

Wilczewski, M., Wróblewski, Z., Wołośńiej, M., Gut, A. and Wilczewska, E. (2020). Spirituality in expatriate experience and coping in mission. *Journal of Global Mobility: The Home of Expatriate Management Research*, Vol. ahead-of-print, No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-04-2020-0022>

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Michał Wilczewski

Faculty of Applied Linguistics, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

Zbigniew Wróblewski

Faculty of Philosophy, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Lublin, Poland

Mariusz Wołośńiej

Department of Psychology, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Lublin, Poland

Arkadiusz Gut

Department of Cognitive Science, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland

Ewelina Wilczewska

Technical School, The Constitution of 3 May High School Complex, Iława, Poland

SPIRITUALITY IN EXPATRIATE EXPERIENCE AND COPING IN MISSION

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the role of spirituality, understood as a personal relationship with God, in intercultural missionary experience.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted narrative interviews with eight consecrated Polish missionaries in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Paraguay. We used thematic analysis to establish spirituality in missionary experience, and narrative analysis to examine sensemaking processes.

Findings – Missionary spirituality was defined as a personal relationship with God, a source of consolation, psychological comfort, the strength to cope with distressing experiences, and the grace that promotes self-improvement. This spirituality compensated for a missionary’s lack of familial and psychological support and enhanced psychological adjustment to environments perceived as dangerous. Missionary spirituality helped missionaries deal with cultural challenges and traumatic and life-threatening events. Traumatic experiences furthered a missionary’s understanding of their mission and triggered a spiritual transition that entailed a change in their life, attitudes, and behavior.

Research limitations/implications – Comparative research into religious vs. non-religious individual spirituality in the experiences of various types of expats in various locations could capture the professional and cultural specificity of individual spirituality. Research is also needed to link spirituality with expat failure.

Practical implications – Catholic agencies and institutions which dispatch missionaries to dangerous locations should consider providing professional psychological assistance. Narrative interviewing could be used to enhance missionaries’ cultural and professional self-awareness and better serve the local community. A missionary’s stories of intercultural encounters could be incorporated into cross-cultural training and the ethical and spiritual formation of students and future expats.

Originality/value – This study captures the spiritual aspect of intercultural experience of under-researched expats.

Keywords: Expatriates; Missionaries; Christianity; Spirituality; Intercultural Experience; Cultural Stressors; Narrative Inquiry; Qualitative Research

After I came to Bolivia, we opened a parish in Cochabamba. I didn’t know Spanish then, only “*si*” and “*no*”...

And then, one missionary told us some spiritual adages, which I’ve taken to heart, like: “If you do not pray, you’d better not go on a mission”. (A Polish Franciscan on the importance of prayer in coping during a mission)

Introduction

Christian missionaries are a unique type of highly trained and qualified “expatriates/expats” who are transferred temporarily from their home country to a foreign country to undertake an international assignment (Dowling and Welch, 2004). Missionaries thus leave the comforts of life to spread the Gospel and provide medical, educational, and humanitarian aid to people, organizations, schools, and medical centers (Oberholster et al., 2013). Christian missionary work has established churches on all continents and its importance is increasing, even in secularized Europe. Suffice to say, in 2020, Europe sent 80,900 Christian missionaries

(38,950 in 1900) to other continents and itself received 103,000 missionaries (2,120 in 1900) (Johnson and Zurlo, 2020, accessed May 2020).

Today, many missionaries are laypersons and professionals delegated by the Church and non-religious institutions to work and share their specialized knowledge. Strikingly, although expatriate literature recognizes several types of missionaries, including traditional (who expatriate with their families), inpatriates, flexpatriates, and humanitarians (Oberholster and Doss, 2017), little attention is paid to expats from missionary religious congregations (e.g., Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Oblates) whose mission is, apart from spreading the Gospel, “to deliver hope (...), work to fund soup kitchens, projects for well systems, and the development of farms, churches, medical clinics, and housing for the poor” (“Franciscan Missions”, 2020).

The qualitative empirical research of this work explores the intercultural experiences of Central European (Polish) Christian missionaries in distant locations in South America (Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Paraguay). Focus is given to their spirituality as a support structure, which may compensate for a lack of other kinds of support, especially family support, which has been found to be crucial for expatriate intercultural adjustment (e.g., Caligiuri et al., 1999). We want to shed light on the role of spirituality in missionary intercultural experience, and understand how it may help expats to function in a host country and cope with their mission.

We respond to calls for exploring the individual perspectives (Guttormsen et al., 2018) of under-researched expats (Black, 2017; Shaffer and Westman, 2015) and for studying the outcomes of personal spirituality in professional contexts (Kolodinsky et al., 2008), thereby expanding expatriation literature. This context-sensitive study takes a non-essentialist and social constructionist approach to culture while assuming the multiplicity of cultures and identities (Sackmann and Phillips, 2004). Unlike numerous quantitative studies which use

self-reporting to capture cultural (national) differences in large samples of respondents, our research perspective uses narrative inquiry to capture the spiritual perspective of Central European missionaries' experiences in non-European contexts. This allows our study to extend the field by elaborating upon the spiritual aspect of expatriate experience.

To link spirituality with intercultural experience, we continue with a brief review of literature concerning missionary expatriates and determinants of their experiences, placing a special focus on spirituality. As context matters in expat experiences (Selmer et al., 2015), we also lay out the main elements of the Franciscan and Benedictine doctrines, as these are a driving force of the missionary work and spiritual development of the missionaries whose stories are presented in this study. After formulating our research aim and question, we describe our methodology and the results of the study, and follow this with our conclusions and the implications thereof.

Literature review

Formal expat missionary research started in the 1950s due to the post-war boom in the number of missionaries sent to alleviate the suffering of war-torn societies. Since then, central interest has been given to the influence of missionary life on missionary expatriate families (Useem et al., 1963). Other issues related to missionary families involve their expectations, member care services (e.g., Rosik et al., 2005), the support received from the local church, mission agencies, and other sources (Camp et al., 2014), the repatriation process (Selby et al., 2011), missionary retention (Turney, 2013), traumatic stress while in the field, marital satisfaction (Cousineau et al., 2007), and missionary child experience (e.g., Bikos et al., 2014).

Determinants of missionary experience and success

According to literature concerning the management of Christian missionary service (Anderson, 2001), a successful mission is determined by missionary selection, training, on-the-field productivity, and reentry practices (Moore et al., 1987), with these overlapping with the selection, preparation, management, and repatriation identified with other (e.g., business) expats (Oddou and Mendenhall, 1991). Likewise, missionaries' experiences are shaped by their pre-departure preparation, on-site mentorship, adjustment, support during and after expatriation, relationship with the sending organization/institution, host nationals, other stakeholders, and their capacity to cope with stressors. Such stressors and challenges involve harassment, persecution (Hefley and Hefley, 1994), and other traumatic experiences that can influence a missionary's well-being, adjustment to a host country (Irvine et al., 2006), repatriation adjustment (Gregg, 2012), and spirituality (Stirling, 2008). A review by Cousineau et al. (2010) shows that a missionary's experiences and success are also shaped by personal characteristics including a missionary's mental health, personality, and spirituality.

The role of spirituality in shaping missionary experience

Individual spirituality may be understood twofold: (1) as a relationship with God or the Sacred/Transcendent, and (2) as "the human capacity to transcend immediate circumstances and search for meaning in life" (Cavanagh et al., 2003, p. 119). The former faith perspective views spirituality as a set of connections between the self, the other, the environment, and a higher power (Howard, 2002). In the latter sense, spirituality is detached from religiosity or denomination, and is rather defined as a person's inner consciousness that emerges from one's beliefs and values (Guillory, 2000). Because we focus on spirituality in Christian missionary experience, we will draw on the first conceptualization of the construct.

Cavanagh et al. (2003) list four defining aspects of Christian spirituality: God (the Trinity); human beings (who should be viewed in relation to God); discipleship to Jesus

Christ (which symbolizes the transformation and reorientation of Jesus' followers); and the church (the human community of faith in which Christian doctrine is taught). These aspects allow for the addressing of the fundamental issues of balance, ethics, meaning, and security (Cavanagh et al., 2003). Hence, they position spirituality as a relevant construct for defining the "mission" and identifying coping strategies. Because Christian spirituality is regarded as a way of life that "requires fellowship of Christ and living in Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Melé and Fontrodona, 2017, p. 673), we assume Christ should serve as a primary source of support in a Christian mission.

Medical research has linked individual spirituality with physical and mental health (Bai et al., 2018; Yi et al., 2006), and has found that a sound spiritual, religious, and personal belief system helps the individual cope with illness-related stressors (Das et al., 2018). From a cross-cultural perspective, spirituality allows the individual to develop a positive sense of the self, which may be helpful in coping with the stress and anxiety related to intercultural experiences or in encountering cultural differences (Hauge et al., 2019; Sandage and Jankowski, 2013). As such, individual spirituality may be perceived as a skill that, when encouraging one's appreciation of cultural diversity and compassion towards others, can stimulate a person's or a group's intercultural development (Hauge et al., 2019).

The main elements of the Franciscan and Benedictine doctrines

The Franciscans participating in this study belong to the Order of Friars Minor Conventual, founded in 1209 by St. Francis of Assisi. Franciscan spirituality is rooted in the evangelical truth that holds God as the highest good, love as such, the best father, the Creator of all found within the visible and invisible world, and who is good by His own nature. For the missionary, the idea of God's fatherhood is the source of a filial attitude and common

brotherhood with Christ, monastic members, all people, and creation generally (both animate and inanimate nature). This common brotherhood (*fraternitas*) entails a view of the world that is good and brings people closer to God (Burr, 2003).

The Christocentric character of Franciscan spirituality is manifest in one's imitating Christ, the God of love, by directing all spiritual power towards Him and in adopting an attitude of faith permeated with love. Franciscans view apostolic zeal as a necessary effect of love. Their fidelity to the Church is regarded as a continuation of Christ's earthly ministry and the only way to salvation (Armstrong et al., 1999). Franciscans follow Christ through sacrificial love for God through helping people. Franciscans also practice poverty as a sign of total commitment to God, obedience as the highest form of expropriating the self and showing the availability for God (Pansters, 2012), and humility in pain and sorrow to show that these things should be endured patiently. According to evangelical poverty and obedience, St. Francis' rule obliges all brothers to be with and serve others, especially the sick and the poor, and to share *pax et bonum* ('peace and all good,' a Franciscan greeting) among people of all cultures.

In terms of spiritual development, prayer is an inextricable part of missionary life (*oratio et operatio*) and an expression of love for God. Franciscans participate in daily Mass and pray the Liturgy of the Hours at least twice a day. Franciscan spiritual life revolves around the Mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption with Mary at their center thereof, with this explaining Franciscan devotion to the Blessed Mother.

The Polish nuns participating in this study belong to the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St. Benedict, which was founded in 1917 in Ukraine by Mother Hedwig Kulesza. The spirituality of the congregation draws on the rule of St. Benedict (whose Order of St. Benedict was founded in 529 AD), which emphasizes the virtues of humility, restraint of speech, conversion, stability, and peace in God's service and in one's spiritual practices

(Benedict, Saint, 1980). The sisters' warm devotion to Christ is expressed in the axiom "Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ" (Benedict, Saint, 1980, chap. 72). This is why these sisters "cherish with a special devotion the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the abode of God's love for [them]" ("Missionary Sisters of St. Benedict", 2020).

The essence of Benedictine spirituality is encapsulated in the motto *ora et labora* ('pray and work'). Prayer, work, and everyday activities are kept in balance by means of moderation, prudence, and inner discipline while, simultaneously, respecting each missionary's individual capacities. Of great importance is the seeking and praising of God through prayer, ministry, and community within the local church wherein a missionary is in contact with their neighbor (Gioia, 2016). Perseverance in God's presence is the condition for finding deep peace of heart, and reconciliation with God, the community, and self (*Pax Benedictina*). Peace and order (*ordo et pax*) can be achieved through liturgy (everyday Eucharist, the Breviary, and the monastic Liturgy of the Hours), as well as through individual prayer enlivened with the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, reflective reading of Holy Scripture. In turn, serving one another is a rule of life, emphasizing hospitality and an honorable manner of receiving each guest in any circumstance, thus following Christ according to Jesus' words "I was a stranger and you took Me in" (Mt 25:35).

The ideal of monastic life is to live worthy of the Gospel and to follow Christ (Derkse, 2000). The apostolic zeal and life of the Blessed Virgin Mary serve missionaries as an example. The life of every sister is guided by St. Benedict's motto *Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus* ('That in all things God may be glorified') (Benedict, Saint, 1980, chap. 57), which embodies the sisters' desire to seek and praise God and His glory in Christ, in every person, and in every situation. The sisters do so by engaging in apostolic works in Ukraine, the USA, Brazil, and Ecuador, through education of children and youth, especially those deprived of care, catechesis and preparation for Holy Sacraments, and through running schools,

orphanages, kindergartens, and care homes for older people and people with mental disabilities. Moreover, due to a lack of priests in Brazil and Ecuador, the Benedictines do pastoral and charity work, as well as teach in schools. Blessing God and promoting obedience without grumbling and reluctance entails looking at difficult situations with eyes of faith and hope in God's mercy.

Research aim and question

Besides a few notable exceptions (e.g., a recent study of African religious ministers in France; Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2019), prior empirical research into missionary expats is limited to missionary laypersons who often relocate to a host country with their families. Hence, there is a gap in our knowledge about the experiences of consecrated missionaries who are not accompanied in the host country by family members and, thereby, may need to compensate for their lack of family support through developing alternative support structures. We propose that missionary spirituality is considered as a support structure that not only defines and gives sense to one's mission, but also facilitates a missionary's functioning and coping in distant and often dangerous locations.

Apart from contributing to expatriation literature through exploring experiences of under-researched Christian missionaries, our research aims to develop, through narrative inquiry, understanding of the role of spirituality in missionary experience and how the construct serves missionaries coping with cultural stressors. The research given is guided by the following question: *What did missionary expat stories of intercultural experiences reveal about the role of spirituality in coping with a mission, and how did the spirituality-laden experiences thereof affect missionaries' understanding of their mission?*

Method

Research design

We draw on narrative inquiry in investigating how eight Central European (Polish) missionaries dispatched to South American countries ascribed meaning to events or critical incidents (Denzin, 1997), including traumatic events. This inductive, interpretive, and non-positivist research approach is still rare in expatriation research. So far, this method has been used to study, among other things, the construction of expatriate experience and career cycles (Myers et al., 2017), expatriate identity formation (Kohonen, 2008), expatriate-local personnel communication in the MNC (Wilczewski et al., 2018), and expatriate adjustment and cultural learning (Gertsen et al., 2012; Wilczewski, 2019; Wilczewski et al., 2019). This approach is well-suited for exploring intercultural experiences because it allows for investigations into how a narrator constructs experience and how the processes he/she participates in are enacted in the storytelling process (Czarniawska, 1998). Narrative interviewing allows for collecting life stories that are not mere compilations of facts and events, but do essentially reveal a narrator's understanding of personal experience and functioning in new socio-cultural circumstances. Thus, the narrative method enables us to obtain the perspective of missionaries, with this being necessary for a social understanding of the phenomena in question (Ricoeur, 1995).

Interviewees

Five Polish Franciscans and two Polish Benedictine nuns in long-term missions were recruited through personal contacts in order to yield information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). This number of cases is recommended by research methods literature which suggests using between four and 10 cases (Eisenhardt, 1989), with this being reflected in case-based studies of expatriate literature (e.g., Dickmann and Watson, 2017). To maintain the anonymity of interviewees, only general characteristics are presented in Table 1. All interviewees are presented as experienced expats with several years of intercultural experience (4-35 years).

The Franciscans perform the functions of vicars or priests in town and country parishes, with some of them participating in the formation of clerics, whereas the Benedictines work in local orphanages. Thus, all interviewees are exposed to interactions with locals on an everyday basis.

Table 1. Interviewees' characteristics

| Fictitious name (real age) | Affiliation | Education | Current mission (years) | Previous missions (years) |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|---|
| Adam (59) | Catholic priest in the Order of Friars Minor | MA in theology; a 2-year program in philosophy | Peru (3 months) | Italy (1) Bolivia (30) |
| Stefan (62) | Monastic priest in the Order of Friars Minor | A graduate degree in theology | Bolivia (35) | --- |
| Piotr (65) | Monastic priest in the Order of Friars Minor | BSc in construction MA in theology; a 2-year program in philosophy | Peru (3) | Bolivia (20) Argentina (1) |
| Tomasz (29) | Monastic priest in the Order of Friars Minor | MA in theology; a 2-year program in philosophy | Argentina (3) | Italy (1) Spain (7 months) |
| Dominik (70) | Monastic priest in the Order of Friars Minor | A graduate degree in theology | Paraguay (1) | Columbia (5 months) Peru (1) Bolivia (27) |
| Eryk (47) | Friar in the Order of Friars Minor | BA in theology | Ecuador (20) | --- |
| Rita (51) | Missionary Benedictine Sister | MA in theology; a postgraduate program in family studies | Ecuador (11) | --- |
| Maria (49) | Missionary Benedictine Sister | MA in theology | Ecuador (14) | Brazil (4) |

Data collection

The missionaries' storied experiences were collected by the second and third author through narrative interviews conducted in an interviewee's place of current residence in a mission (see Table 1). The friendly atmosphere of their own homes may have helped interviewees to feel comfortable, as they spoke freely and willingly told stories, in some cases very personal and traumatic ones, through which they shared their emotions and reflections on their mission.

Interviews were carried out following the recommendations given by M. W. Bauer and G. D. Gaskell (2000). Interviewees were prompted for stories with the general experiential question: "Please, tell me (a story) about your experiences as a missionary". Having delivered a story, an interviewee was then asked detailed questions to focus in on critical events: "Can you think of something particularly surprising/frustrating/difficult/positive/thought-

provoking/challenging?” (Gertsen and Söderberg, 2011). Finally, interviewees were asked why-questions to deepen our understanding of particular experiences related in a story. The interviews lasted between 45 and 110 minutes and were 66 minutes on average.

The missionaries were interviewed in Polish, which is their mother tongue, in order to obtain elaborate and multi-faceted stories. The interviews were audio-recorded with the interviewee’s consent and transcribed verbatim by the fifth author. The material was further coded by all authors to excerpt interviewees’ stories in which spirituality is enacted by (1) a missionary’s reflection on their own spirituality or relationship with God, and (2) by attributions of happenings to supernatural forces (e.g., interpreting a successful coping with a difficult situations in terms of God’s protection). The selected stories were further translated into English by the first author, who has a background in English philology, as literally as possible to faithfully retain their original meaning.

The role of the interviewer in the construction of meanings

The interviewers participated in the construction of meaning because (1) interviews were performed on the initiative of the interviewers; (2) interviewers asked why-questions concerning specific topics and, hence, influenced the interpretation of material; (3) the interviewers themselves have vast theological knowledge and pastoral experience, which may have influenced the course of the interview; (4) the shared language, nationality, and culture of the interviewers and interviewees may have influenced the storytelling process through the sharing of a home country perspective of the related events (Wilczewski et al., 2019); however, the site of interview (the host country) may have alleviated this limitation. All in all, interviewees shared personal stories of their most spiritually intimate experiences, with the

shared nationality of everyone involved perhaps playing a role in creating an atmosphere of trust.

Data analysis

We analyzed the interview data thematically (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in order to establish themes relevant to reaching our research aim. Being guided by our research question, we looked for narratives and stories which enacted spirituality in the elaborated experience and, moreover, revealed how spirituality-laden experiences determined an interviewee's understanding of their mission. To ensure methodological rigor, analysis was performed by all authors who, subsequently, discussed divergent opinions and agreed on a final set of narratives and stories. The established themes (see Table 2) served to structure the results found in the findings section.

Second, apart from presenting plotless narratives chosen in the manner of representing all the experiences of all interviewees, we conducted a narrative analysis of all stories, that is, we identified narratives through which missionaries elaborated upon their experiences with symbolic significance given through a plot (cf., Gabriel, 2004). This analysis allowed us to examine how missionaries made sense of their (missionary) experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). We focused on the emotions of interviewees and the challenging situations that triggered spiritual experiences by identifying the turning points (Aristotle's *peripeteia*) and discoveries (Aristotle's *anagnorisis*) (Gertsen and Söderberg, 2011) of the given stories. The aforementioned turning points revealed the circumstances that led to changes in the interviewees' behavior and attitudes toward cultural others, as well as their understanding of their mission. In turn, discoveries revealed the moments of recognition, which increased interviewees' cultural (Gertsen and Söderberg, 2011) and spiritual self-awareness.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the material allowed us to establish three major themes (see Table 2) in the interviewees' stories and, hence, answer the question regarding the role of spirituality in intercultural missionary experience. As shown in Table 2, various aspects of missionary spirituality performed a supportive function in everyday functioning in a host country and in coping with cultural stress and even life-threatening situations. For example, God was viewed as a source of self-improvement, psychological support, and as a driving force for a cultural transition. Fellow missionaries and home and host nationals also provided psychological and cultural support, be it by offering an opportunity to share one's experience or by prayer. Similar effects were produced by an individual and other people's prayers, as well as by sacramental practice (confession) and spiritual exercises (examination of conscience). Spiritual development was perceived as a learning and self-developmental process, which, being moderated by a relationship with God, was a source of spiritual and psychological strength and helped determine relationships with locals. Finally, through spiritual reflection on their encounters and the role of the missionary, the interviewees could give a spiritual sense to these very encounters, which allowed our missionaries to develop a positive perspective of their mission and lives.

Table 2. Themes in interviewees' stories of intercultural spirituality-laden experiences

| Aspect of spirituality | Themes |
|---|--|
| <i>I: Spirituality as a support structure</i> | |
| God | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A source of grace that promotes self-improvement and motivates one to change their attitude to better address cultural situations (Rita) • A source of the humility and patience necessary for successful interactions with locals (Rita) • God and saints are entrusted with particular problems (Rita) • A source of power and strength that helps a missionary survive their mission (Maria) • Christ as a source of consolation, psychological comfort, and strength in coping with distressing experiences (Stefan) |
| Missionary community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides prayer support (Rita) and cultural support as missionary communities introduce a missionary to their host culture; provides psychological support as a missionary may share his experiences and seek advice from fellow missionaries (Eryk, Tomasz); and accompanies a missionary in pain and sorrow (Maria) |

| | |
|---|---|
| Prayer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Functioning among culturally diverse nuns leads to a missionary's loneliness due to the subsequent language barrier (Maria) The foundation of missionary life; ceasing prayer may lead to a burnout, crises, and temptation (Adam) A "special power" that gives one the spiritual strength to overcome cultural difficulties (Eryk); "a talk with God that colors up your life" (Maria) Helps the missionary in a moment of weakness (Stefan); Individual prayer and the prayers of people (both host and home nationals) for missionaries solve everyday problems (Rita), push through projects/ideas (Rita), help missionaries to overcome their weaknesses (e.g., anger, failures) (Stefan) and cope psychologically in the host country (Piotr, Eryk) |
| A missionary's spiritual development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in spiritual retreats and conferences develops a missionary's spirituality and is a source of the strength and power that enables one to carry on a mission (Rita) Missionaries learn from locals and from their spirituality through observing how locals dedicate themselves to others (Adam); spiritual development is important as locals carefully observe the devotion of missionaries (Dominik) Spiritual development is shaped by a missionary's personal relationship with Christ; it determines a missionary's relationships with people (Piotr); the closer and better a missionary's understanding of his relationship with Christ is, the better the quality of his mission |
| Sacramental practice | Confession is a form of psychological support (Stefan, Piotr, Eryk) |
| <i>II: Spirituality in dealing with life-threatening situations</i> | |
| God | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A lifeguard who constantly watches over a missionary; God saves missionaries in life-threatening events (Adam, Stefan) A guardian in whom the missionary puts trust; the missionary's fate is dependent on Divine Providence (Andrzej) |
| Spiritual exercises | An examination of conscience is a strategy to calm one down during an armed robbery (Andrzej) |
| <i>III: Making sense of spiritual experiences</i> | |
| Reflection on one's encounters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traumatic experiences and suffering through life exemplify "Job's experience" permitted by God for the missionary who has a close relationship with Him (Maria) Meeting a friend who was killed in a terrorist attack in a dream serves as a spiritually strengthening experience (Adam) Being God's servant (Rita, Stefan) and being set by God to difficult circumstances means that, despite cultural stress, the missionary cannot give up and has to face challenges (Rita) |
| Perception of one's role of being a missionary (discipleship to Christ) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A missionary is a tool in God's hands (Maria) who can do nothing on his/her own (Piotr), it is God who saves the world (Piotr) The role of missionaries is to show Christ to people, attract them to the Church (Stefan), and help them to live their lives in the faith (Piotr) Being a missionary is a chance to live a worthy life and help others in changing their lives (Piotr) |

Spirituality as a support structure

Support from other people

Besides collaborative and financial support from locals, our missionaries received social support from fellow missionaries with whom they discussed daily affairs, and spiritual

support from family and congregations in Poland. In the latter case, for example, Sister Rita linked spiritual support both with her coping with her mission as well as with her mission successes: “Whenever things are not going well, I call my friends: ‘Please, pray or offer a Mass in my intention’. This contact is priceless, as it often helps us push through some project or idea”.

In terms of psychological counseling, only nuns working in children’s centers admitted to having sought the professional help of psychologists employed in their institutions: “Other sisters and I find great support in our child psychologist. I sometimes go to her to share my pain, to ask her to listen to me and tell if I am still normal... [laugh]” (Maria). Moreover, the psychologist served Sister Maria as a cultural mentor who helped her interpret certain local behaviors which she had initially misunderstood in a culturally relevant manner: “Thanks to our psychologist, I can understand [local behavior] and still want to believe in others and help them”.

By contrast, monastic priests essentially did not have access to professional help, but relied on their fellow missionaries, spiritual directors, and confessors: “There are no psychologists in our province [in Bolivia], only spiritual directors, confessors, or the superior” (Stefan). Even in the case of alcohol or drug addiction, missionaries could only seek professional help in their home country:

I have not heard about psychological help... There have been instances of alcohol or even drug addiction... In such cases, we have to send these people [missionaries] to Poland and treat them there... But most often, confession is the moment of such... counseling. But you cannot go to any confessor, one needs to select one that is right to his mind and who really believes in what he’s doing. (Piotr)

God and prayer as sources of psychological support

Besides spiritual support from other people, our missionaries sought support from God. For Maria, praying to God was a way to build a personal relationship with Him, with this being a source of psychological support, whereas praying to saints served as a spiritual shield: “I have a particular devotion to saints, so I like to talk to them. One saint is for the health of our kids, Joseph protects from thieves, Anthony helps with anything”. Friar Eryk, in turn, regarded prayer support as critical for coping with a mission: “Weren’t it for prayer, you wouldn’t make it here [in Ecuador]... Prayer from home [Poland] helps a lot. [...] But people here pray for us, too. We can feel it”. Finally, Father Adam stressed that individual prayer helped missionaries deal with cultural challenges: “Living here [in Peru] with a new language and culture, you need a special power that gives you the spiritual strength to overcome all these difficulties”.

Father Stefan emphasized the primary role of God in his dealing with stress in Bolivia:

In the first place, we receive support from God, Jesus. Prayer comes first. There are such days when you get upset or angry, or frustrated, or discouraged, so you need to pray. A lot of people, seminary students and missionary clubs pray for us in Poland, and we ask for prayers... The most important thing in a missionary’s life is prayer, be it individual, with a breviary, or during the time of Mass. (...) We have come here for Christ, to show Christ to others, to attract people to the Church. We are not tourists. If you come here as a tourist, you are not going to make a mission... You are going to quickly go back to your country being psychically... [torn apart]. (Stefan)

Prayer served a therapeutic purpose for Stefan by lifting his spirits and helping him to calm the feelings of frustration or anger by giving him a sense of community both with God and the home nationals praying for him. Situated at the center of his life, prayer defined his life. Stefan positioned himself as Christ’s servant on a mission to spread the message of the Gospel. Such an identity construction entails a relationship with Christ as a source of consolation, psychological comfort, and strength in coping with distressing experiences. By

positioning himself vis-à-vis tourists in Bolivia, Stefan implicated that he would not be able to persevere in his mission if it were not for prayer and God's support. In his view, limiting one's attention to the cross-cultural aspects of functioning in Bolivia is not sufficient for psychological adjustment.

Likewise, in reflecting on her successful coping with difficulties in Ecuador, Rita linked her coping with divine grace:

Observing how other sisters struggle with the same problems [during a mission], I realize God must have gifted me enormous grace. (...) If you go on a mission, you must be at God's disposal. Wherever God sends you, in whatever setting, you must try to respond to His call and face it. We [missionaries] came here to share God, right? This is a form of evangelism for ourselves too. I do have to find an attitude of humility and patience in myself, which is not easy. But this is God's gift.

In a way similar to Stefan, Rita constructed herself as a God's servant. However, she perceived her mission as a gift that helped her deal with the problems that other missionaries found, in her view, difficult to overcome. She viewed God as a source of grace that promoted her self-improvement through motivating her to change her attitude to better address cultural situations.

Spirituality in dealing with life-threatening situations

"But the Lord blessed me..."—God as a lifeguard

Oftentimes, when relating traumatic events, missionaries applied a spiritual interpretative framework on these events. For example, missionaries ascribed getting out of a dangerous situation unharmed to being guarded by God:

Once a man once approaches me in a street and asks me about how to get to another plaza because he's a tourist and doesn't know the city. So, I show him the direction... But here comes another man, a

migration officer, and he asks us for documents. The first guy immediately gives him his passport, but I don't have mine... So, he [the officer] says we have to go to the office and check my papers. Meanwhile, a taxi arrives, and the "tourist" hops in the taxi from the other side, and the "officer" opens the door for me. As I'm sitting on my seat, something inside tells me: "Something is not right".

And I had a feeling that all three of these men were in cahoots. Perhaps they didn't want to kill me... I don't know... because I told them I'm a priest. But I'm sure they wanted to rob me. And later... I had another experience, a car accident. But the *Lord blessed me!* (Adam)

Adam related a story of an attempted robbery in which local criminals plotted to abduct and rob, if not kill, him. Yet, Adam managed to find out their evil intentions thanks to an inner voice that warned him against sitting in the "taxi". Most likely, Adam meant God by that voice, as he closed his story with the triumphal phrase "the Lord blessed me!", through which he could express his gratitude to God for saving his life in another life-threatening event involving a car accident.

"Come what may"—Entrusting one's life to the hands of God

Father Dominik related the event of an armed robbery in Pariacoto, Peru, terrorized by the "Shining Path" revolutionary communist party:

Once, I was attacked in Peru by those of the... "*Sendero Luminoso*". They stole my car and wanted to shoot me there... I'd arrived from Pariacoto [in Peru], where they'd killed our... Zbigniew and Michał, and headed for Lima.

So, on my way back to Lima, I visited a bishop and he gave me about 300 paintings painted by one nun. And after I'd arrived in Lima, I stopped the car and we started to take out those paintings when, suddenly, two armed men approached us. And I kind of joked, as I thought the men were some of the youths from our parish, and I grabbed one of their pistols and said: "No kidding! Leave me alone!". I guess they got frightened because they saw I wasn't scared... Suddenly, they ran back and, standing by the wall of the church, one of them shouted at me to give him the keys.

Whenever something tragic happens in my life, I always make an examination of conscience, ask for forgiveness, calm down, and think to myself: “Come what may...”.

So, as the young man was shouting, I was examining my conscience. I took my time because I hoped some of the workers who were at that time renovating our church would come out for sand and, perhaps, they’d scare them [robbers] and make them run away. But nobody came out... I approached the one pointing the gun at me, while the other was covering his back. I ask him: “Which keys do you mean?”. He said: “*Clave, clave!*”. So, I said: “Which *clave* do you want, as I have a whole bunch of keys here...”, and I was still stalling for time. They started to get nervous... and, eventually, one shouted: “*Llaves de camioneta*”—‘car keys’. So, I gave him the key, they got in the car, and drove off, still pointing the gun at me of course... (Dominik)

Surprisingly, the tone of this story indicates a rather “frivolous” perspective of the experience, which could have had fatal consequences for the missionary. The light-hearted attitude of Dominik in the face of danger suggests that the missionary apparently did not treat the armed robbery seriously, suspecting it was a kind of a cruel joke done by a group of his own juvenile parishioners. Nevertheless, in having realized the robbery was a real danger, Dominik resorted to his spirituality by making an examination of his conscience, rather than trying to find a way out of this life-threatening situation. Dominik’s reaction served as a psychological strategy to calm down and put his life in the hands of God whom he asks for forgiveness “whenever something tragic happens in [his] life”. The missionary’s spirituality somewhat developed into the attitude that his own life was grounded on a deep trust in Divine Providence. This can be summarized as “come what may...”, a motto that encapsulates Job’s trust in the Lord in the face of trials: “Hold your peace, let me alone, that I may speak, and let come on me what will” (Job 13:13, KJV). Such an attitude allowed the missionary to function in a dangerous environment terrorized by the “*Sendero Luminoso*” while knowing that two of his brothers, Blessed Father Michał and Zbigniew, had been murdered there.

Making sense of spiritual experiences

Finding strength in the loss of a friend through a spiritual experience

The next story was told by Father Adam who is currently on a mission in Pariacoto, Peru. Its plot revolves around the “martyrs of Pariacoto” (see the above story), that is, two Polish Franciscan priests, Father Michał Tomaszek and Father Zbigniew Strzałkowski, who were abducted and murdered by the “Shining Path” communist guerilla faction in 1991 in Pariacoto in the Peruvian Andes. Adam studied with Father Michał in a seminary in Poland. During their last seminary year, they shared a room in a dormitory and got on well with each other, as they both shared a passion for photography. Having been asked about the influence of the murder on his mission, Adam told us, surprisingly, a rather positive story in which he turned a tragic event into a strengthening experience that even increased his willingness to continue with his mission. First, Father Adam related a spiritual experience of his friend visiting him in a dream to say goodbye:

In 1991, I was in Bolivia when I learned about that [Father Michał had been murdered]. It was the first time I'd had a kind of a personal experience in my dreams... I woke up that morning and felt the presence of Michał.

I had a dream that night. There was a big dark room and a [human] figure... that was kind of embracing me. I don't know if it was a welcoming embrace or a farewell... It was 5 am, and we'd normally wake up at 6 am, but the news [about Michał's death] came at around 8 am, after our morning prayers. It was striking to me! I didn't know what to do! (...) There were rumors that he [Michał's body] was to be taken to Poland, but we didn't know for sure. But I was a guest there, so I couldn't just ask for a ticket [to Poland, to participate in the funeral]. So, I didn't attend the funeral... This was the morning when they [Father Michał and Zbigniew] had been murdered... (Adam)

Further, when being asked if the death of his friend caused doubts about continuing his mission, Adam told us:

No, it was kind of strengthening... I took that [event] this way... Bolivia was safe at that time. The people were good, the parish life was peaceful. Later, the [“Shining Path”] leader was caught, so, after a year or so, a new climate was coming, and it was more peaceful then. And they started to talk about the process of beatification [of Father Michał and Father Zbigniew]... First, [they were supposed to become] servants of God... So, although the world is so big, and they [Bolivians] also have their own saints, we, Franciscans, also talked about that [beatification] a lot... (Adam)

This story clearly shows that the dramatic and personal experience of losing a friend, who had served on a mission in Peru, did not discourage the missionary from continuing his mission. The fact that the murdered missionaries were going to be recognized by the Church as “Servants of God”, which is the first of four steps in the canonization process, made Father Adam proud of them and may have contributed to his own self-image as a Polish Franciscan in Bolivia.

This tragic event served the missionary as a turning point that influenced his missionary trajectory. After 30 years of mission work in Bolivia, Father Adam decided to move to Pariakoto, Peru, where his friend, Blessed Michał Tomaszek, had served as a missionary:

And there was a thought sprouting in my heart: I wished I could also, by the grace of God, go there... I wished I could “give my hand to Michał” one day and—as I’m used to saying—[give my hand] to the Peruvian mission. The time for this has come. My current one-year stay [in Peru] reflects my desire to change my mission. After this year, I’m going to ask for more [time in Peru]... (Adam)

Apparently, Adam perceived his coming to Peru as a mystical form of meeting his friend and continuing his mission in Pariacoto.

How spiritual experience deepens an understanding of a mission

In the following story, Father Tomasz reflected on his being a missionary:

The mission is, above all, my journey with Jesus. Therefore, this dimension of contemplative life, however pompous it may sound, isn't merely a theory because every matter, your every word is grounded in some sort of reality, a kind of lifestyle.

For me, in the context of my personal life with Jesus, the core of my mission is accompanying people... in everything they experience. For example, right now, I have an image in my head, a kind of incident that happened some time ago...

One young man wanted to hang himself, and succeeded in doing so. He broke down that day because his wife had separated from him. His mother and mother-in-law came to ask me to bless their house because of the demon there... And I thought to myself: "O, Mother! How am I going to bless the house where he is still hanging there from the ceiling?" That was the first time in my life when I had to face a suicide, and was such a powerful experience ... A bad thought crossed my mind: "These women should go and get him down", right? And then I think: "No, how are they going to go there? Those older women...". So, I simply had to get on a chair and try to untangle everything [a rope and a chain]. I remember my feelings then, such strong priestly feelings...

Later, I realized what had happened to me... in that house. I saw the situation of that man... that I, as a priest, a missionary, was not be able to untangle it... in the physical and spiritual sense. Something interesting happened then. When I touched it [the rope], it simply fell off as if... it untangled itself! I started to cry like a baby, sitting on that chair and touching that [rope and chain]. [pause]

And it struck me then, and later, during my prayers, that I kind of realized what God the Father feels every time He touches our sins. Our falls... they are like that rope, a chain attached to a ceiling... Sometimes we get off it, and sometimes we get strangled by it. Then He comes who has to untangle everything so that we can carry on, somehow...

And I was crying, although I didn't understand why. I felt horrible because I'd come and was supposed to bless the house. Those mothers looked at me and didn't know... I tried to hide that [breakdown], but I simply cried like a baby, not because of the suicide attempt, but... those feelings of God the Father... (...) We fail to see the other side... that He is also grieving because each sin, everything that touches a person, first touches God.

And this is the issue of one's relationship [with God]. This is why my monastic life is primarily a journey with Him. Everything else should primarily come down to accompanying these people in their lives. If you see you can help, you should be there, be with them, and go with them through their lives.
(Tomasz)

This story is fraught with emotions, such as shock, fright, embarrassment, and a feeling of helplessness in the face of a challenging situation in which the missionary was expected to bless a house where a man had just committed suicide. Moreover, the missionary was also asked to untangle the hanged man, which simply overwhelmed him. Father Tomasz described this experience as the most powerful experience of his life, with this being confirmed by the story. His attempt to untangle the rope and chain was a turning point that led to his recognition (marked by such phrases as “It struck me...”, “I realized...”) of the deeper meaning of this experience and his mission in general. Fr. Tomasz interpreted his activity of untangling the rope and his feeling of helplessness and subsequent emotional breakdown in spiritual terms. He referred these moments to the feelings of God who watches a sinner and grieves over him/her. Nevertheless, even if he, as a missionary, or God Himself could not turn a person from sin, the missionary recognized a deeper meaning in his mission, to be with others. Therefore, the traumatic experience unfolded as a trigger event that gave a new spiritual meaning to Fr. Tomasz's mission.

Discussion and conclusion

Although expatriation literature recognizes the missionary as a type of expatriate (Oberholster and Doss, 2017), little is known about the experiences of consecrated Christian missionaries and the role of individual spirituality in shaping intercultural experiences of the various types of expats dispatched to overseas locations.

With this exploratory study, we advanced our understanding of the role of spirituality, understood as a personal relationship with God, in expatriate experiences based on the intercultural experiences of eight Polish Christian missionaries in South American countries. We used the narrative approach to examine how spirituality unfolded during storytelling and how spirituality had affected our subjects' missions. We expanded the field by capturing the spiritual aspect of the intercultural experiences of under-researched expats (consecrated missionaries), whose importance increases both abroad and in secularizing Europe, and in exploring the outcomes of spirituality on a missionary's capacity to cope with a mission (Kolodinsky et al., 2008; Peltonen, 2017).

With regard to support structures, our findings show that—unlike lay missionaries or other expats who often relocate with their family—consecrated missionaries lack family support in their host country and seek spiritual support from family members and prayer groups in their home country. Missionaries also have limited access to psychologists, and our missionaries' stories suggested that insufficient psychological support in some instances led to alcohol and drug addictions. However, we found gender and monastic variance in this regard, as the Benedictine nuns who worked in children's centers found psychological and cultural help in the psychologists they employed, and highly appreciated such informal counseling.

It may be assumed that a deep relationship with God, the development thereof in a mission, and spiritual support from other people (e.g., fellow missionaries, spiritual directors, and confessors) served for missionaries a compensatory function. Spirituality helped our missionaries control frustration or anger, and helped them deal with cultural problems/stress and the psychological distress found in their everyday work (e.g., providing sacramental service at the scene of a suicide, pushing through projects, supporting orphans with prayers). This helped our missionaries maintain sanity of reason in dangerous and life-threatening

situations, such as break-ins, attempted and armed robberies, abductions, and also performed a therapeutic function as a result of those and other dramatic experiences (e.g., having a friend murdered by terrorists). In psychological terms, spirituality served our missionaries as a coping strategy founded on trust in Divine Providence and a close relationship with God. Our subjects viewed God as a “spiritual shield” against danger, who guarded them against local criminals via an inner voice that directed their behaviors. Accordingly, and confirming our assumptions drawn from appropriate literature (Cavanagh et al., 2003; Melé and Fontrodona, 2017), spirituality unfolded as a critical aspect of missionary life, which enhanced psychological adjustment to environments perceived as dangerous.

The findings allowed us to capture the doctrinal specificity of spirituality defined by a personal relationship with Christ as a source of consolation, psychological comfort, strength to cope with distressing experiences, and grace promoting self-improvement. The Franciscans, who view God as the highest good, love itself, and a source of brotherhood with all people, defined their life and mission as a “journey with Jesus” and “being with others in their misery”, with this being deeply rooted in the rule of St. Francis. These missionaries placed individual prayer and the Eucharist at the center of expression of love for God. The Benedictine missionaries, who in turn emphasize humility and peace in God’s service and spiritual practice, and who emphasize moderation, prudence, and self-discipline in work and service to others, perceived the mission as a challenge they must face in patience and humility. The Benedictines perceived themselves as tools in the hands of God. They defined their mission as serving others and sharing God with locals, but also as evangelizing themselves through prayer and work. Praying to God, a source of grace, facilitated their psychological coping with their mission and promoted self-improvement and behavioral change in interactions with locals.

Not only did we expand the list of stressors and challenges of a host country (Hefley and Hefley, 1994; Irvine et al., 2006; Stirling, 2008), but also advanced our understanding of how spirituality is developed through intercultural experience to better address cultural and professional situations. We identified the critical role of traumatic events in triggering a change in a missionary's life, attitude, and way of functioning in a different cultural environment. Paradoxically, such events strengthened missionaries psychologically, and gave sense to their mission, with this perhaps enhancing the quality of service delivered to local communities. In this sense, our study extends prior research results concerning the positive influence of spirituality on an individual's self-image and coping with cultural stress (Hauge et al., 2019; Sandage and Jankowski, 2013), by shedding light on the process of an expat's spiritual transition and intercultural development in a mission. This also develops our understanding of missionary spirituality against the backdrop of Christian spirituality viewed as a way of life that entails belief and values concerned with God (Melé and Fontrodona, 2017).

We contribute to the corpus of literature by developing, based on our findings, a theoretical model that presents the involvement of individual spirituality in coping with a mission (Figure 1). The central position in the individual spirituality of missionaries (and other expats) is occupied by *God*, which is not surprising, given the nature of spirituality (a personal relationship with God). This position resonates with recent findings concerning God's centrality in expatriate worldviews and career plans (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2019). According to our findings, God is perceived as a source of virtue (humility, patience; see the centrality of thereof in Franciscan and Benedictine doctrines), psychological support (comfort, consolation), and spiritual strength, all of which facilitate interactions with locals and help expats cope with cultural stress. A personal relationship with God enables a missionary-God dialogue, which is especially crucial for expats deprived of family support.

God is also the source of grace which promotes self-improvement, helps expats to overcome personal weaknesses, and triggers a behavioral change to better address cultural situations.

The *church* (the faith community) also plays a crucial role in coping with a mission. The church involves fellow brothers and sisters with whom expatriates may share their experiences (psychological support); locals (e.g., congregation members) who serve as culture nodes who introduce an expatriate to their host culture (cultural support); and home and host nationals who pray for expats and their intentions (prayer support).

An important moderating effect of spirituality on coping in a mission is played by *spiritual practice and development*. Individual prayer, sacramental practice (e.g., confession, the Eucharist), spiritual exercises (e.g., examination of conscience, meditation), and participation in retreats and conferences allow for the development of a relationship with God, the entering into dialogue with Him, and the (re)gaining of spiritual strength. Apart from helping expats to cope psychologically in stressful (e.g., life-threatening) situations, a deeper understanding of God develops an expat's understanding of their mission itself, which should influence a missionary's activity and service, and hence, a mission's success. Besides this, our findings suggest that spiritual development may influence the image of a missionary perceived by locals (see Table 2), thereby affecting interactions with locals. However, future research should consider this from the locals' perspective.

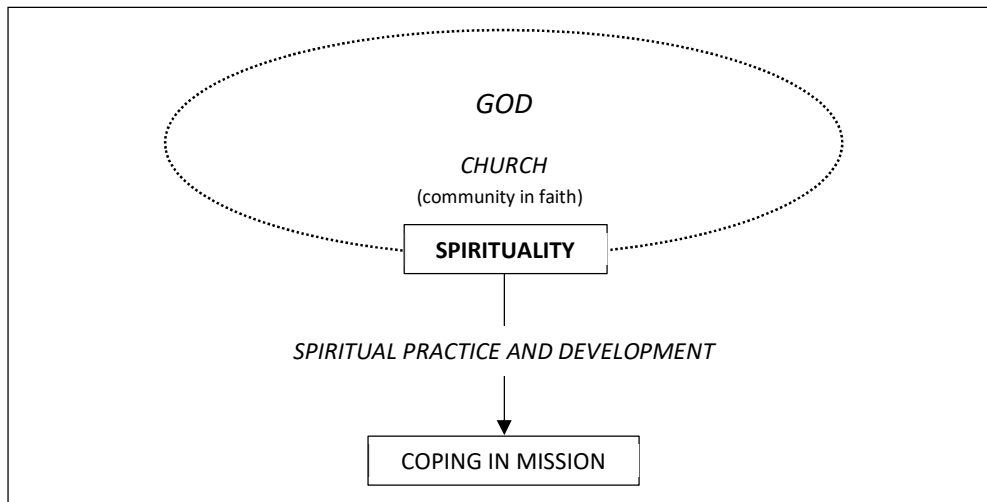


Figure 1. A model of the involvement of individual spirituality in coping in a mission

Implications

Future work should include the intercultural experiences of non-Catholic missionaries and other types of expats. This would allow for comparative research on the role of religious vs. non-religious individual spirituality in coping with various cultural and professional contexts. Moreover, more research is needed to confirm the positive triggering impact of traumatic events on the functioning of missionary lay expats in a host country.

Another implication results from a limitation of our study, which focuses on the positive effect of spirituality on coping with a mission. Therefore, research linking spirituality, intercultural experience, and expat failure could shed light on the limits of spirituality in expatriate retention in international assignments.

Our study revealed that consecrated missionaries are often deprived of psychological counseling. Therefore, we suggest that the Catholic agencies and institutions, which dispatch missionaries to dangerous locations, should consider providing professional psychological assistance to missionaries. Moreover, narrative interviewing could be used to enhance missionaries' cultural and professional self-awareness and better serve the local community.

Apart from religious organizations, the results of this research should also inform other public and private sector expatriate-sending organizations and institutions. In particular, it would be beneficial if these organizations incorporated personal stories delivered by their expats into cross-cultural programs. Studies show a positive association between one's spiritual well-being and intercultural development (Sandage and Jankowski, 2013), and researchers suggest that the incorporation of individual and organizational spirituality into training in intercultural development may be beneficial to fostering openness. These values are crucial for the health of an individual's relationships with cultural others who think, act, and perceive the world differently (Hauge et al., 2019).

In addition, missionary stories of intercultural encounters could also be used in the ethical and spiritual formation of students and future expats in business education as a contribution to "a more complete formation of managers and future managers, educating them to be effective business leaders with high principles" (Melé and Fontrodona, 2017, p. 677).

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the (Polish) Minister of Science and Higher Education within the program "Regional Initiative of Excellence" in 2019-2022 [grant no. 028/RID/2018/19].

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