INTERCULTURAL BRIDGES: A CASE STUDY OF A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER IN MOLDOVA

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Abstract

Objectives. This study is a case study on narrated intercultural experiences of a Romanian-American Peace Corps volunteer in the Republic of Moldova. It seeks to understand in depth the participant's viewpoint on the role of cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism in creating bridges of understanding between people, as well as hindering communication.
Material and methods. The method used is a case study based on 5 formal in-depth interviews over the course of 2 years. The interviewee is a Romanian-American male in his 40s who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Republic of Moldova between June 1st, 2017 and June 1st, 2019. The topics of the interviews were: the participant's experiences of adjustment to the Moldovan culture, the nonverbal communication of Moldovans, and the participant's strategies of building communicative bridges with Moldovans.
Results. The themes that emerged from the participant's narrative were: the change from stranger to insider; the Russian influence on Moldovans' non-verbal communication; and the use of code switching as a "third" language. The results are interpreted through the lenses of intercultural communication concepts of individualism-collectivism.
Conclusions. This study adds to the literature of intercultural communication and non-verbal communication by highlighting the process of personal adaptation to a new culture. This case study, although based on only one participant, discusses limitations and offers suggestions for future studies on building intercultural trust in an era of globalization.

Keywords: individualism, collectivism, non-verbal communication, code switching.

Introduction

Living in a culture other than the one of your birth has become a norm for an increasing number of people in the past decade. The reasons, too numerous to list, range from emigrating for personal, family, or work to short terms travels. Volunteering in another country, either for work or religious purposes is also common. Volunteering with Peace Corps, an American government association, offers American citizens the opportunity to experience another culture through a two-year assignment. Usually, the countries that Peace Corps works with are developing countries. This study focuses on understanding a few elements of the Moldovan culture through the lived experience of a returned Peace Corps volunteer, who served there for 2 years, between 2017 and 2019. More specifically, the interest was to see how one person who was born into a collectivistic culture but spent most of his adult years in an individualistic culture, negotiates the realities of another collectivistic culture; how his perceptions were influenced by his previous life experiences, and how successful he was at resolving potential tensions between his expectations and the reality he encountered. From a theoretical standpoint, the intention was to see how Hofstede's cultural

dimension of individualism-collectivism played out through a one-person case study.

The intercultural communication literature is dominated by social scientific studies, especially surveys (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), and sometimes case studies of cultures (Saint-Jacques, 2015). It was noticed that the lived experience of individuals who interact with "others" is not reflected in the literature. There is value in understanding this lived experience for practical purposes, as well as scientific purposes. From a practical standpoint, individual reflections, values, and ways of communicating are the factors that drive the intercultural interactions. Peaceful or hateful relations with others are mostly the result of how members of a culture think and feel about others different than themselves. From a scientific standpoint, studying the lived experiences of a returned Peace Corps volunteer adds a fresh perspective and a deeper and possibly more accurate understanding to the intercultural communication literature on code switching and cultural dimensions (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), especially individualism-collectivism, in-group versus out-group, and self-construal. In the following section, these concepts will be defined, before going into the explanation of the method.

Definitions of Terms: *Individualism-Collectivism*

Individualism-Collectivism is one of the 5 cultural dimensions proposed by Geert Hofstede (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) to explain cultural variability. Mostly, in individualistic cultures, the major values are self-sufficiency and self-expression, whereas in collectivistic cultures, the major values are social harmony and tradition. When it comes to communication, Triandis (1988) argues that the presence of in-groups in collectivistic cultures is a major factor that differentiates how members communicate. In-groups are groups that are important to a person and for which individuals will make sacrifices. Whereas members of individualistic cultures have many in-groups (e.g., families, religions, social clubs, professions, etc.), members of collectivistic cultures have only a few (e.g., families, work groups). The influence of just a few groups on an individual's behaviour is greater than the influence of numerous groups. To put it another way, if people have only their family and their church to give them advice, they'd likely have two major voices to listen to. However, if they are also involved with social and sports clubs or professional organizations, the message of the family or church diminishes in importance with the competing voices for their attention. In addition, in-groups have different rank orders of importance in different cultures. For instance, the company (work group) is considered the primary in-group in Japan (Nakane, 1970), the community is the primary in-group throughout Africa, and the family tends to be the primary in-group in Asian and Latin collectivistic cultures. Moldova, although not surveyed in Hofstede's studies, is placed at the intersections of three cultures, Romanian, Ukrainian, and Russian, and there is reason to believe that historically, it has been influenced by all three. All three cultures score relatively high on collectivism, so it is reasonable to assume that Moldova is a rather collectivistic culture, where people belong to a few in-groups that exercise a strong influence on their behaviour.

Individualism-Collectivism concept is used widely to explain communication across cultures. When it comes to communication, members of the collectivistic cultures are more concerned with avoiding hurting others' feelings and not imposing on others than are members of individualistic cultures (Kim, 2015). Also, effectiveness in conversation is not a paramount value in collectivistic cultures. Therefore, clarity and direct requests are not sought after. Other findings related to communication indicate that members of collectivistic cultures communicate more intimately with in-group members than out-group members, they synchronize their communication better, and they communicate more easily with in-group members than with out-groups members (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005).

While the above description of this cultural dimension is theoretical, in real life it is possible to find differences in behaviour among members of either collectivistic or individualistic cultures. Individual socialization is a mediating factor in individualism-collectivism's influence on members' behaviour. Three individual-level characteristics mediate this relationship: individual personality, individual values, and individual self-construal. For instance, idiocentric individuals

(focused on their own's goals) in collectivistic cultures are less sensitive to others' rejection and are more willing to be unique, as opposed to allocentric individuals (focused on groups' goals) in collectivistic cultures. Gudykunst et al. (1996) used individual-level individualistic and collectivistic values to assess communication styles and they found that individualistic values predicted the use of dramatic style of communication, the use of feelings to guide behaviour, and openness and preciseness in communication, whereas the use of collectivistic values predicted tendency to use indirect communication and being interpersonally sensitive. Lastly, self-construals or the way members of a culture conceive of themselves, influence people's communication style as following: the interdependent self-construal is associated with concern for others' feelings, whereas independent self-construal is associated with concern for clarity in conversations.

Material and methods

The participant to this case-study is a very close person of the author, making it easy to establish a rapport with him. Establishing a trusting rapport with the participant(s) is not only a common practice in all ethnographic research, but it is the most important way of getting valid data. This case study's participant is a 46 years old male, who took the opportunity to serve as a volunteer in Peace Corps in the Republic of Moldova from June 1st, 2017 to May 31st, 2019. Throughout the study, to protect his identity, he will be mentioned with the initial L. In the following section, the method will be described, starting with a background on Peace Corps, the organization that he worked with, in order to understand the set-up of his job and his goal during his service.

Peace Corps was established on March 1st, 1961, as a result of an executive order of President John F. Kennedy. Since then, more than 220,000 volunteers have served in 140 countries around the world (National Peace Corps Association, 2019). As of 2017, this government agency had an annual budget of $410 million (National Peace Corps Association, 2019). Peace Corps volunteers go through a rigorous application process before being sent to serve in a developing country for 2 years in one of the following sectors: agriculture, environment, community economic development, health, education, and youth in development. They undergo an intensive 3 months training at the site, including language training, cultural training, safety training, and skills training. After the training, they are placed with a host family, in underdeveloped communities in rural areas, where they work in schools, dispensaries, or with community leaders, as teachers and liaisons for the duration of their service. Most of the volunteers are in their early to mid 20s, recent college graduates, although older volunteers, as well as retired individuals serve, too. Peace Corps' mission is: "to promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals": helping people from developing countries in the areas of health, entrepreneurship, English language, and community development; helping people from outside the U.S. understand the Americans better; and helping Americans understanding the people from developing countries better.

Over the duration of his service in Peace Corps Moldova, L. shared his experiences almost daily during his conversations with the researcher. However, I conducted 5 formal in-depth interviews with him, each lasting approximately one hour. The first interview took place 3 months after his arrival in the country, on September 1st, 2017. The second, third, and fourth interviews were spread out throughout his service as follows: the second interview was after six months in Moldova, the third, after one year in Moldova, and the fourth, after one and a half year. The last interview was done one month after he arrived to the U.S., on June 15th. All of the interviews, except the first, were conducted face-to-face. The first interview was done using the application WhatsApp because he was in Moldova, while I was in the U.S. For the second and third interviews I traveled to Moldova, for the fourth interview he visited the U.S., and for the fifth interview, he was already in the U.S., after finishing his service. All interviews were semi-structured. This means that there was a general topic for each interview, and all the questions were adapted to the

conversation. The topics of the interviews were: the participant's experiences of culture shock and adjustment to the Moldovan culture (interviews 1 and 2), the nonverbal communication of Moldovans (interview 3), and the participant's strategies of building communicative bridges with Moldovans (interviews 4 and 5).

Results

Several themes emerged from the participant's narrative: from stranger to accepted member of the community; Moldovans' non-verbal communication heavily influenced by the Russian's serious and reserved demeanour; and constant code switching as a "third" language is both an oddity and an opportunity for intercultural bridges. The results are interpreted through the lens of intercultural communication concepts of individualism-collectivism.

Theme 1: From Stranger to Accepted Member of the Community

One of the themes that stood out from the numerous conversations with L. was the change from being a stranger to becoming a member of the Moldovan community in which he worked. This change was noticed first in the language that he used throughout the interviews. In the first interview, his language was more distant: he mainly referred to his co-teachers as "they" and he made constant comparisons between Moldovans and Romanians and Americans. He always emphasized how the Moldovans "lacked" something that was readily available either in Romania or the U.S. For instance, during the first interview, most of his comments were on the "lack of freedom" and the fact that he "needed to report every step he took" to the higher-ups in Peace Corps. They were told that it was for security reasons, given that they were foreigners in a foreign country. However, when analyzing his interview answers, it was noticed that he did have expectations of managing his free time and of being more independent than what he experienced at that time. By the time of the third and fourth interviews, it was observed how his attitude changed. He didn't complain about having to report his travels within the country. On the contrary, he accepted the Peace Corps' directive and even found it "normal". By the second interview, he told stories about how he was invited by the locals to their homes. This was an important step in being accepted into the community. In one instance, he described how he participated in grapes picking with a Moldovan family. He volunteered to help them pick up grapes from their local vineyard, just 4 months after his arrival at his site. For two days, he worked with the family and they treated him as one of their own. Later on, during a visit six months after his arrival in the country, the family was very welcoming. They invited both of us for dinner and talked about how L. was "like part of our family". A similar story involved a local music teacher who took a liking to L. and invited him to spend New Year's and Russian Christmas with the family. L. discovered that, once he got close to the first local family, others started to approach him more easily. He reasoned that it was because, in that small community, people relied on each other's perceptions in order to decide whether to trust or not to trust a stranger. By the time of the last interview, L. spoke about his Moldovan friends with affection. The two-year bonds he formed there ensured him a place in the local community. He already used the pronoun "we" when referring to Moldovans. He seemed to have been fully integrated and accepted in Moldova.

Theme 2: Moldovans' Non-Verbal Communication Heavily Influenced by the Russians' Serious and Reserved Demeanour

Non-verbal communication includes the use of touch, space, movement, time, and body to communicate. During the discussions to L., it was interesting to learn about his perceptions of differences and similarities between Moldova and the U.S. or Romania when it came to non-verbal

messages. Two observations stood out from his descriptions: the use of movement (gestures and facial expressions of emotions) and the dress code. A particularity of the Moldovans was their calm and composed demeanour in public places. In his 2 years serving in a small community near Kishinev, L. never witnessed episodes of conflict or even simple emotional interactions in public. He described the Moldovans as being "reserved", not using their hands to gesture, and not showing emotions on their faces. They considered gesturing and being emotional as "inappropriate" behaviours in a community. The few incidents L. noticed as being somewhat close to a conflict were in school, when teachers would raise their voices to discipline the students, or in a supermarket, when a frustrated customer would call on a manager to open an extra cash register. A very important interactional behaviour that further exemplifies the composed public demeanour in L.'s community was the greeting. Students would always greet their teachers, no matter where they saw them outside the school and colleagues would greet one another, closely observing their rank. The greeting signified, according to L., that the right amount of respect was shown and, overall, the relationship was in good standing. In spite of the importance of greetings, L. noticed a peculiar lack of smiling, something that he got accustomed to during his 20 years of living in the U.S. Moldovans do not smile when they greet one another, as opposed to Americans. They do not smile too much in public situations in general. Whereas in America the smile signifies friendliness, in Moldova, friendliness was either already assumed to have existed (and there was no need to make it obvious) or it was not the most important message that they wanted to transmit through a greeting.

Another element of non-verbal communication was the dress code. L.'s first observations were that dress code was "normal". This can be explained by the fact that he wasn't able to perceive differences in dressing in his first stages of his service there because he mostly interacted with teachers in a school setting and with his supervisors in the Peace Corps office. However, after some prompting, he was able to describe the formal dress of his female teachers. "They were always dressed professionally and put together". He also noticed the importance of the traditional dress on public holidays or whenever Moldovans felt a need to show pride in who they were. For instance, at the swearing in ceremony held at the Peace Corps' headquarters in the beginning of their service, all Peace Corps volunteers wore the traditional Moldovan dress and many of them learned and performed the traditional songs and dances. However, during regular functions, modern dress was worn by both males and females, although it was not as casual as in the U.S. Moldovans followed the "dress up" rule used in Europe and Russia whenever they went out, even if it was just to go to the grocery store. Therefore, men wore a shirt and business pants and many of them wore a tie, whereas women wore dresses, with very few wearing business pants.

Theme 3: Constant Code Switching as a "Third" Language is Both an Oddity and an Opportunity for Intercultural Bridges

One of the characteristics of the Moldovan culture that L. found the easiest to adapt to was the code switching. Code switching refers to the practice of using two or more languages in a conversation and switching back and forth between them. From the first interviews, he revealed that almost everybody in Moldova knows Russian. Even though not all of them speak it as their first language and even though very few public signs are in Russian, most people would greet him in Russian and when he started to speak Romanian, they would easily switch to Romanian. He described an incident at the local open market, where a thin, energetic, and self-deprecating woman selling apricots asked him if he was speaking Romanian from Romania. When he confirmed it, she said: "Noi, vorbim şi noi, da' noi vorbim, vorbim, până începem să grăim". In translation: "We speak it [Romanian], too, but we speak and speak until we start to talk [in vernacular]".

Many countries in the world have populations who speak multiple languages. The multi-linguistic fluency develops for different reasons: a colonial history, strong regional loyalties, or unavoidable cultural influences of a nearby superpower. In the case of Moldova, the strong regional

loyalty to Russia and its unavoidable cultural influence contributed to their code switching skills. L. told several stories of Moldovans he befriended, who showed attachment to the Russian culture and language. Many of them have children working in Russia or Western Europe who send their own children to Moldova to spend their summer vacation with their grandparents. These children bring with them a variety of languages, such as Russian, Italian, French or Romanian. It seemed much easier for Moldovans to pick up the foreign languages, because they already are familiar with the Russian-Romanian code switching. L. described another incident that showed the loyalty of some Moldovans to their powerful neighbour to the East. As a co-teacher, he had the opportunity to prepare a lesson plan with Mr. Vasili, a local teacher (name changed to protect the participant). L. proposed to the class to listen to a song and to discuss it afterwards. The song was the hymn of the formers U.S.S.R. L. was surprised to see the look of reverence on Mr. Vasili's face and the one of confusion but respect on the pupils' faces. He was convinced that the Russian influence was still very strong, at least with some parts of the Moldovan population.

Another good example of the Russian influence on Moldovan's language was the use of Russian names. Moldovan children usually have two given names, and at least one of them is Russian-influenced. L. read the list of 280 students registered for classes in his high-school, and discovered that the majority of them had one of the given names Russian, such as: Vladimir, Veaceslav, Tania, Katia, Ludmila, Tatiana, Vadim, Vitalie, Anastasia, Liuba, or Iulia. Also, many family names are formed following the Russian style. If the father's name is Constantin, the son is usually called "given name + Constaninovici" (Constantin's son). The same goes for women: "given name + Constantinova" (Constantina's daughter). Language in this case, is an indicator of people's perceptions of themselves as part of a close group.

Luckily for L., he has an affinity for languages. He loves paying attention to the nuances of pronunciation and grammar and this was one of the things that he used to make friends and integrate into the community. As a Peace Corps volunteer, he benefitted from 3 months of training, including language training. Fortunately or unfortunately, the language was Romanian, as this was the official language of the country and he already knew Romanian as a native speaker. Hence, he tried to learn Russian independently, so he could integrate easily. He always tried to pronounce Russian words and ask people to correct his pronunciation. As expected, people were more than happy to comply and this gave L. an opportunity to engage in small talk with them about language use. In a different situation, he set up an American Culture and Civilization club for high school students. Interested students would come and talk about different aspects of the American culture in English. This way, they could practice their English language as well. In the beginning, L. noticed that the students were reluctant to come. Then he realized that he could ask them to teach him Russian in the beginning of the club meetings. This way, they would be more comfortable to open up and start asking questions about America. The strategy worked well. In the last interview, he considered this as a great tool that helped him to build the bridge between cultures.

Discussions

This case study is an illustration of how cultural dimensions such as individualism and collectivism are perceived and acted upon by a stranger to the culture. The study started with the general question about how individualistic and collectivistic cultural expectations will play out in the lived experience of a Peace Corps volunteer. Through five in-depth interviews, it can be concluded that going back and forth between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is not impossible. People can adapt their cultural expectations and this can be seen in the language they use to refer to others (changing from complaints about a perceived "lack" of freedom, to the use of the inclusive pronoun "we"); the change in their perception and understanding of non-verbal messages (perceiving friendliness through other non-verbal signs, not necessarily just smiles), and the recognition and acceptance of cultural influences, such as the use of code switching and the

formation of names that show strong family bonds.

Limitations: This is a case study based on one participant's answers to semi-structured interviews. Therefore, it has inherent limitations that are common to any case studies. First, while the themes found provide very interesting and rich insights into the lived experiences of a Peace Corps volunteer, the results are not generalizable to other individuals or populations. Second, despite the attempt to interview him at different key points in time, those periods of time are indicative but not entirely representative of his life of two years in Moldova. Many of the daily decisions or encounters that might have been interesting from a researcher's perspective were probably not shared in the interviews.

Future Directions: This study turned out to be an excellent starting point into the research on Peace Corps volunteers' lives outside the U.S. and after their return to the U.S. There are several avenues of research that this study opens up. A very interesting one is to look into reverse culture shock (Kim, 2015) of returned Peace Corps volunteers, with the multitude of sub-topics that might derive from it (e.g., adaptation, cultural identity, intercultural ethics). Peace Corps does an excellent job at training people to adjust to their temporary home country. However, there are few studies on their re-entry into the U.S. and re-adjustment to their life back home (Cushner, 2007; Piercy, Cheek and Teemant, 2010; Sussman, 2000; Sussman, 2002). Some of the conclusions of the above studies, as well as anecdotal evidence suggest that at least some returned Peace Corps volunteers go through a veritable re-entry shock as they come from a developing to a developed world.

Another interesting path is to look into the scope and impact of international volunteerism. The research on the long-term effect on the international work experience on careers is even sparser (Suutari et al., 2017; Sherraden, Lough and McBride, 2008). What we know is that volunteer work is associated with self-efficacy (Cross, 1998), psychological growth, and a meaningful life (Piercey et al., 2010). What is less known is how returning volunteers negotiate their identities and cope with the big changes over a short span of time (Elmoudden, 2013). According to the National and Community Service Corporation, volunteer work in the state of New Jersey alone is in decline since 2003 and below the national average (National and Community Service, 2019). National average in the U.S. for volunteer work is relatively low. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, volunteer work is lowest among 20-24 year olds (18.4%) in the year ending in September 2015 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Kramer and Bisel (2017) argue that communication during anticipatory socialization influence volunteers' roles. This means that, the more exposed people are to conversations about volunteering during their formative years, the more likely they are to take up volunteer work. Future research should look into the possible changes in family and school conversations to explore the influences on the motivation to volunteer (Niehaus, 2017; Wilson, 1993).

Interviewing returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs) on the significance of their experience abroad and on their ways to adjust to the life home will give us an in-depth understanding of the changes that they went through, as well as the challenges, including communication challenges that they face on their return. This insight will be relevant to others who travel into foreign countries for extensive periods of time. It would also be interesting to see the types of cultural resources these RPCVs tap into to help them get through the reverse culture shock when they return home (the complex psychological, physical, and physiological process of reintegrating into the home culture).

Conclusions

This study is a qualitative attempt at understanding the inner and communicated experiences of one person, as he lived, worked, and interacted with Moldovans in professional and social settings. It adds to the literature of intercultural communication and non-verbal cross-cultural communication by providing a glimpse into a rarely studied society, Moldova, through the eyes of

an American born in Eastern Europe. It shows the Moldovan culture as a natural linguistic experiment of language blending that provides an unusual openness toward intercultural communication. It also highlights the slow and difficult process of personal adaptation to a new culture in order to be accepted as a full member of the community. This case study, although based on only one participant, offers suggestions for future studies on bilingualism and intercultural tolerance, and building intercultural trust in an era of globalization. It encourages researchers to study the "sandwich" cultures, those at the intersection of two strong cultures (like Russian and Romanian, in the case of Moldova) in order to understand the lessons of survival and intercultural openness that they can teach us.

Acknowledgements

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