

Interview With a Peace Corps Volunteer: “On Being Viewed as Strange”

Use this interview in Lesson 5, Part 1. Adapted from the Peace Corps publication *Culture Matters*.
You can find the full text of this publication on the Web: www.peacecorps.gov/wvs/publications/culturematters/.

Interviewer: When you went to the Dominican Republic, were there any surprises?

Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV): Not really. I mean, you're not prepared for every little thing, for all the particulars. But you know the people are going to be different, so you expect that. You may not know all the ways they're going to surprise you, but you do know you're going to be surprised when you go to a foreign culture.

Interviewer: How did the Dominicans react to you?

PCV: It's funny you should ask that, because that was surprising.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

PCV: Well, we thought we were prepared for going into a culture different from ours, but we weren't. After all, if you go in knowing these people aren't like you, then of course you also know that you aren't like them. But we had trouble believing that they found us strange sometimes. Doesn't make sense, does it?

Interviewer: So it's easy to accept that other people might be strange, but hard to believe that you could be perceived of as strange?

PCV: That's what I experienced, anyway.

Interviewer: I wonder why.

PCV: I think it has to be that while you are actually having the experience of their strangeness, they are the ones having the experience of yours. You never really experience yourself as strange, of course, so it just doesn't seem real. You know it must be real, but you have to take their word for it.

Interviewer: So you think it's hard for Peace Corps Volunteers to believe that the local people don't always understand them?

PCV: Despite all our training, I think we unconsciously tend to believe that we are the “normal” ones and the people in the other country are going to be the “strange” ones. Then, when you get to the other country, you realize that people see the world, themselves, and others in fundamentally different ways. The hard thing is learning to see things from their point of view.

Interviewer: Why is that hard?

PCV: Because before you go to another country, you tend to believe that your point of view is the only point of view—and that it's the right point of view. It's hard to realize that there may be two equally reasonable ways to view a situation, depending on your culture.