

Costa Rica a Collectivistic Culture

For my study abroad experience I am currently living in San Ramón, Costa Rica. Every day that I have been here has been an adventure, in the best way possible. The “Ticos” (Costa Ricans) are so welcoming, friendly, and eager to talk about why Costa Rica is so awesome. Since living here I have noticed many similarities as well as differences. I have observed in myself growth, maturity, and confidence. A confidence that continues to grow because of the Costa Ricans’ willingness to help in many aspects. Culturally, the Costa Ricans are proud. They are quick to defend their country and correct any presumed stereotypes. As one of the members of my host family said, “Costa Rica is not just a jungle, we are a modernized country with lots of technology.” This stereotype, that Costa Rica is an ancient town in a jungle, has proven to be false as my host family uses lots of modern appliances that also exist in America.

Paradoxical attitudes and behaviors are defined as preconceived perceptions of a culture or presumptive stereotypes, in comparison to the legitimacy of a culture; or ideas that are contradicting in nature (Osland and Bird, 2000). For example, because Costa Rica is located in a tropical climate near the equator with lots of vegetation and animals, a paradoxical attitude could be the preconceived notion that all of Costa Rica is surrounded by a jungle, that it is a very underdeveloped country, and one would need to bring their own supplies in order to live comfortably. This is a pre-formulated conception that has been exaggerated. Yes, there are jungles in Costa Rica, however most of the country is very developed and up to date on all of the world’s latest technology. Sophisticated stereotyping has limitations that become evident when one is directly confronted with a cultural paradox (Osland and Bird, 2000). Confrontation will allow one to realize their misunderstanding and correct their mistake (Osland and Bird, 2000). Cultural learning is characterized as an ongoing dynamic process that helps one develop knowledge and skills generalizable to other intercultural experiences (Brubaker, 2007). Studying abroad is a unique opportunity that allows one to be directly immersed in a culture and come face to face with any preconceived stereotypes; thus, expanding one’s cultural competency, open-mindedness, and respect towards different cultures.

One noticeably different behavior in Costa Rica is the cultural practice of collectivism. Collectivism is defined as assigning priority to a group of people rather than the individual. In Costa Rica families live together until the “kids” get married. If a family has a child in college, the child will continue to live at home as a way to save money and stay together longer. It is hard for them to understand that in the United States we move out of our homes at age 18 and live with roommates or on our own. It is unheard of for someone to live alone in Costa Rica. My host mom is a great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, sister, and so much more. Her husband passed away a few years ago, so she now lives with her sister. Every day when I come home from school, she always has family over. She has a large number of cousins who live nearby, and they are always calling her or stopping by to check in and hang out with her. Costa Rica lives by the motto of “family takes care of family.”

In America, the culture is very individualistic. An individualistic culture is defined as being independent and self-reliant. In America, it is culturally accepted to put yourself first. It is more common for one to spend time with their immediate family and only see cousins, grandparents, etc. during holidays and vacations. This is largely in part because Americans live an extremely busy lifestyle. According to The American Institute of stress, 77 percent of people experience stress that affects their physical health and 73 percent of people have stress that impacts their mental health (The Recovery Village, 2022). The Global Organization for Stress reports that 75 percent of Americans experienced moderate to high stress levels in the past

month, 80 percent of people feel stress at work, and stress is the number one health concern of high school students (The Recovery Village, 2022). The question is, does stress in Americans arise from a busy lifestyle or rather, from an individualistic culture?

In conclusion, it is important to come into a study abroad experience with an open mind and an eagerness to learn and immerse oneself into the culture. By focusing on cultural learning, students are at an increased ability to gain insight into a culture and to develop and practice skills directed towards cultural awareness, inquiry, and understanding (Brubaker, 2007). Another study's results concluded that "approximately half of the responses reported that the field trips and interactions with the community were the most influential aspects of their program" (Strange and Gibson, 2017). From my personal experience, I agree with the previous statement. I have learned more just from interacting with the Costa Ricans, speaking the language, and being eager to try new things. Their collectivistic culture is one that I admire and hope to implement more upon my return to America. I hope to spend more time with my family and friends with a mindset of "we" rather than "me."

References

- Osland, J. S., & Bird, A. (2000). Beyond sophisticated stereotyping: Cultural sensemaking in context. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 14(1), 65-77.
- “Stress Facts, Statistics and Trends: The Recovery Village.” *The Recovery Village Drug and Alcohol Rehab*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/mental-health/stress/stress-statistics/>.
- Strange, H., & Gibson, H. J. (2017). An investigation of experiential and transformative learning in study abroad programs. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 29(1), 85-100.
- Brubaker, C. (2007). Six weeks in the Eifel: A case for culture learning during short-term study abroad. *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, 118-123.