Cultural Norms & Visiting Communities

You are the co-leader of a group service trip in rural Ecuador. The participants in your group are very diverse and come from a variety of race, class, ethnic, gender, and interest backgrounds. No one has traveled extensively in the group, but everyone seems open and excited for the challenge of adjusting to and learning about a new culture during the experience.

After the first few days in-country, students are beginning to adjust to life in Ecuador, and cultural differences often come up in group conversations. Some of the women on the trip compare stories about the forwardness of the local men, using terms like "creepy" or "gross". In another conversation, some students joke about the strangeness of their host families customs, food choices, religious fervor, and living conditions. Everyone seems well-intended in their commentary, and is enjoying the challenge of adjusting to a new culture regardless of their humorous complaints.

As these comments are shared more frequently, you begin to notice that a few members of the group are not amused. Three participants who self-identify as Latina often exchange angry glances with one another at some of the comments made, and have begun to isolate themselves from the rest of the group socially. Also, you notice that one of the international students on your trip seems to withdraw once this type of joking begins. You know that the other group members do not mean to be offensive, but it seems to be creating a damaging divide in your group.

- How do you approach this situation as a group leader?
- How do you make this a valuable group conversation?
- How can this sort of situation be prevented?; What discussions, trainings, etc. can be built into your pre-field course/sessions to address cultural norms, expectations, appropriate behaviors, etc?