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# An Autoethnography: Constructing (& Interpreting) Cross - Cultural Awareness through the Mind of a Peace Corps Volunteer

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## An Autoethnography: Constructing (& Interpreting) Cross - Cultural Awareness through the Mind of a Peace Corps Volunteer

### **Abstract**

In the form of an autoethnography, a returned Peace Corps volunteer examines how, when, and if, he was able to establish a significant level of cross - cultural awareness while living in Suriname, South America for two years. Employing a process called emotional recall, the author analyzed two years worth of personal journals kept during his time in Suriname. The author writes about the explored interactions of his physical/temporal reality and “enacted” reality to provide examples of going through the first three levels and his fleeting attainment of the fourth level of cross - cultural awareness. Ultimately, one of the primary interpretations the author concludes from this examination is that power structures and personal perceptions have a great influence on cultural experiences and how those experiences are perceived to apply meaning.

### **Keywords**

Cross - Cultural Awareness, Emotional Recall, Autoethnography

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## An Autoethnography: Constructing (& Interpreting) Cross-Cultural Awareness through the Mind of a Peace Corps Volunteer

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*In the form of an autoethnography, a returned Peace Corps volunteer examines how, when, and if, he was able to establish a significant level of cross-cultural awareness while living in Suriname, South America for two years. Employing a process called emotional recall, the author analyzed two years worth of personal journals kept during his time in Suriname. The author writes about the explored interactions of his physical/temporal reality and "enacted" reality to provide examples of going through the first three levels and his fleeting attainment of the fourth level of cross-cultural awareness. Ultimately, one of the primary interpretations the author concludes from this examination is that power structures and personal perceptions have a great influence on cultural experiences and how those experiences are perceived to apply meaning. Keywords: Cross-Cultural Awareness, Emotional Recall, Autoethnography*

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Map of Suriname  
 (Source: "Merriam-webster's atlas: Suriname," 2001)

As you read the passage in italics, I ask you to imagine. Imagine your eyes are closed. Imagine a voice is reading the scene to you. Imagine your construction of a visual scene of this story in your mind.

*A crowing cock interrupts the morning stillness that has gone unbroken since last night's drumming ended. He seems to be near my head. The initial outburst spurs an explosion. It's a chain reaction as, one by one, roosters begin crowing in a clockwise motion around the village until inevitably the*

*sound is right next to my head again. They are our alarm clock. It is time to roll out of our hammocks. We have to get an early start this morning, it's barely past 5:00 a.m. Erik, a fellow Peace Corps Volunteer in Suriname, assures me there is a 'can't be missed' fishing spot about an hour down river where we can camp and catch large piranhas until our hearts are content.*

*After drinking some coffee, we gather our fishing gear and walk the beaten dirt path to the river. Along the way we encounter a few Ndjuka women carrying large plastic buckets filled with clothes on their heads. These women are from one of the tribes of the Maroon people who are descendants of the runaway African slaves. Today they inhabit Suriname's interior rain forest. The Maroons still hold onto many of their traditional customs and beliefs. If you didn't know better you could easily believe you have been transferred back in time to old Africa. We exchange the appropriate morning greeting, "Ma-e-weki" (good morning greeting to an adult female). "Ya-e-weki-e-Da. Fa yu weki?" (good morning response to adult male and asking me how I woke.) they respond "Mi weki moi," (I woke well) I respond. Although, truth be told, it's far too early in the morning for me to be feeling good yet.*

*The scene in front of us looks like something out of an Indiana Jones movie. Fog blankets the river and surrounding bush. Tall walls of pristine jungle flora guard either side of the river. Local women, wearing only wrap-around skirts reaching to their knees (called pangi), wash clothes and dishes on rocks at the river's edge. We pack the gear into our dugout canoe. Erik and I begin paddling down river with Erik's dog, Scrappy, standing at the bow of the boat watching for rocks. The vast green forest decorates the banks of the river, its large branches dangling over the water's edge. As the sun begins to heat up, the fog starts to rise above the jungle. Occasionally, as we paddle, we will pass small, thatched roof, open-air canopies built along the side of the river. These are small camps built by local Maroons and used as shelter. Nearby they will have plots of land where they will do their farming. Birds sing hidden safely in the deep forest while butterflies glide atop the surface of the water.<sup>1</sup>*

The story you just read was taken from a journal I kept as a Peace Corps volunteer in Suriname, South America. Much as we constructed the scene in that story, come with me as I venture on a journey of reconstructing my personal cultural knowledge through constructive and interpretive/narrative epistemologies. This will be done in the form of an autoethnography. It is also a research study. Some will dispute the validity of an autoethnography being considered research. In that case, let us take a look at the meaning of the word *research*. The term can be defined as, "studious inquiry or examination aimed at the discovery and interpretation of new knowledge" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1997, p. 627). Therefore, since I am examining how, when, and if I was able, as a Peace Corps volunteer, to establish a significant level of cross-cultural awareness, I feel safe in my presumption that this narrative can be considered research. To further validate this claim for those qualitative researchers out there, I will adhere to a few ground rules, which I will outline next.

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<sup>1</sup> All indented italicized writings were writings taken from a journal I kept during my Peace Corps experience from July 1998 through July 2000. With the exception of the parenthesis, The journal writings were copied exactly as they had been written in the journal to avoid losing any of its authenticity. As a result, there may be numerous grammatical inaccuracies. The writings in parenthesis have been added in an attempt to clarify certain words and passages for the reader.

## Method of Analysis

While writing this autoethnography, I will employ a process called emotional recall. This concept is described the following way, “To give a convincing and authentic performance, the actor relives in detail a situation in which she previously felt the emotion to be enacted” (Ellis, 2005, p. 260). In addition, in order that my autoethnography become more than a story and establish the life of a research study, I, as the researcher and participant, will establish some narrative ground rules. According to Arthur Bochner (2005), one way in which a narrative transitions into research is by focusing attention on the relationships between author and subject. In this case I am both the author and subject. In addition, the entanglements that both separate and connect how life is lived and how it is told to others is acknowledged, the story’s plot and moral should unfold with richness while the process of culture-making that shapes taken for granted assumptions, silencing minority voices, is explored.

One of the data sources employed in an autoethnography are the use of field notes and journals, which can allow the individual to relive details of a past situation and become immersed in the event emotionally (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). During my two years of living in Suriname, I journeled every day. This writing grew into a 938 page, four journal account of my thoughts and experiences during my time as a Peace Corps volunteer. Additionally, I had recorded the time and date of each entry in my journals. As I reread the journals, these specific details were an additional aid in enabling me to become immersed in the physical and emotional sensations surrounding events that had occurred approximately a decade earlier.

In order to provide myself a clear impression that what I was engaged in was qualitative research, I made a conscious effort of following Creswell’s (2007) steps for doing an ethnography analysis. I will explain this data analysis method next so the reader understands how I translated the material. In the first stage, data management, the researcher creates and organizes data files. I met this stage through having the chronologically organized volumes of personal journals. Next, I started taking my initial notes on the journal, which allowed me to put the data into context. I then began classifying the data into found themes and patterns. While going through this process of analyzing my journals, I read through the daily behaviors and observations I had described, my reflections on these behaviors and observations, and, using Hanvey’s (1976) cross-cultural awareness framework (see Figure 1), I reflected on the emotional sensations the journal’s words led me to relive in order to determine my levels of cross-cultural awareness. This naturally led me into Creswell’s next stage of interpreting and making sense of these themes and patterns. In the final stage, the researcher represents and visualizes the case, presenting an in-depth picture using narrative, tables or figures. I did this by including chosen excerpts that reflected a particular level of cross-cultural awareness during a period of journaling, in which, that level of awareness had become the norm.

Since I previously stated that this story will investigate how, when, and if I was able to construct a significant level of cross-cultural awareness as Peace Corps volunteer, it would be prudent to briefly discuss the nature of constructivism. According to constructivism, humans interact with two realities: a physical/temporal reality, which consist of tangible items that can be directly perceived through the senses; and an enacted/constructed reality, which are interpretive, meaning-making activities that bring meaningfulness to one’s life. These two realities interact and influence each other in ways unique to each individual (Lincoln, 2005). The collision course of these two realities will be another area of exploration during my story. Finally, data from ethnographies normally takes the form of interpretation (Heath, 2005); therefore, my study will self-admittedly be open to interpretation. I ask the reader join me

and recognize your own subjectivity as you put a personal twist on the meaning of the language used throughout this text.

### **Why Now?**

The reader may be interested in knowing why, so many years removed from my time as a Peace Corps volunteer, I have chosen now to write an autoethnography on cross-cultural awareness. The reasoning goes back to my time as a Ph.D. candidate. Approximately two years ago, I completed my dissertation, in which I was exploring to what self-identified globally-minded secondary social studies teachers attributed to the development of their personal global perspective. Perceiving that I personally had a global perspective, I deemed it prudent that I reflect upon how my global perspective developed and evolved. This introspection led me back to the journals I had kept as a Peace Corps volunteer. As I read through the documents, I found myself beginning to emotionally relive the initial experiences of culture shock when I first arrived and settled into life in Suriname, but reading it eleven years after the fact allowed me to know my overwhelming fears, concerns, and aggravations of those moments were going to filter away and become something else. I was consciously aware, that within a matter of weeks that culture shock was going to leave and I was going to enter a new heightened stage of cultural awareness. My voice on the journal pages just did not realize that yet. This reflection of my experiences at cultural adaption fascinated me. As a social studies instructor who believes understanding other cultures is a necessary component of students' education in an increasingly interconnected world, I became particularly interested in the cross-cultural awareness dimension of a global perspective. Therefore, once my dissertation was completed, I decided to embark more thoroughly on this personal ethnography.

### **Cross-Cultural Awareness**

This journey is about my cross-cultural awareness. I know what I mean by this concept, but since I am in my head, and not the readers', I cannot presume to know that everyone has the same interpretation of the concept. Therefore, I will attempt to bring you as close as possible to my interpretation, mindful that your own construction of knowledge may take your meanings to a place, that while rather close, still differ from my own. On the other hand, if I do not inform you of my version of this concept, the gulf of understanding may be too wide for my voice to be accepted with any sense of validity.

I draw my version of cross-cultural awareness from the writing of Robert Hanvey (1976). From his perspective, rather I should say from my perspective, discerned from his writings, cross-cultural awareness is the ability to perceive one's own culture from other vantage points. This culminates in being able to "live in" another culture as opposed to "live with." In order that one attains the ability to "live in" another culture, which implies the ability to actually become immersed within living the culture of another, Hanvey discusses four hierarchal levels one must go through, with level I being the lowest level and level IV being the highest level. These levels are outlined in Figure 1.

As I think I will attest in this autoethnography, I believe there is much fluidity between levels I and II, with neither level allowing a person to experience empathy with another culture, either consciously or subconsciously. According to Hanvey, true acceptance of another culture's people is only achieved at levels III and IV. While level IV is an ultimate goal, it is very difficult to attain and level III, while not having achieved the status of an "insider," remains an attainable intellectual and practical goal for most people.

**Figure 1: Levels of Cross-cultural Awareness**

Level	Information	Mode	Interpretation
I.	Awareness of superficial or visible cultural traits; stereotypes	Tourism, textbooks, National Geographic	Unbelievable (i.e., exotic)
II.	Awareness of significant & subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own	Cultural conflict situations	Unbelievable (i.e., frustrating)
III.	Awareness of significant & subtle cultural traits that contrast with one's own	Intellectual analysis	Believable, cognitivity
IV.	Awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider	Cultural immersion living the culture	Subjective familiarity

Hanvey, 1976, p. 16

Unfortunately, many people in the United States have demonstrated a remarkable lack of awareness of people and places outside the immediate physical locale of their daily lives. In a recent study done by the National Geographic's Global Geographic Literacy Survey (RoperASW, 2006), United States citizens, aged 18-24, geography and cultural skills appear be dismally lacking. For example, despite the extensive media coverage of the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11 and the on-going United States presence in Iraq for the past three years, nearly 90% of young Americans were unable to locate Afghanistan on a map, and 63% were unable to find Iraq. Results from the previous administration of the survey in 2002 demonstrated that United States citizens were less culturally aware than comparable same-age peers from other industrialized nations (RoperASW, 2002). In addition, researchers have found people tend to individualize the characteristics of people in their in-group and perceive their behavior as normal, while viewing out-groups in terms of more stereotypical characteristics (Merryfield & Wilson, 2005).

### **Pre-Peace Corps Awareness**

I was born in San Diego, California and raised in a culturally advantaged environment and influenced by middle-class values. It was my grandmother and mother who first attempted to instill in me that the differences in people were not the result of one ethnicity or race being superior to another one, rather the differences were people not appreciating or understanding one another's culture. That seed was planted at an early age and through a variety of experiences I will share in the next few paragraphs, my cultural awareness would begin to develop. Some of my earliest memories are of Vietnam War naval ships docking in the Sand Diego Bay and my mom and grandmother periodically taking my cousin and me across the border to visit the orphanages in Tijuana, Mexico. Another exciting time was a summer of driving across the country and up into Canada with my parents in their old VW van. Unfortunately, not all of my memories were as exciting, as my parents would divorce soon after.

My first memorable experience of dealing with culture shock happened a couple years later when my mom decided to leave the more liberal California and move to an ultraconservative region in Indiana, despite having no family there. Later she would tell me, "I thought it would be a nice place to raise a child." It was an interesting experience growing up in Indiana, but I never truly felt comfortable in the "southern Indiana" culture and it

allowed me to grow up wondering why people did not see that, rightly or wrongly, there was often more than one way of perceiving an issue. Living in southern Indiana also exposed me to the Amish culture, as my first babysitters in Indiana were Amish, a conservative Christian group probably best known for their simple dress, refusal to use electricity, and seclusion from the rest of “mainstream” society. I would often spend weeks on an Amish farm as my mom was finishing up her college degree. Some of the sweetest people I have ever met, the Amish seemed to be the exception to the rule, in the area of Indiana where I lived, of accepting others whatever their beliefs are (with the exception of “shunning” their own if one of their own turns his/her back on God, but I digress). Who needed electricity when I got to ride ponies on their farm during the afternoons!

Upon graduating high school, I went to Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. While Bloomington, Indiana was not a bastion of culture, it was during this time that I developed a travel bug and craving to experience different cultures. During my last year of school, one of my roommates, Hatem, was from Egypt and thanks to him, I had the opportunity to travel through Egypt and stay with his family for a month. The Egypt trip also happened to coincide with the Islamic celebration of Ramadan. The experience would have a profound effect on me as I discovered a feeling of comfort and peace sitting around talking with Hatem’s family and friends in this culture that I had not attained in my higher strung life back in the United States. The experience left me yearning for more of the international experience. The next few years, in between working with abused/neglected children, I would attempt to satisfy my travel appetite by spending my time backpacking through Central America, South America, and SE Asia with my wife.

As a result of my lived experiences, I believe my level of cross-cultural awareness as I prepared to join the Peace Corps bordered on level II with the occasional backslide to level I. Now, the reader must understand that this is my interpretation. It is an interpretation that stems from a period of time that is now more than a decade past, as I joined the Peace Corps in 1998. As a result, the defense I provide for identifying myself in this gray area between the two lower levels of cross-cultural awareness, may be slightly clouded by a faulty memory and a romanticizing thought process, although I give you my word that is not the intention.

Approximately a month and a half prior to leaving for two years in Suriname, as Peace Corps volunteers, my wife and I took a three-week backpacking trip through Belize and Guatemala. During this trip, I would naively have occasions of slipping into an “enacted reality” of constructivism by seeing the country’s in an exotic light. For example, I would find myself romanticizing the Rastafarian named Roz Creek, who took my wife and me out on his thatched roof, hand painted red tour boat for an afternoon of snorkeling, and swimming with sting rays and nurse sharks. The afternoon with him would turn him into a stereotype, a caricature in my mind as my “physical/temporal reality” and my “enacted reality” collided to turn him into something less than another human being, who shared the same longings and passions as the rest of us and instead became an exotic Caribbean creature to tell my friends tales about. At the same time, I would experience times of cultural conflict, as the exotic would be transferred into times of frustration as cultural interactions between me and the culture I had come to experience clashed due to subtle cultural aspects or expectations that I could not rid myself. The instances that come to mind were the irritation I would undergo whenever we were attempting to travel from one town to another. The guidebooks had warned me about the delays of the bus rides across country, yet my impatience always got the best of me. Another instance, of this level II cultural frustration, entailed the times we stayed at the Black Rock Lodge, in the interior rainforest of Belize, and the restroom facilities were only outhouses. Often, as dusk settled and night began to fall, I would find the outside walk, although only fifteen to twenty feet away from the safety of my cabin, to be a time fraught with anxiety as I would be overcome with the possibility of meeting my doom through an



encounter with tarantulas, snakes, or scorpions. It made no difference at those moments that thousands of people had walked this same cabin to outhouse path before me without meeting their demise, at that moment this was no longer an exotic paradise, it had become a land with a frustrating lack of human ingenuity.

### **The Peace Corps Experience: *Where my awareness goes***

My wife and I arrived in Suriname, South American in July of 1998. Suriname is a small country, about the size of the state of Georgia, which is located on the northeastern shoulder of South America. It is part of and adjacent to the largest remaining expanse of uninhabited, undisturbed rainforest on earth. Approximately only 450,000 people live in Suriname and yet it is a true melting pot. About a third of Surinamese are East Indians, a third are Creole and the remaining third includes Indonesians, Chinese, Europeans, Jewish, Amerindians, and Maroons. The former Dutch colony has been independent since 1975 and although Dutch is still the official language, more than twenty languages can be heard throughout Suriname.

The following two entries from the journal I kept during my time in Peace Corps, seem to represent my fluctuation between levels I and II of cross-cultural awareness during my arrival and first days in Suriname.

*We arrived at the Suriname airport at about 1:30 AM. Since we were with Peace Corps, we were helped through customs without waiting in line. They just collected our passports in bulk (note: referring to the twenty-four Peace Corps volunteers who had arrived) and waved us through. The Peace Corps Country Director, Eddie Stice, was there to greet us. We then all were directed towards an old school bus, which we rode in on a thirty minute trip to our training site. Although it was dark out and the only lights were those coming from the headlights of the bus and the headlights of the occasional vehicle passing on the other side of our pot-hole invested road, I can make out jungle on either side of the road. To be on a bus that could break down at any time, with jungle on either side, in a world that it seems time has forgotten has me feeling so alive! Once we get to our training site, we eat, and socialize for awhile before heading for our rooms after 3:30 AM. Our rooms are dorms. No air-conditioning, of course, but we do have a single fan. Each couple has their own room. The floors are concrete, the walls are plain and there is a single light bulb in the room providing light. Two single beds are pushed together with a mosquito net over top. Despite being tired, I am starting to feel very excited.*

The above journal entry reflects no frustration on my part. In fact, reading it for the first time in almost nine years, it took me back to that moment. I feel strongly that it was a level I moment. I was caught up in a world that I found to be exotic. My “physical/temporal” reality had been overcome by my “enacted” reality and for the moment what would later become sources of frustration for me (i.e. breaking down vehicles in the jungle, no air conditioning) were instead sources of an exotic world implanted in my mind. Yet, three days later, when we were now living with our country “Host Mother” my next journal entry captures the frustrations of the conflict of cultural lifestyles found in level II.

*No shower again this morning! That means bathing out of a bucket. Ugh! The bucket has to be filled from an outside faucet and then carried into the*

*shower room, indoors. Now I sit on my bed with the mosquito net half tossed around the bed, the fan on, and door open to allow air to circulate. I attempted to sit outside to write, but at 11:45 AM, the sun was much too intense only sit under it on the steps. With language class ended for the morning there is nothing scheduled until later this afternoon. I will have to adjust to this new slower pace. Right now it seems to have me on edge. Already I am wondering, "What shall I do next?"*

Yet another couple of journals, dated August 10, 1998 and August 26, 1998, capture the near constant emotional fluctuations I would go through during this period of time as I slowly transitioned to a new acceptance and stage of cross-cultural awareness.

*(8/10/98) This morning I awoke feeling heavy with my throat somewhat sore. I don't know if it was because of this, but most of the morning I was feeling rather negative about this place. Thinking that just a couple hours of luxuries, such as a flushing toilet, warm reliable shower, a lazyboy, with cable television sure would be a nice break. Finally, after lunch I felt somewhat better and by the afternoon I am reinvigorated to be living here again! I am feeling a bit overwhelmed with language classes that may have had something to do with my early ill will.*

*(8/26/98) I'm in dire need of a mental health day! I'm on a short fuse. I'm sick of the structure of training. I don't want to learn anything today/ This morning my mood is swinging out of control for no apparent reason! I want to scream! I want to ride a roller-coaster to feel the rush. I want ten minutes in a padded room to toss myself around! Everybody leave me alone, because right now I am IRRATIONAL!! I AM SO SICK OF TRAINING...In 10 minutes I will probably be having the time of my life, or maybe I will sink into a bottomless pit...or maybe...Right now not even talking logic to me will work.*

*Wow! Less than an hour later and I feel as if I made a 180° turn. Many of the other Peace Corps trainees have been going through the same feelings. Some of us had a good laugh about our frustrations. The laughter was a godsend and turned my mental state around.*

After a couple of months of training near the capital city of Paramaribo, where approximately three-quarters of the country's population live, it was time to move to our site assignments, which would become home for the remaining two years in Suriname. My wife and I were assigned to the village of Tapoeripa, about 200 kilometers south of the capital city. Tapoeripa is a small village, of around 500 people, located in Suriname's interior rainforest and inhabited by descendants of runaway African slaves, commonly referred to as Maroons. Although, only 200 kilometers away, because of the dirt, often muddy road, to get to the village, travel time fluctuated anywhere from four to eight hours.

By the time we had arrived in Tapoeripa, I was continuing to fluctuate between the first and second level of cross-cultural awareness, while having fleeting moments of time in level III. The following journals, from our early experiences in the village, display this fluctuation.

*(9/25/98) Up at 5 AM. I am so tired. Difficult time sleeping last night. It could be excitement. It could be the bug bites that were irritating me. We had*

*to take our bags and catch a bus into town to the street that has the vehicles that take people into the interior. Although it was still early in the morning the area was bustling with activity. We found the DAF truck that would take us to Tapoeripa. The truck we boarded looks like an old Mayflower/Uhaul truck with old, dusty, torn bus seats placed in the back. There were sliding windows on either side. The bags that we couldn't put on our seats, were lying piled on top of one another at the front of the cabin we all sit crammed in. The person in front of me was practically sitting in my lap, as the seat appeared ready to break. Not only did I have her practically in my lap, but I had to breathe the Maroon lady's pre-rolled cigarette that burnt at a snails pace. As if tattered chairs, and people on top of us wasn't enough, the cabin was unbearably hot from the heat pertruding from the close proximity of all the people, some of home were forced to stand. At 8:30, after an hour of not moving, we began our bumpy ride out of Paramaribo.*

*The trip lasted for just over four hours. The ride was a combination of scenic beauty with the plush green jungle surrounding us on either side and part torture as the truck vibrated and bottomed out on hole after hole in the road. We were constantly being jolted around as we drove through the reddish mud and dusty road.*

*When we arrived we were at our destination, we were at the edge of the Suriname River. It was a gorgeous portrait of river water surrounded by jungle flora. Once off the truck, we still had a two km walk to Tapoeripa. We gathered up our bags and made our way down the dirt road. When we arrived in Tapoeripa, we found Eddy who was supposed to show us to our house. Right away there was some confusion. Apparently, our house had not been cleaned yet and was still locked and the basia who has our key was not around. We went to one of Eddy's houses and dropped our bags off there for awhile.*

*After eating, Eddy took us on a walk around part of the village. He showed us the creek where some people wash tings. Armania met up with us aw we were walking around and we all went to what appeared to be the other side of the village to wash at the river. There, Andrea and I bathed as village women scrubbed clothes on rocks with rushes and washed dishes nearby. Children watched us bathe, like we were exotic zoo animals in a cage.*

*After walking along the jungle path from the river to the village, Armania had us get our bags from Eddy's house. It had been three hours since we arrive and it appeared we were finally on our way to see our own house. Unfortunately, for some reason, all we did was move our bags to Armania's house. Why we had to was anybody's guess. It seems like she just wanted our stuff at her place. Maybe to have our food at her place so she could pressure us into feeding her? Maybe she wanted us to feel like she was watching over us and it was an act of showing us how much she cared since our language skills made it difficult to communicate?*

*In the evening, we walked around the village, attempting to talk in the local tongue. Our attempts at speaking their language frequently brought laughter.*

*It must have been humorous to them to see white people talking Ndjukan (what little we know). Villagers have given me the name "Foisipai." It means first white man and I have been told it reflects that I am the first white man to live in Tapoeripa. I am filled with pride over the name. It gives this whole experience an extra sense of the adventure we are experiencing. It makes me feel like a character in an old adventure novel, who has stumbled upon a lost Amazonian civilization.*

*Later, we eat at one of Eddy's wives houses. We eat a bowl of rice, kosbanti (a green bean like vegetable), and a mystery meat. Eyes are on us. We see adults and children peeking through doors and windows. We are definitely on stage. After eating we walk back, with Eddy, to Armania's house to pick up our bags. The sky is full of stars here at night, highlighted by the sight of the Milky Way. Armania was not home; therefore, we are forced to wait longer before moving into our house. We wait on her front porch, passing the time trying to teach Eddy some English words as he teaches us some Ndjukan. Finally, after 9 PM, after hours of thinking, "Maybe now we're gong to our house," we finally move into our house. The house has two rooms, a front visiting area, a backroom to sleep and a front porch. Each room is about 10x12. Nobody has lived in it for quite awhile. It apparently was being used for storage, as there are bags of cement piled on top of each other in the front room. There are large holes in the back room floor. We hang up our hammocks in the back room and have little trouble falling asleep to the sounds of bats flying around inside our house.*

*(9/27/98) It is amazing how mentally exhausting a day can be here. Just a walk down the street can leave my head in a daze. The culture here is such that you must greet everyone you pass, tell them how you do, and where you're going. At times, even more if they feel like teaching Ndjukan or challenging your Ndjukan knowledge. Not only that, they have about twenty greetings depending upon the time of day, whether you have already seen them today, their sex, age, etc...I also always have to be on. People are frequently asking for things, such as, "Give me half of your food." I don't know the etiquette. If I say no, I appear rude, but if I keep giving in, I will be left with nothing. Just sitting in the house for a few minutes with nobody around isn't completely relaxing right now, because somebody can by at any moment and, so far, always does! At times, we could just use a break from everyone. That all said, I Love It Here!*

These previous two journals express my flow in and out of the different levels during the early stages of my time in the village. For example, I found myself caught up in the limiting stereotypes of level I, as I fantasized about an exotic lost world I had entered when I was branded with the name of "Foisipai." Minutes or hours later I would be struggling through the feelings of inner turmoil associated with level II, as I felt overbearing annoyance of being stared at like a zoo animal, having my bags moved from one persons house to another or being asked for half of my food. Suddenly, just as quickly, as I had become frustrated, I would begin to intellectualize reasons, both positive and negative, villagers may be asking for half our things or the motivations behind Armenia taking our bags to her house. Finally, I would find myself slipping back into frustration when my attempts at intellectualizing the situation left me with more unanswered questions than answers.

Since level III, is about being able to intellectualize and understand subtle traits of a culture, it was probably a year into our stay in Tapoeripa when I could safely say I had consistently attained level III. From reviewing my journal, it was during this period of time that I began to relax and felt comfortable enough to engage in the same cultural exchange with friends of mine and other villagers that they had vocalized with me, but I had previously been too uneasy to vocalize with them. For example, it was finally during this period of time that I was able to turn the table on them in conversations and walk by somebody's house and yell, "Give me half of your food" or "Give me half of what you have," just as many villagers had done to me over the past year. Up until this time, I had gone from initially finding this cultural trait of theirs as one of rudeness, to then feeling sorry for their poverty, to finally realizing these blunt comments were not considered rude or begging, they were instead comments of respect to the person and, in a sense, meant that you were embraced as a part of a community of friends and family. In the end, I was to discover that the person who asked for half of your things usually gave you back much more than they ever requested.

Another aspect to the Tapoeripa culture was there humor. They like to make fun of people and appeared to have no qualms about making fun of a person to their face, no matter how well they knew them. For a time, my wife and I questioned whether it was a mean culture that we lived in and did not always take it well when we were ridiculed. We would go through days of not leaving the house or ignoring certain individuals, who had made fun of us. Although, it was a gradual process, again, it was during this one year period where my understanding of this concept and language skills finally allowed me to become quick-witted enough in the culture to give as good as I could take and much to my surprise the more I could make fun of someone, the more that person seemed to enjoy my company. Of course, this meant more time for them to make fun of me, but I had finally come to understand that this was not to be taken personally and was, in fact, an act of intimacy. This journal, dated June 14, 1999, expresses this new level III awareness:

*Today we are going into foto (Paramaribo), so we can go on our vacation to Trinidad & Tobago. Some people in the village know that we are going, although we have tried to keep it quiet. As I was walking around, this morning, Mofeensha yelled out at me in front of a group of people, "Take me with you on your vacation. I know you can afford it." I told her sure, get her stuff together and we'll put her in our backpack. Immediately, she and the others started laughing and allowed me to walk away. I had passed the test and can now go without others feeling like we are trying to be above them by going off on vacation.*

Looking back on that moment, I remember the feeling of excitement that I had accessed an inherent understanding of the culture. The "physical/temporal" reality of their faces and body postures demonstrated a noted relaxation and gleam in their eyes when I had responded with an inviting joke. Again, this reality was interconnected with my "enacted" reality, which took this as meaning that rather than hiding the fact that I could afford something that they could not nor treating them as less than me due to that gulf, instead, I was opening my life to them and; therefore, since I was able to joke about the vacation, I had been accepted as a part of their community and was no longer a "Bakra," which is a condescending phrase towards a white person.

While I feel safe in saying that I will never know whether I was able to sustain level IV of cross-cultural awareness, there were occasions that I believe I at least spent a brief period of time at that level. For the purposes of this story, I will describe one of these occasions. It was my last day in Tapoeripa, as I would spend the remaining couple weeks of

Suriname in the capital city, Paramaribo. Due to medical reasons my wife had left a month and a half earlier. I had remained behind to complete a village project. Normally, when leaving the village and returning to the city, I rode a DAF truck. Due to the rainy season, travel from the village in most vehicles was impossible. As a result, Peace Corps headquarters sent down an SUV to pick me up. The following journal entry, dated June 27, 2000, describes the scene and my feelings as I left Tapoeripa for the final time:

*Noon (approx.): After walking around visiting for the past couple of hours, I've just arrived back at my house and a teenage boy has run up to inform me he's seen the Peace Corps vehicle arrive. I thought I was doing well on closure. Now I feel like the insides of my body could crumble! I knew I was dreading the actual day I wouldn't be back returning to Tapoeripa. I'm short on breath. I never expected this moment to have such an effect on me. I'm limp.*

*It seemed like the whole village surrounded my house to help me carry things and see me off. Everybody was acting so sad. They stood and stared with gloomy faces. It's good they helped me carry things out because I think I was to overcome with sorrow. I couldn't even talk. I kept getting choked up. If I tried to say anything tears began forming in my eyes and I had to cease speaking (or I would have completely broken down). I might as well have been an infant and had someone guiding me by the hand. It was so upsetting, I suddenly felt like I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Suddenly, out of the blue (literally, as the skies had been clear up to that moment), a downpour of rain erupted and we had to wait as everyone was still standing there. I overhear people in the village say, (in Ndjukan, of course) "Even the heavens cry when Ken leaves Tapoeripa." I would have broken down in tears for good, if I didn't walk away.*

*Just as suddenly that the blue skies had been overcome by a rain cloud, the sky cleared up. We put the last of my goods in the vehicle. I said my final goodbyes and then Captain Kentie (the village chief) provided one final grand entrance for me to see, as he walked up guided by his every present captain's cane, wearing his kamisa (a brightly colored madras tied and worn around the waist) and his usual red baseball cap. The village onlookers remained standing lined up along the sides as the captain and I said our final pleasantries to each other. Then we were off.*

In retrospect, that day may have been the closest I would ever feel to my Tapoeripa family. There are two factors I point to when attempting to convince the reader level IV had been attained. One, the sorrow I felt to be leaving my friends and the village I believe was the type of sadness only felt by those who are immersed in a culture and have now moved beyond living side-by-side with another culture. Instead living the culture, even if that entailed being able to remove oneself to live your own culture. This embodies W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness," that has been explained as "...a transcendent position allowing one to see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion – margins and mainstreams" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 260). The second factor that points to level IV was the comments of people stating the rain was actually tears from the heavens. My interpretation of these comments seemed to solidify my construction of level IV of cross-cultural awareness. The "physical/temporal" reality of the scene and discussion unfolding around me was able to connect with my 'enacted' reality, which had internalized and

understood the meanings of their words in a manner only an “insider” could decode. While I cannot say that I agreed then or agree now, that it was truly the spirit world crying at my leaving the village, the reason it was so touching to hear that said was because I instantly understood, from the viewpoint of an Ndjukan person from Tapoeripa, what they meant with that statement and the intensity with which they believed it to be true. While someone may argue with me on whether this meets the criteria for level IV by stating that anyone who had been educated about the “traditional” spiritual beliefs of these people would understand what was meant, I do not believe a person could experience the emotional core intensity of understanding the significance unless they had truly lived that culture. I would compare it to someone who is a Christian versus someone who is not a Christian. While most know the story of Jesus dying on the cross, the significance of the event is more likely to be felt with a profound emotional intensity by the Christian than the non-Christian.

## Reflections

Though the words on these pages spring from my hands through my memories stored in my head and heart, try as I might to give the reader meaning, it is each individual who will construct his or her own meaning of what has been read. As I reflect on my story, two questions rise to my consciousness. What does this all mean for me and is there meaning in this for others?

*What does this mean for me?*

Before stating what this means for me, I first must determine exactly where the meanings stem from. First, is the meaning I gained from the Peace Corps experience and development of a more profound cross-cultural awareness? Second, is some of the meaning I gained from writing this autoethnography? While, initially, I was tempted to say these entail two separate learning experiences, I question my accuracy in that statement. They may well be interrelated. It seems to me that by writing the autoethnography, I did not as much learn something new as much as it provided me a forum to articulate what the realizations of the Peace Corps experience were; therefore, the meanings I have derived from both of these experiences will be treated as if they stemmed from the Peace Corps experience and were constructed through the process of cross-cultural awareness and the autoethnography.

I now have a renewed realization (an awareness!) that there is a power structure and as a white male, I am perceived by some to be high up the hierarchy of the power structure, but it must be understood that there are other perspectives out there. Indeed, there is some truth to me being higher on the power structure. After all, for two years I learned to live life as a minority, but truth be told, did I really? I must keep in mind that I was able to leave the poverty in the village and fly back into a world of treasures awaiting me in the United States. A luxury not afforded to most other minorities. Therefore, throughout my experience, subconsciously, I always knew I could get out of the situation and this probably limited how far I could embrace a minority’s perspective. As a result, if my minority perspective was limited, then no matter how much I came to understand the culture of the Ndjukan Tapoeripa experience, my final elevation to the top level of cross-cultural awareness may have been doomed to merely a fleeting moment of cultural wisdom.

On the other hand, is there something to be said in my embracement of this role that knowing I could leave, I remained for the full two years? Maybe this turned it into a perceptible that was unique in of itself. Is this Alexander’s (2005) border pedagogy, the graying of two different perspectives, while not really able to fully embody either one of them?

*Is there meaning in it for others?*

While there has been a sizable amount of literary works done by Peace Corps Volunteers and a body of that literature is on the lived experiences, cycles of cultural adaption, and personal growth, I have not seen research discussing personal reflections on stages of cross-cultural awareness. It is this personal reflection of cross-cultural awareness that I hope to contribute to that literature. Additionally, hopefully, as a result of reading this story others have become aware of some of the possibilities in this journey and, do not get caught in isolating it as one person's story. It can be a story of understanding, in which everyone has their own perception. It can be a story about expanding one's mind to understand another paradigm of research, in contrast to accepting a single paradigm as dogma. Of course, I am trying to determine meaning that others will get from it from an already established perception of my mind. Maybe I should be skeptical of my own perceptions. After all they have been constructed in a manner unique to my own experiences, far different from that of others. As a result, I will leave it to the interacting "physical/temporal" and "enacted" realities of the readers to determine what meaning they have established.

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