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Adjusting to Life in Mexico – One Couple's Adaptation Process and Suggestions for Coping

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Adjusting to Life in Mexico - One Couple's Adaptation
Process and Suggestions for Coping

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for Inter-
national Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

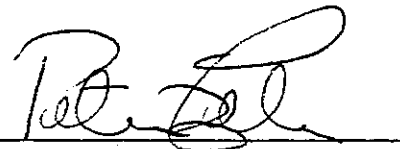
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This project by Michael D. Krauss is accepted in its present form.

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To Sharon, for literally living this project with me and for sharing the risks that insured its success.

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Abstract:

In this paper I present challenges which confronted Sharon Beckett, my partner, and me as we underwent the process of adapting to life in Mexico during a three month stay. Some of the issues are unique to a couple with our respective backgrounds, but many are applicable to any couple or individual traveling to Mexico or other foreign countries. I discuss some guidelines and principles of interacting which proved helpful to us in Mexico and also offer some suggestions for coping to couples or individuals going abroad. The primary source of data for the paper is a daily journal which I kept in Mexico throughout our stay.

ERIC Descriptors: Diaries, Latin American Culture, Mexicans, Cultural Awareness, Culture Conflict, Adjustment to Environment, Coping, Behavior Patterns, Problem Solving, Emotional Adjustment, Social Adjustment.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Participants - Background Information

My partner, Sharon Beckett, and I traveled to Santa Cruz, Tlaxcala, Mexico, where I completed an English as a Second Language internship, working from June through August, 1982. Sharon is a nurse practitioner and although she had traveled and lived abroad in Europe for a year, she had never been to Mexico prior to our stay in Santa Cruz. Sharon received some basic training in Spanish before leaving for Mexico, but was a beginner in terms of her communicative competence and had never studied a foreign language before. I lived in Mexico with a Mexican family for six months during 1980-1981. For this reason, I spoke Spanish at an F.S.I. 2 level upon leaving for Santa Cruz and was familiar with Mexican culture and lifestyles. Sharon was forty-three, I was thirty, and we had lived together as partners for about ten months when we left for Mexico.

B. Setting - Centro Vacacional La Trinidad

The teaching site for the internship was Centro Vacacional La Trinidad (The Trinity Vacation Center) which is a recently constructed vacation and convention center complete with dining accommodations, sleeping facilities and recreational areas. La Trinidad can accommodate several hundred guests and is mainly visited by conventioners and upper class Mexican families on vacation, although residents of small neighboring villages could use the recreational facilities during the day for a fee.

My internship involved teaching twelve hours of English per week to Mexican employees of the Center, and Sharon and I received free room and board in addition to full use of available facilities. Sharon was under no obligation to work while at the Center but did assist me in teaching my English classes on an occasional basis.

C. Predicted Issues

Before Sharon and I left for Mexico, we attempted to predict some areas where conflicts might arise in the process of our adaptation to the new culture and living situation in Mexico. We suspected that substantial adjustments would be necessary due to our disparate knowledge of the Spanish language and Mexican culture, and our newly assigned roles as husband and wife. (We were required to represent ourselves as married in order to qualify for the internship at La Trinidad.) We anticipated that because we would be presented as a married couple, because I would be the one fulfilling a professional role as a teacher with Sharon not working, and because I would be largely responsible for communicating for both of us, I would be viewed by others as the more dominant half of the couple, as the decision maker with Sharon being relegated to a more passive, secondary role. This was very threatening to Sharon and me because we viewed our independence within the structure of our relationship as one of the most important ingredients for its success. Keeping these initial assumptions in mind, I kept a daily journal during the entire teaching

internship. I discussed and reviewed the journal entries with Sharon on a regular basis, and she occasionally made written comments after reading my entries. We used the journal data as a departure point for discussions about issues that arose during our stay at La Trinidad.

D. Project Focus

The purpose of this project is, through an examination of the journal entries, to identify and analyze some of the challenges that actually did arise for Sharon and me in adapting to life in Mexico and to synthesize some guidelines, principles of interacting, and suggestions for coping which may prove helpful to other couples or individuals going to live and work abroad. Because every individual is unique and every couple interacts, resolves problems, and shares experiences in a different way, some observations and suggestions may not be relevant to all readers. I have attempted to isolate for discussion issues which I feel would likely arise for a majority of individuals or couples going abroad.

E. Method - Journal Keeping

The journal keeping process and the communication that it engendered was the single most significant assisting mechanism to Sharon's and my adaptation to the new country and culture.

Daily, upon awakening, I recorded events from the previous day in the journal. This was the general pattern, although there were days when I recorded in the journal events,

conversations or emotions immediately upon their occurrence so that they would not inadvertently slip from my mind. Whenever possible, I discussed issues with Sharon before or even during the physical act of recording in the journal. During our stay at La Trinidad, Sharon periodically read over all of the journal entries I had made, adding her own written comments. At one point, near the end of our trip, Sharon and I took homestays apart from one another, and during this period both she and I kept separate journals.

By committing ourselves to keeping a regular journal in which issues and problems concerning cultural adaptation were recorded, we ensured that conscious and regular attention and energy were devoted to the task. Often, solutions to difficult problems suggest themselves during the sifting and ordering process that inevitably occurs when one puts thoughts into words. Reading my past journal entries, coupled with Sharon's regular reviewing of what I had written, gave us a sense of perspective and of moving forward by capturing ordered events which, if unrecorded, would have surely faded slowly into distant memory. For a couple, the journal keeping process seemed doubly effective. Many times Sharon and I discussed issues immediately after, or in the process of, my recording events in the journal. Problems were discussed when they were fresh, and comparisons with formerly recorded proposed strategies were made to see if progress was really being made in dealing with the problems which existed. The end result was that Sharon and I regularly communicated and worked on the problems and

challenges that confronted us. Communication was the key and the journal writing process stimulated that communication time and time again.

II. THE ADAPTATION PROCESS - CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING

A. Preparations for Leaving

In retrospect, the stress of going to a new culture in a different country began long before arriving in Mexico. Sharon and I discovered that the process of leaving our former job/school, house and friends was an emotional experience. "Good-byes" had to be said, travel arrangements made, and belongings boxed up and either stored or shipped. In addition, there was the pressure of an unknown work and living situation waiting at the end of the move. All of these arrangements took longer than anticipated, and we left our home in Vermont a day late, feeling very rushed.

Had it been possible, arrangements should have been made so that there were a few days devoid of school or work responsibilities to prepare for leaving. Sharon worked up until a day or so before we left, and I found myself feeling as if I were responsible for all of the house cleaning and packing responsibilities. It would have been helpful had we discussed our plans for departure in more detail and developed a clearer plan regarding division of responsibilities. A well-planned and shared effort in leaving one's country can be a big help, and really the first step towards ensuring a smoother adaptation to the new country and culture.

B. Language Related Issues

1. Shift in Interaction Dynamics

a) Loss of Independence

Consistent with our prior assumptions, Sharon and I did have to learn to relate to one another in Mexico in ways that were significantly different from our normal interaction in the United States. The single factor that necessitated the most fundamental adjustments was the disparity in our Spanish language skills. Looking back, it would have been an easier adjustment for us in terms of our interaction as a couple if we had both been beginners or at some other equivalent level of Spanish upon our arrival in Mexico. Had this been the case, we could have struggled along together sharing similar frustrations. Instead, our differing levels of Spanish language skills set up an imbalance between us in terms of our ability to act independently in Mexican society. While at home, Sharon and I had been independently functioning individuals within the framework of a relationship together. Upon arrival in Mexico, Sharon was almost instantaneously required to be dependent upon me for things that she had always done for herself at home. This was due to her inability to communicate in Spanish. Simultaneously, Sharon felt a decrease in her ability to function as an independent person, while I felt the added pressure of performing and interacting for two people rather than for myself alone. Although we experienced this phenomenon in the context of a couple, this loss of independence and increased dependence upon others that Sharon felt in Mexico would also be experienced by a person arriving alone in a foreign country with

minimal knowledge of the language and culture.

Sharon and I never completely resolved the issue of her increased dependence upon me, although we did develop strategies, some conscious and others unconscious, for dealing with our new roles. An offshoot of Sharon's dependence upon me to do the communicating was that I handled everyday affairs for both of us in my own personal style, which was very different from Sharon's. At home, this was not as much of a problem, as I dealt with people in my way and Sharon in her way. But in Mexico, I was doing the interacting for both of us, and Sharon felt a loss of personal power. The intensity of the feelings accompanying this issue was reflected in a journal entry that Sharon made approximately one month into our stay when she wrote:

...here, I'm able to acquiesce to Michael's desires and let him be in control since he knows the language, is more aware of people's feelings because of his language knowledge. I don't want to offend people of another culture and feel as if I am a guest in this country and I have no responsibilities which cause me time pressures and a need to be efficient. Being a follower will have its limitations and I hope I can make necessary adjustments towards independence when needed without ultimately coming "to the end of my rope" and then exploding.

There were several ways in which Sharon and I worked to restore some of the independence balance between us. Early on, it became evident that there were things which Sharon could handle which required little or no Spanish. Usually when we were in a situation where arrangements could be made or

information obtained from someone who spoke English, Sharon would take the initiative and I was able to relax. Moderately simple tasks such as buying tickets for the metro, asking simple directions, or ordering a meal could be handled by Sharon in Spanish.

The strategy of slowly shifting more and more communication responsibility to Sharon as her language ability improved could have been more successful than it ultimately was if our stay had been longer and if I had been more patient and supportive of Sharon's attempts. An issue which arose was my impatience with her lack of language skills:

Michael sees and hears the mistakes I make when trying to communicate, he observes the difficulties Mexicans have in trying to understand me and ends up feeling embarrassed and frustrated with me...I feel "put down", stupid, lose my sense of humor in being able to laugh at myself and enjoy my learning when Michael is critical and I find it easier to avoid conflicts by allowing Michael to communicate for me.

I recognized my impatience and found it doubly confounding that I seemed to have much more patience and sensitivity with my E.S.L. students than I did with the person closest to me and about whom I cared the most. Unfortunately, but understandably, Sharon reacted by allowing me to do a lot of her speaking for her, knowing that our stay in Mexico was temporary and assuming that she would be reestablishing her independence in our relationship when we returned home. Also, it was consistent with the Mexican culture to have the man make many of the

important decisions. Both Sharon and I realized that we were often content to follow many Mexican customs even though this called for actions which were different than we were accustomed to at home.

The idea occurred to both of us and often appeared in journal entries that one's cultural background determines, to a large extent, one's social and political views and actions:

...perhaps many actions or behaviors are not right or wrong in any absolute sense, but have to be evaluated in terms of the cultural background of the participants...Perhaps there are, in truth, very few absolutes which cross all cultural boundaries.

The cultural expectation by Mexicans that I be the spokesperson for Sharon and myself when there were major decisions to be made was, therefore, another factor which made it more palatable to Sharon to allow me to do most of the talking for both of us and thereby exercise more than my equal share of the decision making authority.

b) Responsibility Overload

Just as Sharon was having to adjust to a decrease in her autonomy, I was trying to cope with my new role as translator and spokesperson for both of us. Just as it proved difficult for Sharon to give up some of her power in our relationship, I found it very burdensome to carry what I perceived as more than my share of the load. In the United States, I had always felt that I had a partner who shouldered her share of the

responsibility and decision making obligations in all facets of daily life. Suddenly, I was put into the position of taking care of many of Sharon's needs, and it created a significant amount of stress for both of us in our relationship.

When we first arrived in Mexico, I do not think that Sharon realized that, although my Spanish was adequate, it was still very tiring for me to handle all of the communicative tasks. Especially at the beginning of the trip, I did not feel at ease with my Spanish. It took Sharon a few days to realize that I expended a great deal of energy in order to communicate all of our everyday wants and needs. On the very first day of the trip, while in a Mexico City hotel, I wrote the following journal entry:

This morning we awoke to find that there was no running water. Sharon asked if I would call the clerk about it. I explained to her that I would, but that I needed a minute to think about what I was going to say. I realize that because Sharon has virtually no Spanish language ability, that she has no way of judging my language ability and assumes that I am able to communicate spontaneously.

In retrospect, it would have been helpful to explain to Sharon that I would need some time upon arriving in Mexico before feeling comfortable with my Spanish and to explain to her that I would never be totally relaxed when communicating in Spanish. As it was, it took a week or so of Sharon observing my interaction with Spanish speakers to realize that I was not fluent and that I had to use a great deal more energy to accomplish

what would have been routine communications and social interactions in my native language with people of my own culture.

Although Sharon and I could not completely avoid conflicts which arose as a result of my communicating for both of us and taking on extra authority in our relationship, through our journal writing and attendant discussions, we had better insight into why the dynamics of our interaction were changing. Because Sharon could see for herself that I was aware of and trying to work through my feelings, and because I knew that Sharon was trying to understand the stress that my new responsibilities were causing, an atmosphere was created in which change and progress could occur. We continually knew that each cared about the struggles the other was experiencing.

2. Interacting with Mexicans

a) Initiating Interaction

Another challenge for Sharon, given her limited Spanish speaking skills, was meeting and befriending new people. A strategy which proved very successful for her was to offer to exchange English practice for Spanish practice with a new acquaintance. This made for an easy way to get to know one another and also an excellent atmosphere for language acquisition. Finding out about the new person using the foreign language was a struggle, but when accomplished, each person realized that there had already been a commitment made in time spent and trust established which seemed to lay an excellent foundation for a new friendship.

In Mexico, if one is in the country in a professional capacity or if one can establish that all-important first friendship with a Mexican, then meeting people is not difficult. A whole world of social opportunities is likely to open up. As a teacher, I was held in high esteem by the La Trinidad employees and was besieged with invitations to go places, do things, and meet families. Realistically, the challenge may shift from that of establishing interaction with Mexicans to learning how tactfully to decline some invitations for social engagements because one simply would not have the time or energy to participate in everything.

b) Meeting Families

Meeting new people according to Mexican custom inevitably leads to numerous invitations to visit families in their homes. While both Sharon and I viewed these social occasions as high points in our trip to Mexico, they also raised language related issues to which we had to adapt.

Frequently, Sharon and I would enter a home, and I would immediately engage in social courtesies followed by the usual introductory small talk. Inevitably, our Mexican hosts would then look to Sharon and begin to engage her in conversation which she could not comprehend. After several such occurrences, Sharon and I discussed the problem and developed the protocol that I would introduce her to the family and immediately explain to them that she spoke only a little Spanish. This seemed to spare Sharon those few moments of awkwardness that

had accompanied her initial interchanges with Mexican families.

Although Sharon could not follow conversations at normal speed, she was very interested to know what was being said so she could feel a part of the conversation and so that she could be a participant to the greatest possible extent. This meant that, although I sometimes was struggling along myself trying to understand the informal banter, I was also required to fill the role of translator.

Before beginning to translate for Sharon, we found it essential to explain to our Mexican friends that I would be speaking English to Sharon in order that she understand the conversation. Despite my initial announcement to the family when we first arrived that Sharon could not understand Spanish well, this fact would slowly be forgotten as she listened intently to the conversation, sometimes reacting with smiles or laughter, seemingly understanding the linguistic content of the conversation, although in actuality focusing on nonverbal clues to get a hint of the message.

The majority of families with which we visited were very poor by American standards, and often our hosts were genuinely concerned that we might not approve of or be satisfied with our accommodations or the food we were served. If Sharon and I spoke a lot of English, especially when a family knew that I could speak Spanish, it created a sense of mystery for them as to what was being communicated. For this reason, it was necessary that I also translate everything that Sharon and I said to each other in English to the Mexican family members.

By the time our visits were over, I was usually exhausted. The translation was a fatiguing activity but was absolutely essential for Sharon in order that she feel she had participated and been able to offer something of herself to the families we visited, and for the families to feel that they knew who Sharon was as a person.

C. Culture Related Issues

1. Discovering the New Culture

Although the distinction was not always clear, Sharon and I also faced a series of adaptation challenges which can be characterized as culturally rather than language based.

During the early stages of our trip, I was overly sensitive about Sharon's inability to easily accomplish necessary daily transactions in our new cultural setting. When Sharon didn't know the procedures for buying and paying for goods in a bakery, or when she took a long time examining and counting her change after making a purchase due to her unfamiliarity with Mexican money, I found myself becoming embarrassed for her lack of knowledge about the Mexican system. I had "learned the ropes" when I lived in Mexico two years before, and I did not want to be seen by Mexicans as a "typical tourist" again. For this reason, I often jumped in and did things for Sharon to ensure that our daily interactions with Mexicans went more smoothly. Only after discussing this issue with Sharon, and reviewing my emotions and behavior at the time, did I realize that I really was not giving her the opportunity that she

needed in order to make basic adjustments to life in another culture. I now see that there should have been no need for me to be embarrassed about Sharon's normal and necessary process of examining her new environment and taking the risks necessary to develop her survival skills, but this was difficult for me to recognize at the time.

When I first visited Mexico in 1980, I came alone, with few Spanish language skills and with little knowledge about life in Mexico. I struggled, to be sure, but I also had the satisfaction that comes with facing a challenge alone, struggling to overcome obstacles and enjoying the satisfaction and sense of independence that comes with coping for myself. Reflecting upon Sharon's and my experiences together, I realize that a person experienced in a culture and language may be overzealous in wanting to help, in wanting to smooth over the rough spots, thereby unintentionally diminishing the sense of adventure and discovery that can accompany a new cultural experience. In certain respects, I enhanced Sharon's appreciation of Mexico and its culture by virtue of sharing my knowledge and experience with her. However, at times, I should have been more restrained. It was a difficult task to strike an appropriate balance.

2. Significant Roles in Mexican Culture

(a) Husband and Wife

In order to qualify for the internship in Santa Cruz, Sharon and I had to represent ourselves as a married couple.

although we were not. We anticipated that this would be uncomfortable for us simply because it was a role that we had not been in before, and it required that we be less than totally honest in our dealing with others. Surprisingly, we adjusted relatively painlessly, and we discovered that it would have been much more uncomfortable to have had to explain why we lived together but were not married had we presented ourselves as an unmarried couple. Although an unmarried couple living together in Mexico is not unheard of, it is far from socially acceptable. Because Mexicans expected and assumed that Sharon and I were married, and because we would have been less readily accepted if we had been open about our not being married, it was just simpler and less painful to portray ourselves as husband and wife. Looking back, we gained substantial insight into what it would mean for us to formalize our relationship through marriage, and we would not have had that learning experience without playing the role of a married couple while in Mexico.

b) Parent

An issue related to our being known as a married couple was the fact that Sharon and I have had no children together (although Sharon does have two sons by a former marriage). Marriage and child rearing are assumed to follow one another automatically in Mexico, and it was difficult for me to make people understand that Sharon and I might not ever have children. Family is such an integral part of Mexican culture that a

married couple choosing voluntarily to not have children is viewed as an anomaly. My English language students responded with exclamations of amazement with an undertone of sadness upon my telling them that Sharon and I might not want children. That reaction on the part of my students showed me in a very powerful way how Mexicans cherish a sense of family as an integral part of their lives.

In Mexico, for the poorer class, life revolves around the extended family out of necessity. A great many of Mexico's people are poor, and when one member of a family achieves some level of financial security, often resources are shared with less fortunate family members. Sometimes this means that an extended family or families will live together, pooling resources so that all can survive more easily. Sharon and I saw that even though it was often crowded and noisy in a Mexican household, with little privacy available, there was normally a tremendous sense of sharing and caring that existed.

Sharon and I discussed the issue of having children. We talked about what family meant to us and what it appeared to mean in Mexican society. Again, it became clear to me that decisions which are made about many important things in life are very much influenced by the cultural environment in which they are made. I found myself thinking often of how it would be to live permanently in Mexico apart from any family structure, and it seemed that it would feel odd, almost unnatural. I began to think that perhaps having children in the near future was more important to me than I had previously supposed.

However, after having returned to the United States and again being surrounded by a different way of life and set of cultural values concerning family, it became clear that my present choice to not have children had not really changed while in Mexico, but only the cultural and social setting within which my reflection on the question had occurred. An important consideration was that our trip to Mexico lasted only three months. We knew that we would be returning to our own country and culture after that time. However, when one goes to live and work abroad for an extended period, one must be prepared for the process of a cultural identity change and perhaps the shifting of one's views, feelings and beliefs about ideas and institutions as basic as family, marriage and religion.

c) A Couple

Sharon and I modified our behavior and interaction in Mexico so as to be more consistent with the Mexican role for men and women together as a couple. Most of the changes began to occur without conscious decisions on our part to institute them. For example, I soon began to pull Sharon's chair out for her as did all of the other men in the restaurant for their wives. I was rather amazed at this development and wrote the following in my journal:

I found myself pulling Sharon's chair out for her. I never (emphasis in original) do that at home but people do it here...I don't feel strange doing it here but I know that I would at home...

This small courtesy began to feel natural in the environment we were in. As I expected, I quickly got out of the habit upon returning to the United States and its less traditional atmosphere.

Early in our trip, Sharon and I realized that Mexican couples touch a lot in public. Hand holding and kissing were common occurrences in restaurants, grocery stores, on street corners or wherever couples happened to be when the urge arose to show signs of affection. In the United States, I feel somewhat inhibited to show affection in public. In the more expressive Mexican environment I felt less constrained and self-conscious. Sharon and I took advantage of the accepting environment to become more expressive with each other. In reading the journal entries it appeared that, for me at least, there were other factors also at work which induced a new closeness for Sharon and me:

I notice that Michael and I touch more often here in Mexico, i.e. hold hands or I can give Michael a peck on the cheek without making him feel uncomfortable. Michael also pays close attention to where I am. I feel closer and warm towards Michael because of this extra affection...

People touch more here. Couples hold each other and kiss passionately. Sharon and I are both aware that we touch more, we always walk arm in arm. I don't usually do this (at least not as often) in the States. I am enjoying this closeness. I think that I do it partially as a "security blanket" kind of thing. I am glad I am not coping with this new situation alone and I want people to know that we are together. I also really think that Sharon's specialness shows across cultural and language boundaries and I am glad to be associated with her...

Sharon and I looked upon our time in Mexico as an experiment and an adventure, a time to observe and to experience different things, a time of openness and observation rather than criticism or judgment. We found that this freed us to learn and understand more about people and their way of life. When we returned home, we were free to integrate permanently into our lives parts of the Mexican way of interrelating and living that we saw as beneficial to us in our lives within our own cultural surroundings.

3. Concept of Time and Efficiency

Despite our desire and efforts to accept and actively experiment with Mexican ways of interacting and looking at life, there were times when we could not easily adjust and, sometimes, became frustrated in the process.

One difficult area concerned the Mexicans' concept of time and efficiency. My classes were held at five o'clock in the afternoon. Initially, I felt that I would have no problem with this schedule as I could jog in the morning, spend time with Sharon talking or shopping in a neighboring village, eat breakfast and lunch in the restaurant, and still have time to prepare my lessons before class. This schedule, although perhaps reasonable within an American time framework, did not take into account the pace of life at La Trinidad. Meals were events. Our meals were paid for so that we ate daily in the restaurant. The waiters were wonderfully kind and considerate to us. They were some of the most special people we met during

our stay, but the service was so slow by our standards that sometimes we went a little crazy. The midday meal, which was served from two to four in the afternoon, was the main meal of the day. Regardless of what we ordered or how hard we pushed, we could never eat in less than an hour and a half, and sometimes it took over two hours.

Because Sharon was on no fixed time schedule and had no set responsibilities, she was able to more easily relax and accept the long delays at mealtime. At times during our stay, I envied Sharon's position of having her entire day to spend as she wished. Because of the disparate time demands upon us, delays and inefficiencies that bothered me were often not as burdensome to Sharon.

Some little inconveniences which seemed petty in isolation slowly grew in significance. We were elated to have authentic Mexican music available in our room, piped in through a loudspeaker. We were not too disturbed when we discovered that the music stayed on even when the volume was turned all the way down. A simple complaint to the desk should have remedied that. Two very long nights and numerous complaints later, I finally unscrewed the plate from the wall and disconnected the wires, allowing us our first night of sleep without the benefit of a Latin salsa lullaby.

Sometimes little inefficiencies even turned out to be hazardous to our health. During our travels away from La Trinidad, Sharon and I stayed in a hotel where the ceiling fan was connected to its power source by means of two bare wires

placed directly into the wall socket. (We had been in rooms before where we turned the lights on by wrapping exposed electrical wires together.) I decided that I just did not feel safe, so I complained to the hotel manager who sent a maintenance man to our room. He stated to me, and I later recorded in my journal:

Señor, no hay ningun problema. Regreso ahorita y voy a arreglar todo. No se preocupa nada. (Sir, there is no problem. I will return right away and will fix everything. Don't worry about a thing.)

I never saw the maintenance man again, and it was so oppressively hot that we continued to use the ceiling fan so we could sleep at night. During the third night of our stay, I awoke at two in the morning to find that the wires had shorted out, the room was filled with smoke and noxious fumes, and Sharon's mattress was on fire. We poured water on the mattress to extinguish the flames and threw the mattress outside of the room. When we reported the incident to the hotel manager the next morning, we received five minutes of apparently heart-felt apologies, but when we left the hotel the following morning, the wires, now blackened and fused to the wall by the heat of the fire the night before, remained unrepaired.

Generally speaking, Sharon and I dealt with the little inefficiencies and slower pace of Mexico (what some have described as the "mañana" attitude) by slowing our own pace down and planning our schedule, when possible, to mesh with the flow of events around us. To an extent this was healthy for us. We

realized that, in many cases, there truly was no need to hurry and it was acceptable, even beneficial, to simply slow down. At other times, we found delays and inefficiencies simply unacceptable by any person's standards, and we realized that Mexicans themselves were just as irritated with the delays as we were.

In cases where it really makes a difference, for example when one's health or safety are involved, or in cases where delays are outrageous even by Mexican standards, then one does a service to oneself and to others by making it known that certain behavior is unacceptable. In our effort to learn about Mexican culture and to be careful not to offend anyone, we probably tolerated behavior that we should not have accepted and that would not have been tolerated by most Mexicans. It was better to err on the side of tolerance, but we learned that visiting another country should not mean that we surrender the right to insist on a certain level of service and behavior. The challenge is to discover what that level is, according to custom, and to develop a sufficient self-confidence and confidence in one's ability to communicate cross-culturally to know when it is appropriate to insist on more than is being offered, and to do so in such a way that bad feelings are not unnecessarily created.

4. Restriction of Freedom for Women

Sexual harassment was a very difficult issue for Sharon to deal with individually and for us to handle as a couple. The

fact that I describe the process as sexual harassment and most Mexican males would define it as "hacer piropos" (to give compliments) is a statement not only as to the source of the problem but also goes a long way in explaining why the issue is such a difficult one to resolve. Basically, activities that are viewed by many American women, Sharon included, as oppressive and insulting are seen by the Mexican males who initiate them (and by many Mexican women) as complimentary and socially acceptable at best, and as tolerable male foolishness at worst.

Harassment by Mexican males also compounded the problem of Sharon's loss of power and independence which was discussed previously. In Mexico, a man never whistles, catcalls, or makes remarks of any kind to a woman who is accompanied by another man. During the two month period that Sharon and I lived at La Trinidad and traveled together as a couple, the issue of harassment by Mexican men rarely arose. It only surfaced when I left Sharon for a moment or two, and then immediately men would approach her making remarks, clucking or whistling.

After the internship ended, Sharon and I spent two weeks apart, each of us having arranged a homestay in different regions of the country. It was during this time, when Sharon really hoped to develop her Spanish skills and a better sense of independence, that the attitudes and behavior of Mexican men became a very negative and discouraging experience for her. Sharon kept a separate journal during our time apart. The following passages catch a glimpse of her frustration and anger:

Men here in Mexico oppress me, especially when I run, by staring and making comments as I pass. I also constantly feel their stares when I walk in the streets and feel afraid to go out alone at night. I will try not to take responsibility for my self-consciousness, as I think it is a legitimate response. It's hard to overcome and makes me angry. This restriction of my freedom would make it impossible for me to live alone or perhaps with anyone in Latin America.

The following night Sharon wrote about a specific occurrence that illustrated her dilemma:

Men were bothersome again with their comments and one walked all the way home from school by my side. [At the movie] a man sat next to me and I felt I needed to be aware of him during the whole movie. He put his hand against my leg--ugh.

It was especially difficult for me to lend helpful insight to Sharon about this issue because I had never had a similar experience. I could not know what it was like to have my freedom restricted in this manner. Also, we were apart at this point in time, and Sharon had to deal with the problem alone. It was a constant reminder that she could not function freely and independently in Mexican society without being with me or with another adult male. It would have been difficult enough had Sharon been able to communicate freely with the men she encountered, but her inability to do this merely highlighted the power imbalance which existed.

It is difficult to formulate suggestions for coping with this problem. There are as many ways to respond to a bothersome male in Mexico as there are in the United States. I have

known women who advocate ignoring men completely, simply acting as if they were not there and never uttering a word nor acknowledging their presence. Others feel that this is the ultimate surrendering of power, to have to so alter their activities as to not even speak. There are, of course, stock phrases in Spanish which can be learned and recited at the appropriate moment and, while they may be effective if executed flawlessly, the slightest hesitation, mispronunciation or show of insecurity or embarrassment may simply induce an increased effort by the Mexican male to gain the attention of the woman. It is truly more difficult to deal with this scenario in Mexico than in the United States because even Mexican women, as a rule, are not especially sympathetic. It is difficult to find someone who understands and can offer helpful advice about this problem. Every woman who travels to Mexico or any other Latin American country should be aware of the restrictions upon her freedom that she may feel due to the attitude and actions of many Latin males. Prior to leaving the United States, it should prove helpful to confer with other women who have made the transition into Mexican culture and who can offer further suggestions for dealing successfully with this problem.

5. Health

There are many jokes made about getting sick in Mexico, but Sharon and I discovered that the reality of being frequently ill, or ill for more than one or two days at a time, was not something to joke about. In reviewing the journal data, there

were not many days during our stay when both Sharon and I felt absolutely fit.

Upon arriving in Mexico, our diet changed drastically and immediately. First, we began to eat our meals at different hours with a huge mid-afternoon meal and a final one at eight or nine o'clock at night. Our menu in the La Trinidad restaurant, which served traditional Mexican dishes, included much more meat than we were accustomed to eating, a variety of hot chiles and spices, and even familiar foods were all prepared in unfamiliar ways. Sharon and I enjoyed the Mexican cuisine, and miss it now, but it was a strong shock to our systems. Although bottled water was available in the restaurant and rooms, the tap water was not drinkable and, against the advice of my personal bedside registered nurse, I used the water to brush my teeth and rinse my mouth, which proved to be a mistake. Sharon and I both experienced stomach problems and diarrhea early on in our stay. La Trinidad was situated on a high mountain plateau at over eight thousand feet, and we also suffered headaches and nausea due to altitude sickness which added to our initial discomfort.

We had anticipated an initial physical adaptation period with attendant maladies, but what we did not anticipate was that periodically one or the other of us would continue to be sufficiently sick to alter our daily plans and require that we stay in bed. Being "unhealthy" was a totally new experience for us as a couple. Other than an occasional cold, Sharon and I had always enjoyed excellent health and had rarely had to

physically minister to each other's needs. Numerous times we expressed our feelings of gratitude that we were not alone during our bouts of illness:

Sharon and I are usually both feeling so good that when we are sick we're especially unaccepting of it and are pretty irritable. Sickness is something we should expect when coming to a foreign country and it really helps to have a partner for some T.L.C. (tender loving care) and morale boosting.

On the other hand, nearer to the end of our trip and after Sharon had come down with yet another case of stomach cramps and diarrhea, the strain that accompanies caring for someone else, even a loved one, began to emerge:

We've spent Friday, Saturday and Sunday in Mexico City and it's been a mixed bag. Sharon hasn't been well--stomach problems again. I really feel for her (and am, at the same time really glad that it's not me who has the problem), yet I find myself being somewhat intolerant even though I know from a logical standpoint that she has no control over her physical condition one way or the other.

Our illnesses were never serious and usually passed within a couple of days. My experience talking with other travelers convinces me that one cannot totally avoid illness regardless of precautionary measures and, even if possible, it would seem unwise to forego the experience and adventure of trying new food and drink because of a fear of illness. There are a few practices which may reduce the number and severity of stomach problems. Water should be assumed to be unsafe for drinking

purposes. Safe bottled water is available everywhere if one requests it. Spicy foods and chiles should be consumed in moderation. I personally proved the theory false that consuming chiles by the handfuls would ward off stomach bacteria. One should also refrain from eating fresh fruits and vegetables unless they can be peeled or thoroughly washed with soap and water and, of course, the wash water must be pure. On the positive side, antibiotics may be purchased over the counter in Mexico, and there are often good public health clinics even in small towns.¹

Although Sharon and I were sick in Mexico, we were never seriously ill and never had to consult a physician or even take medicine (except perhaps a Lomotil tablet or two when diarrhea and a several hour bus ride happened to be scheduled in the same time slot). Knowing that there will be a certain number of days of illness on a trip and accepting that fact beforehand will, at least psychologically, ease the actual discomforts when they do arrive. The risk of becoming ill should not deter one from experiencing Mexico's wonderful taste treats provided that one uses common sense and a modicum of restraint.

6. Poverty

An issue which every visitor to Mexico must confront is poverty. Unlike the United States where our poor are mostly unseen, in Mexico the streets are often lined with people

¹An excellent book on Mexico, with a particularly sensible (yet not stodgy) approach to eating and other fun activities, is The People's Guide to Mexico, Carl Franz, John Muir Publications.

begging for a few pesos in order to buy food. For every person begging there are hundreds who try to eke out a subsistence living selling trinkets or small quantities of fruits or vegetables. The children of these poor (and the number of young children is increasing at exponential rates) are also on the streets begging or selling, working to help the family survive although they themselves may be but five or six years old. Many of the poor and their children are unhealthy and malnourished. It is a common occurrence to see a mother with a sick child in her arms begging on the street by showing a medical prescription to passersby, hoping that enough money will be given so that the prescription can be filled.

Because one is literally confronted physically by poverty in the streets of Mexico, one must decide upon a course of action. In our culture, we are told that begging is wrong and even shameful. In America, so the traditional teaching goes, there is enough wealth and resources for all to survive if one is willing to work. Beggars are seen as people who are not willing to work and, instead, want those who are working to share or donate a livelihood to them. Some Americans overlay this cultural and historical stereotype of the poor upon the poverty-stricken in Mexico. They refuse to give a peso to any beggar and somehow convince themselves that the poverty is contrived and a deception, that perhaps those bedraggled, dirty beggar children really come from wealthy families and are "ripping off" the Americans and other foreign visitors. As harsh and unfeeling as it may sound, I have personally heard numerous

American tourists use this absurd story as an excuse to turn down requests for help and to avoid, or at least to cut to the bare minimum, any contact with the poor that they might have.

Sharon and I took our cues from watching how many Mexicans dealt with their poor. We observed that very few Mexicans turned down a beggar's request for money, although the amount given was usually small. Sharon and I always tried to carry a pocketful of change so that we had at least something to give when approached on the street. However, deciding how to physically handle the situation of meeting people who are destitute and asking for help is the easier problem to resolve, the more difficult being to mentally and emotionally reconcile one's own relatively comfortable and secure position in the world with the pathetic destitution of so many human beings who, by sheer accident of birth, find themselves in a literally unbreakable cycle of intense poverty. It was this struggle that was reflected when Sharon wrote in her journal about people who seemed unwilling to share equitably with those less fortunate, in this case with Gloria, the servant of the household where Sharon did her homestay:

...I watched how Susie came home with two new pairs of shoes costing one thousand pesos each, showed them to Gloria and what clothes would go with the new shoes - then told Gloria to fix the kids' food bathe them and put them to bed. Gloria would love (emphasis in the original) those shoes, she deserves them, but on her meager salary there is no way she can buy them as she sends most of her money home to her parents. I resent Susie and Margarita for their wealth - it simply is not fair. I hate it. Part of the conflict is in myself though too as I also have wealth and so many around me are poor - why don't I

give more to help others? At least I try to offer respect, equality, and understanding but still don't think that's enough. My anger is at myself as much as at Susie and Margarita.

Another terribly troubling aspect of living in a country where many are impoverished is that it can begin to dull one's sense of perspective and deaden one's emotions. When I first visited Mexico in 1980, I too was appalled at the low standard of living suffered by many Mexicans. However, after six months in the country and upon returning with Sharon on this latest trip, I found myself emotionally feeling less shock and more readily accepting as a part of Mexican life the ever present poor. It was almost as if my body had developed a self-defense mechanism, a hardening of my emotions to insulate myself, an outer shell so that I would not have to intimately deal with the suffering of so many who surrounded me. During the trip, I recognized this conditioning process and wrote:

Sharon and I saw a small child today, about eight years old, and her three year old sister on the street begging. They were both filthy and looked sick. Looking back, I now see that it is common to see dirty children sleeping in filth. It was so pathetic, yet somehow, seemingly impossibly, I am becoming accustomed to it. I knew that I would and that is what bothers me so...

Mexico is a beautiful country with loving people and a rich culture, but the poor of Mexico are truly a shameful blemish on those who control the wealth and resources in that country.

The poverty is real. It is pervasive. Every visitor to Mexico

must confront it as his or her conscience dictates. One option for helping which is available to those who return from Mexico is to assist financially by joining one of a number of quality organizations which collect funds and do community development work in the regions of Mexico and other impoverished countries where it is most needed.

III. CONCLUSION

In writing about the challenges of adapting to life in a new culture, one runs the risk that readers may focus upon the struggles and problems which were highlighted and come away feeling that the experience must have been difficult and unpleasant. It was not. It was one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of our lives. That is not to say that the process was easy. To be sure, there was incredible enjoyment, pure and simple, which required little active effort on our part: watching families share their love for one another in ways special to Mexico, walking along blinding white beaches with the bluest clear water lapping at our feet, experiencing with all of the senses the spectacle of a traditional Mexican bullfight, admiring with awe and respect the relics of ancient Mexicans whose culture surpassed any in the world during its premier era, observing with unanticipated emotion the color, sounds, energy and spirit of Mexico captured in performance by the Ballet Folklorico. Our appreciation of the significance of all of these things which are part of Mexico, and a better understanding of ourselves as a couple in relation to one another as well as to the culture and lifestyle of Mexico, did not come easily or passively. It required active searching and learning on our part. We worked with one another, constantly communicating, sifting and examining events and emotions. The risk-taking required to make our visit a meaningful experience was well rewarded and positively worth the effort. I hope that

others will be able to profit by some of our experiences and observations and can use the information to complement and augment the meaningfulness of their travels abroad.