Women and Cultural Learning in Costa Rica: Reading the Contexts

A d e l e   A n d e r s o n

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Introduction[1]

Costa Rica provides a good example of the way global travel, tourism and modern telecommunications have fundamentally changed the nature of study abroad. Costa Rica has seen increasing internationalization and undergone dramatic economic and social shifts in recent years, especially for women. These shifts have followed a distinctive path that does not make cultural adjustment an intuitively obvious task for visiting U.S. students. Complicating this situation are distorted and stereotypic representations of tropical adventure disseminated by rapidly growing travel and tourism media. Once on site, students are bombarded by local commercial tourism advertisements, and the commercial practices themselves tend to amplify the stereotypes concerning tropical tourism. In these situations, stereotypical cultural figures may distract students from understanding the daily life, varied point of view, and values of the people. Students are also less likely to be able to read the cultural signposts of danger in the field.

This article reviews research on Costa Rica's cultural context, student adjustment, and tourism theory as they relate to U.S. women student experiences there. It includes insights from ethnographic observations and interviews collected during three years of residential direction of a short-term, small-group program in Costa Rica. It introduces an applied anthropological tool, based on a cultural learning model of participant observation, which may be used by study abroad practitioners to guide student cultural adjustment more systematically.

A d e l e   A n d e r s o n

B a c k g r o u n d

Costa Rica, a country of roughly four million people, saw an influx of 1.1 million visitors in 2001. The capital city, San José, (population 1.4 million, *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos,* 2003), is the staging area for most international arrivals. Welcomed for economic reasons, tourists and foreign students affect deeply the mix of local cultural interactions. Along with the continued growth of foreign investment and international telecommunications, the increased presence of foreigners is generating new points of cultural conflict. Heavy exposure to U.S., Canadian and European visitors has led to shifting norms, generation gaps, and commercial pressures. The increased interaction has given rise in Costa Rica to something very different from a textbook "traditional local culture." U.S. female students situated in this culture-in-transition often report substantial adjustment problems, which may have been prevented through culture-specific, pre-departure orientation. Many U.S. study abroad programs have minimal site-specific, pre-departure preparation for the risks and discomforts of gender role differences in the field, unless the differences are perceived as extreme. As an applied anthropologist, I have found that a socio-cultural perspective on study abroad has been essential to successful field direction in Costa Rica.

T h e   C o s t a   R i c a   W i n t e r   S e s s i o n   P r o g r a m

For the past three years I have directed the State University of New York (SUNY) Brockport's Winter Session program in Costa Rica, "Costa Rica: A National Perspective on Globalization (CRWS)." It focuses on Spanish speaking skills and Costa Rican social issues. Students enrolled in the program usually have varied language-proficiency levels. Unlike the large University of Costa Rica campus-based programs sponsored by several U.S. universities for U.S. students (e.g. Twombly 1996), and also unlike many private language schools in the area (where U.S. institutions also send groups of students), our program has enrolled only five students per year. The program has been conducted through the *Centro Cultural Costarricense-Norteamericano* (CCCN), a nonprofit Costa Rican cultural exchange organization, the majority of whose language students are Costa Ricans studying English. CCCN began in the post-WWII era as one of

the cultural exchange organizations sponsored by the U.S. Information Service, but in the past decade its management has been turned over entirely to a Costa Rican board of directors and executive director. In the past three years, the *Centro Cultural* has moved rapidly to meet demand for English language instruction by expanding its English language programs. Today, over ninety percent of CCCN students are Costa Ricans studying English.

Although the CRWS syllabus is revised slightly each year, program assignments include pre-departure reading of the book *The Ticos*, a monograph which provides an in-depth description of contemporary Costa Rican culture and other selected readings.[2] A four-to-six page response essay on these readings must be turned in at the beginning of the program in Costa Rica. The CRWS program includes thirty hours of classroom Spanish at multiple levels of assessed proficiency. Some students arrive with only beginning or intermediate Spanish language skills; but at least one semester of college-level Spanish is required. A similar amount of time is spent in structured seminars, in dialogues and also in tours with Costa Rican experts at government and non-government agencies, businesses, ecological and cultural sites. Using an interdisciplinary approach, topics covered in seminars include contemporary social, economic, environmental, and national issues. Students are evaluated on their effort and progress in Spanish. They make hand-written field journal entries, which are reviewed and discussed each week, along with the student's participation and adjustment in the field. Thirty days after departure from the field, students must submit a summary report paper, along with copies of field journal entries. The student's field performance and written materials are evaluated as a whole for the final grade.

Students arrive in San José, where they receive orientation to the city, the *Centro Cultural*, and the use of basic services such as banks, pharmacies, telephones and local transportation. Host families' residences are located in a university suburb near the *Centro Cultural*, and students use buses and taxis to reach the *Centro* for classes each morning. As resident director, I maintain a continuous presence in the field, working with the *Centro Cultural* and home stay families to support the students' instruction and adjustment.

Adele Anderson

Ethnographic Methodology of this Study

As a trained anthropologist with fieldwork experience in urban settings among Spanish speakers, the role of resident director in San José afforded me the opportunity to gather ethnographic data on student learning and field adjustment through observation and informal interviewing. I was also able to research and observe changes in the larger context in which the students travel and study, and to assess the information in the public domain widely available to the students through the Internet, television and other media. Often the students' initial assumptions and expectations of their abroad experience are influenced by these media outlets, and in a short-term program it is imperative to address these initial assumptions and expectations.

Ethnographic writing has seen an explosion in popularity in social and cultural studies over the past 20 years, but its hallmark in anthropological research remains its significance as the recording of participant observation of daily life in one or multiple settings, in order to learn to interpret socially-valued meanings constructed in public interactions. If cultural systems can be understood as webs of meaning that are realized in the particular (see Geertz 1973), then their continual formation, corrosion, and reformation can be accessed and appreciated through observing, reflecting, checking with insiders, and recording observations. As Jorgensen (1989) points out, the primary task of the anthropologist is to find out what is important to those who are regular participants, the cultural insiders to a setting.

In this study, due to the very short periods of field contact, the small number of U.S. students, and the importance of reflective application in teaching cultural concepts and adjustment abroad, the author's research and analysis has been of a qualitative, holistic, and emergent nature. Before and during the programs, I lived with local families in the same areas of San José as did the students and kept daily field-journal notes on students' and their host families' responses. My observations included the public activities of other U.S. students abroad in Costa Rica as well. I also conducted open-ended individual and small focus group interviews with both my own and other U.S. students abroad and with Costa Rican students at the *Centro Cultural*, as well as with some host family members. The ethnographic data were constituted from my own observation and

experiences, host family interactions and interviews, student interactions and interviews, and the interactions of other Costa Ricans with the U.S. students. I used cross-checking consultations in which my interpretations of the reactions and relationships were tested by presenting them to Costa Ricans familiar with the settings in which the observations were done.

As part of their cultural learning, the students were required to keep their own field journals of experiences and were provided with guidelines and handouts on how to approach the journal writing task. Students were recruited into the ethnographic study only on a voluntarily basis. They were offered participation as subjects in a separate context unrelated to their class performance and grading. Of ten students electing and consenting to participate as ethnographic subjects over the three years, only one later decided to withdraw. Participation in several cases included my access to these students' field journals for research purposes, and consent to my recording their public participation and commentary on study abroad activities in my research field notes. As an additional aspect of the research, a few students also elected to participate in focus group interviews, for which each participant was paid a nominal appreciation fee of $10.00. Student inclusion in the research followed my university's human subject policies.

A limitation of the methodology described above is that, because of my role as director, it was at times my obligation as an educator to intervene during data collection, much in the mode of action researcher (see Stringer 1999) and reflective practitioner. Thus, the outcomes of my interventions could not be aggregated and temporally separated as a set of results in the manner of an experiment. However, it is my overall impression that using guided field intervention, and in particular the cultural learning tool described later in this article, provided both the program participants and me with an important mechanism for feedback that the participants would otherwise not have received, particularly if they had been in the field without a director and cultural adviser with a national background similar to their own.

Tourism Theory and the Study Abroad Experience

Anthropological and sociological studies of tourism have provided

insights that are useful to research in study abroad. Knowledge of the larger context of international travel and theories of tourism helps us to predict student expectations and reactions. The number of students going abroad for academic credit from North American colleges and universities has been reported to have increased 135 percent between 1987 and 1997 (Hoye and Rhodes 2000: 153). Desruisseaux (1999: A60) reported that 113,959 American students, 65 percent of them female, were studying abroad in the 1997 academic year. According to Heyboer (Hoye and Rhodes 2000: 153), the percentage of students going to Latin America doubled between 1985 and 1999. Further, the 2002 Open Doors Report cites 3, 641 US students studied abroad in Costa Rica in the 2000-2001 academic year, accounting for 2.4 of all American students, and an increase of 6.4 percent from the year before. These developing figures suggest what we can easily see at field sites: larger numbers of foreign students are present than ever before.

The Internet and specialized television channels enable students and their parents to find more commercial and pictorial representations of foreign destinations than have ever been available before. At first glance, traditional study abroad seems to share many elements of the tourist attractions presented on the Internet and through mass media, such as international mission programs and service programs, and independent adventure travel. Based on comments and responses of students I observed in the field, many students frankly view themselves also as tourists and actively participate in tourism activities. However, we must proactively confront expectations of tourism or our students may be more easily drawn into interactions in which they remain intellectually passive and unaware of themselves as part of an educational and intercultural experience. A lack of understanding of distinctions between media representations of tourism and actual intercultural learning can result in a lost learning opportunity, and lead, as we shall see, to a potentially more risky experience for individual students.

Tourism theory in anthropology and sociology has offered a number of models attempting to explain the motivations, significance, and consequences of tourism. Graburn (1983) identifies the tourism experience in two forms, as routine recreation and escape, and alternately, as an exceptional experience or state of existence similar to a rite of passage (1983:12-13). His and other researchers' portrayals of tourist behavior present it as

a departure from the workaday lives of modern society. In a similar vein, MacCannell (1976) has argued that tourism undertaken by alienated Westerners is a search for personal authenticity, often a quest for encounter with an Other who is non-Western and exotic. Similar claims of a transformational or authenticating nature have been advanced for the study abroad experience. These have often appeared in the mostly anecdotal and testimonial opinions of educators; for recent examples see Hopkins (1999) or Lonabocker (1997).

Nash, on the other hand, questions the research basis of claims that tourism is transformative, or that its effects are even necessarily anything more than short-term. He has defined tourism more broadly as "leisured travel" (1996: 10) and he views it as part of an affluent society's superstructure—its participants are free from their regular social obligations to maintain society, and therefore tourism is not a fundamental or primary activity (1996: 61). Nash has also taken a critical view of tourism as economic development for host destinations. He has urged closer study of large tourist processes and actions of the multinational tourism industry for insights into the changes and intensification of tourism.

In a more postmodern vein, Casteñeda and Wallace (2001) have suggested that there may be very little cultural interchange resulting in equivalence or reciprocity of meanings between the tourist and the toured. Tourism encounters are often double-articulated—the parties on either side achieve no transparency of meaning or intercultural communication. Thus tourism offers modes, means, and media of representation between culturally different counterparts whose interpretations remain mutually unintelligible at the cultural level. Economic gain, confirmation of a stereotype or marketing expectation, or experiencing the thrill of the exotic may occur, but Casteñeda and Wallace warn that we can make no assumptions about authenticity or reciprocity.

Experience-based cultural learning abroad is attainable in short-term programs, but given the rapid changes in global travel and the power of commercial communications, this will not occur without significantly more investment in preparation and structured in-field direction than is presently typical. Informed interventions must challenge students to reappraise their experiences and responses in the field and in reflections afterward. The remainder of this article will discuss the context and representations of travel and tourism, identify the kinds of field interventions that

are needed, and describe a cultural learning model and tool that I found useful in preparing and intervening in adjustment issues for U.S. women students.

Representations of the Travel Experience and the Attitude of Study Abroad

The representations of the travel experience that entice students to sites of intensive tourism, and the cultural mix of images that they find on the surface once they arrive there, often pose a challenge for a study abroad program's attempts to promote intercultural learning. Informal hearsay, a source of tourism information often documented in the literature on tourism marketing, and which I have observed in students, is clearly not the most complete or comprehensive way to get information about a study abroad destination. Marketing and travel programs on television or websites may well influence students to be less reflective than they might be about the purposes of study abroad. I would argue that the popular media and tourism activity most easily accessed by culturally unfamiliar and inexperienced students actually promotes rather than discourages stereotypic thinking about the people at many popular tourist destinations.

Students report getting information about the Costa Rica study abroad program from other students who have been to the same destination, either for study or for leisure travel. Some prospective students have also said that they gleaned information from the Internet. However, prospective students and their families, much like non-academic tourists, should not rely solely on such sources for optimum preparation. Moreover, those who make decisions based on media coverage when things go wrong can be equally misled.[3] In the absence of accurate details and understanding of the cultural context, students are likely to make simple visit/no-visit decisions rather than obtaining the resources, knowledge, and skills to adapt and survive in an international setting. Although study abroad programs can never foresee every kind of risk, close attention to the cultural context might produce knowledge of the ways that the tourism and cultural discontinuities, especially in rural areas outside capitol cities, may contribute to increased danger for students, and facilitate effective avoidance of such danger.

If the tourism theories of inversion of routine and escape are at all predictive, then it is not hard to see how the enchantment of a tropical place might eclipse a traveler's attention to routine, as well as to culturally-specific, personal safety precautions. Host families and Spanish language program staff in the San José area have told me repeatedly that they often see visiting U.S. students, especially females, ignoring what the host parents considered to be commonsense indications of danger. Male U.S. college students, whom I also interviewed in focus groups and informally during the 2001 and 2002 program years, reported that they and their peers frequently abandoned routine behaviors while in Costa Rica and increased their exploratory behavior. Confirmation of these impressions would require more systematic research, but my interviewees brought up such observations spontaneously and repeatedly.

The tourist-vacationer figure is compelling for many student travelers. In two different program years, at least one student in the group referred to participation in the study program as "my vacation," despite the advance reading and essay assignments, rigorous program schedules, graded field journaling and language classes, and final paper requirements. For certain opportunistic inhabitants of international tourism scenes, vacation attitudes and behavior invite attempts to take advantage of the visitors. The presence of heavy tourism in study abroad sites further complicates the work of study abroad. U.S. women students, in particular, may encounter alternate cultural interpretations of their behavior by local men with expectations based in tourist practices.

Confronting Tourist Stereotypes

Conditions in tourism-intensive locales do not make underlying cultural norms easy to spot. More recently, developing intercultural practices in some tourism locales, especially for women travelers, make the distinction between cultural norms and behavior presented to tourists ambiguous, and challenging to define. In several Caribbean and Latin American tourist locales, relationships between local men and traveling women have been noted by several researchers. The literature describes this phenomenon as romance or sex tourism, which does not always result in clear economic gain for the men; in any event, these relationships are usually sexual. Beach boys in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic (Herold, Garcia,

and DeMoye 2001), Rastas on some beaches in Jamaica (Pruitt and LaFont 1995), some *indígena* men from Otavaleño, Peru (Meisch 1995), and some Costa Rican men in that country's beach and resort areas (Shaffer 1999) strike up and maintain relationships with female visitors, usually for the duration of their visits. Young female college student travelers have been reported among those involved in local relationships in Otavaleño and Costa Rica.

Research does not give the impression that intercultural learning necessarily results from these liaisons. Some studies interpret the women's accounts of the relationships as a thrill or an escape, for self-esteem, or an encounter with the exotic. This would lend some credence to tourism theory claims about exceptional behavior or quest for authenticity. But if these are double-articulated (non-transparent) cross-cultural encounters, they probably reinforce rather than dispel stereotypes on both sides. When the students are inexperienced, personal risk also is heightened.

Myths and figures of a stereotypic and distorting nature permeate inter-gender themes in commercial tourism advertising, the media, and the Internet. For example, one expatriate-oriented, English-language Costa Rica newspaper, *The Tico Times*, offers such headlines as: "Tica Wife Charged in Murder of U.S. Retiree (Wolkoff 2001), and "'Viper Lady' Lies in Wait to Prey on Unsuspecting Old Gringos" (Brodell 2001). And local tour guides self-stereotype, like one San José area guide who styled himself "Jorge de la Selva" (George of the Jungle) for the entertainment of visiting U.S. students. The task of looking beyond reductive figures, so fundamental to successful international education, is complicated and undermined by such characters.

Without killing the joy of discovery, more students could benefit from being asked to think critically about such stereotypes and myths. One way to promote critical thinking is to point out the extreme examples that will raise general awareness. Directors also must be ready to intervene gently for the sake of learning. For example, one student, a relatively sophisticated adult past her twenties, began referring to a young local man she met socially as "Tarzan," in field journal references and individual discussions. When I pointed out that this figure was replete with stereotypes of nature, noble savages, and romantic condescension, she defended that she found it compelling and never used it outside of the individual field journal or her conversations with me. I replied that the issue still deserved her attention, and that my job was to encourage her to

think and reflect about such imagined cultural figures so she did not close herself off to a richer and more empathetic learning experience. In subsequent conservations, the student's comments suggested to me that our discussion had prompted her to gain more insight into her own thinking and behavior. At the same time, it is important to convey the message that anyone can generate caricatures and stereotypes, and that we all do, at times. They are not only common, but also correctable, and in fact we often learn new cultural features by a series of approximating stereotypes that get refined with further knowledge. To do this, however, we need to experience discomfort with our existing perceptions, and have the opportunity to reassess our thinking.

Certainly, most U.S. college students going abroad now have access to rich and reliable information about locations where cultural norms place more limitations on women's public behavior. Discussions on multiculturalism such as those provided by Taylor and Gutmann (1994) provide a helpful contrast between the Western liberal democratic priority on individual rights and the alternate group rights priorities of other traditions. Okin, Howard, Cohen and Nussbaum. (1999) carry this discussion further, with a direct focus on women's issues.

Whether resources like these are systematically integrated into pre-departure preparation when the knowledge of cultural distinctions is critical to the safety of the student is another question, however. When necessary, the orienting faculty member must inform students when there will be different behavioral expectations and judgment norms for women. I now routinely include as required reading pre-departure letters to students describing specific differences they can expect in Costa Rica.   I restate this information by telephone, and when possible, in person at pre-departure meetings. Additional description of learning models used in pre-departure orientation will appear in a later section of this article.

Female Student Adjustment Issues in Culturally-Specific Milieus

The research literature on female student experiences abroad strongly suggests gender-associated differences in field learning experiences stemming from the specific cultural milieu of the field placement. Companion studies using quantitative and qualitative methods to examine

second language acquisition, for example (Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg 1995; Brecht and Robinson, 1993), reveal that, for semester students in Russia, females gained less than males in listening and speaking skills. The authors offer a plausible explanation in their female students' reports of being excluded from conversation opportunities because they were women.

Talburt and Stewart (1999), in a qualitative study of five female students on a summer language study in Spain, documented the adjustment difficulties that one female student encountered when Spanish men responded to her as a racially different and gendered target of *piropos* in public settings.[4] The student told the authors that she received more unwanted attention than the other female students. Group discussion did little to improve her subjective experience, thus creating a major distraction from the other tasks of learning.

Woodside (2001) conducted long interviews with six women students who had spent time abroad in several Latin American countries. Emergent themes in her grounded theory analysis included difficulty in relationships with local women and local men, reactions to *piropos*, concerns over safety and fear of harassment, coping with daily living abroad, and change in the participants' long-term goals. Despite the difficulties, some of the interviewees wanted to continue Spanish language studies or to return to live and work in Latin America. Twombly's (1995) students at the University of Costa Rica were unable to make friends with female Costa Ricans, and they complained of males' *piropos*, yet most spent their time with other U.S. students and did not make cultural accommodations in areas such as more modest dress.

The issues raised by Woodside's and Twombly's students, while representing long-term study abroad students, bear some resemblance to initial experiences related by students on the San José short-term program. Females have made up the majority of the program's students each year, and those with less previous experience abroad often initially balk at local cultural preferences and judgments. It is almost inevitable that at first, inexperienced students will import U.S. campus dress, cultural assumptions and behavioral expectations, and apply them to situations that are different culturally, pre-departure briefing sessions notwithstanding.

Students do not automatically comply when host organization faculty and home stay hosts suggest local cultural preferences; for example, that young women not wear shorts, that they not go out alone after dark,

that they phone the home stay family when staying out later than expected, and that they return home with those with whom they arrived at a restaurant or bar. "It's an infringement on my rights," one student recently complained, regarding the shorts-wearing issue. This re-opened an opportunity to discuss the basis of this and related cultural differences. On such occasions I invite students to predict the likely responses to them, given their choices of presentation and behavior, so that cultural adjustment may be seen as a decision. Students bombarded by cultural novelty frequently need help to think through the possible consequences of what they consider ordinary behavior in their new setting. They benefit when offered support for sorting through all the new input.

Another kind of response to pre-departure advisories and the protectiveness in home stay hosts' communications is fear. The following field journal entry, logged early in her trip by a woman with limited Spanish skills and travel experience, illustrates:

> Yesterday the group went to the rain forest . . . after[wards] we went to a bar with the guides; that was interesting. I wish that I could go out and have fun. Not that I'm not having tons of fun. It's just that never in my life have I had a curfew, in my small hometown I know how to take care of myself and at school in 'the city' even another girlfriend is enough, but here always in the back of my mind is you're not safe. I hate it. I don't like having to be back by dark, which is like six, it's stupid. Sometimes I feel like a prisoner of the house even though I mostly only sleep here. I would like the option of being able to and most likely even if I could go out I probably wouldn't because I'm too tired. It's the principle. (Female student, 2001)

It should be noted that although female students were advised to be careful moving about the city and warned not take cabs alone at night, they were not given a curfew. This student's home stay was located in a middle-class neighborhood close to the national university and not far from the home stay residences of other students in the program.

Some other female students reported that they received social invitations from local males to whom they had previously been introduced by reliable persons (either from host families or in the *Centro Cultural*), and although these invitations were to socialize with a group, they were still

too afraid to socialize with a Costa Rican male by personal invitation. Still others did socialize with males who invited them, but most planned ahead to arrive and leave together as a group, a safety strategy favored by many of the home stay parents.

Interpreting Foreign Women's Behavior: Costa Rican Perspectives

Further insight into women students' adjustment issues requires a view of the cultural context against which they are formed. In Costa Rica, for example, there are visible changes in commercial culture, especially in San José where U.S. products are prominently advertised and sold. Women are prominent in roles as business professionals and public officials in the Costa Rican government and media. However, despite these changes, there remains a conservative strain in many Costa Ricans' normative judgments of women's behavior. An era of globalization with neo-liberal policies of foreign investment and exports has brought new opportunities and new stress to both women and men (Tardanico and Lungo 1995, Biesanz and Biesanz 1999). This social climate has produced heightened tensions over freer behavior of women, especially in the middle class, in contrast with older *machista* expectations. The even more liberated behaviors of affluent visiting U.S. women might be expected to increase these normative tensions.

One outward hint of this tension is that when researchers have tried to interview local women about these issues, or when visiting U.S. women have sought friendships, local women reportedly have been unavailable. Shaffer (1999) had this difficulty when investigating North American and Costa Rican women's relationships in a tourist town. Other researchers (Twombly 1995 for Costa Rica, and Woodside 2001 for Latin America) similarly mention the difficulty female foreigners had in striking up friendships with local women.

In this connection, the author (a European-American woman over fifty) found Costa Rican women of various ages quite friendly in the context of classes and work settings, but when I tried to recruit a mixed group for an evening interview on male and female norms of public behavior, only males showed up. This may have indicated women's embarrassment and reluctance to address a topic of gender roles in mixed company, where

they might be judged negatively by male Costa Ricans or, possibly, their reluctance or the inconvenience surrounding attendance at a meeting by themselves in the evening. Couples' clubs meet in the evening at homes but I was told repeatedly that women are less likely to go out by themselves, and the interview recruitment setting, English language classes at the *Centro Culturale*, did not provide for the inclusion of spouses of the interview volunteers.

On the other hand, the program's women students were invited along by female home stay family members to the shopping mall, to bars, and to family gatherings. Students reported tolerant, welcoming attitudes among many young and old Costa Ricans whom they met. The difficulties reported in some other studies may have reflected a campus setting full of foreigners, and perhaps lack of young people in the home stay family to accompany students on social outings. Moreover, the university campus students wanting friends outside their home stay families may have held expectations that were out of synch with Costa Rican preferences for socializing with relatives or with friends whose families have been known for a long time in the community (see Biesanz and Biesanz, 1998).

Costa Rican males' comments largely concurred with the interpretations offered by the families. Two males interviewed in depth were students of English at *Centro Cultural*; therefore, they represent a relatively cosmopolitan or progressive end of the range of attitudes toward the U.S. and foreigners. However, these interviewees spontaneously described students' behavior using cultural assumptions of female vulnerability, a norm rooted in a more traditional Latin American cultural logic.

A Costa Rican English-language student and father of a teenage boy commented that more concern is warranted regarding the safety of young visiting women students. Characterizing his impression of the young women visitors as "*un poco libre*" (a little bit free—meaning a little bit too free), he observed that "*ellas no saben peligro*" (they don't know/recognize danger) when out in public, although he found it acceptable for young women to go out to restaurants and bars—but "*en grupo*" (*in groups;* his emphasis). Elaborating on the potential for danger to a female if she gives the impression that she will, for example, "dance close" with more than one male in a public social setting, he restated an old-fashioned Latin American implication: unless a woman is regarded as belonging to a group or somehow escorted and therefore under someone's protection, she

could be regarded as dangerously "available." Without protection of such escorts, "bad persons" are predicted to take advantage of her.

I heard almost identical portrayals about danger to females from two different home stay mothers. One woman recalled a situation in which she felt compelled to leave a young male relative at a nightclub to "watch" a U.S. female student who would not leave when the mother and sisters, her 'escorts,' were ready to return to the house. The theme of good persons versus bad persons and women in moral danger ran through several other conversations when discussing U.S. students with Costa Ricans.

Evidence of male protectiveness toward females continues and often is observed in customary behavior such as when a brother holds his sister's hand protectively as they walk through a crowded public area. This commonly is seen at the downtown market area and at the annual *festejos*, a large fair that takes place during the New Year's holiday. Described by one male U.S. program student as "so cute," this behavior works as a hands-off warning to anyone who might otherwise bother the protector's female relative in a public place. Another participant recalled a similar practice in Mexico, and said that in Costa Rica the protectiveness seemed less extreme.

Moral protection may seem a confusing and even offensive notion to U.S. female students abroad, especially when all the artifacts (the McDonald's hamburger stands, Pizza Huts, and adventure tours advertised in English) seem to signal modernity. Yet conservative cultural norms can be very much alive amid contemporary social realities. Local interviewees indicated that norms are even more conservative outside the capital city. When this bit of local knowledge is placed alongside the fact that large numbers of young foreign visitors travel across the countryside to the coastal beaches, encountering a mix of rural communities and heavy international commercial tourism, the warning signals should be clear to study abroad program designers or resident directors. If strangers get the impression that a wandering female is unknowledgeable about local realities and also morally unprotected, social inhibitions may be loosened and she may find herself in real danger.

There is a more complicated behavioral side to this picture. Along with a "white" *mestizo* Spanish-American majority from whom one could expect *machista* values expressed toward women, there is also a sizeable Afro-Caribbean contingent and substantial minority groups of Asian and Europeans with long term residence in Costa Rica, as well as a sizeable

expatriate U.S. and Canadian resident population. Participants reported very "liberated" (in their American judgment) attitudes expressed in some home stay families. As Biesanz and Biesanz (1998) note, Costa Rican families routinely accept and raise children born out of wedlock to daughters; this practice was observed in home stay families. Two U.S. male university students interviewed (who were not part of the program but were on another, longer study abroad program in San José) reported that Costa Rican females seemed eager to strike up dating relationships with them. Thus behavioral exploration and fascination for foreigners may be equally experienced by both genders, and changes in behavior are evident among Costa Rican young people.

This does not imply, however, that Costa Ricans embrace cultural homogeneity with the U.S. The Costa Rican pathway to new behavior is culturally distinct from the kind of enculturation that U.S. students receive, as are the justifications for behavioral change. This is perhaps the hardest concept to convey to U.S. students eager to draw comparisons. For example, ambivalence is evident even among the most change-oriented constituencies in Costa Rica. One cosmopolitan, bilingual, young adult female Costa Rican whom our students met, opined that Costa Ricans behave promiscuously in comparison to North Americans, a characterization that may reflect nothing more than a mix of old normative judgments and labels colliding with new behaviors. Yet, another young Costa Rican woman asked a student staying at the house not to tell her parent of having seen her in a particular mall on a given afternoon. She was exercising freedom, but did not want to deal with the generational clash that knowledge of it would bring at home.

Costa Rican parents repeatedly expressed concerns to me about the effect they see North Americans having on their children. At the same time, they recognize the economic benefits foreigners bring and Costa Rica's close and active commercial relationship with the U.S. Home stay providers explain their participation partly as a quest for cultural exchange, but also for economic help (see McMorran 2000). For young people growing up, learning English is considered a key to economic opportunity in the future. However, some parents are angry when their young adult children with marketable English skills go to work for virtual casinos, despite the evident economic benefit.

Thus in the capital of a country that is already a kaleidoscope of

heritages, and where tourism is a top economic performer, many Costa Ricans continue to verbalize normative cultural judgments that have been in place over the generations. They have not had the opportunity to sort out the cultural differences that are now increasingly thrust upon them, and there are fewer shared sets of behavioral guidelines these days. As in other cultures, conservative norms of judgment, deeply held, are among the last elements to change. Even as many admire the freedom of U.S. women, they retain traditional notions about the need for women to have moral protection.

In the ethnographic literature, such a "disconnect" often is noted between the realm of behavior and normative judgment or expressed ideals in communities, and frequently between generations in the same families. This is not hard to understand in a globalizing world. Yet this common facet of culture, existing at a hard-to-access level of normative values, is not easily visible to U.S. women students. Thus it is an aspect that may be expected to create relatively frequent inter-cultural misunderstanding.

In short, it is important that foreign students in Costa Rica understand the cultural context of their interactions. What they may experience as substantial tensions, a mix of admiration, worry, and occasional resentment, is a result of a period of rapid social change. Most important, they need to be helped to realize that they will not necessarily know the rules in a given situation. They can begin to learn, despite the mixed messages of this culture in transition, when actively guided by caution, interpretation and intervention. How to help students learn about cultural difference while paying attention to their own actions as actors on an intercultural stage is a subtle and delicate business.

Effective Learning Strategies in Study Abroad

In study abroad the learning and understanding of cultural patterns and day-to-day life is an essential ingredient of success. The cultural and experiential learning models described below may more systematically enhance student learning about behavior and interpretation issues in the field.

Small Groups

Relying on a "sink or swim" placement, or learning a second language isolated in an immersion environment, no longer seems the optimum way of acquiring essential knowledge and skills for maximum cultural adjustment. The isolation of individual students to force use of the local language on their own (e.g. Cholakian 1992) not only has met with growing skepticism, but also has become less realistic in an increasingly globalized world, and especially in intensively toured and commercially developed international settings. A different approach is needed, especially for short-term programs.

Recent literature suggests keeping American students away from each other may not be an optimum strategy for either language acquisition or cultural adjustment. Wilkinson reports that students formed expatriate support groups to keep them "from drowning in the French 'ocean' while they began to process the barrage of cultural differences and linguistic challenges faced on a daily basis" (1998: 32) in a summer program. Twombly's (1995) student-to-student support strategies for coping with adjustment problems in Costa Rica, however, may have added to the problem because there were too many U.S. students together on a university campus, creating insulation and therefore not providing enough demand on the visitors to make local cultural adjustments. Dowell (1995) notes in passing that students in a ten-week Cuernavaca language school "traveled in packs" during their time in the field, yet her findings are that they still returned from study abroad with improved strategies for conversation.

Group coping strategies can also help in a place where local arrangements discourage women from traveling alone after work hours; pairs of students in home stays are thus practical. The field director needs to make sure that one student does not do all the communicating and that Spanish is spoken in the home. On balance, my impression has been that inexperienced students especially benefit more from each others' help in making sense of their experiences, and they encounter fewer occasions of complete frustration than when alone. This can make a great difference in how much students get out of short-term programs in particular.

Interpretive Intervention

The potential benefits of observation and intervention by an experienced faculty member throughout residence in country, including regular individual and group discussions in the field, are also apparent. This is suggested by recent work in experiential learning abroad. Experiential models favor developmental stages and process considerations (for example, Bennett 1986, Kolb, 1983), but implementing them is difficult. A recent emphasis on requiring ethnographic journaling by students for reflection (e.g. Laubscher 1994, Hess 1997, Wagner and Magistrale 1995) continues to emphasize process, but Laubscher has reported that without decisive intervention in the field, very few of his students could offer abstractions or attempt to theorize their experiences. They could recognize and report on cultural difference, but they had no tools to help them understand it at an interpretive level.

A lack of cultural interpretation means students have no strategy to use to align behavior to adjust to new cultural situations more effectively. Language skills alone will not provide students with the means for cultural interpretation. One or two advanced-level Spanish language students in other, semester-long programs appeared to understand cultural issues no better than some intermediate-level CRWS students did. Wilkinson reports a similar finding for summer French program students, for whom the lack of a French perspective on the daily cultural issues they encountered led to more stereotyping and denigration than to increased empathy (1998:33). Few of Twombly's University of Costa Rica female students adjusted their dress styles to reduce unwanted *piropos* even after a full semester abroad, and they had made few relationships with Costa Rican peers who could have explained or interpreted local reactions.

Pre-Departure Orientation

Support, in the form of culturally-specific information, behavioral and interpretive challenges, and a framework for sorting them out, should be part of pre-departure orientation. As Szabo (1996) has suggested from her pre-departure orientation research, study abroad students want specific, personalized information. They want to meet other study abroad students and to have immediately applicable information. Working in a

group with practical suggestions and a model for interpreting cultural difference encourages students to form a small learning community. It is an ideal way to meet the need for contact with other students, as well as to reinforce students' ability to benefit from questions asked by others.

In two of the three years of the CRWS program, all participating students were able to meet at least twice in face-to-face meetings prior to departure. In the case when students did not come from the same campus, correspondence and telephone discussions helped greatly, especially group correspondence in the form of e-mail. Faculty and field directors should not cut corners in this important area of personal contact with students. Once in the field, continuous assessment, particularly in shorter programs, is essential to identifying the need for intervention and interpretive challenge. A solid rapport established early is of key importance to a constructive on-site relationship between director and student.

In addition to the now practically standard set of mailings (travel preparation advice, behavioral conditions of participation, medical information forms, and release of liability forms), instructional materials must include culture- and program-specific introductions. The CRWS program uses required readings of an ethnographic text and a collection of English-language newspaper clippings that provide current national and regional news from the area students will visit, especially as related to the seminars and excursions they will experience. This material is introduced prior to travel and a prepared written essay response is a requirement due upon their arrival in Costa Rica. In addition, students are introduced to the cultural learning tool presented below.

A Heuristic Cultural Learning Model

For short-term students especially, but also for anyone new to a cultural setting, an approach that helps make explicit one's reading of others' behavior and cultural materials can greatly increase a working understanding of local cultures. Such interpretive tools assist in sorting out and analyzing experiences so that they may be brought to discussion with knowledgeable insiders and others. The materials I developed take a participant observation approach to this task.

The public interactions between people make cultural meanings understandable. Participant observation tries to make accessible what is

normally concealed, that is, the backstage information. At an interpretive level, behavior patterns are tied to the normative assumptions or values of a cultural setting (Kluckhohn and Strodbeck, 1961), even though the specific behaviors called for in a situation, much like a language, have arbitrary elements. This is why students need interpretive double-checking of their readings of the cultural text operating in any given social context. They can then begin to predict and make sense of actions and obtain guidelines for how to behave. Without structured help, most foreign travelers lose countless opportunities for such feedback.

For this purpose I found it useful to adapt a cultural learning model (Figure 1) that had been first developed for cross-cultural business relations (Reeves-Ellington and Anderson 1997b: 145).

Figure 1. A Heuristic Model of Intercultural Learning.

CULTURAL LEARNING FROM ENCOUNTERS
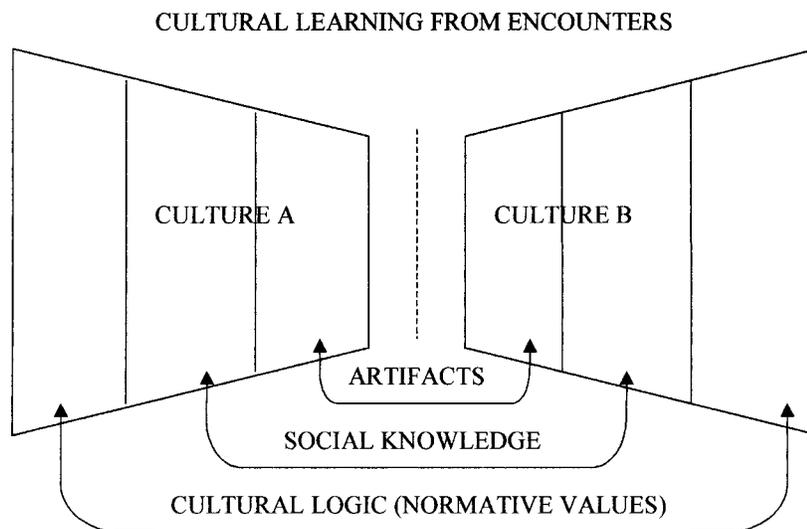
As is the case in early stages of establishing workable international business relationships, the human relations of study abroad occur in a context in which the parties need to learn how to predict and respond to one another responsibly and constructively (Reeves-Ellington and Anderson, 1997a). The model in Figure 1 provides a heuristic basis for sorting observations and interpretations into three analytic categories. Cultural Logic
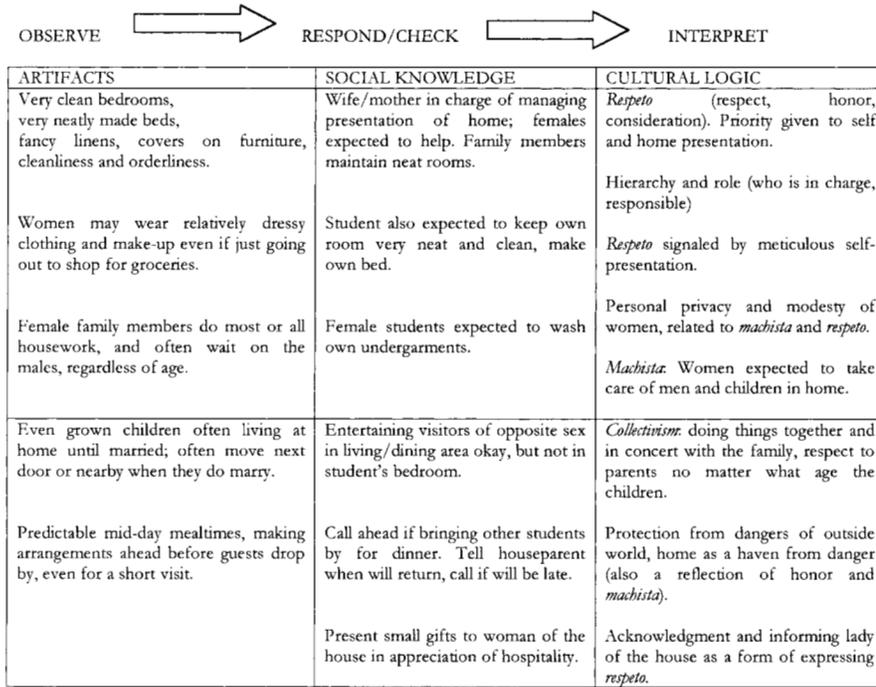
reflects the least accessible part of a cultural set when two culturally different parties meet and interact. The underlying norms and values of Cultural Logic are abstract and might ultimately help make philosophical sense of a specific event or behavior to an outsider, at a broad level of understanding. But knowing something about cultural logic, for example, that Costa Rican social culture tends to be collectivist and to emphasize a specifically-construed sense of respect and honor, does not necessarily help a newcomer to predict the best action to take as a participant in the context of a particular social encounter.

Prescriptive behavioral expectations that are shown as Social Knowledge, the middle layer of the model, do offer such help in predicting peoples' responses, and this level of the construct is the one most amenable to asking questions and to processing daily experience in a culturally-specific setting, with help from insiders and consultants who are familiar with the cultural setting and event. As a predictive description of "how things work" in a situation, social knowledge serves as a kind of working middle range theory for predicting behavior and material culture interrelationships. It implies interpretive guidance for constructive adaptation.

Finally, the most concrete and obvious visual and behavioral cues, here termed Artifacts, represent those first-noticed aspects of cultural difference that students report in a particular sphere of activity, even before they know how to respond to them in a culturally appropriate way. As Laubscher (1999) discovered, in most unguided student journals, the vast majority of things about which students will write will be the artifacts of cultural difference. They usually cannot move beyond this level to interpretive knowledge without further guidance and intervention. This was also true of my own students' journal writings; at weekly individual review sessions, I often helped them work through, interpret, and make sense of differences about which they had written.

Students will need some way to implement the model's heuristic concepts, as they seek to assign meanings and to predict responses in a cultural setting. Figure 2 illustrates a way to do this, by charting and interpreting a few local artifacts that are prevalent in middle-class Costa Rican ("white" *mestizo*) domestic settings, the typical home stay placement setting CRWS participants encounter in their San Pedro neighborhoods.

Figure 2. Interpreting Culture in the Domestic Setting.

OBSERVE → RESPOND/CHECK → INTERPRET

ARTIFACTS	SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE	CULTURAL LOGIC
Very clean bedrooms, very neatly made beds, fancy linens, covers on furniture, cleanliness and orderliness.	Wife/mother in charge of managing presentation of home; females expected to help. Family members maintain neat rooms.	*Respeto* (respect, honor, consideration). Priority given to self and home presentation. Hierarchy and role (who is in charge, responsible)
Women may wear relatively dressy clothing and make-up even if just going out to shop for groceries.	Student also expected to keep own room very neat and clean, make own bed.	*Respeto* signaled by meticulous self-presentation. Personal privacy and modesty of women, related to *machista* and *respeto*.
Female family members do most or all housework, and often wait on the males, regardless of age.	Female students expected to wash own undergarments.	*Machista*: Women expected to take care of men and children in home.
Even grown children often living at home until married; often move next door or nearby when they do marry.	Entertaining visitors of opposite sex in living/dining area okay, but not in student's bedroom.	*Collectivism*: doing things together and in concert with the family, respect to parents no matter what age the children.
Predictable mid-day mealtimes, making arrangements ahead before guests drop by, even for a short visit.	Call ahead if bringing other students by for dinner. Tell houseparent when will return, call if will be late.	Protection from dangers of outside world, home as a haven from danger (also a reflection of honor and *machista*).
	Present small gifts to woman of the house in appreciation of hospitality.	Acknowledgment and informing lady of the house as a form of expressing *respeto*.

The model in Figure 2 emphasizes specific situations and a process of observing, checking provisional responses, and finally tying those experiences to a provisional interpretive framework. In this way students can begin to situate their learning within a larger, abstract conceptual category. Students will often comment and write about such "artifacts" of difference as the extremely neat housekeeping of their home stays, the meticulous attention many Costa Rican women give to personal appearance, and the presence of grown children or nieces or nephews living in the same house with house parents or next door. They also comment on the house mothers' and sisters' tendency to wait on the males.

Corresponding roughly to these surface artifacts is some important "social knowledge" that may go unstated by home stay parents. A substantial number of hosts prefer that students maintain neat rooms, something that doesn't always happen, and many want female students to wash their own undergarments, an issue of personal modesty to the Costa Ricans, but an inconvenience that is hard to understand for the U.S. stu-

dents who expect mechanical washing and drying instead of the frequently encountered hand washing, wringing, and line-drying of clothing. The formality of the comings and goings of relatives and guests is also surprising to some students. They will not know about Costa Rican expectations for arranging visits ahead and for notifying housemothers of time of return in the evening, unless they are told.

Students need the most help in tying their experiences to "cultural logic," the most abstract and speculative part of the chart. Cultural logic references a mix of insider cultural terms, such as *respeto* and *machista,* alongside more externally-derived social psychological constructs, such as collectivism and external locus of control, which have been derived from cross-cultural research. I introduce these concepts early, along with pre-departure readings. While some students struggle with this level of abstraction, the concepts can be very helpful in making sense of the differing world views involved later, when I point them out in the field or when they reflect on their experiences in papers submitted after travel.

The complexity of interpretive work such as this requires early introduction and repeated practice and discussion. In pre-departure orientation, CRWS participants received a copy of the general concepts shown in Figure 1, along with an explanation and discussion of their potential usefulness. They also received two or three simplified tables similar to Figure 2, listing actual artifacts of difference that they were likely to see in Costa Rica for other contexts. Figure 2 illustrates just the domestic sphere, but students receive similar charts illustrating selected cultural differences encountered in school and business settings, and in public leisure settings such as bars and nightclubs. Another chart showing public leisure contexts, for example, lists some 'artifacts' associated with young women's presence in places such as bars and restaurants. Students learn that women alone in bars are often regarded as being of poor moral standing and dangerously "available" to approaching males. The cultural logic behind the chaperoning behaviors of family members and trusted male companions can then be discussed, along with parallel artifact issues such as women wearing shorts in the city, and other issues that were mentioned earlier in this article. Beyond the more foreign cultural insider concepts such as *machista*, it sometimes helps U.S. students make sense of Costa Rican assumptions about females' need for moral protection, to discuss related social psychological concepts. For example, discussing the

concept of external locus of control, a feature very characteristic of Costa Rican cultural logic, helps North American students to interpret peoples' expectations that a woman will not be able to resist the approaches of an interested male.

Students also were given additional blank copies in the format of Figure 2 and invited, but not required, to fill in their own impressions and share them with the resident director, as well as to seek insider explanations for what they observed. They were encouraged to allow themselves to make mistakes and seek corrections from those around them, and to correct and add to the original diagram.

This practice reinforces the idea that culture is soft and changing, that no two people see it exactly the same way, that the ultimate "correctness" of items in the tables is less important than the process of thinking about how objects and behavior carry cultural meaning and how one should continue to question one's assumptions. When students report inconsistencies with their own cultural assumptions, these can be mapped into the analysis of difference. Value and norm explanations may be tentatively offered to test their plausibility as explanations. Students can then observe empirically and consult their teachers and families for clarification. Through this process, students learn to reflect on and provisionally interpret another culture with guidance. The tool is not static or authoritative, but like the cultural scenes of activity it describes, the analysis is expected to shift through time and experience.

In individual and small-group discussions in the field, I referred back to the heuristic categories when answering students' questions about what they had experienced. Some students used the table more effectively than others, but it makes the task of interpretive exercises and explanations much clearer and easier for the field director. Seeing these samples of cultural materials, behavior and circumstances ahead of time also helps cue many students about what they might expect. It lowers the surprise element somewhat and brings delicate areas of difference into the open for discussion among travelers who might not yet know each other well. In a short-term program especially, prompt engagement is crucial for optimal learning.

Conclusion

Costa Rica, like many other heavily touristed study abroad sites, has seen increasing internationalization, and has undergone dramatic economic and social shifts. The task of study abroad in such settings, beyond improving second language proficiency, is to provide the opportunity for critical thinking and reflective practice, so students take charge of their own learning and their appreciation of cultural difference. Adjustment tasks will be all the more challenging, but the argument made here is that students with earlier, more culturally-comprehensive and systematically-responsive tools and support will be more likely to accomplish them.

Unless students are provided early and regularly with the tools and interpretive support to challenge their preconceptions and to help them process their experiences, they will often continue to apply single-culture stereotypes and wonder why there are so many exceptions, or why they cannot find the "true culture" of the place. Second language skills help in adjustment, but without empirical ways to pursue cultural inquiry in order to adapt to specific and varying social contexts, the level of intercultural communication and understanding will remain limited.

The conclusions that can be drawn regarding these specific field-work observations and interventions are limited. Ethnography is inherently context-specific, and action research is always reflexive. The small numbers and varied academic preparation of the CRWS participants allowed a subtle and complex set of observations, but also ruled out the possibility of making large generalizations from a small and dynamic setting. In several instances, students' responses verbally and in their field notes strongly suggested that using the model and interventions described had helped them make gains in cultural insight. However, I make no claim here of conclusive results.

The complex and particular nature of adapting to local cultures presents challenges to students, study abroad administrators and researchers alike. Although future studies with multiple sites of research are possible, the effectiveness of providing in-field interventions over a period of time would ideally require operational procedures specific to each cultural context, and evaluation should occur some time after return from study abroad. In the case of three CRWS participants, I have had the opportunity to talk to them informally about their views of their experiences some

months after returning from travel. All three, who happened to be women, had continued to pursue cross-cultural studies in different disciplines that they said they had not previously considered. One student continued to use conceptual terms that I had introduced to her in the field study. However, complete evaluation of the impact of this kind of approach requires further study.

Drews, Meyer, and Peregnne (1996) report that students personalize their perceptions of other nationalities after having the experience of living in a different country. I saw indications of this among some of the participants toward the end of their residency abroad. This is a desired outcome, as it implies moving beyond stereotypes. Students can move more rapidly toward enhanced perspective and greater tolerance by their use of cultural learning tools that help them predict, and also receive feedback about, their responses to new settings. For women students in particular, such predictions for learning to cope with varied situations will become increasingly important for their safety in locations such as Costa Rica. All students can be helped to move beyond the polarized reactions of denial of danger on the one hand or unwarranted preoccupation with perceived danger on the other. With the right kind of support, they can gain skills of observation, response and attention to feedback, and become reflective travelers who take responsibility for their own learning.

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[2]Beisanz, M.H., R. Biesanz, and K. Biesanz. *The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica.* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

[3]In Costa Rica, three tragic deaths, of young U.S. and Canadian

women traveling independently outside major urban areas, occurred in 2000 and 2001. (See Arguedes and Parrales, 2001).

4*Piropos* refers to the practice of men passing remarks to women about their looks; for a discussion of *piropos* and study abroad in Costa Rica, see Susan Twombley's "Piropos and Friendships: Gender and Culture Clash in Study Abroad," *Frontiers,* Volume I (Fall, 1995).

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