their excursion, a log of work accomplished during preparatory meetings, the daily journal from their excursion, and a reflective summary of their experience. Also, students typically participate in a debriefing, where they have the chance to share their experiences alongside the leader and HPWB Program Coordinator. Upon successful completion of these requirements, students may obtain university credit.

While the HPWB Program Coordinator gains some insight into the experiences of program participants through their journals and reports, this thesis is the first formal exploration of the nature of HPWB experiences conducted by a researcher in the field. As the initial step to gain an understanding of this experience from the perspective of a participant, I first explored my own experience as a HPWB member using autoethnography as my method.

### **1.3 AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

The conception of this thesis was driven by: (1) my desire for a meaningful and transformative international experience, and (2) the hope of positively impacting the HPWB Program by completing meaningful research relevant to the program and its participants. By selecting an autoethnographic approach to research, I was able to remain faithful to both motivations. *Autoethnography* is:

An autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers

gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

Thus, by iteratively and reflexively exploring my experiences as data, not only did I derive greater meaning from my ISL work in Mongolia, but I was also able to potentially benefit the HPWB Program by providing insight into its excursions from the insider perspective of a participant.

As a precursor to my ISL and autoethnographic journeys, I needed to become aware of the ways in which I, as the researcher, influenced the research being conducted. This development of *reflexivity* was an essential stage in my research process (see Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 9 for more detail on reflexivity). Through readings and lectures, I started to learn about the importance of reflexive thinking in qualitative research. However, it was not until I experienced a connection between my research, a course assignment, and my yoga practice, that I was able to comprehend my growth as a reflexive researcher (this profound personal experience is explored and presented as the first manuscript in Chapter 2).

Taking a step back from this pursuit for greater self-awareness, I also needed to explore the bigger realm of autoethnographic literature in order to write my own autoethnography. I found several examples of publications using this approach that resonated with the aspirations I had for my research. Gallé & Lingard (2010) explored the experiences of the lead author while completing an interprofessional education placement; observations and a personal reflective journal were used as data sources to create three vignettes, which captured different cultural and educational themes that emerged during the placement. This work framed my early

understanding of generating academic knowledge from one's own experiences. Popovic (2010) furthered my perception of critical thinking, and broadened my appreciation for the different manners in which autoethnography work can be presented. Lastly, research by Darling, Kerr, Thorp, & Chung (2014) demonstrated the impact of connecting autoethnography to an international community-service experience, and this ultimately became a foundational paper for this thesis.

#### **1.4 ORIENTATION TO THESIS AND INTEGRATED MANUSCRIPTS**

This thesis document consists of five chapters: an introductory chapter, three unique but interconnected manuscripts, and a concluding chapter. This first chapter introduces the research direction and context, and the relevant literature needed to understand the subsequent content of the thesis and the integrated nature of the manuscripts. Chapters 2-4 are prepared as independent but sequential manuscripts that were formatted for submission to the *Journal of Experiential Education*. The second chapter uses an autoethnographic approach to share my experience of developing reflexivity through a yoga class. It serves as both a preface to, and preparation for, the core of my research: exploring the experiences of HPWB participants while completing their ISL work. The third chapter presents the autoethnographic story of my HPWB excursion, as I sought to understand the nature of my personal immersive experience in Mongolia. The fourth chapter builds on the knowledge gained from understanding my own experience, and further explores the experiences of my fellow HPWB group members. The fifth and final chapter integrates these three manuscripts and discusses the commonalities, discords, and significances within the overall findings of this thesis. It also provides practical implications for the HPWB Program, summarizes study limitations, and presents directions for future research. Table 1 (p.

10) provides an outline of these three manuscripts in terms of the title, purpose, and methodological approach used.

**Table 1: Outline of Manuscripts**

	<b>Title</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Approach</b>
<b>Manuscript One</b>	Reflexivity through a Yoga Class Experience: Preparing for My Health Promotion Without Borders Excursion To Mongolia	To share my story of development as a reflexive thinker through a yoga class experience	Autoethnography
<b>Manuscript Two</b>	Health Promotion Without Borders: An Autoethnography of an International Service Learning Experience in Mongolia	To explore the nature of my personal immersive experience as a HPWB participant	Autoethnography
<b>Manuscript Three</b>	A Case Study Exploring Cultural Dissonance Experienced by Students on an International Service Learning Excursion to Mongolia	To identify the nature of cultural dissonance that participants experienced while completing their immersive work in Mongolia as part of the HPWB group	Case Study

## 1.5 SUMMARY

Overall, this first chapter provides insight into the nature of this thesis research and generates a basic understanding of the key concepts that are discussed throughout this document. This chapter also links the three manuscripts presented in Chapters 2-4. The first manuscript (see Chapter 2) serves as a greater introduction to the autoethnographic method, the pre-data collection phase of this research process, and my experience preparing for the HPWB excursion to Mongolia.

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## CHAPTER 2

# Reflexivity Through A Yoga Class Experience: Preparing For My Health Promotion Without Borders Excursion To Mongolia

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## 2.0 ABSTRACT

**Background:** Yoga has been an important influence on my physical and mental well-being for over 10 years, but I did not consider its implications in my academic life until I was asked to write a reflexive assignment for a qualitative methods course. The task was connecting myself to my thesis project related to autoethnography; the challenge was finding a starting point for my reflexive journey of self-exploration. Frustrated by the latter, I turned to yoga for refuge; instead of escaping the assignment, I found that my quest for self-discovery was intertwined with my yoga practice. **Purpose:** The purpose of this manuscript is to further explore my experience with yoga as a medium for developing reflexivity. **Approach:** Using autoethnography, I share my journey of developing critical thinking through a narrative related to my yoga class experience. **Findings:** Linking my research to my yoga practice allowed me to: better understand myself as a person and researcher; become mindful of how my own views shape my experiences; and develop a deeper level of critical reflection. **Implications:** This work demonstrates the experience of a connection between yoga, reflexivity, and autoethnography, and adds to the sparse literature exploring the intersection of these three.

**Key Words:** Autoethnography, Reflexivity, Yoga, Experiential Learning

## **2.1 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this manuscript is to share the story of my experience of reflexive growth through a yoga class, within the context of writing an assignment in preparation for my thesis project related to using an autoethnographic method. To make sense of this work, it is important to establish an understanding of practicing yoga, exploring one's own experiences as a research method, and the nature of my thesis project. Together, these pieces intertwine to form the framework of my constructed narrative.

### **2.1.2 Yoga**

The goal of practicing *yoga* is to “‘unite’ or ‘bring’ the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions into balance” by connecting various postures, cues, and breathing techniques (Wertman, Wister, & Mitchell, 2016, p. 191). Due to its multi-dimensional impact, as well as the multitude of other health implications associated with its practice (see Ross, Friedmann, Bevans, & Thomas, 2013, p. 2), it is not surprising that the body of literature exploring the effects of yoga on well-being is growing (Wertman et al., 2016, p. 191). There is research on the impacts of yoga at the practitioner-level (see Ross et al., 2013; Quilty, Saper, Goldstein, & Khalsa, 2013), at the clinical-level (see Park et al., 2013), and within the realm of school-based interventions at the elementary and secondary school levels (see Butzer, Ebert, Telles, & Khalsa, 2015). Yet, the literature is sparse on yoga within the context of post-secondary education or as part of a reflexive research process.

However, one publication stood out; a PhD dissertation titled, “Stories of (my)nd body and soul: An autoethnography through hockey, figure skating, and yoga” by Popovic (2010). Popovic (2010) described yoga as a vessel for empowering “individuals to move in the world,

and serve their communities, to inspire growth and transformation” (p. 174) and used an autoethnographic approach to critically reflect on her own yoga experiences and perceptions as an academic, a yoga teacher, and a yoga student. Overall, her work strongly resonated with me because it suggested that: (1) one’s yogi-self is entwined with other aspects of one’s life, and (2) yoga can be used as a medium for self-discovery.

### **2.1.3 Autoethnography**

*Autoethnography* is a research method through which researcher uses “vulnerability, personal feelings, and emotions . . . . to illustrate their experiences as well as construct and share knowledge” (Darling, Kerr, Thorp, & Chung, 2014, p. 20). According to Sparkes (2002), “Writing autoethnographically has provided . . . . a means to develop a greater sense of integration between the concerns that infuse the ‘private’ and ‘public’, or ‘academic’, domains of my life.” (p. 105) This methodology enables the exploration of, and development of connections between, the different dimensions of one’s life. Thus, it was an appropriate way for me to find my reflexive footing before diving further into my thesis project.

### **2.1.4 My Thesis Project**

My thesis project was designed to explore the experiences of participants during an International Service Learning (ISL) excursion to Mongolia through the Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) Program. Since 2001, students at a northern Canadian University have been able to participate in ISL excursions facilitated through the HPWB Program. However, no formal research has been conducted on the HPWB Program itself, or the experiences of its participants. To address this need, the first phase of my thesis aimed to explore the nature of the immersive experience through an autoethnographic look at my own HPWB excursion.

## 2.2 APPROACH

In preparation for my thesis project, I enrolled in a qualitative methods course in the semester before my departure for Mongolia. Through the qualitative methods lectures and related readings (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Gallé & Lingard, 2010; Humphreys, 2005; Popovic, 2010), I discovered the importance of positioning my thoughts, values, and understandings within my research project. In other words, I learned the importance of being *reflexive*, or thinking about how I as a researcher “affect the ways in which the research is conducted and the findings are interpreted” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 19). However, when given an assignment to practice being reflexive, I realized that this concept was challenging to actualize.

Why was this so difficult? The problem was not my lack of ability to reflect on my thoughts and actions. Of course I recognized that there was much more to discover on my journey towards reflectiveness and mindfulness, but as a naturally introspective person, contemplating about my place in relation to my research should not have been this difficult. Perhaps the challenge stemmed from the lack of confidence I had in expressing my own reflective thinking. I could develop my own critical awareness, but could I share this understanding with others in a meaningful and eloquent way? And even if I could express my thoughts, would the implications be worth the risks associated with exposing myself so vulnerably to other readers?

Furthermore, was I ready to be open? Was I willing to persevere through the difficult moments in order to grow and learn? These concerns made me think of a quote from Ellis & Bochner (2000), “If you are not willing to become a vulnerable observer, then maybe you ought to reconsider doing autoethnography. If you let yourself be vulnerable, then your readers are more likely to respond vulnerably” (p. 752).

I was struggling for weeks to find a starting point for this writing assignment, when I discovered inspiration in an unexpected place: my evening yoga class. Initially, I went to the class to forget about my long day of reading and unsuccessful writing attempts. Ironically, in the place I sought to escape the frustration and confusion of this assignment, I found clarity. The flow of instructions and poses aligned metaphorically with my concerns and ideas for the assignment, so I decided to embark on my first autoethnographic journey and create a narrative of my yoga class experience.

### **2.3 FINDINGS AND REVELATIONS**

The findings of this autoethnography are revealed through a narrative entitled “Who Is This Person?” The narrative serves as an “agent of self-discovery” (see Ellis and Bochner, 2000) that looks to make sense of, and to further explore, my identity and how this identity influences my thesis project. The narrative is presented in italics and divided into three segments, through which I am “attempting to construct a window” that invites the reader to observe and reflect upon my experiences (see Humphreys, 2005, p. 842-843). After each narrative segment I then “intervene in the narrative and . . . interpret events” (see Sparkes, 2002, p. 80), further elaborating on the key ideas of that section.

#### *Who Is This Person?*

*As I entered into the studio, I was surprised by the climate of the room. The temperature was cooler than I anticipated, and the air was dry. I supposed I was used to the heat and humidity of the hot yoga classes, and that I needed to allow my body a few moments to adjust to the conditions of this new practice style.*

*A nudge from my sister brought my attention back to the task at hand, finding a place to set our mats. I motioned for her to follow me, and led us to the far, back corner of the studio. Normally I would have preferred to be more central in the room, but today I needed to be tucked safely away in the corner where I could fall into my own practice without any distractions.*

*I carefully placed my grey mat on the ground and gathered my props- two blocks and a blanket- in preparation for the practice. I arranged my water bottle and props against the white wall, and then discovered my spot on my mat and closed my eyes. I tried to block out the sounds of the room; the mats slapping the wooden floor as they were unraveled and set up for practice, the blocks and blankets being pulled from the shelves, and the opening and closing of the heavy studio door as people entered the room; but instead I found myself giving into the energy of the room and my desire to share in it.*

*The instructor then took her place at the front of the class and prompted us to move into Goddess Pose to begin our practice. As I laid on my mat with my knees bent and falling open to the outer edges of my mat, the soles of my feet touching, my arms at my side, and my palms open to the ceiling, my attention started to wander from the intense sensation in my hips to all of the uncompleted tasks that remained on my day's to-do list.*

*I was trying to breathe into the pose and keep my thoughts in the room, when the instructor cued us to, "focus on the feelings in our inner thighs, groins, and hips." She then told us to, "pause for a moment and ask yourself, 'Who is this person that is experiencing these feelings?'"*

*This question was unsettling. What does she mean, "Who is this person?"*

Who am I? What are the values, beliefs, and traits that shape my being? This segment of the narrative helped reveal to me many aspects of my personality, or how I see my personality.

For example, I think of myself as being open-minded and willing to try new things, which is evident through my decision to try a different style of class. I also consider myself to be organized, but I am aware that I have trouble managing stress, as shown by the reference to my to-do lists and my inability to block out the thoughts of pressing tasks from those lists. These attributes, in addition to the other attributes revealed throughout the narrative, are based on my understanding in this moment of the structure of my person. Together, they shape my thoughts, actions, and perceptions. Therefore, the process of identifying and understanding these attributes is relevant in preparing for my research, because they influence the decisions regarding my thesis project. In other words, in order to strengthen my thesis, I need to recognize who I am as a person and how that impacts my researcher persona.

However, I still wondered, “Why does my level of self-understanding matter to whomever is reading this?” “Will he or she care if I know who I am?” I realized though, that knowing myself not only helps to clarify my approach to research, but also it is critical in producing a relevant work that the reader can connect to. Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011) stated that autoethnographers need to “consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (p. 276). Therefore, my self-understanding is necessary in order to relate to the reader and communicate knowledge in a meaningful and relevant way.

That being said, Darling et al. (2014) state, “In this methodology, the researcher is an integral part of the story he or she seeks to tell through self-reflection on the experience.” (p. 20) Thus, before I can reflect on how others would experience a situation, such as a yoga class or

ISL excursion to Mongolia, I need to comprehend the impact that these experiences have in my own life.

*After Goddess Pose we then flowed into a twist on the right side of our bodies. The instructor listed off a number of variations in order of increasing difficulty. She then proceeded to encourage the class to take whichever option feels “right” for the body, but I had already decided to move into the most difficult version, whether my body realized it was “right” or not. After a few minutes, we repeated the same twist on the left side; once more, I positioned my body in the most challenging variation of the twist.*

*The instructor then guided us into our next pose, Happy Baby. Having done this pose many times in other practices, I immediately bent my knees, flexed my feet up towards the ceiling, laced my index and middle fingers around my big toes, and drew my knees inwards towards my armpits. As I focused on wiggling myself into a tolerable and somewhat sustainable position, the instructor offered the suggestion of placing a blanket or block underneath our heads to provide more support and comfort in the pose.*

*Having never tried this modification before, I reached for my blanket and carefully placed it on my mat. I inhaled as I repositioned myself back into Happy Baby, and exhaled, releasing the back of my head onto the folded blanket.*

*As I took my next inhalation, I could feel the strength increase in my arms and the sensations deepen in my hips. As I exhaled, the tension in my neck released and my body fell deeper into the pose. I spent my next few breaths enjoying the discovery of this new adaptation.*

*After a few breath cycles, we released our feet onto the mat and were instructed to take a bridge pose for a few moments. With our knees bent, hips lifted up towards the ceiling, and arms extended at our sides, the instructor then cued us to draw our attention inwards to our thoughts.*

*She asked, “Is your mind busy? If so, take few moments to acknowledge and be okay with the busyness”. She paused, and then posed the question, “Ask yourself, ‘Who is this person that is acknowledging this busyness?’”*

*Again, I was taken aback by a different version of the same question.*

This narrative segment helped me explore both my personal identities and my research topic. My identities as a Health Promotion alumni and former exchange student led me to do my thesis research project on the experiences of HPWB participants. The value of health education was embedded in me through my undergraduate studies, and after spending a year abroad studying in Germany during that time, I also experienced firsthand the powerful effects that immersing oneself in another culture can have on one’s being. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself to participate in the HPWB Program, I had a strong feeling that my month-long Mongolia excursion would be transformative, and critically reflecting on it would provide a rich source of knowledge for both the HPWB Program and myself.

However, the first paragraph of this narrative segment echoes some concerns I have with the route I chose for my research. According to Ellis et al. (2011), “When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (p. 276). The first idea of deciding to write retrospectively or after-the-fact troubles me; if I go into this experience prepared to write an autoethnography, how can I be sure that what I am experiencing is actually meaningful and not fabricated to produce a good manuscript? In other words, does my role as a researcher conflict with my experience as a participant?

To answer this, I needed to consider my personal motivations for going on this ISL excursion: I wanted a life-changing, powerful, and meaningful experience. Looking at the

characteristics of autoethnography, the reflexive process may enhance and help me to make sense of my experience travelling to Mongolia; it may also allow me to derive greater meaning from my participation in the HPWB Program. Thus, this method may actually strengthen, and add value to, my ISL excursion.

The second idea of “cultural identities” (see Ellis et al., 2011) forces me to reflect on the groups that are explored through, or affected by, my research. I am a female Canadian university student, working through the HPWB Program and the Source of Steppe Nomads (SoSN) Organization to promote health within Kazakh communities in western Mongolia. Therefore, my work involves several diverse groups of people. The question is, “How can I produce a work that positively impacts all of these groups?” My hope is to benefit the HPWB program and other ISL programs by providing a sense of the experience to those who are considering participation, or to the coordinators and organizers that are unable to participate first-hand but are instrumental in excursion-operations. I also hope that my work better prepares HPWB and other ISL programs for partnering with international organizations (like SoSN) and working in their respective communities, which in turn improves the quality of support that locals receive during these excursions.

Lastly, for my work to resonate with and be helpful for the readers, I need to satisfy the following questions: (1) “Is the story I am relaying to you catalytic—that is, does it inspire new thoughts or ideas? Has it engaged your thoughts and feelings and thus in some way pulled you in?” and (2) “Have I demonstrated a grounded understanding and perspective so that you are able to get a sense of my lived experience? Is it so abundant in concrete detail that you can feel and understand the partial truth of the narrative?” (Darling et al., 2014, p. 23).

*Shortly after, we transitioned into a lunge and then hamstring stretch on the right side. We held each pose for a few minutes, and then began the same series on the left side.*

*With my left foot forward, knee over the ankle, right leg back, and knee resting comfortably on the mat, I began to breathe into my right hip, drawing it closer towards the ground. As the instructor brought us through the different elements of the pose, she told us to be mindful that the sensations on this side may differ from that of the other side.*

*After completing the sequence, we then moved into a wide-legged variation of Child's Pose. I positioned my knees to the width of the mat, drew my feet together, released my backside towards my heels, and folded forward. With every breath in, I walked my fingertips closer to the top of the mat, and with each exhale, I pulled my hips back towards the wall behind me. As I found a balance in this pose, I began to relax and concentrate on the sound of the instructor's voice and the prompts she delivered to the class.*

*She asked us to remain in the pose with our eyes closed, but to shift our awareness from ourselves to the sounds of the room, then to the other participants in the room, then to the sounds again, and finally back to ourselves. This was a challenging exercise. How do I remain rooted and immersed in my own practice while being actively aware of "the others" in my surroundings?*

*Following a couple more breaths, we shifted onto our backs and took Happy Baby once more, as our last pose before final relaxation.*

*Head on the blanket, I laid back with my hands reaching towards my flexed feet and breathed into the hip stretch. The instructor cued us to, "remain still in this pose, and notice the feelings experienced in the body without making any changes in your position." She followed this by asking, "Is your body accepting or rejecting of these feelings?" She then encouraged us*

*to be vulnerable and open to these feelings as we remained in Happy Baby for another breath cycle.*

*We then released the legs onto the mat and extended the arms to the sides for final relaxation. Instinctively I reached for the blanket and unfolded it to cover my body.*

*The instructor guided us through the relaxation, and then we concluded our practice.*

*I opened my eyes and glanced around the room, watching as “the others” bowed forward to seal in their practice, each at their own pace. Slowly I made my way to standing, returned my props, and gathered my belongings. I thanked the instructor for the class, and then followed my sister out of the studio.*

This last segment of the narrative voices my views (and concerns) of making space for “the others”, the participants’ stories, within my thesis project. The cues of the instructor reflect my thoughts, revealing that I am still learning, and require the guidance of my supervisors and the participants themselves to help me through this process. The instructor’s cue to be mindful that the pose feels different on each side of our body shows that my experiences and perceptions of these experiences will be different from the participants, even the ones with whom I am travelling and working alongside. Furthermore, when the instructor asks the class to become aware without making changes, it speaks to the importance of understanding and accurately portraying the experiences of the participants. Lastly, the instructor’s prompt to become aware if our bodies are accepting or rejecting the feelings of a pose also speaks to the issue of making space without altering participants’ voices.

Overall, this segment allows me to reflect on the ways in which I, the researcher, can explore how the participants lived through their ISL excursion. This is important, especially because I am travelling with, and therefore a part of, the ISL experience for the Mongolia

participants. I need to ensure that I am telling their story as they feel and understand it, instead of how I see it.

## 2.4 IMPLICATIONS

“I now ask *you* as readers of my own autoethnographic narrative to examine how you *feel* about it.” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 850)

This manuscript took you, the reader, through my constructed narrative of a meaningful experience, which acted as a medium to discover and convey thoughts and feelings. As a result of my exploration of self and reflexivity through a yoga class, I found a greater understanding of who I am, why I chose my research topic, and some of the considerations for my approach to this research project. Connecting my research to my yoga practice allowed me to better understand myself as a person and researcher, become mindful of how my own views shape my experiences, and develop a deeper level of critical reflection. Together, these lessons better prepared me for, and furthered my understanding of, writing an autoethnography. Although this narrative is uniquely situated within the context of an assignment to prepare for my thesis project, this manuscript also demonstrates the power of linking the kinesthetic practice of yoga to reflexivity and the research process. Further research should continue to explore the benefits of yoga and other similar kinesthetic practices for researchers, specifically as a tool to further critical thinking and self-reflection.

Overall, the writing of the narrative itself was an incredibly challenging process that generated many questions: “Am I a *good* writer?”; “Was I open enough in my narrative and reflections?”; “Why I am I doing this?”; and “Is this an effective way to communicate my ideas?” There were many moments when I wanted to scrap this style of writing and save

myself from the suffering of pursuing such a creative approach to my assignment. However, it was in those instants I heard my yogi voice saying, “It’s okay to fall, in fact it’s a good thing. I should welcome falling because I can get up; and it means that I am pushing myself. It means that I am growing.”

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## CHAPTER 3

# Health Promotion Without Borders: An Autoethnography of an International Service Learning Experience in Mongolia

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### 3.0 ABSTRACT

**Background:** As the popularity of International Service Learning (ISL) excursions continues to grow, there is an increasing need for research that explores these types of experiences. This manuscript focuses on the Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) Program, which is an ISL opportunity offered to students from a northern Canadian university. HPWB has been active for 17 years. However, no previous research has been conducted with respect to the program or the experiences of its participants. **Purpose:** This research is the first step to address this need by examining my own experience as a HPWB participant. **Approach:** I chose an autoethnographic approach, in order to facilitate critical reflection on my ISL experience and impart my understanding of the nature of my excursion. **Findings:** After iteratively reflecting and analyzing my journal from my month-long experience in Mongolia, I realized that the cultural dissonance I experienced was the key to understanding my immersive experience. I wrote six narratives that explore some of the cultural dissonances that I felt during my immersion into the Kazakh communities of western Mongolia and with respect to the HPWB group itself. **Implications:** Although the narratives are specific to my experience, they provide some understanding of the nature of ISL experiences, which may benefit future ISL participants and coordinators. This research also adds to the sparse literature available on the nature of ISL experiences from the participant perspective using an autoethnographic method.

**Key Words:** Autoethnography, International Service Learning, Health Promotion, Cultural Dissonance

## **3.1 BACKGROUND**

### **3.1.1 Literature Review**

Many post-secondary students are seeking opportunities for global learning and personal growth, and thus they are choosing to participate in *International Service Learning (ISL)* excursions (see Fechter, 2014, p. 1). These excursions enable students to help others, gain global health awareness, and experience diverse cultures while travelling (Fechter, 2014, p. 1; see also Crabtree, 2008, p. 18). Fechter (2014) states that as the prevalence of ISL excursions continues to rise, so too does the need to explore the experiences of students that participate in these excursions (p. 1). Furthermore, “research about the variety of international service immersion experiences and the experiences of students as they move through these important co-curricular experiences is lacking” (Fechter, 2014, p. 6). Thus, there is a gap in the literature related to understanding the nature of ISL experiences, especially from a participant perspective.

### **3.1.2 Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB)**

The HPWB Program is an ISL opportunity coordinated by faculty, staff, and graduate students in a northern Canadian university. It is designed to address the need for health promotion efforts in developing countries. From a pedagogical perspective, the HPWB experience allows students to complete an internship and supplement their theoretical knowledge with practical community service and reflection (see ISL definitions in Pechak & Thompson, 2009; Seifer, 1998). Each year students are selected through an application process to travel with a leader (university representative) to a developing country for two-to-five weeks. During their stay the HPWB participants are immersed in the culture of their host country. While participants usually have the chance to take part in excursions, the majority of their time is devoted to

educating and promoting health and wellness in community centres, schools, clinics, and homecare settings.

The program has been active for 17 years, and has enabled approximately 80 students to travel internationally to complete medical, health promotion, and/or humanitarian work. In 2017, one leader and four students participated in a HPWB excursion to Mongolia. I participated in this experience as both a participant and researcher.

### **3.1.3 Personal Goals**

Overall, I wanted my research to be meaningful and to have a positive impact; these were my personal goals for this project. When a spot opened up on the HPWB excursion to western Mongolia, I felt very strongly that participating in this international opportunity, and critically exploring my international health promotion experience, would enable me to satisfy both of those goals. I anticipated it would be a life-changing experience, since I would be serving others in remote communities. Thus, my research would be personally meaningful. Additionally, I would be able to provide valuable insight into HPWB from the perspective of a participant, which may benefit the HPWB Program Coordinator and those involved in HPWB. Lastly, this work would fill a gap in the ISL literature, which would extend the impacts of this research to the larger scientific community.

### **3.1.4 Purpose**

Presently, no formal research has been conducted with respect to the HPWB Program or the experiences of the participants while completing their ISL excursions. This research is the first step to address this need by using an autoethnographic approach to explore my own experience as a participant. My guiding research question is: What is the nature of my immersive experience as a participant in the HPWB excursion to Mongolia?

### 3.2 APPROACH

Through *autoethnography*, I construct and share my story as a HPWB Program participant in western Mongolia. Autoethnography is “a forward-and-backward, in-and-out, around-and-around process of meaning-making that moves between memory, story, reading, .... reflection, discussion, and analysis” (Asfeldt & Beames, 2017, p. 75; see also Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It aims to “unite ethnographic (looking outward at a world beyond one’s own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one’s self) intentions” (Schwant, 2007, p. 16). In other words, autoethnography involves using personal experiences as data to search for an understanding of others (see Chang, 2008). Autoethnography is an appropriate method for this research, since it allows me to: critically think about my experience as an ISL participant and impart my understanding of the nature of this excursion in a beneficial way for those currently involved in, or considering participation in, HPWB or other ISL programs.

I travelled with the HPWB Program to promote health in western Mongolian communities during the months of May and June 2017. I kept journals throughout each phase of my experience, where I documented my observations about the group, the HPWB Program, and myself. The journals also included personal reflections, reflections on group activities and interactions, and reflections on the culture of our host communities. After returning to Canada, I transcribed, coded (see Sotiriadou, Browers, & Le, 2014), and thematically analyzed my journals (see Gallé & Lingard, 2010). Figure 2 in Appendix A portrays a visual representation of the preliminary coded categories using Tableau Software. I also had several meetings with co-authors that deepened my reflective analytic journey. Together, these steps helped me to develop an understanding of the nature of my HPWB experience.

### 3.3 FINDINGS

The findings are presented in a series of six narratives, based on entries from my excursion journal (in italics) and reflective accounts of meaningful moments.

#### 3.3.1 Preface

*June 8th, Sogog*

*Journal Entry 22*

*I was waiting for this “aha” moment, where all-of-a-sudden this experience made sense and its meaning became clear. However, I’m realizing now that this trip won’t be made or defined by just one story, one lesson, or one interaction; instead, it’ll be formed by a bunch of tiny moments that come together like pieces of a puzzle. The little things, both good and bad, will eventually merge to create a unique and intricate picture of my experience.*

My autoethnographic journey to make sense of my ISL excursion was neither a straightforward path nor was there an easy-to-achieve endpoint. Many times, I wished that one moment from my excursion would present itself so clearly above the others that it alone would undoubtedly capture the nature of my experience. However, since that was not the case, I embarked on this iterative journey of forming and re-forming, and arranging and re-arranging, all of the impactful pieces of my time in Mongolia until they created a meaningful image. In addition to this already challenging process, the final product of my reflective journey needed to: (1) be authentic and truthful with respect to both the high points and the low points of my excursion; (2) describe the benefits gained from my excursion, even though I was still processing the effects of the experience; and (3) give back to the people who positively impacted my experience. However, my ability to be totally open and honest was bound by the need to preserve the anonymity of all those involved in my excursion. Needless to say, this was not an easy feat.

In the end, as I moved through my reflective journey and tried to satisfy these three conditions with different (and sometimes conflicting) aspects, I realized that this process of navigating between dissimilar elements felt very similar to what I experienced during my ISL excursion.

### **3.3.2 Narrative One: The Ger**

*May 25th, Sogog*

*Journal Entry 5*

*It was a long day. We woke up at 03:00 to fly from Ulaanbaatar to Bayan-Ulgii, and then drove another couple hours to Sogog. The flight went by surprisingly quick; initially I planned to get some sleep during this time, but the view was so incredible that I couldn't peel my eyes away from the window.*

*There were hardly any clouds so I could see everything: the mountains, the vast desert areas, the small pockets of communities, and the gers scattered over the land. I couldn't believe how isolated some were, nor could I imagine living in one of those secluded little white specs.*

*It was apparent that this would be a much different experience from our first few days in the capital city; the way-of-life for Mongolians living in urban Ulaanbaatar was more comparable to my western-lifestyle, and would definitely not be the same as the rural- and nomadic-living Kazakh people in western Mongolia. Where we were going, there would be no subdivisions of houses, blocks packed with tall buildings, paved roads, running water, "traditional" toilets...*

Once we landed in Ulgii, we crammed into old Soviet Union off-road vans and set out for Sogog. The drive across the steppe was long, bumpy, and broken up by several stops.

*The first time our vans stopped, we had no idea what was going on. Our leader told us that it's common for these vans to overheat and breakdown, so that's what I assumed was happening.*

*We climbed out of our seats, and wandered onto the gravel surface of the large, dry valley we were driving through. There were no other people or buildings to obstruct the views of the two mountain ranges on either side of us; it was just our group and our vans in the Mongolian steppe.*

*An impromptu yoga session was called, in order to fill the time until we were ready to continue our drive. Navigating through the prickly plants that poked out of the sand and rocks, our group spread out, each person taking their spot against the mountainous backdrop.*

*Practicing yoga in this setting created a mix of emotions. My body automatically flowed through each pose, as if it was at my home studio moving through a routine practice. With the sun beating down and the dusty air hitting my skin, however, my mind was very aware that there was nothing “routine” about this yoga session.*

*That disconnect between my physical state and my mental state was overwhelming. Part of me felt at home, while another part of me felt so small and out-of-place in this vast desert.*

We had two or three stops, of varying lengths and for varying reasons, over the course of our journey to Sogog. By the time we finally arrived at our host family’s house, it felt like we already experienced a full day. I was ready for some rest, but there was still a busy day of activities ahead. We had a multi-course lunch, and then were introduced to our host family and accommodations for our time in Sogog. Our hosts gave up their entire main house for us, and moved into a smaller structure on their property. On top of that, they lent us their ger as an additional living space, particularly for group meetings and meals.

*I was really excited to stay in this traditional dwelling; I’d never seen a ger before so this was going to be a new and unique experience. And something new and exciting was exactly what I*

*needed to enhance my cultural immersion, and also to distract me from being halfway across the world from my family and friends.*

As an additional opportunity for cultural-learning, we met with the husband and father of our host family to assist him with assembling the ger. We started by piecing together the wooden lattice segments for the walls. We then attached poles to the tops of these segments, which were used as the roof of the structure. Despite the big group of us working together with the husband, things were moving pretty slowly. As time went on, more locals joined us; the rest of our host family, our translator/NGO President, our cooks, and a few others came to assist with the ger construction.

*I was happy to be a part of this building process, however there were many moments when I struggled to overcome my own walls; I felt so drained, both physically and mentally, and just wanted to rest. But I never did, because I looked around and saw how this team of people worked together, through language barriers and different levels of experience, to build something so beautiful, and I knew I needed to see this project through.*

It was eye-opening to see first-hand the fascinating work involved in building a ger. More so, the way our host family and translator involved us in the process made this experience impactful. I am sure if they assembled the ger without us, it would have been done much faster; instead, they generously gave up their time to include and teach us. I was not expecting to be taught such a great lesson on my first day in the community.

*Like my yoga experience earlier in the day, again I was feeling overwhelmed. My expectations for this trip were being challenged; I came into it excited to share what I know, but I'm realizing that I may have more to learn from the community than they have to learn from me.*

### 3.3.3 Narrative Two: The Nutrition Lesson

*May 29th, Sogog*

*Journal Entry 10*

*We arrived in Sogog only a couple days ago, and already we were so busy. With so much going on, it was a challenge to find time to take everything in. We participated in lots of rich cultural activities, but didn't have much time to process the impact of, and make sense of, those experiences. And it's not that the jam-packed days weren't great, it was just that if we didn't stop to contemplate the new things we did, they started to blur together, and maybe even lose some of their significance.*

*This could have been why the culture shock was still hitting me pretty hard. Every day I discovered and experienced first-hand new aspects about the Kazakh culture as I tried to adjust to this different way-of-living. Without much time for reflection, however, it was hard to fully understand or make meaning of my cultural immersion.*

*And as we prepared for our second day of teaching a group of Kazakh women, I knew I still had a lot to comprehend about their way-of-life.*

We walked alongside the roaming cattle, across the rattling tin bridge, and past the small line of shops to get from our ger to the Sogog Kindergarten where our lessons took place. I enjoyed this walk; it was a chance to appreciate the landscape and get ready for the day ahead. It was also a good opportunity to check-in with my feelings. I was nervous because I did not know what to expect with my lessons, or how it would be received, but mostly I was excited for the chance to finally start giving back to the community. It was time for me to “prove myself”, and to help those who shared with me during my first few days in Sogog.

We started with a maternal health lesson, followed by yoga, a lunch break, and an exercise class. Then it came time for me to teach nutrition. We sat in a circle on the carpeted floor of one of the classrooms; with our translator by my side, I began my lesson. I talked about the food groups, servings per day, and portion sizes using an adapted version of Canada's Food Guide. But when the women started whispering amongst themselves, I knew something was not right.

*That's when it really hit me just how different our lifestyles were. I knew that our eating behaviours varied, but I didn't recognize the underlying factors that contributed to those behaviours, or how impractical most of my western-educated nutritional advice was.*

*When I started teaching solely from my Canadian-made lesson plans, most of the women just laughed because of how unreasonable the guidelines were. The more time I spent with them, the more I too realized that I wouldn't be able to maintain my normal diet for the few weeks immersed in this culture, so it was totally unrealistic to ask these women to change their way of living so drastically.*

It was not that these women did not want to learn about nutrition, or that I was forcing my ideals on them; it was that I did not understand the line between feasible and unfeasible food goals, considering the socioeconomic and geographic factors of the area we were in. In the end, we turned my nutrition lesson into more of a conversation, through which we worked together to create more reasonable changes that they could make to their diets. Ultimately, this experience challenged my way of thinking, and showed me that before I could help the community members, I needed to be more immersed in their way-of-living and develop a deeper understanding of their culture and its differences from my own.

### 3.3.4 Narrative Three: The Vodka Shots

*June 1st, Dayan*

#### *Journal Entry 13*

*Before our trip, our leader informed us that it was customary for hosts to give their guests vodka shots as a sign of appreciation or gratitude. As someone who doesn't really drink, I was very apprehensive about this aspect of the trip.*

*After being physically forced to drink vodka on our first night in western Mongolia, I realized just how important it was to accept these shots as a sign of respect. That being said, I was still uncomfortable with drinking so much, knowing the effects it would have on my body and my ability to partake in various aspects of the experience. Fortunately, our translator was sympathetic to my concerns and did her best to prevent me from drinking, and to ease the tension that I felt whenever the drinks were passed around.*

*However, the men who offered the shots weren't always as understanding. When our translator told them I wouldn't have one, the shot-giver almost always shook his head in disbelief, and looked at me disapprovingly. On occasion, they gave me a shot anyway. When this happened, I either took a sip of the shot or let it touch my lips, and then one of my fellow group members finished it on my behalf.*

*Overall, I felt uneasy whenever the vodka was brought out. I wanted to be respectful of the culture, especially when the families we were visiting had been so kind and generous to us. At the same time though, I also needed to be mindful of my own beliefs.*

*It was difficult; I didn't want to be rude to our hosts, I didn't want to be a burden to my own group, but I also couldn't waver on my values.*

### 3.3.5 Narrative Four: The Quiet Moment

Between the long drive and all the stops we made at different family homes along the way to handout donations and teach our lessons, we definitely needed a break. When our driver stopped the car to show us a nearby waterfall, I was happy to finally have a moment to catch my breath.

As the rest of the group emptied out of the cramped car to go on a walk, I stayed back to journal about some of the things I experienced throughout the day. I did not get far into my journaling though, because our leader came back to pull me along to join the group. I was resistant at first, but when she insisted I realized that I needed to go.

That was the challenge with being a researcher and participant. I did not want to miss documenting a moment, because I wanted to ensure I would remember it later in case it was important or something I wanted to share. At the same time, I also needed to make sure that I was fully living each moment, and making the most of each new experience. It was difficult to find a balance between recording and fully participating; to decide which activities I needed to participate in to enrich my trip and those I could “miss out on” in order to journal. At times our leader made the decision for me, but when that was not the case, I sometimes hesitated to join in with the group.

After our walk, we piled back into the van and continued on our way. When we finally arrived at our destination, we unloaded our bags and settled in for the night.

*June 1st, Dayan*

*Journal Entry 14*

*The high of returning to a more comfortable environment was short-lived, and tension with group members began to fester again. This was not just because we were all exhausted from the*

*long day. We all had our moments throughout the trip, but this was more than that; we were just not clicking as a group.*

*Since we were more than halfway through our trip, it was better just to carry on instead of trying to resolve our issues; the risk of making things worse seemed greater than the chance of things improving. That being said, I wasn't sure if the other girls felt this way, or knew my feelings, but I guess that's how we got to this point; we just weren't all on the same page.*

*Overall, this was a tough situation to be in. Although I came into this trip looking for an opportunity for personal growth, I was also looking forward to working with our group, and sharing this experience together. As problems began to arise, however, it became more difficult to concentrate on our shared experience without compromising my own happiness.*

*Maybe this is why the quiet moments to myself were becoming more valuable?*

I was realizing throughout my immersive experience that the quiet moments were not just necessary for documenting my experience in a different culture, but they were also a time to reflect on the dynamics of my HPWB group and my role as a participant within it. Thus, these moments became times to reflect and recharge, as well as moments to observe and record.

### **3.3.6 Narrative Five: The Donations**

The shipping container of donations arrived by the time we returned back to Sogog from our week of visiting other communities in the area. After we sorted the supplies, we had a meeting with community members, and then handed out used eyeglasses to those in need. As everyone gathered around the ger where our donations were being stored, I was excited for this chance to make an impact in the community and share our resources with them. My resolve to make a difference was quickly challenged though, as the community members shoved each other, crowded our table, and grabbed at the eyeglasses.

*June 9th, Sogog*

*Journal Entry 23*

*I really wanted to help, but I found myself preoccupied by the lack of personal space as the crowd continued to close in on us.*

*People were reaching from all directions; some even sent their kids into the centre of the pack to reach for the eyeglasses from underneath the table. They did not seem bothered by the closeness of the crowding bodies.*

*Why was this such a big deal to me? Why was I so overwhelmed and uncomfortable?*

I looked over at our leader to see if she was in as rough emotional shape as I was, but instead was taken aback by her positive disposition; she was not the only one who managed to maintain a good attitude despite all of this chaos. One of the girls in our group stood behind our table and organized eyeglasses while trying to shield us from the people reaching, and she did it all with a smile on her face. Together, the two of them helped to change my mindset. Instead of worrying about my own well-being, my attention should be on working together, with both our group and community members, to carry out our HPWB work and help the people of Sogog.

### **3.3.7 Narrative Six: The Breakfast**

It was our first morning back in Ulaanbaatar and the girls were still asleep, making the most of their first night in a real bed since we left for Sogog just over three weeks earlier. I, on the other hand, woke up early to call my family. Luckily the phone call was successful; I had enough time to share with them some of my stories and hear how they were doing before everyone woke up and the Internet connection slowed.

*June 16th, Ulaanbaatar*

*Journal Entry 30*

*The lack of contact with my loved ones has been one of the most challenging aspects of my time in Mongolia so far for two reasons: (1) I am very close with my loved ones, so not being able to contact them meant that I couldn't instantly share and enjoy all of the new things I was doing with them, and (2) issues with the group made it tough not to feel isolated at times; it was hard having moments of "feeling alone" so far from home.*

*So, those moments of connection with them, even if it was just a two-minute call, were very meaningful and significant to me.*

A little while later, the others woke up. Everyone managed to get ready quickly, despite there being only one bathroom and thirteen of us, and we headed out the door to meet the other group for breakfast at a café. I was excited to get there; not only for the food, but because sharing meals together with the group was always a highlight of my day, or at least that was the case when we were back in our Sogog ger.

When we arrived, we picked our pastries, ordered our drinks, and grabbed a table. I was really happy with my selections, and looked forward to our meal, until some of those at our table got the Wi-Fi password. Their focus quickly shifted from our own conversations to catching up with loved ones and checking out social media. This should not have frustrated me because I just did the same thing back at the hostel, but there was something about this situation that did not sit well. I was always overjoyed whenever we had Internet to call home, but in this case it prevented our table from engaging in our meal together.

*This made me think, "Were there times when I was so preoccupied with being connected to home that I missed out on chances to connect with the group?" "Did I concentrate too much on what I*

*was not doing at home, when I should have been present and focused on the opportunities here?”*

### **3.3.8 Putting the Pieces Together**

Pechak & Thompson (2009) stated that meeting the needs of both “the server and those being served” is an important characteristic of ISL (p. 71). This was reflective of the initial goal I set for my ISL experience: to grow as a person while making a difference in the lives of others. With an objective that aimed to serve both myself and a larger community, it was not surprising that: (1) throughout the course of my excursion I encountered many situations in which it was difficult to balance my needs and experiences with those of the other, and (2) the cultural and contextual novelty required a continuous process of negotiating different tensions.

The idea of experiencing tension between dissimilar elements of an immersive excursion appears in Service Learning (SL) and ISL literature through discussions regarding *dissonance* (see Akhurst, 2016; Taylor et al., 2017). Dissonance is described as a “psychological tension” (Brehm & Cohen, 1962). Festinger (1957) states that humans strive to achieve balance or consistency among cognitive elements (p. 260), but if there is a discrepancy between these elements “being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance” (p. 3).

Santoro and Major (2012) stated that, “for students undertaking international experiences, dissonance arises from being in an unfamiliar environment that may be physically, culturally, socially and emotionally challenging” (p. 312). The authors also explained that, “the dissonance created by presenting students with concepts and ideas that challenge sometimes deeply entrenched views, and the associated discomfort can ultimately, lead to learning” (Santoro & Major, 2012, p. 312). Earlier research from Allan (2003) supported this, as the author stated that

students can achieve “real intercultural learning from the experiential process of successful negotiation of cultural dissonance” (p. 105). Furthermore, Allan (2003) described *cultural dissonance* as the “development of the personality of the student, where s/he learns to see and understand different facets of behaviour in people of other cultures, and is able to relate them to him/herself and adapt behaviour accordingly” (p. 104).

While overall my HPWB experience in Mongolia was positive, throughout my excursion I encountered many situations in which I felt a pull between distinct and/or contradictory elements. These feelings resulted from immersion into both the Kazakh-Mongolian cultural context and the HPWB group. In drawing on the dissonance literature, the overall nature of my experience can be described as: the process of negotiating cultural dissonance as I navigated through elements of the Kazakh-Mongolian culture and the HPWB group culture.

In the first narrative (*The Ger*), I shared my profound experience building the ger and interacting with the people of the community for the first time. As I navigated through the cultural dissonances that emerged from this experience, I discovered the power of working together with community members to complete tasks. The second narrative (*The Nutrition Lesson*) went through my experience trying to teach in the community. Again, I was shown the importance of working with the residents, and I learned that I had more to understand before I could effectively teach. The third narrative (*The Vodka Shots*), revealed my struggle to follow local customs that conflicted with my views. Collectively, these narratives illustrated examples of some of the cultural dissonance between contrasting features of my Kazakh-Mongolian cultural immersion. Other situations in which the cultural dissonances arose included: teaching in, and learning from my host communities; managing new activities and time for reflection; and

adhering to my own values and beliefs while respecting the traditions and culture of my host communities.

In an autoethnography on Peace Corp Service in Tanzania, the lead author discusses her struggle to balance “effectiveness and cultural appropriateness” throughout her international volunteer experience (Darling, Kerr, Thorp, & Chung, 2014, p. 17). Similar to my experience, her story describes the pressures she faced while navigating between: (1) her values, the values of her host culture, and the values of the international program; and (2) teaching and learning from community members. Fetcher (2014) also mentions this idea of tension between teaching and learning. In her research, some participants felt they “could have spent more time doing actual hands on work, versus the time they spent in the community; learning about the community and the culture and interacting with the people” (p. 70). Other participants indicated that:

It wasn't the amount of work that was accomplished or the hours they spent working that mattered most but rather it was the quality of time. Working alongside .... and building skills and community together can be beneficial to the local community even after the immersion trip participants return home. (Fetcher, 2014, p. 70)

Fechter (2014) also reported the connection between exploring poverty in the community and exploring one's own privilege across ISL participants. This related to my experience of trying to understand the lifestyle of my host community and its differences and similarities with my own western way-of-living. According to Fetcher (2014), this exploration led to participants having “more questions than answers” (p. 67) and further considerations and reflections.

Darling et al. (2014) claimed that making time to reflect on experiences was crucial in order to help the lead author grow, overcome challenges, and better understand the experience

(p. 33). This importance of reflective time was also noted in an ISL study by Abedini, Gruppen, Kolars, & Kumagai (2012). However, in my experience it was not a question of the value and benefits of reflection, but instead, it was the dissonance between making time for reflection and participating in experiential activities that influenced the nature of my excursion. Overall, after exploring the abovementioned examples, I learned that the situations of cultural dissonance I encountered during my experience within a new cultural group shared similarities to those described by others who have participated in other ISL excursions.

Similar to my Kazakh-Mongolian cultural immersion, my experience in the HPWB group was also one of negotiating cultural dissonance. The last three narratives (*The Quiet Moment*, *The Donations*, and *The Breakfast*) related more to my experiences as a member of the HPWB group. Narrative Four (*The Quiet Moment*) and Narrative Five (*The Donations*) explored our group dynamics, and the differences between separating myself from the group to focus on my own experience and engaging and working within the group. Lastly, Narrative Six (*The Breakfast*) showed the challenges associated with thinking about home and being present with and for the people and opportunities related to the ISL experience. Two other examples of group-related cultural dissonance included: (1) documenting the experience as a researcher and living the experience as a group participant; and (2) disconnecting from home and connecting with the group.

There were many factors that shaped our group dynamics and led to the aforementioned experiences of cultural dissonance. In their study looking at an ISL excursion, Johnson & Howell (2017) describe how the lack of connection with family and friends from home, coupled with the amount of time spent with group members, fostered the development of group cohesion. This group connection made it easier for participants to work and overcome obstacles together while

providing healthcare in the communities (Johnson & Howell, 2017). In my experience, I had trouble with connecting and being disconnected. There were times where I felt really connected to the HPWB group, and that made it easier to be present and focus on promoting health. However, there were also moments when it was challenging to engage with the group and/or be totally disconnected from home. Ultimately, I believe it was this process of feeling challenged (see Santoro & Major, 2012, p. 312) and navigating through cultural dissonances that most strongly resonated with me, forming the nature of this ISL experience in Mongolia with the HPWB group.

### **3.4 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Throughout my immersion in the Kazakh-Mongolian culture, I was constantly balancing aspects of my western knowledge and lifestyle with my understanding of, and living according to, the culture of my host communities. Thus, cultural dissonance seemed to be a foundational aspect of my ISL experience. I found that in order to teach effectively and appropriately, I needed to learn about the Kazakh way-of-living from the communities. In order to understand the cultural differences, I needed to make time for reflection within our busy days of new activities. I also found it challenging to adhere to both my values and those of our hosts. Looking at my immersion as a HPWB group member, although the tensions of balancing collective and individual characteristics and struggling to find connection were unique to my group experience, similarities were found in the literature. Results of this work could be applied during the planning stage of future HPWB excursions, to ensure that group members understand each other's needs and program objectives and the importance of staying present while completing ISL work.

Overall, future research can build on this work to further explore the nature of the ISL experience as the continuous process of negotiating cultural dissonance experienced by participants as they balance various pressures in other cultures and contexts, particularly for those students participating in excursions through the HPWB Program.

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## CHAPTER 4

# A Case Study Exploring Cultural Dissonance Experienced by Students on an International Service Learning Excursion to Mongolia

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#### 4.0 ABSTRACT

**Background:** Many students are engaging in International Service Learning (ISL) experiences abroad, and often these experiences are in host countries with different cultures. Thus, these excursions can involve cultural dissonance for participants due to the vast contrast between participants' home culture and that of the host country. Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) is a program based at a northern Canadian university that has been coordinating ISL excursions to developing countries since 2001. **Purpose:** The purpose of this research was to identify and explore the nature of cultural dissonance that HPWB participants experienced during their 2017 ISL excursion to Mongolia. **Approach:** This research involved a case study methodology, enriched by a thematic analysis of three participants' journals; and supported by excursion observations and recollections of the lead author and two co-authors who all participated in the excursion. **Findings:** Four themes emerged from the data related to cultural dissonance: Activities, Routine, Scope, and Group Dynamics. Although there were unique examples of cultural dissonance for each participant, these four themes were common for all participants. **Implications:** It is clear that cultural dissonance was an important characteristic of the ISL experience for Canadian HPWB students during their ISL excursion to Mongolia. Future research should explore cultural dissonance within other ISL contexts, the relationship between cultural dissonance and learning, and the post-excursion effects of cultural dissonance over time.

**Key Words:** International Service Learning, Health Promotion, Cultural Dissonance

## 4.1 BACKGROUND

### 4.1.1 Introduction

The lead author (S.L.D.) travelled to Mongolia in Spring 2017 with the Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) Program to complete a short-term *International Service Learning (ISL)* excursion with a group of students from a northern Canadian university. After moving through a reflective and analytic journey, the lead author completed an autoethnography to explore and understand the nature of her immersive experience (see Chapter 3). This ISL experience was described by the lead author as “the process of negotiating cultural dissonance as I navigated through elements of the Kazakh-Mongolian culture and the HPWB group culture” (see Chapter 3, p. 49). This was the first formal research conducted on the HPWB Program and the experiences of its participants.

Anecdotal accounts from former students on past HPWB excursions reflected similar experiences, as they learned about themselves and their groups in unfamiliar places and cultures. However, there has been no formal research to confirm or elaborate on the HPWB participants’ experiences of *cultural dissonance*. Thus, there was a need to better understand the nature of cultural dissonance during immersive ISL experiences, such as the HPWB Program. To address that need, this case study aimed to identify and explore the nature of cultural dissonance that HPWB participants experienced during their 2017 ISL excursion to Mongolia.

### 4.1.2 Literature Review

ISL excursions involve reflection (see Fechter, 2014, p. 4; Wright & Lundy, 2012), service work, and academic learning in international communities (Crabtree, 2008, p. 18). Several studies described cultural dissonance as a part of the ISL experience and/or international learning (see Allan, 2002; Allan 2003; Namaste, 2017; Taylor et al. 2017 for examples). Taylor

et al. (2017) explored “students’ developmental readiness for productively negotiating the disorienting dilemmas and dissonance” during a three-week ISL excursion run through a university program to Ecuador (p. 685). Their research suggests that participants feel dissonance as they navigate through differences in privileges and expectations between cultures and communities (Taylor et al., 2017). According to Santoro and Major (2012), dissonance experienced on ISL excursions is an essential precursor to learning (p. 311).

In a study examining the benefits and tensions of immersive international excursions, Akhurst (2016) explains that ISL “often results in students having their ideas challenged, motivating them to find explanations to resolve the disequilibrium they experience” (p. 19; see also Mitchell & Humphries, 2007). Thus, “meaningful, integrative, ‘learning-laden’, and transformative study abroad experiences hinge on students’ ability to make sense of cognitive dissonance” (Namaste, 2017, p. 8). Research from Allan (2002) supports this by stating, “intercultural learning happens at the borders between cultures, the friction or frontier skirmishes of cultural dissonance being the medium through which the learning takes place” (p. 66).

## **4.2 APPROACH**

### **4.2.1 Case Study**

This research used a *case study* approach to explore participants’ experiences of cultural dissonance within an ISL excursion. The case under investigation in this study was the HPWB excursion to Mongolia from May 21st – June 19th, 2017 (see Taylor et al., 2017 for “case” and “case study” descriptions). Case studies “facilitate [the] exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). Patton (2015) explained that there are many views on defining case studies, and that it is the duty of the researcher to

“define what a case is within the context of [their] own field and focus of inquiry” (p. 259).

Taylor & Thomas-Gregory (2015) confirmed this and suggested that a “good” case study adheres to the following: “the context is clearly articulated; and the boundaries of the research are well defined and are evident to the reader” (p. 40). Therefore, the following subsections describe: the context of the HPWB Program, details of the HPWB Excursion to Mongolia, and the main data sources and analysis process.

## **4.2.2 Context: HPWB Program and HPWB Excursion to Mongolia**

### **4.2.2.1 HPWB Program**

Since 2001, the HPWB Program has coordinated an annual ISL excursion for a small group of undergraduate students (usually four or five students) from the School of Human Kinetics (SHK) at Laurentian University (LU) in northern Ontario, Canada. The excursions ranged from two-to-five weeks, and focused primarily on providing health promotion and health education in various communities around the world such as: Costa Rica, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Ghana, and Kenya. Students were immersed in the lifestyle of their host communities while completing their international health promotion work; they also had opportunities to participate in culturally rich experiences and excursions whenever possible. In 2017, two HPWB excursions went overseas to Malawi and Mongolia; this case study focused only on the Mongolia excursion.

Students were selected to participate in the HPWB Program excursion to Mongolia by the HPWB Program Coordinator and the HPWB Selection Committee based on an application process, which involved submission of a Curriculum Vitae and a statement of interest. Pre-excursion HPWB Program requirements included: attending weekly meetings to prepare logistically and culturally for the excursion, creating lesson plans and health promotion material, and organizing fundraising events. During the excursion, students were required to complete

daily journal entries while completing their health promotion work as a reflective activity. This is also an important aspect of the ISL learning process (see Sanders, Van Oss, & McGeary, 2015). Finally, students were required to submit their journals and a summary report to the HPWB Program Coordinator for evaluation following the excursion. If the students completed these requirements successfully, they received academic credit for their HPWB work.

#### **4.2.2.2 HPWB Mongolia Group**

The HPWB group consisted of three Caucasian female students (not including the lead author) and one Caucasian female leader; ages ranged from 19-24 years at the time of the excursion. The students were in varying years of their undergraduate studies in the SHK, and they had no previous experience in the HPWB Program or other ISL programs. The leader was completing her graduate degree in the SHK, and was a previous participant in a HPWB excursion to Mongolia in 2013, while completing her undergraduate degree. This was her first experience as a HPWB leader. Thus, there were five people in the HPWB group: three students, one researcher-participant (the lead author), and the leader.

Some of the group members were friends and/or had participated in other SHK-related experiences together prior to the HPWB Program; others had no previous connections to any of the group members. Before departure, the group participated in meetings and fundraisers on a weekly and monthly basis respectively. The time spent as a collective group before the excursion was relatively minimal compared to the immersive time spent together while completing the ISL work.

To help facilitate this ISL excursion, HPWB worked with a Mongolia-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Source of Steppe Nomads (SoSN). SoSN arranged accommodations, food, and transportation for the group while in western Mongolia. The NGO

President also identified the teaching topics (based on the needs of the communities), coordinated the group's schedule, and travelled with the group as their translator.

It is important to note that another group of 24 LU students and professors from the SHK travelled with the HPWB group to Mongolia, in order to complete a separate outdoor adventure education program with different course requirements. The two groups were together for approximately the first and last weeks of the excursion; they separated in the middle of the excursion for approximately two weeks to complete separate program objectives and itineraries. Although the presence of another group likely impacted the nature of the experience for HPWB participants, neither this impact nor the interactions between groups were explored or included in this case study analysis.

#### **4.2.2.3 HPWB Excursion Location**

Mongolia is a landlocked country bordered by China to the east, south, and west, and Russia to the north (Sanders, 2016, p. 12). The population of Mongolia is approximately three million people, with almost half living in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar (Sanders, 2016, p. 10). Mongol is the language spoken primarily in Ulaanbaatar, and Kazakh is spoken in the north western provinces of Mongolia (Sanders, 2016, p. 11). While most of the population is settled, roughly one third of the people in Mongolia are “directly reliant on mobile/semi-mobile pastoralism as their major livelihood” (Upton, 2010, p. 866). In other words, these people are nomadic, and this characterizes the main communities visited by the HPWB group in Bayan-Ulgii. Figure 1 highlights the western Mongolian province of Bayan-Ulgii, with a full map of Mongolia in the left lower corner of the figure. The HPWB group spent time in the communities of Ulgii, Sogog, Ulaankhus, Dayan, and Zastap.



Figure 1. Map of Mongolia and Western Province of Bayan-Ulgii

Notes: <sup>1</sup>The HPWB group also visited the community of Zastap, which was unable to be located on the map.

<sup>2</sup>This map was created by L.L.Larivière - Laurentian University, 2018.

According to Upton (2010), “nomadism remains a core element of contemporary Mongolian identity and rural practice” (p. 872). Nomadic families travel with their “flocks and herds across the great grassland steppes, and .... carry their shelter, the mobile dwellings known as gers or yurts. These are large circular transportable tents made from poles and felt, with wood-

fired stoves for heating and cooking” (Buckley, Ollenburg, & Zhong, p. 52). Zhang, Borjigin, & Zhang (2007) described the nomadic culture in Mongolia as being “centred on an awe of life”, embodying “harmonious coexistence with nature”, and revering nature and environmental protection (p. 21). Mongolian practices and culture are also strongly influenced by their more recent historical ties to communism and the former Soviet Union (see Upton, 2010).

#### **4.2.2.4 HPWB Mongolia Excursion Overview**

The group travelled from Ontario, Canada to Mongolia mid-May, 2017. After three days in Mongolia’s capital city, Ulaanbaatar, the group travelled to Bayan-Ulgii, where they spent three weeks living and visiting several different steppe communities (Sogog, Dayan, Ulaankhus, and Zastap). In mid-June the group returned to Ulaanbaatar for four days, before concluding their HPWB excursion (See Figures 3 and 4 in Appendix B, p. 106-107 for excursion schedules).

While in Ulaanbaatar, the group explored the city, visited local markets and museums, and toured culturally significant sites. During their time in western Mongolia, some days were dedicated to experiencing different cultural activities (such as camel milking, visiting an eagle hunter, and hiking), but the majority of the time was spent preparing for lessons, travelling to different communities, and engaging in health promotion activities.

Most of the health promotion activities involved lessons that were taught to women in the community, with the exception of three lessons for children, and home visits while travelling through the remote community of Dayan. Lesson topics included: maternal health, maternal nutrition, nutrition, hydration, hand washing, dental health, physical activity, and yoga. The teaching topics were divided amongst the students ahead of time, and the majority of lesson planning took place before the excursion. During the excursion, lesson delivery was the responsibility of the student assigned to that topic, however the entire HPWB group usually

participated in most lessons whenever possible. The lessons were given in English, and the SoSN President translated to Kazakh (the local language) concurrently with the delivery of each lesson.

#### **4.2.2.5 Post-Excursion**

The HPWB Program officially concluded on the last day in Ulaanbaatar, prior to departure for Canada. During past HPWB excursions, groups usually met for a post-excursion debrief at a local restaurant back in Canada, so that students had the opportunity to share their experiences with their leader(s) and the HPWB Program Coordinator. In this excursion, the HPWB group participated in a debrief led by the excursion leader while in Ulaanbaatar. However, due to extenuating circumstances, no debrief meeting was held with the HPWB Coordinator following the excursion.

#### **4.2.3 Research Question**

The analytic phase of this case study aimed to answer the research question: To what extent was cultural dissonance experienced by participants during their HPWB excursion to Mongolia?

#### **4.2.4 Data Sources**

The main source of data was the three participants' excursion journals. Participants were required to keep daily journal entries while immersed in the HPWB experience. The guidelines given to students regarding their journals were very broad: write daily and complete the journal in any form deemed meaningful (lists, pictures, stories, etc.).

This research received Research Ethics Board (REB) approval on March 22nd, 2017 (REB #6009875; see Appendix C for REB Approval Certificate). The participants were informed of the study and provided consent during a pre-excursion meeting with the lead author. In this meeting, the lead author emphasized that: (1) the journals should be completed in accordance

with program requirements, (2) the final grade received by the students for the HPWB work would not be impacted by the study, and (3) the participants held the right to withdraw from the study or remove pages from their journals to prevent the lead author from reading sensitive entries. The rationale for this was to encourage the participants to journal as naturally, authentically, and personally as possible.

The lead author fully participated in the experience as a HPWB group member and maintained a journal with group and participant observations. These notes, in addition to field observations and recollections, were an important additional data source to supplement the participants' journals. Furthermore, co-authors (S.D.R. and E.J.T.) were also on the Mongolia excursion, and their observations and recollections provided an additional source of data and an important contextual contribution to the analysis.

#### **4.2.5 Data Analysis**

On the last day of the program, journals were collected by the HPWB excursion leader and given to the lead author. Upon return to Canada, the journals were transcribed, anonymized (all personal identifiers were removed or replaced with pseudonyms, as per the stipulations listed in the REB agreement) and returned to the HPWB Program Coordinator.

The lead author then thematically analyzed the electronic journals for examples of cultural dissonance. These examples were defined based on the lead author's previous research (see Chapter 3), which considered cultural dissonance to be related to the following culture-related contexts: feeling uncomfortable or outside one's comfort zone, feeling tension, and/or being challenged, or experiencing a challenging situation. The lead author then highlighted examples of cultural dissonance within the participants' journals. The examples were then coded and grouped into themes, guided by coding and analysis strategies that adhered to reasoning

principles (Saldaña, 2014; see section titled: QDA Strategy: To Reason). Two co-authors (S.D.R. and E.J.T.) also reviewed the provisional themes and supporting examples, and all three authors arrived at consensus to reduce any biases in the reported findings.

## **4.3 FINDINGS**

Similar to the experience of the lead author (see Chapter 3), the journals of the participants revealed that while their overall ISL excursion was positive, they also experienced cultural dissonance in various situations. These situations were analyzed and grouped into four common themes related to cultural dissonance experienced during their HPWB excursion to Mongolia: *Activities*, *Routine*, *Scope*, and *Group Dynamics*. Although there were other unique instances of cultural dissonance experienced by participants, this case study focused on profiling the themes common within the data for all three participants, and then confirmed by all three co-authors who also witnessed this during the excursion. A sample of cited quotations from journals that support these themes are provided and presented as they were transcribed verbatim.

### **4.3.1 Theme One: Activities**

This theme describes the cultural dissonance that participants experienced between focusing on their ISL and HPWB duties and balancing this with their desire to participate in new and unique cultural experiences. This interplay was amongst participants' accountabilities to the program requirements and their yearning for personal cultural experiences. The participants experienced this activity-related cultural dissonance in a variety of situations throughout the excursion.

For example, during their time in Mongolia, participants were required to take part in compulsory program-related activities, such as group meetings and sorting donated materials.

Sometimes, these obligations clashed with the participants' preferred activities. One participant wrote:

Before lunch we checked out the Chingus Khan square where they were having a cultural festival. It was really cool we got to see people dressed in some traditional clothes and dance costumes. We didn't get to see any dances because we had to rush to go to lunch at the adventure temple café.

In this case, attending the mandatory group lunch at the Adventure Temple Café conflicted with the activity that the participant wanted to engage in. Thus, in these situations, participants had to reconcile between contrasting aspects: their commitment to their HPWB Program, and their personal aspirations for a meaningful international experience.

Another example was related to activities involving the consumption of alcohol. This often triggered cultural dissonance amongst participants due to different perspectives on suitable behaviours pertaining to alcohol. Looking at the host culture, a narrative from the lead author (see Chapter 3, p. 43) described how host families in western Mongolia offered shots of vodka to their guests, to show appreciation, gratitude, and respect. This meant that as guests of these different host families, the HPWB participants were expected to respectfully accept these shots. Although this cultural tradition of being *toasted* by host families was new for most of the HPWB participants, aspects of this custom were similar to their own alcohol practices, and the shots were well received. Knowledge of this was based on excursion observations by the lead author and supported by the participants' journals. One participant stated:

We visited the governor .... for a special celebration dinner, followed by lots and lots of drinking (vodka mostly). The governor + others would make a toast (all men) and then we would all have to have a shot of vodka.

To provide some context for the significance of this theme, it is important to understand the attitudes towards activities involving alcohol that were related to this specific experience. Knowledge of these attitudes is based on the unique interactions and conditions of this excursion in this specific region of Mongolia, and thus it may not be generalizable to other contexts. From the perspective of the HPWB Program, students are called to be health and wellness role models while completing their international work. Therefore, alcohol consumption was only acceptable as it pertained to exploring and understanding the traditions of the host culture, however this often caused dissonance when the consumption exceeded a perceived acceptable level.

During a two-day excursion to the outlying community of Dayan, participants experienced similar cultural dissonance when engaging in alcohol-related activities impacted their ISL work. In this case, their desire to participate in the unique cultural custom of vodka toasts and views on acceptable alcohol consumption conflicted with their HPWB responsibilities. Based on the excursion journals, this was a particularly challenging learning experience for participants; they recognized that their full engagement in that cultural tradition impeded the delivery of their health promotion lessons. Thus, this experience of cultural dissonance seemed to cultivate personal growth and awareness in participants, as seen in their journal entries.

That being said, later in the excursion participants were given alcohol-related restrictions based on program expectations. These regulations seemed to frustrate participants' desire to explore the area and culture in their own ways. Again, the participants experienced cultural dissonance when the requirements of the program challenged their abilities to engage in their choice of activities.

### 4.3.2 Theme Two: Routine

This theme demonstrated the cultural dissonance that participants felt as they tried to adjust to the host and ISL way-of-living and sustain their regular way-of-living. Specifically, it was a challenge for the participants to practice their usual health habits, while adhering to both the agenda set by the NGO and experiencing the immersive lifestyle of the host communities. Those habits most cited in the journals included sleep duration, exercise, and diet.

In terms of their schedule, participants had to negotiate the need for flexibility and structure. The NGO President determined the group's daily plans; days were often busy, and the "scheduled" lessons and activities could change at any time. This made it challenging to plan ahead, especially when trying to maintain a regular sleep routine or set aside time for exercise. When able to find a balance between the two elements of this dissonance, one participant stated: "I feel like I've finally regained a little bit more control over that, and .... I have been working out the past few days as well, which is something I hope we keep up with (I need to keep up with)." When an imbalance occurred, however, the same participant wrote, "The last couple days have been pretty draining and I'm not sure why – maybe it's a mixture of sleep deprivation, being with the same people all of the time or just always being on the go and not having a set routine...." Other participants expressed similar sentiments in terms of adapting to a variable agenda and making time to attend to their wellness needs.

Furthermore, the diet of the host communities was different than the typical diet of the participants due to a combination of geographical, socio-economical, and cultural factors. Although the NGO hired cooks tried to accommodate for this difference (by buying western sauces or spices, for example), many meals were hosted by local community members and thus prepared in a more traditional way. In either situation, the foods available to, and eaten by,

participants contributed to this dissonance. Although some participants tried to mitigate these dietary differences by bringing their own supplements or snacks, all three participants discussed (both in their journals and during the excursion) the challenge to “stay healthy” and/or “feel good” while adjusting to local eating customs and foods.

### **4.3.3 Theme Three: Scope**

This theme reveals the cultural dissonance that participants experienced as they navigated through recognizing health and education disparities and working within their means to address the compelling need. The first lessons in Sogog were eye-opening for participants as they realized the differences between cultures, especially in terms of education. Following the first maternal health lesson, one participant stated:

I couldn't believe the ladies general lack of knowledge of the menstrual cycle and periods. What I thought would be a five minute conversation turned out to be the majority of the lesson. I explained the reason why we have a period, and then gave them some signs and what you can do once you become pregnant. The ladies have lots of questions and I was happy to tell them. It opened my eyes that these women don't really get any form of health education in their schooling.

Another participant commented that “everything we are teaching seems to be so new.... it's incredible .... It really makes me open my eyes as to how lucky we are in Canada.” Ultimately, with each lesson taught, participants became increasingly aware of the importance of their health promotion work and the value of sharing their knowledge with others.

As the excursion continued, participants remained eager to help the different communities through their health education lessons and donations. However, at times

participants experienced tension between what they were able to do and wanting to do more. For instance, during their visit to families' homes in Dayan, one participant reflected:

We soon realized that we don't have all of the supplies that we would want to supply our generosity needs. It was sad going into some of the homes and seeing how little these people have. You just want to give them everything you have, but you know you only have so much and that there's more than just this family struggling in this community.

For another participant, the sense of "wanting to do more" inspired them to take further action beyond the ISL excursion. This participant wrote: "I know what my purpose in life is now. I need to go home + get the education I've taken for granted and use it to help people that don't have the opportunity to get the same level of education."

#### **4.3.4 Theme Four: Group Dynamics**

This theme provided insight into the dissonance that participants experienced as they navigated through group differences between other HPWB members and themselves. In some instances, this dissonance made participants feel disconnected from the HPWB group and more connected to home. One participant indicated, "I kind of feel a bit like I'm going crazy and actually miss my friends/having someone to talk to that I know cares about me and has known me for along time around." Another participant stated, "I think this is the hardest part about this trip. My communication with the people I love is cut." At other times, participants focused more on their personal experiences as a result of this dissonance. One participant said, "I miss working out and being on my own, making my own decisions...." Additionally, all participants journaled about their own travel plans, ideas, wants, and experiences outside of the group.

#### 4.4 IMPLICATIONS

It is clear from the literature (see Namaste, 2017; Taylor et al., 2017), and from the findings of this case study, that cultural dissonance is a central characteristic of the ISL experience. All three participants from this study experienced aspects of cultural dissonance reflected in the four themes: *Activities*, *Routine*, *Scope*, and *Group Dynamics*. These findings lead to several implications.

The *activities* theme revealed the importance of having well-defined expectations prior to an ISL excursion. Although the HPWB Program cannot change the values or desires of its participants, especially in terms of their alcohol-related behaviours, setting clear goals and expectations for participants before the ISL excursion may have been helpful in mitigating the clashes between those values and desires, and the program mandate and aims. Namaste (2017) discussed how ISL leads to learning, but the type of learning changed depending on the direction given to students (p. 7). In one of her findings, Namaste (2017) reported that, “universities need to explicitly state their own student learning objectives for semester-long study abroad programs so as to aim for consistency of desired outcomes” (p. 8). Interestingly, one participant echoed this idea by stating that students need “clearer expectations” during the excursion and recommended implementing this idea to improve future HPWB excursions.

The *routine* theme highlighted the importance of considering the unique characteristics of the HPWB group. The participants of this HPWB case study were health promotion students. Thus, they may value or practice certain health actions differently than students from other populations or areas of study. The participants’ efforts to exercise during the excursion, their excitement when able to purchase fruit, and their conversations related to other aspects of health, might all be examples that are specific to this group because of their personal or educational

interests and habits. Thus, this cultural dissonance may not be as relevant for ISL students in other contexts.

Furthermore, the participants of this case study were all Caucasian females residing in the same small northern Canadian city. These factors shaped their personal cultures, the culture of the HPWB group, and their interactions within the Kazakh culture. Thus, the routine theme, as well as the group dynamics theme, may have been different for other participants with varying genders, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Research by Taylor et al. (2017) supports this idea, as their findings revealed that participants experienced dissonance during their ISL work as a result of differences in race, gender, and social identities between group members, and this also impacted their personal and group interactions with members of the host culture (p. 693).

The *scope* theme was clearly portrayed through participants' expressing feelings of wanting to help and wishing to do more. For some, this cultural dissonance may have been partially resolved after receiving positive feedback from community members and local health care providers. For example, after a meeting with the local doctors in Ulaankhus, one participant stated, "that made me super happy and just acted as a positive reinforcement that we're actually doing something good + impacting the community (even if it feels like we're not getting our message fully across)".

For others, perhaps the resolution to further their own education was enough to settle the discord between these two different aspects of the dissonance. Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) support this connection between ISL experiences and participants' post-ISL education and career decisions. In their findings, based on interviews and focus groups with ISL alumni, Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) reported:

These participants addressed the question of career choice with a strong and clear voice: their attitude seemed to confirm that their educational and career expectations were decisively shaped by their service-learning experience. Many participants felt that the experience played such a transformational role because of the way in which service-learning combines academic work with practical work at an agency. (p. 144)

Due to the limited scope of this case study, it is unknown whether or not the HPWB participants upheld their respective post-ISL resolutions related to this scope theme. Future retrospective research could explore this further, following up from research on the reflective experiences of participants after immediately returning from their HPWB excursions.

The *group dynamics* theme reflected feelings of dissonance while participants were immersed into the new culture and dynamics of the HPWB group. Thus, although the previous three themes reflected a dissonance with the Kazakh culture, this theme reflected a dissonance within the cultural parameters of the travel group. Interestingly though, unlike the other instances of cultural dissonance, this dissonance was not addressed or discussed as an entire group during the excursion. One explanation may be that the act of journaling was therapeutic or healing for some participants, and as a result they did not feel the need to bring the discord forward to the group.

Alternatively, perhaps the lack of discussion was related to the level of connection or comfort between participants. As mentioned earlier, not all of the group members knew each other before the excursion, and as a group, only a few hours per month were spent together leading up to the excursion. As a result, this unfamiliarity with each other may have contributed to the dissonance experienced and/or prevented it from being resolved. Ultimately, for whatever

reason(s), this dissonance between perceived challenging dynamics in the group versus reconciling those dynamics personally seemed to linger without obvious resolution.

Group reflection is one potential remedy to the dissonance related to group dynamics. In a recent publication, Asfeldt, Hvenegaard, and Purc-Stephenson (2017) explored students' experiences using a group journaling activity during an expedition. Their research found that journaling was more effective in group settings, where the participants have the opportunities to: receive feedback, learn together, and change viewpoints (Asfeldt et al., 2017, p. 4). The authors identified five themes relating to students' perceptions of a group journal activity: (1) promoted learning from others' perspectives, (2) enhanced reflection and facilitated learning, (3) enhanced sense of community, (4) preserved memories and enhanced meaning, and (5) avenue for expression and fun (Asfeldt et al., 2017, p. 9). Hence, incorporating formal group reflective activities into the HPWB excursion program could help participants to bond, develop stronger connections, and work through dissonance pertaining to group dynamics.

Although these four themes provide rich details, it is important to understand the role of cultural dissonance in the learning process of participants during ISL experiences. Allan (2002; 2003) related the influence of cultural dissonance through process and intercultural learning models. He suggested that in order to promote intercultural learning, one must recognize and work with cultural dissonance (Allan, 2002, p.84; Allan, 2003, p. 107). Taylor et al. (2017) explored the interrelationship between dissonance and developmental readiness (p. 688), and found that sources of dissonance, and responses to dissonance, varied amongst ISL participants. Additionally, Namaste (2017) suggested that the capacities of participants to process cultural dissonance determines the impact and meaning of their ISL experience (p. 8). More research is

required in order to better understand how cultural dissonance relates to the educational process in ISL contexts and within different populations of participants.

## **4.5 CONCLUSION**

This case study identified four themes related to the nature of cultural dissonance for three students from an ISL excursion to western Mongolia. The activity theme reflected the cultural dissonance participants experienced as they negotiated between contrasting views of planned activities related to the program versus other activities related to exploring and experiencing the new culture. The routine theme reflected the process of navigating the immersed lifestyle within a new culture while trying to maintain aspects of one's usual lifestyle. The scope theme revealed the cultural dissonance participants encountered as they reconciled their desire to have a greater impact in their host communities with the limited resources available. Finally, the group dynamic theme exposed the dissonance HPWB members experienced while navigating through group and personal differences. It is important to note that these themes are not necessarily generalizable to other ISL contexts and populations.

Connecting these themes to Service Learning (SL) and ISL literature leads to several implications for the HPWB Program. HPWB leaders should discuss group dynamics and the characteristics of the travel group culture within the host culture. Group reflective activities should be used to foster connection and resolve discord amongst the group. This can be applied throughout all stages of the ISL excursion (pre-, during-, and post-excursion) to enhance reflection, connection between group members, and overall group cohesion. It may also lead to further cultural learning and personal growth during the excursion.

There are several important recommendations for future research that emerged from this case study. First, HPWB studies and other ISL research should consider longitudinal and retrospective study designs to identify longer-term impacts from the experience and how they may change over time. Second, more studies are needed to better understand the role of cultural dissonance as it relates to the learning process in ISL contexts. Structured journal reflection questions during the excursion, and post-excursion interviews and/or focus groups, could be used to better understand how knowledge was constructed and gained by participants as they moved through cultural dissonance during their immersive excursions. Finally, future research should also continue to explore the nature and characteristics of cultural dissonance in other ISL experiences, contexts, and cultures. This could lead to the development of an evidence-based theory on how cultural dissonance relates to and reflects the educational process for ISL students.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Discussion**

## **5.0 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to integrate the three manuscripts presented in Chapters 2-4. Manuscript One (Chapter 2) explored reflexivity through an autoethnographic narrative of my yoga class experience; this prepared me for my International Service Learning (ISL) excursion to Mongolia. Manuscript Two (Chapter 3) provided insight into the nature of my immersive excursion through autoethnographic narratives that described my experience in Mongolia as a Health Promotion Without Borders (HPWB) Program participant. This revealed a common theme related to cultural dissonance that was reflected through all six narratives. Manuscript Three (Chapter 4) used the knowledge gained from my autoethnographic exploration to search for an understanding of the cultural dissonances experienced by my fellow HPWB group members while in Mongolia.

Integrating these three manuscripts creates a compelling portrayal of the nature of the HPWB experiences as it relates to cultural dissonance. This research also leads to several recommendations for the HPWB Program, and implications for the Source of Steppe Nomads (SoSN) and collaborating partners. Additionally, limitations of this research are discussed and suggestions for future research are offered.

## **5.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **5.1.1 Manuscript One**

This manuscript explored my development as a reflexive researcher, through my constructed narrative of a yoga class experience. Although it was initially written as an assignment to satisfy a course requirement, my narrative developed into an essential chapter in the larger story of my thesis research. It served the purposes of: (1) highlighting my connections

to, and personal motivations for, the topic and path I chose for my thesis research, (2) introducing autoethnography, (3) preparing me for utilizing my own experiences as data in my subsequent research endeavours, and (4) providing an innovative example of an experience that connected a yoga practice with the research process.

Critically considering the connections between different dimensions of my being and my thesis, or practicing reflexivity, is important as a qualitative researcher because it clarifies my subjectivities to the reader (see Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 19). Moving through a reflexive self-exploration also enriches research methods and outcomes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 21). Thus, this manuscript shed light on an important aspect of the research process.

Furthermore, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) wrote that autoethnography “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (p. 274). Therefore, my journey to develop reflexivity acted as a preparatory tool that enabled me to explore aspects of this methodology before conducting the core of my thesis research. It also introduced the reader to, and prepared the reader for, the autoethnographic exploration of my immersive excursion, which was presented in the following chapter.

Lastly, Manuscript One shared the story of an impactful experience in which yoga, reflexivity, and autoethnography intersect. This is significant, as research exploring that interconnection is sparse. Therefore, Manuscript One not only enhanced my research process and thesis document, but it also addressed a gap in the academic literature.

### **5.1.2 Manuscript Two**

Manuscript Two explored the nature of my immersive HPWB excursion to Mongolia using a reflexive autoethnographic method. Although the experience was positive overall, I

encountered many moments of cultural dissonance, which arose from my immersion into the culture of our host communities and the culture of our HPWB travel group. I shared these experiences of cultural dissonance through six narratives. Together, these narratives aimed to: (1) describe situations in which I navigated through cultural dissonance, (2) express my thoughts and feelings as I tried to comprehend the cultural dissonance I experienced, (3) derive, and share, knowledge from my experiences of cultural dissonance.

The first three narratives (*The Ger*, *The Nutrition Lesson*, and *The Vodka Shot*) portrayed examples of the cultural dissonance I experienced as I negotiated between differences in the Kazakh culture of our western-Mongolian host communities and my own culture. Some of these cultural differences included: style of homes, decorum for hosting guests, education systems, access to various resources, and views on alcohol practices and consumption. Recognizing and reflecting on these differences helped me to find a balance between: teaching in, and learning from my host communities, and adhering to my own values and beliefs while respecting the traditions and culture of my host communities. These examples of cultural dissonance were then connected to the ISL literature (see Abedini, Gruppen, Kolars, & Kumagai, 2012; Darling, Kerr, Thorp, & Chung, 2014; Fechter, 2014) to draw further meaning from my experiences.

The last three narratives (*The Quiet Moment*, *The Donations*, and *The Breakfast*) provided examples of the cultural dissonance I felt during my HPWB group experience, due to the differences between my group members and myself. As I navigated through these differences, I also negotiated between: (1) documenting the excursion as a researcher and living the excursion as a group participant, and (2) disconnecting from home and connecting with the group. Again, these examples of cultural dissonance were linked to ISL literature (see Abedini et al., 2012; Johnson & Howell, 2017).

Ultimately, moving through these moments of cultural dissonance challenged my usual way-of-thinking and/or doing things. Critically reflecting on these moments of cultural dissonance enabled growth and understanding. Sharing these moments of cultural dissonance in the form of six narratives provided a snapshot of my excursion for the reader to experience, and make sense of, in their own way. Connecting these experiences of cultural dissonance to ISL literature further enhanced the knowledge gained from this HPWB experience.

The prominence of cultural dissonance that emerged within my own immersive excursion led to a compelling research question addressed in Manuscript Three: To what extent is cultural dissonance experienced by participants during their HPWB excursion to Mongolia?

### **5.1.3 Manuscript Three**

Manuscript Three applied my knowledge of cultural dissonance, derived from the autoethnographic exploration of my HPWB excursion, to understand the nature of cultural dissonance experienced by my fellow HPWB group members while in Mongolia. Through a case study approach, enriched by a thematic analysis, I found that my fellow HPWB group members also experienced cultural dissonance as they navigated personal and cultural differences while immersed in Kazakh communities and the HPWB group. I analyzed, coded, and grouped these experiences into four themes that were common across the data for all participants: *Activities*, *Routines*, *Scope*, and *Group Dynamics*.

*Activities* referred to the cultural dissonance participants experienced between remaining committed to ISL activities and expectations and wanting to participate in cultural activities. *Routines* captured the cultural dissonance participants felt when trying to follow the host community and ISL program routines and health behaviours and trying to maintain their regular routines and health behaviours. *Scope* described the cultural dissonance participants experienced

between working within their means, abilities, and expertise, and wanting to do more for the host communities to address the compelling needs. Finally, *group dynamics* examined the participants' perceptions of challenging dynamics in the group and reconciling those dynamics personally. Together, these themes provided further insight into the cultural dissonances experienced by participants during their HPWB excursion. Linking these themes to research by Asfeldt, Hvenegaard, & Purc-Stephenson (2017), Namaste (2017), Taylor et al. (2017), and Tonkin & Quiroga (2004), further broadened the knowledge and resulting implications from this exploration of an ISL experience.

#### **5.1.4 Integration of Manuscripts**

Taken together, these three manuscripts add to the academic literature in several distinct ways. First, Manuscript One presents an alternative approach for self-discovery and reflexivity through yoga. Second, Manuscript One and Two both provide additional contributions to the use of autoethnographic methods, particularly in an ISL context. Third, Manuscripts Two and Three broaden and deepen our collective knowledge-base on cultural dissonance during an ISL experience. Table 2 (p. 89) summarizes the key findings and significances of each manuscript.

**Table 2: Summary of Manuscript Findings and Significances**

	<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>Manuscript One</b>	Exploring my research through my yoga class experience allowed me to better understand myself as a person and researcher, become mindful of how my own views shape my experiences, and develop a deeper level of critical reflection.	Tells the story of an experience that unites reflexivity, autoethnography, and yoga practice, which provides insight into the research process, and fills a unique literature gap.
<b>Manuscript Two</b>	While the overall nature of my HPWB experience in Mongolia was positive, the cultural and contextual novelty required a continuous process of negotiating cultural dissonance between different aspects of the immersive experience.	Shares several narratives that show the impact of cultural dissonance on the nature of ISL experiences; this may benefit ISL coordinators, leaders, and participants, especially those involved in HPWB.
<b>Manuscript Three</b>	This research identified four themes related to the nature of cultural dissonance for three students from an ISL trip to western Mongolia.	Offers greater insight into experiences of cultural dissonance during ISL excursions, which may help ISL coordinators, leaders, participants, and HPWB.

Additionally, ISL excursions are recognized in several publications as a type of experiential learning (EL) (see Crabtree, 2008; Fechter, 2014, p. 4; Hayward & Charrette, 2012, p. 79; Pagano & Roselle, 2009). According to Kolb (1984), models of EL suggest that: “learning is by its very nature a tension and conflict-filled process” (p. 30), and “learning results from resolution of these conflicts” (p. 29). In order to gain knowledge, learners must be able to: “involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences”; “reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives”; “create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories”; and “use these theories to make decisions and solve problems” (Kolb, 1984, p. 30).

During our immersive excursion to Mongolia, my HPWB group members and I had many new experiences and reflected on these experiences in our journals. However,

understanding the nature of learning from the reflections on these experiences was beyond the scope of this thesis project. That being said, a connection can still be made between: (1) our HPWB group's experiences of cultural dissonance, during which we were challenged by conflicting aspects that resulted from immersion in new cultural groups; and (2) Kolb's (1984) discussion of EL models, in which he connected this form of learning to "conflicts between opposing ways of dealing with the world" (p. 29). This connection should be further explored in future ISL research in order to increase the academic literature on cultural dissonance and EL during ISL excursions.

## **5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.2.1 Recommendations for the HPWB Program**

The purpose of this section is to propose several recommendations for the pre-excursion stage, excursion stage, and post-excursion stage of the HPWB Program. These recommendations are based on my immersive experience in the HPWB Program, and the results from Manuscript Two-Four. They are aimed to improve or enhance the experiences of future HPWB participants.

There are five recommendations that the HPWB Program can consider implementing during the pre-excursion stage to improve of the ISL experience: (1) modify the application process, (2) facilitate formal goal-setting activities, (3) incorporate group reflection activities into weekly pre-excursion meetings, (4) increase pre-excursion cultural learning, and (5) increase the duration of time spent together as a group before the excursion. The purposes of these recommendations are: to improve the participant selection process, to facilitate group bonding, enhance personal growth, and stimulate cultural learning. Table 3 (p. 92) summarizes these

recommendations with additional detail on the purposes and confirmatory references to the literature.

**Table 3: Pre-Excursion Recommendations**

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Purpose(s)</b>	<b>Supporting Literature</b>
Modify the application process to include a multi-dimensional interview component.	(1) Enables the HPWB Program Coordinator and excursion leader(s) to gain a better understanding of the knowledge, abilities, and personalities of prospective HPWB participants; (2) Increases the rigour of participant and group selection.	See research from Eva, Rosenfeld, Reiter, & Norman (2004) on the use of a Multiple Mini Interview (MMI) format; an adapted version of the MMI process can be developed and incorporated into the HPWB application process.
Facilitate formal goal-setting activities during the first group meetings; establishing program, group, and individual goals for the pre-, during-, and post-excursion stages of the ISL experience.	(1) Clarifies program, group, and individual expectations; (2) Provides insight into the participants' ISL aspirations, which the HPWB Program Coordinator and excursion leaders can use to inform excursion opportunities and projects.	See research from Namaste (2017), on the importance of developing explicit learning objectives for international immersive experiences (p. 8).
Incorporate group reflection activities into weekly pre-excursion meetings.	(1) Promotes connection and cohesion amongst group members; (2) Enhances personal and group learning.	See research from Asfeldt, et al. (2017) on benefits of group journaling and reflection (p. 9).
Increase pre-excursion cultural learning by having participants plan and present lessons on topics related to the host-community and the HPWB project(s) (including: language, lifestyle, and health care system).	(1) Stimulates cultural learning; (2) Provides participants the opportunity to practice preparing and delivering lessons to a group.	See research from Lattanzi, & Pechak (2011) on pre-excursion cultural competency training (p. 107).
Increase the duration of time spent together as a group before the excursion by offering a mix of learning-related and relaxed activities for the group (examples: movie nights and cooking classes).	(1) Encourages group bonding; (2) Enhances knowledge & skills relevant to the ISL experience.	See research from Johnson & Howell (2017), which discusses the importance of social time for ISL groups (p. 252).

There are four recommendations that can be considered for incorporation into the HPWB Program while participants are completing their international health promotion work during the excursion. These recommendations include: (1) allocate more time for participants to engage in local daily living activities; (2) facilitate daily group reflection sessions; (3) provide questions for structured reflection; and (4) supplement written journal entries with photo- or video-based reflections. The primary purposes of these recommendations are to enhance cultural learning and group cohesion. Table 4 (p. 93) summarizes these recommendations with additional detail on the purposes and confirmatory references to the literature.

**Table 4: Excursion Recommendations**

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Purpose(s)</b>	<b>Supporting Literature</b>
Allocate more time for participants to engage in, or assist with, daily living activities with members of their host communities (examples: cooking and cleaning).	(1) Increases cultural learning; (2) Strengthens participants' relationships with their host communities.	See research from Amerson (2014), which recommends unstructured community time, and learning from community members during ISL experiences (p. 178).
Facilitate daily group reflection sessions.	(1) Furthers connection and cohesion amongst group members; (2) Enhances personal and group learning.	See research from Asfeldt et al. (2017) on benefits of group journaling and reflection (p. 9).
Provide questions for structured reflective journaling.	(1) Enriches reflection and learning; (2) Provides common themes for discussion at reflection sessions.	See findings from Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah (2004) on the benefits of structured journaling (p. 43).
Supplement written journal entries with photograph- or video-based reflections.	(1) Provides participants with alternative methods of reflecting on, and making meaning of, their experiences.	See research from Namaste (2017), in which photographs were incorporated into reflective activities for students (p. 10-12); see also Amerson (2014, p. 178).

There are four recommendations for consideration during the post-excursion stage of the HPWB Program. These recommendations include: (1) facilitate post-excursion group reflection discussions, (2) include a structured reflective essay in the post-excursion requirements, (3) have participants follow-up with the NGO and their host families, and (4) connect HPWB alumni with new HPWB participants. These recommendations are mainly aimed at furthering participant reflection and learning. Table 5 (p. 94) summarizes these recommendations with additional detail on the purposes and confirmatory references to the literature.

**Table 5: Post-Excursion Recommendations**

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Purposes</b>	<b>Supporting Literature</b>
Facilitate post-excursion group reflection discussions.	(1) Furthers group connection; (2) Enhances personal and group learning.	See research from Abedini et al. (2012), which supports the need for post-excursion group reflection (p. 826).
Include a structured reflective essay in the post-excursion requirements.	(1) Increases reflection and personal growth; (2) Enhances cultural learning.	See research from Namaste (2017) for sample reflective essay questions (p. 15).
Have participants write and send follow-up/thank-you cards to their partnered NGO and host communities.	(1) Ensures that participants' relationships with the NGO and their host-families are sustained; (2) Further develops participants' sense of responsibility to their host communities.	See research from Lattanzi & Pechak (2011), which discusses the importance of post-excursion communication with communities (p. 107).
Connect HPWB Alumni with new HPWB group members.	(1) Allows participants to share their knowledge and experience; (2) Stimulates further learning within participants as they reflect on their excursions.	See research from Taylor et al. (2017), which suggests educators should create opportunities for post-excursion students to connect with pre-excursion students (p. 701).

### **5.2.2 Implications for SoSN and Collaborative Partners**

The HPWB Program partnered with the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) SoSN in order to make the Mongolia excursion possible. This organization coordinated the schedules, accommodations, meals, transportation, excursions, and service-work for the HPWB group. The NGO President travelled alongside the group and translated for group members. Thus, SoSN played a significant role in the experiences of the HPWB group as they completed their ISL work.

Based on this research and my experiences as an HPWB student working with SoSN, I offer three suggestions for consideration related to future partnerships with this NGO (see Table 6, p. 96). The purposes of these suggestions are to: (1) strengthen the relationship between HPWB and SoSN, (2) ensure HPWB is meeting the needs of SoSN and the different communities it serves, and (3) enhance the cultural-learning and service-learning experiences of HPWB students. While these suggestions are specific to my unique interactions with SoSN, some ideas may be transferrable to partnerships with other NGOs, or SoSN's partnerships with other ISL Programs.

**Table 6: Implications for HPWB Students, SoSN and Collaborative Partners**

<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Implication(s) for HPWB Students</b>	<b>Implication(s) for SoSN NGO</b>
Encourage ISL Participants to Learn the Local Language.	While the SoSN President travels with the group to translate lessons and facilitate conversations with community members, knowing and practicing basic phrases creates more opportunities for students to connect with host families and community members. Thus, making more effort to communicate in Kazakh can strengthen the relationships made with the community during the ISL excursion.	Help or offer support to students as they learn basic Kazakh phrases both before and during their excursion. For example, during the ISL excursion SoSN can facilitate language lessons, where community members teach Kazakh to HPWB students.
Ensure the Health Promotion Work is Sustainable.	It is important that SoSN and communities have access to HPWB's health promotion lessons, so that the community members can continue learning and practicing new health behaviours after the HPWB students have left. Thus, students should spend more time creating clearly organized copies of their lesson plans for SoSN, and a variety of educational resources (such as posters, games, etc.) to leave with the community members. Also, students should work with SoSN to translate educational resources prior to arrival in Mongolia.	Provide direction to students on the resources that would best serve SoSN and communities, and assist students with the translation of educational resources prior to arrival in Mongolia.
Develop an Inquisitive Culture During the Experience.	Students will encounter many new cultural situations during their immersive work. To learn from these experiences, students should seek clarity from SoSN and community members by asking respectful and genuine questions.	Create an environment that stimulates and encourages cultural learning. For example: after cultural activities, provide students with the opportunity to ask questions.

## **5.3 CONCLUSION**

### **5.3.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Manuscript One explored the connection between my yoga class experience and my reflexive learning. This work was based on my own unique experience. Therefore, more research should investigate the influence of yoga experiences on the research process and the development of reflexivity, in order to see if others have similarly profound and helpful experiences. Furthermore, given the importance of reflexivity within qualitative research (see Sparkes and Smith, 2014, p. 19), future research should continue to explore yoga, narratives, and other novel mediums for cultivating reflexive and critical thinking skills.

Manuscript Two examined my experience as a HPWB participant completing an ISL excursion in western Mongolia and it highlighted the impact of cultural dissonance on the overall nature of my experience. Like Manuscript One, this research used an autoethnographic approach that explored my unique experience. Future research should further explore cultural dissonance within the experiences of other ISL participants, particularly as it relates to learning and personal growth. This research should consider the perspectives of students from different demographics, travelling to a variety of countries, and through both HPWB and other ISL Programs.

Manuscript Three explored cultural dissonance through a case study of the experiences of my fellow HPWB group members. First, this research was based on the experiences of this specific group, which consisted of young female, Caucasian students from the Human Kinetics Faculty of a northern Canadian university. The results may be different for students of other genders, ethnicities, programs, locations, or other groups that consist of students with varying characteristics. Second, the experiences of the HPWB group may have been influenced by the presence of another group of Laurentian University (LU) students, who also travelled to

Mongolia to fulfill different program requirements. In the 17 years of HPWB, this is the first trip in which the HPWB group travelled with another group from the same university. Therefore, some of the cultural dissonance experiences may not be applicable to the HPWB trips that took place, or will take place, without the presence of another group.

Overall, future research should explore the nature of cultural dissonance within the experiences of participants on other HPWB and ISL excursions. Additionally, more studies are needed to explore the role of cultural dissonance within the learning process of ISL excursions. Lastly, longitudinal and/or retrospective studies should be completed to explore longer-term impacts of ISL experiences generally, and the role of cultural dissonance specifically.

### **5.3.2 Reflections on My Research Experience**

#### **5.3.2.1 Challenges**

As I reflected on my research experience, I first recalled the many diverse challenges that I faced during the data collection, analysis, and writing processes of my thesis. First, within both of my autoethnographic journeys I needed to overcome: (1) my concerns of being able to express my feelings in both vulnerable and meaningful ways, and (2) my struggle with writing both creative and thought-provoking narratives that captured my experiences. In the second phase of my ISL research, which explored the experiences of my HPWB group members, my most substantive challenge was honouring their unique stories without imposing my own views on their data. Lastly, after analyzing the data and moving through the writing process, there were many instances in which I lost sight of the *bigger picture* that I was trying to communicate. Between stubbornly clinging to phrases or paragraphs that did not adequately express my desired ideas, and writing disjointed manuscripts that forced paragraphs together like mismatched pieces

from different puzzles, I struggled to weave together all of my ideas in a clear, convincing, and compelling way.

Admittedly these difficulties all stemmed from my own decisions and choices regarding my thesis project. Ultimately though, they led to further growth as a researcher. Through my autoethnographies, I was really challenged to push myself; as a result, I became more confident in my abilities as a writer and researcher. While analyzing my group members' journals, I gained a greater appreciation for the process of understanding and telling the participants' stories. Finally, through writing the different chapters of this thesis document, I realized the importance of having a clear message for each chapter and making sure that the different components of the chapter aligned to convey that message.

Altogether, the lessons learned from tackling those different obstacles were some of the most impactful takeaways from this research experience. Furthermore, the purpose of sharing these obstacles and lessons was to provide insight into my experience. This may resonate with other researchers and perhaps help them to make sense of their own research experiences.

#### **5.3.2.2 Benefits**

I chose this direction for my research because I wanted to have a meaningful international experience through the HPWB Program. The excursion itself was very impactful; writing an autoethnography of my excursion experiences further enhanced, and helped me to make sense of, my time in Mongolia. This allowed me to derive greater meaning from my participation in the HPWB Program. Also, I found the autoethnographic process and the “therapeutic consequences of stories” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pg. 746) provided clarity and guidance as I transition into the next chapter of my life.

Another goal for my thesis was to benefit the HPWB Program and all of those involved in this special ISL opportunity. As this research is the formal exploration of the nature of the HPWB experience, I hope it is useful for the HPWB Program Coordinator and future excursion leaders, so that they can gain insight into participants' perspectives of their immersive experiences. Also, I hope the narratives and experiences discussed in this thesis can better prepare future HPWB participants for the different situations they may encounter during their own ISL excursions. In particular, this research may help other HPWB students, as well as ISL students from other programs, to learn from their experiences of cultural dissonance and perhaps derive greater meaning from their excursions as a whole.

In addition to potentially benefitting the HPWB Program, I hope this research may also positively affect the SoSN NGO. The excursion would not have been possible without the SoSN President and the other SoSN members, all of whom worked tirelessly to create an impactful and enjoyable experience for our HPWB group. The list of implications (Table 6, p. 96) will hopefully be useful to the NGO as they continue to partner with ISL Programs and help facilitate international service work opportunities.

### **5.3.3 Conclusion**

My research within Manuscripts One and Two led to several important findings. Through using an autoethnographic method, I discovered the value of learning from my personal experiences and using those experiences to construct and share knowledge. The importance of reflecting critically, practicing reflexivity, and becoming aware of the connections between my experiences and the experiences of others were three additional key findings from my unique experiences within the first two manuscripts. Lastly, I found that sharing my experiences and

reflections in the form of narratives led to a greater understanding of how to disseminate knowledge in an accessible, interesting, and novel way.

Another significant finding from Manuscript Two was the role of cultural dissonance in shaping the nature of my ISL excursion. Furthermore, this finding of cultural dissonance within my own experience was so meaningful that it led to further research (presented in Manuscript Three) on the cultural dissonance experienced by my HPWB group members. Together, the examples of cultural dissonance conveyed in both manuscripts demonstrated that it was a critical component of our HPWB excursion to Mongolia.

Overall, this thesis research was impactful on a personal level, local program level (HPWB), and international program level (SoSN and other ISL Programs), as well as an academic level by addressing several gaps in the literature. This research provided insight into reflexive autoethnographic methods, and the nature of ISL excursions from the perspective of participants. Further research should continue to explore the reflexive process and the experiences of participants within other HPWB and ISL contexts. This research also identified cultural dissonance as an important aspect of the HPWB experience. Future research should continue to explore cultural dissonance within other contexts, as well as the role of cultural dissonance within the learning process of ISL experiences.

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## APPENDIX A

### Appendix A: Supplementary Information for Manuscript Two

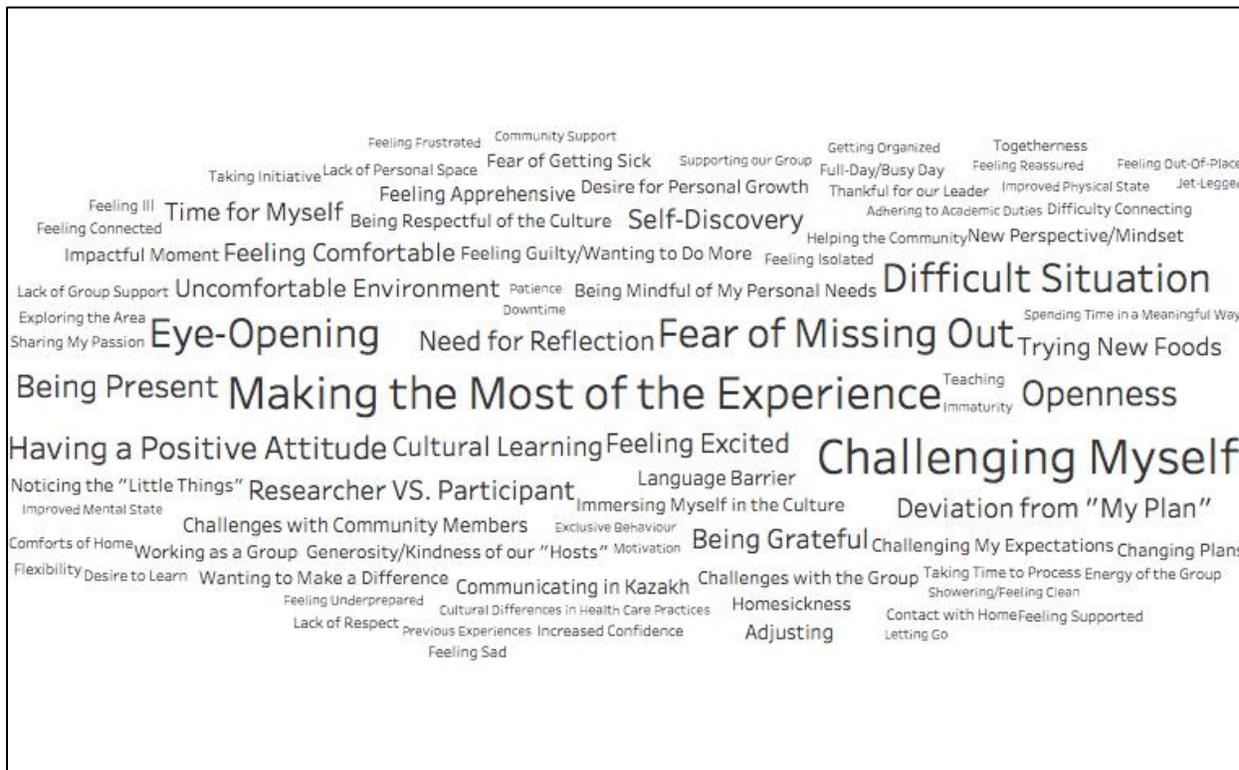


Figure 2. Visualization of Codes from S.L.D.'s Excursion Journal

Figure 2 is a visual representation of coding S.L.D.'s excursion journal, created using Tableau Software. The phrases or words included in the figure help to describe, or paint a picture of, the experience of the lead author (S.L.D.) while completing her international health promotion work in western Mongolia.

## APPENDIX B

### Appendix B: Supplementary Information for Manuscript Three

HEALTH PROMOTION WITHOUT BORDERS 2017							
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	
23 ULAANBAATAR		24 ULAANBAATAR	25 ULAANBAATAR	26 MAY 18 TORONTO - SEOUL (Flight time: 13 hours)	27 SOGOG • Meet with the community (Flight time: 3.5 hours)	28 SOGOG Visit Kindergarten Visit Eagle Club Teach Hydration	29 SOGOG Recycling Materials Visit Eagle Hunter
30 ULANKHUS Work in Kindergarten Share Canadian experience of blinjeleim	31 ULANKHUS Visit NGO projects Cultural cooking exchange	1 ZASTAP Visit national households and NGO projects	2 ZASTAP Work in clinic Teach physical exercises	3 ZASTAP Nutrition & Hydration	4 DAYAN Healthy Teach Forum Visit NGO vegetable fields Vegetable preservation techniques	5 DAYAN Nutrition & Hydration	
6 DAYAN Work in clinic Teach physical exercises	7 Dayan Healthy Teach Forum Came riding	8 Dayan Work in clinic Teach physical exercises	9 SOGOG Work in clinic Teach physical exercises	10 SOGOG Visit clinic that receive NGO medicines	11 SOGOG Teaching strategies (Kindergarten primary, junior) Recycling Materials	12 SOGOG Nutrition Cultural cooking exchange	
13 SOGOG Plant trees and bushes	14 SOGOG Work in clinic Teach physical exercises Recycling Materials	15 SOGOG Work in clinic Teach physical exercises	16 SOGOG Closing ceremony	17 ULGII Meal with college students preparing to become leaders	18 ULAANBAATAR	19 ULAANBAATAR	

Figure 3. Original HPWB Excursion Schedule



## APPENDIX C

### Appendix C: Research Ethics Board Approval Certificate



**APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS**  
Research Ethics Board – Laurentian University

This letter confirms that the research project identified below has successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Your ethics approval date, other milestone dates, and any special conditions for your project are indicated below.

TYPE OF APPROVAL / New / Modifications to project X / Time extension X	
<b>Name of Principal Investigator and school/department</b>	Shelby Deibert. School of Human Kinetics, Stephen Ritchie (Supervisor); Bruce Oddson & Ginette Michel (Co-investigators)
<b>Title of Project</b>	Canadian University Student Experiences Participating in Health Promotion Without Borders Trips to Mongolia and Malawi
<b>REB file number</b>	6009875
<b>Date of original approval of project</b>	March 22, 2017
<b>Date of approval of project modifications or extension (if applicable)</b>	April 20, 2018
<b>Final/Interim report due on: (You may request an extension)</b>	April 20, 2019
<b>Conditions placed on project</b>	

During the course of your research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment or consent forms may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to the Research Ethics website to complete the appropriate REB form.

All projects must submit a report to REB at least once per year. If involvement with human participants continues for longer than one year (e.g. you have not completed the objectives of the study and have not yet terminated contact with the participants, except for feedback of final results to participants), you must request an extension using the appropriate LU REB form. In all cases, please ensure that your research complies with Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS). Also, please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence with the REB office.

Congratulations and best wishes in conducting your research.

Susan Boyko, PhD, Vice Chair, *Laurentian University Research Ethics Board*