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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FAMILIES WHO PARTICIPATE IN LONG TERM  
INDEPENDENT INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL: THE FAMILY GAP YEAR

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Carrie A. Pullen

July, 2015

Mark Allen Ph.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family: my husband Mark Pullen, son Wilder Pullen, daughter Peyton Pullen and parents Doug and Brenda Adams. Mark and the kids, of course, agreed to take a year out of their lives to travel the world with me. That experience is both one I will never forget and the all-important inspiration for the topic of this paper. My parents instilled a love of travel in me early, and have always supported my travel, my education and the travel as education experiences I seek out. I am grateful for each of these amazing individuals who I am so blessed to have as my people. They inspire me, support me and love me, and they make my life and this work possible.

## VITA

**EDUCATION:**

Doctor of Education, Organizational Leadership 2015  
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 Dissertation: A Phenomenological Study of Families who Participate in Long Term International  
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## ABSTRACT

Moustakas (1994) emphasizes that phenomenological study arises from the experiences and passions of the researcher that in turn focus and drive the research. This researcher's own experiences include a 9-month trip around the world with my family that led me to conduct this study exploring the phenomenon of the family gap year. Existing research focuses on the traditional gap year taken by a young person in between graduation from high school and beginning college. This study seeks to add to that knowledge by exploring the related, but also unique, experience of families who take an extended time period off from career and formal school in order to participate together in a multi-continent international trip. The study addresses why families may decide to take such a trip, what they hope to gain from such an experience and whether or not the trip actually met those expectations. It also attempts to establish whether or not any changes in family members were identified by participants and believed to be attributable to the experience of the family gap year. Findings from this study indicate that the families examined chose this experience because of a desire to travel and see the world with their children. Subjects agreed that the experience met or exceeded expectations in that it provided a unique opportunity to learn about other peoples and cultures and also provided concentrated time to be together and grow closer as a family. Subjects also however referred to less desirable aspects of the trip related to the maintenance required to keep the family on the road, such as travel planning and laundry. Finally many of the participants in the study referenced learning and personal growth in family members that they attributed to the experience of the family gap year. Together these findings represent an early effort to establish an understanding of the phenomenon of the family gap year.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Moustakas (1994) emphasizes that phenomenological study arises from the experiences and passions of the researcher that in turn focus and drive the research. This researcher's own experiences include a 9-month trip around the world with my immediate family, resulting in an interest in, and passion for, exploring the shared human experiences of other families who have chosen to embark on such an adventure. Extended multi-continent backpacking adventures are most commonly associated with young adult students, frequently in the form of a year taken off between high school and college, spent traveling independently or with peers. This phenomenon has come to be referred to as a gap year and has been substantially researched and reported upon in books, periodicals and peer reviewed journals. The topics explored include, but are not limited to, such themes as participant motivations, shared experiences, perceived outcomes, and measurable outcomes. Less is known, however, about families that have chosen to experience a similar trip together. I hold very dearly the special qualities and unique experiences of the period of time I experienced traveling the world with my husband and two children. I have also spent a lot of time examining my own motivations and beliefs about the outcomes as well as the changes I witnessed in each of my family members that I attribute to the relatively unique and special experience we shared together. I therefore now have a strong desire to explore, discover and describe the common experiences of other families who have undertaken such a trip together.

In addition to my own personal motivations, there are significant societal reasons to explore the emerging phenomenon of the family gap year. One important such reason is the well established fact that the United States is facing an increasingly competitive global market, and is therefore seeking avenues to improve the cultural intelligence and global savvy of its citizens (Hayden, 2011). Hayden asserts that gone are the days when the United States could operate in

an isolationist manner, declining to participate in international business, politics, initiatives, dialog and education. American businesses, therefore, are increasingly demanding a work force that exhibits intercultural competence. Colleges are attempting to fill the void by providing additional and improved study abroad opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. These experiences have been found to positively impact global citizenship, an indicator that is directly related to the expressed desire of the United States to have more globally oriented citizens (Tarrant & Lyons, 2012). While concerted efforts by government, educational institutions and business interests have resulted in improved percentages of students participating in study abroad opportunities, the length and breadth of the actual experiences appears to be diminishing as colleges, and students alike, look to make the experiences more affordable (Ismail, Morgan, & Hayes, 2006). Researchers are divided regarding whether the shortened study abroad experiences retain the established positive benefits associated with the more traditional year abroad.

Students from European countries, and also notably Australia, have traditionally augmented the education of students, whose families have means, with a gap year, arguably giving those countries an advantage in the race to compete on the global stage. Researchers have documented many desirable outcomes of gap years including, not only increased independence, maturity and enhanced self-awareness, but also increased cultural understanding and competence (Bull, 2006; Hulstrand, 2010; Martin, 2010). While some American students also opt for a gap year, the practice is less prevalent in the United States. This has been attributed to a variety of factors, from concerns about safety to an inherent American distrust of delaying career goals (Hulstrand, 2010).

Another important reason to examine the effects of a family gap year is due to what many consider the increasingly ineffective educational environment that exists in the kindergarten through twelfth grade public education system in the United States today. Achievement is widely considered to be declining across much of this age group, and in particular the United States is losing ground relative to other countries and the educational outcomes of their students (Carroll, 2000). While researchers point to many potential reasons for the declining outcomes, one identified factor is particularly relevant to the subject of gap year travel. The lack of experiential education in today's schools is frequently cited when considering how to improve educational outcomes. Barth (2001) laments the lack of experiential learning in modern classrooms as he points out that students and teachers pour over books in the classroom to learn about the very things that exist outside the classroom if one just ventures to look. Gap year travel is widely considered to be an extended experiential education, and one that has been shown to positively impact the education of college aged participants. It is therefore reasonable to explore whether younger children and or teens, that experience a gap year with their families, might also benefit from a year out of the classroom and immersed into the world our educational system seeks to teach them about.

It is in this environment that a small, but seemingly growing, number of families in the United States are now electing to take an extended period of time off from career, pulling their children out of school, in order to participate in the shared family experience of extended international independent travel, a phenomenon referred to herein as a family gap year. This appears to be a relatively new phenomenon within this demographic and an as yet unexplored version of the well-studied and documented traditional student gap year. The purpose of this study will be to explore the identified phenomenon of the family gap year, examining and

illuminating common perceptions and experiences of families who seek out and choose to participate in this unique experience. Before a society can ascertain whether an emerging practice is positive and whether it should be encouraged, it is important to have an understanding of the phenomenon. The two key aspects of a family gap year I seek to illuminate are first, to understand why people participate and second, to explore what they believe they hope to gain from the experience. Finally, this study examines the shared experiences of family gap year participants in order better understand how this unique experience is significantly similar to or different from the experiences of older independent students who normally make extended international trips on their own.

## **Background**

The gap year itself is not truly a modern invention. Its roots are said to originate in Victorian England, during which time it became fashionable for well heeled young persons to take an extended trip for the purpose of viewing spots of exceptional natural beauty and experiencing other classical cultures. Such a trip was considered a type of finishing school for the elite and was described at that time as an improving experience. Since that time the gap year is said to have a strong association with upper class and privilege. While the gap year definition does not limit one to the time period between high school and college, this is currently the most popular time to take a gap year (Heath, 2007). Recently, however there is a growing trend to take a gap year in between years of college, in between undergraduate and graduate school, or even between graduation and entering the work force (Hulstrand, 2010). While statistics are not available regarding numbers of families currently taking gap years together, such families do exist, and therefore constitute yet another category of gap year taken mid-career.

As stated previously, much research exists with regard to the college age, or gap year, extended travel participant. We know that gap year participants are more likely to set and achieve goals, as well as to possess more maturity than their peers (Heath, 2007; Jones 2004). Additionally Martin (2010) found that uncertainty about college and overall lower motivation in students predicted their choice to participate in gap year, but that motivation was positively affected in those self same students following the gap year experience. Martin concluded that the gap year was, in effect, an experiential education process that increased student skills and allowed them to self-reflect which in turn resulted in a more mature and self-directed student. Less is known however about how other age groups react to similar travel experiences and whether or not the effects on them would be similar to those in the young adult group. Unlike college age students, who usually travel independently or with members of their peer group, children and adolescents that embark on international travel for extended time frames generally do so with their immediate families. Therefore exploring the all ready well-researched topic in different age groups could help to close a gap that exists in current knowledge. It is assumed that the older and younger age groups, while participating in similar trips, will experience those trips in different ways, and therefore may or may not have significantly different results.

As noted in the introduction, study abroad is an area of study that relates closely to gap year as it relates to both desired and documented outcomes, and is therefore relevant to the topic of this study. Like gap year, study abroad is a well-researched and documented field of study, and academia has collected a significant amount of information about participants' motivations, experiences and outcomes. Also like the gap year, study abroad is an approach utilized by both academic institutions and students to help improve cultural competence, other soft skills and overall personal growth (Tarrant & Lyons, 2012). Prior to 1965 study abroad participants were

also most likely to be from families with the means to financially support the costs (Kauppinen, 2012). However, the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 allowed students to use financial aid provided by the federal government for study abroad, opening the door for such study to become much more mainstream (Mukherjee, 2012). Still, the most current information shows that the United States is 15<sup>th</sup> among countries in the number of students who study abroad (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2011). Many feel the success of the United States at improving that situation and putting itself in a better position relative to other developed countries is vital to the future economic success of the country (Loh, Steagall, Gallo, & Michelman, 2011; Mangiero & Kraten, 2011).

The design of this phenomenological study is based on the writings of Edmund Husserl (1964) and Clark Moustakas (1994) focusing on the lived experiences of the subjects that are interviewed. In addition, based on the writings of Glaser (1978, 1992) and Rolls and Relf (2006), I describe my own experience and beliefs at the outset of the study, in order to *bracket* them and thus limit as much as possible my bias about the phenomenon being studied. My own gap year was taken with my husband and two teenage children, ages 15 and 16 at the outset of our trip. The trip took place in between my first and second years of doctoral study, commencing on August 1, 2011. For my husband our gap year consisted of a year off from his career of real estate development, and for the children it took place during the junior year of high school for my son, and the sophomore year for my daughter. The impetus for the trip was a combination of factors. First, I was experiencing some dissatisfaction with how my son was performing in a traditional classroom. In addition, I felt a strong desire to bond with my children in the limited time I understood was left before they would depart for college. Finally I, who am a firm

believer in the educational value of travel, was frustrated with the limited amount of international travel experiences our income and lifestyle had as yet afforded my children. Through the process of struggling with these desires and dissatisfactions, I came to believe that a family gap year could successfully address and mediate all three of those concerns.

While I initially thought the idea of taking a gap year with one's whole family was my own alone, I quickly discovered while planning our trip that other families had previously conceived of, and successfully embarked on, similar journeys. Many of those families also publish blogs while traveling, describing their expectations and experiences and offering advice to other families considering a similar trip. These blogs provided very practical information to this researcher about planning and successfully executing this type of adventure. They also gave me some initial insight into the common interests, motivations, and experiences among these families. Many hours perusing these blogs therefore had significant influence on my desire to further explore the common lived experiences of this unique subset of the gap year phenomenon, to also share the findings with the academic community as well as other families who may consider such a trip in the future.

### **Statement of Purpose**

I am conducting a phenomenological study to explore the common motivations, expectations and perceived outcomes of families who choose to take an extended break from career and formal education in order to participate together in a multi-continent international trip. As the researcher, this topic is important to me because I seek to understand better my own experiences and whether or not they are shared with others who have participated in a family gap year. It is also important however to the academic community to begin to understand the



phenomenon of a family gap year, to ascertain what the practice consists of and accomplishes as well as its potential benefit to our society.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided my study:

1. Why do parents decide to take their families on a family gap year trip, i.e. what do they hope to gain from the experience?
2. For families that have been on a gap year trip, in what ways did the trip meet, or fail to meet, their expectations?
3. What changes in family members do participants attribute to the experience of the trip?

These questions were geared to ascertain the substance of the unique shared experience that is a family gap year. In particular I was interested in exploring motivations regarding family gap year participation, as well as beliefs about perceived outcomes.

### **Definitions**

Definitions of a gap year vary according to author, however there is general agreement that a gap year consists of a period of time taken out from formal education or career by an individual to volunteer or travel or both (Martin, 2010). This time frame exceeds the length of the traditional summer break and essentially interrupts, briefly or otherwise, the traditional established linear path of unbroken years of education followed by an immediate transition into career. It is important to note that a gap year for the purposes of this study could be as short as 6 months or as long as 2 years. Parents will be interviewed within seven years of returning home and resuming careers and or formal education. For the purpose of this study, family will be

defined as at least one parent and at least one child under the age of 18. Gap year participants will be referred to in this study as such, or alternatively as *gappers* for short.

Study abroad is referred to, within this work, as a formal education opportunity available to undergraduate or graduate students to study in another country to supplement their formal education provided in the United States. These experiences may be as short as a couple of weeks long and up to and including an entire academic year in length.

Other terms relevant to this area of study are Backpacker and ‘Round the World (RTW). Backpacker is a term originally coined to identify gap year participants who travel with only what they can carry on their backs. RTW is a term that is shorthand for an extended trip embarked upon to circumvent the globe, traveling in one direction through multiple countries until one arrives back in the country where their trip originated. RTW trips typically include four or more continents.

### **Key Assumptions**

In order to conceive of and implement this study I have made the following assumptions. First, I have assumed that a family gap year is similar enough to a traditional gap year to rely on the established research in that field to design and inform this study. Second, I have assumed that a family gap year differs significantly enough from a traditional gap year to warrant separate study and understanding. Next I am assuming that disparate participants in a family gap year will have sufficient overlapping or similar motivations and experiences to make this study both viable and illuminating. Finally, I have made the assumption that, as the researcher, I would be able to locate, contact and obtain permission to interview a sufficient number of families to effect this study as planned and described.

## **Limitations**

This study is limited to families that have participated in the phenomenon defined and described previously as a family gap year. While families are the focus of the study, only the parents will be interviewed, therefore the insights obtained will be from their viewpoint alone. This limitation is due in part to the practical difficulty of obtaining IRB approval to interview minors in a manner that is congruent with the timely completion of a dissertation. In addition however, as one of the key research questions addressed in this study seeks to identify motivations for embarking on the trip, it is assumed that the parents would be uniquely able to address that question. Conversely it is assumed that, because the minors would not drive the decision to make the trip, they would not contribute substantially to that specific objective of the study.

Additionally, as families that meet the prerequisites of participation in this study are relatively few, locating appropriate subjects was based on opportunities afforded by the researcher's own experience, as well as the snowball method, when possible. There is no single source that identifies or catalogs either the number of families that take these types of extended trips annually, nor contact information for the families that are known to have participated in such a trip. Therefore the researcher utilized the internet primarily via travel sites and blogs to search for, identify and solicit participation in the interview process and therefore the study. Due to the limitations of this method, participants were generally only be identifiable at the earliest during, or more likely, following the completion of their trip, not prior to embarking. For this reason, pre and post interviews are not feasible and so interviews were consequently conducted only after families have returned from their trips. This limitation means that identifying expectations of participants prior to the trip were based on their memories of their thoughts

during the time preceding their trip, rather than the arguably preferred method of questioning and establishing those expectations prior to the trip and subsequently comparing them to their thoughts and understanding afterwards.

### **Organization**

The balance of this paper is organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a review of the existing literature that is relevant to this topic. Specifically it summarizes what is known about traditional gap year participants, their motivations, experiences and outcomes as well as what is known about study abroad participants. It also briefly addresses the concept of psychological capital. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology utilized for this study and details the steps to be taken. Chapter 4 will include a presentation and analysis of the data and findings, and Chapter 5 is a summary containing conclusions and recommendations for future study.

### **Summary**

The history, motivations and effects of the traditional student gap year experience are well researched and documented. The phenomenon of the family gap year, however, has yet to be substantially explored academically or otherwise. The topic is important both to this researcher, based on my own experiences, as well as to society in general as it relates directly to the topics of family, growth and learning that are integral to the human experience. Additionally, this study was conducted during a particularly relevant time in history as the United States is currently experiencing a need to more effectively compete in an increasingly global economy. In addition the country is concurrently struggling with a kindergarten through twelfth grade educational system that gives little attention to experiential learning and is simultaneously experiencing declining results. Therefore, beginning to understand the impact that a family gap

year might have on both the adults and children participating in such an experience has the potential to be particularly illuminating. A phenomenological study was chosen in order to explore in depth the common experiences of disparate families who selected to participate in such an experience, as well as to better understand how their expectations and experiences may relate to the well-studied traditional gap year participant and those established outcomes.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter consists of an overview of available academic literature as it relates to the subject matter of this study. While there is a very limited amount of published literature specific to the family gap year, there is a sufficient body of work available addressing the traditional gap year, and the bulk of this work is thoroughly described and analyzed herein. This chapter therefore includes a thorough review of the history, popularity and identified outcomes of the gap year, as well as a look at gap year stakeholders and varying types of gap year participants, their motivations and expressed experiences. Particular attention is paid both to motivations of gap year participants as well as the perceived and expressed outcomes of a gap year experience upon participants, as these specific subjects speak to the purpose of this proposal and most directly inform the research questions.

In addition, because research found in the travel field related to a type of traveler, referred to as a *backpacker*, is often relevant to the gap year participant and experience, an overview of the available research on this topic is also included. Backpackers are often, but not always, gap year participants, in that some are traveling for a shorter time frame, such as a summer break, or traveling and working as a lifestyle. Still, the findings related to research focused on this group have some overlap and commonalities with the gap year phenomenon, and therefore a brief overview of current literature regarding their motivations is included. This chapter therefore includes established definitions of backpackers, what is known about this identified group and why they choose to participate in this style of travel.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the literature most relevant to the previously outlined and detailed topic, the phenomenon and experience of the family gap year, yet necessarily focuses on the available literature. That literature, as explained, is related to the

broader issue of the gap year, of which the family gap year is an identified subset. The chapter therefore covers what a gap year is, who takes them and why, when they take them, their common experiences and the many varied identified outcomes of gap year participation. It also looks at how Americans in particular view the gap year and how an American gap year might differ from a European or Australian gap year that much of the available research is based on. Finally this review of literature includes a brief look at other stakeholders in the gap year experience from universities to industry players, their positions and contributions to the phenomenon.

### **What is a Gap Year?**

Definitions of a gap year vary according to author and can refer to fairly disparate groups and activities. Indeed many researchers point out that the wide variety of activities that conceivably make up a gap year can make it difficult to make generalizations about gap year participants and their experiences as a whole (Jones, 2004). Other researchers attempt to narrow the definition in order to establish a more homogeneous group to study, yet still refer to that subset as gap year participants (King, 2007; O'Shea, 2011). This makes it important to identify the parameters that were utilized to select subjects in each study that referring to gap year participants, in order to understand how applicable the findings might, or might not be, to another group or subset.

The broadest definition of a gap year seen in literature refers to an extended interruption of school or career of any kind by choice (Stehlik, 2010). This group includes individuals that delay school to work and who are not travelers or volunteers of any kind. A more narrow definition used frequently, however, consists of a period of time taken out from formal education or career by an individual to volunteer or travel or both (O'Shea, 2011). Martin (2010) utilizes a

similar definition but points out that gap years might also consist of, or at least include, pursuits that would simply fall under the category of leisure. Jones (2004) also points out that most gappers participate in both leisure activities as well as more focused activities, such as working or volunteering, during their gap year. In other words, according to Jones a single individual's gap year often consists of multiple activities during the breadth of their time off, and therefore gap years are not easily categorized by activity.

The time frame involved in a gap year is generally thought to exceed the length of the traditional summer break and essentially interrupts, briefly or otherwise, the traditional established linear path of unbroken years of education followed by an immediate transition into career. While this gap year definition does not limit one to the time period between high school and college, this is currently the most popular time to take a gap year (Heath, 2007). Of note however, there is now a growing trend to take a gap year in between years of college, in between undergraduate and graduate school, or even between graduation and entering the work force (Bull, 2006; Counter, 2013; Hulstrand, 2010; Jones, 2004). Bull (2006) even points to a growing number of baby boomers who are choosing to take a gap year, one of the few references to the subject of this study, family gap year participants, that I have identified in academic literature. Finally, there are researchers who include shorter experiences in their gap year definitions. Jones (2004) for instance identifies time periods between three and 24 months. However I find this definition problematic as it could conceivably include college students and their pursuits during the annual summer break, which would undoubtedly be expected to significantly alter any findings.

The more narrow gap year definition, as described previously, is the definition that is most relevant to this study, and in most, but not all, instances the literature reviewed herein is



specific to this group. It is important to note again, however, that most researchers do not address the mid-career, or family gap year, and also that the vast majority of subjects of gap year studies are young adults participating in between high school completion and college enrollment. In fact, while some researchers refer to other types of gap year participants, few if any focus their studies on gap year participants outside of the traditional young adult age range. I have found that even mentions of non-traditional gap year participants in academic literature are relatively few and far between.

The individuals who participate in a gap year are often referred to, in both international popular and academic literature, as gappers and their activity described as gapping (Stehlik, 2010). When researching the phenomenon of the gap year another term that it used to identify the participants in the more narrowly defined gap year, is backpacker. Traveling gap year participants are often referred to in travel circles as backpackers due to the tendency of this group to travel light, carrying everything they require on their backs in packs, thus allowing them to be both mobile and independent (Paris & Teye, 2010). The travel industry in particular has been keen to understand the motivations and experiences of backpackers, and therefore there exist a number of studies published in travel related publications that represent what is known about this group. Backpackers, it should be noted, are frequently, but not always, gap year participants according to the previously established definition. Many backpackers are students participating in global travel during traditional school breaks and therefore are not interrupting a school or career trajectory (Kanning, 2008). Conversely gap year participants, even utilizing the more narrow definition, are not always backpackers, as some gap year participants spend their entire break in one foreign location volunteering with a local community or conceivably some gap year

travelers may travel in a more traditional style. This is important to keep in mind while reviewing the literature, in that family gap year participants likely fall broadly into both groups.

Finally, it is important to restate that gap year experiences can vary widely and therefore it is unsurprising that the diversity and variety of published studies and their subjects reflect that fact. In an effort to address this reality Jones (2004) identified the following categories of activities that may make up a gap year. Those activities included travel, work for pay, volunteer work, and leisure activities. Jones also made a distinction between those gappers that traveled internationally, in that case outside of the United Kingdom, and those that did not. Therefore, this review of literature encompasses studies comprised of both varying types of gap year participants with varying types of activities as well as an overlapping category of travelers known as backpackers, in an effort to consider all research that is potentially relevant to this study's subject matter.

### **Historical Roots of the Gap Year**

As stated previously, the roots of the modern gap year are in Victorian England (Heath, 2007). Heath refers specifically to an activity taken part in by a relatively small and select group of upper class young men, after completing their schooling and prior to beginning a career, referred to as a "Grand Tour" (p. 99). Since that time the gap year is said to have a strong association with upper class and privilege. At the same time, however, the practice has become much more mainstream (Bull, 2006; Heath, 2007; O'Shea, 2011). Researchers tell us that the next significant trend in the creation of the modern day gap year was the counter culture movement experienced in western societies during the 1960s and 1970s that resulted in a surge in the number of young people who dropped out of school to travel the world (Kanning, 2008). These students traveled in a very low cost manner and style that was new and not all together

appreciated by much of mainstream society. The described group was initially referred to as *hippies* and then later as *backpackers* (Kanning, 2008). While, due to the fact that many backpackers of this period participated in low cost travel as more of an ongoing lifestyle than as a break, they wouldn't necessarily fit today's definition of a gap year participant, their actions undoubtedly created a legacy that led to today's growing gap year trend.

In addition, at least one set of researchers, Haigler and Nelson (2005), point out that “the tradition of taking time off with a purpose – whether to renew one's spirit, explore new worlds, gain perspective, fulfill an obligation, learn a new skill, or reconnect with a passion for learning – is centuries old” (p. 21). They reference classic literature such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Siddhartha* as examples to support their position and point out that examples also exist in oral tales and myths that come from even more ancient peoples and cultures. They also point to Native American traditions of a *vision quest* as an early American type of gap year. I would also add that early global explorers might reasonably be thought to pre-sage the modern day gap year participant, connecting travel and exploration to learning.

Finally, Haigler and Nelson (2005) also point to Cornelius (Neil) Bull as a “pioneer and visionary” (p. 23) that contributed significantly to the growth of the new and slightly different gap year trend now gaining popularity in the United States. Bull's work in Arizona in the 1960s, helping students volunteer working with the Navajo Indian reservation, led him to become a firm believer in the transformative power of that type of experience, and he was an outspoken proponent that Haigler and Nelson (2005) say encouraged many students to choose to take a gap year.

## Popularity of the Gap Year

During the 1980s, a more conservative era that followed the *free love* decades that preceded it, popularity of the concept of the modern gap year began to rise in England and has continued to gain in popularity throughout Europe ever since (Brown, 2004; Bull, 2006; Heath, 2007). Brown (2004) asserts that gap year participation in the United Kingdom increased almost 30% between 1997 and 2002. The practice is also gaining in popularity through out the developed world. In the country where a gap year is most popular, Australia, Krause et al. (2005) found that 11% of students opted for one. More recently, in 2012, Curtis, Mlotkowski and Lumsden asserted that 20% of high school graduates in Australia would take a gap year and that the practice is widely considered mainstream. According to Jones in 2004 the number of individuals in total worldwide that were thought to be on this type of break was estimated as 250,000 individuals. Based on growth trend estimates however, this number has no doubt increased significantly since that time (Stehlik, 2010). More recently Martin (2010), estimates that at any one time between 5 and 20% of the age appropriate population is either preparing to take a gap year, currently on one, or in the process of returning from one. Stehlik (2010) summarizes by calling the gap year “a significant trend globally” (p. 363) and specifically in “English-speaking western capitalistic societies” (p. 373). At least one other researcher reports that the trend is also gaining momentum in non-English speaking developed countries such as Japan (Ito, 2011).

American students, however, have been relatively late to adopt the trend, and many researchers point out the concept is still in the early stages of gaining traction in the United States (Haigler & Nelson, 2005; O’Shea, 2011; Sarouhan & Sarouhan, 2013). In fact, the option of the gap year was virtually unknown in America prior to the 1980s, and was slower to catch on

here than in Europe and Australia where extended vacations are more culturally the norm (Hulstrand, 2010; Kanning, 2008). Despite the slow start however, the popularity of the phenomenon is clearly rapidly on the rise in the United States currently (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; O'Shea, 2011). Still, many in America are as of yet un-accepting of the idea of a gap year (Hulstrand, 2010; Stehlik, 2010).

It is important to note here that the popularity of the gap year specifically in both Australia and England has resulted in much of the academic research available on the topic originating from those countries and, unsurprisingly, focusing on their students exclusively. Even American researchers, in an effort to assess the desirability of the growing trend in the United States, have resorted to utilizing research subjects and or data from other countries in an effort to better understand the effects of the gap year. As an example that demonstrates this point, O'Shea (2011), a professor at Florida State University, recently published the results of his study and findings in a comprehensive book entitled, "Gap Year; How Delaying College Changes People In Ways the World Needs" in the United States. This book represents perhaps the most thorough and convincing argument for the gap year published to date in the United States; however, O'Shea derived his research from conducted interviews of gap year participants who were exclusively from the United Kingdom.

Haigler and Nelson (2013) were among the first to utilize American students as subjects. Their research consisted of more than 300 respondents to an online questionnaire, as well as referencing a significant number of in person interviews of both gap year alumni and their parents. Haigler and Nelson themselves however caution that their research is considered informal in that they had no baseline as well as due to the fact that the subjects of their study self selected to participate. Their findings however are similar to those of other researchers in the

field and represent the earliest attempts to look specifically at American gap year participants. Their research is frequently cited in popular literature. American gap year stakeholders also reference it.

The literature reviewed herein therefore includes peer-reviewed articles and studies available from multiple countries of origin but is notably relatively lacking in studies that focus exclusively on American students. When you consider that fact, in conjunction with the earlier explanation that there is little research associated with older gap year participants or families that take a gap year, you begin to understand that the following literature review represents what is known about groups that have significant commonalities with the subjects of this study but that the subjects of the included research cannot be said to represent an identical group.

### **Importance of the Gap Year**

Most researchers of the gap year point to the importance of the phenomenon in modern day society as well as to the tremendous potential benefits both for the individual participant, as well as the societies they represent (Bull, 2006; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; Martin, 2010; O'Shea, 2011). The United States, as stated previously, has acknowledged its need for more globally educated citizens. Other developed countries have historically done a far better job of exposing their students to foreign cultures (National Association of Foreign Students, n.d.). Much of the current relevant literature stresses the need for the American educational system to improve students' readiness to participate in global business operations (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011; Gullekson, Tuckers, Coombs, & Wright, 2011; Hayden, 2011; Kaufman et al., 2011). Business leaders state that they value students who have had multi-cultural experiences, and can demonstrate cultural sensitivity, understanding and competencies (Braskamp & Engberg, 2011). As efforts are made to positively impact this situation, it has become important to study

the effectiveness of attempted solutions to the problem of the isolation of American students in an increasingly global environment. As the push for more globally minded citizens has intensified, increasingly American students and their parents are beginning to see the gap year as an intervention that might give them the cultural intelligence that employers are looking for (Bull, 2006; O'Shea, 2011).

Concurrently, in the world of psychology, researchers are stressing the positive potential of human capital and exploring what interventions might be put in place to impact the traits that are said to make up psychological capital and thereby to create a competitive advantage for both individuals and companies (Luthans, Youseff, & Avolio, 2007). Seligman originally put forth the concept that psychology should not focus solely on studying deviant or unproductive behavior, as it had in the past, but rather that the science should serve to identify and study those traits and behaviors that result in optimum human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The concept of psychological capital arose out of a focus on positive psychology and, according to Luthans, includes an individual's level of self-confidence, optimism, perseverance and resiliency. These traits, it is believed, hold the key to maximizing overall human functioning and performance. Not only do researchers posit that psychological capital is vitally important both to individuals and to the organizations those individuals make up, but also that those traits can, and should, be positively impacted by intervention. While most research to date examining efforts to positively impact psychological capital has focused on the workplace, I suggest that the theory is also applicable to research associated with outcomes of the gap year. Some of the same traits that make up psychological capital show up repeatedly in research about the outcomes of gap year experiences. Improved self-confidence in particular is an established outcome of gap year participation, and perseverance and resiliency are also repeatedly referenced by gap year

participants. The findings I refer to are discussed further in this chapter under the heading *Gap Year Outcomes* and the sub-heading *Soft Skills*. Students and families who are interested in establishing a competitive edge may reasonably look to improving their psychological capital and to a gap year as a legitimate way to do so. Similarly, organizations interested in improving their own competitive edge might well look to hire and promote individuals who have participated in a gap year.

In addition to attempting to address the specific problem of the relative isolation of students and citizens of the United States, as well as the need to address and improve our combined psychological capital, researchers point to the overall need for a global community in which people can understand, relate to and empathize with each other. Researchers also point to education as the tool that might be best utilized to accomplish this goal (O'Shea, 2011). Concurrently, there is also an outcry among some stakeholders in the United States that traditional education is outdated and failing to address the current educational needs of students (Carroll, 2000). Carroll points to the link between motivation and learning as well as to a worrying lack of motivation among modern students and what he identifies as a correlating lack of learning. O'Shea (2011) speaks to the link between the education system and our need for globally educated students by stating, "The challenges of our time demand an educational system that can help young people to become citizens of the world" (p. 1). He goes on to point out, however, that the classroom alone is not capable of accomplishing this goal. O'Shea is not alone in this assertion, as other researchers point to the shortcomings of the traditional classroom education in addressing the goal of a more motivated, culturally sensitive, globally educated population (Carroll, 2000). Some researchers point to the gap year and its substantial inherent potential benefits as, if not a pat solution, at least a viable tool to help eliminate the lack of



cultural sensitivity that currently exists among many populations, and help to realize the goal of a more cohesive world (Jones, 2004; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; O'Shea, 2011).

### **Who Takes a Gap Year?**

As pointed out previously, currently gap year participants are most often young adults who participate in the year just following completion of high school and just before beginning college or, alternately, prior to joining the full time work force. Most gap year definitions do not exclude older or younger individuals, who opt for a similar experience, but they are referred to infrequently and most of the research is conducted with this primary group. Jones (2004) for instance utilized the 16-25 year old age group for his research that was commissioned by the British Department of Education. Other researchers do not necessarily specify an age group per se but conduct research exclusively with individuals who took a gap year directly following high school graduation, which would then presumably mean their subjects were between the ages of 16 to 19 when they participated.

Some researchers opine that taking a gap year directly after high school is more beneficial than taking one later in life (O'Shea, 2011). O'Shea (2011) believes that the relative youth of this type of gap year participant allows them to be more open to change and the learning that may take place as a result of a gap year. He also points to the subjects of his study and their belief that their gap year experiences led them to take better advantage of all the learning college had to offer them, a benefit that would arguably be missing or not fully realized among older participants. It is important to note here that O'Shea does not address the potential advantage, or disadvantage, of a still younger student taking a gap year, such as in the case of the elementary, junior high or high school aged children of a family that takes part in a gap year together. He does, however, assert that he firmly believes that taking a gap year later in life, such as in the

case of the parents of families that take gap years, is still beneficial and therefore highly recommended.

It is interesting to note that recent research suggests that currently females appear to participate in a gap year more frequently than males do (Birch & Miller, 2007; Hurt, 2008; Jones, 2004). This modern trend runs contrary to the historical roots of the gap year, during which time most participants were male. It is also noteworthy when considering research, detailed later in this chapter, which suggests that males may benefit more from participation in a gap year than females do. Along with males, Jones (2004) also found that persons with disabilities comprised another under represented group among gap year participants from the United Kingdom.

Finally researchers describe the majority of current gap year participants as coming from either privileged families, or alternately, from primarily middle class backgrounds (Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011). Gappers have also been found to be primarily white, with fewer participants coming from other ethnic backgrounds (Jones, 2004; King, 2011). King (2007) postulates however that it is possible that it is the term *gap year* itself that is specific to the middle and upper White classes rather than the time out experience as the gap year is defined. In other words, he indicates that the practice of taking a break from formal education to travel or volunteer may be more common than is realized among students of color or lower socio-economic groups yet simply not known as, or referred to as, a gap year within those cultural groups. King's point is of particular interest to this researcher in that, as the family gap year is not a well-established term in either academic or popular literature, it is conceivably also true families who take gap years, as defined through out this paper, may similarly not identify them

as such. This possibility will inform efforts to identify potential subjects by ensuring that a full description of a family gap year is included in all discussions.

### **Cost of a Gap Year**

This chapter established previously that the historical roots of the now modern gap year lie with the offspring of persons of privilege. That gap year participation would be associated with privilege even today is not surprising, as participation is necessarily predicated on the would be gapper or their family being able to afford, or alternately raise, the funds necessary to participate. One current expert in the field reports that international gap year volunteering programs can range in cost from as little as \$3,000 to as much as \$200,000 and more (O'Shea, 2011). O'Shea (2011) goes on to state that while living in developing countries can be relatively inexpensive, flights, insurance and other expenses such as support and oversight by a responsible organization can be costly. It is also not surprising then that, since the cost of a gap year can be seen as cost prohibitive for many students and families, some researchers point out the practice creates yet another unfair advantage for elite families (Heath, 2007). Heath is particularly concerned about the potential advantage that the gap year may provide to well off families, specifically in that it represents a purchasable means of gaining distinction when applying to elite universities. She also opines that, as the widening gap in incomes levels in the United Kingdom has been mirrored by the increase in the popularity of the gap year, the two phenomena are related.

One researcher however found that, as costs vary widely based on the type and length of gap year, some gap years could be relatively inexpensive (Jones, 2004). Another has recently pointed out that new technology-aided fund raising efforts, such as crowd funding platforms, are making the option of raising the funds needed for a gap year more realistic for many students

today (O'Shea, 2011). This supports Jones' (2004) assertion that, while most gap year participants do come from the middle or affluent classes, the majority of them contribute to the cost of their gap year with their own savings or by working or borrowing money. Jones also states that many gap year provider organizations actually require students to raise a portion of the cost associated with their placement.

Ancillary to the issue of cost and the option of fund raising, O'Shea (2011) states that, among students who took part in his study, several individuals who had worked to raise the funds for their trip said their success in doing so had contributed to their feelings of accomplishment following their trip. Those same students also indicated that a feeling of responsibility to their donors encouraged them not to give up when their trip became trying. In addition to his optimistic view about students' growing ability to raise the necessary funds, O'Shea also opines that universities may also be in a position to help to fund gap years in the not so distant future. Should that prove to be true, it would undoubtedly change the identified socio-economic demographics of the gap year participant as well as presumably contribute substantially to an increase in the number of students who choose and complete a gap year.

Secondary to the issue of cost is value. While the motivations and outcomes sections of this chapter speak to what are presumably less tangible values, at least one writer points to the fact that a gap year might produce more easily measurable financial benefits in the form of reduced college tuition (Hulstrand, 2010). To support this supposition Hulstrand points to the growing trend of students in the United States taking five or even six years to obtain an undergraduate degree, and to the two primary identified causes of those delays, students changing schools and changing majors. Because multiple studies, as covered later in this chapter, find that gap year participants return more focused on their goals and sure about their

choices of career and major, Hulstrand opines that those students may be more likely to finish college in four years, resulting in a substantial potential savings.

Finally it is important to reiterate that because costs vary widely by type of gap year, concerns over the ramifications of those costs vary as well (Kanning, 2008). While Heath (2007) looks at middle class and economically advantaged students and worries about unfair advantage, researchers that study backpackers point out that it is a relatively low cost method of travel. Key here to point out too is that Heath looked exclusively at British gappers. Hulstrand (2010) points out that American gap years, however, tend to be significantly different than what she describes at the British variety “vacationing in trendy European party spots” (p. 51). Regardless, it is fair to acknowledge that costs for gap year participation probably vary widely based upon such factors as number of destinations included, time involved and level of luxury desired, as well as the nature of the trips themselves, whether they are focused on volunteering, travel, or more recreational pursuits.

### **Motivations of Gap Year Participants**

Having established what a gap year is, who takes them, why they are important and some attention to what they might cost, this section of the review of literature will move on to delve into what is known about the motivations of gap year participants. This research speaks to why students decide to take a gap year in the first place, and directly addresses one of the primary research questions that drive this study. In fact researchers have ascertained that gap year participants have many and varied reasons for choosing a gap year, never the less there are identifiable recurring themes in the research literature. While the gap year industry, as discussed later in more detail, tends to use altruism as an appeal to potential travelers, most students report primarily egocentric reasons for undertaking a gap year (Heath, 2007; O’Shea, 2011). It is

interesting to note however that O'Shea (2011) found that while students reported primarily selfish reasons for participating in a gap year, those motivations changed during the year to focus more on the well being of others.

It is widely acknowledged by researchers that young people, when addressing their motivation to take a gap year, almost universally cite a desire to have a break from continuous formal study, to rest, rejuvenate and contemplate their path and plans for the future (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011; Stehlik, 2010). Similarly, many participants report that *burnout* or a desire to escape what is sometimes described as the treadmill of formal education was an important factor in selecting a gap year (O'Shea, 2011). Some of these students reported they didn't feel ready for college and believed that a gap year would leave them feeling rested, rejuvenated and better equipped to succeed at university. Snee (2014) also points out that students expect their gap year to be, among other things, fun. A few students also refer to escaping from problems at home (O'Shea, 2011).

O'Shea's (2011) study, in particular, further found that a desire to do something new and exciting was a common and important motivating factor for students. These students cited wanting to get outside of their comfort zone, to be more independent, different or brave as important motivations. O'Shea also reported that participants stated the freedom to act in different ways or to be perceived differently were important to their decision to take a gap year. Multiple studies found that students planning to participate in a gap year expressed a belief that their time out year would be an experience of accelerated learning resulting in personal growth (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011).

Researchers report that many American colleges appear to support the concept of the gap year (O'Shea, 2011). One college in particular that encourages gap year participation suggests in

their literature that the gap year helps with “the primary goal of our education: to discover what it is we truly care about and want to pursue further, and thereby come as close as possible to realizing our potential” (Buckles, 2014, para. 2). Indeed many gap year participants report a motivation to develop skills and perspectives they felt they were missing was an important factor in their decision to take a gap year (O’Shea, 2011). Notably, many of these same students expressed that they specifically desired to learn things that they didn’t feel they would, or could, learn during their traditional, classroom based education. Some researchers also point to interviews with gap year participants wherein they refer to a desire for what the researchers refer to as educational benefits such as gaining life experience, and or obtaining soft skills that they perceive will benefit them down the road (Stehlik, 2010). These soft skills include increased maturity and independence among others (Jones, 2004).

Finally, while altruistic motivations are not among the primary reasons cited for embarking upon a gap year, some students do refer to helping others or making a difference as among the reasons they chose a gap year (O’Shea, 2011). O’Shea (2011) also points out that many students in his study referenced responsibility to others as a reason for not giving up on their gap year when it became difficult. So O’Shea found that while altruistic motivations are not necessarily important motivators for many prior to embarking on a gap year, it appears they may be more important as the year goes along. He summarizes the motivations of the students he studied to take an international gap year as a fundamental desire for change, and as viewing a gap year as an “instrument of change” (p. 22). This falls in line with other researchers who examined the motivations of gap year participants.

## Motivations of Backpackers

Research specific to backpackers also provides information and insight about the motivations of the gap year participant. Backpacker is a term that O'Reilly (2006) says began to appear in academic and popular literature during the 1990s. One preeminent researcher defines backpackers as international travelers who travel for an extended period, eschew schedules and prioritize socialization and adventure (Pearce, 1990). O'Reilly (2006) defines backpacking as "long-haul, long term independent travel" (p. 998), and points to the importance of serendipity, or the openness to chance and change of plans, as an important part of why backpackers choose to travel in the described style. Like the modern day gap year, backpacking is a relatively modern phenomenon that has its roots in the earlier referenced *Grand Tour* as well as to European exploration (Kanning, 2008). O'Reilly (2006) points out that the term backpacker does not always have a positive, or even a neutral, connotation. The fact that the practice of backpacking is occasionally seen in a negative light by society at large is another similarity to identified perceptions related to gap year participants.

While, as referenced earlier in the chapter, the total population of backpackers is not made-up exclusively of individuals taking a gap year, as some were found to be pursuing an alternative lifestyle that didn't include school or a formal career, a significant portion can be expected to overlap with the gap year population in that many of them meet the definition of a gap year participant as established earlier in this chapter. O'Reilly (2006) asserts that the burgeoning popularity of the gap year has contributed substantially to the significant increase in the popularity of the phenomenon of backpacking. We would expect then that findings about the motivations of backpackers might be similar to those of gap year participants, and indeed some



similarities do exist. Therefore the research available conducted related to the motivations of the group of travelers known as backpackers is briefly summarized as follows.

Researchers have found that motivations of backpackers include the need to take a break from school or work, the desire for authentic and novel experience as well as achievement, and a wish to gain cultural knowledge, relax and, most relevant to the subject of education, to learn (Kanning, 2008; Paris & Teye, 2010). Of these the two factors that were found to be primary were relaxation and a desire for cultural knowledge, which respondents believed could only be obtained by extended time traveling in the backpacking style. Backpackers also regularly cite burn out as a reason for taking time off to travel (Kanning, 2008). Finally Kanning (2008) who interviewed exclusively backpackers from the United States found the desire for freedom was an overarching theme to explain the motivations of those 22 individuals he interviewed.

Researchers of backpackers have also provided additional information by identifying the reasons young people travel as backpackers, rather than more traditionally. One primary reason is economic, in order to travel longer and further. They also cite ease and flexibility as well as social motivations, as a method to ensure they will meet and interact with others of similar age and interests (Paris & Teye, 2010). Backpackers say they value the freedom that traveling in this style provides them (O'Reilly, 2006). O'Reilly also says backpackers generally dislike being referred to as tourists, and believe that their travel is a more real experience than that experienced by more traditional tourist travelers. Surveys of backpacking respondents also reported that this type of travel was widely recommended to them by family and friends, contributing to their desire to participate.

## **Positive Outcomes of a Gap Year**

Having examined the motivations of individuals participating in a gap year, researchers have begun to study the outcomes and ramifications of this choice. The fear of many, and particularly those in the United States, is that taking time off from an education and career path has the potential to derail students and cause them to lose motivation needed to continue on toward their goals (Martin, 2010). Much of the research, however, refutes this supposition and instead supports the assertion that the opposite is in fact true. To begin, students themselves report the gap year to be a pivotal experience, increasing learning motivation and clarifying personal and career goals (Bull, 2006; King, 2011; Martin, 2010). Martin's (2010) recent study found, first, that post school uncertainty and lower motivation in students predicted their choice to participate in gap year, but second, that motivation was positively affected in those same students following the gap year experience. Sparks and Dorko (2010) agreed that students participating in a gap year were seemingly more likely to finish college than those that had not. Haigler and Nelson (2013) interviewed recent gap year students from the United States and found that nine out of 10 students returned to college within a year. Additionally, 60% of those students indicated that their year abroad had either created or confirmed their choice of major.

Haigler and Nelson also concur that student experiences served to elevate motivation levels when students began college following a gap year and further speaks to what they describe as a renewed passion for learning. They credit the new found ability of gappers to connect their classroom learning more effectively with their experiences in the real world. Martin (2010) concluded the gap year consisted of an actual education process in the form of experiential learning that contributed to student skills and provided opportunities for self reflection, which in turn led to individual development and resulted in a student that was more self directed and

motivated. In fact, Birch and Miller (2007) found that students who participated in a gap year tended to have better grades upon their return to school than students who did not. Of particular note, they found that this effect was most pronounced among males who had lower grades preceding the travel experience. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that, as reported previously, it is believed that more females than males currently participate in a gap year. Birch and Miller (2007) concluded then that gap year benefits appeared to be most valuable for students who are initially low achievers with low motivation levels.

**Increased motivation.** The majority of researchers are in agreement that the gap year has a positive effect on participant's motivation (Bull, 2006; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011; Martin, 2010). O'Shea (2011) found that the experience of the gap year among his subjects almost universally resulted in what they described as increased energy for and motivation to accomplish their goals, whether they be school related or otherwise. Bull (2006) referred to the tendency that gappers have to be highly likely to buckle down upon their return to formal learning. Learning motivation, in particular, is a theme that appears regularly in gap year literature (Bull, 2006; Martin, 2010; O'Shea, 2011). Martin (2010), at the conclusion of his study, went so far as to suggest gap year participation as a potential intervention for students who are experiencing low motivation. O'Shea (2011) states that many students reported they felt their motivation to learn and perform well in school had flagged during junior high and high school, but that the gap year had renewed the motivation to learn that they felt like they had as a child. He further expresses that most subjects interviewed following their gap year reported a desire to get the most they could out of college, to challenge themselves and achieve more than they thought possible just a year or two before. Some students reported this change was simply as a result of having a break or the time to think and reflect. Still others pointed to a renewed

appreciation for the opportunities that had been afforded them, an appreciation that extended to their schools, their teachers and to the overall opportunity to learn, as a result of their exposure to others who weren't privy to those same opportunities.

**Improved school and career performance.** A couple of researchers have asserted their findings that participation in a gap year was found to positively affect subsequent school performance (Jones, 2004; Martin, 2010). Heath (2007) found that participation in a gap year gave gappers an advantage over non gappers in obtaining admission to elite institutions within the United Kingdom. Stehlik (2010) also found that skills and understanding obtained during the gap year had positive implications in the workplace as well. Additionally, Heath expounded further by claiming that it is as simple as the fact that those who are able and willing to take a gap year have a personal advantage over those who are not. He argues that the differentiation of a student with a gap year experience serves as an advantage to them in an increasingly competitive market of school selection as well as in the job market they eventually reach. Jones (2004) concurs by finding that benefits of a gap year include improved school performance as well as improved career opportunities, but he also points out that not all identified benefits are seen in all gappers. Heath concluded that gap year participation is an important method or tool that may be utilized to gain distinction in the ever more competitive world that young people face.

**Soft skills.** Multiple researchers reference the idea that gappers obtain soft skills that are not easily obtained by other methods in a similar time frame (Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011). Jones (2004) refers to these as life skills and references the ability to make decisions, self-discipline, problem solving, leadership and communication skills as well as the ability to handle money. Other skills referenced include greater maturity, enhanced self-awareness and increased

independence. Other researchers, however, caution that these types of skills are difficult to quantify (Stehlik, 2010). King (2011) found that one of the primary benefits of a gap year for students was the identity work that they accomplished both during their trip and upon their return to their home country. Specifically he identified increases in maturity, confidence and, to a slightly lesser degree, independence. King (2010), along with O'Shea (2011) also found that gappers consider themselves more mature following their time out of organized education and believe they are more mature than students of their age who did not participate in a gap year. O'Shea also found that gap year participants also reported increased confidence and independence. Martin (2010) cited improvements in what he described as adaptive behavior such as planning, task management and persistence.

**Changed view of home country.** Researchers report that gap year participants often express that their opinions of their home country changed after their time abroad (O'Shea, 2011). While not everyone would concur that this is necessarily a positive outcome, I have chosen to classify it as such based on the wider worldview this outcome implies. The majority of subjects report that they now better understand the shortcomings and flaws that they perceive to be a part of western culture and functioning. Some subjects report the reason for this is not only due to seeing how other countries do it differently, but also as a result of having people from other cultures question and challenge them regarding their own country's beliefs and actions (O'Shea, 2011). Overall the gap year experience reportedly resulted in students viewing the beliefs they were raised with in a new and much broader context.

**Tolerance and acceptance.** Along with understanding their own home countries and beliefs differently, gap year participants report new and expanded understanding and acceptance of other cultures and their different ways of thinking and operating (O'Shea, 2011). This finding

speaks directly to the United State's desire to raise more culturally aware citizens. Participants in the O'Shea (2011) study expressed an understanding that people's beliefs are based on their upbringing and the culture they were exposed to. This led them to feel closer to people with views different than their own, to be more accepting of other views. They also reported feeling a connection to the countries in which they spent significant time. Some even went so far as to say that they felt less American, or British, or whichever country they hailed from, less Western in other words. They said they began to identify more with people from the third world countries they were visiting. Kanning (2008) also found that the worldviews were altered among the backpackers that he interviewed. Those travelers pointed to interactions with people from other cultures as contributing to this result.

**Gratefulness and decreased materialism.** Finally, participants in the O'Shea (2011) study expressed a new feeling of gratitude for their upbringing, their experiences and opportunities. Some even went so far as to refer to guilt about their relatively rich lives. This, O'Shea explains comes from viewing up close the inequalities that exist between western and developing countries. Students reported to O'Shea that their up close experiences of injustice affected them deeply. Importantly, O'Shea reports that this new feeling of gratefulness among students resulted in a reassessment of available opportunities and a drive to take better advantage of those opportunities, to do more with what they had been given. Specifically many students in this study expressed the belief that their gap year would result in their participating in more volunteer activities and through out their lives, to travel more and to learn still more about the world. Haigler and Nelson (2013) supported that finding by indicating that 64% of past gap year participants they interviewed had been involved in a volunteer activity during the previous 12 months and that as many as 50% said they were involved in some type of volunteer activity at

least once per month following their gap year experience. Finally, when gap year participants are asked about the changes in self that they perceived as a result of their gap year experiences, many refer to a decrease in materialism (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; O'Shea, 2011).

**New interests.** Many interviewed gap year participants also report that their gap year experience resulted in new and broadened interests (O'Shea, 2011). These students stated that they both cared more about existing interests as well as that they developed new and varied interests based on their experiences on their trip. Other interview subjects referred to new and expanded curiosity, about the world and other cultures, but also about how and why things work at home. One specific and notable area of interest that was recurring in the interviews that O'Shea (2011) did was an interest in international affairs. Not surprisingly then, many gappers expressed an interest in traveling internationally and indicated that they believed they would do so again.

Another interesting specific outcome of note is that students from the O'Shea (2011) study reported that the gap year experience gave them time to read, and specifically time to read those things that interested them, rather than only those titles and subjects that were assigned. They further reported that this contributed directly and substantially to their new and expanded interests. Another interesting finding in the area of new interests is that some interviewed students reported their gap year experience resulted in a decreased desire to drink alcohol or use recreational drugs (Bull, 2006; O'Shea, 2011). Some students that O'Shea interviewed expressed this in terms of their increased maturity, while others felt they had gotten it out of their system while on their gap year out. Still others stated that they had learned they didn't need to drink to have a good time. This finding is certainly relevant to understanding how gap year participants might fair in college versus their peers who did not opt for a gap year.

**Ambition and new directions.** Finally, O'Shea (2011) reported that many students he interviewed expressed newfound ambition as a result of their experiences. O'Shea explains that their changed view of the world resulted, not just in a desire to help others, but also in a desire to get more out of their own life experience. Many of the gap year participants in O'Shea's study said their experiences resulted in a change of plans following their return home, some in the form of changes in their planned major or others in a change of career plan even in the same major.

Most of O'Shea's (2011) interview subjects reported their plans following their gap year were to return to their home country to attend college. Many however reported feeling better about that path after their trip. Students reported that their gap year experience left them feeling that college was a choice they were making consciously and purposefully, with energy and excitement, rather than just taking the next expected step. This finding dovetails nicely with earlier research finding indicating that learning motivation was positively impacted in students who took part in a gap year, and perhaps gives some explanation as to why that might be.

Some students interviewed by O'Shea (2011) following their gap year reported a planned change in major. Of those changes some were as a result of positive exposure to a new field during their time abroad, for example discovering a passion for teaching or healthcare, while others were due to less positive experiences that led them to decide a career they were previously considering was not the one for them. Many students in O'Shea's study reported that their global travel experience left them looking more at careers that would allow them to focus on helping others. Even students who had no plans to change their planned majors, expressed a desire following their gap year to practice in their planned field either internationally, or in ways that focused on the charitable, on helping others and attempting to make the world a better place.



It is important to note however that not all students that take a gap year after high school decide to attend college following their travel experience. O'Shea (2011) reports that most of the students in his study that made this choice also reported feeling ambivalent about college prior to their trip. Still, these students also reported new plans and excitement for their futures. Frequently, interviewed gap year participants report that their experiences during their gap year positively affected their future interests, plans and attitude about the future (Martin, 2010; O'Shea, 2011).

**Benefits summary.** To summarize, researchers have identified many and varied benefits associated with gap year participation. The general consensus is that a gap year can provide benefits that are not easily obtained inside of a classroom. Identified positive outcomes of a gap year include increased motivation, improved school performance and career opportunities, as well as significant identity work resulting in a variety of changes including, but not limited to, increased maturity and independence. Gap year participants, it has been found, are more likely to finish university and less likely to change schools or major. Finally research points to changes in gap year participants related to making them better global citizens, more likely to travel in the future and focus on professions that help others as well as to regularly volunteer for projects that they perceive can make a difference.

### **Negative Outcomes of Gap Year**

Not all research however supports the idea that a gap year has no negative connotations or outcomes. Stehlik (2010) points out that the term gap itself has a negative connotation in that it refers to something that is missing. He goes on to assert that having an unaccounted for period on a person's resume is generally thought to be negative. Multiple researchers have examined the concern that a gap year may disrupt a student's school or career path. Other researchers have

examined concerns about the culture shock that students report experiencing both upon arrival in third world countries, but more commonly upon return to their own home country.

**Disruption of school or career path.** Some researchers have found that those students who delay going to college for a year or more are less likely to finish and complete their degree than those that do not. While students delay beginning college for many reasons, gap year participation, it must be noted, is one of those reasons. Curtis et al. (2012) looked at Australian students that delayed entering college and found that they were slightly less likely to finish university and obtain a degree than those students who went straight to college. It is important to note however that the sample utilized for this study included students who delayed college entrance for any reason. In fact that study identified that only 3% of participants reported travel as the main activity of their gap year and the majority of them reported that work was the main activity they took part in during that time.

An analysis of college completion data of students in the United States by Jonathon James (2012) appears to support this concern in finding that students that delay beginning college by a year are three times less likely to complete the degree than those students who go directly to college following high school graduation. James, however, also did not differentiate between students that delayed college to travel internationally and or volunteer and students who stayed home and worked at a job. In fact, he reports that 90% of the students included in the analyzed data reported that working was the reason for delaying their start to university, raising the question of what percentage of the 90% had no travel experience and therefore weren't gap year participants as defined by the literature. It is also important to emphasize that these findings run contrary to the results of researchers who looked exclusively at gap year participants who met the definition established at the beginning of this paper.

**Culture shock.** Some researchers have found that gap year participants frequently report having difficulties adjusting after they return home (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; O'Shea, 2011). Students interviewed after they have been home from a gap year experience for an extended time often refer to difficulties fitting in, as well as in trying to relate to the peers they left behind (O'Shea, 2011). The term *culture shock* appears with some frequency in post gap year interview transcripts, as students describe the trouble they experienced upon returning home (Haigler & Nelson, 2013). O'Shea (2011) goes so far as to say that students reported feelings related to culture shock, or disorientation upon sudden exposure to a different culture, more upon return to their own countries than they did when describing their initial experiences in the third world countries they visited.

The difficulties described by students upon returning to their home countries, which the students often attributed to culture shock, included difficulty relating to their peers. Many students reported that they felt they had little in common with their friends who had not participated in a gap year. Some said their friends seemed materialistic and focused on things the gap year participants no longer felt were important. Some gap year participants also reported they felt pressure from their friends, and their society as a whole, to shop or purchase things they didn't need, and that the pressure made them uncomfortable (O'Shea, 2011). Others reported that they had little patience for what they perceived as whining and or lack of appreciation on the part of people in their age group.

Additionally, gap year participants who spent a significant period of time working or volunteering in a single overseas locale reported feelings of loss associated with missing the friends and community they had left in their adopted countries (O'Shea, 2011). They also expressed guilt that they could return home to relative comfort and ease while their third world

community members didn't have access to that type of escape. Some also reported that their lives in the west seemed relatively lacking in meaning, were superficial and lacking in the strong community they experienced while volunteering in less developed countries.

Finally, some interviewed gap year students, upon return to their home countries, expressed dissatisfaction with their family and community with regard to the topic of gender roles (O'Shea, 2011). This showed up predominantly in an expressed feeling that men should be helping around the house. O'Shea (2011) pointed to the differences in traditional male role models in the countries in question as a likely reason for this outcome.

### **A New Type of Gap Year**

As American students and families have become more familiar with the concept of the gap year, according to college admission personnel as well as education advisors, they are more frequently choosing the option (Hulstrand, 2010). Hulstrand states that colleges are reporting a radical increase in the number of accepted students who are asking for a deferral in order to pursue a gap year. It appears however that while more American students are making the choice to take a year out from traditional structured learning, they are turning around and seeking a much more structured version than that of the typical gap year (Bull, 2006; Haigler & Nelson, 2005; Simpson, 2004). Simpson (2004) argues that this trend is desirable, that formalizing the gap year will ensure the best results. American students and families, as well as the colleges from whom they are seeking deferments, are said to be specifically interested in more structured experiences that would fall more closely in line with the American work ethic and value system than the amorphous backpacking jaunt around the world favored by gappers from Europe, Australia or the rest of the developed world.

Sarouhan and Sarouhan (2013) define this new American style gap year as “a focused, finite period of time in which an individual takes a deliberate break from his or her current academic or professional path in order to explore other interests” (p. 1). It is important to note that Sarouhan and Sarouhan also point out that gap year participants are not all the traditional young adults one normally thinks of by stating they can be anywhere from 16-60 years old. While this is a rare and therefore appreciated reference to non traditional gap year participants, this researcher would argue that participants might also be even older or younger than the ages referred to by these writers, as specifically referencing family gap year participants.

American proponents of this new style of gap year say it is a fun but focused way for students to learn about their own individual interests and explore multiple opportunities before settling on one (Hulstrand, 2010). Interest is rising therefore in opportunities to explore scientific opportunities or to investigate and clarify a variety of career options, and to do so in ways that allow more exposure than entry level jobs might. Additionally, some researchers point out that time out spent volunteering or working in a single community results in students becoming more responsible and arguably provides more opportunities for students to reflect and therefore grow (Haigler & Nelson, 2005; O’Shea, 2011). On the other hand however, some of those same writers argue that the paradox is that the very free flowing nature of the traditional gap year is the key ingredient that, while allowing the gapper the very break needed from formality and years of numbing structure, also results in the clarification of goals and increase in motivation that is desired by parents and educators (Hulstrand, 2010; O’Shea, 2011). O’Shea (2011) specifically states that as someone reads the interviews he conducted with students “it becomes increasingly clear that there is often only so much a gap year administrator can control or insert in gap years and still have a gap year program” (p. 148).

Increasingly, it appears that Americans are beginning to consider the gap year option. However a new Americanized version of the gap year is emerging that is far more structured in content than the practice that has been analyzed thus far. The question becomes, will the American version of the gap year be as effective as the more continental one, as it relates to an increase in motivation and the production of more globally minded citizens. In addition, as discussed previously, students traditionally cite relaxation and lack of structure as the primary reason for wanting to take a gap year. Another question then becomes whether the Americanized, more structured, gap year will have less appeal to the target group? Future study will undoubtedly address these questions and more regarding the efficacy of the gap year for American students. Finally, further study is warranted on the subject of whether or not the modernized gap year might be considered an effective intervention for the motivation malaise that has been identified in many American students today, as well as for the overly isolated American citizens.

### **Support for the American View**

Resistance to the gap year experience though is still common in the United States, and the well-entrenched belief is that young people who opt to take a gap year are likely never to return to complete a college degree. The perception is that a gap year is time off and that implies that it is apart from and therefore less important than an individual's formal education (Bull, 2006). Research detailed in the negative outcomes section of this chapter supports American concern by suggesting that gap year participation may make college completion less likely.

Haigler and Nelson's research (2013) however refutes the supposition that a properly planned and executed gap year will decrease the likelihood that participants will return to school with the results of the first substantive survey of gap year participants from the United States.

This study indicated that the vast majority of American students participating in gap years that included international travel did return to University along with a renewed passion for learning. This finding supports the vital link between independent travel and increased motivation levels that have been established by researchers from other western countries. These same students were also shown to be more adept at connecting their formal education with actual real-world experiences, giving them the same advantage over non-gappers claimed by students in other parts of the world (Haigler & Nelson, 2013).

Researchers are now attempting to differentiate between the newer more structured formal gap years that are often focused on volunteering and the less structured variety that traditionally featured more travel and leisure and a variety of experiences. O'Shea (2011) looked at students primarily from the United Kingdom who participated in a single formal established program that placed students in volunteer positions, often teaching, in developing countries for a year. He found that their experiences represented an experiential education that came out of a combination of civic engagement and personal development. This finding suggests that formal gap years may indeed have similar results to those identified by research regarding less structured experiences. It is important to note that the students in the study O'Shea conducted participated for a full year and therefore his results may not be expected to mirror those that look at significantly shorter experiences.

Still other researchers question whether the more structured gap year is an improvement. Simpson (2005) in particular points to the professionalization of the gap year option as one that is likely to significantly alter the experience and therefore the outcomes for students that participate. Specifically she reports that the gap year is changing from an idealistic endeavor to a much more commercialized venture that promises individual career development. Researchers

suggest that studies that analyze, and compare and contrast, the results from the *new* gap year as compared to the more traditional one are needed (O'Shea, 2011).

Finally, yet another type of gap year reportedly gaining popularity is one that is taken following college graduation and prior to entering the work force (Counter, 2013). Little research is available on this specific group of gappers, but Counter states that a lack of jobs has popularized this alternative, and that some consider it a way to way to stand out to potential future employers. She also suggests it may be a more practical time for a gap year in that participants are older and, presumably, more mature.

### **The Role of Universities**

There is a general feeling among gap year professionals that both parents and educators are looking for a gap year to provide experiences that, in addition to the desired learning objectives, would also result in personal growth and enhanced confidence (Hulstrand, 2010). Universities in particular, and contrary to what is often the popular belief in the United States, are frequently supportive of students' desire to take a gap year (Haigler & Nelson, 2013). Those universities that state that support publicly appear to buy into the belief that freshman who are a year older and have had global life experience are less likely to party excessively or flounder and drop out (Bull, 2006). Bull quotes Fred Haradon, past dean of admissions at Princeton, as saying that his ideal freshman class would consist of students at least 21 years old. Only then, he is quoted as saying, would an individual have the wisdom and experiences necessary to take optimal advantage of what Princeton could provide.

The gap year, it is believed by some, provides that broad range of skills and allows a young adult to reinvent him or her self as needed as they acquire self-identity and certainty (Bull, 2006; Hulstrand, 2010). To that end some universities in the United States are creating their own



versions of gap year programs (Hulstrand, 2010; O'Shea, 2011). These programs, as described by Hulstrand, embrace what was described previously as the new American form of the gap year and are designed to provide all the identified benefits of a more traditional gap year while also focusing the experiences to maximize those benefits, in some cases even offering course credits for participation. Most gap year providers in the United States now recommend that would be gappers apply to colleges during high school and request a deferral of admission in order to complete their gap year (Haigler & Nelson, 2013). These recommendations appear to be heard, as over half of the sample in Haigler and Nelson's survey of gap year participants from the United States asked for and received deferrals.

Not all universities however continue to be supportive of a gap year, particularly of the type that involves an unstructured tour of the world. One college head in the United Kingdom went so far as to declare that the gap year was dead, and encouraged instead a *bridge year* or one that involved work or training that would make students more attractive to universities and employers (Barrett, 2010). Indeed, O'Shea (2011) reports that the British press has recently produced a number of articles that dismiss the gap year as a waste of time or, perhaps worse, an indulgence for well off families that, not only does no good but, may possibly do harm to the countries in which gap year participants travel and or volunteer. O'Shea also points out, however, that these articles don't represent actual academic research findings, and emphasizes the need for more empirical data in order to either confirm or deny these claims. He also makes a point of suggesting that the mere existence of more recent criticism of the gap year phenomenon points primarily to its growing popularity.

## **Maximizing the Benefits of a Gap Year**

Some researchers are now attempting to differentiate between varying types of gap years, separating experiences that are solely travel and leisure from ones that are more structured and involve volunteer work, whether that is to provide humanitarian aid, to explore fields of interest or even just to travel around the world albeit in a more learning centered fashion. Haigler and Nelson (2005) explain the importance of this differentiation by expounding that “without a plan, a structure, and goals, some young people may yield to the temptation to just hang out, travel with friends, or bum around...and these young people may be no more focused than when they left high school” (p. 25). Fobes (2005) set out to make recommendations for study style travel in order to maximize learning for the participants. She suggested that in order to ensure learning the following activities should take place. First, examining is required. This means seeking out experiences that are outside an individual’s previous experience and really exposing themselves to all the sights, sounds and implications of the occurrence or encounter. Next, understanding is required. That necessitates the grasping of occurrences in their basic form. Then reflecting is necessary to compare one’s own experiences and reorient and eventually adjust their view. This self-reflection involves and requires the practice of self-examination (Friere, 2010). Finally, the act of engaging in social action facilitates learning relevant to learning’s highest definition, that of personal growth and change (Fobes, 2005).

O’Shea (2011) also attempted to outline how the most beneficial gap year might be designed. He begins however by pointing out that too many or too energetic of attempts to control or program a gap year might logically interfere with what is often cited as the most important factor, the fact that the gap year is supposed to be a year off. Therefore O’Shea concludes that the planners of gap years can best facilitate productive gap years by first

providing safe placements and local logistical support. Next, he states it is important for program administrators to provide significant training to gap year participants prior to departure regarding what to expect and strategies for coping with expected challenges. Finally, O'Shea stresses that those attempting to maximize the benefits of a gap year would do well to provide favorable conditions for students to engage with local communities, exposure to a large variety of types of activities and regular and guided opportunities for self-reflection throughout the process.

Haigler and Nelson (2005) take a different approach and instead attempt to advise the parents of students about how to get the most out of a gap year. They begin by recommending that parents communicate with their students about their feelings upon the completion of high school and anticipation of college enrollment. This is important, they explain, because their research showed that students report that broaching the topic with their parents of taking time off from formal study is a large and difficult hurdle. Next, Haigler and Nelson say parents and students should establish goals and agree upon responsibilities. Step three, of seven, relates to planning a timetable to maximize benefits and ensure expectations about return to formal education. Step four involves research into the available programs and speaking to students who have taken part in different experiences. After identifying potentially appropriate programs, Haigler and Nelson recommend that parents and students together establish priorities to be utilized to evaluate and rank those programs. The next recommended step includes staying on top of details and encouraging parents to ensure there is sufficient support and attention to logistics. Finally this research duo, like others as described previously, states that it is important for the student to reflect. Haigler and Nelson's approach is perhaps the most informed approach, while posed as recommendations to the parent, they actually recommend putting the control in

the hands of the student and thereby presumably avoiding the pitfall warned about by O'Shea (2011) and others of planning and scheduling all of the benefits identified in the first place right out of the gap year experience. This approach also acknowledges that in order for the student to get the most out of the experience, it is necessary that the process is, not only bought into, but also driven by the student.

### **Gap Year Industry**

Due both to the rapidly rising number of individuals opting to travel during a gap year, and the spending and potential business stream of revenue that those choices represent, the travel industry is particularly interested in studying the motivations of this specific group (Jones, 2004; Paris & Teye, 2010). In fact, a sizable industry has grown up with the goal of capitalizing on the potential gap year associated revenue (O'Shea, 2011; Stehlik, 2010). This industry takes the form of planning and travel services, volunteer placement, websites and guidebooks. Jones (2004) looked at what he referred to as the Gap Year Provider Sector in the United Kingdom and found that a wide variety of organizations existed providing everything from travel packages to structured volunteering and work placements both in the United Kingdom and abroad. He further found that the availability of potential placements exceeded the supply of young adults looking for gap year assistance.

### **Gap Year and Related Research Summary**

In summary then the gap year, while not a brand new phenomenon, is gaining in popularity worldwide and now, more recently, in the United States as well. The substance of what makes up a gap year is said to vary widely, from what are essentially decadent luxurious European extended vacations to relatively low cost backpacking journeys around the world and finally to the more structured volunteer and education focused programs most frequently favored

by gap year participants from the United States. While the gap year is considered mainstream in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, several American researchers refer to a historical distrust of the gap year concept among the general population of the United States. Still though, while Americans are relatively slow adapters of the gap year trend, all indications are that the popularity of the gap year will continue to grow as universities are seen to support the option and students and parents become aware of the substantial potential benefits.

The majority of research to date indicates that participation in a gap year has a positive effect on students. Additionally, while research that includes non-traveling gappers indicates lower college graduation rates and in some cases less desirable career outcomes, studies specific to the more narrowly defined gap year participants show the opposite. In fact, studies show that gap year participants not only by and large return from their time off to attend college, they are more likely to be focused on their studies, less likely to change their major, and more likely to graduate in a timely manner than their peers. In fact, while popular opinion of the desirability of gap year participation varies, academic research has yet to identify much in the way of negative outcomes associated with gap year participation as defined in this study, and instead points to many and varied positive outcomes including, but not limited to, increased self awareness, maturity, motivation, and confidence regarding both college major and career goals. Additionally, research suggests that gap year participants are more tolerant, grateful, educated world citizens who are likely to continue to travel internationally and select professions and positions that seek to make the world a better place. Many researchers also say that gappers are more desirable to college admission personnel and some go so far as to say that the ability to take a gap year results in a substantial advantage in obtaining admission to elite universities as well as securing scarce positions in the work force post college.

Criticism of the gap year revolves primarily around cost and privilege. The primary concern is that opportunity to participate in a gap year provides yet another advantage to wealthy families that can afford it and a disadvantage to those who cannot. At least one researcher however points to fundraising as an option for less financially well off students, as well as the possibility that colleges may, in the future, routinely fund gap years for under privileged students. The identified negative outcomes of gap year participation as described by researchers include primarily the difficulties that many gappers are said to experience when returning to their home countries. These outcomes include feelings that are collectively identified as culture shock, and are primarily related to difficulty reintegrating into the materialistic societies they have come to see in a less positive light.

Finally, the preceding information in this chapter represents an overview of what is known about gap year participants, who they are, their motivations, and identified outcomes. Most researchers in the field point to the need for further study. In particular this researcher noted the relative lack of published studies that focus on participants from the United States. Additionally, I note an almost complete dearth of information about non-traditional gap year participants, or in this case participants in what I have identified as the family gap year.

Nevertheless this literature review serves to ground and inform this study in that it helps us to understand how family gap year participants relate to the well studied traditional gap year participant as well as how they differ. In particular because this study focuses on the motivations of family gap year participants, as well as perceived outcomes and common experiences, two studies in particular serve to ground and inform this study. The first is the frequently cited O'Shea (2011) study. O'Shea interviewed traditional aged gap year participants post participation in order to explore their motivations, experiences and perceived outcomes. Not

only is his study among the most current, more importantly, he explored the same aspects of the phenomenon as outlined for this study, but experienced by the more traditional gappers. Similarly, the work by Haigler & Nelson (2013) is current and focused on similar objectives. In addition the Haigler and Nelson study had the added benefit of having been conducted by interviewing gap year participants from the United States. Together these two studies serve as the underpinning for this study, to help us to explore and understand how family gap year participant's motivations, experiences and outcomes might relate to the established findings related to traditional gappers. Finally the work of Moustakas (1994) on phenomenological study helps us to establish a context for the identified outcomes of a family gap year and, together with the cited research about gap year outcomes, will form a lattice on which I will build and support this study.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

This chapter will outline the selected methodology, data gathering instruments and procedures, as well as the selected processes utilized to identify subjects, collect and analyze data and present the results of this study. As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to explore the common motivations, expectations and perceived outcomes of families who choose to take an extended break from career and formal education in order to participate together in a multi-continent international trip. This trip, as defined, is referred to for the purpose of this study and though out this chapter as a gap year.

#### **Restatement of Research Questions**

The research questions that informed this study are as follows.

1. Why do parents decide to take their families on a family gap year trip, and what do they hope to gain from the experience?
2. For families that have been on a gap year trip, in what ways did the trip meet, or fail to meet their expectations?
3. What changes in family members do participants attribute to the experience of the trip?

These questions attempt to explore why families choose a gap year experience, the essence of what that experience is like, as well as their perceptions about the impact of that experience on individual family members.

#### **Description of the Research Methodology - A Phenomenological Approach**

One of the reasons outlined by Moustakas (1994) for utilizing a phenomenological approach is to explore a subject when little is known about it, and yet another reason cited for a phenomenological approach is when a significant amount is known about the subject to be



studied in order to describe the big picture. I assert that the topic of this study, the family gap year, manages to fall into both of these categories, as the broader gap year phenomenon is well known and studied, but the subset family gap year is practically unacknowledged in academic literature. This dichotomy, as described, makes a phenomenological approach for this study especially appropriate to the topic. In addition, the phenomenological method is attractive to me because I believe as stated by Creswell (2013) that it is “important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon,” in this case the family gap year (p. 81). The phenomenological method was therefore chosen as my “aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

Understanding the experience of the family gap year is important as it appears that more families are beginning to consider the option. Considerable effort and expense, in addition to the opportunity cost of experiences missed for families had they stayed home, mean that much is at stake for family gappers. While research can tell us quite a lot about what single young adults experience as gap year participants, we know very little about what a family gap year is like, what families expect to get from the experience and what they perceive changed as a result of participating in the experience. Exploring the family gap year phenomenon is an important objective, and this study represents an early effort to do so.

Van Manen (1990) suggests that using personal experiences as a starting point for phenomenological research is ideal. Many phenomenological scholars suggest that *bracketing* a researcher’s own experiences, or describing them in an effort to limit their influence, is important to ensure that the potential biases of the researcher are both addressed and, as much as possible, controlled for (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2013) suggests that using

Moustakas' (1994) method is desirable for novice researchers, of which I am one. Finally Moustakas prescribes two methods of data analysis for the phenomenological method, one of which also includes utilizing one's own personal experience of the phenomenon being studied. This method appeals because it is structured enough to guide this inexperienced researcher while also providing a prescribed method of bracketing my own experience. The Moustakas method, which I selected for the purpose of this study, includes multiple steps beginning with the creation of one's own reflection, or experience, to be used alongside the interviews of the subjects, in order to compare and contrast. It also prescribes that all relevant statements from interviews be recorded, that similar statements should be clustered and themes developed. Finally Moustakas suggests that a rich composite description be developed that contains both the meaning and, importantly, the essence of the universal experience of the phenomenon as experienced by the subjects. This description represents the primary findings of my qualitative study. In addition, as described more fully later in this chapter, I took care to enumerate statements that do not support the findings, both amid my own statement as well as in those of the research subjects.

### **Process for Selection of Data Sources**

As discussed briefly in Chapter 1, families that take an international traveling gap year are expected to be relatively few and far between. Locating such families, and in particular those who have taken their trip relatively recently and who have kids in the identified age range, was thought likely to prove challenging. This is not unusual however, as Creswell (2013) states "finding individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon may be difficult given a research topic" (p. 83). There is no formal source, that this researcher is familiar with, that catalogs or provides contact information for families who have participated in a gap year. Due to all of these reasons, probability sampling was simply not practical for the purpose of this study.

Identification of subjects was therefore necessarily initially conducted via the convenience method, followed by the snowball method. A convenience sample, as described by Bryman (2008), is one that is available to the researcher due simply to accessibility. He further points out that though the method is often not ideal, it is certainly a frequent method utilized in social research. Similarly, snowball sampling is a form of convenience sampling that has become popular with social researchers. Bryman (2008) describes it as the process of utilizing contact with an initial subject to establish contact with other potential subjects. Both of these methods, as described, were utilized to identify potential subjects and solicit their participation in this study.

Family gappers are known to occasionally blog about their trips and experiences. Searching on-line therefore does provide access to the blogs of a handful of recent family gap year participants, and those blogs frequently contain contact information, or a contact method, for those families. While this represents a relatively small number of potential subjects, once they are identified, this researcher believed it was reasonable to expect that families who go to the effort to blog about their trip, and thereby provide access to their experiences to the public at large in that manner, might reasonably be expected to be open to participating in a study that seeks to understand and describe the emerging phenomenon of the family gap year. Therefore I expected that a larger than normal percentage of potential subjects might consent to participate in the study. In addition, some of those blogs reference additional families who have participated in a gap year, such that the snowball method was also expected to be utilized to identify additional potential subjects for the study. Finally, those who have taken a gap year might reasonably be expected to be known to their families and friends, therefore I utilized word of mouth to identify additional potential subjects via my own contacts, coworkers, friends and

family members. As explained previously, the number of subjects considered desirable for a doctoral level phenomenological study, that has sufficient breadth without sacrificing depth, has been stated as ranging from four to ten. Selection of data sources for this study therefore was planned to conclude when the parents from five families, ideally resulting in nine to ten adult subjects, had consented to be interviewed, at which point data collection will ensue.

### **Definition of Data Gathering Instrument**

Data was gathered utilizing semi-structured interviews consisting of 10 main questions tied to the research purpose and specific research questions. In addition there are noted potential follow up questions that were utilized based on the answers to the initial questions. Finally, the researcher planned to ask additional follow up questions if needed to further clarify the intent of the subject or meaning of their answer. The initial and follow up questions were designed as follows.

1. Please describe the members of your family during the time of your gap year, their sex, and ages, as well as where you resided before and after your trip.
2. What made you decide to take your family on a gap year?
3. Can you please describe the parameters of your trip? Number of countries, length of travel, mode of travel, mode of accommodation, common activities, etc.?
4. What were your expectations concerning the gap year experience prior to your departure?
5. How did your trip either meet or fail to meet those expectations?
6. What would you say were the best aspects of your experience?
7. What would you say were the worst aspects of your experience?

8. Do you feel like any family members changed as a result of your trip? If so in what ways?
  - 8b. To what specific aspect of the trip do you attribute these changes?
9. If you were to do the trip again, what would you do differently?
10. Would you recommend a similar journey to other families? Why or why not?

The described interviews were expected to last approximately one hour, but varied based on the verbosity of the subject. The interviews were recorded, with permission, for purposes of transcription at a later date.

### **Validity and Reliability of Data Gathering Instrument**

Validity refers to what degree the data gathering instrument is effective at gathering the stated and desired information accurately (Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2010). Bryman (2008) points out that validity is ultimately concerned with the conclusions that are developed from a piece of research and whether or not they can be relied upon. Reliability is related to whether or not another researcher, utilizing the same instrument and methods, might be expected to produce the same, or similar, results (Roberts, 2010). Establishing validity and reliability for instruments utilized in social research and specifically qualitative methods can prove challenging. Bryman (2008) points out that for qualitative research establishing external reliability is difficult both because of a tendency to small samples, as well as the subjective nature of the work and the likely influence of the researcher. Creswell (2013), however, asserts that validation is actually a strength of qualitative research in that the research involves a close relationship and interaction between the researcher and the subject, as well as due to the rich and detailed descriptive results that are often the results of such a study.

In order to specifically target the research questions that drive this study, I developed my own open-ended interview questions. In order to help ensure that the interview questions are effectively aligned with the research questions, I created the following matrix (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Interview Questions Aligned with Research Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Questions
Why do parents decide to take their families on a family gap year trip, and what do they hope to gain from the experience?	2. What made you decide to take your family on a gap year? 4. What were your expectations concerning the gap year experience prior to your departure?
For families that have been on a gap year trip, in what ways did the trip meet, or fail to meet their expectations?	5. How did your trip either meet or fail to meet those expectations? 6. What would you say were the best aspects of your trip? 7. What would you say were the worst aspects of your trip?
What changes in family members do participants attribute to the experience of the trip?	8. Do you feel like any family members changed as a result of your trip? If so in what ways? 8b. To what specific aspect of the trip do you attribute these changes?

The questions not specifically aligned with the research questions were either designed to establish basic parameters for the experienced phenomenon so that the researcher could more easily follow the subjects' descriptions, or to provide opportunity for the subject to speak to what he or she feels was the essence of the trip, a key component of a phenomenological study.

Creswell (2013) outlines eight procedures that may be used to help establish validity for a qualitative study. Those procedures are as follows.

1. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation - building trust and relationship
2. Triangulation – using different methods or sources to confirm data
3. Peer review or debriefing – utilizing a devil's advocate to question findings

4. Negative case analysis – reporting information that doesn't support findings
5. Clarifying researcher bias – making sure the reader understands the bias of the researcher
6. Member checking – asking subjects to verify findings
7. Rich, thick description – utilizing abundant detail so that reader can judge findings
8. External audits – have an auditor examine the process and findings. (pp. 250-252)

Creswell (2013) recommends that the qualitative researcher utilize a minimum of two of his described procedures. I utilized the following four procedures. First, I clarified my bias according to Moustakas (1994) method. This method is discussed thoroughly in the following section of this chapter. Second, as I expected that there would likely be responses from some subjects that do not support my overall findings, I planned to include description and analysis of those contrary pieces of information so that my findings might appear more valid. Next I planned to use peer review for analysis of my coding. Finally, I tried to utilize rich descriptions that hopefully allow the reader to ascertain the relative validity of my findings. These four actions will serve to help establish validity, if not necessarily reliability, for my study.

### **Data Gathering Procedures**

The data gathering process consisted of personal interviews, the recording of those interviews and then creating transcripts of the full interviews. The interviews were designed as semi-structured, where in open-ended questions are asked in order to support the discovery of new information (Creswell, 2013). Follow up questions were asked at the researcher's discretion should I feel they are necessary to more fully understand the subjects' answers. I take the position that, for the purpose of this study, participating subjects are in fact co-researchers as suggested by Moustakas (1994). Therefore, providing a description of the purpose of the study,

such that the subjects are readily able to understand the objectives of the study and their role in it was important.

Following IRB approval, the process of which is described later in this chapter, the following steps were followed to identify potential subjects and solicit participation in this study. I utilized online search engines to identify the blogs of families that have participated in a family gap year, as defined by this study. When the identified blogs provide contact information, I attempted to make an initial contact whether by email, phone or through commenting on the blog and requesting a response. Once contact was established I advised the potential subject about my own family gap year experience, my status as a doctoral candidate, and the substance of my planned study. I described the interview process and inquired if they are interested in participating. When they answered in the affirmative, I planned to provide them with a written consent form to sign. It was expected that subjects identified primarily via an Internet search will yield study participants that reside in a variety of widely spaced geographical locations. I had however hoped to travel via air and/or auto, at a mutually agreed upon time, to conduct interviews at the convenience of the subjects. When in-person interviews are either not desired by the subject, or not in some other way feasible, I planned to conduct telephone interviews. Following the interview, I will sent thank you communications via email or regular mail if an email address was unavailable. In addition, I offered to provide a copy of the results of the study to participants if they indicated they would like to have one.

### **Description of Proposed Data Analysis Processes**

Creswell (2013) tells us that data analysis in qualitative research involves preparing and organizing data so that it may be coded, and then condensing the codes thereby reducing the data into themes and finally creating a discussion. As Creswell suggests the data collected for this



study was done in the form of transcribed interviews that were cataloged and organized in my personal, password-protected computer. In order to aid in the ease of analysis, transcripts were re-organized into separate files, to combine all subject replies to each question in a single file. I began analysis following organization by reading the transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself thoroughly with the contents (Creswell, 2013; Roberts, 2010). Next I began the process of forming codes to identify recurring references in the data. It is important to note here that not every single thing referred to by a subject is important to the study. Rather, it is important to establish no more than 25-30 categories of information, with the eventual goal of combining and reducing them to five or six themes is recommended (Creswell, 2013).

Saldana (2009) tells us that a code is either a word or short phrase that “assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (p. 3). I initially looked for *in vivo codes*, these being the exact words that are in the transcripts (Creswell, 2013). In other cases however, I was required to develop codes that refer to references in the transcripts but that are not the words that were necessarily actually used by the subjects.

Following coding I developed themes, also referred to frequently as categories, that are present in many, if not most, of the subjects’ narratives. According to Creswell (2013) these themes must be simplified, descriptive and focused. Moustakas (1994) refers to the process of developing themes as horizontalization (p. 95), and Saldana (2009) states specifically that themes necessarily come out of coding. He further expounds on the process of developing themes by stating that themes further detail and explain the codes, often providing them with nuance that a single word or short phrase can’t really possess. I utilized the codes to develop themes, in the

manner described by Moustakas, Saldana and Creswell, to explain and describe the identified codes in a way that captures the common meaning of the codes across the data.

Finally, I set about to interpret the data. Once again, according to Creswell (2013), interpreting for a qualitative researcher involves “making sense of the data” (p. 187). He explains that to do so the researcher must move outside of the data, to interpret the data and then finally to explain the data. In this case the data was explained via a “composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 194). As Creswell explains, the goal of this description is to expose the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the subjects. This final step therefore involved combining and describing the themes that were established from the coding into a narrative that captures the real essence and meaning of the common experiences of the subjects. This narrative aimed to assure that the reader of the study has a rich description of the phenomenon of a family gap year, with the goal of understanding why families take a gap year and what the experience is really like.

### **Plans for Institutional Review Board Application**

A formal Institutional Review Board (hereafter referred to as IRB) application was filed with Pepperdine University in order to ensure that the human subjects of this study are protected from harm and that their confidentiality is protected (Roberts, 2010). I planned to file for expedited review, or exemption, for this study with human subjects, based primarily on the fact that the research will consist solely of interviews of adult voluntary subjects who will have their privacy protected. In addition the subject matter of the interview questions as described were highly unlikely to create any damage or distress to a subject, as is therefore considered to represent minimal risk. This IRB application contained, in part, the following information.

Subjects who were asked to participate in this study, and who agreed verbally, were asked to read a consent form and agree to be interviewed. Prior to providing consent they were informed regarding the reasons for the study, the manner in which the study would be conducted, how the data would be analyzed and the manner in which the results would be published. They were advised that they had the right to decline to answer any question as well as to discontinue the interview at any time. They were also informed regarding the manner in which I planned to ensure that their responses to interview questions would be kept confidential within the sample of the study.

As per Pepperdine's policy, I have completed and passed the Collaborative Institutional Training course titled, *Social & Behavioral Research – Basic*. Completion of this course ensured that I am familiar with the proper procedures for conducting academic research utilizing human subjects. Only once this proposal was approved by my dissertation chair and committee, and formal signed permission of the IRB obtained, did I make plans to move forward with beginning to contact, and collect data from, potential subjects for this study.

### **Summary**

To summarize, a qualitative study, and specifically a phenomenological method, was chosen to explore the expectations and experiences of the relatively unknown, but presumed to be growing, group of families identified as family gap year participants. I sought to explore, begin to understand and describe the essence of the shared experience of an extended period of time taken off to explore the world together with one's family. Because the subject group is relatively small and difficult to locate, I planned to utilize the convenience method, followed by the snowball method, in order to identify potential study participants. Data collection was via semi-structured interviews that were transcribed for purposes of data analysis. The procedures

utilized to help ensure validity included triangulation, clarifying researcher bias, rich description as well as analysis of negative information. Prior to contact of potential participants an IRB application was filed and approval received to identify and approach subjects in order to begin data collection and eventual completion and conclusion of the proposed study. The following chapters, numbers four and five, present the results of the data collected for the purpose of this study, the analysis of that data, as well as provide a summary of findings and this researcher's recommendations for future study.

## Chapter 4: Findings

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is to explore the common motivations, expectations and perceived outcomes of families who choose to take an extended break from career and formal education in order to participate together in a multi-continent international trip. For convenience throughout the study I refer to this experience as a family gap year. To reiterate, there is a dearth of academic study about the family gap year, and this study seeks to address that lack. The primary purpose of this chapter is to note and describe the findings of this study, the results. As a preamble I will explain how the subjects of the study were located and include a brief description of the data collection process as it unfolded subsequent to the study proposal. Finally, I will provide a detailed explanation of the findings, including charts in the cases where they are helpful to visually demonstrate the provided information.

Following approval of the proposal of this study, I applied for and obtained a waiver of exemption from IRB (see Appendix A). In order to collect data I identified adult members of families who had participated in a gap year that met the established criteria of this study. Those criteria included that a family consist of a least one adult and one child under the age of 18 at the time of travel, have traveled for a minimum of 6 months and a maximum of 2 years to at least three continents and to have been home less than seven years following the completion of travel. Once potential participants were identified I contacted them via published email addresses, blog contact windows or public Facebook accounts. In addition I asked study participants to ask other potential participants they knew to contact me, via email, if they were also interested in participating in my study.

In this manner I identified more than 10 families as potential subjects for the study. Most individuals contacted were willing to be interviewed however, due to time constraints and

scheduling concerns, I subsequently interviewed a total of 11 individuals representing a total of 9 families who had participated in a family gap year. I found that most families had just one adult willing to be interviewed who acted as the spokesperson for the family. In the two cases where both spouses were interviewed, they preferred to be interviewed together. While this was not the way the study was originally designed, it was necessary based on the preferences of the subjects in order to obtain the most participants. While the original approved design of the study allowed for single parent families, it failed to allow for two parent families wherein only one parent was interested in being interviewed. In order to compensate for that unforeseen occurrence, I continued the subject location process until I had located sufficient additional families. The resulting number of included subjects, 11 individuals representing nine families, exceeds my originally planned number of subjects of five families and eight to ten individuals. In that way I believe the obtained data set is stronger than originally conceived.

I made initial contacts utilizing the initial contact script attached (see Appendix B). When the potential subject indicated interest in participation in the study I forwarded the attached consent form approved by IRB (see Appendix C). Because I obtained a waiver for signed consent through the IRB process, I subsequently obtained a verbal approval of the consent form and scheduled interviews at times that were mutually desirable.

Prior to conducting interviews, in order to attempt to bracket my own experience and therefore biases, I prepared a written version of my own family's experience, addressing why we embarked upon the trip, what my own expectations were and what our experiences were like, as well as the outcomes that I attributed to those experiences (see Appendix D). The reader of this study is encouraged to consider my experiences in relation to my findings to judge for themselves my success at attempting to remain impartial in the data collection and analysis

process. To this end I will state here that I found that, while some interview subjects described very similar experiences and opinions to my own, other subjects' experiences, and especially opinions, varied widely from those I held prior to completing this study, and in some cases diverge from opinions I hold still at this writing. I have endeavored, in any case, to identify and present all findings in as unbiased a manner as possible.

The original proposal for this study indicated that in-person interviews were preferred, but that telephone interviews would be acceptable. During the data collection process I found that, because of the geographical diversity of participants and the time and money constraints involved, in-person interviews weren't practical, and all interviews for this study took place via telephone. I obtained permission from the subjects to record the interviews and subsequently transcribed the interviews, eliminating any reference to names or other identifying information as per IRB protocol. Subsequent to the interviews I once again contacted participants via email to thank them for their participation in the study (see Appendix E).

In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts. Individual families were identified throughout the data analysis process by an assigned number, one through nine. In the two cases where two individual parents took part in one interview, and they provided different or divergent views, I identify them by family number followed by a further identifier and the sample size becomes either 10 or 11 representing the number of individuals replying. In these cases the letter "a" indicates the husband of the couple and the letter "b" indicates the wife. In the frequent case when they expressed agreement, or alternately didn't express any additional opinion, I refer only to the family identifier and the sample size reverts to 9, the number of participating families.

## **Coding Process**

Finally after transcribing each interview, I read them multiple times to familiarize myself with them thoroughly. Then I reorganized responses by interview question and corresponding research question for ease of coding. I proceeded with coding as outlined in the methods chapter of this study and originally identified 24 recurring codes. These codes were primarily in-vivo in that at least one subject utilized the exact wording. In order to reduce the number of codes and to help to establish themes, I eliminated codes that did not appear in more than half of the 9 interviews. This resulted in 13 codes that were then reorganized and combined into five themes that relate to the research questions and represent the findings of this study (see Appendix F).

In order to help to validate the identified findings I had a peer review my processes and coding. The individual I selected to conduct the review is a full time faculty member in the Education Division at Pepperdine's Graduate School of Education and Psychology, and she is also a graduate of the Doctor of Education in Organizational Learning program. I selected her primarily because of her interest in my topic combined with her expertise in the field of education. Her input resulted in some reorganization of the themes, and that reorganization is reflected herein.

## **Subject Demographics and Trip Parameters**

In order to establish a basis of understanding of the type of families being interviewed, question one included an inquiry about demographic information including size of family, age and sex of participants, as well as the geographic location where the families resided both before and after their trips. This information helps to establish a basic understanding of the where subject families were from, the make up of those families and the length and breadth of the travel



they participated in during the course of their gap years. It also serves to confirm that the participants met the established requirements for participation in the study (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Demographics of Study Participant Families and Trip Parameters*

Interviewed Family	Residence Before and After Gap Year	Age of Parents	Age and Sex of Children	Length of Travel	Number of Countries Visited
1	Australia	36 36	9 M 5 F	11+ months	20
2	New York/ California	Not given	12 M 9 M 5 M	12 months	25
3	California	Not given	12 M 10 F	11 months	20
4a b	Oregon	51 51	12 F 11 M	12 months	15
5	Florida	50 49	17 F 15 M	9 months	17
6	Canada	52 46	13 M 11 F	12 months	22
7	Florida	49 43	17 M 17 M 14 M	13 months	22
8a b	Canada	40 40	13 F 10 M	12 months	21
9	Washington D.C.	48 45	14 F 11 M	10.5 months	18

Of the nine families that the subjects represented, six were from the United States, two from Canada and one from Australia. The families who lived outside of the United States

returned to the same location following their trips. Of the families who resided in the United States prior to departure, four families lived in the same location both before and after traveling. One of those families one was from Florida, one was from California, one from Oregon and one from the Washington D.C. area. Another family from Florida resettled following their trip in another town in Florida, and a family from New York resettled after their trip in California.

Of the adult subjects who elected to state their age at time of travel, participants ranged from a low age of 36 years to a high of 52 years old. Six of these families consisted of a mother, father and two children who participated in the experience with them, and the other three families consisted of a mother, father and three children. No single parents families participated in the study. The children who traveled with the subjects ranged from a low of five years old up to a high of 17 years old at the time of departure. The sexes and specific ages of each of the children in each family are identified above.

Question number three inquired about trip parameters, and from the answers to this question I obtained information about each family's trip including the length of time they spent traveling as well as the number of countries they visited. All of the subject families had returned within the seven-year parameter design of the study. The family who had traveled most recently had been home less than two. Some families elected to name all of the countries they visited while others provided either an approximate or definitive number. The minimum number of countries visited by the subject families was 15 and maximum number of countries indicated was 25.

## **Findings**

The balance of the data collected related either to one or more of the three research questions or to my attempt to obtain a broad description of the phenomenon of the gap year

experience in and of itself. Those three questions addressed why families take a gap year, what their expectations were about their travel experience prior to travel and then what the experience was like as well as what changes if any were observed in family members and believed to be attributed to the experience of the trip. The findings correspond to those questions and are organized under the following three headings:

1. Why do families take a gap year?
2. Expectations versus Reality; What the Family Gap Year was Actually Like
3. Outcomes of the Family Gap Year

**Why do families take a gap year?** The first of the three research questions speaks to why families take a gap year. Another way to ask this is what do people hope to gain from the experience. Interview questions number 2 and 4 were specifically designed to elicit responses to this query, however I found that in some cases responses to other questions also addressed the topic. While responses varied, two themes emerged as primary findings.

1. The decision to participate in a traveling gap year came from a strong desire to travel, expressed either as an existing love of travel and a consequent desire to pursue a longer, more comprehensive trip, or alternately from a personal dream or goal to travel extensively, with their family.
2. Electing to plan and participate in a family gap year frequently came out of a desire to see, and experience the world and other cultures, and to do so with their children.

*The decision to participate in a traveling gap year came from a strong desire to travel, expressed either as an existing love of travel and a consequent desire to pursue a longer, more comprehensive trip, or alternately from a personal dream or goal to travel extensively, with their family (see Table 3).*

Table 3

*Strong Desire to Travel*

Contributing Factors	Direct Quotes	Subjects with similar responses
Love of Travel	“I think it really comes down to, it started out anyway, as a love of travel.”	3, 4, 5, 6
	“I like to travel and by gum my children were going to travel with me, whether they liked it or not.”	
Goal of Travel	“His goal came back to traveling the world”	2, 7, 8
Dream of Travel	“I’d always had this dream of travel.”	9
Need to Travel	“ I...just had a need to travel.”	1
	“This is your void and you need to fill it”	
	“It was just a real obsession... something I could not get out of my head”	

All subjects interviewed expressed that their decision to take a family gap year came out of a strong desire to travel, to do so extensively and internationally and to do it together as a family. The love of travel or, alternately, having a dream of travel or a goal to travel was a recurring and frequent theme in all of the families I talked to. A statement by this subject was representative, “I think it really comes down to, it started out anyway, as a love of travel.” Another subject said, “I’d always had this dream of travel.” In addition most subjects also referred to the opportunity the gap year represented for length and or breadth of travel as being particularly desirable. Examples of this include the following direct statements by interview subjects from two different families, “We’ve always traveled whenever we could, we did lots of two to four week trips and we just thought wouldn’t it be nice to do a whole year” and “We had

done quite a bit of traveling before our trip, but most of those trips were anywhere from two to five weeks, and we felt like we wanted to do a longer trip and be able to visit more countries and do more things.”

In some cases this trip was just another, albeit longer, trip that families embarked on, having traveled frequently as a family prior to the gap year experience. Other families however had limited international travel experience prior to their gap year. It is important to note however that among the families that described their family as having limited travel experience prior to the decision to take a traveling gap year, all referred to the presence of a strong drive which created a goal, described either in that way or in terms of a dream, to travel widely and more specifically in the manner that they chose.

One notable caveat to this finding is that in four cases subjects referenced the fact that the dream or love described came from one adult parent in particular and that the other, while supportive or at least eventually supportive, was perhaps not as passionate about the subject of travel, or the dream of the trip, as the individual driving the process (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Supportive Spouse*

Direct Quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
“You know I think that it probably took a little longer for my wife to embrace the idea of the trip, but once she did she was all in.”	1, 2, 8, 9
“You know my husband is European and when I said let’s do it he didn’t balk. He said let me think about it, and then that’s a great idea.”	

*Electing to plan and participate in a family gap year came out of a desire to see and experience the world and other cultures, and to do so with their children (see Table 5).*

Table 5

*See the World*

Contributing Factors	Direct Quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
See The World	<p>“The real purpose was the chance for our three boys to see the world before they started college.”</p> <p>“Well one of the reasons we wanted to go was just for us to learn more about the world, particularly the children.”</p> <p>“Because you see the world through your children’s eyes”</p>	2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
See new cultures	<p>“We like to see new cultures”</p> <p>“Meet people not like us”</p>	3, 5, 6
Create Global Citizens	<p>“We helped to create three global citizens, two more if you count my wife and I.”</p>	7, 8

The second theme that emerged to the why question was to see the world themselves and to show their children the world, to experience other cultures and/or to create global citizens. In one-way or another at least one parent interviewed from seven of the nine families espoused this desire, this intent. As a corollary, multiple people referenced the concept of seeing the world through the eyes of their children. Those individuals indicated they felt this was a particularly unique opportunity.

Responses that came up in more than one interview but not with sufficient frequency to be considered significant findings included were either dissatisfaction with the formal education of their children or the idea that the children would learn more on the trip than they did in school.

**Expectations vs. reality: What the family gap year was actually like.** Three themes emerged from the questions that addressed trip expectations, whether or not the trip met

expectations and spoke to what the trip was actually like. They were as follows and represent the third, fourth and fifth findings of this study:

3. The experience of a family gap year met or exceeded expectations for those interviewed in that it provided a unique opportunity to explore other countries, to learn about different people and their cultures.
4. Families that participated together in a traveling gap year expressed satisfaction with the opportunity the trip presented to spend concentrated time together and to grow closer as a family.
5. Less desirable, or more wearing, aspects of the family gap year experience were reported as being primarily chores associated with being on the road, including travel planning and laundry, as well as the way being together with family 24/7 could occasionally create friction and stress.

*The experience of a family gap year met or exceeded expectations of those interviewed in that it provided a unique opportunity to explore other countries, to learn about different people and their cultures (see Table 6).*

Table 6

*Expectations*

Contributing Factors	Direct quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
Met or exceeded expectations	<p>“I think it totally met our expectations.”</p> <p>“The trip both met our expectation and exceeded it.”</p> <p>“I think that the trip really did meet those expectations.”</p> <p>“It was really successful.”</p>	1, 2, 3, 4b, 5, 6, 7, 8b, 9

Contributing Factors	Direct quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
	“It is something I think every family should do”	
Superlative descriptors	<p>“Best experience of your life”</p> <p>“Amazing opportunity”</p> <p>“It was such a positive experience.”</p> <p>“What a powerful thing”</p> <p>“Can’t say enough good things”</p> <p>“It is one of my passions”</p>	(continued) 1, 6, 7, 8, 9
People and Cultures	<p>“We met lots of great young travelers who really inspired our kids”</p> <p>“Our goal was to expose them to different cultures and have that international mindedness, and I think that was a successful part of the trip”</p> <p>“When in fact, being able to get out and see how other peoples and cultures are gives you a whole new perspective.”</p> <p>“For me it was just about learning that mankind is just beautiful”</p>	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8b

At least one member of each representative family expressed that the trip had either met or exceeded their expectations. In general responses that addressed the more positive aspects of the trip tended to come in the form of superlatives or occasionally in other phrases that were more balanced affirmations. Two respondents specifically referenced that while the trip was not easy, it was worth it. More enthusiastic responses included “the best experience of your life” and that the experience “came to define us as a family.” Still other references were made to the power of the experience, how fulfilling it was, as well as a tremendous sense of accomplishment engendered by the successful planning and completion of such an epic trip.



One individual, however, declined to answer this question by stating he had no expectations, but he did not express disagreement with his wife who responded in the affirmative. Another subject spoke specifically regarding an expectation he had about his family being able to speak about what they had learned with other people and that this particular expectation was not met because, “if you try to relay something about where you traveled, in a conversation with somebody, if they haven’t been there and had the exact same experience, we’ve noticed that their eyes just tend to glaze over, and they are not really present in that conversation anymore.” His wife indicated however that she has had a different experience. Finally, in another case a respondent, not relating to what she felt like were the connotations of the word expectation, referred instead to what she characterized as her “hopes” for what the trip would be like. When addressing whether or not her hopes had been realized, however, she stated in the affirmative and her response is included in those described as meeting or exceeding expectations above.

Subjects from eight out of nine families indicated that their experiences of learning about new countries, by exploring their cultures and meeting new people, were aspects of their gap year that they appreciated. Answers in this vein appeared through out the subject interviews. The one interview subject who did not specifically reference appreciation for this aspect of the trip, did refer to the family’s attempts to “live like a local” and also, in describing the family’s common activities, referenced how they would “explore a neighborhood” and “explore as much of a city as we could.”

*Families that participated together in a traveling gap year expressed satisfaction with the opportunity the trip presented to spend concentrated time together and to grow closer as a family (see Table 7).*

Table 7

*Appreciation for Time Together as a Family*

Contributing Factor	Direct Quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
Appreciation for time together as a family	<p data-bbox="459 453 1062 485">“I think it made us more of a family, traveling”</p> <p data-bbox="459 527 1130 596">“The family knows each other a lot better than some families do, because you are together 24/7”</p> <p data-bbox="459 638 1138 743">“I think that to this day the kids know my wife and myself better as people and not just as parents. And I think we know them better as people.”</p> <p data-bbox="459 785 1198 854">“We wanted the kids to get really close...so in that way it was really successful”</p> <p data-bbox="459 896 1118 928">“This was a year that was dedicated to family time”</p> <p data-bbox="459 970 1089 1039">“I don’t think we really knew how powerful time together would be.”</p> <p data-bbox="459 1081 1187 1178">“I think she, more than any of us recognized the value of being away together for a year and with our kids, about what that would be like.”</p>	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9

Representatives from six of nine families interviewed referred to their appreciation for the special family bonding time created by the experience of their traveling gap year. Subjects reported that the extended and concentrated time together helped them to know each other better and to draw closer as a family. While for many parents this outcome was one they had initially hoped the experience would provide, others indicated it was something they had perhaps failed to fully consider prior to embarking on the trip.

Less desirable, or more wearing, aspects of the family gap year experience were reported as being primarily chores associated with being on the road, including travel planning and

laundry, as well as the way that being together with family 24/7 could occasionally create friction and stress (see Table 8).

Table 8

*Negative Aspects of Family Gap Year*

Contributing Factor	Direct Quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
Difficulty of travel chores	<p>“Well one thing that I didn’t mention was that it was really hard sort of planning. Like I said there were a few times when we stayed in the same place for like a month so that was kind of easy to settle in, but there were other times when we were moving every day or every few days. And just how much time it took to find accommodations, and figure out the transportation, it seemed like that was consuming the days.”</p> <p>“In the beginning I had enjoyed planning the next step, but by months 6, 7, and 8 it was getting tiresome.”</p> <p>“For me as a mom, probably for me (the worst aspect) it was just where am I going to do the next load of washing. Where is our next meal coming from?”</p> <p>“And the other thing was that we spent a lot of time on just like maintenance, you know, like laundry could take the whole day, in some unfamiliar place.”</p>	1, 3, 5, 7, 9
Getting on each other’s nerves	<p>“When you are with the same people 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, you can get on each other’s nerves.”</p> <p>“There was a lot of close quarters...and there is no where else to go to cool down... And again, you had to know that that would be happening at different times, but it still made certain times difficult and just, yeah, sort of struggling to get through that.”</p> <p>“Two things that we said were the worst, one of them is just general stress, family arguments and things,</p>	1, 2, 3, 4, 8a

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I'm sure everybody has those.

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When discussing the negative side of their family gap year experience, five subjects referred to the tedium of the general maintenance required to keep a family on the road. The most commonly mentioned chores were travel planning, booking ahead transportation or lodgings, followed closely by laundry, and then figuring out where and what to eat as well as what to do in each new locale. One family, it is interesting to note, indicated that they had completed the majority of travel planning in advance, leaving more time, as they explained it, to experience. The balance of the families (eight out of nine) appeared to have done the majority of their travel planning on the road.

Also in the negative category, five subjects referred to the occasional difficulty of being in confined quarters and or alone with each other so much. In some families this resulted in what was described as fighting or getting on each other's nerves. Others indicated that it was something that eventually brought them closer or that they learned to manage or even simply as an occasional negative that was part and parcel to the trip. It is interesting to note that, in this vein, three of the five subjects who referred to family squabbles as a negative aspect of their trip also referred to family togetherness and bonding as an important positive. Similarly and also paradoxically, two interview subjects, when asked about the best aspects of their trip referred to times that they acknowledged were decidedly not the best at the time, but rather were times when they were perhaps lost or in some kind of a pickle.

Finally, four out of nine subjects referred to the difficulty they experienced attempting some type of formal schooling process for the children while on the road, but this topic failed to meet the established 50 percent threshold and therefore was not included in the significant findings. It is also important to note however that not all families attempted formal schooling

while traveling, or did so but on a fairly small scale, so that this statistic is potentially more significant than it appears in the full sample context.

**Outcomes of a family gap year: Changes attributed to the experience.** Question 8 spoke directly to what changes, if any, were observable in family members and attributable to the trip. Answers to trip outcomes in general however were found in answers to other questions as well. The following single theme emerged as significant representing the sixth and final finding identified in this study (see Table 9).

6. Family gap year participants frequently reported learning and personal growth in family members they attributed to the experience of the gap year, and indicated that these changes were observable as improvements in personal traits, or occasionally, as improved or changed focus or goals upon return from their trip.

Table 9

*Learning and Growth*

Contributing Factors	Direct Quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
Learning and personal growth in family members as a result of the trip	“My kids really grew a lot”	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8b, 9
	“Well we...learned a lot of things”	
	“It changed all of us for the better”	
	“Well I would say that everybody has obviously grown”	
	“Yes, so I definitely think it has”	
	“Whatever residual fear I had about my life or within my life, I felt like I left that behind.”	
Improvements	“I believe the importance of our experience was just in giving them that immersive, hands on learning classroom”	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9
	“He just became more independent, more of his own	

Contributing Factors	Direct Quotes	Subjects with Similar Responses
noted in personal traits	<p>person”</p> <p>“I think they are very open minded...I think they are often more organized...I would say appreciating other people”</p> <p>“I think the best thing that came out of all of this is that our children have that same confidence and belief in people and people’s humanity and people’s desire to help one another.”</p> <p>“Made me feel different about myself and my level of courage and my willingness to take a risk.”</p>	(continued)
Changed or improved focus upon return home	<p>“Our daughter, I think, has been influenced to go into a career where she wants to do good for the world.”</p> <p>“It’s like now my role is bigger, and work is just a piece of it, and it doesn’t get first dibs.”</p> <p>“In that way it kind of focused us on what we want to get out of the world, and what we want to do.”</p> <p>“For my wife it was transformative in another way... she decided to become an ESL teacher... I think she finds that work incredibly rewarding and I think it kind of keeps her connected to what we did.”</p>	1, 3, 4, 7, 9

At least one representative of every family interviewed indicated that they had witnessed learning and or personal growth in their family members as a result of their trip. Six of nine families referenced change in the form of improvement in a specific attribute. The attributes referenced included increased empathy, courage, confidence and independence. Subjects from five of nine families explained that they had seen changes in the focus of one or more family member following the trip. In one case the respondent reported that work was less important after the trip than it used to be to him. Most, however, reported either a renewed interest in career or how the trip led one of the family members to a new choice of career. Two parents

reported that they believed their child's future career interests had been influenced by their travel and experiences. Still another pointed to a passion developed on the trip for a pursuit that was unrelated to either school or career, but rather a passion for sailing.

In the cases when a respondent said either that they could not attribute changes to the trip, or were unsure, the reason cited was the young age of the children, and the fact that since they were growing and learning quickly, they believed it was possible that the changes may have occurred even had they not had the experience of their extended around the world trip.

### **Summary**

To summarize, this chapter details the findings of this study. The chapter began with an overview of the steps followed to collect and code data and explained any discrepancies that existed in the sample based on necessary practicalities. The demographics of all families interviewed were presented as well as the basic parameters of the trip those families took. Next, six statements of finding, aligned with the three research questions, were presented together with charts providing direct quotes supporting them. The research presented supported the findings that the decisions to embark upon a traveling family gap year were primarily related to a love of travel and a desire to see the world with their children. Analysis of the interview data supported the fact that the experience of the gap year met or exceeded expectations representing both family time together and exposure to new people and cultures. Subjects also pointed to less desirable aspects of the trip, most commonly the chores associated with keeping a family traveling. Finally most subjects reported that they felt like family members had experienced growth and learning as a result of their family gap year experience. These findings are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10

*Findings Related to Research Questions*

Related Research Question	Findings
Why do families take a gap year?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The decision to participate in a traveling gap year came from a strong desire to travel, expressed either as an existing love of travel and a consequent desire to pursue a longer, more comprehensive trip, or alternately from a personal dream or goal to travel extensively, with their family.</li> <li>2. Electing to plan and participate in a family gap year frequently came out of a desire to see, and experience the world and other cultures, and to do so with their children.</li> </ol>
Expectations vs. reality; What the family gap year was actually like	<p style="text-align: right;">(continued)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. The experience of a family gap year met or exceeded expectations for those interviewed in that it provided a unique opportunity to explore other countries, to learn about different people and their cultures.</li> <li>4. Families that participated together in a traveling gap year expressed satisfaction with the opportunity the trip presented to spend concentrated time together and to grow closer as a family.</li> <li>5. Less desirable, or more wearing, aspects of the family gap year experience were reported as being primarily chores associated with being on the road, including travel planning and laundry, as well as the way being together with family 24/7 could occasionally create friction and stress.</li> </ol>
Outcomes of a family gap year; changes attributed to the experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Family gap year participants frequently reported learning and personal growth in family members they attributed to the experience of the gap year, and indicated that these changes were observable as improvements in personal traits, or occasionally, as improved or changed focus or goals upon return from their trip.</li> </ol>

Notably, all subjects interviewed indicated they would recommend a trip similar to the one they took to other families. It is also important to note, however, that the majority of subjects interviewed (eight of 11) would make that recommendation with one or more caveat. Those caveats varied, but the most common was related to suggesting caution to other families based on either whether or not the family had significant prior travel experience or whether or



not the family seemed suited to the journey. Other cautions included planning for what if any formal education plans might be needed, whether or not the financial means were available or the security of jobs available upon return home. Still others referred to a belief in the importance of buy-in from all the family members, including the children. Finally one person interviewed stressed that one shouldn't expect a family gap year to improve relationships within a family if those relationships were already strained, pointing out he felt like that was like a couple having a baby to improve a relationship, and more likely to make things worse. The three respondents in the minority however recommended the trip unequivocally across the board. Statements in this category included, "I would, absolutely" and "Yeah, without question." Another parent backed up this opinion with, "You know, not just seeing the touristy things, but the greater global awareness, is really critical for people."

Having put forth the findings of this study in this chapter, the following chapter will further illuminate and explain these findings and provide the rich detailed description of the composite experience described by the family gap year study participants as is desirable in a phenomenological study.

## Chapter 5: Summary, Implications and Recommendations

### Summary

**Overview.** According to Moustakas (1994) the aim of phenomenological research “is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). My own experience spending 9 months traveling around the world with my husband and two teenage children led me to begin researching the phenomenon of a family gap year, to find out what is known about the subject and to understand if other families who have chosen to do something similar might have had similar motivations, experiences and outcomes.

Chapter 1 of this study points out the reasons why studying the phenomenon of a family gap year is important to society as well. First, it is understood that the United States is facing an increasingly global marketplace and therefore needs culturally competent individuals to effectively function (Hayden, 2011). At the same time the education system in the United States is under attack for decreasing outcomes in the formal kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade education system (Carroll, 2000). The gap year represents an intervention that potentially addresses both of these important current concerns to society. This research is important then because, as many previous researchers have pointed out, the practice of the gap year provides many documented benefits, both for the individual participants, as well as the societies they represent (Bull, 2006; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; Martin, 2010; O’Shea, 2011). This study begins to address whether those established benefits extend to the practice of the family gap year as well.

**Summary of the literature review.** Creating a thorough review of the literature led me to read and summarize what is known about gap year experiences in general, as little or no academic research is available that focuses specifically on families who take one. While

multiple definitions of a gap year appear in the literature, this study utilizes one that describes a gap year participant as someone who takes an extended period of time off from formal studies or career to volunteer or travel or both (O'Shea, 2011). Gap year participants, however, are most often single young people who typically take their gap year immediately following graduation from high school and prior to beginning college (Heath, 2007).

Researchers refer to the practice of a *grand tour* taken by upper class young men in Victorian England as the historic roots of the present day gap year (Heath, 2007). The practice has in recent decades, however, become more mainstream, and Stehlik (2010) calls the gap year “a significant trend globally” (p. 363). Researchers also tell us, however, that American students have been slower to adopt the trend, due primarily to parent concerns about safety as well as a distrust of delaying formal school and career goals (Hulstrand, 2010). This circumstance explains why, while there is a significant body of literature addressing the phenomenon of the gap year, most of it originates from Australia and the United Kingdom, where the practice is more popular.

Researchers have identified many reasons why students elect to take a gap year, but most report that participants express the desire to take a break, to have time away from formal study to rest and reflect on their future plans (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011; Stehlik, 2010). Multiple studies have also found that students expect their gap year to represent an accelerated learning experience resulting in personal growth (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011).

Regarding outcomes, researchers tell us that students who have taken part in a gap year report it was a pivotal experience, increasing learning motivation and helping to establish or clarify personal or career goals (Bull, 2006; Jones, 2004; King, 2010; Martin, 2010). Martin

(2010) found that the gap year itself was an educational process of experiential learning resulting in students who were more self directed and motivated. Martin (2010) and Jones (2004) both found that gap year participation positively affected subsequent school performance.

Researchers have also identified positive outcomes in the form of an increase in skills and improved traits. Jones (2004) calls these soft skills and references, for example, the increased ability to make decisions and problem solve. Researchers also point to increased independence, self-awareness, confidence and maturity (Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011).

Writers who reference the American view and experience of the gap year point to an emerging more structured style of gap year than the type that has been popular in other western countries (Haigler & Nelson, 2005; Hulstrand, 2010; Sarouhan & Sarouhan, 2013). Instead of the solo extensive travel experience that most gap year research is based on, gap years spent in supervised volunteer placements or career focused internships are on the rise. Some stakeholders think that this more structured approach is a positive way to address concerns that American parents have about the traditional gap year, but others are concerned that the established benefits of a gap year may be reduced when too much structure is introduced (Hulstrand, 2010; Haigler & Nelson, 2005; O'Shea, 2011).

**Purpose statement and research questions.** The purpose of this study is to explore the common motivations, expectations and perceived outcomes of families who choose to take an extended break from career and formal education in order to participate together in a multi-continent international trip. In order to do so I designed the following three research questions.

1. Why do parents decide to take their families on a family gap year trip, i.e. what do they hope to gain from the experience?

2. For families that have been on a gap year trip, in what ways did the trip meet, or fail to meet, their expectations?
3. What changes in family members do participants attribute to the experience of the trip?

**Review of methodology.** I chose to conduct a qualitative study, and more specifically to utilize a phenomenological method, precisely because I wanted to explore and explain the phenomenon of a family gap year. Participation in a family gap year is not currently a common experience, and in order to locate families to include in the study I utilized the internet, searching for the blogs that some families keep while traveling and contacting those that provided published avenues to do so. In addition I asked those that I succeeded in contacting whether they knew of other families that had participated in a family gap year, and in that way I eventually was able to obtain a total of 11 adults, representing a total of nine families, who were willing and able to be interviewed within the timeframe I had allotted for data collection.

Data were collected utilizing semi-structured interviews consisting of 10 main questions. Those questions were as follows:

1. Please describe the members of your family during the time of your gap year, their sex, and ages, as well as where you resided before and after your trip.
2. What made you decide to take your family on a gap year?
3. Can you please describe the parameters of your trip? Number of countries, length of travel, mode of travel, mode of accommodation, common activities etc?
4. What were your expectations concerning the gap year experience prior to your departure?
5. How did your trip either meet or fail to meet those expectations?

6. What would you say were the best aspects of your experience?
7. What would you say were the worst aspects of your experience?
8. Do you feel like any family members changed as a result of your trip? If so in what ways?
  - 8b. To what specific aspect of the trip do you attribute these changes?
9. If you were to do the trip again, what would you do differently?
10. Would you recommend a similar journey to other families? Why or why not?

These questions were developed to specifically address the research questions in the following manner (see Table 11).

Table 11

*Research and Interview Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Questions
Why do parents decide to take their families on a family gap year trip, and what do they hope to gain from the experience?	2. What made you decide to take your family on a gap year?  4. What were your expectations concerning the gap year experience prior to your departure?
For families that have been on a gap year trip, in what ways did the trip meet, or fail to meet their expectations?	5. How did your trip either meet or fail to meet those expectations?  6. What would you say were the best aspects of your trip?  7. What would you say were the worst aspects of your trip?
What changes in family members do participants attribute to the experience of the trip?	8. Do you feel like any family members changed as a result of your trip? If so in what ways?  8b. To what specific aspect of the trip do you attribute these changes?

The questions not listed in the matrix were necessary to help me establish that subjects met the parameters of the study, to better understand the subjects' narratives or to give the subjects ample opportunity to speak about the essence of their trip, an important component of a phenomenological study.

In order to help establish validity for this study, I have attempted to utilize four of Creswell's (2013) recommended methods. Those methods include negative case analysis, clarifying research bias, peer review and utilizing sufficient detail to aid the reader in judging for themselves the accuracy of the findings.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Chapter 4 of this study provides a summation of the data collected, an explanation of the data analysis process, as well as direct quotes to support the findings. The following findings were identified (see Table 12).

This portion of the chapter will provide further discussion of these findings and in so doing attempt to explain why the families that participated in a family gap year did so, what their experiences had in common, as well as what those experiences were really like. It will also discuss how these findings relate to existing literature and explore potential implications.

Table 12

#### *Findings Summary*

Related Research Question	Findings
Why do families take a gap year?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The decision to participate in a traveling gap year came from a strong desire to travel, expressed either as an existing love of travel and a consequent desire to pursue a longer, more comprehensive trip, or alternately from a personal dream or goal to travel extensively, with their family.</li> <li>2. Electing to plan and participate in a family gap year frequently came out of a desire to see, and experience the world and other cultures, and to do so with their children.</li> </ol>

(continued)

Related Research Question	Findings
Expectations vs. reality; what the family gap year was actually like	<p>3. The experience of a family gap year met or exceeded expectations for those interviewed in that it provided a unique opportunity to explore other countries, to learn about different people and their cultures.</p> <p>4. Families that participated together in a traveling gap year expressed satisfaction with the opportunity the trip presented to spend concentrated time together and to grow closer as a family.</p> <p>5. Less desirable, or more wearing, aspects of the family gap year experience were reported as being primarily chores associated with being on the road, including travel planning and laundry, as well as the way being together with family 24/7 could occasionally create friction and stress.</p>
Outcomes of a family gap year; changes attributed to the experience	<p>6. Family gap year participants frequently reported learning and personal growth in family members they attributed to the experience of the gap year, and indicated that these changes were observable as improvements in personal traits, or occasionally, as improved or changed focus or goals upon return from their trip.</p>

**Why families take a gap year.** While families who participated in a family gap year did occasionally cite reasons that were unique, or at least not common, two themes emerged as being universal to the subject group. First, families took a gap year because at least one member of the family had a strong desire to travel and to do so extensively, in the manner that they chose. Second, at least one subject from each of the families that made up the sample indicated that the decision to take a gap year arose out of their desire to see the world, to explore other countries and learn about other cultures and to do so with their children. While these findings may seem closely related, they came from two distinct codes, one expressed specifically as love of travel, dream to travel or need to travel. These statements stood alone, and appeared to me to represent an emotional basis for their decision. The other was expressed in statements that referred to a desire to see the world or to show their children the world, citing new cultures and people as desirable components of the trip. These statements to me referenced a more intellectual reason for participation. Finally, the research showed that in multiple cases the dream or need to travel



originated from one of the two parents and that they initially drove the process. All together then we come to understand that the adults who decided they wanted their family to participate in the phenomenon of a family gap year felt a strong desire to do so. They valued the experience of extended international travel and wanted to have that experience with their family, to expose their children to other cultures and other people. They wanted that enough to do what it took to make it happen.

These findings appear to me to be relatively unique to the family gap year, as references to similar motivations are not common in studies that looked at the motivations of college aged gap year participants. Traditional gap year students express primarily a desire to take a break from formal schooling and also frequently refer to the desire to have fun adventures. While similar motivations were referenced occasionally by subjects in this study, they were not common enough to represent the group and neither were they primary. In this way then family gap year participants seem to differ substantially from traditional gap year participants in that they decide to take a gap year for quite different reasons.

**What a family gap year is like.** Gap year participants interviewed for this study shared similar experiences in that they all took an extended period of time off from career and or formal schooling to travel together to multiple continents, visiting many countries to learn about and experience other cultures and people. A member from each family expressed that the trip either met or exceeded expectations and most subjects used superlatives like, “best experience of your life” or “amazing opportunity” when describing their experience. This finding helps us to understand that the trip was an overall positive experience for the families that took part, even considering the more negative aspects related in the finding about the less desirable aspects of their trips. The two findings specific to meeting expectations help us to understand why the

families felt so positively about their trip. Subjects expressed that they felt like the trip delivered in terms of providing exposure to other countries, cultures and people, and they appreciated the way the trip provided a unique opportunity for the family to spend extended and concentrated time together, thereby strengthening their family relationships.

More negative aspects of their experience were reported as being the ways in which some necessarily repetitive chores, such as travel planning or laundry, could become drudgery. Many subjects also referenced how the extended time in tight quarters, or with limited other resources, could result in quarreling among family members. The importance of this finding is that it helps us to understand more fully what the gap year experience is actually like. While family gap year participants really value the concentrated time the trip provided them to spend time together, they also report the fall out of close quarters and extended time together wasn't always fun. Similarly, while travel and the exposure it provided to new cultures and people was an important part of the satisfaction subjects felt with the trip, the on-going work required to make that travel possible could sometimes get old on an extended trip.

The findings in this area relate to those that found students report that their gap year was a pivotal experience (Bull, 2006; King, 2010; Martin, 2010).. The superlative statements in particular seem to support the idea that the family gap year subjects also had very positive feelings about their experiences and felt that it was very significant. The findings regarding family time and or quarrelling are, unsurprisingly, not congruent with solo travel experiences, and neither do we see references to complaints about travel related chores.

**Outcomes of a family gap year.** Finally, a representative from each of the nine families interviewed referred to changes in family members, related to learning and personal growth, that they felt were attributable to their gap year experiences. This finding came from two categories

of responses. The first was in reference to growth in areas like independence, courage, empathy and confidence. The second related to a change in focus or priorities observed in family members after their return home. I found some of these statements, in particular, to be quite powerful in that they appear to point to the experience of the trip as having created, not only a unique opportunity for learning, but also, in some cases, a change in the course of an individual's life. These statements include, "Our daughter, I think, has been influenced to go into a career where she wants to do good for the world" and "for my wife it was transformative in another way... she decided to become an ESL teacher... I think she finds that work incredibly rewarding and I think it kind of keeps her connected to what we did." This finding adds to those in the previous section to our understanding of what these families felt like they got from their gap year experience: the opportunity to see the world with their family, to spend special time together and become closer while they were able to learn and grow in a way they presumably could not have done during the same period spent at home working and going to school.

This finding regarding outcomes dovetails especially well with those from previous studies about more traditional gap year participants. Specifically subjects in this study referred to improvement in traits such as courage, confidence, independence and empathy, outcomes that have been identified in previous studies about college aged gap year participants (Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011). In addition this finding connects to the work of Luthans et al. (2007) regarding psychological capital. In particular confidence was one of the four traits Luthans identified as contributing to positive psychological capital thereby improving overall human function and performance. This seems important in that participation in a family gap year appears to have the potential to positively affect psychological capital and therefore the future performance of participants.

Additionally subjects of this study referenced positive changes in focus and or new interests upon return home. This finding is similar to O'Shea's (2011) finding that gap year participants reported new and broadened interests following the completion of their gap year. In general the subjects of this study felt like family members had experienced change in the form of personal growth as a result of their experience, and that mirrors the findings of other researchers who studied outcomes among young adults that took a gap year.

### **Bracketing my Own Experience**

I included in Chapter 4 a description, written prior to the collection of data, of my own experience of the phenomenon of the family gap year (see Appendix D) in an effort to acknowledge my preconceptions and, as much as possible, bracket my opinions from the results of this study. Anyone who reads my account will see that my family's experience was similar to those of the families that I interviewed, in that my account would also support most of the individual findings of this study. In this regard I found the results unsurprising. I was surprised however in that some aspects of our experiences that I felt were quite central and important were not present in the accounts of many of the respondents. In some cases those aspects did appear in other accounts, but failed to meet the 50% threshold. In other cases they didn't show up at all. In still other cases, aspects of the experience that showed up as central to other families' stories failed to show up in my account as well. In this last example this was sometimes due to the fact that our experience was actually different, but was also sometimes simply because I just hadn't focused on that aspect when I wrote my account.

It seems plausible then that responses that were common among the subjects of this study, but failed to meet the 50% threshold, might also be views held by other subjects that were just not expressed during the duration of our interview. Of course it is also just as possible that

those respondent didn't agree or didn't have the same experience. Finally, it also seems possible that individuals might hold a similar view or have had a similar experience but failed to mention it either because the question didn't bring the subject to mind or that it was less important in their mind than the answers they did provide. In summary then further research is needed to explore whether or not there are other identifiable aspects of the common experience of the phenomenon of the family gap year. Additional recommendations for future study are addressed later in this chapter.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have implications to multiple groups including researchers, parents, educators and business leaders. First, as this study serves to establish a base of academic knowledge about the family gap year, going forward other researchers may choose to examine further the phenomenon and thereby add to our growing knowledge. Specific recommendations for researchers who are interested in building on these findings are articulated in the next section of this chapter, under recommendations for future study.

Next, the findings of this study could be important to families who are considering a similar trip, to understand more about what they might expect of such an experience both for themselves and for their children. In addition, families who have yet to consider the idea of a family gap year may be inspired by these findings to consider the option for their own family. I believe that American families in particular, due to their documented reluctance to have their young adult offspring participate in a more traditional solo gap year, might consider the family gap year as an alternative opportunity to expose their children to the world and provide access to all of the potential benefits identified by this study.

The findings herein might also be of interest to educators who could find themselves asked to coordinate with a family who wants to take their children out of school for a year to participate in a family gap year. The mere fact that the subjects interviewed do exist means that some educators have already found themselves in this position. Educators put in this position going forward may want to consider the identified value of a family gap year provided in this study against the opportunity cost of a year spent at home participating in formal schooling, particularly when working with parents to ascertain what if any formal schooling should be attempted during the trip.

Similarly, the findings of this study may also be valuable to college admission personnel who may need to evaluate an applicant who participated in a family gap year, to decide their relative merit as an applicant and their likelihood of success at their institution. As some children of the subject interviews have already applied to colleges, it follows that at least some admission counselors have already been faced with trying to evaluate the benefits of a family gap year experience to the applicant. In particular in the case when a student has missed a year of high school to travel, the findings contained in this study should be considered against the likely circumstance of fewer advanced courses on that student's transcript.

Finally, business leaders who have the opportunity to interview an applicant with a family gap year on their resume may appreciate knowing more about what that year likely represents in terms of experiential learning and personal growth. Similarly, employers who may be approached by company employees who want to take a year off to travel with their families should also consider the findings of this study. Review of these findings should point to potential benefits, not only to the employee and their family, but potentially to the employer as well. In particular, the implications to business leaders are relevant with regard to the potential

of the family gap year to develop global leaders. The need for a more culturally competent workforce was identified earlier in this paper. Similarly global leaders are needed to help the United State compete in an ever-evolving international environment. To this point, Oddou, Mendenhall, and Ritchie (2000) have published regarding a related topic in an article titled “Leveraging Travel as a Tool for Global Leadership Development.” While their work speaks to leveraging business travel, the findings of this study suggest that family gap year travel may also create results that contribute to the development of global leaders.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

As this study represents a very early effort to understand the phenomenon of the family gap year, the recommendations for future study are many. Certainly I recommend that researchers in the future conduct studies aimed at creating a better, more thorough, understanding of the shared family gap year experience.

I believe, based on the interviews I conducted with both parents in which different accounts or experiences were sometimes provided, that future studies ought to consider interviews conducted with both spouses as that approach might provide additional results to those provided by one parent, and would also likely provide a more well rounded view of an individual family’s experience.

In addition, as this study did not address some parameters of a family gap year that I believe would provide desirable information for families considering such an experiences, I would recommend a study that identifies participants’ experiences in terms of cost of trip and method of financing. Similarly, I think future studies that look at best practices regarding integrating any formal schooling into the experiential learning experience that is the gap year would also be especially beneficial.

My own personal interests in research going forward would revolve around looking more closely at any learning or personal growth that may occur as a result of this type of experience. Identifying families prior to departure on their gap years would likely prove difficult, but the opportunity to do pre and post testing would be desirable to move the discussion away from subjective perceptions and toward more quantifiable data. In particular, as multiples studies have identified positive changes in learning motivation in traditional gap year students, I would like to see future study that attempts to identify whether or not similar changes might occur in the adolescent or teenage children of gap year families. I also think that studies that focus on looking at potential outcomes related to increased levels of cultural understanding and competence would be desirable in order to further document whether the exposure to other people and cultures inherent in a family gap year provides the globally educated citizens that American businesses say that they need.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion I will say that this study serves as an early effort to understand the phenomenon of the family gap year. The findings of this study support the idea that a family gap year may provide similar benefits to those established as being positive outcomes of the more traditional gap year, specifically in terms of learning and personal growth experienced by the participants. Family gap year participants also appear to agree with subjects of earlier studies that the experience was both desirable and satisfying. The family gap year, however, appears to differ from the traditional gap year in that parents reference different reasons to take part in a gap year in the first place than do their younger counterparts. Family gap year participants also refer to less desirable aspects of their trip that don't necessarily show up in studies about younger students who travel solo. Finally, the family gap year appears to provide an additional benefit in



the form of special bonding time together for the family. All of these findings represent knowledge that is potentially important to families, educators and business leaders as they may be in the position to consider or evaluate the practice of the family gap year.

Finally, as was previously noted, the topic of this study is a very personal one to me. I identify closely with the subjects of this study and very much enjoyed interviewing each subject and hearing their narratives about their family gap year experience. In conclusion then I wish to quote one of the participants of this study who articulates very well my own thoughts and feelings, “You know, I love families who have done this. I love talking to families who have done this, because they are my kind of people.”

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## APPENDIX A

## IRB Approval

# PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

## Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

February 11, 2015

Carrie Pullen

Protocol #: E0115D03

Project Title: A Phenomenological Study of Families who Participate in Long Term Independent International Travel: The Family Gap Year

Dear Ms. Pullen:

Thank you for submitting your application, *A Phenomenological Study of Families who Participate in Long Term Independent International Travel: The Family Gap Year*, for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB appreciates the work you and your faculty advisor, Dr. Allen, have done on the proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations (45 CFR 46 - <http://www.nihtraining.com/ohsrsite/guidelines/45cfr46.html>) that govern the protections of human subjects. Specifically, section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) states:

(b) Unless otherwise required by Department or Agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the following categories are exempt from this policy:

**Category (2) of 45 CFR 46.101**, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: a) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

In addition, your application to waive documentation of informed consent has been **approved**.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a **Request for Modification Form** to the GPS IRB. Because your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to "policy material" at <http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/>).

## APPENDIX B

## Initial Contact Script

Hello, my name is Carrie Pullen.

In 2011 and 2012 I took my family on an around the world (RTW) gap year. My husband and I and our two teenage children visited 26 countries on 4 continents during 9 months. I am also a doctoral student at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology. I am currently working on a dissertation that will explore the common experiences of families that have taken part in a family gap year. This study will be conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership, and is entitled "A Phenomenological Study of Families who Participant in Long Term Independent International Travel: The Family Gap Year."

I am wondering if you would be interested in being interviewed for this study? I am seeking participants who have gone with their family (consisting of at least one parent and one child under the age of 18) on a multi-continent trip lasting from 6 months to 2 years and who have done so during the last seven years. The interview would take approximately one hour of your time and could be conducted at a time and place convenient to you, or via telephone if that is more convenient.

The purpose of this study is to explore the common motivations, expectations and perceived outcomes of families who choose to take an extended break from career and formal education in order to participate together in a multi-continent international trip. While there is substantial

academic literature regarding college age students who take a similar trip, little to no academic research has addressed the experience of the family gap year. This study will help to address that lack, as well as to help us to understand why families decide to take a gap year, what they expect from their gap year and what a family gap year is actually like.

If you are interested please let me know and I will forward an informed consent form that explains in detail the interview process and your rights and includes a copy of the initial interview questions. This informed consent will take approximately 5 minutes to read.

Best Regards,

Carrie Pullen

Doctoral Candidate

Pepperdine University

## APPENDIX C

## Informed Consent

Principal Investigator: Carrie Pullen

Title of Project: A Phenomenological Study of Families who Participant in Long Term Independent International Travel: The Family Gap Year

I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in the research study, described herein, being conducted by Carrie Pullen under the direction of Dr. Mark Allen of Pepperdine University. This study will result in a dissertation to be completed in partial fulfillment of and Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership.

The purpose of the research is to explore the common motivations, expectations and perceived outcomes of families who choose to take an extended break from career and formal education in order to participate together in a multi-continent international trip.

My participation will involve participation in an interview to be conducted by Carrie Pullen either in person, at a time and place of my choosing, or on the telephone. This interview is expected to last approximately one hour, and I have received a copy of the questions that will be asked during my interview (see attached). I also understand there may be additional follow up questions at the discretion of the interviewer based upon my answers.

I understand that I may choose not to participate in this research and that participation is completely voluntary. I understand I can decline to answer any question. Further I understand

that at any time during the interview I am free to discontinue my participation without any penalty whatsoever.

I understand that the possible benefits of this research to myself and also to society include added knowledge about the phenomenon of the family gap year.

I also understand that there are certain risks and discomforts that may be associated with participation in this research including boredom during the interview and the potential that my confidentiality is not properly maintained.

I understand that Carrie Pullen will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my records and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. I give permission for Carrie Pullen to record my interview and understand that my interview recording will be kept on her password protected phone and that transcriptions that are created from my interview will be kept on her password protected personal computer and that both the recorded interview and transcripts will be destroyed three years following the publication of the study. I understand that I, as well as the members of my family that I may reference during the interview, will be referred to in the study under pseudonyms.

The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others.

I understand that Carrie Pullen is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described and can be reached at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]. I also understand that I may contact the supervising faculty member Dr. Mark Allen at [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] if I have other questions or concerns about this research. Further, if I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I can contact Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional School Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University, via email at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]

I understand that, should I so desire, Carrie Pullen will provide me with a copy of the research conclusions upon the completion of this project.

I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form, which I have read and understand. I hereby consent to participate in the research described above.

A Family Gap Year  
Interview Questions

1. Please describe the members of your family during the time of your gap year, their sex, and ages, as well as where you resided before and after your trip.
2. What made you decide to take your family on a gap year?
3. Can you please describe the parameters of your trip? Number of countries, length of travel, mode of travel, mode of accommodation, common activities etc?
4. What were your expectations concerning the gap year experience prior to your departure?
5. How did your trip either meet or fail to meet those expectations?
6. What would you say were the best aspects of your experience?
7. What would you say were the worst aspects of your experience?
8. Do you feel like any family members changed as a result of your trip? If so in what ways?
- 8b. To what specific aspect of the trip do you attribute these changes?
9. If you were to do the trip again, what would you do differently?
10. Would you recommend a similar journey to other families? Why or why not?

## APPENDIX D

### My Family's Gap Year

In the beginning of 2011 I was a first year doctoral student pursuing an Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership. My husband and I had been married for 20 years, and we had a son who had just turned 16 and was a sophomore in high school and a daughter, 16 years old who was a freshman. Multiple circumstances came together in February of that year that lead me to conceive of the idea of a gap year for our family. I have always loved to travel and had traveled fairly extensively prior to getting married. My husband however had traveled very little and since we married we had not traveled a lot. I missed traveling however, and had talked often about my desire for our family to travel together, and more specifically to volunteer together abroad. I had little success however in making that happen due primarily, I thought, to financial constraints. While my husband and I had good income, we spent it all on house payments, private school, kids activities and trips to Costco. In one of my classes the previous semester my professor had asked us to commit to a volunteer project. I had indicated that I wanted to take my family for a week to Belize to volunteer on a medical mission the following summer. The cost of that trip though was approximately \$10,000 and, by February, I was doubting our ability to make that happen. I was frustrated that, while we had a substantial amount of money coming in, it went out just as quickly and there was none left over for what I thought was most important.

At the same time I was thick in the throes of being the mom of two high school kids. Our lives were crazy busy and stressful but also fun. I was dreading however the upcoming time when I knew they would grow up and go away to college or to start their own lives. In addition, the biggest worry I had on my mind was my son's education. While he was very smart, he didn't seem to be getting much out of his traditional education experience, and we were considering



switching him into a virtual academy, an online school. I knew that I only had a short time left to influence his future path.

All of these circumstances coalesced one day while I was in the shower. It suddenly occurred to me that it might be possible to put the kids in online school for a year and get rid of all of our regular expenses freeing up enough income for us to travel together internationally. We were lucky in that we had income that would continue to come in whether we were working or not, and we had retirement accounts that we could borrow from. I thought that I had invented the idea. One short online research session quickly disabused me of that belief. I quickly came across the blogs of other families who had done something similar, and they had traveled around the world. They further inspired me and I began to believe that we could do it too.

When I broached the topic with my husband and kids they quickly agreed it was something we all wanted to do. To be honest I don't think it was my husband's first choice of how to spend the year, but his work, tied to the real estate market, had kind of stagnated and he said he believed it was the right choice for the kids and our family at that time. The kids loved the idea.

That was in February, and on July first we departed on our family gap year and set out to travel together around the world. Getting to that point wasn't easy though. There were many times I thought we wouldn't make it, like when our house rental looked like it was going to fall through or when planning for the kids' schooling got tough. But the turning point came while I was in the middle of cautioning my kids that this idea might not actually come to fruition and my son said to me, "Yeah, you always have great ideas but you never follow through." That was a kick in the butt. If that was what he thought, then I was determined to change his mind.

We traveled for 9 months and visited 26 countries. It was hard; it was great. It was, in a way, like any other year in that there were highs and lows and there is no way to describe 9 months with a pat summary. Looking back now I would say it was fantastic. I am, we are all, so very glad that we did it. But there were many days during the trip when we would have said that it was too hard and that we just wanted to be home. My son took to the lifestyle especially well, and I would say my daughter had the most difficult time. While she had no doubts about going initially, she hated online school and was often homesick. The worst part of the trip for me was watching her when she was feeling miserable.

We traveled using just about every form of transportation, from car, to bus, to boat to train carrying just a backpack apiece. Our budget was tight. We couldn't buy anything unless we consumed it, and I created some sayings to help keep us on course. "It's not a VAcation. It is an EDUcation" and "We are traveling, not acquiring." Travel planning was a constant but I quickly discovered that I could book furnished apartments as cheaply as hostels, and so at that point our level of accommodation really improved. Food became very important in our lives, just figuring out where it was going to come from was challenging, but then we generally ate only one large meal per day and we found our moods often revolved around how good the food for the day turned out to be.

Some of the highs of the trip for me included going on safari in Tanzania, being among the few Westerners witnessing the full moon lantern festival in Hoi An or riding horses on Easter Island. But the most precious memories I have are just of the time together, huddled on a bed under mosquito nets in Cambodia playing cards and laughing because our daughter had named the mouse that kept showing up in her room "Fred" or watching my son try to keep up with us on bicycles when his pedal kept falling off. For me I would also just find myself sitting on a rooftop

listening to the call to prayer in Morocco, or sitting looking out at the countryside through a window on a train in Vietnam and feel a deep sense of happiness and contentment. The kids I'm sure would point to jumping out of an airplane in Australia or off a bungee bridge in South Africa. Most days however were much less exciting. They were spent just trying to get most places on foot, to buy food when we couldn't speak the language, to experience what living in a new place was like, to navigate a city, to learn something new. Still other days we were just biding our time until we could move on to the next place, trying to stay out of each other's way and using one of our many technology devices to communicate with our friends back home.

When we returned home my son chose to continue in online school, got a job as a lifeguard and loved his altered lifestyle. He got mostly A's that year, graduated on time and got into the college of his choice out of state. As I write this he is a sophomore and spending a semester studying and interning abroad in London. I feel confident that our trip changed the course of his life for the better. He says that he does too. Our daughter happily went back to her brick and mortar school. She too got into a great college out of state and is hoping to study next semester in Buenos Aires. She looks back more fondly on the trip now and I do think it changed her, although not as dramatically as it did her brother. I think the trip made us all less materialistic, more culturally aware and it undoubtedly made us closer. Perhaps most importantly though I think we are all better educated because of how we chose to spend that year. I often joke that the kids learned that Southern California isn't the center of the universe. Overall I really believe we are just better people for having chosen and then participated in the experience.

Now we have over 7000 pictures from our trip and a lifetime to re-live our memories. I know that not everyone can take such a trip, but I believe that the benefits are so substantial to a

family that anyone who can do it, should. You can read more about our entire trip at <http://pullensgortw.blogspot.com>

## APPENDIX E

## Thank you letter

Date

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I want to express my appreciate to you for your participation in my study entitled “A Phenomenological Study of Families who Participant in Long Term Independent International Travel: The Family Gap Year.”

If you interested in receiving a copy of the results of this study, please let me know and I will forward you a copy following the completion of the study.

My very best to you and your family in the future,

Carrie Pullen

Pepperdine University

## APPENDIX F

## List of Coding

## Codes Initially Identified

1. Love of Travel
2. See the World
3. Right Time
4. Strengthen Family
5. Meet People
6. Experiential Learning
7. Better Focus
8. Adventure
9. Trip Maintenance
10. Getting on each other's nerves
11. Soft Skills
12. Recommended
13. Superlatives
14. Doable
15. Always remember
16. Supportive Partner
17. Lucky
18. Figuring it out
19. Teamwork
20. Homesick
21. Volunteering
22. Not 5 Star
23. Finances
24. Museums

## Codes Identified in more than 50 percent of transcripts:

1. Dream/Love of Travel
2. See the World
3. Right Time
4. Strengthen Family
5. Meet People
6. Experiential Learning
7. Better Focus
8. Adventure
9. Trip Maintenance
10. Getting on Each Other's Nerves
11. Soft Skills
12. Recommended
13. Superlatives