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# The Eve of the Storm

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## Abstract

In the first week of March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread worldwide, fourteen American travelers spent a week in Morocco. The researchers analyzed electronic correspondence, journals, recorded discussions among program participants, and interviews. The data suggest that (a) participants experienced culture shock very early in the trip, (b) travel disruptions (especially luggage loss) affected program participants more than COVID, (c) the program leaders concentrated on problems they felt they *could* solve, (d) exhaustion and stress were prevalent themes for the program leaders, and (e) the program leaders experienced doubt and confusion while helping program participants. We recommend that study abroad officials reexamine faculty and students' preparation and emergency procedures and avoid over-relying on third-party providers. We conclude that during a crisis, problem-focused coping can be a stress-reducing mechanism for study abroad program participants.

## Abstract in Spanish

En la primera semana de marzo de 2020, cuando la pandemia de COVID-19 se extendió por todo el mundo, catorce viajeros estadounidenses pasaron una semana en Marruecos. Los investigadores analizaron la correspondencia electrónica, los diarios, las conversaciones grabadas entre los participantes del programa y las entrevistas. Los datos sugieren que (a) los participantes experimentaron un choque cultural muy temprano en el viaje, (b) las

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interrupciones del viaje (especialmente la pérdida de equipaje) afectaron a los participantes del programa más que el COVID, (c) los líderes del programa se concentraron en los problemas que sintieron que podían resolver, (d) el agotamiento y el estrés fueron temas predominantes para los líderes del programa, y (e) los líderes del programa experimentaron dudas y confusión mientras ayudaban a los participantes del programa. Recomendamos que los funcionarios de estudios en el extranjero vuelvan a examinar la preparación de profesores y estudiantes y los procedimientos de emergencia y eviten depender demasiado de proveedores externos. Concluimos que durante una crisis, el afrontamiento centrado en el problema puede ser un mecanismo para reducir el estrés para los participantes del programa de estudios en el extranjero.

### **Keywords:**

Study abroad, culture shock, problem-focused coping, higher education

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## **Introduction**

On February 29, 2020, a group of 14 travelers left Des Moines, Iowa. Their destination: Asilah, Northern Morocco, population 40,000. Safe and picturesque, this charming town by the sea is often the destination of European and Asian tourists.

The group leader directs a graduate program in Leadership and Talent Development (the Master of Science in Leadership Development, henceforward called the MSLD). She was born in Rio de Janeiro, lived in Buenos Aires in her youth, and immigrated to the United States in her late twenties. Before joining Academia, she traveled extensively to Latin America and Europe as an international leadership consultant. She also previously led four short-term travel seminars, taking students to Brazil, Spain, Portugal, and Morocco. The co-leader, an experienced traveler, is a doctoral student and an MSLD alumna who visited Morocco in one of the leader's previous travel seminars. The remaining participants were current graduate students, program alumni, or alumni family members. Their experiences abroad were limited to brief stints to touristy destinations in Mexico, Canada, or Europe. Aside from the program leader and co-leader, none of the participants had ever been to Morocco.

While everyone's destination was the same (Tangier), the group had two different flight itineraries. Half of the travelers traveled with the program

leader from Des Moines to Dallas and then continued to Madrid and Tangier. The program's Spanish host and a Moroccan driver greeted this first group at the Tangier airport and took them directly to the Asilah hotel. They spent a pleasant afternoon exploring the local Medina (a colorful shopping area near the beach) and marveling at the local colors and sights.

In the meantime, the second group of students, accompanied by the co-leader, had planned to reach Madrid via Chicago. A flight delay in Des Moines disrupted their plans, resulting in five layovers and long airport waits. They finally arrived in Asilah at about 3a.m. They had lost all their checked luggage.

Baggage loss was hardly the leaders' and students' only worry. By the end of February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was rearing its ugly head. The group had had several meetings in Des Moines, and the leader had discussed the problem at length with the director of the International Office at the university. Ultimately, the group decided they could not cancel the trip. The CDC had not yet listed either Morocco or Spain as "hot zones," so the students could not back out of their travel contracts with the third-party providers in Spain. Canceling the trip meant losing all the money paid in advance for accommodations, food, and other expenses. Further, the airlines were not yet canceling flights or allowing passengers to rebook them without penalty.

Those were the days before the storm hit. The pandemic still felt far away to most Americans. It was happening out there in China, out there in Korea; maybe there were problems somewhere in a small town in Italy. The group leader knew the pandemic was coming and had misgivings. In the end, though, as she explained to her brother, "If they go, I go. I can't let them go alone, and I can't be responsible for them losing all their money." She hoped the group would have time to return to the United States before the storm hit.

They made it. Barely. This article describes the travelers' adventures, documented in participant and leader journals, email communications, and recorded conversations. The reader will follow the travelers as they desperately try to recover their luggage, hunt for hand sanitizers, and get home safely right as airports start closing around the world.

A review of the participant journals and interviews suggests that the program leaders followed a psychological mechanism called problem-focused coping, a way of dealing with stress by solving or addressing the stressful problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Further, our data suggest an intersection

between problem perception and culture. The leaders and students focused on different challenges. Meanwhile, cultural misunderstanding and gender norms hindered problem-solving.

## **Conceptual Background**

### **Problem Focused Coping**

Problem-focused coping (PFC) is a stress management method where the person takes action to resolve the immediate problem at hand (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Examples of useful strategies include gathering information, making decisions, or devising solutions. For instance, someone worried about catching COVID-19 may wash their hands frequently (Trougakos et al., 2020).

The percentage of people who used PFC skills during the COVID-19 pandemic ranged between 11.45% and 90.9% depending on the exact population and operationalization of the construct (Frey et al., 2021; Li, 2020; Szabo et al. 2020). Most people, however, reported relying on at least one method, suggesting some application of PFC.

Studies in general populations found lower stress levels among adults who endorsed PFC during the initial COVID-19 lockdown (Guo et al., 2020; Szabó et al., 2020). Extant research suggests that people who use PFC have a lower risk of traumatic stress (Chew et al., 2020) and post-traumatic stress (Guo et al., 2020; Li, 2020). During COVID-19, people who controlled their stress through PFC were more likely to report positive emotions in the face of employment stress (Chee et al., 2020) and see themselves as healthier (Szabó et al., 2020). They were also less likely to report suppressing emotions (Trougakos et al., 2020) and eating unhealthily (Chee et al., 2020).

### **Culture Shock**

Culture shock means “a state of distress following the transfer of a person to an unfamiliar cultural environment” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 516). Individuals who experience culture shock may express irritation, distress, helplessness, anxiousness, depression, and hostility towards the new culture (Hofstede et al., 2010; Winkelman, 1994). Kracke (2015) describes culture shock as happening in stages. Excitement and curiosity characterize the first stage, as sojourners get ready to experience the new culture. Then, as the journey continues and travelers face unfamiliar experiences, they feel frustration and exasperation. Finally, travelers start to feel more comfortable with their new

cultural setting (Kracke, 2015). Culture shock, however, is not a linear process; feelings associated with culture shock can reoccur sporadically (Winkelman, 1994).

Cultural shock does not occur only on semester-long study abroad trips. Instead, culture shock can happen instantly (Furnham, 2019), and participants may experience it during short-term study abroad experiences. For example, Conner and Roberts (2015) found that students who participated in a short-term study abroad experienced stages following the Dynamic Model of Culture Confusion (Hottola, 2004), a modified version of Oberg's 1960 model including cultural confusion, adaptation, and opposition of culture.

Culture shock often worsens before improving (Furnham, 2019). Sims and Schraeder (2004) note that travelers with greater cultural flexibility, higher stress tolerance, and more interpersonal skills are less likely to experience significant levels of culture shock. Sims and Schrader suggested intensive pre-departure cultural training to reduce uncertainty.

## Methods

This study followed a Case Study approach, where a case can be any delimited system such as an institution or a program (Stake, 1978). We explored this case holistically using several different data sources (Yin, 2003): travel documents, participant journals, and recorded interviews/conversations with participants. Travel documents included a travel wiki page with program information, announcements sent by the third-party program hosts, and emails shared between participants and the program leaders.

Participants' journals were a valuable source of data. Before the departure and daily during the trip, the leader, co-leader, and five students recorded their experiences. The program co-leader anonymized the journals and entered them on Dedoose, a qualitative software, for coding purposes. The program leader did not have access to the student journals to ensure student confidentiality and comfort during the process.

Lastly, we recorded and transcribed multiple recorded interviews and discussions upon reentry. These include interviews with the leaders, conversations between the leader and two students, and one additional student interview. We used an automatic transcriber (Otter.ai) to initiate the transcription process, corrected all transcripts manually, and entered the data on Dedoose. One author reviewed and coded the student documents while two

authors coded the leader documents. Two authors met to review and reconcile all codes from both the student and leader documents.

## Subjectivities

Subjectivity cannot be eliminated from qualitative studies, only acknowledged and reported (Maxwell, 2012). The three authors and all students contributing journals and testimonials are affiliated with the same university. Therefore, all interviews and discussions involved people who knew one another well. The researchers' connections to the study participants could have influenced participants' responses.

The three authors have also been involved in short-term study abroad programs with the university. One author has worked in education abroad for twelve years. Two authors have participated in short-term study abroad trips as students. Further, the fact that two authors were co-leaders in the trip could affect our interpretation of the data.

We followed Merriam and Tisdell's recommendations to increase the trustworthiness of our findings (2015). First, we invited a third researcher who was not a program leader or co-leader. The coders had lengthy discussions, reviewed the excerpts carefully, and analyzed and included in the report negative codes. Next, the researchers examined the report and shared the final themes and codes with program participants for member checking purposes. Then, the paper was shared with peers at two conferences and revised according to the feedback received. Finally, we followed member-check procedures and had all participants review the article to ensure accuracy.

## Results

A review of our data revealed student themes related to the lost luggage, cultural discomfort, and COVID. Leadership themes had to do with COVID, exhaustion, problem-solving, and the uncertainties of leading "without a guidebook."

### Student Themes

#### Student Theme 1: I Feel Miserable Without my Luggage

The luggage debacle affected all travelers including those whose luggage arrived safely. Luggage references appeared in 55 student excerpts.

Students who lost their luggage felt overwhelmed by the absence of familiar objects such as primary hygiene products, clothing, and essential articles from home. These students were not only physically exhausted, having arrived in the wee hours of the morning; they also felt disconnected and unable to get ready for the day:

Last night we stayed up until about 3 a.m. working on finding our luggage.

In the back of my mind, all I could think about was how disgusting I felt and how I wanted to shower and wear my own clothes.

When I woke up, my mind was still on my luggage. I was constantly wondering when it would arrive.

COVID seemed far away from these students' minds. Instead, they worried about more practical and immediate issues. Where do I buy shampoo? Where can I find underwear that will fit me? What is my sweater size?

After the "luggage-less" group finally arrived, the leader quickly thought of solutions. She planned a visit to the local market to help students find necessities and arranged a trip to the Tangier mall the following day. The options, however, overwhelmed students. The clothing available for purchase did not come in all sizes, so students had limited choices. Compounding the issue, no one seemed to know how to recuperate the luggage. The guide suggested that students drive to the airport, explaining that calling the airport employees was useless. The airport was in Tangier, about 40 minutes away. Taxis were the only forms of transportation; the students would board one almost daily with their Moroccan guide, the co-leader, and one of the hosts. Each day, students were told the luggage was nowhere to be found:

On our way to Tangier we stopped at the airport so the group that lost their luggage could try to get some answers. It was sad to hear that they didn't have the location of all the bags or know when they would arrive - leaving our friends without clothes and their personal belongings for even longer.

## Student Theme 2: I Feel Like an Outsider

The high number of inexperienced travelers on the trip contributed to feelings of culture shock. We identified references to cultural differences, culture shock, and relief with cultural familiarity in 88 student excerpts.

Since many participants had young children, preparing for the trip was already a source of worry. Parents expressed concerns about coordinating child care while they were away and taking too much time away from their children to plan the trip.

I feel like I haven't even had the chance to research the area because I am trying to ensure all the needs of the kids will be taken care of when [I'm] gone.

Aside from our packets of information containing details such as time differences, our travel agency, and cultural norms to be aware of, there are multiple in-person and Zoom meetings required which is taking quite a bit of time and dedication.

Cultural discomfort struck participants early and fast. Even participants who did not lose their luggage felt immediate unease (where do I find coffee? how do I communicate?). When the leader and the first group of students arrived at the Madrid airport, a small group of students entered a Starbucks. Later one of the students wrote:

Entering the Madrid airport was the start of the culture shock. Something as simple as buying a coffee at Starbucks was difficult as a result of the language and money differences.

The student expected familiarity - and familiarity was elusive. As participants navigated their new surroundings, they wondered how to behave, what to say, how to be polite. One participant recalled: "I still feel like everyone is looking at us. It seems everything I do (walk, talk, etc.) draws attention to us/me and how I don't belong here naturally."

Cultural differences seemed to mediate participants' abilities to solve problems throughout the trip. For example, how does one retrieve luggage in Morocco? Is it true that one needs to visit the airport every day? Participants needed to trust their guides but did not know if the guides were trustworthy cultural informants or just wrong. One complicating factor: The third-party provider was Spanish and might misunderstand the local rules.

While in Morocco, students said they felt more comfortable when they saw American brands and foods.



We had dinner and drinks at a restaurant that reminded me of a typical American bar/grill and were able to order food that seemed “normal” and it was relieving.

We did get some Lay chips, Doritos and Oreos - comfort food from home.

After leaving Morocco, the travelers spent a night in a Marriott hotel in Madrid. One student wrote: “Checking into the Marriott in Madrid felt like we were one step closer to home. After 8 nights and 9 days, I was really ready to feel a taste of home.”

### Student Theme 3: The Ghost of COVID

COVID started affecting the trip before the travelers' departure, as the students, the leader, and the co-leader debated whether they should continue with their plans. COVID-related comments were present in 10 student excerpts.

Prior to departure, the leader sent an email to students consistent with what she knew at the time: Masks were not recommended, and COVID risks to healthy adults were still considered low. Once the journey started, participants started noticing COVID signs. The following are portions of the students' journals:

I am also anxious about the Coronavirus making its way around the globe. I wasn't anticipating a global pandemic occurring simultaneously with our trip so just feeling a touch uneasy about that aspect.

As we got on the plane, there were a lot of masked passengers and we were diligent about sanitizing everything. It felt uncomfortable especially considering how much the virus was spreading in other countries. We had already started to hear of potential businesses and schools that would close when we return to the states if the virus couldn't be contained.

I am still feeling a bit anxious with the new alert warnings to be more aware of surroundings while traveling to Morocco that the Embassy has posted.

Despite the concern some students had before departing, once arriving in Morocco, COVID seemed to play a less important role than other logistical or cultural issues. Leaders and students discussed COVID in informal conversations, but students did not write about COVID in their daily journals upon arriving in Morocco. Also, students did not seem to notice the decisions the

leaders had to face to keep the group as safe as possible. One student journal included an excerpt about a sudden change of plans after a potential group exposure to COVID:

We woke up early to go have breakfast before traveling to Chefchaouen. We were unsure why the plans changed from eating breakfast at a hotel to going to a local restaurant.

After returning home, a student reflected on how COVID affected the trip. She explained students carried disinfectant wipes for things such as seats in the airplane or menus at restaurants. They often used hand sanitizer after touching things and refrained from touching their faces. “It was kind of this constant thing while we were there, just wiping up our hands and not touching our faces and those types of things.”

## Leader Themes

A review of the leaders' email communications, journals, recorded discussions, and interviews revealed themes relating to COVID-19, exhaustion, and uncertainty when making decisions, including the decision on *which* problems to prioritize during the trip. Indeed, the leader and the co-leader appeared to focus on different issues: the leader concentrated on COVID-safety precautions, the co-leader paid more attention to supporting program participants with luggage loss.

### Leader Theme 1: How do we Protect our Group?

The COVID theme was prevalent in the leaders' data, appearing in 61 leader excerpts. Before, during, and after the trip, the leader and co-leader discussed COVID precautions and made difficult decisions.

During the weeks preceding the trip, the CDC hadn't advised against travel. The leader and co-leader gathered as much information as possible to share with the students. Knowing that the students would not receive a refund for their pre-paid travel expenses, the leader felt particularly conflicted:

[In] the [name of university] contract and the contract that everybody signed, there's nothing in there that says if I'm worried about a possible pandemic, then I can get out of this trip and get my money back.

The co-leader's data reveals more excitement with returning to Morocco and fewer concerns about COVID.

I was concerned for other people's opinions, but for my personal opinion, I wanted to go back to Morocco so bad and I wanted this experience so bad. And that I just was like, I don't care about anything else as long as we go.

The leader worried about COVID the most. She sensed that the crisis was about to worsen and was concerned about the effects of COVID on one student with asthma. While the leader knew that she had no control over COVID, she made every effort to support the group. In a later interview, she explained:

There's apparently a pandemic here and I'm responsible for this group. I felt responsible for doing whatever I could. Not to ensure the safety of people, because I knew I couldn't, but whatever I could to maximize the safety of the group.

COVID references appeared in multiple emails between the leader and the students and in communications from the third-party provider. For example, in an email sent to participants just four days before departure on February 26, the leader shared various recommendations from the third-party provider on reasonable precautions and added:

I thought you all would appreciate this information from [the third-party provider]. I heard from [official's name] at [name of university] that even though they are monitoring the situation; there are no plans to cancel trips abroad. I'll be talking to [official's name] this afternoon. What I'm planning to do is take normal precautions such as taking Lysol wipes with me, sufficient antibacterial gel for the trip, and then pay attention to the CDC notes while there. I'm not worried about masks (I understand they can't be purchased now?) because my understanding is that masks are advisable for people who are sick, not to protect people who are healthy.

One evening, the leader found out that a large group of South Korean travelers was about to arrive at the hotel. She immediately contacted the third-party host provider to problem-solve. Her main concerns: South Korea was, at

the time, considered a "hot zone." Most hotel meals took place in the same closed room in a buffet style. In those early days, not enough was known about the virus transmission. In addition, when the leader arrived at the hotel, she realized that the South Korean travelers had been housed near the students' rooms.

At that point, the luggage became relatively unimportant. The leader explained: "I didn't feel responsible for the luggage, but I did feel responsible for paying attention to the safety of the group."

Negotiating with the hotel manager, the third-party host provider, and even university officials left the leader frustrated and drained. The third-party provider insisted that there was no danger from the pandemic. The hotel manager explained that the Moroccan government had placed strict security measures at the airport (translation: travelers answered questions about their health). And while all that took place, the advice received from the university was to "follow the third-party provider's advice." The leader felt alone and overwhelmed by the responsibility to keep everyone safe.

In the meantime, I'm calling [name of university official] to find out what are the [university] guidelines. [The university] guidelines don't help me at all because basically, all they say is you have to go by whatever the host provider tells you. And I'm like; the host provider has different interests. My interest is one interest and one interest only, protecting my students. I don't have any other agenda here.

## Leader Theme 2: Exhaustion and Stress

Stress and exhaustion were prevalent in the leaders' data. Both the leader and the co-leader went to bed late most nights and felt like they were "on-call" most of the time. The exhaustion and stress theme was apparent in 41 leader excerpts.

Exhaustion was a constant theme in the leader's journals and in her interviews after returning home. While waiting at the Dallas airport to continue the trip to Madrid, the leader learned about the problems experienced by the other group. At first, she was not concerned, having faced trip delays during study abroad trips before. After arriving in Asilah, however, the long wait unnerved her. Waiting for the second group in the hotel lobby at 1 a.m., she wrote: "I'm exhausted from being on stage, exhausted because well, it's been an

exhausting day, exhausted because I'm responsible for the group, and the group is not all here."

The co-leader's journal and interview also highlighted fatigue and stress. The following is an entry from the co-leader's journal: "Overall, my journey was physically and mentally exhausting. The entire time I never had more than a few hours of sleep - being a planner/leader led to many difficult decisions and late-night discussions."

The co-leader discussed her feelings of exhaustion during a recorded re-entry recorded conversation.

You're constantly on the clock and you're constantly dealing with these things and you never know what's going to get thrown at you. So, you have to always be prepared.

The entire time I never had more than a few hours of sleep - being a planner/leader led to many difficult decisions and late-night discussions.

### Leader Theme 3: COVID or Luggage?

The conflict between COVID and the luggage appeared in multiple conversations and documents. This theme was identified in 50 leader excerpts.

The leader experienced frustration as the luggage seemed to "take over" the trip. During multiple conversations with the co-leader, the leader feared that participants would miss on major investment and a once-in-a-lifetime experience worrying about a problem that would eventually be solved. In other words: She wanted participants to purchase new clothes and let the process take its course. As a result, the leader struggled to decide how to support the students while also advising them to solve the immediate problems and wait.

So, all the problems are happening really fast and I have this sinking feeling in my head that we're going about it the wrong way, but I don't know how to change directions without really sounding non-empathetic and sounding like I don't care, because I did care.

The co-leader, who had accompanied the stranded group, experienced the loss of luggage under two roles: a leader and a traveler. Like any of the stranded travelers, she was tired, frustrated, and missed her necessities. As a co-leader, however, she also felt responsible for the welfare of her fellow travelers.

After the initial shock was over, the co-leader's instinct was to buy new clothes, keep track of the receipts, and enjoy the rest of the trip. She knew, however, that this solution felt simpler for her than for the other luggage-less participants. In an interview, she explained:

Those bags caused so much anxiety...I never knew what to do or say when people were saying that they were upset about the luggage, or when they wanted to stay up until two in the morning and call American airlines because of this luggage or [when] they wanted to go to the airport every single day because of the luggage. Do I say yes to help their anxiety at least a little bit, or do I say no to hopefully make them get over it and focus on the trip?

The co-leader felt caught between two worlds, not knowing whether to focus on the luggage-less group or the trip's adventures and activities. "I am still hoping that the luggage is found as soon as possible so everyone can start seeing and experiencing Morocco as I do."

The co-leader believed that the luggage was an area in which she could contribute. As one of the stranded passengers, she knew what her group had experienced. She also had a "spot" in the inevitable daily cab rides to Tangier. She was there when participants became frustrated and lost. She added:

In my mind...that's the problem I can attempt to help. I can be on the phone. I can help. You know, I can go to the airport with these people...I can do that stuff. Whereas with Corona, ...we can't stop a virus.

In other words: The co-leader was confident she could facilitate luggage discussions. She felt helpless, however, to handle the COVID crisis. In addition, the co-leader *knew* the leader was taking care of the pandemic problem. The co-leader explained:

Let's be honest, COVID was a way bigger issue than lost luggage. I guess I did want my luggage, but I was just trying to kind of get other people to settle down and get other people to not be worried. So, I think having me know that the leader was more focused on COVID, and she was keeping an eye out on it allowed me to not focus on COVID.

#### Leader Theme 4: Leading Without a Guidebook

While COVID was rearing its head and students struggled with cultural adjustments and luggage woes, the leaders tried their best to fulfill their duties. Often, however, the leaders were unsure of what to do. The weight of the leadership responsibility and the need to work on problems until late at night - often “behind the scenes” was a clear theme, appearing in 90 leader excerpts.

First, culture affected the leaders’ roles. As the leader explained, during an informal recorded conversation with the co-leader:

It's kind of a kaleidoscope of stuff that is happening at the same time. Right? So, for example, the luggage issue, it was partly a cultural issue because I know how to handle lost luggage in certain cultures, but I certainly didn't know how to handle a lost luggage in Morocco.

The leader experienced problems as she attempted to interpret local costumes and move around in Morocco (do I say something? Is this all right?). She wrote in her journal:

In Brazil, if a car almost runs over me and I smile and wave, and mouth the words I'm so sorry and thank you, the driver typically smiles back. No harm done. In Morocco I do the same and worry that as a woman I shouldn't have smiled.

At one point in the trip, the leader had a tense disagreement with the third-party provider over COVID precautions. When the South Korean group arrived at the hotel, the leader asked to move her group to another side of the building and change the eating venues. The third-party provider forcefully objected in front of the students. “This is at 12:30 in the morning, and I didn't even realize [the host provider] was furious with me. (...) [Name] started raising his voice; I had to take him outside.”

Gender and personality added additional layers of discomfort. The leader wondered if gender affected her relationship with the third-party provider (a male) and explained that she felt uncomfortable with constant conflict: “I'm normally not afraid of being assertive, but he's so much more challenging than I am that I have a hard time challenging him. So, then it becomes really, really stressful.”

That same night, the co-leader witnessed conflict with the third-party provider and a student at the airport when retrieving the missing luggage. The co-leader described the situation as a miscommunication between the Moroccan guide and the students:

[The Moroccan guide] made the assumption that [the student's] luggage was delivered instead of [another student's] luggage. So, when he told her she did not get her luggage, she was very upset because she anticipated it was going to be there...so [the third-party provider] came back in and told us we need to go because there's nothing else we can do. [Student] got upset because there was nothing else to be done. And then they started, I wouldn't say yelling, but very high raised voices over each other.

Both the leader and the co-leader experienced moments of doubt and confusion. After the trip, the leader reflected on those moments and explained: "Leaders don't always know what to do. They have to make decisions on the fly based on their best judgements and previous experiences."

The co-leader also confronted a lack of clarity in her role. When was she in charge? How did people see her? In a later conversation, she recalled:

Some people would view me as a leader and some people didn't. Like I think in the instance where nobody knew what to do. Like in the airport, everybody was like, Kayli, what do we do?

During a particularly tense exchange between the third-party host provider and a program participant, neither party seemed to focus on the co-leader's role. "I don't think either of them at any point thought to themselves, well let's see what, what Kayli wants to do. I think they were both on their own agenda."

In other moments, however, the co-leader's knowledge of the area made her the apparent person in charge, the general problem-solver or guide.

But, and then in other aspects, I think people would just view me as a leader because I knew Asilah so well, I knew where all the restaurants were. I knew where to go. And Medina, I knew where their calligraphy



place was. Like, people were just saying, like, Kayli, take us here. Can you take us here? Because I knew I knew where to go, which was helpful.

Much of the conflict and confusion happened behind closed doors, as the leader and co-leader tried to solve problems in their shared hotel room. Students did not always know about these late-night conversations or fully realize the leaders' exhaustion after long problem-solving days. Only one student commented on the leader and co-leader's problem-solving efforts, and only after the problem was brought to her attention by the leader in an interview:

I think that, from a leadership perspective, we definitely didn't know that all that stuff was going on. Especially, like, even when you go back to the bags, so many people that were making all of these behind the scenes decisions.

## Discussion

The speed of culture shock emergence was an intriguing finding. Well-known culture shock models (Oberg, 1960) assume a honeymoon period when sojourners are excited about the surroundings and have not yet spent enough time abroad to miss what is familiar. However, what these typical models may fail to account for is the emergence of critical problems such as, for example, the loss of luggage. Problem-solving may be culture-specific (Badke-Schaub & Strohschneider, 1998), and addressing issues abroad may generate feelings of frustration and incompetence. In effect, a sojourner will not have the resources to reach their goals, and the inability to achieve goals leads to negative emotions (Jones, Papadakis, Orr, & Strauman, 2013).

The cultural heterogeneity of study abroad participants is also worth exploring. Often, researchers and practitioners discuss the impact of culture on the experiences of sojourners as they interact with local people. However, national cultures are layered. For example, a group of American students may include students of different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. Further, not all participants in a travel seminar come from the same country. The local hosts may come from different ethnic or cultural groups. In this trip, the main cultural conflicts occurred between the leader (a Brazilian woman) and the third-party provider (a Spanish man). Finally, culture does not stem only from nationality. Other layers such as gender play a role in cultural interactions.

The role of the "lost luggage" in this scenario is puzzling. The luggage may be the metaphor for everything people left behind. Suddenly, the absence of the familiar becomes overwhelming. One cannot enjoy the beauty of a new location or the excitement of new tastes if one cannot solve basic problems such as washing one's hair or getting dressed. Thus, the loss of luggage could have led to a much faster culture shock and consequent paralysis (Presbitero, 2016).

Problem-solving coping mechanisms interacted with perceived roles and problem priorities. The two leaders, for example, clearly focused on different sets of problems, prioritizing the issues they felt they could control. The interaction between problem-solving coping mechanisms and perceived roles is an intriguing topic for future research.

Finally, one must consider the considerable stress and exhaustion experienced by program leaders in study-abroad trips. The problem may be particularly severe in short-term trips, as those tend to be more intensive.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

As we finish this paper, the COVID pandemic has taken the lives of 968,245 people in the United States and 6,046,323 people worldwide (Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, 2022). The pandemic has greatly disrupted study abroad. Students had to pack in the middle of the night to get the first plane home. Some students were even stuck behind and had great difficulty returning home (Redden, 2020).

By now, universities are likely reviewing insurance plans and checking on quarantine and repatriation coverage. Maybe, the next pandemic will find us better prepared. Here is the problem, though: Next time, we may not confront a pandemic. Next time, we may face serious political unrest or a natural disaster. The question remains: How prepared are university officials to protect study abroad travel? How can we better anticipate a global crisis that has not yet happened? Answering that question requires imagination and future thinking. It also requires better collaboration between university international education administrators and people "on the trenches" including instructors and students who studied abroad before.

One issue of concern is a possible over-reliance on third-party host providers. Third-party host providers have good knowledge of the local environment, can help with safety precautions, and know local experts (Keese

& O'Brien, 2011). However, these professionals also have a business to run. International crises may disrupt that business. For example, if a university cancels a trip because "there could" be danger ahead (but the danger is still uncertain), the third-party host provider might push back. Further, one must consider the constraints under which third-party providers operate. They often pay in advance for hotels, guides, and other services. Given that inherent conflict, relying on third parties to make crucial safety decisions seems unwise.

During a crisis, problem-focused coping can be a stress-reducing mechanism. Faculty and students can focus on the problems they can solve rather than issues beyond their control. Perhaps, problem-solving coping, in particular, and crisis-management, in general, could become topics in study abroad preparation courses.

Finally, study abroad trips during a crisis may require alternating leadership between program facilitators and participants. Alternating leadership may (a) relieve the leaders' excessive stress, (b) result in stronger decisions, and, most importantly (c) teach students valuable leadership lessons.

In summary, we make the following recommendations for future practice:

- **Prepare for the unexpected worst.** Travel leaders and international office administrators might hold brainstorming discussions to anticipate problems that *could* happen. These sessions should go beyond "what seasoned leaders know." After all, if there is anything the pandemic taught us is that even experienced leaders can be caught in the middle of a sudden storm.
- **Go beyond the obvious in training processes.** At a minimum, travel leaders' training should include psychological first aid and CPR. Travel seminar leaders should also become familiar with emergency procedures in the host country. Well-designed simulations and role-plays would be a welcome addition. It is not enough to simply give the faculty the institution's emergency phone number.
- **Read and share the fine line.** Travel seminars typically include health and repatriation insurance. Travel seminar leaders, students, and parents must be encouraged to carefully read the insurance information and consider additional insurance, if appropriate. For example, general insurance on trips cancelled for any reason and luggage protection insurance could be offered to students and their parents.

- **Do not over-rely on third-party providers.** Third-party service providers can be extremely helpful, both in the planning and implementation of travel seminars. These professionals know the travel sites, are familiar with emergency procedures, and presumably, were selected on the basis of their professional ethics and expertise. That said, third-party providers are also business owners who must protect their own businesses. Their dual role as business owners and travel seminar hosts creates a natural conflict of interests. For example, third-party providers may not be the most reliable sources of information on decisions that could increase their costs or damage their relationships with local partners.
- **Teach problem-solving.** All travel participants should practice problem-solving as part of their travel preparation. For example, travel leaders and students could receive a thorough decision-making flowchart for emergency scenarios and practice their responses.
- **Encourage and foster shared leadership.** All participants in a travel seminar should fully understand their responsibility to one another and be ready and willing to support the leader during the trip. Shared leadership could minimize the feelings of exhaustion experienced by travel leaders and protect students in emergencies or when the leader is not available. Further, expectations of shared leadership would provide an additional benefit to travel seminar participants: practical leadership development.

## Conclusion

One critical lesson learned during COVID: Study abroad contracts do not provide administrators, faculty, and students the flexibility they may need to prevent serious problems. By the time study abroad participants realize the problem, it may be too late to cancel contracts - or too early. American universities are often unable to cancel a travel contract unless the CDC declares a pandemic or the State Department officially designates an area as dangerous. Therefore, the problem may not be what to do when a storm has arrived. Instead, universities must have plans in motion for when the weather report predicts a storm that may or may not happen.

Faculty and students must actively learn crisis management and be better prepared to handle emergencies in their destinations. Further, we must stop assuming that our years of experience in study abroad have taught us “everything we need to know.” COVID was an unexpected hurricane for which

no one prepared; we cannot assume that something similarly unexpected will not come again. Instead, we must discuss what we *don't know yet* and train trip leaders and participants to lead through crises *they have not yet seen*. If we continue on our current path, the arrogance of experience could get our students hurt.

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