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Person to Person in Ecuador

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Field Notes From Abroad: Person to Person in Ecuador

Not only during the interview, but also through my observations while living in Ecuador I noticed a great many differences in norms and habits. For example, as a greeting people kiss each other on the cheek, a great deal of salt is added to everything, the drinking age is younger, and lunch is eaten much later (and it is the most important meal of the day, it's huge!). But I was most surprised by the different pace of life they have here in Ecuador. Not only literally, but also by means of perspective. Even though everyone here is busy with work and school, their outlook seems to be a much more relaxed 'day by day' perspective. My friend from the university whom I interviewed, as well as many others I've talked to, on the whole, do not seem to have as much planned out in their future years in comparison to many of my friends at Linfield. Even more surprising is that they seem less worried about their futures as well. That isn't to say they don't care, it just seems to me that many of my friends (and myself included) are extremely stressed about future career options, relationships, money, housing etc., while Ecuadorians seem to be a bit more optimistic. One explanation I can offer is that it is common here for children to live at home until their late twenties, and even live at home while attending a university. My friend told me that she doesn't have to worry about her financial situation as much because she lives at home. In the U.S. living at home could be considered a social stigma, children feel the need to move out, it's not as acceptable as in Ecuador. Just from experience another difference I've noticed is the difference in time. When someone from Ecuador says 20 minutes, you can most likely be expected to wait for over an hour, another aspect related to the laid back nature of things here.

The culture here is also less individualistic than the U.S. Ana (my friend that I interviewed) told me that families here depend on each other a lot, also seen by the earlier social norm of children living at home for a longer period of time. Just by living with a family here I can see that. My host family seems to check up on me every hour, while at Linfield I am usually left alone until I look for someone. I was also curious about the homework differences I noticed. At Linfield I'm busy every day with cross-country and lots of homework every night, whereas here I find myself with a lot of free time. Ana told me that it's common to have more free time - not that there isn't homework, just a much smaller amount. As for similarities the friends I've made here are not that different from friends I have at home. Although we speak different languages with different slang, students here love to socialize, they love to go out to eat and enjoy each other's company, maybe see a movie or go dancing one night. They even listen to a lot of music that's popular in the U.S. Another thing I noticed and inquired about was a different kind of relationship, the romantic one. Ana explained that since children live at home for so long it's not always acceptable for boyfriends/girlfriends to come over and so there is a lot of public affection, and almost everyone I've met is in a relationship, and if I had to guess I'd say there is a much higher percentage of couples here than in the US. Some things Ana told me that surprised me, were A) abortion is illegal and B) prostitution, on the other hand, is legal. Ecuador is a very Catholic country and as such many of the laws here are tied into religious beliefs (so I was a bit surprised to hear about the law regarding prostitution.)

One of my biggest struggles here was the poverty I've seen. It's not uncommon to see children here working, selling food on the buses or on the streets, helping to support their families. I asked Ana about child labor laws, and she said there were laws against it, but that they were not highly enforced. Many people in poverty here make their living by selling gum or chocolates on the street, and I get especially sad to see children as young as 6 years old, by themselves, trying to make a living. But poverty is a daily experience; even some of the nicer houses here are much smaller than an average sized house in the U.S. It really adds perspective, and makes me grateful for what I have.

Most of what we discussed in the interview I'd already observed from living here (in fact, many of the questions posed here are similar to those asked of me by my Ecuadorian friends at school) but nevertheless they have challenged me to view the U.S. in a different light. For example, although I really admire the work ethic of the U.S. I've also really come to appreciate the more 'live for the moment' lifestyle here. I think a balance between the two would be preferable, because forward thinking does promote progress, but I also think you can't live every day stressing about every minute detail of the future. I've also really come to admire Ecuador as well. Although I sometimes grow frustrated at the cultural differences here, the people are very friendly and open and generous, even through all the poverty I've seen here I think the general attitude is very optimistic. I think Ecuador is a very undervalued country, I didn't know much about it before applying to study abroad, but it's a beautiful country and I'm learning a lot!

Interviewee: Ana Escobar, student at Universidad de San Francisco de Quito, 3/19/2012