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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person

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Person to Person in Spain

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Alicante, Spain—October 29, 2013

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Alicante, Spain

Lazy, temperamental, late, and good-looking are just a few of the adjectives commonly applied to Spaniards by both those from outside of Spain, as well as some of those within Spain. However, after interviewing and observing Spaniards, it is plain to see that although these stereotypes might be based on partial truths, they certainly do not cover all the population, and they can lead to uninformed and offensive assumptions. The woman whom I interviewed, is the very definition of hard-working, as is her husband, who holds a job at a fruit packing factory as the electrician who keeps the machines running and fixes them when they are broken down, as well as his personal job as a handyman and do-it-all during the night. Clearly, not all Spanish people are lazy, and it would be fair to say that the grand majority are very hardworking. Furthermore, even when discussing Franco, personal history, and other anger-inducing subjects, this woman remained calm and strong as she responded, telling me stories that remained surprising despite what I had heard before. She spoke of how she lived under Franco, the importance of the Catholic Church, the police and security during his regime, and the rapid change since his death. This continues to shock me, just how quickly and how radically Spain transitioned from a conservative dictatorship to a liberal democracy. Yet she and many other Spaniards continue to live a daily life similar to that of the United States, although with some minor changes such as the later meal times and the siesta (which is taken by most, but not all Spaniards, and usually lasts anytime between 15 minutes to 1.5 hours). Yet for the majority of Spaniards, life is relatively similar to that of the United States (at least from the Northwest), and perhaps that is what surprised me the most.

That being said, there are definitely some cultural differences that become apparent through observation and conversation. One of these cultural differences that is especially apparent to me is the role that the church plays, and another would be the Spanish view of family life and sexuality. My host mother is Catholic, yet is completely comfortable making sexual jokes in the middle of conversation. Although this occurs in the United States, including myself sometimes, it is a little bit odd in the evangelical subculture of the United States in which I have been raised. In addition, she will often watch sexual or sensual scenes on the television without batting an eye,

something that some Catholics or evangelicals would never even consider. She is Catholic, but she made sure to let me know that although Spain has lots of traditions from its Catholic roots, the majority of Spaniards are not Catholic by religion. This is similar to the United States protestant/evangelical roots. However, many Americans would rather talk about the tradition of freedom of religion than the importance of evangelical and protestant tradition in the United States. And the family is all important in the eyes of many Spaniards. So much so, that even if they already have jobs, many Spaniards will choose to live with their family or close to their family. When asked about this, my host mother revealed to me that the building in which we are living was actually constructed by her widowed mother and that nearly everyone who lives in the six different floors are related to her because the building was split into three parts upon her mother's death. Two floors each for her brother, sister, and herself. Although family is also important in the United States, it is rare to see a mother, her daughter, son, and sister all living within a few miles or less of one another.

I cannot say that the interview changed my perception of the United States significantly, as I already had relatively strong opinions coming into the interview, but I can say that it did provide me the opportunity to learn new things about the history of my host mother and her family. Overall, it was an excellent experience.

Interviewee: Maria Isabella Vives Rodes (host mother) October 29, 2013