Developing National and Global Identities: Adolescent Identity Crisis Negotiation during a Two Week International Exchange

Literature elucidating the adolescent travel experience is scarce. In fact, travel and tourism scholarship to date largely glosses over the adolescent experience, focusing instead on the perspective of the whole family unit or the experience of the older adult traveler. The purpose of this study was to give voice to youth travelers by investigating the travel experiences of two male and six female adolescents from the South Eastern United States.

The study participants engaged in a two week Sister City International (SCI) exchange program in Northern Ireland, comprised of a mix of service, civic, and tourism based activities. Six of the participants were White and two African American. All were either 15 or 17 years of age. The study employed a qualitative research methodology utilizing interviews, field notes, and open and close ended survey questions to elicit meanings and perspectives about their experience. Data were recorded and transcribed, and then coded independently by three members of the research team. Themes were developed from the data and discussed until agreement between the researchers was reached. In order to establish trustworthiness in the findings, triangulation of the data was achieved through the multiple data sources and field notes were used to guide a reflexive data collection and interpretation process (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Findings indicated that participants may have undergone a process of identity transformation and development, marked by a greater appreciation for their national identity and indicative of early stage global identity development. Novel, disorienting events related to the travel experience were found to initiate identity crises that required identity negotiation (Swann & Bossom, 2008), exploration, and achievement (Marcia, 1994); e.g. American identity, travel identity.

Travel may allow youth to become more aware of and able to define specific, personal identity domains which will facilitate successful identity transformation in the future. Continued examination of the youth travel experience generally and travel-induced youth identity development specifically is imperative. Longitudinal research could also explore the long term impact of these experiences on personal, academic, and career identities.