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Chapter 4: Host Families in Cuenca, Ecuador

from

El Otro Lado:

Considering the Impact of Education Abroad
on Host Families in Cuenca, Ecuador

a master's thesis by Søren M Peterson

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CHAPTER 4: HOST FAMILIES IN CUENCA, ECUADOR

Introduction

As we saw in the last chapter, in the past decade Cuenca has experienced significant growth in the education abroad sector. A growing number of US university-sponsored programs⁴⁶ and local language schools are bringing an increasing number of international students to Cuenca, many of whom stay with local host families to practice Spanish and to experience the culture firsthand. This chapter will examine the lives of these host families from the perspective of the families themselves to learn who they are and why they host, and to see how education abroad programs impact them socioculturally and economically. In particular, I will take a critical look at their motivations for hosting and at what transpires in their encounter with students. As I noted in Chapter 2, little attention has been given to the potential sociocultural and economic

⁴⁶ In addition, there is also one program sponsored by a Canadian university.

impacts of education abroad on hosts. Given this dearth of information in education abroad, it is crucial to turn our attention to the group of hosts with whom students have the most contact—that is, host families.⁴⁷ This is particularly important given the empirical evidence from tourism that has shown that cross-cultural contact can have a negative sociocultural effect on locals.

I begin the chapter by examining the motivations of families to host students, as well as the process of becoming a host family. This discussion is framed especially in terms of fictive kinship and economics. I then analyze the hosting experience itself by utilizing the notion of the host-guest encounter from anthropological studies of tourism. My ethnographic analysis is based primarily on qualitative data that I collected during interviews with actors on both sides of the cross-cultural encounter, including host families, other locals, key school personnel, and students. In my discussion of the hosting experience, I include representative narratives and quotes to illustrate key points. The narratives and quotes from host families and other locals are my English translations of the interviews, which took place in Spanish (interviews with students and other foreigners took place in English). To protect their confidentiality, I have changed the names of the people with whom I

⁴⁷ As Stephenson (1999) points out, there is also another group of hosts, local university professors, with whom students have substantial contact. Given the limited scope of my research, I have focused solely on host families.

consulted. Where appropriate, I also use quantitative data to enhance my analysis.

Before delving into my examination of host families, let us review the questions and assumptions that have guided my research. Prior to beginning my fieldwork, I presumed that host families in Cuenca were not representative of the population as a whole. From my experience as an education abroad professional in Cuenca, it seemed that most, if not all, host families were from just one sector of the population: the middle class. With this in mind, I wanted to learn more about who host families are—specifically, how they are different from the rest of the population—and why they decide to host. As we will see, the issue of class is an important criterion for language schools when deciding whether to accept a prospective host family.

Language schools and education abroad programs offer, and promote, homestays as a way to provide extracurricular opportunities for students to learn about the culture through firsthand experience and to practice Spanish. In other words, schools expect host families to incorporate students into family life, which then serves as a real-world learning laboratory. But how do host families and students actually interact? What happens in this host-guest encounter? How do host families share their culture with students?

As I noted in Chapter 2, the tourism and acculturation literature would suggest that host families—and not just students—experience some kind of sociocultural impact as a result of the host-guest encounter. Since this thesis is primarily a qualitative study, I have chosen to focus on host families' perceptions of the impact of hosting students on them. Specifically, I wanted to know whether hosting fosters in host families a greater appreciation of their own culture, as Esman (1984) and Besculides et al. (2002) observed have occurred in host-guest encounters in tourism, and as Stephenson (1999) suggested was the most salient outcome in her study of Chilean host families. Besculides et al. and Stephenson used questionnaires to measure this outcome, while Esman based her assessment on locals' temporary adoption of traits that she considered to be characteristics of traditional Cajun culture.

Why Families Host Students

In this chapter, I focus on host families' motivations for hosting and on their perceptions of what they receive from the experience. Central to this discussion is the notion of *fictive kinship*, which is defined as “a relationship, based not on blood or marriage but rather on religious or close friendship ties, that replicates many of the rights and obligations

usually associated with family ties” (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:189) or, more succinctly, as “relations modelled on kinship ties” (Keesing 1975:129). Fictive kinship is a logical concept to use in my research, because education abroad programs and language schools often speak of the relationships between host families and students using kinship terms. In addition, students sometimes begin to refer to their host families simply as their “families,” suggesting that they begin to see their hosts as genuine kin. Marshall (1977:644) criticized terms such as “fictive” or “ritual” kinship for implying that such relations are not “real” and proposed the term *created kinship*. Nevertheless, *fictive kinship* remains the preferred term, as evidenced by recent studies (e.g., Ebaugh and Curry 2000; Holy 1996).

The study of kinship has a long, rich history in anthropology, which has provided its leading theoreticians (Holy 1996:1), beginning with Lewis Henry Morgan in the 1870s (Marshall 1977:644). During the first half of the twentieth century, anthropologists preoccupied themselves with the kinship structures of the societies they studied (Holy 1996:3). More recently, kinship lost its centrality as anthropological inquiries shifted their focus from the structure of social relations to the process of social life (Holy 1996:5). Whereas anthropologists once viewed kinship as a determinant of other cultural domains such as economic production and

exchange, they now view kinship and other domains as interrelated (Holy 1996:4-5).

At mid-century, as kinship itself was becoming a secondary focus in the discipline (Holy 1996:5), anthropologists were just beginning to study fictive forms of kinship (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:191). Among the first anthropologists to systematically study fictive kinship were Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:191), who examined *compadrazgo* (co-parenthood), a common form of fictive or ritual kinship in Latin America. Mintz and Wolf (1950:341) described *compadrazgo* as a triumvirate of relationships among an initiate (usually a child), the initiate's parents, and one or more ceremonial sponsors (the initiate's *padrino*, or godfather, and *madrina*, or godmother). *Compadrazgo* usually, but not always, stems from the Catholic ritual of baptism (Dávila 1971:396; Mintz and Wolf 1950:341).⁴⁸ Generally, sponsors are selected from non-kin or distant kin (Keesing 1975:130), thus extending one's kin network.

Some scholars (Dávila 1971:396; Keesing 1975:129; Mintz and Wolf 1950) suggest that the relationship between the parents and the sponsors—collectively referred to as *compadres* (co-parents)—is the most important one. It is this emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between

⁴⁸ See Miles (2004) for a discussion of *compadrazgo* among *campesinos* (rural peasants) in southern Ecuador.

compadres that distinguishes compadrazgo from other forms of godparenthood (Dávila 1971:396). In this respect, although compadrazgo provides a general understanding of the importance of fictive kinship in Latin America, it is not a perfect framework for my research. In education abroad, it is rare for biological parents and host parents to meet, or even to have contact with each other, and their relationship is minimal.

A more useful focus for my purposes is the relationship between “initiates” (i.e., students) and “sponsors” (i.e., host parents). Scholars (Dávila 1971:397; Ebaugh and Curry 2000:195) note that the sponsors have multiple responsibilities, including instructing the initiate in religion and morals, raising the initiate if the parents die or are otherwise unable to do so, and providing assistance. Such assistance may include lending money, offering a place to stay, providing contacts or other connections, etc. In other words, these “fictive parents” help to enculturate and to take care of the initiate. In a homestay setting, host families are responsible for teaching students about the culture (i.e., enculturating the students).

Ebaugh and Curry (2000) have proposed that migrants are another form of initiate, in that they often receive support from fictive kin in the form of social capital. These fictive kin may be the person's padrinos or other people from the destination community. For example, Miles (2004) describes how one transnational migrant, already well established in New York, helped a young man from Cuenca to migrate as well, lending him the

money to pay the *coyote* (smuggler), providing a place to stay, and connecting him with a job.

Ebaugh and Curry's (2000) notion of fictive kin as social capital is useful for examining the host-guest relationship in education abroad. In this context, we can think of students as “migrants” who rely on the social capital that their fictive kin (i.e., host families) provide. In addition, as Dann (1996) has suggested, there is also a fictive kin relationship between “tourists” (i.e., students) and the “tourist industry” (i.e., education abroad programs and language schools). In other words, students have two sets of fictive kin, both of which provide social capital that help them to adapt to their new surroundings and to survive in a new culture. Bourdieu describes social capital as

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. [2002:286]

This type of capital involves social relationships in neighborhoods, the workplace, or among kin (Bourdieu 2002:287) that “can serve to enhance an individual's access to opportunities, information, material resources, and social status” (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:190). It is important to note that the admission of new members to a group

necessarily exposes it—and its identity—to redefinition, alteration, and adulteration (Bourdieu 2002:287). This would suggest that host families also benefit from social capital, by extending it to the students they host. In turn, host families obtain prestige by associating with foreigners.

Blanca, a *señora* who has been hosting for just a few years, clearly expressed the notion of fictive kinship when she summarized her experience: “It is as if each one is another daughter that has returned home after living far away for many years.” When a student returns home and does not keep in touch, the host family may feel that it has lost a child (Sumka 2000:27). Indeed, several host families suggested that they do not always think of students merely as guests in their home but as fictive kin:

“I do not differentiate between the student and my children —they are all my children.” —Patricia

“There was one in particular who stole my heart—he was one more son in my life ... the students call me *mamá*.” —Julia

“They are like my family. They *are* my family. I give them the same rules that I give to my children.” —Beatriz

“[Mary] came to have great affection for our family. She always says that we are her Ecuadorian parents.” —Galo

“Some call me '*mamá*,' which gives me satisfaction.” —Elsa

As these quotes suggest, there is often a mutual feeling of fictive kinship that develops between host family and student.

Host families may claim, as Patricia did, that they do not differentiate between students and their own children, but in reality, the guest siblings have a special status in the family not enjoyed by their host counterparts. Generally speaking, over the last decade or so, host families have begun to offer students significantly more independence than they allot to their own children. Several host mothers mentioned the importance of allowing students to come and go as they please, even though they do not let their own children do so. This level of independence has developed at the urging of the schools and programs, who have made these requests in response to student complaints about curfews and not being allowed to go out in the evening to socialize with friends. In addition, as one homestay coordinator made clear, students have paid money to stay with a host family, so they should not be expected to do household chores. Instead, students should be served. On one hand, this situation would suggest that students are treated more as guests than as fictive kin. On the other, it is similar to the treatment that out-of-town relatives would receive when they come to visit.

In some cases, host families do expect students to help out around the house, at least with some tasks. For example, one host mother told me that each person in her family—including the student—is responsible for taking their dirty clothes downstairs on wash day (which occurs once a week when the *señora* hires someone to do the laundry). Failure to do so means that that person's laundry will not be washed that week. No family member—not even the student—is given any leniency in this respect. In other cases, especially for summer- or semester-long stays, students sometimes volunteer to help out around the house, as they and their hosts become more comfortable with each other.

I certainly witnessed, and experienced, fictive kinship firsthand when I lived with a host family in Cuenca during my year abroad. From the first day, my host siblings referred to me as “*ñañño*” (“brother” in Quichua),⁴⁹ a term they still use with me some 14 years later. As well, I still recall my first day of school in Cuenca back in June 1992. As my host mother dropped me off at the front door of the school, she said, “*Chao*,⁵⁰ *mi hijo. Cuídate.*” (Bye, my son. Take care.) And recently, I ran across one of the letters that she wrote after I had returned to the United States; it was signed “*tu mami mona*” (your Ecuadorian mom).⁵¹

49 Although Quichua is spoken only by *indígenas* (indigenous people), many Quichua words have entered the colloquial speech of *mestizos* and *blancos* in Cuenca.

50 Ecuadorians spell the Italian word *ciao* phonetically, replacing the letters *ci* with *ch*, which results in the equivalent Spanish sound.

51 Literally, *tu mami mona* means “your monkey mom.” In Ecuador, the term *mono*

The notion of fictive kinship in the host family-student relationship extends beyond just using terms such as “brother” or “son.” After losing touch with my host mother for a few years, we were accidentally—but pleasantly—reunited during my fieldwork. Following the obligatory greetings and inquiries about how we were and what we had done in the last few years, she affectionately chided me for having lost touch: “Listen, you ingrate, why haven't you written? That is something you inherited from your father, because you did not get it from me.” Similarly, Heather, a student from a medium public university, told me that at an extended family gathering, her host father introduced her to the relatives as his daughter and later remarked, “She is pretty smart. She gets that from my side of the family.”

These examples suggest, as scholars have claimed, that fictive kinship transforms the parties involved into genuine kin (Ebaugh and Curry 2000; Marshall 1977). Because these relationships are seen as *real*, fictive kinship includes the same marriage restrictions and incest taboo that would be associated with blood kin (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:202).⁵² The incest taboo surfaced unexpectedly during an interview with Eulalia, a

often is used in place of *costeño* to refer to someone from the coast, especially someone from Guayaquil. My host family was originally from Guayaquil but had moved to Cuenca a few years prior to hosting me.

⁵² In *compadrazgo*, these restrictions extend to the sponsors themselves, who would then be prohibited from marrying each other (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:202).

señora who has hosted for several years. Smiling mischievously, she explained:

I treat them just like my daughters. I introduce them as sisters to my daughters, and I tell them, 'I am your mother, and this is your father' ... I prefer to receive young women, because I have two daughters [but] once I hosted a young man. Apparently, he fell in love with my older daughter. He told a friend of mine that he could not tell my daughter, because it was incest—she was his sister. So it has worked for me!

As we can see from Eulalia's response, sometimes families intentionally create fictive kinship as a way to make students feel comfortable and to incorporate them into family life.

However, while fictive kinship is a concept that many host families mentioned in the course of describing their experiences, none explicitly mentioned it as a motivation for hosting. In contrast, two percent of Chilean families cited “having another child” as an advantage of hosting students (Stephenson 1999:17). Several of the *señoras* whom I interviewed mentioned that they started hosting because they had empty space and enjoyed having company, which Stephenson (1999) cited as well. For example, Estela, a widow, explained why she started hosting students:

For me, foreigners are no burden at all ... I am alone now, and I want to have other people around. I like to cook, to

serve. All my life, I have served others—my husband, my children. I enjoy it.

One could argue that by hosting students, Estela is creating new kin (i.e., fictive children) and thus enhancing her status as a mother.⁵³ As some scholars have suggested, in Latin America a middle-class woman's status often is based on her domestic responsibilities as a mother (Ehlers 1991:10; Jaramillo 1980:411; Miles 1997:59; Miles and Buechler 1997:2). Indeed, according to the traditional Hispanic model of gender roles, a woman is ideally relegated to the household and to her role as a mother (Miles 1994:140 and 1997:59). Even women who have prestigious jobs “are considered first and foremost women, and as much, their most important role is ultimately within the household” (Miles 1997:59), although middle- and upper-class women in Cuenca traditionally have a maid (and perhaps other servants) to take care of most of the domestic chores (Miles 1994:140). This model would explain why a professional, middle-class woman in Cuenca might look to hosting students, which serves as a means to fulfill her personal needs as a mother and, therefore, to enhance her status, while at the same time providing a crucial source of income for her family.

⁵³ Sumka (2001) used the notion of hospitality to describe similar comments, as well as the general concern that host families expressed for the well-being of students.

With regard to occupation, there is no significant difference between host mothers and women in general with regard to the percentage who are housewives (61.5% and 42.1%, respectively).⁵⁴ This suggests that host mothers are no more (nor less) likely than women as a whole to dedicate themselves to domestic responsibilities. Moreover, using chi-square ($\alpha=0.05$), there is no significant difference between the three language schools with regard to occupation of host mothers, even though the percentage of host mothers who are housewives appears to vary substantially from a low of 52.6% to a high of 75.0% (60% of host mothers at the third school are housewives).⁵⁵ This suggests that host mothers from the various schools can be considered as a homogeneous group for the purpose of comparison with women as a whole.

There is, however, a very highly significant difference between host mothers and all women with regard to occupation (chi-square test, $\alpha=0.001$). This difference lies in the category of businesswomen, which has a higher percentage of host mothers than women in general; there is no significant difference for other occupational categories

54 The Ecuadorian population census tables of economic activity and inactivity (INEC 2001) aggregate women into 5-year age groups (e.g., 25-29, 30-34, etc.) through age 64; all women age 65 and older are aggregated into a single group. Because of this, I have decided to limit my comparison of host mothers and all women to just the ages of 25-64. (Only one host mother is actually older than this.)

55 The school with the highest percentage of host mothers who are housewives actually prefers host families in which someone—generally the *señora*—is at home during the day.

(including housewife, as mentioned in the previous paragraph). Host mothers who self-identified as businesswomen usually are involved in owning or managing small businesses that often are home-based, including art gallery, hair salon, interior design, and telephone repair. This suggests that host mothers tend to work in more professional capacities (and, perhaps, are more educated) than women as a whole. Moreover, this would also suggest that host families are from the middle class (and perhaps even the upper class), but certainly not from the lower class.

Fictive kinship is, of course, only one motivation for hosting students. At the beginning of each interview, I asked host families how they got into hosting. Some cited multiple reasons. Nearly half mentioned that they learned about the possibility of hosting after talking with friends or relatives who had hosted students already. This suggests that social networks play an important role in recruiting new host families and in prompting families to consider hosting. Others, such as Josefina, had considered hosting but did not make the final decision until speaking with others:

My husband and I considered hosting. At first, he objected because he thought that we were going to lose our privacy. But we talked with other families, and they said that the students spend very little time at home ... and [that] they did not lose their privacy like we thought.

Whereas the families with whom Josefina spoke might be suggesting that they do not want to spend too much time with the students, later in this chapter we will see that several of the host families complained that students did not spend *enough* time with them.

The next most cited reason for hosting international students was the opportunity to learn about other cultures and people, as well as to share Ecuadorian culture with others:

“Primarily, I was hoping to learn about other cultures. I am very friendly. I like to meet other people and exchange ideas.” —Ximena

“We have traveled a bit. We have always tried to learn about other cultures. I imagine that because of travel agencies, they [students] have the idea that we are all indigenous, so we wanted to show them that we are civilized people.” —Galo

“I am in the program because I want my children to learn about other cultures and people, to see that we are all alike, so that they might adapt better when they go somewhere else. Sharing with other cultures and learning are important things.” —Julieta

Cultural reasons topped the list of advantages of hosting students in Stephenson's (1999) study of Chilean host families, and cultural exchange was also a common response in Sumka's (2001) study of host families in Quito. Cultural exchange is, logically, what schools and programs would

consider to be the ideal motivation of host families, as Pilar, a homestay coordinator, suggested when she said that an interest in cultural sharing is an important characteristic that she looks for in prospective families. In fact, a perusal of program and school websites reveals that learning about and experiencing the culture are almost universally-mentioned reasons for living with a host family.

In addition, cultural exchange is part of the notion of intercultural understanding that is cited frequently as a goal of education abroad and which has been studied extensively (e.g., Bochner et al. 1979; Carlson and Widaman 1988; Dwyer 2004). Cultural exchange is also cited as a motivation in tourism, especially cultural tourism (e.g., Smith 2003; Wickens 2005). Indeed, it is this motivation that distinguishes cultural tourism from other varieties of alternative tourism. Just as cultural tourists participate in cultural or ethnic tourism out of a genuine desire to interact with other cultures, I suggest that families in Cuenca choose hosting over other economic activities for similar reasons.

Some *señoras* mentioned curiosity or the novelty of seeing a *gringo*⁵⁶ as their motivation for hosting students:

“I wanted to see if it was true that *gringos* were really cold people.” —Julieta

⁵⁶ *Gringo* refers to a foreigner, particularly one with pale skin and light-colored hair. In Ecuador, the term is rarely derogatory (in contrast to Mexico).

“Seeing a *gringuito*⁵⁷ was a novelty. I was passing by the school with my children, and they said that they wanted to have a *gringuito* in the house. So we went inside to speak with the homestay coordinator, and later someone came and visited our home.” —Clara

In Julieta's case, she seems to be indicating a genuine interest in learning about people from other cultures, specifically, in dispelling a stereotype expressed by many in Cuenca that *gringos* are cold people. I will discuss this stereotype later in the chapter. Clara's comment about the novelty could be interpreted either as curiosity or as an aspiration for enhanced prestige by associating with foreigners. In Stephenson's (1999) study, two percent of Chilean families cited prestige as an advantage of hosting students.

Several families also mentioned that it was actually the *school* that asked them to become hosts. Schools might take the initiative because of the proximity of the family's home (to accommodate students who are not able to walk very far) or because a family member works or studies at the school. For example, Flor said that the school sought her out because she lived in the city center and it wanted a nearby option to offer to students.

⁵⁷ Cuencans are known for their frequent use of the diminutive (marked with the suffix *-ito*), hence Clara's use of *gringuito* as a term of endearment.

A couple of families mentioned their desire to practice English as a motivation for hosting. Stephenson (1999) and Sumka (2001) reported this as well in their studies. Host families in Cuenca pointed out that there has not been much opportunity to do so, since schools have policies requiring that only Spanish be used (exceptions may be made for emergencies, of course). These policies reflect the focus of these programs on Spanish language learning.

Finally, some families acknowledged that the need to supplement their income was a significant motivation for deciding to host students. Other scholars have reported similar findings: ten percent of Chilean families in Stephenson's (1999) study cited economic reasons, and Sumka (2001) mentions economics as a secondary motivation for families in Quito. Given the poor state of Ecuador's economy in recent years, I suspected that hosting might be an economic survival strategy for families in Cuenca, but I was surprised that several of them admitted it to me quite openly (perhaps this is an indication of the rapport that I had developed with them). In Cuenca, families receive \$10 per day for hosting a student. This is a significant amount, given that the Ecuadorian government estimates a typical family of five requires \$437.41 per month to cover basic expenses (INEC 2006).⁵⁸ Students generally stay with a host family for a

⁵⁸ This refers to the *canasta analítica familiar básica*, an economic indicator that is adjusted on a monthly basis. The figure I cite here is from December 2005; by September 2006, it had risen slightly to \$450.83 (INEC 2006).

minimum of one to two weeks (and sometimes for several months), which means that the income from hosting can have a significant impact on the family budget.

While few host families mentioned economics as an important motivation for hosting, it is, nevertheless, a factor that cannot be ignored. In each interview, I asked how long the family had been hosting and how many students had been their guests. One third of the families provided incomplete data, as they recalled either how long they had been hosting or the total number of students, but not both.

For the two thirds that responded with complete data,⁵⁹ I calculated the students per year so that I could compare new host families with those who had been hosting for many years. This statistic ranged from 0.9 to 28 students per year, with a median of 3.2. I did not collect data on the actual number of days that students were with their host families, which would have permitted a more accurate calculation. If I were to do this again, I would carefully examine school records to collect data on the number of students and nights, as well as how long each family has hosted. Without data on actual lengths of stay, I arbitrarily chose an average duration of two weeks.⁶⁰ Using this average and a rate of \$10 per day, I then

⁵⁹ In some cases, host families provided the approximate number of students hosted per year instead of the total.

⁶⁰ This figure is arbitrary in the sense that it is not based on the actual number of days that these particular families hosted students. It was not, however, invented in a vacuum; it is a figure that I calculated in 2002 while I was an employee of one of the

calculated each family's approximate annual income from hosting, which ranged from \$140 to more than \$3900. To make these figures more meaningful, I then calculated this annual hosting income as a percentage of the *canasta analítica familiar básica* (CAFB) for December 2005 (see INEC 2006). The results ranged from more than two percent up to nearly 75 percent.

I caution the reader that these figures are merely for illustration and in some cases are grossly inaccurate. In the case of at least one family on the lower end, the one student it hosts each year stays for approximately two months. Adjusting for this longer duration, its annual hosting income rises to nearly 10 percent of the CAFB (instead of the two percent I calculated initially). In the case of Dora, a *señora* who has been hosting for two years, I calculated an annual income of more than \$2500 (48 percent of CAFB), yet she gave me an actual figure of approximately \$800 (15 percent of CAFB) for the previous year and predicted that her hosting income for the current year would be even lower. Dora said that while she hosts a lot of students, most stay with her for just a few nights (i.e., less than a week), so her hosting income is actually quite low. Nevertheless, the income she earns makes a difference in her family's

language schools in Cuenca from data on individual students in non-credit language immersion programs (i.e., excluding group programs sponsored by US universities). I am recalling this figure from memory, as I do not have access to those records.

budget. As she explained, “we do not depend on the income from the school, because we would die that way. But it helps.”

In short, regardless of whether a family hosts one student for several weeks each year or many students for a shorter duration, hosting has a significant economic impact on its income. Nevertheless, this income is merely supplementary; host families must seek income from other sources as well.

Through my interviews with host families, I was struck by the fact that many of them did not seem to consider hosting as being about only cultural exchange or income. Instead, they seemed to have come to grips with the idea that it could be about *both*. In contrast, schools and programs have a tendency to see these motivations as mutually exclusive, although staff members understand the economic situation that host families face.

Tania, a former homestay coordinator, said she recognizes that many families depend on the income from hosting students; however, economics cannot be their only motive. As Pilar (a current homestay coordinator) suggested, genuine interest in cultural exchange is a key criterion in evaluating prospective families and in deciding whether to continue working with host families.

Indeed, schools determine which families receive students and how often, as well as what should be provided and for what price. Given this power inequality, some families may feel obliged to host a student whenever the school calls:

“One year, around the time of Cuenca's independence celebration, I was going to go to Guayaquil, but the school called to see if I could host. I said, 'send the student, I'll stay here.' You have to host when the school needs you, not just when you want.” —Paulina

Paulina's statement reflects not only a power inequality between school and host family, but also a genuine desire on her part to collaborate with the school and to share her cultural knowledge. She also explained,

[I switched to this school,] because the other school gave me only one student per year, and to others it gave two or three. I do not consider that fair, because I am a teacher, and I do not want to wait a whole year to be able to explain to another student things about our culture.

Other than that, the schools with which I have worked are similar, because they pay the same and they have the same expectations. For the families, it is not about money, but rather new experiences. There is the economic part, but I place more value on the experience that I have with students.

As Paulina suggests, families are not completely powerless, and they sometimes shop around for a better deal (e.g., higher pay or more

students) from another school. Paulina is not alone; several of the other families that I interviewed have also hosted with two or three different schools. On the other hand, some families have hosted with only one school and feel a certain sense of loyalty to it, even though they are asked to host students less frequently than they would prefer.

Carmen and Pilar are the homestay coordinators with whom I spoke the most about the requirements for becoming a host family. They emphasized the importance of class and location, as well as motivation, in evaluating prospective hosts. For example, Pilar uses these criteria when meeting with a prospective host family for the first time:

I ask where they live. How long does it take to walk [to the school]? I want to know what class of family it is, who they are. One realizes what class they belong to, what they are looking for. Cultural sharing is important for us, but it is apparent that some are interested only in the money.

Those families who appear to be interested primarily in the money generally do not proceed past the initial inquiry stage, as Pilar feels that they would not fulfill the school's goal of providing a comfortable, educational environment for students.

Carmen also discussed the process of evaluating a prospective family and described what she considers to be the ideal host family:

First you get to know the house. In that sense, yes, we are a bit selective, in order to provide a good environment. I also

have to explain things to the family so that they know what I expect. Sometimes I even sit on the bed to see how it is.

I chat with them to find out what their reasons are [for hosting], what they are expecting from the student, what they want to share with the student.

The ideal family? Starting with the house, that they have a nice place. Also, they need to be a stable family and open-minded to hosting someone from another culture.

Pilar made it quite clear that while her school wants host families to integrate students into their daily lives, there is also an expectation of comfort: “students are here to be attended to, so they do not need to clean the house.” She also added that the school has guidelines on how host families should prepare food for students and that they should boil water for drinking (or provide bottled water). Other schools have similar guidelines for host families. As these comments suggest, language schools understandably want to provide guests (i.e., students) with a comfortable and safe environment and a positive impression of the city. In this way, the schools are trying to meet guests' expectations in a way that is similar to how the tourism industry caters to tourists (Chambers 2000).

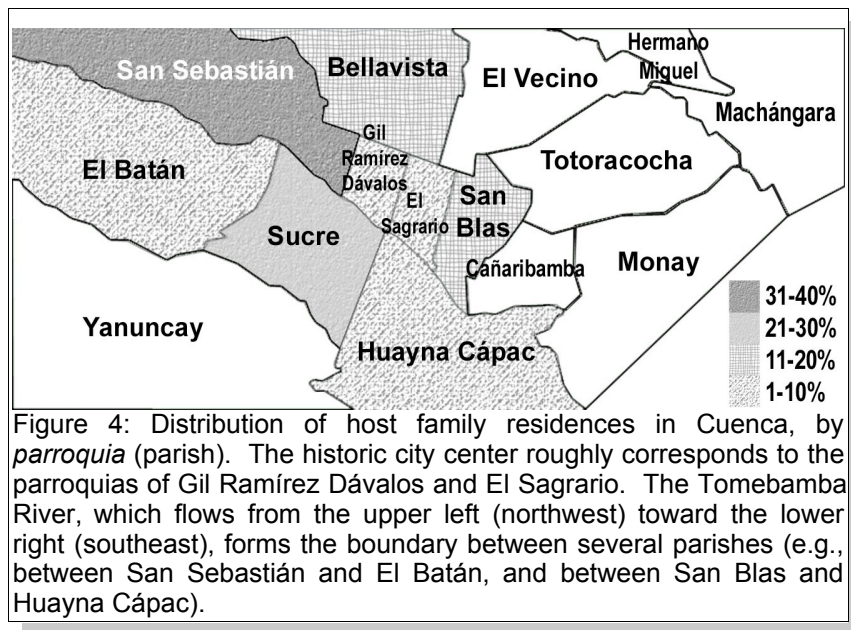
However, whereas their comments show obvious concern for students' welfare, they did not express similar concern for the host

families. This is not to say that schools are uninterested in the host families' welfare. Indeed, John, the director of one of the schools, acknowledged that his school could improve its relations with host families, especially in terms of providing a better support structure, including training in intercultural understanding:

I wouldn't claim that we provide any profound understanding of other cultures. There are still cultural misunderstandings; they [host families] still have it wrong. Sure, there is some understanding, but not much. We do not help the families like we should. I could use the analogy of dropping an individual student in a foreign city to sink or swim. We have weekly meetings with students, but nothing similar with the host families. This is regrettable. We need to do a better job toward intercultural understanding and teaching.

The issue of class that I mentioned above can also be seen through a spatial analysis of host family residences. As Pilar indicated, proximity to the school is an important criterion, which might suggest that most host families would live in the city center, where the language schools are located. However, other factors, such as class, come into play as well, so there are many host families that reside in other areas of the city. Indeed, just one-quarter of the host families in this study live in Cuenca's historic city center, which corresponds roughly to the *parroquias* (parishes) of Gil Ramírez Dávalos and El Sagrario (see Figure 4.4). Cuenca is divided into several *parroquias*, which provide a convenient geographic unit for

analyzing the distribution of host families throughout the city, in much the same way that census tracts would be used for similar analyses in the United States.⁶¹ Of the one-quarter of families that live in the city center, only a few reside in the core (“*área de primer orden*”); most live in the periphery (“*área de respeto*”) that serves as a transition between the historic core and newer areas. The remaining three-quarters of host families reside in newer parts of Cuenca, particularly in the southern and western areas, which Lowder (1990:116) reports were areas settled by the middle and upper classes. As Figure 4 indicates, host families are concentrated primarily in the western half of the city and secondarily in the south, with none residing in the eastern parishes.



61 However, *parroquias* have a religious origin and may vary considerably in population.

Parroquia San Sebastián, which extends westward from the edge of the city center core, has the highest percentage of host families (35 percent). The western region of San Sebastián, especially along and in the immediate vicinity of Avenida Ordóñez Lasso, has some of Cuenca's nicest and most expensive neighborhoods, including the area around the Hotel Oro Verde, one of the city's best hotels. The fact that the Eljuri family, one of Ecuador's richest and most influential families, lives in this area is an indication of the economic prosperity of the parish's residents. This is the area that a 1944 city plan designated for a “superior residential zone” (Lowder 1990:116).

Parroquia Sucre, located on the south side of the Tomebamba River, has the second highest percentage of host families (22 percent), and it is followed by two parishes adjacent to the historic city center, Bellavista and San Blas, each of which has 13 percent. Four other parishes—Huayna Cápac, El Batán, Gil Ramírez Dávalos, and El Sagrario—form the bottom tier in terms of percentage of host families. All of the parishes mentioned above are within “reasonable” walking distance (i.e., 30 minutes or less) from the language schools, which are located in or near the historic city center. Hermano Miguel, Machángara, Monay, and Yanuncay parishes are too far from the city center for walking to be feasible, so these are not areas where language schools normally would place students.

On the other hand, portions of Cañaribamba, El Vecino, and Totoracocha parishes *are* within walking distance; however, they are considered dangerous and not the kind of area where schools would want to place students. When I asked Tania (a former homestay coordinator) about these parishes, she replied:

Really, one of the basic requirements for us is the distance of the families—the closer to ... the school, the better for students in terms of time and transportation. Another very important thing is safety. These parishes or neighborhoods that you mention are distant and not very safe for foreigners. They [students] go out a lot at night, and it would not be a good idea for them to return late to these areas. Also, these areas are not very picturesque, and in general the families that live there do not have very good habits, which things we want to offer to our students.

The last part of Tania's response suggests that these eastern parishes are lower class neighborhoods. Indeed, as Lowder (1990:116) reports, this area was designated by a 1944 city plan for industrial use and working class homes. Many of the people who live in these areas work as street vendors, custodians, or as menial laborers. As such, they work long hours and may not have time to spend with guests. Moreover, their residences are humble, and they may not have adequate space for a guest, let alone for the family itself (see Miles 2004). In addition, the *Terminal Terrestre* (bus station) is located on Avenida España in the western corner of Parroquia Totoracocha. The area surrounding the terminal, which spills

into Parroquia El Vecino, is congested and infamous for crime. Mariscal Lamar Airport, which opened in 1932 (Secretaría Municipal 1932), is also located along Avenida España and is surrounded by the industrial and commercial land use one would expect around an airport. The *Parque Industrial* (Industrial Park), constructed beginning in the 1960s (Espinoza 2001:49), is located in the southern tip of Parroquia Hermano Miguel, just beyond the airport.

In summary, families decide to host students for a variety of reasons. A primary motivation, although not explicitly expressed by host families, is the creation of fictive kin, which enhances women's status as mothers and offers them prestige from associating with foreigners. Another primary motivation that *was* expressed are social networks, which serve as a means for families to find out about the possibility of hosting and to learn about the advantages (and disadvantages) from experienced hosts. Other motivations include a desire to learn about other cultures and to teach students about Ecuadorian culture, curiosity about foreigners, the opportunity to practice English, and the need to supplement the family's income for economic survival. In addition, sometimes schools seek out new host families among their students and employees. Schools look for middle-class families who live in Cuenca's nicer neighborhoods in an effort to provide students with a safe, comfortable environment. Additionally, schools expect families to

integrate students into their daily lives and to follow established guidelines on the preparation of food. In these ways, schools, like the tourist industry, tend to cater to the expectations—both expressed and perceived—of their guests.

The Hosting Experience

We now look at the hosting experience from the perspective of the host families themselves. As I noted in Chapter 2, although the term “host-guest encounter” suggests a binary opposition, a triumvirate of actors is involved (Chambers 2000). In the context of education abroad, these actors are students, host families, and programs or schools (i.e., mediators or culture brokers). As Mathieson and Wall (1982:163) suggested, the nature and quality of the interaction is dependent on the interplay of these actors, as well as on the context in which the encounter takes place. Although my analysis in this section focuses mostly on what I learned from host families, I have also included the perspectives of students and schools where appropriate. In this way, I have heeded Stronza's (2001) call to include people on both sides of the encounter. In this section, I examine the host-guest encounter in homestays, beginning with the anticipation of hosting the first student and proceeding through a

typical weekday and a typical weekend. I also discuss some of the problems that occur in the encounter.

Mi primer gringuito⁶²

Going into any host-guest encounter, each actor (or group of actors) has its own expectations about the interaction that might occur. Prior to meeting their host families, students often become nervous and apprehensive. *Who are these strangers with whom I am going to live? What if we do not get along? What will they feed me?* Back in June 1992, as I waited in the lobby of the Hotel El Dorado in Cuenca, I was so scared to meet my host family that I actually hoped that they would not show up. As each family arrived, my level of apprehension skyrocketed and then quickly subsided when the homestay coordinator called out someone else's name.

Then I heard my name called, and I nervously approached my new host mother and brothers and greeted them in very broken Spanish. We collected my luggage and headed for their car. As we walked down Gran Colombia (the “main street” in Cuenca's city center), not a word was uttered for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, I broke the ice and admitted that I was nervous. Much to my relief, my host mother looked

62 “My first little *gringo*”

over at me and sheepishly said, “*yo también*” (“me, too”). I later learned that I was the first student they had ever hosted.

Indeed, students are not alone in feeling anxious about meeting their hosts. Host families expressed some of the same anxious sentiments, especially when describing their first time hosting a student, but they also suggested that such fears were unfounded:

“What habits might they have? The anticipation, the uncertainty, the fear ... but everything was fine. One does not know what the student will be like. Even now, there is still a little bit of fear before a new student arrives. [Hosting the first student] was the most beautiful experience of my life.” —Clara

“Perhaps the first girl was the best, because she was the first one. We thought that it was going to be difficult to adapt to a person from another culture, but it was not that way at all. We bonded very well.” —Esperanza

“I had a lot of anxiety, but we had a very good experience with the first girl. My children became very attached to her, and I had a lot of affection for her. My daughter cried when the girl left. She was like a daughter.” —Bélgica

“I started [hosting] precisely with Mary. It was the most significant experience for us. She came to have a great affection for our family. She always says that we are her Ecuadorian parents. She was a model girl, extraordinary. When she left, it was very difficult for us. She always adapted to our customs, even though they are very different

... later, we had two or three others, but there was not the same relationship that we had with Mary.” —Galo

Apprehension on the part of host families is understandable. After all, they are opening up their homes to strangers with whom they will be sharing close quarters. Doing so necessarily requires losing some degree of privacy, and it can also disrupt a family's regular habits. For example, Vicente, a long-time host father, told me about the disruptions in his household:

My seven-year-old daughter asks why she always has to lend her room [to the student] and her older sister does not. She also wants to know why she cannot go into the student's room, if she always goes into her sister's room.

And I also have to change some of my habits. Within our family, there is a certain level of confidence. But when we are hosting girls, I can no longer come out of my room in pajamas. And I have to change my schedule of when I use the bathroom. I do not want to inconvenience the student. And I try to keep a distance. For example, I try to not be home alone with the girl. Once it happened, so I locked myself in my room and did not come out until she left. That put me behind schedule, but I did not want to make the girl feel uncomfortable.

Vicente's reaction may be a bit exaggerated, but it may demonstrate his concern for the student's comfort. He may, in effect, be catering to the

perceived needs of his guests, just as we have seen occurs in tourism (Chambers 2000).

On the other hand, Vicente may be aware that some host fathers and brothers have been accused of acting inappropriately toward female students. When a female student reports such an incident, the school removes her from the home and finds a new host family. With this in mind, Vicente's behavior would not be exaggerated at all but instead could be understood as a defense mechanism. This is a valid concern, because several families over the years have been removed from schools' host rosters after the report of such an incident.

Nuestro arroz de cada día⁶³

Following Spradley's (1979) advice, I started each host family interview with a “grand tour” question by asking the *señora* to describe a typical weekday and weekend when she is hosting a student. Their responses about weekdays repeated a similar, and somewhat routine, rundown of the three daily meals, while comments about weekends described a bit more variation in activities.

A typical weekday begins with breakfast, which might include some combination of fresh fruit juice, a ham and cheese sandwich, *mote*

63 “Our daily rice”

(hominy) with scrambled eggs, fruit, and coffee or hot chocolate. Usually only the *señora* eats breakfast with the student, whose morning schedule often conflicts with that of the rest of the family. Students usually rush through breakfast before heading off to class, so there is not much opportunity for conversation. Indeed, whatever conversation that might take place is generally limited to inquiries such as how the student slept and what plans the student has for the day.

Lunch, on the other hand, provides greater opportunities for conversation, as Cuenca still observes the traditional *siesta* when many stores and offices close for a break from 13:00 to 15:00. Lunch is the main meal of the day, and most families—especially host families—return home at midday to eat together and to converse:

“At lunch we all try to get together, including my married son who has his own house. We share lunch. Sometimes we go to my daughter-in-law's house, and other times we eat at home.” —Diana

“We come home for lunch. Everyone is here. We are together for about an hour, and during that time we converse. Afterwards, I wash the dishes, and we continue talking.” —Esperanza

“For lunch, the whole family gathers to share and converse. The entire family is involved in the dialog ... afterwards, we all clean up the kitchen. My children help me, and sometimes the students pitch in as well.” —Bélgica

In this respect, Cuenca remains more traditional (and conservative) than Ecuador's two larger cities, many of whose residents have a half-hour lunch break at midday instead of a two-hour siesta.

Schools in Cuenca take the siesta into account when scheduling classes and other activities, so that students can take part in this important daily family ritual. For example, one school provides students with the following advice about living with a host family:

It is expected that every member of the household (and sometimes extended family members) be home at mealtime [, which] is considered *family time* ... the entire family often will wait for every person to come home before they begin to eat. For these reasons, it is of paramount importance to be courteous and arrive home *on time* for every meal.

Lunch typically begins with a homemade soup such as *locro de papas* (a creamy soup made with a potato base), which may be accompanied by *mote* or popcorn. The main course generally includes fresh fruit juice, a generous serving of white rice, meat (usually chicken or beef, but sometimes fish), and vegetables. During lunch, host families converse with students about how classes went in the morning and what plans they have for the afternoon, although conversations occasionally delve into deeper topics:

“Lunch is a lively family gathering. We converse about various topics—for example, we might talk about politics, *coyotes* [smugglers], migration, and so on.” —Clara

“We talk about a lot of things, such as politics, religion, the city, places they can visit, questions the students have such as the government of Abdalá Bucaram, and what celebrations are like both here and in their country.” —Rebeca

“We converse about globalization, Ecuador as an oil-producing country, how the president is doing (politics), movies.” —Elsa

Conversations often continue after lunch:

“After the meal, there is a bit of *sobremesa* [after-dinner conversation]. It lasts only about 5-10 minutes, because students have homework to do. We ask them questions such as how things are going, how their friends are. In general, everyone takes part.” —Diana

“When we have a student here, after eating we stay at the table longer. There is more *sobremesa*. That does not happen when there is not a student.” —Mercedes

As the siesta comes to a close, students head back to school, and host families usually do not see them again until supper. Like lunch, supper is also a time for conversation:

“At supper, students share in absolutely everything. Everyone is here, or just about everyone. We converse about the day ... if the student says that class was boring, we ask what about it was boring and why.” —Patricia

“We are all here for supper to spend time together and talk. Generally, students have a lot of homework, so we try to converse at mealtime.” —Esperanza

“Everyone is here for supper. We chat about lots of things, including what we did in the afternoon. Sometimes we continue talking for quite awhile.” —Bélgica

Supper often has the same menu as lunch, except with smaller portions or without the soup. Other families prefer a lighter menu of a sandwich or piece of bread and a hot beverage such as tea. But the menu is not always traditional; Clara smiled as she told me about her family's weekly menu diversion:

On Tuesdays, we have pizza, because Pizza Hut has a family special that night. Before, I did not care for pizza, but I noticed that students really like it, so I thought it would be nice to offer them something special.

Here, we see that Clara began catering to students by offering them a type of food that her family had not considered part of its diet. Pizza is by no means new to Cuenca. Since at least the early 1990s, when I first visited Cuenca, there have been Italian restaurants that serve pizza, and Pizza Hut

opened about a decade ago. Nevertheless, pizza is still seen as foreign and is not a regular part of the diet of Cuencan host families.

In the evening, families usually watch television or a video, and they invite students to join them, although students often decline the invitation because they have homework to do. Some families offer to help students with their homework:

“We are very willing to help students with their homework. For example, we review their assignments when they ask for help.” —Daniel

Julia echoed the desire to help students learn:

We ask them if they need help with their assignments. Sometimes there are words or phrases such as *coma nomás* [go ahead and eat] that they do not understand, so they ask, '¿Qué es eso?' [What is that?]. They also might ask about the old stories of Cuenca such as the headless priest.⁶⁴ Sometimes we do not know, but the student does, because they talked about it in class. Our mission is not to learn English but to help students with their Spanish.

Here, Julia reiterates the justification for students living with host families, which I mentioned earlier—that is, the opportunity to practice Spanish and to learn about the culture. In the process, as Julia suggests, host families occasionally become “tourists” of their own culture (Esman 1984). That is, while they are hosting a student, they learn more about

⁶⁴ See Miles (1994:150).

their own culture and their city. Bélgica, for example, takes students to a different church each Sunday, even though she normally attends mass at the same one every week (that is, when she is not hosting). This is not unlike the situation in which a local resident anywhere in the world goes about his regular business, “stuck” in the daily routine, without exploring or experiencing local events, museums, etc. How many of us go to these places only when we have guests?

Most families suggested that weekends offered more time for interaction, although they noted that students often have day-long excursions that may conflict with family activities:

“On weekends, I have taken students to Baños to go swimming, or to Gualaceo and Chordeleg. Occasionally, we go to the Mall del Río to eat lunch, and then I show them the stores and indicate what they can buy that is made here—for example, artisanry such as vases and dishes. But sometimes students are busy on weekends with excursions to Cajas, Ingapirca, and so on.” —Ruth

“Many Saturdays, students go on their [school] excursions. But on weekends when they are here, we head for the countryside, we go shopping, or we get together with our extended family.” —Julia

“On weekends when the student does not have an excursion, we go camping in the countryside where we have some property and an old adobe hacienda house. There, we offer the student *cuy* [guinea pig]—the guys love it. Sometimes we take the student's friends along, too.” —Patricia

“Some weekends, we go to Yunguilla where we have a small house. The students from this school almost never go, because they have their excursions to Ingapirca, Vilcabamba, Jima, and so on.” —Blanca

“On Saturdays, students generally have excursions. That is the day that I spend with my extended family, so students do not get to go with me. But if a student does not have an excursion, he or she goes with me and has lunch with my family.” —Flor

“On Sundays, we go to our property in Paute. We take the students along so that they feel comfortable and part of the family. On Saturdays, students generally are not at home, because they have excursions or they hang out with friends.” —Pía

As these host parents have suggested above, students have busy lives. A day in the life of a typical student⁶⁵ begins by waking up early and eating breakfast quickly before rushing off to school for class at 08:00. After four hours of class, split by a half-hour break, students return home for lunch with their families. Following lunch, students may chat with their families or rest briefly before returning to school for the afternoon extracurricular activity. Sometimes, students return to school early so that

⁶⁵ This overview of a typical student's day draws on my fieldwork observations, as well as on my own experience as a student and my years as an education abroad professional in Cuenca.

they have time to stop by the computer lab and check their e-mail; others log on after the afternoon extracurricular activity. Students may also remain at school to do their homework for the following day, especially if they need to use a computer to prepare an assignment.

As the sun sets,⁶⁶ students head home for supper. Some nights, however, students remain in the city center to go out to a bar or club. For example, Wednesday evenings, students head to Eucalyptus, an international *tapas* bar, for Ladies' Night. Other nights have a predictable hangout as well. Vicente, an experienced host father, gave me a rundown of students' weekly nightlife:

Sometimes they go out several nights a week. What is the typical behavior? Wednesday, Eucalyptus; Thursday, Wunderbar; Friday, La Mesa; Saturday, El Cafecito.

Elsa, a host mother for several years, lamented that students do not spend much time with their host families, and she seemed critical of the school:

On an ordinary day, there is not much to tell about. And on weekends, there are school excursions, so there is no way to spend much time with them then either ... they spend more time at the school than with the family ... in general, students have a lot of homework, so they do not take part in many family activities ... I encourage them to get more involved, but it just does not happen. I believe that students feel more

⁶⁶ Three degrees south of the Equator, the sun sets at approximately 18:00 (and rises like clockwork around 06:00) throughout the entire year.

comfortable in their free time hanging out with the group. They go to the movies or to a bar with their friends from the group.

In contrast to Josefina's acquaintances who appeared relieved that students do not spend much time with the family, Elsa clearly would like to interact more with students. Felipe, a young man whose family has hosted for nearly a decade, also remarked that students have busy schedules and concluded, "with them [students], what we can share is the weekend or evenings." But his mother, Piedad, quickly corrected him: "Evenings, not really, because they have homework. It is really just the weekend." As these hosts suggest, to a certain degree, schools monopolize students' time with classes, extracurricular instruction, and field trips. But at the same time, schools suggest that their professors assign discussion questions to encourage interaction between students and host families.

While many of the students whom I observed seemed to spend more time with each other than with their host families (just as Elsa suggested above), some made a more conscious effort to interact with their families. For example, Todd, a student from a small liberal arts college in the midwestern United States, contrasted his two study abroad experiences:

I am more into family life here than I was with the other program that traveled around. Sometimes I just prefer to spend time with my family than with the group.

Stacy, a student from the same college, also preferred to spend time with her host family instead of going out with classmates:

My family gives me a hard time every Wednesday because I have not gone to Eucalyptus for Ladies' Night. For them, it's a huge sin that I don't go out. But I want to spend time with my family. They are amazed that I do not dance, drink, or party.

Stacy's remark suggests that, based on their previous hosting experience, her host family has developed certain ideas about what students are like and what to expect from them. Her host parents expect her to act in a certain way that is acceptable only because of her status as a foreigner (Van Broeck 2001). They would not permit their own children to go out during the week.

Two common themes emerge from this discussion: students do not spend much time with their host families (especially during the week), and weekday interactions with students center around mealtime. This would suggest that the host-guest encounter in education abroad sometimes can be superficial, as often is the case in tourism (Chambers 2000). Nevertheless, some degree of acculturation may be possible. As I noted in the literature review, Brunt and Courtney (1999:509) found that meaningful conversation between villagers and tourists was not required; the mere presence of outsiders led to attitudinal changes in locals.

The reality that students and host families often do not spend much time together is something that I observed firsthand while visiting a couple of the schools. Students typically have class for four hours each day, and extracurricular activities such as dance classes, lectures, volunteering, and field trips occupy their time as well. In addition, as several *señoras* commented above, school programming even extends into the weekend, when students often have excursions to nearby sites of natural and historical interest. Great effort, therefore, may be required on the part of both host families and students to take advantage of the limited time they share together.

Gracias a Dios⁶⁷

Whenever humans interact with each other, especially when they are from different cultures, there is the potential for conflict to develop. Conflict can result when one person's behavior does not correlate with what another person expects or considers acceptable (Adler 1975; Chambers 2000; Lea 1998; Waldren 1997). As some tourism scholars have documented, this conflict may manifest itself in the form of hosts' negative perceptions of their guests (Chambers 2000).

⁶⁷ "Thank God"

From my experience as an education abroad professional in Cuenca, I dealt with a variety of problems involving the host-guest encounter. Some of those problems included students staying out later than expected, or occasionally not returning home at all. Others involved missing money or possessions. As well, there were a few complaints from families who were concerned about their host students drinking too much, especially on weeknights. With this in mind, I expected to get an earful when I asked host families about problems or bad experiences with students. This did happen a few times, but some *señoras* denied that they had experienced problems:

“No, *gracias a Dios* [thank God], so far no problems. They have all been respectful.” —Sofia

“I have received such good girls. They have been like a gift. I have been lucky, because I have heard about problems with students from other *señoras*, but I have not had any problems.” —Blanca

As Sumka (2000:29) suggests, some families may have downplayed problems and recounted only positive experiences out of concern that acknowledging problems might jeopardize their opportunity to host again in the future. In fact, Vicente confided to me that he believed some families were concerned only about the money they received and so would consequently ignore problems that arose. In addition, as I noted in

Chapter 3, some families seemed to see me, at least initially, as an official envoy of the schools, which could have affected their responses. I am more inclined to think, however, that the tendency toward positive responses may have been due to host families' experiences with previous students and their growing acceptance of student behavior that young Cuencans could not get away with (see Van Broeck 2001). This shift in host attitudes toward acceptable student behavior is evidence of a sociocultural impact of hosting on families.

Some *señoras*, such as Alexandra, acknowledged that they had experienced minor problems with students but said that others had it worse:

I think I have been very lucky. When I was with another school, I heard about some problems ... I have had two or three problems, but they were not very serious. Most have been very good experiences.

Toward the end of my interview with Elsa—when we had established a good level of rapport—she mentioned a topic that I had not expected, but one that obviously bothered her a lot:

A lot of times, students say that they want everything to be tidy, but they are not neat—neither the girls nor the boys. Just one, a boy, was neat. His room was impeccable; he did everything perfectly. It was a pleasure to see.

But the table manners are bad; they eat in a terrible way. The school should give a talk to the students about what the family does at the table. They make a lot of noise when they eat. For example, when the soup is hot, they blow on it. *They come from a culture that supposedly is superior, so they should teach us, but it is exactly the opposite.* It is terrible; I just want to die. First, one should observe what the family does. If they do not blow [on hot food], one should not blow. If they do not talk with food in their mouths, one should not talk with food in the mouth.

Elsa's remark about superiority suggests that her hosting experience has instilled in her a greater appreciation for her own culture.

Having discovered a potentially interesting topic (i.e., manners), I began asking other *señoras* about this as well. Most indicated to me that they had not noticed poor table manners, although a few expressed minor irritation that students do not always greet family members the way that Cuencans do. The custom is to greet each person individually, either by brushing cheeks and making a kissing sound in the air (between two women or a man and a woman) or by shaking hands (between two men). Instead, students often walk in the door and shout a collective greeting, or they proceed directly to their rooms without greeting anyone at all.

But when I asked Julieta if she had noticed poor manners, the words poured from her mouth:

That is definitely true. Many of us families have commented about that. There are very few [students] who have good manners. Most come in without saying hello; they were not

brought up right. They have bad habits in the the bathroom, too. There are very few students who do things the way we do.

There was one exceptional student—an exaggerated case. He had a very good character, but it was as if he had come from the forest. Once, we were eating *caldo de patas* [pig's foot soup], and when I told him what he was eating, he took it out of his mouth and threw it on the table. His manners were so terrible that I did not want my children to be at the table with him. I had to invent reasons why they were never able to eat with him. I accompanied him, of course, but I avoided looking at him.

I do not know, but I think that rural peasants from Ecuador, who have no culture at all, would have a much different way of acting. In Ecuador, we spend more time with our children, so we can teach them good manners.

As with Elsa, Julieta's remarks suggest that she has developed greater appreciation for her own culture—and perhaps even for indigenous members of Ecuadorian society—as a result of hosting students.

Others also expressed irritation with students' table manners:

“I do not like the way they [students] eat—for example, the way they grab a fork or a spoon, as if it were some tool. It is a really disagreeable form and shows a lack of culture, of manners. And some students do not close their mouths when they chew. My younger daughter is a monkey; she copies everything.” —Vicente

“One boy would grab his soup bowl and [gestured that he lifted it to his mouth and slurped]. And this one girl would leave a bit of food on her plate and then tell me that I could eat it if I wanted. There was also another boy who used to slurp his soup quite loudly.” —Ruth

These host parents clearly expect students to behave the same as Cuencans, at least with respect to table manners. This would suggest that hosts do not always hold guests to a separate (lower) standard, unlike the case that Van Broeck (2001) reported in Turkey. Some host mothers, such as Pía, seemed more laid back about manners:

I have not noticed any problems with bad table manners. Of course, sometimes we laugh at the table and play games. Sometimes, too much etiquette at the table is bad.

So, while there are differences in manners between host families and students, it would appear that there is some degree of variation in terms of what is deemed acceptable. At the same time, the question of manners demonstrates that Cuencans' identity is strengthened through perceived superiority to their seemingly uncultured guests (Chambers 2000; Kohn 1997; Waldren 1997).

Those familiar with Ecuador (and Ecuadorians themselves) generally acknowledge that the country has an inferiority complex, especially with respect to the United States. Early in my fieldwork, I

interviewed Francisco, a local professor and historian, and I asked him about the notion of cultural inferiority. He explained that

there is a tendency to see that which is Ecuadorian as inferior to that which is foreign. For example, people see the superiority of technology from the United States (and elsewhere), and that creates a feeling of insecurity. There is also familiarity with US culture and a sense of its cultural superiority.

Miles (2004) noted that this inferiority complex extends to Ecuadorians' view of Colombia as well, which they also see as culturally and technologically superior. One need only peruse store shelves in Ecuador to notice that many goods boast that they were produced in Colombia. Implicit in these labels is the superiority of the goods due to their Colombian origin. As well, although the Universidad de Cuenca has a well-respected medical school, a common sight on the city's streets are signs outside doctors' offices announcing that the physician was trained in Cuba or the United States. In light of this inferiority complex, the notion that hosting students can strengthen Cuencans' identity suggests an important, and beneficial, sociocultural impact on families.

The importance of family is another factor that seems to strengthen Cuencans' identity. In Cuenca, family is expected to take precedence over friends and personal ambition (Miles 2004). Carmen pointed out that in spite of many cultural changes due to interconnections with other places,

the importance of family remains an important characteristic of Cuenca culture:

We have evolved a bit. Now we accept more things. Before, we were more closed. There has been so much communication. So many people have left and returned with different ideas ... [but] in spite of all the changes, the family remains important.

Indeed, families in Ecuador—and especially in Cuenca—remain close-knit, as I observed with both my host family and my in-laws.⁶⁸

Julieta theorized about the differences between families in Ecuador and the United States, suggesting that the students she hosts receive something in Cuenca that they lack at home:

We dedicate ourselves to teaching our children. We have a lot of time to teach. I think that students do not receive much affection from their parents, but they do receive it in Cuenca.

Esperanza echoed this cultural difference:

One girl told me that it seemed strange to her that someone would dedicate so much time to the family. They tell us that they leave home early and go to college. The family relationship is a central theme of our discussions—what it is like there and here.

⁶⁸ Handelsman 2000:39 has also noted the perseverance of the close-knit family in Ecuador. In addition, Stephenson (1999:21) reports that this is also the case in Chile.

Julieta and Esperanza are alluding to the notion of *gringos* as “cold” people. We saw this notion earlier as a motivation for hosting, but in the context of these remarks, the implicit perceived “coldness” of US family structure is evidence that the unity of Cuenca families is considered to be superior. Notably, Stephenson observed this with host families in Chile:

The aspect of Chilean culture most frequently mentioned as positive was the nature of the Chilean family. The hosts considered that in this area Chile definitely was stronger than the United States, which they considered to be 'cold' and 'too independent.' [1999:20]

Moreover, some of her respondents suggested that Chilean host families offered more *cariño* (affection) than students received from their own families in the US (Stephenson 1999:20-21). This is precisely the same sentiment about which Julieta theorizes above.

Vicente also noted the importance of family but suggested that there have been some recent changes:

Cuenca families are very close. Cuenca is a very peculiar city in that regard. This draws foreign students' attention, because in their country there is not the interest for others that there is here.

But the concept of family in Cuenca has changed with the wave of tourism during the last 10 years. For example, there is more freedom now. Young people see the freedom that

foreigners have, and it has prompted them to want the same thing.

As can be seen in the preceding discussion, an important sociocultural impact of hosting students is that families often develop a greater appreciation of their own culture. Stephenson suggested that for Chilean host families,

the most significant result of hosting a US student upon the host families appears to have been in reaffirming their own sense of being Chilean and in gaining a deeper appreciation of their own culture. [1999:35]

In the context of host families in Cuenca, this stems from three factors. First, as students talk about other parts of Ecuador that they have visited, host families begin to realize that their country is rich in cultural diversity. Given Ecuador's inferiority complex, the fact that foreign students are interested in learning about the culture has a tendency to foster in host families a greater appreciation of their own culture. Second, greater appreciation can also develop in reaction to students' manners (especially at mealtime or with greetings), which often are incongruous with what families consider to be acceptable behavior according to their own cultural norms. As a result, families suddenly see their own culture as superior to that of their guests. Finally, some host families talked about the differences in family life between Ecuador and the United States. To

explain why students seem to get so attached to their hosts, several host parents theorized that students receive something in Cuenca that they do not receive at home: love and affection from the family. While some host parents admired the fact that students are more independent than their own children, they also saw greater family unity in Cuenca as a strength of their own culture.⁶⁹

While there is evidence that hosting has some minor sociocultural impacts on families (not to mention economic impacts), the effect on children seems to be much greater. Several host mothers remarked that hosting represented an opportunity for their children to learn about other cultures and to learn to share with other people. Vicente reported that hosting has had a significant sociocultural impact on his university-age daughter, who grew up with foreign students as household guests. As he noted, by sharing her home with students, she learned that “there are other alternatives, other possibilities in the world.” Vicente also declared that his daughter knows both worlds (i.e., the local and the foreign) and that this openness was the best inheritance that they could have given her. Had there been more time, I would have liked to have interviewed the daughter to get her perspective of the experience.

In addition, Daniel, a young man whose family has hosted for a few years, suggested that the sociocultural impact was probably greater for his

⁶⁹ Chilean families reported this as well (Stephenson 1999:21).

sister than for him. He based his suggestion on the fact that, in general, males in Cuenca have more freedom than females, so she would be more impressed by the level of independence that female students exhibit than would he. Vicente also addressed this subject and said that young Cuencans observe the freedom that foreigners have, and they then want the same independence for themselves, a demand that often is opposed by their parents. As often is the case, sociocultural change eventually occurs in this younger generation, especially in terms of attitudes and ideas.

Finally, Tatiana, a young host mother, provided another example of the impact on children. Her young daughter was extremely timid, but having guests in the home and learning to share and to interact with these strangers has helped her to break out of her shell. I would have liked to have learned from the daughter what she thought about her family's stream of guests, but I did not have Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to include minors as research participants. If I were to conduct this research again, I would seek IRB approval to include minors because, as I suggested above, the greatest sociocultural impact seems to be on children.

At this point, it would be useful to review the impacts of hosting on families. First, there is a presumed—and real—economic impact derived from hosting students from language schools and education abroad programs. Even for families that host just one or two students each year,

the income helps in meeting expenses. On the other hand, there is no such economic impact for hosting a high school student for an academic year through one particular exchange program, since those host families receive no monetary compensation. For those host families, the benefits are primarily sociocultural (e.g., increased prestige or social status). There is, however, a benefit for which an economic value could be determined: the opportunity for a family to send one of its own children abroad, where that child would receive room and board from a host family. Only about 60 percent of host families in Cuenca and vicinity actually take advantage of this opportunity; for the remaining 40 percent, hosting a student incurs a real cost for which there is no return.

I also discussed numerous sociocultural impacts on families from hosting students. As Table 1 indicates, some of these impacts are temporary in nature, lasting only for an initial period of adjustment or throughout the entire duration of a student's stay, while others are more long-term in nature. In addition, as we saw above, several impacts affect children in particular. A child may become jealous of a student in the home, perhaps due to the student receiving special treatment (e.g., not having to do household chores) or because the child has had to relinquish his room to the student. Although only five of the 27 items listed in Table 1 specifically mention children, many other impacts affect children as well. Children, especially young ones, are impressionable, so there is great

potential for them to be impacted by the hosting experience in ways that their parents are not.

<i>Sociocultural Impacts</i>	<i>Temporary Sociocultural Impacts</i>
Developing fictive kinship ties or becoming attached to students	Jealousy toward students on the part of host siblings
Learning English	Spending more time together as a family
Children becoming more responsible by emulating student behavior	Avoiding arguments to present a good impression
Children adopting more direct way of dealing with conflict	Speaking more slowly or using simpler vocabulary
Hearing outsider's impression of one's own culture	Serving holiday foods at other times of the year
Learning about the world, other cultures	Changing family's diet to accommodate student
Becoming more open-minded toward new ideas and attitudes	Changing daily routine (especially breaking the monotony of daily life)
Children learning to share with others	
Desire to travel to other countries	
Learning to play card games	
Learning to cook vegetarian food	
Learning recipes from guest's country	
Learning to eat new foods (e.g., pizza)	
Celebrating holidays from guest's country (e.g., Thanksgiving)	
Children becoming more independent	
Breaking down stereotypes (e.g., <i>gringos</i> as cold people)	
Increased social status or prestige	
Changing views of women	
Greater acceptance of persons with disabilities	
Greater acceptance of other races	

Table 1: Sociocultural impacts on families from hosting students. Some impacts last only for an initial period of adjustment or for the duration of a student's stay, while others are more long-term impacts.

In this section, we saw that host families, like students, experience apprehension prior to a new encounter. As host families suggested, this fear often is unfounded, as the encounter generally occurs without any serious problems. We also saw that students generally do not spend much time with their host families, especially during the week. This would suggest that the host-guest encounter is sometimes more superficial than might be expected in cultural tourism. Finally, I discussed how hosting students can cultivate in families a greater appreciation of their own culture. I noted that this stems from three factors: (1) host families become “tourists” of their own culture (Esman 1984) as students talk about Ecuador's cultural diversity, (2) families react to students' poor manners, which they see as inferior to their own, and (3) Cuencans see the importance of family, and the apparent lack thereof in the US, as evidence that their own culture is superior.

Summary

In this chapter, qualitative data—and some quantitative data as well—have shown that host families are well-educated, middle-class families who reside in neighborhoods that language school personnel generally

consider to be safe and picturesque. The selection of these families to be hosts demonstrates the language schools' concern for students' welfare and their desire for students to receive a positive impression of Cuenca. As I noted in the section on motivations, the decision to start hosting students involves a complex interplay of many factors, including social connections to other hosts, an interest in cross-cultural exchange, and the pragmatism of economic survival. Implicit in the decision is the prestige or increased social status that families can obtain through their association with foreign students. Additionally, although families did not state that fictive kinship was a motivation for hosting students, we saw that it can be an implicit motivation.

In terms of the host-guest encounter, we saw that students often do not spend much time with their host families on weekdays because of school commitments, which usually include morning language classes and afternoon extracurricular instruction or field trips. Host families reported that their weekday interactions with students often are limited to mealtime conversations about culture, which afford an opportunity for mutual learning, but that language can be a hindrance (especially for beginning and lower intermediate students).

Weekends offer more opportunities for interaction, but even then, students often have school-related excursions that preclude their participation in family activities and social functions. Some families

suggested that schools monopolize too much of students' time and that scheduling fewer activities, especially on the weekend, would allow students to spend more time with them.

As we saw in this chapter, hosting students appears to have a sociocultural impact on families, and especially on children. This evidence would support acculturation and tourism studies that have shown that cross-cultural encounters result in outcomes for both guests and hosts. Moreover, it confirms that Bochner et al. (1979) were correct to question the implicit assumption in the education abroad literature that host growth or development neither occurs nor should be expected. Indeed, as I have shown in this chapter—and as Stephenson (1999) and Sumka (2001) demonstrated in their work as well—hosting students does appear to impact host families in positive (and, potentially, also negative) ways.