

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Peace Corps' cross-cultural training, one of the most challenging and rewarding dimensions of the toughest job you'll ever love.

This workbook, *Culture Matters*, is a map to guide you through your cross-cultural experience and also a way for you to record your thoughts and feelings as you live and work in your host country. It contains a variety of exercises, as well as stories and quotations from Volunteers who have served before you, from experts on cross-cultural training, and from the kind of people you might expect to meet in your new country. Their stories present the exhilaration, satisfaction, confusion, and frustration that are all part of being a Peace Corps Volunteer. These stories and quotations, we hope, will inspire you, sober you, make you laugh, and make you think. You can compare these sentiments to your own observations and reactions as you move deeper into the culture around you.

We all would like to find a magic pill for crossing cultures, the “right” answer, a simple list of do's and don'ts, and you will get some useful do's and don'ts from your trainers. But crossing cultures is a dynamic, complex process, where context is everything. A list of behaviors or a script can only take you so far, for what is a “do” in one set of circumstances might very well be a “don't” in another. This workbook will help you function outside the script, to understand the values and beliefs behind behavior, and, ultimately, how the local people think.

Cross-cultural training involves not only learning about the place you've come to, but comparing it to what you've come from—to the assumptions and values that have shaped you. In *Culture Matters*, therefore, you will be examining the behaviors and values of people in your host country in relation to those of people in your own. This workbook does not intend to suggest that American culture is necessarily superior or inferior to your host country's culture.

MAKING SENSE OF YOUR EXPERIENCE

You may wonder why you need such a workbook since you are, after all, living in the country and may even be living with a host family. Living in the country does expose you to the host culture, of course, but cross-cultural exposure is not cross-cultural knowledge. Having an experience, in other words, does not necessarily mean understanding it. You need to make sense of the contact you're having, which is what cross-cultural training and this workbook are designed to do.

Mystery is delightful and exciting, but it is foolish to admire it too highly. A thing is mysterious merely because it is unknown. There will always be mysteries because there will always be unknown and unknowable things. But it is best to know what is knowable.

—Aldous Huxley,
Along the Road

You may understand much of what's been happening to you, but many actions, attitudes, values—entire ways of thinking and behaving—may on occasion surprise, puzzle, or even shock you. On the other hand, you also may be unaware of what you have in common with host country nationals. People in any culture, for example, need to find an acceptable way to express anger, cope with sadness, manage conflict, show respect, demonstrate love, or deal with sexuality. As we examine the differences between two cultures, we are often looking at different ways of answering the same questions. If you don't notice the similarities, it's because the ways in which we act or think differently are what produce the most challenge and tension for us. What we have in *common* often goes unnoticed, but it is one of the most important parts of the Peace Corps experience.

THE GOAL IS UNDERSTANDING

In cross-cultural training and living, the goal is learning about yourself and others. Just as you want to learn another language so that you can communicate with local people and understand the new world around you, you also will want to learn the silent language of cultures—your own and your host country's.

In trying to appreciate the differences between your culture and the local one, you may feel that you're supposed to like and accept all these differences. Cultural sensitivity, however, means knowing about and respecting the norms of the local culture, not necessarily liking them. You may, in fact, be frustrated or even offended by certain acts. In some cases, increased understanding will lead to greater respect, tolerance, and acceptance; in others, it just leads to enhanced awareness. The goal in cross-cultural training is to increase your understanding, to give you a powerful set of skills, a framework to make sense of whatever you do and experience as a Volunteer so that you will be able to interact successfully with host country people. That is what will make you an effective Peace Corps Volunteer.

A COUPLE OF CAVEATS

It's impossible to talk about groups of people without generalizing, but without talking about groups, we can't talk about culture. In order to contrast and compare US Americans* and host country people, this workbook asks you to make a number of generalizations. Treat these generalizations with skepticism and wariness. They can give you potentially accurate and useful information, but the actual accuracy and usefulness will depend on the context and specific circumstances.

* For brevity and simplicity, we will use the term Americans to refer to US Americans. We do, however, wish to acknowledge a global perspective by recognizing those outside our nation's borders who share in the heritage of the name "America."

Americans, for example, may be regarded as individualists, but in some circumstances, Americans will be highly team oriented. Another concern with generalizations is that we instinctively feel uncomfortable making them or being the subject of them. They rob us of what makes us unique. To allow you to express your individuality, this workbook wherever possible gives you an opportunity to consider and record your personal views.

Keep in mind, too, that culture is just one of numerous influences on behavior. People can differ from each other in many other aspects as well. Could the miscommunication or misunderstanding between you and a host country national be the result of a difference in personality, age, generation, or gender, and not a cultural difference? Maybe you misinterpreted her or she misinterpreted you because she grew up in a city and you grew up on a farm. As you try to understand the role culture plays in behavior, remember that personal differences often play as great or even a greater role.

USING THIS WORKBOOK

Culture Matters has been designed mainly for independent study. You should move through the workbook at your own pace. On occasion, your trainers may conduct group sessions that deal with the same concepts covered in these pages, giving you the chance to share some of your feelings and reactions with other trainees and to hear theirs. In doing a number of the activities in this workbook, you will be asking questions of your host country friends, who will act as your cultural informants. Be ready for conflicting replies; that's part of the richness of culture.

Use the workbook in the ways that suit you. Some of you may complete every exercise your first few weeks in country; others of you may work with certain chapters in training, and other chapters after you have become a Volunteer, when the content of those sections suddenly has meaning or relevance for you. You may never want to do certain activities while you may want to do others repeatedly, at different times during your service. You may even want to refer to this workbook when you share your cross-cultural experiences back home. Revisit sections over time, browse, analyze, question, ponder, and enjoy.

However you approach this workbook, you will always have it as a record of your personal journey into the host culture, a journey that is one of the greatest legacies of the Peace Corps experience.

