

## **CULTURE SHOCK IN A RAINBOW OF COLORS.**

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During the years 2000 and 2001, I had the unique opportunity to participate in the fifth and sixth editions of the Canada-World-Youth-MINED (Cuban Ministry of Education) Program as a supervisor of two groups (one each year) of eighteen participants (nine from each country). This article is a result of the the impact I personally received from having been suddenly transplanted abroad and having been another victim of all the confusion caused by the "disease" of *culture shock*.

I would like to make some remarks about this affection on the grounds you could be in the same situation some day. Culture shock is said to be an occupational disease and individuals differ greatly in the degree in which it affects them. In the editorial Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment to new Cultural Environments by Dr. Lalervo Oberg, anthropologist working in Brazil, he states:

*"Culture Shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse".*

These signs can be translated into the many customs, cues and norms in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: how to greet people, when to accept or refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not, when to pay in an invitation and when not and how to interpret values. In a new culture, cues are not familiar or easy to interpret. You start feeling like "the odd man out". Despite of your best intentions, you begin to feel frustrated and profoundly homesick because all or most of your cues have been removed. Then, a new process starts.

### **The process of adjustment to the new culture.**

Each individual adapts differently to the new cultural environment and each of us may experience different steps or stages during this process.

*The honeymoon.* Everything is new and exciting. Your favorite color is blue or pink because that is the way you are likely supposed to picture all the things that surround you.

*Loss of control.* The excitement is gone. Differences start to emerge. Questions about how to deal with people come out. The commonest symptoms are

frustration, fatigue, nostalgia, stereotype tendencies, poor energy, discomfort and confusion. There is a tendency to only see the negative aspects of the host country. You are likely to see everything in white or blue or black or yellow, either color is fine, anyway, you don't feel sure any more.

*Adjustment.* Everything starts making sense. You can communicate better. You have made some friends and you feel more comfortable with the community in general. You accept the new culture as another way of living life. You may not agree, but you accept and understand the differences. You start to see the world with blue or pink stripes.

*Back home.* You start feeling your changes. You have confusing thoughts regarding your return home and badly try to recall to memory your favorite color again.

Obviously not everybody experiences all these stages with the same intensity. In my case, I did not go through all the stages, but it is my belief I never skipped culture shock. During my first days in the host country I found many things were different: the weather, the smells, the noises, the colors, the language, the life style and the people. I really had the impression I had to perform in a theater play without having read the script. By this time, I was not sure about the job I was going to do because it was my first time abroad and I had never done any exchange program like this before.

As soon as my honeymoon finished, I started to feel uncomfortable with some situations I was facing in my routine work with my country and host participants. There are huge challenges you may face working in a cross-cultural context and whenever I was before one of them, an alternative question came out of my mind: **Am I facing a personal or a cultural conflict?**

One of the toughest times I had, arose from the interpretation of values and concepts like *respect, sharing and solidarity* and from the recognition of the sort of difference I faced in each ambiguous or difficult situation as well. It is really very interesting to see the different connotations the words *respect* and *sharing* may have when they are seen from a cultural perspective. For instance, in the Cuban culture since you are a child your parents teach you the following saying: "The little

you have, you always share it” and you easily distinguish this sharing quality in any Cuban native you have probably met. However, I invite you to read one of my stories.

During my first experience with the program, I remember it was a tradition in my group whenever any working session was over, the two facilitators (one from each country) would distribute some cookies among participants. Cookies were always enough for everybody till one day something happened with the money and the facilitators could not buy cookies for each of the participants. Then, they decided to give a cookie per each pair of counterparts to be shared at the end of the activity. When this moment arrived, all the cookies to be given out had disappeared. One of the host participants had made a “joke”. He had taken the cookies and distributed them among his countrymen.

Obviously, this fact provoked a sort of conflict among participants including myself and each one gave different degrees of importance to the matter. To Cubans it was a matter of respect and sharing. To host participants, it was just a “joke” they were used to doing since they went to school for the first time, and at no time thought about being disrespectful.

In another situation, cultural differences made me feel uncomfortable again. To Cubans it is not acceptable to open the door of a refrigerator and help yourself without permission in a house where you do not know people very well. It is seen as if you were breaking the familiar rules of the house and were disrespectful. To host participants, this is a natural or routine action and in some occasions we found that the owners of the house felt pleased if you liked something they had in their refrigerator. For some weeks, I kept misjudging them considering my own cultural patterns.

On the other hand, there was something, which really stroke me and reinforced my cultural shock. In my country, in terms of *solidarity* we find no boundaries of age, sex, nationality, race and beliefs in order to help someone in need. This is a quality we grow with so that we are always ready to be helpful any time and under any circumstances. However, I found myself in a country where people generally have another way of dealing with *help*. In their conception, you

should help only if you are asked and if the occasion deserves it. Consequently, the individual learns he has to do everything by himself/herself since he/she is born and needs to count on nobody else but he/she to succeed in life. It is hard to remember how embarrassed and shocked I felt the many times I offered my help and it was refused, the old man at the Mall who could hardly move his shopping cart, the woman carrying a lot of plastic bags and the young boy who fell down before a crowd of people at the entrance of a school.

Immersed in this process of adjustment, another question arises out of my mind: **How much can I adapt or/ and adopt?**

Certainly, I know there are different scales of values and they are influenced by the milieu in which we have grown up, by our life experience, and by our own culture. There are many possibilities in the answer to this question. In my view, we can adapt to a new culture. But our own cultural baggage (costumes, traditions, values, beliefs) together with our life expectations is essential to decide whether you want to adopt something from this adaptation. I really prefer to think that in order to overcome my culture shock it was not a good idea to adopt any particular attitude from this new culture. I just tried to adapt.

There is no exact recipe to get rid of this “disease”, and I absolutely believe we can prevent it or minimize it if we are aware of the many reactions we may have. I would suggest being patient, positive, and tolerant and not generalizing the situations.

Far from making any sort of criticism of the host country, I have just preferred to highlight some of the numerous challenges I experienced during the Canadian phase of the program, which made me grow more personally and professionally. Programs like these will always bring conflicts and development as well.

#### References:

- Canada-World-Youth Handbook. Article: Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment to new Cultural Environments by Dr. Oberg Lalervo, 2000.