

Cognitive-emotional drama in the life history narratives of U.S. study abroad alumni

What does it mean when people claim that study abroad changed their life? Within the tradition of cultural-historical theory, cognition is understood as existing in a dialectical relation to emotion, as captured in the term 'perezhivanie,' or the cognitive/emotional apprehension and appraisal of the environment. The concept of 'perezhivanie' permits analysis of how and why the environment, or social situation of development, is not deterministic but supports various developmental pathways for different people, or for the same person at different times. Conditions for qualitative movement forward emerge at times of crisis or drama, often during transitions, when individuals perceive and must resolve contradictions between current understandings and new or newly salient features of their social environment. Furthermore, these events are subject to long-term evaluation and (re)interpretation, leading to catharsis, and can become significant elements in an individual's life story. In this presentation I will delve into the qualitative data from a large scale (N=4899), mixed methods investigation of U.S. based study abroad alumni of all ages. Following an overview of the study, I will outline the systematic process by which participants in the qualitative phase were chosen. I will then examine dramatic moments of development in the life history narratives of several participants from among the 54 individuals interviewed for the project. In each case, the events narrated represent turning points into new phases of life, offering evidence to explain how the cognitive-emotional drama experienced during study abroad both supports development and lends coherence to life history narratives.