

Lessons from my intercultural experience

Sociology, Identity



What is culture? What is intercultural communication?

In the textbook, “Interplay” by Ronald B. Alder, Lawrence B Rosenfeld, and Russel F. Proctor II, culture is defined as, “the language, values, beliefs, traditions, and customs people share and learn.” Culture describes and makes a certain group of people who they are. There is a multitude of different cultures throughout the world, and there are also many different co-cultures within those. Co-cultures are basically smaller more specific groups of cultures. Some examples of a few co-cultures are age, race, and gender. Alder defines intercultural communication as, “the process that occurs when members of two or more cultures or co-cultures exchange messages in a manner that is influenced by their different cultural perceptions and symbol systems, both verbal and nonverbal.” If you have ever been to a funeral for someone who had different religious views from you, you may have had an intercultural experience there because you are able to perceive the differences between you and the other individual. Another example is if you have ever visited a friend’s house and before they eat dinner they say a prayer. However, you may have never experienced this at home before and you are about to eat a bite when you are surprised by the sight of everyone else closing their eyes and going into a prayer without even mentioning it’s about to happen. Intercultural communication is an important obstacle to overcome in order to break the barrier between two cultures and become interculturally competent.

During my intercultural experience, I was able to step out of my comfort zone and overcome that obstacle by seeing the world from a different point

of view. During my intercultural experience, I got to meet a Japanese American family and eat dinner at their home with my dad. My dad is a carpenter and works for Mother Nature Landscaping. He met the Smiths through his job because he remodeled their back deck on their house. Ben Smith is married to a woman named Aoi. Ben is a Japanese American; his mother is Japanese, and his father is American. Unlike Ben who was born in America, Aoi was born in Japan and has two Japanese parents. Ben has visited Japan multiple times since his childhood to visit family there. He met Aoi when he was visiting in Japan. Then years later Ben and Aoi got married and moved back to the U. S. After buying a house in Bloomington they had two kids named Jules, and Mai. I was nervous about going to their home since at the time I knew almost nothing about them. My dad and I dressed casually and showed up around 6 pm. When we rang the doorbell Aoi greeted us at the door. The first thing I noticed was her heavy accent.

The second thing I noticed was the cubby full of shoes to my left and a cubby with slippers on the right of that. Aoi shook our hands and then offered us “ indoor guest slippers” to wear instead of our shoes which she had us put in the cubby. I’ve never met anyone who had this kind of shoe slipper set up at the entrance of their home. I wasn’t too shocked by it, but it was not something I was used to or have had a previous experience with. Shortly after my dad and I got there, Ben showed up at the house. He was dressed as if he had just come from some sort of business meeting. He wore a button up long sleeve with a tie and some slacks. Aoi and Ben invited us to sit at the dinner table. Aoi shouted something in Japanese and shortly after Jules and Mai came to the dinner table. The girls both greeted us and sat down. The

girls spoke fluently in English. The dinner table was already set up with an assortment of plates. Their home didn't look too different from any home I've seen really. They had a wooden dining table with wooden chairs. There was a banner on the wall near the table that had some signs on it which were obviously Japanese. Although, I did use their bathroom and they had a bidet. I have only ever heard of bidets, but I have never actually seen one in person or ever used one. It was the fanciest toilet I've ever seen. It has all kinds of different buttons and I was afraid to mess with it because I've never used one. I was curious as to what we would be eating for dinner. I knew it was a type of traditional Japanese dinner, but it would be my first time trying that type of food. Ben put a pot in the middle of the table which looked to be some sort of stew with different veggies and beef. He then went into the kitchen and took some rice out of their rice steamer and put it into a big bowl that he then put on the dinner table. Aoi finished cleaning up the kitchen while we talked to Ben and the kids. They all talked to my dad and I in English and they spoke very fluently. However, when Aoi joined us at the table, while Ben told us about how he and Aoi met, I noticed Aoi and the kids speaking about something in Japanese. I had asked Ben about a difference between an American greeting and a Japanese greeting and he told me that Americans will quite often hug each other during greetings with people whom they know but in Japan, hugs are usually reserved for romantic relationships. I found that interesting. What makes a hug so romantic?

After portioning out our food onto our plates, we began eating. Ben offered my dad and I chopsticks and forks to eat with. I tried to use the chopsticks but quickly quit trying because I was only embarrassing myself since I had no

idea how to use them. I then noticed that when Ben, Aoi, and their kids ate the rice they were holding their bowls of rice in one hand while they used chopsticks to eat it with the other. I found this strange because I felt like that would be bad table manners. I tried the stew and it was different from anything I've ever tasted. I don't think I would have ever tried it if I had not gone to the Smiths house. I didn't really enjoy the food, but it's just different from what I'm used to eating. Although, it did seem very healthy. After leaving the Smiths house, I took some time to reflect on my experience. I am happy to have met their family and have gotten to do something I wouldn't normally do in a typical day. I feel that I have learned more about another culture now that I have had some intercultural communication. Instead of just reading about Japanese culture in a book I was able to go experience it for myself.

I believe it was a great experience that helped open my eyes and see how not everyone is like me. I think it would be good for every person to be able to do this a few times in their life. It may be intimidating being the minority or feeling like the odd one out, but it is necessary to feel that way in order to see the world from a different perspective. Connecting back to Chapter 2 in *Interplay* it discusses culture values and norms, individualism versus collectivism, and language and identity. After my experience, I learned that the reason the Smiths held the bowl of rice in their hands while eating it was because that is one of their cultural norms. That is a normal part of their culture, and it is seen as having good table manners to do that. However, at the time I did not realize this and from my own experiences, I initially perceived that as strange.

In Professor Hofstede's article, "What about Japan?" Hofstede stated, "Certainly Japanese society shows many of the characteristics of a collectivistic society: such as putting harmony of group above the expression of individual opinions and people have a strong sense of shame for losing face. However, it is not as collectivistic as most of her Asian neighbors." Korea and China are very collectivistic, as well as Japan. However, Japan isn't on the same level of collectivism as Korea and China are. The third concept in chapter two is language and identity. In Interplay, Alder states, "When asked to identify themselves, individualistic Americans, Canadians, Australians, and Europeans are most likely to respond by giving their first name, surname, street, town, and country-in that order. Many Asians respond the other way around." How people introduce themselves can give you a hint as to whether they are more individualistic or more collectivistic. Alder also states, "Japanese has as many as 100 different ways to say I, depending on whether you want to be polite, casual, businesslike, or arrogant; to emphasize your family role, your social situation, age, or gender." There is a multitude of ways to introduce yourself in Japanese and that can be very surprising to other people like Americans who are individualistic.

In conclusion, I believe intercultural communication is something everyone should experience in their lifetime. Intercultural communication is an important obstacle to overcome in order to break the barrier between two cultures and become interculturally competent. During my intercultural experience, I was able to step out of my comfort zone and overcome that

obstacle by seeing the world from a different point of view. I encourage others to experience this and change their perspective.