

The Use of Cultural Wealth and Humility During Travel

By Conrad Rodriguez

When I traveled with the Guatemala Project this January, I anticipated that week and a half to be full of mistakes and learning moments. Anyone's first time on a work trip in a different country requires them to have a more open mind than that of a tourist. From as early as the plane ride in, I could tell that it was going to be a very new experience for me. Looking out the window and seeing a landscape previously unfamiliar to me, I wondered how well my lived experiences as a Costa Rican would help me here.

What I experienced over the course of those ten days was a test of both my cultural wealth, and my cultural humility. Cultural wealth can be defined as “the knowledge, skills, and experiences that individuals from diverse backgrounds bring” (Thompson), and cultural humility has been described as “a process of self-reflection and discovery to understand oneself and then others in order to build honest and trustworthy relationships” (Tervalon). My personal cultural wealth aided me and my team, specifically in that I felt comfortable speaking the language, connecting with the locals, and generally navigating the culture. Yet, like my teammates, I had gaps in my knowledge. There were moments where I needed to employ cultural humility to learn about the differences between Guatemalan and Costa Rican culture, or more interestingly, Guatemalan and U.S. culture - One such example came up on the first day of work. Our task was to get a rudimentary understanding of where the existing system's springs, tanks, and pipes were. This meant long hikes through the mountains off beaten paths that were incredibly taxing for our team, but were no problem for the members of the community we were walking with. I had a suspicion of what the hike ahead of us would look like when the day began. I had done that type

of thing before with my tio (uncle), in Costa Rica. I recalled what it was like the first time my tio took me trekking through mountainous Latin American terrain, and how exhausting it was. Every time I would ask my tio how long we had left, he would tease me and say there was only a little bit more and continue on like it was nothing, because to him, it was nothing.

I noticed something similar happen as we followed the COCODE through the mountains, only they weren't teasing. Each time we asked how far we were, the only thing that changed in their answer was the intent behind it. At first, they were giving their genuine opinion that "it should only take about 30 minutes." As 30 minutes came and went though, it became clear they were only telling us what we wanted to hear. I eventually asked for us to take a shortcut back to a road, because I had recognized what was going on. What they honestly believed would be an easy hike just around the mountain would have taken us gringos another several hours. We took that shortcut, and looking at a map later revealed that hours of hiking only took us halfway to our final destination.

At first, I practiced cultural humility by listening to our fellow community members and trusting their experience in the area. I later utilized my cultural wealth; my knowledge and experience as both a Latino and American, to resolve the discrepancy between the blunt, business-first attitude (and hiking inexperience) of us visitors from the U.S. and the polite, people-pleasing nature of the Guatemalans we were working with.

Works Cited

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