

A Qualitative Account of
Acculturation: The case study of
Canadians in Cuba

Randal G. Tonks
Camosun College

Overview

- Qualitative Methods
- Hermeneutics of identity and acculturation
- Setting the stage: context of study
- The issues and themes
- Reflections

Qualitative Methods

- Palys (2003) describes Qualitative Analysis as:
- *an iterative process* involving successive iterations at both the data-gathering and data analysis stages
- Identifying *patterns, themes, and clusters* with goal of *data reduction* to develop a *meaningful account of the experiences*
- Telling a story or making an historical account
- *Metaphorical descriptions*

Hermeneutics & Understanding

- Ratner (1997) describes Cultural psychology as involving the hermeneutical concept of *Verstehen* or *understanding & interpretation of experience* and behaviour
- Pomichalek (1997) states: “in order to ‘qualify’ as ‘qualitative’ [it] must have a way of accessing that dimension of human reality which is meaningful involvement in the world” (p. 4)

Hermeneutics of Understanding: The hermeneutical circle

- The *circle* is a metaphor to describe understanding against a context of pre-understanding and the continuous flow between these dialectical poles
- Each person comes to the acculturative experience with a background context of expectations which will be revised through interaction and interpretation

The Narrative Account

- In the hermeneutical tradition of Dilthey and Erikson *auto-biographical accounts* are deemed to be most illustrative in understanding the *lived experience of human subjects*
- *Presently: Story telling and theme presentation* of the most salient issues taken from student culture logs and the field school director's participant-observer field notes

Setting the Stage

Who and Where?

- 8 Canadian students from Victoria aged 18 – 35 plus a sign interpreter as well as the field school director his wife and three children.
- 5 Cuban faculty and 18 Cuban students at the Universidad d'Oriente in Santiago de Cuba for 6-week field school May-June 2004.

Upon arrival there were various expectations of what Cuba was and what we would do, however we had very little information of what life would really be like once we got there. That would all have to be discovered



Gulf of Mexico

Straits of Florida

HAVANA

Mariel

Matanzas

Pinar del Rio

Santa Clara

Cienfuegos

THE BAHAMAS

NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN

Yucatan Channel

Isla de la Juventud

Camagüey

Nuevitas

Las Tunas

Holguín

Bayamo

Manzanillo

Pico Turquino

Santiago de Cuba

Guantánamo

U.S. Naval Base
Guantanamo Bay

Caribbean Sea

Cayman Islands
(U.K.)

HAITI



General Themes

- Communications
- Infrastructure-toilets, roads, buildings
- Security
- Self-realisation
- Racism
- Many faces of Cuba
- Weather
- Dancing

Review of Themes

- Given a different forum we would be able to go through the bio-psycho-social aspects of acculturation in some detail to consider the ways in which identity is shaped in through the dialectics of this encounter.
- Present focus will be on some of the positive aspects of the acculturative experience, however there will more focus on the more negative or stressful aspects of acculturation

Communication

- “can’t communicate, ... lost in translation” - Serena
- “Spanish is very difficult to learn, sounds that don’t exist in English” -Tessa
- “Communication is so difficult here even if they speak English.... [it is] Annoying when people speak Spanish when I clearly don’t understand them” –Cindy
- “I have traveled across Latin America and never had so much trouble communicating in Spanish, I thought I was fluent, but here I have a hard time understanding what they are saying” -Milene

The Physical & Environmental

- Infrastructure crumbling (yet digging bombshelters)
- Body language & Greetings
- Weather

Infrastructure

- “First thing – terrible conditions of the buildings ...looks like the government doesn't put away any money into the maintenance of the roads here either, it looks as if they've been bombed or something. “ - Cindy
- “The roads potholed and dangerous” - Tessa

Toilets

- “Bathrooms are the worst I’ve seen yet- one would think they wouldn’t be this bad at a University!” –Tessa
- “These toilets are so bad it is a delicate balance of drinking enough water to stay hydrated, but not so much so that you have to use the bathroom while at school”
- Kirsten

Classrooms





Body language and greetings

- “- open, always leaning forward to hear another person speak, touching often, holding hands, hugging, arms linked. Always greet people with a kiss. When they dance their bodies are pressed tightly together, indicating an intimate bond to me, but actually just being normal for Cubans. Not keeping to the “comfortable” Canadian distance “ - Tessa

Weather

- The heat for 7 year old Kai was unbearable, he would step outside and lay down saying “it’s too hot [to walk]”
- Joanne wore lip gloss to the pool and found herself with a severe case of blistered lips
- “Weather – first thing to hit me is the humidity. Santiago de Cuba is hotter than Havana everyone carries a sweat-handkerchief” - Tessa
- “Weather in Santiago Pouring rain and thunder Cubans know when the rain is coming and all head indoors, crazy tourists stay out in the rain. Alana is at the pool” – Serena

Food

- Mangos!!!
- Bread and cheese; beans and rice
- Canadian snacks and Cuban cookies
- Rations and the black market
- Homestays
- Alcohol (Rum)

Mangos & Street Food



University hotel food

- “Food is extremely bland and flavourless, bread with cheese and maybe pickles. Dinner rice and beans and choice of fish or meat. Most of us are vegetarian. I don’t think it is very common to be vegetarian in Cuba.... I miss good food, my supply of Canadian chips, candy and powerbars is dwindling. However have found special Cuban cookies. “ – Cindy

Rations and limitations

- Restaurants with full menus but only two items
- Homestays: much better food
 - Getting eggs and other foods on blackmarket
 - Some Cubans were upset with Canadians' demands for specialized food

Alcohol

- Alcohol was means for coping and participating in Cuban culture
- Greeted on the first morning (after 24hr travel and 4 hours sleep) with the worst tasting wine at introductory meeting. Also sent off on last morning of class with shots of rum
- Alana was a recovering alcoholic, this was considerable source of stress for her

Movement

- Transportation
- Dancing
- Trapped in the City
- Escape

Transportation

- “Transportation - people driving anything from horse carts to motorcycles (without helmets) to big trucks “
- Truck rides cost 5cents, at home it is \$2.50 for two zones – Serena
- Joanne became a regular at riding scooters; only 15 cents (three pesos) and they take you to the place you want to go
- Walking for miles in the heat of the day

Dancing

- “Dancing to the music. The Cuban party can’t sit down, dragged to the dance floor 2 seconds later” – Serena
- “The Cubans are forever dancing. Being a good dancer is important for one’s social status. It is as important as wearing the right clothes is in our culture.” – Frank

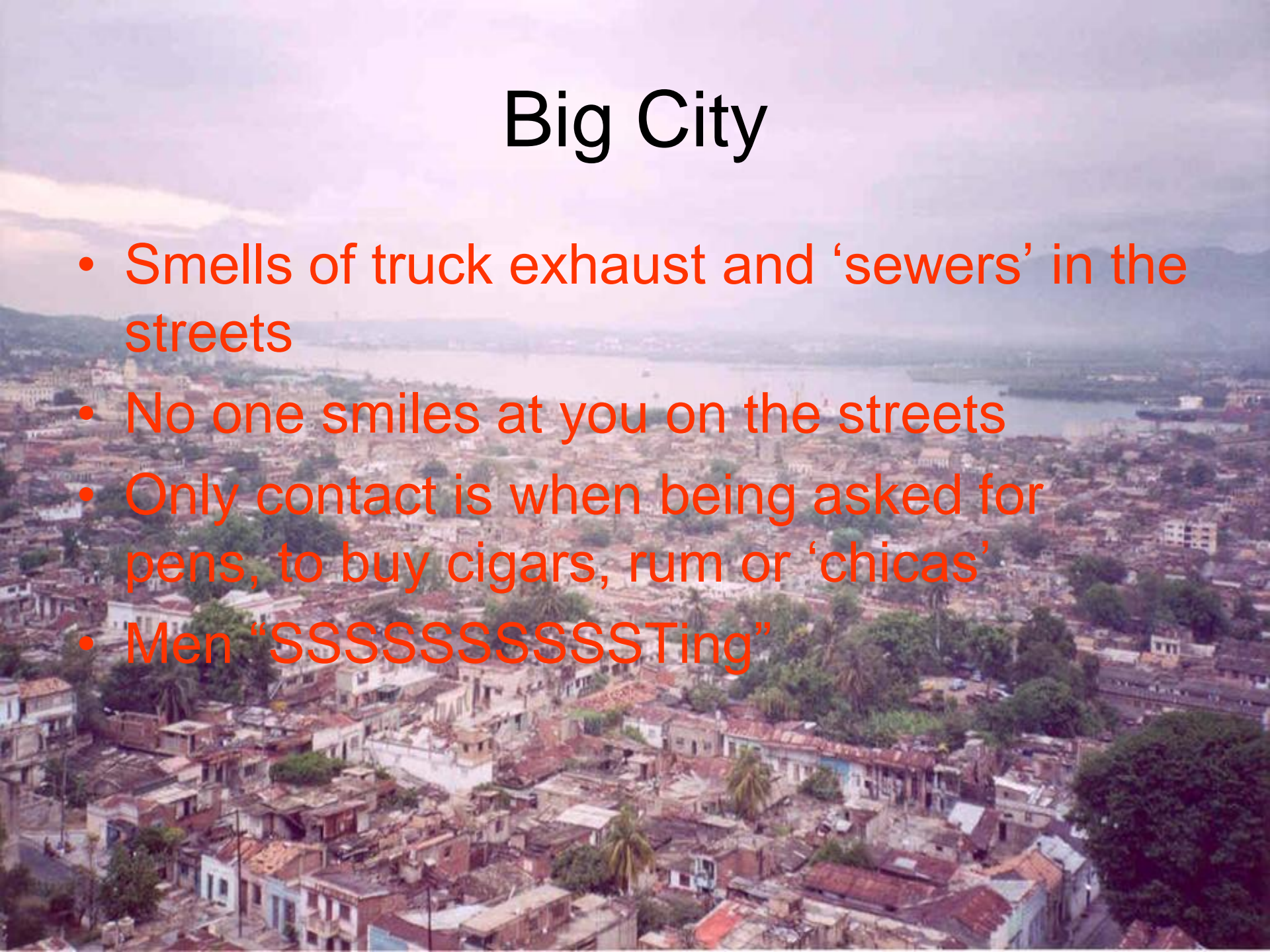
Trapped

Getting outside of the city was not easy to arrange without authoritative grace. Tried to rent a truck to the beach but had to wait a week for official papers to come through. Alana expressed wanting to go home due to her lack of control and the stress that followed

- “Authoritative people make pronouncements that everyone can leave (and yet never go into detail on how difficult it is). I Also feel that crucial information is always being withheld.” –Cindy
- Actually nearly impossible for most Cubans to leave the country and now they even need official permission to move to Havana.

Big City

- Smells of truck exhaust and ‘sewers’ in the streets
- No one smiles at you on the streets
- Only contact is when being asked for pens, to buy cigars, rum or ‘chicas’
- Men “SSSSSSSSSSSTing”



Escape / Leaving

- Escaping to smaller towns with a rental car or on a bus or truck was rejuvenating for all who were able to do so.
- “They were so friendly only hissed at 7 times (rather than 700 times), no one in Baracoa asked for money “ - Tessa
- “I am a bit confused about the way Cubans feel about their country. Today a huge demonstration in Havana. Out of patriotism or fear and intimidation? Say they love their country and yet they all seem secretly desperate to leave.” - Cindy

Many faces

- Patriotism
- Trust and truth behind the bars
- Authority
- The 'group'



CHE

Patriotism

- “The Cubans...appear to consider anything that helps maintain the country’s liberty their patriotic duty” - Frank
- Serena writes: “THE PEOPLE BELIEVE”
four weeks later she adds: “(or do they?)”
- They are so proud of the education, healthcare and philosophy of everyone gets the same. Like at the birthday party where everyone gets a little box with the same portions, or at a “buffet” dinner.





SI SE
PUEDE
CDR 6
ZONA 10

Trust

- Watch your pockets
- Bars on the windows
- Sexism & Security
- Friendship



Trust

- “What’s really unfortunate about Cuba is that you can’t just trust that people strike up conversations with you simply because they’re friendly; it inevitably turns into them trying to sell you something or trying to squeeze money out of you somehow, and it’s really depressing.” -Frank

Hissing & Sexism

- “Aggressive attention getting, I feel insulted. I find it rude when men do this, after a couple of blocks of constant hissing, I am offended, or uncomfortable. vs. Canadian men [who] have a reputation for being polite. ...Spanish girls here said to just ignore it & that it happens all the time. They are only offended if the men start saying weird or insulting things.” - Tessa

Sexism

- “I honestly cannot ever picture living in an environment where I am constantly made to feel like a piece of trash or meat. To face that behaviour every time you’re walking to the store, school, anywhere. I can’t even walk down our street without having to ignore someone and I can no longer just ignore it! The fighting fists are coming out!” - Serena
- “I spent the day walking around with some of our girls, and I really noticed the ssssssting! And kissing sounds. I don’t notice it much when I’m by myself, but while I was with the girls, it actually started to drive me crazy, too.” - Frank

Sexism and Security

- “El Cobre Carnival – expecting a delightful experience with people dancing and having a good time. BUT Cubans and Alcohol do not mix under any circumstances! I can think of nothing worse in fact. Cuban men are always totally disrespectful and demeaning but add alcohol to them and its trouble. We were hissed at, kissed at, followed, grabbed and spoken to (less than kind things were probably said) things were actually thrown at Tess. Even little boys hissed at us – where are their mothers? I felt so angry and helpless at the same time. Then stayed in the house can’t tolerate being treated like garbage anymore.” - Cindy

Trust & Security

- “I think it is sad that people are so dishonest here that people’s homes are more like medium security prisons, bars on windows & like 6 locks on doors.” ...
- “I officially despise Cuban men. We were warned not to trust any of them and the ironic part is that the person who warned us was the very person we should have trusted least.” -Cindy

The Group?

- “Differences in social standings are huge in Canada, and in Cuba they do everything to prevent it ... Told that there are no classes in Cuba but that is false. Some much better off than others. How can these wealthy Cubans ignorantly tell me there are no classes?”
- “Appears to be collectivist in many ways but clearly there are obvious aspects to Cuban culture that are only dedicated to the independent self.... Cuba’s many faces, or layers are slowly but surely being peeled away like an onion.” -Serena

Surviving Cuba

- Trying to keep a group of Canadians together as a group was a great challenge, especially when it became apparent that the Cubans don't really act in solidarity. This became a moral challenge for us in trying to uphold these ideals in this context.
- Many really ready to leave, some wanted to stay as they were starting to "get it" about Cuba. Joanne was ready to stay and following her return had decided to make many major life changes, including becoming an anthropologist.
- Cuba is a complex place that is full of contradictions: The good, the bad, the beautiful & the ugly

Self & Identity

- Serena had the realisation that her own life is good and that essentially having the same job as the waiter here seems worlds apart. “He is jealous of the tourists he serves, not me. I am lucky! We got it good”
- “It will be good to leave Cuba – I sure developed a new appreciation for my life in Canada....I have noticed a change in my self since we’ve been here, especially an increased sense of gratefulness for all that I have in my life.. I have grown and become more independent, more trusting of my self.... I will be quite happy to leave here....Writing thoughts down helped me to realize what I was seeing and going through” –Tessa

The Cubans

- Many new friendships were formed and email relationships continue today
- Some want to leave, asking for help
- Others hoping or expecting gifts and money from the next field school that came a year later
- Having experienced Canadians some reported having crossed the cultural divide and found some of the best friends they will ever have. Others doing like Cubans and surviving hoping for a recovery from the difficult times following “the special period” and the recent tightening of US embargo. **They have time and they hope.**

