

CULTURE SHOCK – Part I

As many volunteers are preparing to visit Ecuador, they make many careful preparations. They will be getting adequate vaccines, securing money for the trip and packing the appropriate clothing. They might even venture to take language classes so that they can communicate in the country. However, most volunteers do not realize that cultural awareness is an equally important step if they wish to have a more satisfying international experience.

Why is cultural awareness and understanding important for volunteers working in Ecuador?

Cultural awareness can help the volunteer to thrive in their new environment. People everywhere take for granted how ingrained their culture is and how shocking other cultures can be. When we think of differing cultures, we may tend to think of different styles of dress, different types of food or different holiday traditions. However, culture penetrates our lives at a much deeper level. It affects social rules for interaction and values regarding time, individuality, age, work and so on. Volunteers that educate themselves about Ecuador's culture will enjoy greater satisfaction in their volunteer experience as they appropriately interact with native Ecuadorians. Cultural awareness will also help volunteers thrive in the following ways:

- reduce their stress level and susceptibility to culture shock
- improve their working capabilities by improving communication skills
- increase their capability of forming friendships with orphanage workers, ward members, drivers, and other Ecuadorians
- leave a more positive impression with those they interact with
- minimize misunderstandings due to lack of knowledge
- develop lasting understanding of, and appreciation for, cultures that will help them in future cross-cultural experiences
- gain skills that will help them thrive in an increasingly globalizing world

What is culture?

“Culture includes everything people have, think and do as members of their society....Thus culture is made up of 1) material objects, 2) ideas, values and attitudes, and 3) expected patterns of behavior” (Ferraro 16). The culturally aware volunteer recognizes that culture is *learned*

Most people in the United States would prefer to think of themselves as clean and hygienic. However, that assumption may be debatable. For example, a North American seeing an Indonesian blow his nose onto the street might be disgusted, but an Indonesian may be disgusted on seeing a North American blow his nose into a handkerchief and then carry it around in his pocket (Ferraro 31).

rather than inherited genetically. They have learned from infancy what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior; these behavioral rules inevitably convey value messages about what is most important in the culture. These behavioral rules and values vary widely from culture to culture. Often one does not recognize the values in their own culture until they have seen it contrasted with another. It is important to recognize that these contrasting behaviors are learned rather than inherited because such understanding promotes tolerance needed for effective

“The British professor of poetry relaxed during his lecture at Ain Shams University in Cairo. So carried away was he in explicating a poem that he leaned back in his chair and so revealed the sole of his foot to an astonished class. To make such a gesture in a Moslem society is the worst kind of insult. The Cairo newspapers the next day carried banner headlines about the student demonstration which resulted, and they denounced the British arrogance and demanded that the professor be sent home.” (Condon and Yousef 1975:122)

communication. It also helps the volunteer adjust as he or she recognizes that they too can learn to function in the new culture.

What is ethnocentrism?

“All cultures—to one degree or another—display ethnocentrism. Perhaps the greatest single obstacle to understanding another culture is ethnocentrism—literally ‘culture centered’—which is the tendency for people to evaluate a foreigner’s behavior by the standards of their own culture and to believe that their own culture is superior to all others. The tendency to be ethnocentric is universal. Since our own culture is usually the only one we learn (or at least the first), we take our culture for granted, assuming that our behavior is correct....No society has a monopoly on ethnocentrism....Every society with its own distinct culture has the tendency to refer to themselves as ‘us’ and everyone else as ‘them’” (30).

Most citizens of the United States casually refer to themselves as Americans without recognizing the ethnocentric connotation the title carries. Be careful not to call yourself an American in Ecuador because the term can be offensive. After all, *they* are Americans, too. You are a *North American*.

Sometimes our own ethnocentrism can be startling. For example, one North American student, when visiting a Japanese classroom for the first time, was startled to see that the United States wasn’t located where it “ought” to be on the wall map. Right in the center of the map, where he had expected to find the United States, he saw Japan. “To his surprise, the Japanese did not view the United States as the center of the world” (31).

“All people in all societies are ethnocentric to some degree regardless of how accepting or open-minded they might claim to be” (32). Unfortunately, ethnocentrism can contribute to prejudice, contempt and inter-group conflict. By recognizing ethnocentric tendencies, volunteers may be able to minimize its negative effects. Volunteers will likely face many situations in which they feel Ecuadorians are doing things the “wrong” way, or at least a less effective way. In many of these situations, trying to impose “your way” (even if you think it is more efficient) may be more harmful than helpful. For example, the way OSSO volunteers know how to take care of children

“The orphanages and the children are Ecuadorian, not North American. We should not judge needs and appropriateness by North American Standards.... Ecuadorians have different ideas about how warmly to dress children, and how and when to bathe them. These differences do not represent risks to the children, so we should not impose our attitudes on them.”

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is not necessarily the best way. Because they have been raised in a North American culture with North American parents, their knowledge may not pertain to Ecuadorian children in an Ecuadorian culture. Volunteers should think twice before trying to persuade people to do things “better” because they might damage important relationships through perceived ethnocentrism. Rather than comparing the North American way of life to that of native Ecuadorians, volunteers should seek to *understand* the cultural differences according to Ecuador’s unique historical, social and cultural background.

Symptoms of Culture Shock

Culture shock “refers to the psychological disorientation experienced by people who find themselves living and working in radically different cultural environments.” Culture shock develops from “anxiety that results when all of the familiar cultural props have been knocked out from under a person who is entering a new culture” (130). Culture shock can be mild or severe

and has numerous symptoms. Because some degree of culture shock is inevitable, you will most likely suffer from a few of the following symptoms during your stay in Ecuador:

- boredom
- withdrawal
- need for excessive amounts of sleep
- compulsive eating
- irritability
- exaggerated cleanliness
- tension and conflict with your friends, roommates and fellow volunteers
- stereotyping of Ecuadorians
- hostility toward Ecuadorians
- loss of ability to work effectively
- physical ailments (psychosomatic illness)
- sense of confusion over expected behavior
- surprise or disgust when discovering features of the new culture
- homesickness for old familiar surroundings (friends, possessions and so on) and cultural patterns
- feelings of rejection by members of the new culture
- loss of self-esteem because of inability to function in new culture
- feeling out of control of your environment (132)

Completely evading culture shock seems almost impossible, but fortunately preparation and knowledge can help you recognize why you feel the way you do and help to relieve your anxiety.

Stages of Culture Shock

Generally, those going to or staying in another country experience a variety of thoughts and emotions. Ferraro has characterized these feelings into four stages. It is important to note that the length and severity of each stage varies by person.

1. *The honeymoon stage*—As a volunteer, you will most likely feel positive and excited when you first arrive. Everything around you will seem new, exotic and exciting, and your attitude about your ability to assimilate with the culture is unrealistically optimistic. You'll settle down in the OSSO house and may be quick to note the similarities between home and Ecuador. You may be surprised at how much Ecuadorians have in common with you. This stage often lasts from several days to several weeks.
2. *Irritation and hostility*—Unfortunately, honeymoons do not last forever. After a few weeks you might start running into obstacles. You start noticing all the problems that face the country and that people around you are doing everything wrong. Small problems are blown out of proportion. "A commonly used mode for dealing with this crisis stage is to band together with other [foreigners] to disparage the local people" (133). You might barrage Ecuadorians by classifying them as lazy, dirty, slow, stupid, irresponsible and so on. Before long, ethnic jokes become a common source of entertainment. Unfortunately, some volunteers may not get past this stage. They then become "premature return statistics, or somehow manage to stick it out but at high cost to themselves," the children and the workers (133). We highly encourage you to strive to quickly move on to the next two phases.

3. *Gradual Adjustment*—This stage is the recovery stage. “Slowly an understanding emerges of how to operate within the new culture. Some cultural cues now begin to make sense; patterns of behavior begin to emerge which enable a certain level of predictability; some of the language is becoming comprehensible; and some of the problems of everyday living...are beginning to be resolved” (133). The culture now seems more natural and you might even be able to start laughing at your cultural blunders. Ideally, you should reach this phase before you leave Ecuador. The sooner you reach this stage, the more enjoyable your experience will be.
4. *Biculturalism*—This final stage is characterized by full functionality within the culture. The volunteer is now fully capable of interacting, socializing and doing everyday activities in both Ecuador and the United States. He or she understands and appreciates local culture and customs without feeling high levels of stress or anxiety. This does not mean that all stress will be gone, but it means that you can deal with problems without bitterness to the culture or people. Most of the culture shock symptoms have faded and you enjoy your interactions with Ecuadorians. In fact, you will probably find yourself missing the people and customs upon your return to the United States.

Minimizing Culture Shock

In order to manage the anxiety that you will feel, it is important to know yourself. “The international volunteer who is most likely to do well abroad is the person who: 1) has a realistic understanding of the problems and promises of [volunteering]; 2) possesses a number of important cross-cultural coping skills; 3) sees the [volunteer experience] as providing opportunities for personal growth and adjustment” (136). Therefore, it is important that you study these preparation manuals and prepare yourself as thoroughly as possible. The more thorough your preparation for the experience, the less surprises there will be. In your preparations, we recommend a four-fold approach.

Fourfold Approach

- 1) *“A general understanding of the concept of culture can provide a fuller appreciation of other cultures,”* regardless of where you travel (136, italics added). For example, understanding that cultures are learned rather than inherent may help you understand that behavior which is inconsistent with your own logic may not be “primitive,” “savage,” or “stupid,” but rather may simply follow its own logic. For example, when you are aware of culturally learned behavior, you recognize that Ecuadorian drivers are not any more insane than those found in North America. Rather, their system of driving is just more aggressive and requires a lot more attention than the North American system. Rather than characterizing all Ecuadorian drivers as insane and wreckless, you might see the system of rules that regulate the driving style (audible honking rather than visual blinkers, for example).
- 2) *Become familiar with local patterns of communication, both verbal and nonverbal.* When you learn these local patterns, or even make efforts to learn them, you open windows of communication that permit friendship and understanding to flow freely and create a sense of belonging. The ability to communicate also helps reduce culture shock because it minimizes misunderstanding and misjudgment.

“Knowledge about the host culture adds to the individual’s capacity to adjust. It is important to recognize that culture shock will never be totally avoided, but it can be minimized through careful preparation” (Gudykunst and Kim 217).

3) *Understand your own culture.* Before you can understand someone else's culture, you must understand your own. While we do not review North American culture in this lesson, the next lesson for your preparations compares the differences in the basic value systems of both Latin and North American culture. Studying this information will help you understand that different cultures behave differently because they value things differently. (This second part will be given to you right before you go down.)

"Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include a thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people,...how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not....All of us depend on our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues."
-Olberg 177

4) *Become familiar with as much specific cultural information as possible.* Take time to study before you go. These lessons provide some specific information, but there is so much more to learn. Go to the library, use the internet and find out all that you can about Ecuador's culture, language, history and current events. Not only will you be more aware of your surroundings when you arrive, but you will relate and converse more effectively with the people around you. It will take time and effort, but will be worth it.

A Final Word on Communication

Be aware that besides communicating with words, people also communicate with non-verbal cues. Posture, hand gestures, facial expressions, gaze, proxemics, touch, etc. are all types of non-verbal communication. While this may seem less significant than verbal communication, non-verbal cues can carry a lot of meaning and even cause significant miscommunications. For example, in North American culture the raising of the middle finger is highly rude and offensive, but in Korean culture it is a means of referring to the middle child. An unaware Korean making that sign in North America might cause a serious offense. Or, in Latin culture kisses on the cheek between a male and a female are frequently exchanged and indicate close friendship. In North American culture, however, it would be indicative of a more intimate relationship.

Unfortunately, we cannot detail every non-verbal cue and what it signifies. However, we do urge you to recognize the importance of these cues. Take time to observe people. Watch the way that they interact, and try to learn from it.

In regards to verbal communication, many volunteers assume that they can get along alright in Ecuador without learning the language. In many cases, they are right. They get by. However, their experiences are most likely less rewarding because they cannot communicate outside of their immediate living quarters. Effective communication, made possible by knowing the language, is essential when working daily with orphanage workers, getting to and from places, shopping, participating in church, and doing almost anything outside of the OSSO house. Not only do language skills contribute to friendly relationships, but your efforts to learn the language breed mutual respect. Efforts to learn and speak the language demonstrate to native Ecuadorians that you are genuinely interested in them and their culture.

Before returning to the United States, I had an interview with the head nun at one of the orphanages. She asked me to answer a few questions on paper and was impressed when I answered them in Spanish. Before I left her office she urged me to tell the OSSO volunteers to learn the language. She really stressed its importance and seemed to believe it would make the greatest difference in the volunteers' environment.

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Unfortunately, even if you become familiar with the language you will almost unavoidably make some blunders. But don't let that discourage you from learning, communicating, building friendships and mastering the language. People love to help you learn, and when you make an effort to do so, it shows that you care. Most likely, you will even be able to share a few laughs with your new friends about the silly things you've said. Take a few personal examples from past volunteers.

- When one volunteer leaned over and told a little girl, “Tu chicle huele como mente” the girl’s father immediately burst out laughing. He then explained that the volunteer had said, “Your gum smells like brains” (mente) rather than “Your gum smells like mint” (menta).
- Guards in some buildings sometimes choose to lock the elevators for safety and must manually unlock them in order for people to use them. After one volunteer got on the elevator and pushed the fifth floor button, it refused to close. She poked her head out and emphatically pointed at the elevator and repeated, “¡No trabaja! ¡No trabaja!” (It doesn't work!). The guard smiled and kindly unlocked the elevator. Someone else later explained to her that “trabaja” refers only to people while “funciona” refers to machines. She had been, in effect, telling the guard that the elevator didn't have a job.
- One day after a hard exercise workout, a volunteer walked into the kitchen and exclaimed, “Tengo calor!” (I'm hot!). The Ecuadorian cook was quick to correct her. While in Chile and other countries, “Tengo calor” means “I'm hot” or “It's hot,” in Ecuador it has a sexual connotation indicating arousal, so be careful, as connotations can change from one country to another.

You'll inevitably make some mistakes, but remember that you're not the only one, but people will appreciate your efforts, and everyone will have a few good laughs.

Works Cited

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