Title: Can we find class within study abroad experiences?

The purpose of this study is to explore experiences of Japanese young adult students in a particular untypical type of English language school in the U.S., in order to illuminate how and why they are motivated for exodus from Japanese society and more importantly, how class factors articulate their experiences.

Research problem

Much of the previous research on study abroad experiences of youth has been devoted to describe either developmental merits or individually constructed meanings of study abroad experiences¹. Yet some of the studies have critically approached this topic and revealed social-cultural dynamics driving the current trend of study/travel/work abroad experiences (e.g. Simpson, 2005, Rizvi, 2005). In our exploratory study of East Asian students in an English language school (Furukawa, 2008c), it is elucidated how neoliberalism that require youth to be flexible, skilled, vigorous, and self-responsible future workers shape the students’ narratives/experiences and the curriculum/climate of the language school. On the other hand, those focused on gender as a demarcating factor of study abroad experiences (e.g. Kelsky, 2001, Ono & Piper, 2004) present particularly significant findings as they unveil why the study abroaders had to escape from their countries, namely gender discrimination.

There is, however, something still critically being missed here—class. While there have been much discussions on how the trend of study abroad has played a certain role to widen the gap between the privileged and non-privileged, namely those who can afford study abroad and those who cannot as study abroad experiences began to be defined as a part of cultural capital that are vital to survive harsh competitions over employment (Brown, 1995, Heath, 2006), class factors within study abroad participants have hardly been paid attentions to. This is surely because study abroad has long been seen as only for the affluent since it is an expensive experience.

Whereas it is no doubt that study abroad is a costly experience, it is wrong, however, to jump to a conclusion that study abroad is a segregated area of the affluent for the following

¹ For a comprehensive critique of study abroad research, see Landis & Wasilewski (1999).
reasons. Firstly, there are visible attempts to include lower class youth into this area. For instance, as observed in the trend of gap year in the U.K., considering the situation where study/travel/work abroad have begun to be recognized as upskilling, therefore empowering experiences, the British government has launched a project to provide youth from lower class with study abroad opportunities (Furukawa, 2005). Second, as Kelsky (2001) points out in her study on “internationalist” Japanese women, empowering/transformative images of moving to and living abroad, which continue to be produced/reproduced through the represented voices of those who experienced living abroad, have an effect not only on those who fortunately gained actual opportunities of going abroad but also on how those who remain and just dream of living abroad re-shape their value systems. Furthermore, as Abelmann et al. (forthcoming) vividly demonstrates, a neoliberal ideology that directs youth to be vigorous, skilled, and self-responsible, which well fit the prevalent image of those who have gone through study abroad, differently influence the lives of youth from different class/socio-economic backgrounds.

Finally—and this is the focus of this research, even if coming from relatively lower class and having been unable to afford study abroad in earlier periods of their lives, young adults who could work and save money on their own can achieve living abroad later, afterdreaming about it for a while. Some might argue they are still categorized into middle class because they could still find a job to fund their traveling abroad. Even so, however, the experiences of youth in this category and the way they give meanings to their experiences abroad in relation to their life contexts would be significantly different from those who could go abroad easily with their parents’ financial supports. The difference will be further articulated if we particularly focus on those who are trying to extend their stay period abroad even by working illegally.

A question then naturally emerges: what motivate them to go abroad, taking such efforts and even risks? They may have a clear goal or staying abroad itself may be their goal. A report by a Japanese journalist Shimokawa (2007) offers interesting insights to approach this question. Shimokawa examines experiences of Japanese young adults who periodically visit Thailand and stay as long as possible with the fund they raised through intensive temporary works (typically manual works in factories) and/or some illegal works in Thailand. Shimokawa called this group of young adults Soto-komori (withdrawal abroad) since they do not actively socialize with others in Thailand but finding comfortable places for their own there as they are tired of and dissatisfied with Japanese society—particularly work environments, and they are contrasted to those who legally gained decent jobs in Thailand, with clearer career goals. While
this might be an extreme way of differentiation of youth going abroad experiences and it is not necessary a clear-cut class-based analysis, this report informs that those who have gone through socio-economically marginalized experiences may tend to invest extra efforts in living abroad and they are likely to have more complex motivations compared to those who could easily afford study abroad.

Considering this underexamined but indispensable way of analyzing and understanding study abroad experiences by way of class/socio-economic backgrounds, in this study, I highlight those who take extra costs and risks to stay in the U.S., while attending English language schools, as “ordinary” study abroad students do.

Method

In order to effectively illuminate class factors within study abroad experiences, I strategically select and focus on young adult students in a particular “untypical” type of English language school. In the course of my previous field work in a metropolitan city in the U.S. (Furukawa 2008a, 2008b), I was informed by one of my Japanese interviewees that there are some specific language schools called “visa gakkou” (visa school) in the same city, where she began to attend after leaving a school she was previously enrolled in. In contrast to the school she formerly attended, where students typically spend their time on attending classes and hanging out with friends to learn English and enjoy the whole cultural experiences, in the visa gakkou, students who regularly attend classes are rarely found. Instead, the students in visa gakkou, according to my interviewee, seem to be occupied in part-time jobs to save for extending their stay in the U.S. For these students, an enrollment in an English language schools seems to be for maintaining their visa status to stay in the U.S. rather than for learning English or meeting friends there. Apparently relating to this uniqueness, tuitions of this type of schools tend to be far cheaper and the existences of such schools are far less known compared to other “ordinary” schools, which attract international students by heavily investing in promotions. The age range of students also tends to be older. Considering these distinct characteristics, the students in a visa gakkou are expected to demonstrate significantly different experiences from the widely observed/known ones of relatively privileged study abroaders, and therefore, workings of class factors will be likely to become salient.

Analysis will be based on semi-structured in-depth interviews of students in visa gakkou. A number of interviewees will be 10 female students and 10 male students. Interviews will be conducted in Japanese. In interviews, while they should be proceeded flexibly along
interviewees’ interests, the central question is how their previous life experiences have led and been connected to their study abroad and how they are planning/trying to direct their current experienced toward future careers. Interviews will be tape-recorded under permissions of the interviewees. After interviews, the data will be transcribed, translated, and coded. In the course of analysis and writing, I will take a debriefing step, by sharing the transcribed data and my analysis with them and incorporate their feedbacks to the analysis in turn.

During fall (2008) semester, I will contact and obtain an official permission from the targeted language school to recruit students in the school, and obtain an IRB official permission to conduct the research. In January 2009, I will stay for approximately a month to conduct research: recruiting students inside the language school and interview them. In February, I will transcribe, translate, and code the interview data. By May, I will write a summarizing report of this research, which will be later developed into conference presentations, journal papers, and a central part of dissertation.

Ethics

The risk of participation of this study is not beyond minimum. While the interviewees may be afraid of being identified as illegal workers in the U.S., I will carefully keep their identities confidential by giving pseudonyms to all the proper nouns such as their names, school name, city name, and modifying some part of information. Participants have rights to withdraw from this study anytime they want. Additionally, by taking debriefing processes, participants can claim against my way of representing their narratives when they feel their experiences/voices are distorted in my analysis, and the claims themselves will appear in my final writing products.

Significance

Shedding light on class factors in study abroad experiences will inform if the trend of study abroad reproduce or shake/break class structures, more concretely, if those from relatively lower class or socio-economically marginalized backgrounds continue to be marginalized even after moving abroad, or study abroad indeed functions as a vehicle to empower them, leading them to more satisfactory life. The answers to this question will be useful for the Japanese government and educators to reconsider the educational and wider socio-economic systems: if the former is true, uncritical praise of study abroad should be recognized as merely maintaining/widening gaps among classes, yet if the latter, it would suggest that study abroad or similar type of extra-curricular experiences are effective to empower marginalized youth, hence should be widely introduced.
Reference


Furukawa, C. (2008c) Study abroad Experiences as Processes of Forming, Negotiating, F and Resisting Neoliberal Subjectivities. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, EUI project conducted with Chen, B. and Choi, H.)


