

DOMINICANS vs. AMERICANS:
AN INTERCULTURAL SHOWDOWN

MOLLY MANNING
JUNE 19, 2002

DR. JIM WOOLLEY AND DR. TOM LACHER
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
STUDY ABROAD DOMINICA

ABSTRACT

Each year Texas A&M sends twenty students and 2 professors to the “Nature Island” of Dominica. Within three weeks, these undergraduates design and carry out projects, most of which are based in biological science. However, occasionally a student will conduct a project on the culture and social science of the Dominicans.

This project is designed to get inside the minds of both Dominicans and the students to explore the cultural differences and challenges that lie within the three-week encounter.

By interviews and observation, I have concluded that food, language, amenities and previous biases are the main issues between the two cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication is a very broad and complicated topic. As a speech communication major, I am challenged to find every angle to every story and interpret the interactions. Having taken intercultural communication classes at Texas A&M, I understand the basic complications that are inherent in these interactions. Ideally, I would be able to come to Dominica and observe the cultural differences without becoming involved or developing my own opinions. However, this was not the case.

Dominica is a unique place, and studying here has taught me a lot about cultural biases and challenges. In this paper I aim to explore the cultural differences between college students and Dominicans. Such a paper is subject to controversial opinions. Therefore I will offer my observations and interpretations as objectively as possible. Some will agree, some will not; but that debate is what makes the art so wonderful. Each individual has their own experiences and each individual will decide their own stance on certain issues. However, I hope to shed some light on the obvious and give some insight into where that takes us and where we go from here.

METHODS

To determine intercultural status of the students and professors, an assessment was made during the first week of the trip. Students and professors were asked about age, cultural heritage, religion, flight experience, languages spoken, and predicted cultural challenges. At the end of the trip, I interviewed the students again to assess the actual challenges they encountered. These interviews were recorded in a spreadsheet. (Appendix A).

To learn more about Dominican culture and history, *The Dominica Story* by Dr. Lennox Honychurch was referenced.

To determine how Americans were viewed and how certain customs were acted out, 6 Dominicans were interviewed:

Mona George-Dill, Manager Springfield Center for Environmental Policy Training and Education

Clem James, Driver and guide for majority of class' field trips, Ken's Hinterland Adventure Tours and Taxi service

Steinberg Henry, local radio personality

Richard Charles, Springfield employee

Sandra "Fifi" Phillip, Springfield employee

Eulina Pascal, Springfield employee

Michele "Chef" Durand, Springfield chef

Other Dominicans were interviewed by other students for the students' projects. These individuals were also referenced for general ideas, for interviewing and for intercultural observations.

Alex Bruno, local playwright and radio personality

Lennox Honychurch, Dominican social historian

Atherton Martin, President Caribbean Conservation Association

Other students interacted with the culture on a personal level. Some of these interactions were for project purposes, and other interactions were natural occurrences. From these interactions, students reported interesting facts, conversations and any complications that arose.

RESULTS

First, it is important to understand that inherent cultural differences between Dominicans and American students.

DOMINICAN STYLE	AMERICAN STYLE
*results based on 3 week study at SCEPTRE	*results based on generalities within most middle-class American lives
<u>DIET</u> – Chicken, rice, plantains, fish, ground provisions, fruits, juice	Anything and everything. Including, fast food, grease, cheese, and beef.
<u>ELECTRICITY</u> – very limited. European	Unlimited. 24-hour electricians, surge protectors,

style outlets, regular power surges and outtages.	back-up electricity facilities.
<u>AMENITIES</u> – Limited hot water, hand washed clothes dried on a clothesline, showers and baths taken in the rivers along with indoor bathrooms, limited TV, movie theaters, entertainment, no air-conditioning.	Rare loss of hot water, washing/drying machines, indoor shower/tub combos, TV's in more than one room in the house, movie theatres in almost every mid-size town, clubs, concerts, etc, standard central air and heating.
<u>LANGUAGE</u> –English (strongly accented to American ears) and Creole	English; other languages are spoken in various parts of the country, with English remaining standard language.
<u>RECREATION</u> – Cricket, hiking, swimming, soccer (football)	Unlimited.
<u>COLOR</u> – Majority: black skin	Majority: white skin.

I have pointed out these obvious cultural differences in order to discuss how the students dealt with each one. I have also referred to the students as “they”, and in the third person. I point this out because it is important to understand that I experienced each of these interactions with the group, and I had many challenges myself. Although I do not always state my conclusions in first person, I was very much a part of the intercultural experience of the entire group.

DIET- Most students had no problem adapting to Dominican diet. They enjoyed trying new things and experimenting with the new foods. Most students had decided before leaving the States that they would try all foods that were offered. However, by the first weekend, there were many conversations about what American foods were craved and what restaurants would “taste real good right now.”

Other students had a more difficult time. They found themselves trying the food in small portions, and simply not liking the taste. By the end of the three-week trip, some of the more picky students found themselves relying on store-bought American snacks and not eating the prepared dinners. Although this was a small number of students, it showed me that some biases are instilled deep. Food is an essential item in a person’s life, and yet something deep in these individuals’ minds would not allow them to like the taste of the foreign foods, therefore forcing them to find nutrients elsewhere.

Another example of food tolerance is the trip the students took to Dominica’s capitol of Roseau. Most students ate local foods, however some chose to eat at Kentucky Fried Chicken.

This attempt to normalize their diet instead of venturing through the streets to find a new food that would please them is a display of cultural intolerance.

ELECTRICITY – Since they were reliant upon technology and electricity to produce their projects at the end of the trip, some students (including myself) found it difficult to accomplish desired tasks with the resources they were given. At any moment there could be a power surge, therefore they would frequently save their work and keep an aware eye out for indications of such an event. Moisture also proved to be a major problem with diskettes and computers in general.

The outlets in Dominica are European style, therefore they had to use adaptors to power their equipment. Because of this, they found that items such as hair dryers, alarm clocks, battery chargers, and computers would overheat or stop working from time to time. To deal with this, they would adjust the power settings on their equipment, and try to use the items for as minimal amount of time as possible.

Occasionally, the power would completely go out. This was new to them because they are used to having a warning such as a thunderstorm or lightning strike to indicate the impending power outage. Such was not the case in Dominica. They sometimes found themselves planning “journal writing time” around the availability of electricity, and relying on candles and battery-powered lights to eat dinner. Dealing with electricity issues is an example of cultural tolerance and overcoming culture shock.

AMENITIES – Hot water was an issue for many of the students. The women’s room had hot water most of the time. However, the men and professors were without hot water for the majority (if not the entirety) of the trip. To deal with this, the men would shower faster, or in some cases, not at all. This is another example of overcoming culture shock.

Doing laundry was another challenge that they had to overcome. On any one day or another, students would be washing their clothes with laundry detergent (if someone had brought it or grabbed it from town) in the sinks and hanging them out to dry. For Dominicans this is a normal, everyday activity. For the students, it was challenging in that their clothes would come out stiff, still dirty, and in some cases, still stinky. Again, as the trip wore on, most of them vowed to throw away the clothes that never came clean and they began washing clothes less and less.

Entertainment was never a problem for the students. Although some of them may spend countless hours watching TV and going to movies in the States, only one student mentioned it as something he desired to do once back at home. And even then, he was referring to the relaxing action of sitting on the couch, not the act of watching TV. Therefore, they came up with

their methods of entertainment. They played cards, board games, talked with the locals, played in the river, or got to know one another. I was very impressed with the ease at which this group of students befriended the employees at Springfield and chose to talk with one another instead of selfishly passing the time. This simple act of self-entertainment is a wonderful example of cultural tolerance and acceptance.

The lack of air-conditioning was more of a culture shock than a trend. Like doing laundry and dealing with hot water, they were able to overcome the heat and accommodate with fans, wearing less clothes, or just “sweating it out”. This is another example of overcoming culture shock.

LANGUAGE – Because of interviews and every day interactions, language was a challenge for most of the students. Dominicans tend to speak in very fast, strongly accented English, and the students had to ask them to repeat themselves very often. Some of the students found this aggravating, since asking them to repeat themselves stalled the conversations and prevented them from conversing longer. However, I noticed that Dominicans didn’t mind repeating themselves, in most cases they would talk slower, realizing that the students were having a hard time understanding. Still, students that interviewed locals for their projects found language as a barrier to complete understanding. In some cases, the language barrier was so strong that students would find themselves ending the conversation or just smiling to get the topic to change.

Interestingly, in most interview cases, the well-spoken, articulate Dominicans were quoted more often than others. I also noticed that many students associated intelligence with ability to speak clearer English. Whether or not this assumption is unfounded is pending further research. The language barrier is neither culture intolerance nor culture shock, it is simply a barrier that requires a conscious effort to overcome.

RECREATION – Finding things to do, and enjoying the beautiful wonders that Dominica has to offer was never a challenge. The real challenge lies within the physical fitness of the group. It was apparent that the diet and everyday activity of Dominicans contributed greatly to the fitness of the people; their fitness highly exceeded the groups’. However, each student hiked from start to finish and made it out alive, challenging themselves every day.

In many cases, though, the students were anxious to get back to “relaxing” and spending their time in other ways. I think this is due to the nature of the study abroad program, not the culture. Having only three weeks on this small island, the program packed each day with research or adventure, leaving little time for relaxation.

COLOR – Perhaps the most obvious difference, yet most ambiguous barrier, is color.

While both countries house people from every skin color and corner of the globe, there could be harsh biases that surround Americans as opposed to other ethnicities.

Although interviews suggested that Dominicans like Americans and only feel animosity towards the government, some of the students felt threatened and unwelcomed by the locals.

In some cases, the students would be driving through town and locals would shout out “Go back whitey.” This made me very curious. Many of the people I interviewed have a high opinion of Americans. “We are human, whether we are black or white,” Michele Durand said about the western world. He says that Dominicans wish to make visitors feel happy and welcome, and he feels that Americans would want to treat him the same way. Mona George-Dill has been working with study abroad programs for over eight years now, and she feels that the students have an openness to learn and a hunger for education that she enjoys. Some employees of Springfield echo Ms. George-Dill. Sandra Phillip says that she, “feels at home with Americans. They are easy-going, will eat anything, and enjoy everything.” In fact, she said she would rather deal with Americans than Dominicans when it comes to serving them, because “Dominicans and Caribs make a fuss!” Clem James has been a driver and tour guide for the A&M program for 13 years. He says that he has never had a problem with the students and thinks they are exciting because they love the island so much. He does have a problem with the American government, but everyone that was interviewed, (with only one exception) separate the Americans and the American government. I also asked Mr. James, Mr. Durand, and Ms. George-Dill if they felt their opinion was indicative of the whole country. They said for the most part, Dominicans feel the same warmth towards Americans.

So why then, is there hostility in town? Are the students simply misinterpreting the shouts because of their own biases? Or have other countries voiced their American dislike so loudly that Dominica is just an innocent country with no bone to pick and the students are wrongly assuming they dislike us? These questions may never be answered, but one observation may lend some encouragement.

When the students traveled into town, and on many occasions when they drove through town, Dominican males would make a “hsst” sound at the women in the group. Many women were offended by this. However, I asked Ms. George-Dill what this meant and she said it means “Hey, look at me, or, “You’re cute.” Mr. Durand said it was not an offensive gesture at all. It was actually an effort to make the women aware of the man’s presence. Once the women in the group understood this, they were more comfortable with the situation and saw the noise as a compliment, not degradation.

So, given that one gesture was originally misunderstood, it could possibly be that Dominicans are fond of Americans, as the interviewees stated, and Americans are just being paranoid. Either way, we should always consciously make the effort to act as ambassadors to the United States and be on our friendliest behavior.

MONEY-SPENDING AMERICANS

Another issue that could not be classified in the above chart is Dominicans viewing Americans as money-making opportunities. One student did his project on the fishing industry of Dominica. He encountered one man, John Adams, who offered to take the student fishing one morning and teach him the tricks of the trade. The student graciously accepted and headed out with Mr. Adams one morning. Unfortunately, Mr. Adams was only using the student for \$90EC, because when they went fishing, not only did Mr. Adams not bring any gear, he taught the student nothing. Luckily for the student, he could observe other fishermen and actually did take away some knowledge.

Ms. George-Dill said that many Dominicans view Americans as a quick money-making opportunity. This could be due to the fact that many visitors are only here for one day or one night, as they are visiting from nearby islands. Therefore Dominicans seize the chance to make a quick sale, or in the case of the above student, take advantage of someone who they assume they will never see again.

Something I thought was interesting, however, is that the student told me that he would've reacted differently if someone from the States had treated him the same way John Adams did. This shows me that tolerance for ambiguity is existent in this group. Whenever someone reacts differently, to their own demise, towards one culture than they would towards their own suggests that the individual is blaming "the culture" for simply bad people. Many tourists and visitors can be sucked into this mindset.

For example, one of the first trips the students took into town was very exciting because the students were not used to driving on the left side of the road. They drove into crowded Roseau, and were cut off by a local who missed a stop sign. When this happened, one student said "That's just the culture, man. That's just the way they are." I think that is very interesting since the car horn system here is so complex that most cars don't cut each other off. However, it was easy for that student to throw the incident into the "culture barrel" because it was something he did not want to look down upon and seem culturally biased.

DISCUSSION (personal reflection)

I am very blessed to have had the opportunity to experience Dominica, and within my three weeks I have had intercultural experiences of my own. I never realized the effort and skill it takes to be a field biologist, and I have a new-found appreciation for the line of work that most of my fellow students carry out.

I have learned that defining a culture takes a lot longer than three weeks, it could take a lifetime. But assessing that culture and discovering what makes it unique is as simple as watching the locals and interviewing the knowledgeable, and as complicated as becoming one of them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I observed that this group as a whole is culturally aware and competent. There are some areas where individuals could overcome personal biases and expand their horizons, but that is left up to their discretion.

Dominicans appear to like Americans, especially the types that visit here, due to the open-mindedness of Americans and their love of adventure and nature. However, there are cultural barriers such as personal biases that Dominica as a country should overcome. I believe it is cultural intolerant to associate an entire group, like the citizens of the United States with a disliked entity like the US government.

Dominica is a beautiful country with so much to offer its visitors and tourists. We as Americans have an obligation to understand this country and all its people. If nothing else is taken from this nature island, let this be understood: Dominica is a natural resource of life and abundance. Its people thrive on providing for themselves and surviving within the world around them. The fact that the world's oldest woman, Ma Pambo, has lived her 127 years in Dominica is no coincidence. It is possible because Dominicans live healthily and happily.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the success of this project. Mona, Chef, Fifi, Richard, Eulina, Clem, Steinberg, and every one of the Springfield employees who worked so hard to make our stay enjoyable.

I would especially like to thank each of the students on the trip who tolerated my personal questions, soul-searching debates, and allowed me to sit in on there encounters. Without these 19 individuals, my project would've been complete speculation. So thanks to Joe Dickerson, Jessica Casey, Amanda Hooker, Meagan Meyer, Jonathan Millican, Seth Marable, Whit

Wolman, Sean Brigidam, Mike Police, John Schwarzlose, Danny Barrera, Adam Burkland, Michael Kerekgyarto, Lori Valentine, Will Morrison, Jennifer Morrison, Sidia Moreira, Neha Shah and Lara Lacher.

Also, a very special thanks goes out to the professors who made this possible, all the trips to town, the endless advice, the comforting laugh when I thought I would pull my hair out, and the chance to open my eyes to a world I knew ABSOLUTELY NOTHING about! Thank you Dr. Lacher and Dr. Woolley.

WORKS CITED

Honychurch, Lennox. *The Dominica Story: A History of the Island*. MacMillan Education Ltd.: London, 1995.