Cultural Guidance for Sojourners

“I’m a little nervous about going to a place I’ve never been before. I don't speak any Spanish. I've never been anywhere in Latin America. I don't know what's right and wrong to do there, and I think I'll feel out of place.”

These thoughts were voiced by a man considering traveling to Central America on a Center for Global Education travel seminar. In expressing his anxieties about crossing cultural boundaries, he articulated feelings that some travel seminar participants—regardless of where they are going—are reluctant to acknowledge.

In actuality, many participants find that there is less cross-cultural interaction on a travel seminar than they had anticipated. For most of the scheduled program, you will be together with the other participants. And in general, the program takes a very "North American" shape—the scheduling is intense, most activities have a well-defined purpose, and all presentations are either given in or translated into English.

So although the schedule may include some experiences which are explicitly cross-cultural (such as an overnight family stay), many of the intercultural aspects are less readily identifiable, sometimes causing unrecognized strain. There are, however, ways to prepare for adapting to inter-cultural dynamics on the travel seminar. For example, it is often helpful to recognize common reactions to cultural differences, and heed some specific pointers from Center for Global Education staff.

Crossing Cultural Boundaries

In our home contexts, we are adept at drawing on cues to make sense of our experience and to figure out appropriate ways of behaving. We generally know what other people mean when they speak our language, when to end a conversation, what hand motions to use to punctuate our speech, what are commonly understood ways to drive in traffic, etc. In fact, we know these things so well that we don't think about them much. But when one moves into a new cultural context, those old cues are absent. The new context has its own cues which local folks know how to use. The term "culture shock" applies to the confusion and discomfort that arise in trying to make sense of the new context and act appropriately.

Much has been written about different manifestations of culture shock. Kalervo Oberg identifies four stages of successfully moving through culture shock to adaptation: 1) Honeymoon; 2) Hostility; 3) Humor; and 4) Home.¹

In the honeymoon stage, the cultural sojourner can be enamored with virtually everything the new context has to offer. “The people are so friendly and courteous.” "The way people

value their families is so beautiful." "The tropical plants are gorgeous." "People seem so relaxed, unrushed; they really have their priorities straight." "Despite their poverty, people are incredibly generous." "People here really know how to enjoy life." Not everyone passes through the honeymoon stage. Some go directly to experiencing hostility. Hostility can take several forms and can be directed at different objects.

One form of hostility is rejecting the host culture and its people. Some common reactions, particularly from Anglo North Americans, are: "People (systems/traffic/etc.) here are irrational." "Things are so untidy here/people are so dirty." "People here are hypocritical; they say one thing but then do another." "Things are so inefficient/people don't plan ahead/people are lazy." "People here are supposed to be open and warm, but they're actually very cold."

Often travelers long to return, not because life seems calmer at home, but because most things make sense there.

In rejecting the host culture, some people withdraw. They may do this by requiring unusual amounts of sleep, saying they are too sick to participate in the program, or simply being silent.

Others reject the host culture by idealizing things which represent home. For example, some people focus on traffic behavior, concluding that in contrast to drivers in the new context, drivers back home seem highly rational, considerate, and safety-conscious. What the cultural sojourner may not recognize is that traffic behavior has taken on a larger meaning for him; the seemingly chaotic driving patterns symbolize the broader confusion of culture shock. He longs for home, not because traffic seems calmer there, but because most things there make sense to him.

Hostility may also be directed toward one's home culture. This may be difficult to distinguish from the honeymoon experience. For example, an individual enchanted with her new surroundings may conclude that, in contrast to the people of the new context, North Americans are selfish, materialistic, cold, up-tight, etc.

The difficulty of contending with this form of hostility is that the cultural sojourner may feel she is dealing with her new context in the "correct" way. She believes she is slow to judge things using the values from her home context; she is flexible and open to new things and ready to affirm the value of how things are done in the new context. But this can create hostility toward the other North Americans in the group; she rejects them and, by making generalizations about all people from her home context, rejects herself as well.

This raises the importance of recognizing diversity among participants. Differences in economic class, education, home region, gender, race, ethnic roots, sexual orientation, mother tongue and other factors can contribute to a greater diversity than may be apparent at first glance. Without a general atmosphere of acceptance in the group—strengthened by conscious efforts to cultivate openness to different viewpoints and experience—participants
who do not identify with the majority of the other participants can find the travel seminar an isolating experience.

Other potential objects of hostility are the group leader or on-site staff. Natural differences in personality can be exacerbated when a participant projects some of his anxiety onto these leaders. The participant might feel his or her uneasiness would disappear if only the leader paid more attention to him or her, handled group dynamics differently, or gave more information. He or she might conclude that on-site staff should have arranged a less intense schedule, or included more visits of a certain type. Any one of these complaints may be valid, but a participant experiencing culture shock can give these grievances disproportionate weight.

Oberg’s third stage, humor, is reached when one is willing to make light of his or her confusion. Laughter eases the tension of not knowing what is appropriate or how to make sense of something. Easing the tension, in turn, frees one to ask questions and continue learning.

The final "home" phase indicates the cultural sojourner has reached a general level of comfort with her new context. She may still have many questions and awkward moments, but she has also grown comfortable with a certain level of discomfort. She experiments with strategies to learn what she needs to know. She recognizes strengths and weaknesses of the cultures of both her home and new contexts. She accepts her own background while striving to grow more sensitive to how other cultures perceive the U.S.

The most expedient way to move toward the humor and home phases is to develop friendships with folks from the area. As trust develops, your new friends can instruct you in appropriate behavior and unveil some of the "mysteries" of your new context.

Of course, these four phases are more applicable to longer cultural encounters than a 10-14 day travel seminar. But some general principles can be extrapolated:

- Recognize some signs of culture shock for what they are:
  - overenthusiasm about people and things in the new context
  - withdrawal
  - obsessiveness (e.g., over traffic, cleanliness, being "neutral," getting a call through to home)
  - complaints about people and things in the new context
  - hostility toward other participants or Center for Global Education staff

- Recognize diversity within the group and cultivate an atmosphere of openness to different points of view and experience.

- Keep a sense of humor and adventure.