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Comparing Cultures

Documentation of the Role Play

Frederike Ronnefeldt representing Brazil

Leon Vollmer representing Russia

Tabea Gregory representing North America

I chose the culture of North American because I have visited the United States several times, and during each stay I found many characteristics which irritated or amused me, although most of the characteristics were things I already knew from stereotyping and prejudices.

One is quickly lead to the idea of Americans being completely different than Germans, but when taking a closer look at the basic values and cultural beliefs of America you will soon find out that they differ less from the Germans in many aspects. One of the shared values (especially in business surroundings) is e.g. punctuality.

Seeing the differences and shared values at the same time I found it interesting to act out in this culture we all think to know so well.

Characteristics I found:

- It is very important to be in a good mood (to be uplifted, energetic, see the positive).
- It is preferred to agree than to disagree and to welcome new ideas.
- Being polite (be nice!) often is more important than to be honest.
- Many U.S. Americans have a strong connection with their country. (Which often is accompanied by not knowing about other countries, little geographic knowledge)
- Most Americans have a strong need for security. They try to make things as safe as possible. For reasons of "safety" and the identification with the country, many support the army and the idea of patriotism.
- Americans are fascinated by old things (buildings, etc.). Probably because their culture (civilization) is still so young that they don't have very old things.
- Things should be easy, quick, effective and efficient.
- Time is money. So don't waste it.

- It is important to be reliable.
- In the USA there's an immense range of products for every need.
- In the average woman talk in a higher, men in a lower voice than Germans.
- Young people very often use the word “like” as a fill word.

Characteristics from Terri Morrison¹:

Greetings

- Compliments are exchanged very often. They compliment something that a person has (clothing, etc.) or has done (sports, work, etc.).
- Until they know someone very well they avoid discussing controversial topics such as religion, money, politics.
- Common topics of conversation are a person's job, travel, foods (and dieting), exercise, sports, movies and books.
- The standard greeting is a smile, often accompanied by a nod, wave, and/or verbal greeting.
- In business situations a handshake is used. It is very firm. Weak handshakes are taken as a sign of weakness. Men usually wait for women to offer their hand before shaking.
- Good friends and family members usually embrace, finishing the embrace with a pat or two on the back.
- In casual situations a smile and a verbal greeting is adequate.
- If they see an acquaintance in the distance, a wave is appropriate.
- The greeting “How are you?” is not an inquiry about ones health. The response is short, such as “Fine, thanks.”

Gestures

- Direct eye contact shows that you are sincere, although it should not be too intense.
- The standard space between conversation partners should be about two feet.
- When sitting, U.S citizens often look very relaxed. They may sit with the ankle of one leg on their knee or prop their feet up on chairs or desks.

Gifts

- As U.S citizens tend to be wrenched at geography, any gift that describes the location of another country is a good choice: a colorful map, a globe, etc.

Appointments

- Punctuality is highly emphasized. If they are delayed, they call to let their contact know.
- It is necessary to fix appointments beforehand (e.g. by calling).

¹ Terri Morrison, Wayne A. Conaway, George A. Borden, Ph.D.: *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands. How to Do Business in Sixty Countries*. Adams Media Corporation. Holbrook, Massachusetts 1994

Looking at the characteristics listed I can't find any inconsistencies – but a lot of supplements. My list is more or less a cluster of facts I think of daily situations I experienced with Americans. The book on the other hand contains information with a special focus on business practices, which was quite interesting to find out about as this is an area I haven't had much contact with yet. For the role play (and the list above) I only took those points into consideration which were relevant for a demonstration of three young students meeting in an informal surrounding.

During the preparations of the role play we realized how difficult it is to demonstrate these points in this short amount of time without completely exaggerating the characters. When we tried to play them authentically in our rehearsal we had to admit that this way no audience would manage to find out which nationalities we are representing. So finally we decided to dare some stereotyping for the sake of recognisability.

The group enacted the following situation:

Three Erasmus students meet for the second time in a foreign country and make plans for the weekend together.

Tabea (T) is already waiting for the others to come. She checks her watch.

Leon (L) enters. T waves from the distance and puts on a big smile, greeting with “Hi” and “How are you?”. L is a little irritated a reserved.

They start a small conversation about the bus and the traffic.

Frederike (F) enters with a noisy “Hello”, trying to kiss L and T. They both hesitate, T gives in, L stays distant, making it impossible for F to reach him.

After talking about what they did the few last days, the three students enter a conversation about the subjects of family, living environment in their home country and marital status. F is constantly touching her counter persons, talking very positively and interrupting the others several times. T comments everything that's said with positive adjectives (“Oh, that's so cool,...”). L acts very passively at the beginning of the conversation but loosens up in the procedure, talking about himself a little more.

T tries to bring the topic to their planning for the next weekend. They have different preferences and start a small discussion but in the end they find a solution together.

F complements T's hair while touching it. T states that she uses great hair products.

T wants to fix an exact time for the meeting, the other give her a “around four or five”-answer.

They say goodbye with confusion if to wave, kiss, hug or shake hands and part.

Stereotypes used (USA):

being on time, wanting to make plans fix, not knowing about other countries, finding everything “so wonderful”, saying “like” all the time (“Well, you know, it's just like so much traffic here!), wanting to see all the “old stuff” of the foreign country, being very “girly” and bubbly, superficial, having a

boyfriend who “serves the country” as a soldier.

The audience was able to match our characters with nationalities very quickly (or at least cultural groups – they allocated Frederike with “Latin American”) and could also reason their guesses.

Most of the audience laughed in several situations. They afterwards confirmed that they enjoyed the moments when they could recognize certain characteristics and that these moments were experienced as “funny”. Some critiqued the exaggeration saying that it gave a negative or wrong impression of the nations.

As the characterization of a culture can only be done if you look at a group of people you always have to make generalizations. Individuals only show certain aspects of the considered culture and often live aspects from other cultures, so a culture can never be reflected by one person. (It is questionable if it is possible to find a “pure” culture at all.)

The presentation ended in a discussion about stereotypes and if they are avoidable or simply part of human nature.