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Disrupted Sojourn and Forced Reentry: A Qualitative Inquiry of College Students' Experiences, Stressors, and Coping Strategies After Returning Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study explores the unique experience of disrupted sojourns and early reentry among U.S. college students who were abruptly repatriated from their study abroad experience in March 2020. Using a combination of focus groups and interviews with 25 U.S. returning students, the findings suggest that students' experiences were characterized by themes of accelerated reentry and a deep grieving process, as well as numerous financial, academic, interpersonal, and COVID-19 related stressors. The findings also highlight returning students' coping strategies of staying busy, seeking social support, and reframing the situation under a positive light. This research provides insights into the challenges and adjustments associated with a heretofore unstudied phenomenon of early reentry among returning students. Important practical implications for study abroad programs and administrators who might face additional cases of early reentry due to the uncertainty of the pandemic are discussed.

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Introduction

Study abroad has become one of the hallmarks of higher education in the 21st century, as it is considered one of the most life-changing experiences for many college students (Di Giovine & Bodinger de Uriarte, 2021). Despite the numerous transformational outcomes of studying abroad (e.g., cross-cultural awareness, empathy, and open-mindedness), literature on adaptation abroad (and readaptation at home) has established that cross-cultural transitions are often associated with high levels of stress (Presbitero, 2016). This stress occurs as a result of the loss of familiar norms, language, and relationships (Pitts, 2016), which have traditionally been studied under the umbrella terms of *culture shock* (Furnham & Bochner, 1986) and *acculturative stress* (Park et al., 2014). Even though culture shock and acculturative stress are *normative* stressors of cross-cultural transitions (Rudmin, 2009), the recent pandemic amplified and brought a new set of challenges for sojourners who were abroad during that time (Harder & Mullaney, 2021). National lockdowns, travel restrictions, inconsistency of information surrounding the pandemic, as well as local orders and lack of social support in the host country, are only a few examples of *non-normative stressors* that sojourners faced abroad at the beginning of the pandemic.

These challenges continued as the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) and U.S. president Donald Trump issued an international travel ban in March 2020 that resulted in the premature repatriation of more than 85,000 Americans from 131 countries and territories (Goldstein, 2020). During this time, hundreds of thousands of college students were forced to return home early and experienced long-term implications for their psychological health, including high levels of reacculturative stress and depression not only upon immediate return, but also six months after repatriation (Fanari & Segrin, 2021). Although another pandemic like COVID-19 may not be encountered in the foreseeable future, this unique case of early reentry was eye-opening for many study abroad programs, which had to effectively implement student-centered emergency responses with very little time and guidance (Dietrich, 2020; Goodman, 2020). Given that U.S. study abroad has grown for more than two decades (Institute of

International Education, 2020), there have been few opportunities to examine disrupted sojourns and early reentry. Furthermore, the discovery of new coronavirus variants (World Health Organization, 2021), might pose an ongoing threat to global mobility (Mok et al., 2021).

The study uses the unique case of the COVID-19 pandemic to explore the experience of disrupted sojourn among U.S. college students who were abruptly repatriated from their study abroad. The unexpected and chaotic nature of the reentry, coupled with the sense of loss and incompleteness from not being able to finish their experience, might have aggravated the normative stressors of reentry (Scott, 2015). Exploring the lived experience of returning students in circumstances never seen before will contribute to current literature in several ways. First, this study will provide insight into coping strategies that shaped college students' experiences during the early reentry. College is a very formative time for most students, and research shows that young people's coping skills change with development and life experience (Compas et al., 1992). The pandemic and forced repatriation that followed is unlike any prior experience for most university students. Consequently, this may pose a series of challenges in a population that is still developing their coping skills. Second, this study will offer insights into students' experiences and stressors during the early reentry. These insights have the potential to be transferred to other instances of disrupted sojourn and encourage study abroad programs to develop resources to handle unexpected cases of early reentry that might be more likely to happen than a global pandemic (e.g., serious illness, death in the immediate family, geopolitical unrest in the host country). Third, this study will provide practical suggestions for administrators working with returning students to identify resources that programs should have in place during this time of uncertainty. The next section reviews literature and theoretical frameworks on re-adaptation that were used to frame this study.

Guiding Literature and Frameworks on Cross-Cultural Transitions

This study was guided by theories of cross-cultural adjustment and readjustment from various disciplines, including cross-cultural psychology and communication. The initial models of reentry conceptualized readjustment as a linear temporal extension of the process of adjustment in the foreign culture, extending the U-Curve model of adjustment abroad (Uehara, 1983) into the W-

Curve model of re-adjustment (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). However, recent theorizing within cross-cultural literature supports a notion of reentry that involves complex patterns of (re)calibration that is part of a larger process of cross-cultural adaptation. According to Kim's (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation (ITCCA), cross-cultural adaptation is a process that unfolds as a complex and repeating cycle of stress–adaptation–growth situated within an open environment. Upon entry into a new culture, sojourners experience stress due to internal conflicts between the needs to adjust and to simultaneously preserve aspects of the home culture (Uehara, 1983). As sojourners adjust to the new culture, they leave aside practices from their culture of origin to find a new functional fitness with the environment, which then results in consequent adaptation and growth. Because new stressors constantly arise in the environment, the stress–adaptation–growth repeats over time and the sojourner continues to adjust and develop a new intercultural identity.

A similar process of adjustment happens when sojourners return to their culture of origin, as they try to adapt to a familiar environment (home) but as changed individuals (Pitts, 2016). Like entering a foreign culture, coming home can be stressful because returners experience a second, more severe round of culture shock into their home country, called reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000). Contrary to common knowledge, the reentry can be more severe than the initial adjustment because most returners do not anticipate a second round of “culture shock” in their own country (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). During this transition, returners experience the push–pull tensions between needing to fit back at home culture while integrating their intercultural identity gained abroad (Szkudlarek, 2010). Because of its complex and contrasting emotions, returning home has been compared to a grieving process during which students mourn the loss of their study abroad location, relationships, and lifestyle developed abroad (Butcher, 2002). As part of this transition, students experience a variety of normative stressors that span from physical, to psychological, to interpersonal challenges (Fanari et al., 2021). While those challenges are temporary, the unprecedented effects of the pandemic might have further increased the stressful nature of reentry.

The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Unique Case of Disrupted Sojourn

With the increase of safety concerns, natural calamities, and geo-political instability worldwide (Smucker et al., 2019), sojourners face many risks during their international experience (Luethge, 2004). Sometimes, unexpected circumstances can turn into long-term disruptions that can cause stress, anxiety, and poor psychological health, which may lead to premature reentry to the home country (Lucas, 2009). Even though any circumstance has the potential to disrupt one's time abroad, the topic of disrupted sojourn has surprisingly received little to no attention among cross-cultural scholars. Sojourn disruption can refer to almost anything that has the potential to interrupt or change students' expected trajectory of completing the study abroad experience. There are a variety of circumstances that might unexpectedly disrupt students' sojourn: health problems that require medical evacuation (Irene, 2014), natural calamities (Heinrich, 2015), geo-political instability in the host country (Stene et al., 2019), sudden death of a peer or family member (Engstrom & Mathiesen, 2012), and academic misconduct (Courtois, 2020). Some disruptions might even lead to a premature termination of the experience, such as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 13, 2020, U.S. president Donald Trump declared a state of national emergency and issued travel restrictions to all foreign nationals and Americans arriving from countries identified as virus hot spots (i.e., China, Italy, South Korea; Owen, 2020). Shortly after the announcement, the U.S. Department of State urged Americans to avoid all international travel, encouraging citizens already abroad to consider immediate reentry lest "they were prepared to remain abroad for an indefinite period of time" (Redden, 2020, para. 5). With little time for preparation, universities had to abruptly cancel their study abroad programs and mobilize their resources to bring back their students, sometimes at great cost. According to Redden (2020), some universities had to arrange privately chartered flights to speed up the repatriation process. In some locations, students were stranded abroad for weeks (Fischer, 2021), despite the U.S. embassies' efforts to arrange additional flights home. However, by the end of March, most U.S. universities had repatriated their students and transitioned to remote learning (Liu & Shirley, 2021). In addition to the aforementioned complications, students faced other challenges upon reentry (West, 2020), including managing quarantine, readjusting to living with their parents,

attending online lectures in their host country (often in different time zones), cancelling pre-planned job and school opportunities, and even experiencing discrimination from people at home due to their travel from high-risk countries (Rzymiski & Nowicki, 2020).

For most students who encountered unplanned repatriation due to the pandemic, the abrupt reentry was experienced at a point in their lives where they were still developing their executive functions and coping skill (Gordon & Hinshaw, 2020). Because executive functioning and resilience go hand in hand (Wu et al., 2021), the demands of unplanned repatriation are likely more taxing to emerging adults than they would be to others who are later along in the lifespan. This is a particularly critical issue, as executive functioning deficits have been shown to interact with internalizing symptoms such as depression and anxiety to predict maladaptive coping responses (e.g., high alcohol consumption to cope with negative emotions) during emerging adulthood (Lees et al., 2020). Consequently, emerging adults are likely more vulnerable to the ill effects of such an unanticipated stressor relative to older adults.

The current study investigates returning students' readjustment experiences associated with a disrupted sojourn and forced reentry during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conditions of this pandemic offer an opportunity to explore a unique case of disrupted sojourn under circumstances never seen before. Although involuntary reentry has been investigated with other types of sojourners, including military personnel, corporate employees, and religious missionaries (Chiang et al., 2018; Schaefer et al., 2013), the study of involuntary reentry among study abroad students is new to the research literature. Furthermore, the abrupt interruption of the study abroad experience places returning students in a liminal position for reentry, having just overcome the initial culture shock but without being fully adapted to the study abroad location. The significantly truncated study abroad experience, for some ending only weeks after it started, may represent a (perceived) failure of cultural and educational goals for the academic term. This study provides insight into the experience of returning students during the first stage of the pandemic, thereby encouraging universities to learn from these circumstances and better prepare for future cases of early repatriation. Our inquiry was guided by three broad research questions:

RQ1: What was the experience of student sojourners who encountered disrupted sojourn and early reentry due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What were some of the challenges and stressors that returning students experienced as a result of disrupted sojourn and early reentry due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What were some of the strategies that returning students used to manage the stressors of disrupted sojourn and cope with the loss of their study abroad experience?

Method

Using a combination of interviews and focus groups, this study investigated the experience of disrupted sojourn and early reentry of U.S. study abroad students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the limited literature on the topic, these qualitative approaches were well-suited to explore returning students' unique experience (RQ1), challenges (RQ2), and coping strategies (RQ3) to manage the reentry. The interactional nature of focus groups allowed returning students to engage in conversations with one another and collectively make sense of their experience through talk (Barbour, 2007). When participants were not available to attend one of the focus groups, they were asked whether they would be willing to conduct an individual interview, which provided a helpful method to triangulate individual stories with the collective narratives of the focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Participants and Recruitment

This study was part of a larger project that aimed to explore the effects of disrupted sojourn on returning students' mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fanari & Segrin, 2021). To be eligible to participate in this project, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) being a student attending a college or university in the U.S. who (b) participated in a study abroad program during the Spring 2020 semester, and (c) was forced to return home early due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the larger study, participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling through personal and professional connections of the first author and through contacting study abroad programs at different academic institutions. Participants were recruited from the larger sample of returning students who

expressed interest in a follow-up study. From those who expressed interest in the second study (n = 50), 29 students responded to the email invitation, and 25 of them participated in a focus group or interview.

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board of the authors' institution, a total of 25 U.S. students participated in the focus groups. Although most students were able to attend one of the focus groups, two students requested to participate in individual interviews due to conflicts with their schedules. Four focus groups and two individual interviews were conducted. Most students identified as female (n = 21; 84%), White (n = 16; 64%), and enrolled in their junior year at the time the focus groups were conducted (n = 15; 60%). The average age was 20.48 (SD = 1.56), ranging from 19 to 27. Three students had a longer time abroad because they left in August 2019 rather than in January 2020. The average time abroad was 10.36 weeks (SD = 9.29), during January–March 2020. Participants received a \$20 Amazon gift card for their participation. Participants' demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1.

TABLE (1): DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Focus Group	Participant	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Grade	Study Abroad Location	Weeks Abroad
Focus Group 1	Participant 1	21	F	White	Junior	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 1	Participant 2	20	F	Asian	Sophomore	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 1	Participant 3	20	M	White	Sophomore	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 1	Participant 4	19	M	White	Sophomore	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 1	Participant 5	20	M	White	Junior	France	10 weeks
Focus Group 1	Participant 6	21	F	White	Junior	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 1	Participant 7	20	F	Black/African American	Junior	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 2	Participant 8	20	F	White	Sophomore	Austria	8 weeks
Focus Group 2	Participant 9	20	F	White	Sophomore	Austria	8 weeks
Focus Group 2	Participant 10	20	F	White	Sophomore	Korea	2 weeks
Focus Group 2	Participant 11	20	F	White	Junior	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 2	Participant 12	19	M	White	Sophomore	Spain	9 weeks
Focus Group 2	Participant 13	20	F	Black/African American	Junior	Spain	8 weeks
Focus Group 2	Participant 14	20	F	Hispanic/Latina	Junior	France	29 weeks
Focus Group 3	Participant 15	20	F	Hispanic/Latina	Junior	Spain	8 weeks
Focus Group 3	Participant 16	21	F	White	Junior	Italy	5 weeks
Focus Group 3	Participant 17	20	F	White	Junior	Spain	8 weeks
Focus Group 3	Participant 18	20	F	Hispanic/Latina	Sophomore	Spain	8 weeks
Focus Group 3	Participant 19	21	F	White	Junior	Italy	2 weeks
Focus Group 4	Participant 20	20	F	Black/African American	Junior	France	One week
Focus Group 4	Participant 21	20	F	White	Senior	Germany	32 weeks
Focus Group 4	Participant 22	27	F	Hispanic/Latina	Junior	Spain	7 weeks
Focus Group 4	Participant 23	20	F	Black/African American	Junior	Italy	8 weeks
Interview 1	Participant 24	20	F	White	Junior	Argentina	3 weeks
Interview 2	Participant 25	23	F	White	Senior	Italy	40 weeks
	Mean	20.48					Mean: 10.36

Procedures

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted via Zoom, a videoconferencing platform that gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Archibald et al., 2019). Before the discussion, participants completed an online informed consent form and a short demographic questionnaire via Qualtrics. For each focus group discussion, the first author served as the moderator, with a research assistant who unobtrusively documented participants' comments toward one another. When participants arrived in the Zoom room, they were welcomed by the moderator, who addressed confidentiality issues and asked for permission to record the Zoom call for transcription purposes. Using the focus group protocol, the moderator allowed participants to freely interact with one another, intervening only when necessary to clarify questions or to prompt participants to discuss the next question. The focus group protocol was organized in the following sections: the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic abroad ("When did you first hear about the COVID-19 outbreak?"); the abrupt reentry home ("How were you notified about your early reentry home?"); perception of social support ("What were some of the challenges you encountered upon reentry and to whom did you turn for support?"); use of communication during the reentry ("How would you describe the role of daily conversations and/or social media during the reentry?"); and maintaining relationships with people abroad ("How have you maintained relationships with people from your study abroad?"). Focus groups lasted between 60 and 70 minutes, and individual interviews between 30 and 45 minutes. Upon transcription, the data were carefully checked by the first author. All personal identifiers were deleted and replaced with pseudonyms. The resulting corpus of data included 79 single-spaced pages from the focus groups transcripts, 16 single-spaced pages of notes, and 10 single-spaced pages from the first author's audit trail.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was primarily conducted by the first author using principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were analyzed using NVivo12, a software that facilitates the organization, preparation, and analysis of qualitative data. The analysis proceeded in four phases. First, the transcripts were read several times to gain a broad understanding of participants' experiences. Second, a first round of open coding was conducted by reading each transcript line-by-line and assigning short descriptive labels

(i.e., codes) to relevant segments of the data (Saldaña, 2013). This first round of open coding is essential to stay close to participants' words, open the data to inquiry, and break the narratives into smaller pieces, categories, and codes. Third, the constant comparison method was used to compare the previously identified codes with one another, collapse those capturing similar experiences, and start developing preliminary themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process continued until most codes were sorted into coherent themes and no new categories emerged (i.e., saturation; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, the last phase involved defining and naming each theme. This is an important step because it involves using descriptive and precise language to identify each theme, explain how it answers the research questions, and clarify how it is distinctive from other themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To faithfully capture each theme, the first author returned to the coded data to select vivid passages to honor participants' stories through their own language (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). As the preliminary themes started to emerge and coalesced within coherent clusters of meaning, the first author looked at existing theoretical framework to connect the findings with established scholarship in the field. More specifically, the characteristics of the theme "Grieving the loss of the study abroad experience" pointed to the phases of grief described by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005). After comparing the theme with each of the five stages of grief, Kübler-Ross and Kessler's (2005) emerged as a helpful sensitizing framework to interpret the findings and connect them to existing scholarship. This important practice ensures that emergent findings in qualitative research do not remain isolated and fragmentary, but they are integrated with current literature (Saldaña, 2013). Finally, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, the first author kept extensive memos to record personal insights, document coding decisions, and take note of interesting concepts that emerged from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through memo-writing, the first author established a detailed audit trail to meet the criteria of dependability, which refers to the degree to which findings are established in the data and not imposed by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

RQ1: Students' Experience of Disrupted Sojourn and Early Reentry

The first research question investigated the experience of students who returned home early due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two main themes emerged: accelerated reentry and grieving the loss of the study abroad experience.

Accelerated Reentry

The first theme, accelerated reentry, describes the hectic, panicky, and stressful nature of students' reentry home due to sudden notice of repatriation, travel restrictions, and fear of COVID-19. Participants vividly remembered the time frame leading up to the reentry as chaotic, uncertain, and confusing. Even though many participants did not anticipate being sent home, others knew it was just a matter of time before they were told their experience was over: "We knew the shoe was going to drop; we just did not know when exactly" (P3, FG1).¹ Despite this awareness, most students were caught off guard by the velocity at which the events escalated, especially after President Donald Trump announced the effective closure of the U.S. borders to people abroad. Because most participants were studying abroad in Europe, which at the time was a global COVID-19 hotspot, most participants received the news of their sudden reentry in the middle of the night, through a university email or a parent's phone call. In most cases, students had little to no time to pack their belongings, visit their favorite places, or even say goodbye to their friends, host family, and classmates. As one participant said, "not being able to say goodbye was the most difficult thing. I felt like I had no closure, which was bittersweet and sad" (P3, FG4). Because of the sudden and abrupt nature of their reentry, students did not even have time to process what was happening: "Everything happened so fast that I didn't even realize I was actually going back home until I was on the plane" (P5, FG1). For many participants, the emotions did not kick in until they were headed to the airport or back in their parents' home. Common to participants' accelerated reentry was a complex rollercoaster of emotions: disappointment and sorrow for the end of their experience; anger for the sudden decision to be sent home; and relief to be back in the U.S. with their family.

¹ We use the following abbreviations to refer to participants in the focus groups and interviews (see Table 1): P = participant; FG = focus group; I = interview.

Grieving the Loss of the Study Abroad Experience

The second theme, grieving the loss of the study abroad experience, captures the complex process of mourning the end of the study abroad experience because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cross-cultural scholars (Butcher, 2002) have compared the reentry home to a grieving process, but not much was known about the specific way this process unfolded. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) identified five stages common to the experience of loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Our findings suggest that returning students engaged in a similar process of grieving their study abroad experience, specifically regarding four of the five the stages: denial, anger, depression, and acceptance.

The first stage of grief is *denial*, which temporarily helps to cope with the loss. During this stage, individuals go into a state of shock and numbness to everything happening around them. As COVID-19 started to spread, participants recalled entering a state of negation by ignoring the news or thinking that “it was impossible to be sent home” (P1, FG3). Another participant explained simply denying what was happening: “If I don’t think about it, it’s not here; it’s not going to ruin my semester” (P2, FG3). When participants heard that they were going home, many simply could not believe that their experience was over. As one student described, “I was in full denial. Everything felt so sudden, almost numbing because everything was so chaotic” (P4, FG2). According to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005), denial helps to pace the feelings of grief, allowing individuals to “let in only as much as they can handle in that moment” (p. 7).

After denial, participants entered a state of *anger*, which is a necessary part of the healing process. Underneath the feeling of anger is usually pain, and anger can provide a “temporary structure to anchor the pain in the middle of loss” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 8). In the context of abrupt reentry, many participants said that they felt “robbed” and “cheated,” and that their dreams were suddenly “stripped away.” Participants shared their frustration for their lack of agency because they had no choice over the immediate decision to come back. Participants’ anger was also related to their lack of accomplishment, as many had “plans” and “goals” for their study abroad, but they were left with nothing: “I went to Europe with many plans and ended up with nothing achieved. I was supposed to learn Spanish, but I ended up watching Netflix with Spanish subtitles” (P3, FG4). Even though many programs were able to issue refunds, participants felt that nothing could give them back what they had lost:

“Even though I got reimbursements, this is a time I can’t really get back. And yes, countries don’t go anywhere, but the time to do these things is specific and you will never get it back” (P2, FG2).

The third stage, *depression*², is characterized by feelings of emptiness and loss. During this time, people often withdraw from their daily activities due to intense sadness. Many returning students described their experience with depression as “a very dark time” of “hopelessness” and “devastation,” as they wondered, “What was the point of taking classes if the study abroad experience was over?” (P2, FG3). Other students described this time of “intense crying,” “isolation,” and “anxiety” as extremely challenging, where they “never left their room” and had “no motivation to get out of bed.” With the stage of depression also came the realization that this study abroad experience would not come back—at least not within the same context. The stage of depression was common to all participants, but it brought healing over time.

The last stage, *acceptance*, involves accepting the reality and permanence of the loss. Even though most people do not ever feel “okay” about losing their loved one(s), eventually they learn to live with it (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Participants eventually came to terms with the end of their experience, recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the whole world and not only their time abroad. This stage was characterized by a transition from individual to collective grieving: “This is a constant reminder that this is way bigger than me and my semester abroad and it helps me to know that this is affecting everyone” (P2, FG3). This collective aspect of grieving made students feel closer to friends and family who were now going through what they experienced abroad: “When I saw the greater effects of COVID, my own loss felt smaller and made me accept the end of the experience” (P24, I1).

² The model identified by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) did not use the term “depression” in the clinical sense, especially considering that many people experiencing grief and loss may not receive a formal diagnosis of depression. The students in this study reported feelings of “emptiness, withdrawal, hopelessness, and devastation” upon reentry, which coalesced into a coherent experience similar to the stage depression within Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s (2005) model. This study did not ask participants to report depressive symptoms, therefore it is not possible to know whether students were clinically diagnosed with depression or even suffered from depression prior to their study abroad experience.

RQ2: Challenges and Stressors of Disrupted Sojourn and Early Reentry

There were four categories of challenges and stressors that students experienced because of disrupted sojourn and early reentry: financial, academic, interpersonal, and related to COVID-19.

Financial

The first major challenge that returning students faced was related to their financial situation. Because of the sudden nature of the reentry, students were not prepared to face the numerous out-of-pocket expenses associated with their repatriation, including booking a flight home, receiving little to no reimbursement for pre-planned trips or housing abroad, and being forced to discard most of their belongings because they had no time to pack or arrange for shipping. One student said, "I lost out on an almost €600 housing deposit, and so financially, it was a pretty big blow for trying to get home and losing all that money in the travel process" (P5, FG3). For many students, studying abroad was a major investment they had been saving for a long time, so it was particularly difficult to see all their efforts, time, and resources wasted. Eventually, most students were able to get full or partial reimbursements. Finally, financial uncertainty was associated with the fact that most students could not work, as the entire country went into a state of lockdown.

Academic

The second major challenge was related to the academic situation. Students experienced various difficulties, including continuing to attend classes in their foreign country while living in a different time zone, having to take additional courses to graduate, and finding the motivation to finish their courses online. Echoing the perspective of many students, one participant said that switching to online was harder than she thought: "I don't feel like I'm learning. I don't have motivation to complete assignments on my computer in my house in a time like this" (P3, FG4). For other students the academic stressors were amplified by the uncertainty of whether the school was going to accept the credits from the interrupted semester abroad. Some students had to take additional summer classes to make up for the credits lost in order to graduate on time. Many participants experienced additional stress due to the lack of responsiveness and understanding from their professors. Because the world was entering into a state of chaos, students' courses were temporarily put on standby until universities figured out how to proceed.

Interpersonal

The third major challenge was related to the interpersonal difficulties experienced upon reentry, which were related to reestablishing relationships with friends and family at home and simultaneously maintaining those formed abroad. Consistent with the reentry literature (Martin, 1986), many students experienced interpersonal tensions in their close relationships due to the lack of understanding, empathy, and sensitivity for their experience. One student described her frustration with her roommate, who studied abroad the semester before and constantly talked about her experience: "I know it's important to her, but it brings back the pain of losing my study abroad experience. It's hard to articulate the depth of my disappointment" (P25, I2). The lack of sensitivity, patience, and understanding for what students experienced further contributed to students' sense of isolation and interpersonal distance from their closest relationships: "Although my friends and family have been there for me, they have no idea what it felt like to go through what I went through, so they cannot really relate to anything I say" (P5, FG2).

COVID-19 and Social Isolation

The last set of challenges were broadly related to restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From quarantining and social distancing, to going back to live with their parents, returning students faced unique challenges that further amplified their psychological distress. While some participants described the experience of quarantine as a time to reflect on their experience, other participants suffered during this time of isolation: "I quarantined for 14 days and didn't see another human and that was extremely alienating" (P1, FG3). Similarly, another participant described her reentry home as heartbreaking, seeing her mom sanitizing the car without hugging her: "I was literally in isolation and couldn't be touched. No one came to see me. I was completely alone" (P4, FG3). Because of the sudden reentry, some students did not have a place to stay when they came back because the university had closed the campus and they had no access to the dormitories. Moreover, many students reported having to find alternative lodging for quarantine (e.g., hotel room) because they would have disrupted their parents' work or because they had elderly or immunocompromised family members. One student described: "I didn't know where to quarantine because my parents are older, so I got a hotel. It was the worst time of my life. I was so depressed" (P2, FG4). Finally, many students experienced discrimination from family, friends, and neighbors, being

alienated because they had just come back from studying abroad in a high-risk country.

RQ3: Coping Strategies to Manage the Early Reentry

Findings suggest that students used three main strategies to cope with and manage the stressors of the pandemic: staying busy, relying on social support, and positive reframing.

Staying Busy

The first strategy returning students used to cope with the loss of their study abroad experience was finding ways to occupy their time. As different U.S. states issued lockdown orders, students said that “doing something” helped them to “fill the void and emptiness” of their quarantine. Going on walks, exercising, cooking, watching movies, doing online classes, journaling, or talking to their study abroad friends helped students to cope with the loss of the experience. As one student said, “I kept myself busy as much as I could with classes and doing things even if I wasn’t seeing anybody” (P1, FG2). Other students stayed busy by maintaining some of the habits or routines gained abroad: “In Italy, I was walking everywhere so [when I got back] I would walk on the beach three to five miles every day to get out and exercise even though it was still cold” (P24, I1). By staying busy, students felt like they had a “purpose” and were “still doing something” that could get them out of bed and help them cope with the pandemic.

Relying on Social Support

The second strategy students used was seeking and relying on social support from family, friends, fellow study abroad students, or counselors. Many students reported feeling grateful for all the financial and emotional support they received from their families, such as being able to come back to their parents’ homes, having the money and space needed to take online classes, and simply having family to be with during the most difficult phases of reentry. Returning students also relied on communication with friends and peers they met abroad. Thanks to social media and group chats, students supported one another by participating in group calls, sharing pictures, and reminiscing about their time abroad. One student described, “We were talking every day all day, sending encouragement, talking about the little things, or whatever. It still felt like we were doing everyday life together” (P7, FG2). The relationships formed abroad became an important source of emotional support for returning

students—for some, the only space where they felt “fully understood among people who were going through the same thing” (P25, I2). Finally, some students sought support from therapists or school psychologists that helped them to cope with the loss of their study abroad experience. In some cases, study abroad offices worked with the counseling services at the university to offer Zoom sessions to support students.

Positive Reframing

The last strategy that student used was positive reframing, a process through which students intentionally reframed their mindset to find the positive aspects of the experience despite the pandemic. Positive reframing helped students to appraise their current situation from a different angle by looking at their own personal growth and at how much they had changed in terms of adaptability, self-awareness, and ability to deal with unexpected situations. One participant said, “I really think I can do anything. I learned a lot about myself and the ways I react under pressure” (P5, FG3). Despite the short time abroad, many students felt transformed and profoundly changed: “The virus was like a catalyst and kind of accelerated all those little things and personal growth” (P1, FG1). Other students focused on gratitude and found a “silver lining in little things.” Despite the disappointment, students were grateful for the “extra time with family,” their “support system,” and the “ability to communicate in their own language.” In hindsight, many students expressed that it would have been much harder to face a world pandemic in a foreign country. Instead, students took advantage of this time to appreciate this season of “rest” at home.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience (RQ1), unique stressors (RQ2), and coping strategies (RQ3) that returning students used to manage their early reentry from studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. As participants’ narratives suggest, it took them time to “see the light at the end of the tunnel” and to “start getting back to their normal routines” after going through a complex grieving process through stages of denial, anger, depression, and acceptance. The only stage that was not present within students’ narratives was bargaining, which involves doing almost anything to not feel the pain or avoid the loss altogether by engaging in a process of negotiation (i.e., I will do anything if I can stay the entire semester abroad). One possible

explanation for the absence of bargaining might be related to the lack of time and agency on students' part, who had very little leverage going against their university's decision to bring them home. Although there were isolated instances of students' bargaining attempts, they did not emerge as a shared, recurrent, and prominent experience within the data, as most students silently accepted their fate going home rather than trying to convince their program to stay longer.

Even though students' narratives aligned with this framework, not all students experienced all the stages in this specific order (denial, anger, depression, and acceptance); rather, embracing the loss was a complex process that involved time. Although the stressors that returning students experienced during the abrupt reentry seem quite "ordinary" and "mundane", similar to those experienced by students during normative times of transition (Fanari et al., 2021), such stressors were experienced during extreme time of uncertainty during circumstances never seen before. Although the financial, academic, and interpersonal challenges might not seem stressful per se, the perceived stress of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to returning students' complex grieving process as well as feelings of loneliness and incompleteness.

This begs the question: If those stressors are quite "ordinary" in nature, why did the effects of reacculturative stress lead to lower psychological health? One possible explanation is that, according to the U-curve model of cross-cultural adjustment (Uehara, 1983), students who experienced early repatriation were still in the honeymoon phase when they were abruptly repatriated, thus never having the chance to experience the "crisis" or "culture shock" phase in the host country. Another possible explanation is related to the fact that early reentry (from any type of sojourn) still holds stigma for sojourners who (for any reason) cannot complete their experience (Doty-Yells et al., 2017). Because early reentry is associated with feelings of failure, incompleteness, and deficit (Matic & Russell, 2020), students who were forced to return home due to the pandemic might have internalized similar feelings even when they acknowledged that they had no control over the situation. Study abroad programs should strive to normalize the experience of early reentry and provide a counternarrative of empowerment (rather than incompleteness) to reframe circumstances that involve early reentry (Irene, 2014).

These findings also shed light on the unique appraisal processes enacted by these students as they faced extremely uncertain circumstances. They also provide greater understanding of the coping mechanisms enacted in response to social distancing and lockdown requirements in a foreign country. These horror stories ostensibly illustrate the manifold stressors of the situation participants faced. At the same time, the findings also highlight the somewhat narrow perspective that students shared, feeling robbed and stripped of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This perspective may be reflective of the unique phase of emerging adulthood that characterizes most participants (Schoon & Bynner, 2017). The pandemic did not just happen to these students, but it caught them at a particular point in their lives where they were still developing coping skills and gaining a larger perspective on life (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). These issues were clearly illustrated in much of the participants' discourse. Nevertheless, participants' perceived growth and enactment of coping skills, such as seeking social support and positive reframing, thus highlight students' ability to react under pressure. Even though positive reframing did not entirely mitigate the complex emotions of coming home early, it might have buffered some of its negative effects and allowed students to transcend the immediate grief to find the silver lining upon reentry.

Practical Implications

While the primary goal of this study was to explore the experience of students who returned home early due to the pandemic, this study offers practical implications for universities. First, students' experiences during the recent pandemic highlighted the overall lack of resources, preparedness, and effectiveness of study abroad programs across universities worldwide. While the chances of encountering another pandemic may seem low, the recurrent discovery of new variants warrant the development of student-focused emergency responses that go beyond boilerplate language such as "in case of emergency, please call this number." In cases of sojourn disruption, study abroad programs should already have in place resources to facilitate reentry, rather than developing them during the time of crisis. This could include financial, academic, and psychological assistance that can be implemented with short notice and without encountering bureaucratic obstacles (e.g., emergency funds, reimbursement for housing or medical expenses).

Second, the efforts of study abroad emergency plans must be coordinated with the larger academic institution, rather than being

implemented in isolation. During this unique case of reentry, many students expected to return to their dormitory, only to find out that the entire campus had shut down. In other cases, this lack of coordination was related to students' academic progress. The study abroad experience was a requirement for many students' academic major that, once terminated, resulted in many students' delays of graduation. Because cases of early reentry could happen at any time, study abroad programs should build contingency plans and resources.

Finally, study abroad programs could modify future recruiting strategies to proactively address newly created contingency plans in the event of an unexpected return. Parents and students would likely benefit from being reassured that these resources not only exist but that they can also be quickly and effectively implemented in crisis situations. This study suggests that many students were having to take remedial measures into their own hands with little assistance from their home university. A powerful recruiting technique might involve reflecting on past failures during the March 2020 reentry while describing the university as the primary provider of assistance.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study was limited in several ways. First, the exploratory nature of this study provides an important, yet descriptive, account of returning students' experiences. However, its generalizability to future cases of reentry under different circumstances is indeterminate. Second, because most participants identified as White (64%) and females (84%), this study was limited by the homogeneity of the sample and thus does not fully represent the race/ethnic and sex/gender diversity among study abroad college students. Considering the perspectives of diverse students (men, transgender, students of color, etc.) would add insight to current reentry literature. From a methodological approach, the use of focus groups might have influenced participants' way of representing themselves, as well as their ability and willingness to form, share, and state their own opinions and experiences about the reentry.

Another limitation of this study was related to its inability to assess, from students' narratives, whether the study abroad programs truly lacked some of the financial, academic, and psychological resources, or students were simply unaware of their availability. Because of the chaotic nature of the pandemic, it is hard to assess which aspects of the larger repatriation were not successfully

implemented. Finally, this study was limited in the fact that it only considered the stressors and coping strategies in isolation, without assessing the larger family and socio-cultural environment into which students reentered. Even though returning students often complained about family and friends' ability to fully "understand what they went through," they were also grateful for the love and support they received upon reentry. The social support received at home might have buffered some of the negative effects of the early reentry. Future research should consider the importance of returning students' social support and specifically seek the perspective of other stakeholders (e.g., parents, study abroad program administrators) that were actively involved in the collective effort to bring students safely back home. Knowing the types of social support and the extent to which it was provided by family, friends, and the home university would further inform study abroad offices about effective interventions for a variety of student demographics.

Conclusion

This exploratory study highlights the unique experience of disrupted sojourn and early reentry during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that apparently ordinary financial, academic, and interpersonal stressors, coupled with an accelerated reentry and challenges related to COVID-19 led to students grieving and eventually embracing the loss of their study abroad experience. These findings are especially noteworthy given that the discovery of new coronavirus variants (World Health Organization, 2021) might pose a severe threat to the future of studying abroad. Study abroad programs could be better equipped to support and transition students back into their home universities by attending to the accounts of disrupted sojourners and critically evaluating the state of their own resources, policies, and procedures for doing so when faced with similarly stressful circumstances.

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