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Enhancing Benefits for Hosts: Insights from Costa Rican Host Mothers

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INTRODUCTION

The homestay is a distinguishing feature of alternative tourism and students are primary clients of such immersion experiences (Dernoi 1981). This research study is a qualitative and quantitative investigation of hosting from the perspective of 30 host mothers in a small town on the Northwest coast of Costa Rica.

Host mothers in this program are expected to provide a room, breakfast, dinner, laundry service, and to engage in conversation in Spanish with the students. Most women go beyond these activities to also give advice, tutor, mentor, and care for students when they are sick. Students, age 18-22, from Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Canada are the main clients of the homestay, though volunteers, teenagers, seniors, and other travelers from around the world also stay with the hosts. Study results (a) contribute to understanding why women choose to host, the benefits and challenges of hosting, and hosts' perceptions of students' behavior, and (b) suggest recommendations for practitioners to enhance benefits to hosts participating in the cultural exchange.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Documentation of host families perspectives is limited and has been mostly focused on hosts in the more-developed home countries of the researchers, including Australia (Richardson 2001), Germany (Weidemann and Blüml 2009), the United States (Olberding and Olberding 2010) and New Zealand (Campbell 2004). Widely accessible, non-academic resources in English for hosts in developed countries include handbooks (Verstrate 2007; Cherington 2011) and exchange program websites (e.g. CIEE 2014). Programs may conduct internal assessments of their homestay programs (e.g. Farthing's 1997 report of program staff for the School for International Training), but these are not widely accessible. The most directly relevant research with hosts in Latin America consisted of interviewing housing directors, students, and host mothers in Mexico, though the research questions were focused on the benefits of homestays for the students rather than the hosts (Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart 2002, 2010; Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight 2004). To my knowledge, there are no peer-reviewed studies from research in less-developed countries about host mothers *own* experiences.

There is some evidence contextualized in Latin America that alternative tourism benefits host communities. Of note, community-based tourism may be preferred by host communities over mainstream tourism (Stocker 2014), volunteer tourists who stay with hosts may benefit host communities more than those who stay in hotels (Gray and Campbell 2007), and host communities may be more likely to perceive volunteer tourism as having a positive impact if they personally benefit from activities of the volunteers than if they do not (McGhee and Andereck 2009). However, it is not always the case that community participation in alternative tourism confers a higher quality of life (Weaver 2012).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This project contributes to the field of alternative tourism research by sharing the voices of women who become surrogate mothers for international travelers, an instrumental role within cross-cultural exchange. More specifically, this study aims to inform the practices of homestay programs by identifying benefits and challenges of hosting for host mothers, describing changes

in the women's lives and their roles within the home due to hosting, and examining views host mothers hold regarding students and the cultures of the students they host.

METHODS

Tourism, including alternative tourism and students studying abroad, continues to increase in Costa Rica and to the research site of this study in particular. The Costa Rican government has been promoting tourism since 1930 and has developed the most competitive tourism market in all of Latin America (ICT 2013; MIDEPLAN 2010). The research site, with 3,000 residents, is home to a language school, a massage school, an English-teaching certification school, as well as numerous surfing schools, bars, restaurants, night clubs, hostels, and hotels.

June through August 2013, I lived with three different host mothers and interviewed 30 of the 59 active host mothers associated with the local language school, as well as nine school staff. Field notes were regularly recorded following informal discussions with host mothers, staff, students, and community members. Every possible invitation for social engagement with host mothers was accepted, including a birthday party, a baby shower, cooking lessons, and playing on a soccer team.

The semi-structured interviews with hosts were conducted in Spanish and lasted for approximately an hour. One part of the interview included a questionnaire in the form of two pile sorts (see De Munck 2009). In the first pile sort, participants were asked to order cards according to how much they like or dislike 15 aspects of hosting, such as cooking, giving advice, and learning about other cultures, which were listed individually on cards. In the second pile sort women were asked to sort 27 aspects of daily life to indicate if there had been a change in the activity due to hosting, from a large increase to a large decrease, such as eating with family, ability to travel, and time spent in the home. For many women the pile sorts prompted stories and examples, providing rich qualitative responses complementing quantitative data. For women who did not initiate such stories, more open-ended questions preceding and following the sort tasks allowed for participants to share more.

Interviews with hosts were audio-recorded and transcribed. Initial transcripts were examined using open coding (see Charmaz 2006). With feedback from two outside readers, codes were narrowed to relevant focus codes, which were applied to all interviews and field notes using ATLAS.ti (Friese 2014) qualitative data analysis software.

FINDINGS

An average host mother in the study was a married 49-year-old with 2.5 children and a 9th grade education, was born and raised locally, runs a side business from the home, and has been hosting for the last 9 years with 1-2 students staying at a time for usually a month each. In response to the question "Why do you host?" 24 of 30 mothers' first responses were financial reasons. In considering all the reasons women cited, six main categories were identified (see

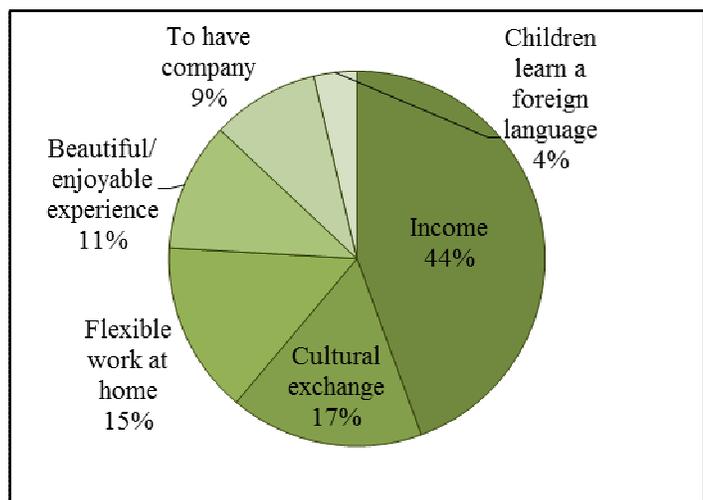


Figure 1: Categorized responses to the question, "Why do you host?"

Figure 1). Though 44% of responses related to income generation, money is not the only reason women host. In fact, hosts criticized women they perceived to be hosting *only* for the money. It was important for women that the work of hosting (cooking, cleaning, giving advice, tutoring, mothering) also be truly enjoyed.

Hosts are paid \$20US a day; weekly payment is deposited into a personal bank account of the host mother. This payment was generally described by women to be enough to cover the expenses for hosting the student. If any money is left over, despite relatively high cost of living, women reported buying household items or meeting other living expenses, though some were able to pay off debt, save for the future, or complete home improvement projects.

Women appreciate that hosting is flexible work that can be done from home and when their bodies cannot endure the rigors of other work. Hosting allows them to simultaneously care for family members and manage side businesses out of the home (e.g., a bicycle rental). Of the benefits of hosting, two thirds of the women reported having a higher self-esteem due to hosting. In particular, older women whose children have moved out or work full-time, described the benefits of the company of students as keeping them active, feeling useful, happy, and healthy.

Women, as skilled mothers and long-time hosts, navigate uncomfortable situations with ease and humor. The biggest challenges lie in students' personalities, attitudes, and expectations; lack of trust and communication can complicate matters. Descriptions of problematic students include students who are "delicate or squeamish" ("delicados") about bugs and discomfort, "messy" ("disordenados"), "spoiled" ("chineados"), and "reserved" ("reservados") not wanting to engage with hosts. While there were not generally shared views among mothers about specific cultures, students were often seen as studious *fiesteros* (partiers) who are more independent from their families than are Costa Rican ("Tico") youth. As one host of 13 years said, "There are all types [of students], just like Ticos. There are good Ticos, there are bad Ticos. There are also good foreigners, really great kids that come here. [pause] And others..." As she trailed off, her adult grandson sitting with us finished her sentence, "...who do a lot of partying." Another host explained that students all go out to clubs and come home late, but they still get up and go to school the next morning. A couple of mothers pointed out that students are in vacation mode; so, they expect the party behavior. Nonetheless, every mother had stories of students causing problems by drinking too much.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Women host both for income and enjoyment of the work of hosting. The recommendations directly from the hosts and in analysis of hosts' stories suggest that hosts demand action from practitioners to ensure 1) fair payment and 2) that students are open ("abierto") to new experiences and engaging with the host family.

Regarding income, first and foremost, programs must be transparent about the amount hosts are paid; this helps set realistic expectations for students. Hosts should be paid enough to cover expenses and still have some left over. Given the power differential between tourists to and hosts in less-developed countries, it is unacceptable to place a greater financial burden on a family than what they are being paid, and being paid did not diminish hosts' desire to engage in cultural exchange. Programs should also be fair and transparent in how students are assigned to families and seize opportunities to expand training and networks of the hosts.

Hosts prefer students who engage, talk, and spend time with the family. One mother suggests, students should "feel like one of the family." She says, "This is very important to me. That they come open, not to everyone, because we are not open to everyone, but that they come

open to be part of the family.” Women described openness to include behaviors such as: speaking in Spanish even though it is difficult for a new learner, talking with the family at meals, accepting an invitation to do something with the family instead of going out with other students, or exchanging language lessons with a family member. Host mothers advice for practitioners includes setting realistic expectations for students regarding the environment and culture and encouraging students to be open.

Hosts give a lot of time and effort to care for students and should be fairly compensated monetarily as well as through receiving students who are prepared to engage like a member of the family.

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