

CULTURE SHOCK – PART II

Contrasting Cultural Values

The United States and Ecuador have very different cultures. This lesson will note some of these differences so that you will be better prepared to handle the contrasting cultural values you will encounter during your stay in Ecuador.

Time Sense

As strange as it may sound, time sense varies from culture to culture. In the United States, people are very future, or goal oriented. They like to be prepared for the future by making arrangements for everything beforehand. They buy insurance for everything: health, fire, auto, theft, flood and even death. Ecuadorians on the other hand could be qualified as a past-present oriented culture. Time commitments may vary depending on the person's circumstances or in the way society as a whole has performed daily activities traditionally. Ecuadorians, for the most part, are more interested in their daily chores and how each day brings with it its routine challenges. Emphasis is placed in being consistent with the traditional ways of doing things, maintaining their natural flow and worrying mostly about how to accomplish what is at hand. This characteristic also helps us understand other aspects of time orientation and informality.

Time Orientation: Polychronic vs. Monochronic

One important aspect of Ecuadorian culture is the idea of polychronic time (P-time). In North America, where we are on monochronic time (M-time), we are very involved with a set schedule and prefer to do one thing at a time. We are concerned with making appointments and taking one's turn. On the other hand, Ecuadorians tend to view people as a higher priority than schedules. Time is more fluid. For them, "the schedule is not internalized as it is for North Americans or Europeans; it is external and carries less weight than networks of family and friends. Thus, according to Hall, being late does not convey a negative message and is not seen as an insult. Of course, what is considered late is also different in Latin American cultures" (Landis & Bhagat, 340).

To illustrate this, one example may be a ward party. Do not be offended if everyone else shows up half an hour late, or even an hour late. In a social event of this kind it is even advisable to arrive a little late. However, don't expect that all events will be late. Although it's culturally and traditionally acceptable to arrive a little late for a party, it is not wise, for example, to arrive late for a flight, as the plane will leave as scheduled and you will not be on it.

Informality

Continuing with this emphasis on past orientation and prioritization of people, tradition also influences the way you address people. As a general rule, avoid informality. The use of the **usted** pronoun will always be respectful. It is not considered proper to address an older person by using the **tú** pronoun. The use of this pronoun places both subjects on equal ground. People older than you are not your equals. Using **tú** shows that you do not acknowledge the age difference, which implies life experience and wisdom. However, **tú** is also a pronoun that expresses affection and closeness. Be respectful to others and feel privileged when you are given the "go ahead" to address someone as **tú**. It is a way of showing that you are esteemed and trusted. Wait until a

higher authority addresses you as tú. Also, you can use tú with kids; it conveys caring and affectionate feelings to kids.

Terminology

In addition to the proper way you address people, it is important to recognize the way you address Ecuadorians as a whole. Most “Latinos” as we here in North America have categorized them, actually refer to themselves by country (Ecuadorian, Colombian, Argentine, Nicaraguan, etc.), rather than as Latino. Just as people in North America do not think of themselves as Anglo American, people in Ecuador and most other Latin American countries do not think of themselves as Latino. It is best to refer to someone by their nationality than by the general term of Latino, but be certain of their country origins before doing so. It might be very offensive to call a visiting Peruvian an Ecuadorian, as the two peoples are very different in culture and customs. Just think of how someone from Texas would get offended if they were mistaken for a New Yorker—and this is within the same country!

In addition, to avoid controversy, use the term **North** American to denote your citizenship because Latin Americans point out that they are also “American.” To much of the rest of the world, North and South America are part of a single continent. Although citizens of Mexico and Canada are geographically North Americans, they are usually referred to as Mexicans and Canadians. The term North American is usually reserved specifically for U.S. citizens, but chances are you will be mostly called “gringo(a)”. This is the term most frequently used by Latinos to refer to members of the mainstream U.S. culture. Again, having in mind these little details about tradition, time orientation and the proper way of addressing people depending on their age and origin, will make your introduction to others more pleasant and less problematic.

Gender Roles

In Latin America, family unity and parental roles are clearly defined and highly valued. In regard to masculinity and fatherhood, the lowest or “worst” thing a man can do is to disgrace his family by not fulfilling his family obligations (Hombres y machos pgs. 107-115). Unlike the U.S., when a woman is abandoned by her partner the fault and disgrace falls primarily on him, because he was not “macho” enough to be responsible for his actions. With regard to masculinity and fatherhood, the Latin male’s highest priority is his duty to his family. These defined male responsibilities in Latin culture have become known collectively as machismo.

In dealing with femininity and motherhood, “the ideal woman was traditionally viewed as one who remained totally above reproach and was submissive” (Lisansky). Hence, women were viewed as subordinate. Although the clearly defined gender roles in Latin America appear to be shifting, the greatest change can be seen in the upper classes; many of the lower classes have held on to traditional views on gender roles.

Machismo

Because there is no universal norm or form of machismo, each demonstration of machismo in society is limited by country- and culture-specific cases. There are both negative and positive aspects to machismo. The negative aspects tend to be more prevalent in the lower urban classes where most of the children in the orphanages come from. Some believe that there is a strong link between the number of children in the orphanage and the prominence of negative aspects of

machismo. For example, negative machismo may say it is manly for a man to father children from several different women, but traditional Catholicism and modern feminism say that it is unacceptable for a man to have a mistress and her children that he supports and visits in a separate household (a practice not too uncommon in the past).

Machismo may say a man must always provide for his biological children in his home, but negative machismo does not accept the concept of a man treating step-children, foster children and adopted children as his own. Those children are the offspring of another man and are not his real flesh and blood and are likely to be rejected. Negative machismo says real men can be sexually promiscuous but a woman who has had sex before is not a suitable marriage partner. Thus, a single mother may not be able to support her child alone but cannot find a partner willing to make a long-term commitment. This may lead to a desperate woman faced with giving up her children that she cannot feed or living with a man who will support her for a time and then leave her possibly with more children than before.

“For many North Americans and Europeans machismo conjures up the image of aggressive males showing off, competing with each other, and dominating women. A more accurate interpretation...is that Latin men behave in accordance with their image of what a man should be: strong, respected, and capable of protecting and providing for women and his family (Hutchinson and Poznanski 88).”

Machismo and Romance

It’s important for volunteers to realize that because of some negative aspects of machismo dating and romantic relationships are very different. Many men with negative machismo tendencies feel like their woman belongs to them. They may define their woman as their wife, their girlfriend, or whatever woman they happen to be with. This means that if a North American volunteer allows herself to be alone in what seems to her a typical dating-type situation she puts herself in great danger. The man may feel totally free to do whatever he wants because the woman’s rights mean nothing—she is his.

Children

“When a newborn arrives in the world, independent of its particular culture, it has many basic needs that require immediate attention. How these needs are met and the manner in which infants are socialized varies considerably across cultures and often among ethnic groups within a single society” (Gardiner and Kosmitzki, 57). When you arrive at the orphanage, experienced volunteers and workers will train you on the childcare methods used there. It is important to remember that “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” (Rex Head, M.D., OSSO Executive Director). As you enter the orphanage, please respect the way they are doing things. A natural reaction for many volunteers is to criticize the way the orphanage does things, because that way is very different from their own experience with childcare. Please be sensitive to the fact that the way you know to take care of children is not necessarily the best way, especially since you were raised in a North American culture with North American parents, so your knowledge may not pertain to Ecuadorian children in an Ecuadorian culture.

Frugality

Another point to keep in mind is that the orphanages must be very frugal with their limited resources. Rex Head, M.D., OSSO Executive Director, noted that “we had a volunteer spend hundreds of OSSO’s dollars on expensive jeans for the girls in the girls’ house when less expensive Ecuadorian clothes would have been a better use of funds. The nuns are very frugal and use clothes and shoes until they are very worn. Even if we donate new things it is not appropriate for us to insist that they throw out their ideas of frugality so that we can see the kids in the cute new things we bought.” Please remember the economical nature of the orphanages and that funds are best spent on needs.

Additional Suggestions for Reducing Culture Shock

Lesson 1 of this series provided information about the four stages of culture shock (Honeymoon, Irritation, Gradual Adjustment and Biculturalism) and four suggestions for adapting to your new environment. In addition, the following suggestions are simple ideas that might help you to move from Irritation to Gradual Adjustment. We hope these ideas will help make your stay more comfortable.

1. Understand that learning about Ecuador is a process that continues throughout your stay in the country. While these lessons will help prepare you for the change, experience is always the best teacher.
2. As soon as possible after your arrival, become familiar with your immediate physical surroundings. Have some of the experienced volunteers show you the fun and safe places to shop and visit.
3. Within the first several days of arrival, work on familiarizing yourself with some of the basic, everyday survival skills. These include learning to use the taxis, the phone system, the mail system and other necessary forms of communication and transportation.
4. Try to understand your hosts in terms of their culture rather than your own. Remember that Ecuadorians have had completely different experiences than you have had. For example, Ecuadorians may dress themselves and their children in sweaters, scarves and hats when it’s 55° F. At this temperature you may only require a light jacket, but for them, it doesn’t get much colder than that.
5. Particularly in the beginning, learn to live with the ambiguity of not having all the answers.
6. Make a conscious effort to be empathetic—that is, to be able to put yourself in the other person’s shoes.
7. Understand that flexibility and resourcefulness are key elements to adapting to a new culture. Your plans may fail and your expectations may be disappointed, but learn to adjust and to keep moving. Roll with the punches.
8. Learn to postpone making a judgment or decision until you have all of the required information.
9. Learn to listen, not just to speak.
10. Don’t lose your sense of humor. Everyone makes mistakes when submerged in a new environment. If you can laugh at what you do, you are less likely to get frustrated.
11. Don’t limit yourself to only socializing with other North Americans. Try to build friendships with Ecuadorian co-workers, volunteers, kids and ward members.
12. Be adventurous. You are in an exciting new world. Don’t be naïve and foolish thinking that you can traverse wherever you please. Ecuador definitely has it’s dangerous places

just as North America does, but don't be afraid to explore the safe places. "There are places to explore, people to meet, customs to learn, food to eat, music and art to experience" (Ferraro, 140). You will have a richer experience as you explore.

13. Learn to manage stress. Do what it takes for you to relax. You might jog, play soccer or volleyball, do yoga or read books.
14. Take appropriate health precautions. You are going to be exposed to new bacteria and viruses that your body is not used to combating. You will probably suffer from some illness during your stay, but be sure to protect against devastating diseases by getting your vaccines. Drink clean water, wash your hands frequently and eat well-balanced meals. It's not hard to take precautions, but it is hard to enjoy work and play when you are sick.
15. Let go of home (for now). You'll want to keep in touch, but you won't want to be so emotionally dependent on home that you cannot enjoy the experience.
16. Avoid over-reliance on cultural generalizations. We have provided you with some cultural generalizations, but keep in mind that every culture is unique, as is every situation and every person within a culture.
17. Maintain your confidence. Maintain your confidence in yourself and in Ecuadorians. You may make some mistakes, but your goodwill will come across eventually. If you let them know that you are trying to learn from them, they will most likely be happy to help you.
18. Have fun! For most people, these kinds of experiences are rare. So make the most of it and have a great time. (Ferraro, 139-140)

Works Cited

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