This document contains

Chapter 5: Conclusion

from

El Otro Lado:

Considering the Impact of Education Abroad

on Host Families in Cuenca, Ecuador

a master's thesis by Søren M Peterson

The complete thesis, including this document,
may be downloaded from the author's website:
www.SorenPeterson.com.

If you find this thesis helpful,
or if you cite it in your own work,
please e-mail the author at
soren.peterson@alumni.du.edu.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summary of the Findings

This thesis has explored the motivations that prompt families in Cuenca, Ecuador, to host foreign students—as explained primarily by the notion of fictive kinship and also by economic incentive—as well as the interaction of these host families and students, framed in terms of the host-guest encounter from anthropological studies of tourism. Through these frameworks, I have examined the host-guest encounter in education abroad, specifically, from the perspective of host families, in order to learn whether—and, if so, how—education abroad programs impact hosts. In this chapter, I summarize the findings of that inquiry, discuss the lessons and limitations of my study, and suggest directions for further research.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the education abroad literature on outcomes has focused almost exclusively on students. These studies have shown that students benefit academically and personally from the

education abroad experience. But do host families benefit as well? What do they receive from the experience? As I noted, concern for hosts was seemingly absent from the literature until the late 1970s when Bochner et al. (1979) attempted to correct this omission. In contrast to what the researchers termed an implicit assumption in the literature that host growth or development is neither assumed nor expected, they concluded that host country students participating in a multicultural program did, in fact, experience some degree of growth—which they termed "international mindedness"—from interacting with students from other cultures (Bochner et al. 1979). However, as I noted previously, they questioned whether the multicultural program could actually claim credit for that growth or whether it was simply reinforcing the students' predisposition for international mindedness.

Twenty years later, Skye Stephenson, who was serving as resident director for CIEE's[70] program in Santiago, Chile, renewed the field's interest in host impacts (see Stephenson 1999). As I noted previously, Stephenson appears to be the first to have examined impacts specifically on host families (her study also examined impacts on US students and Chilean university professors). Stephenson found that Chilean families experienced a transformation from hosting students, most notably "in

70 Council on International Educational Exchange. Stephenson is now the Director of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the School for International Training.

reaffirming their own sense of being Chilean and in gaining a deeper appreciation of their own culture" (1999:35).

Shoshanna Sumka, who was a graduate student in applied anthropology at the University of Maryland, followed up Stephenson's work with her own study of host families in Quito, Ecuador (see Sumka 2000 and 2001). Sumka noted three general areas of impact, including that "host families take greater pride in their culture" (2001), thus confirming Stephenson's primary conclusion. Additionally, she observed that the presence of a student changes family dynamics, in that they may spend more time together, or siblings may avoid fighting with each other (Sumka 2001). Finally, host families demonstrated what Sumka (2001) called "hospitality concerns"—that is, concern for the student's comfort, safety, and well-being.

Stephenson's and Sumka's works represent a significant contribution to the study of host impacts in education abroad, and nearly the entire extent of research specifically on host families. This dearth of information on host impacts required that I first gather a substantial amount of qualitative data to better understand the host-guest encounter from the perspective of host families. To that end, my research questions asked who host families are, what motivates them to host foreign students, what happens in the host-guest encounter, what families perceive to be the impacts on them from hosting, and whether the encounter ameliorates or

perpetuates intercultural misunderstanding. These questions, and thus the framework for my research and analysis, emanated from anthropological studies of tourism, which also draw on acculturation theory.

As I explained in Chapter 2, tourism and acculturation studies have demonstrated that when two cultural groups meet, there is a mutual sociocultural impact.[71] Additionally, as I mentioned above, the few previous studies related to host families (i.e., Stephenson 1999; Sumka 2001) reported that families in Santiago and Quito, two large capital cities, experienced such an impact from hosting students. With this in mind, I certainly felt pressure—and, indeed, expected—to find sociocultural impacts on families in a smaller city, Cuenca, as well (and the more dramatic the impacts, the better). In the process of writing this thesis, I—like Ogra (1999:169)—have questioned whether such expectations going into my fieldwork might have influenced my findings. Moreover, when I first proposed this thesis, I was an employee of one of the language schools in Cuenca,[72] so I brought that experience, along with the biases thereto appertaining, to this project.

71 Additionally, there may also be economic and environmental impacts on hosts.

72 Prior to actually starting my fieldwork, I resigned from my position so that I could focus on my research and also so that I would not be seen as an official representative of the school when I interviewed host families. In addition, this allowed me to interview key personnel from other schools, to whom I might not have otherwise had access.

However, in retrospect, I realize that I was somewhat cognizant of these concerns during the research process itself, which helped me to remain cautious and objective as I conducted my fieldwork and later analyzed the data. The findings below reflect that objectivity, as they are based on a careful analysis of my interview transcriptions and other data I collected. Moreover, I am cautious to portray the sociocultural impacts only for what they are. Simply stated, they are minor, but nevertheless informative, effects that demonstrate that education abroad does, in fact, have an impact on host families (and especially on the children of those families). I will discuss these impacts in more detail below.

While I remained objective during my fieldwork, the experience also was somewhat transformative. As I interviewed more and more host families, my view of them changed: initially, I saw them as working *for* a language school or program, a view that was influenced by my work as an education abroad professional. To use a business analogy, I saw host families as sub-contractors who provided a service (i.e., room, board, language and cultural laboratory, etc.) to contractors (i.e., schools and programs), which sold a product (i.e., language and cultural immersion) to its customers (i.e., students). Or, to paraphrase (neo-)Marxian ideas, schools are the capitalists who control the means of production and thus can exploit their laborers (i.e., host families; see Wolf [1982] for a discussion of modes of production). After all, as I pointed out in Chapter

4, schools determine which families receive students and how often, as well as what should be provided and for what price.

As I got to know the host families during the interviews, I came to see them as *collaborators* who work *with* schools; and, to a certain degree, I assumed an advocacy role on their behalf. Several families seemed to suggest—if not outright demand—that they wanted the schools to see them more as partners and to consider their feedback. Specifically, they suggested several areas that they felt needed to be addressed: school communications with families, school policies, (lack of) support for families, and student orientation. Some families also had specific recommendations about how schools could improve, such as creating an independent committee of host parents to help promote programs and ensure genuine cultural exchange, to provide mutual support among host families, and to serve as an advisory board. I compiled these issues and recommendations and then added my own analysis and suggestions, informed by my professional experience in the field of education abroad, to produce written reports that I provided to the two schools that were most involved in facilitating my research.

What we have learned in this thesis is that host families in Cuenca are middle class families with an interest in cultural exchange and a need to supplement their incomes. Although these motivations may seem to be mutually exclusive, for many families they peacefully co-exist. Earlier, I

proposed fictive kinship as a framework for understanding families' motivations to host and for examining what they receive from the experience. After all, families welcome students into their homes and whether or not kinship terms are used, schools encourage these hosts to integrate their guests into the family's daily life. However, as I also suggested, fictive kinship is not a perfect framework for my research. While students often are referred to as sons and daughters (and as brothers and sisters by their host siblings), in other ways they are treated more like guests than as immediate family members. For example, students are not expected to perform household chores, unlike their host siblings (especially host sisters), although they sometimes offer to help. As Pilar, a homestay coordinator, told us in Chapter 4, from the perspective of language schools and programs, students are there to be *served*, since they are *paying* for the experience. This kind of economic exchange makes students more like (cultural) tourists than fictive kin. Moreover, the economic exchange effectively commodifies Cuencan culture, which is “sold” just like any other product.

In addition, fictive kinship is problematic because host parents frequently grant more independence to students than they would to their own children (especially to their daughters). Some remarked that they admired the greater independence of US students; however, they also considered such independence to be a sign that US culture was inferior to

Ecuadorian culture, at least in terms of the importance placed on family. That is, whereas Ecuadorians consider family to be more important than anything else, they have learned from students' comments that in the US, family is not always the top priority. This conflicts with Ecuadorians' sense of what is important and leads them to believe that, although the US may possess advanced technology and other signs of superiority, Ecuador is superior with respect to what really matters: family.

Several host families expressed this belief of Ecuadorian superiority through the notion that *gringos* are "cold" people. They are not alone in this belief, as Chilean host families also saw *gringos* as "cold" (Stephenson 1999). As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, several host families held this stereotype prior to hosting, but their interactions with students showed them that this idea was inaccurate. Host families remarked that the students whom they had hosted were not "cold" at all—they laughed, danced, became attached to their hosts, and cried when it was time to depart. At the same time, some host mothers theorized that this "warmness" was a result of students receiving something in Cuenca that they did not receive at home: love and affection (*cariño*). In short, while hosting seems to break the stereotype that *gringos* are "cold" people, it does so only partially. Several host families seemed to suggest that *students* may not be "cold" people, but their families back home are.

While most host families reminisced about the bonds that they have developed with students, many of them had a difficult time recollecting the names of all the students they have hosted. A few remembered every student and were able to recite all the names. Most, however, remembered only some of the students. As might be expected, strong, enduring bonds between students and host families develop only some of the time. Indeed, as Galo acknowledged, while his family became quite close to Mary, the first student it hosted, similar bonds did not develop with the two or three other students they hosted afterwards. Likewise, my own host family and I have remained close (albeit somewhat sporadically at times), although I am not aware that it has maintained such ties with other students it hosted.

As I suggested in Chapter 4, we can use a specific form of Latin American fictive kinship, *compadrazgo*, to examine the motivations of families to host students, as well as the encounter of these hosts and guests. Framed in these terms, students are "initiates" and host families are "sponsors." However, in contrast to *compadrazgo*, hosting is an economic exchange in which the "sponsor" receives financial compensation. In *compadrazgo*, especially in situations where the parents are poor, sponsors may be chosen on the basis of their superior social and economic status. Such selection is made with the expectation

that the sponsor(s) will be a source of financial assistance, not only for the initiate but also—and, perhaps, especially—for the parents.

This economic aspect of hosting cannot be ignored. While hosting students offers families an opportunity for cultural exchange, it also provides them with needed income to supplement the family budget. In general, host families emphasized that, for them, hosting is primarily about new experiences—that is, meeting new people from other cultures, learning about those cultures, and sharing their own culture with their guests. They also insisted that hosting is not about the money, yet most acknowledged that it certainly benefits them financially. Indeed, some families were quite open about admitting that the need for additional income was what prompted them to consider hosting. In summary, these findings lead me to hypothesize that, regardless of financial need, families who are not truly interested in cultural exchange will tend to seek economic survival strategies other than hosting students. Finally, although I have focused above on host families as a whole—and, to a lesser degree, on host parents—children are the ones for whom there is the greatest potential for sociocultural impact.

Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis has only begun to discover the lives of host families in Cuenca. While I cannot conclude that there are—or are not—definite, observable changes in Cuencan culture due to the presence of education abroad students, my ethnographic analysis shows that some host families *perceive* that they have experienced one or more sociocultural impacts (albeit generally minor ones). Moreover, as I have suggested, there is tremendous potential for hosting to have profound sociocultural impacts on children. To what extent these sociocultural impacts may have spread to other members of the community (i.e., to non-host families) is beyond the scope of my thesis. Nevertheless, in documenting evidence of perceived changes, this thesis lays the groundwork for other scholars to study the acculturative effects of education abroad on the community as a whole. Such research would need to take into account, and isolate, a variety of globalization and modernization factors such as transnational migration, mass tourism, and the Internet, which may also contribute to culture change. Smith (2003:55) lists several indicators that could facilitate isolating these factors, such as the ratio of guests to locals, the nature of host-guest interaction, local perceptions, degree of usage of local products, changes in family relationships and the role of women, etc. In short, if education abroad does, in fact, lead to culture change in receiving communities, like tourism, it is but one of many agents of change.

Specifically, such a study would need to develop a cultural trait inventory (or perhaps adopt the Intercultural Development Inventory) to be administered to both host and non-host families in Cuenca. The inventory would need to include one set of traits that are characteristic of traditional Cuencan culture and another set that would be characteristic of US culture. In addition, the inventory would need to be accompanied by additional survey questions that would allow researchers to isolate other agents of change (e.g., transnational migration). By comparing responses between the two groups, it then would be possible to determine whether the groups are similar or different. Such a determination would, however, reflect merely a correlation between particular traits and status as a host or non-host. To determine whether (or how) hosting leads to families adopting particular foreign cultural traits, it would be necessary to study new families from the time that they apply to become hosts, through hosting their first student, to post-departure follow-up. As well, a longitudinal analysis of the children of these new host families would be informative in learning how hosting fosters intercultural development.

Finally, the question of motivation for hosting is an area that is ripe for a more in-depth analysis. I have suggested that hosting is an economic survival strategy for at least some families. Further research is needed to explore how that decision is made, and what role, if any, being associated with *gringos* (i.e., the potential for increased social prestige) plays in

favoring hosting over other economic survival strategies such as transnational migration or entrepreneurship.

Research in this area could include a questionnaire based on the responses Stephenson (1999) elicited from host families in Chile using an open-answer format. Host families could be asked to indicate what they felt were the three greatest advantages of hosting students from the following list: cultural, social, economic, family, or other (see Stephenson 1999:18). Likewise, researchers should also ask families to indicate the three greatest disadvantages from a predetermined list: extra work/responsibility, loss of privacy/independence, cultural differences, worry, food issue, telephone, not meeting contract, and other (see Stephenson 1999:19).

Finally, as Stephenson (1999:22) did, the questionnaire could ask families to indicate the area(s) in which they have noticed a personal change attributable to, or influenced by, hosting a student. These areas might include such items as feeling a part of opening [host country] to the world, increased appreciation of [host country] national identity, image of the other, professional expectations of the family, political opinion, change in views of class, change in view of gender roles, and change in views of race (adapted from Stephenson 1999:22). If researchers were to administer such a questionnaire to both current and former host families, they could address the questions of why families decide to host (and what

they expect to receive), as well as why some families decide to stop hosting.