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**Abstract**

While much of recent study abroad research has focused on identifying and measuring different learning outcomes in terms of specific skills, competencies, perspectives and attributes acquired during study abroad opportunities, less research has considered how students' deeper conceptions and understandings of international experience may change and develop during such educational encounters. This paper presents a phenomenographical research study that explored how students conceive of and make meaning out of their international education experience in a study abroad context. The data are based on detailed semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of 28 undergraduate students at an American university who engaged in a variety of different study abroad opportunities. Guided by Variation Theory of Learning, the analysis of the data resulted in a typology of student conceptions of international experience (SCIE) that identified four distinct categories of conceptions of international experience (observing, interacting, participating and embracing) described across three constitutive features (being in the other culture, relating to the other culture and

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learning in the other culture). Hierarchically related through nine critical aspects of variation, the typology provides a unique and useful framework against which to map the “messiness” of students’ complex, often complicated understandings of their experience. It offers study abroad programmers opportunities to better understand and design student learning experiences and assessment instruments that go beyond competencies, skills and other learning outcomes. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)

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