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**Julianne Appel-Opper:
Intercultural communication:
My own personal journey through culture.**

Abstract

In this article I want to share my personal journey through culture. Based on my own experience I will focus on various facets of intercultural communication. On the one hand I will explore the manifold misreadings and challenges. On the other hand I hope to show how a growing cultural awareness may also enrich our relationships, especially in a therapeutic setting.

Introduction

When I think about culture a song comes to my mind 'Everywhere you go you always take the weather with you'. We all take our culture with us. It is like a world inside us with all the experiences, sensations, interactions, contacts we have made so far. They are all stored inside us. The voices echo in the mouth and in the ears. The gestures are written in the muscles and in the bones. All in all we carry knowledge of how to be in our world, our reality. Nine years ago I left Germany to live in the United Kingdom. Before that I had lived for some time in different countries and cultures; I had lived in France, Israel and California for about one year each. These intercultural experiences and contacts had changed the way I organized myself. In this article I would like to invite you to join me on my journey into a new culture.

First steps: A stranger in a strange world

In the first years in the United Kingdom I must have looked pretty serious : a tall woman with a sound German accent who tried so hard to make sense of her surroundings. I became a bit of a stranger to myself. In theory we all know that we need the other to make sense of the world. Our identity is an ongoing life-long process depending on the context, the field we are in. In practical terms it meant that I felt lost.

I remember the following scene in a shoe shop in London. I rushed in at about a quarter to six. Lovely shoes and the shop was really busy. I thought that the shop might be closing in fifteen minutes like the German ones, so I approached a 'lady' working there, who was already serving another 'lady-like woman'. I said to excuse me and could she tell me when they were to be closing. I can still see the woman's face staring at me and telling me that she was already serving that lady. I assume now that we both thought how rudely the other was behaving. What did I do wrong? This was a question accompanying me on my inter-cultural journey. Now, years later I am sure that we both acted in an appropriate way within each of our cultures. At the time I felt the pain of frustration of being looked at like a bull in a china shop. I felt 'told off' as if I had behaved in an inadequate way. I knew that feeling too well. I grew up in a small village in Germany. At home we spoke the local dialect and at school I was expected to speak High German. I had felt embarrassed about using the 'wrong' words in the 'wrong' places. There is one scene that sticks out in my memory. I had been shopping with my parents in the nearest bigger town. Being hungry I was given money to get

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myself a sandwich just a short distance away. I used the local dialect word for sandwich and the woman at the counter did not understand me at all. I did not get my sandwich, and felt humiliated and wrong.

Intercultural communication: could we run with each other?

Imagine you and I were to meet up for jogging. Let us assume we have our own individual speed, rhythm and timing. How will we start, how will we run? In our usual tempo or slower or faster? This situation is a bit like intercultural communication in which we experience differences in speed, rhythm and timing. We are in a continuous process of tuning in to each other to make communication possible. What might we experience? Being breathless, exhausted, overwhelmed or bored, lonely, not in our flow, not being met? We all have our unique non-verbal ways of communicating, our melody of being, our rhythm of moving.

I remember these early ways of getting in touch with a different non-verbal behaviour. In the first months in the United Kingdom, I felt as though in a vacuum, not being met fully. The contact felt so different. Especially the start and the end of an encounter. I still see myself following our guests through the hall trying to come to a 'felt' ending to the visit. For me our guests seemed to disappear without really saying goodbye. I am sure that my behaviour must have been strange too. My German hands wanted to shake other hands to share their known 'hello' and 'goodbye' ritual. Indeed, conventions of greeting and meeting behaviour are culturally different. For me these 'new' conventions left me with feelings of being unworthy, untouched. In my old world I had learnt that leaving like this meant that a rupture in the communication and relationship had happened.

To tune in to each other we need to read each other. How would we read and understand signs to slow down for example? The body speaks her/his own non-verbal language depending on the culture: how we gesture and posture, how we hold our body. Within our own culture we learn to read this body language of the other. At some point I experimented in private with imitating how, for example, one of my neighbours walked. It was as if I was trying on a different body. At first I had read this walk of hers a bit like 'I am in a hurry, can't talk right now'. Imitating the walk did not feel like that. It felt more like being tense in my body and not sure what to do. This changed my perception and I started chatting to her and this helped in breaking the ice.

I also remember phoning various customer services to set up our phone, gas, and water services and so on. I was struck by the high pitched female voices which I was unable to understand. I am sure this was meant to be customer friendly. In the first years I overadapted and my voice got higher and higher. I wanted so much to belong to this new world; a world outside of my lived experience so far. And I kept on interrupting. I just could not read the signs when it was my turn to speak. Or I was so busy answering questions that I missed a longer pause in which I could focus on the other and think about questions. And even the structure of the questions would be different as we will see in the next chapter.

This is the timing within communication, but there is also a timing in a wider frame. How long is the acquaintance time or the visiting time? Who gets the diary out first?

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Who gets up first at the end of the visit? How close will we get? Does this depend on the time we know each other? How much will we show of ourselves? Let us imagine our inner world as a house. A house with a kitchen, a living room, and so on. There is a front and a back garden. We all have different sizes of these gardens with different fences. Some doors have bells to ring, others have doors wide open. Where would we meet each other? Would you let me in, into your house? Would I let you in? What might we allow the other to see about us? How much would we hold back, in the back garden? And how much are we allowed in our culture to look, to gaze at the other? What are the cultural 'rules and regulations' of how to behave to another woman or a man?

I used to work for the NHS as a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. I saw my clients in a room at a centre with other colleagues working there. I smile now as I write it. I am sure that especially the male colleagues there struggled with my overtly direct way of wanting to meet and greet them. I also did not know how to flirt in English culture. A few days ago I read in a German women's magazine how to flirt with an Italian, French or British man. I learnt that in the United Kingdom Hamlet's 'find directions by indirections' would be the motto. The author recommended that you be conscious about gazing because 'this could be violating boundaries'.

In the next section I want to add the language to the communication.

Language in intercultural communication: a joint visit to an art gallery

Let us assume this time that you and I are visiting an art gallery. Which experiences will we express? How will we find a way to exchange our thoughts, feelings, our reactions to what we see? How will culture come into all this? We will have our hidden individual cultural assumptions about how to do that. Like with the jogging experience we could flood each other with our experience or we could keep everything inside. Some will express their reaction in a demonstratively louder way, some will be quiet and meditating about what they have seen. Some might wait to be asked. We might feel understood or not at all.

For me intercultural communication meant not speaking in 'my mother's tongue' but in a 'foreign language'. I still change English grammar so that the melody of what I am saying fits my German style of speaking. And I remember people telling me not to worry. There must have been something in the way I chose my words that the other got the feeling I would 'worry'! Thinking about it now I realize that I get this comment less and less.

I remember sitting with a group of colleagues and friends having lunch. The friendly words inquiring after the details of my journey from a colleague sitting opposite fell on my cultural ground as 'this person cannot find anything else to talk to me about'. Now, years later, I am able to acknowledge and value her slow unfolding process of approaching me. In the past I used to distance myself, not knowing how to read the words in the other's culture. My English is and was quite fluent. However, I could not speak English in the same easy way as German. Not to mention the humour. I remember sitting with my neighbour. His wife had left the room for a few minutes and we sat in silence. I saw that it was raining, so I commented about the weather, which I thought was a good thing to do in English culture. He responded, that at least the rain was good for the garden. Was that meant to be funny? Well, I did not know what to say. I clearly did not understand the rules of this game. I remember I was relieved when his wife returned.

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Intercultural communication in the therapeutic relationship: Could we dance with each other?

In my first work as an 'Older Age Psychologist' for the National Health Service, I offered psychotherapy to elderly clients. Because of my clients' age I did home visits finding myself in the heart of plain white middle class English culture. I told my clients that 'I am German' and asked them how they felt about that. I thought I had to. Because of the age of my clients, being well over 65 years' old, because of the Second World War. The response was always that this was fine. Well it had an impact, positive and negative.

I remember visiting one of my first clients, a man referred to me with 'depression' and 'chronic back pain'. My Germanness for him meant efficiency like his favorite German electrical products made by Krups and Miele. This man looked at me in the same light, he expected me to be as efficient. Psychotherapeutic work sometimes gets compared to a dance between the therapist and the client. But could I dance with him and he with me? I sat with him listening to his story, how the pain started and when, how his life had been so far. In these first years I clearly did not understand every word and every expression. I remember that I needed to slow down a lot to get an understanding of everything else his body told me. Slowly my body got a sense of his body, how he held his back, how he was breathing. In a way I understood more and more what kind of world had been given to him and how he received and stored this in his living body. And how he organized himself when he started to feel sad. We came to understand that from early days he had learnt not to express his sadness. His lower back was the place where all those feelings were held. I told him how I felt in my body as I listened to his experiences in life. I could feel the tension in my back and sensed a movement there. I added that my body wanted/needed to move. My back felt the frustrations, traumas and the pain and wanted to 'defreeze'. He joined in and imitated my movements and was so relieved after a while.

I recall another client, a woman. She had prepared tea for me in the living room. She offered me all kinds of biscuits, I still see the fine porcelain. The whole time I was not sure, what to say, what to do. What kind of dance was this? There were many photographs everywhere in the room. She showed them to me, photographs of her dead husband, of her children, who 'would not come to visit her'. I felt with her and was touched by her loneliness. On that day, I had a tight schedule and I had to leave in time to get to my next appointment. It was as if it was hard for her to acknowledge that her tea party was part of my work. Looking back now I think that my swift exit must have been experienced as impolite and rude. She cancelled the next appointment and I never saw her again. It still leaves me with the feeling of not having passed that kind of dance, which I did not understand enough.

Is there a bridge between the cultures and our personalities we could walk on in order to relate to each other? Because we want/need to understand and meet each other?... we want to have a relationship?...because we need to find ways of tuning in to each other?

I worked with clients, supervisees and trainees whose parents had come from a different culture to the United Kingdom. Interesting how we found each other. In this work I felt like a cultural being. My Germanness could not stay out of the room. I want to share the following scene, part of long-term work with a female trainee. At the end of our first year, the trainee tells me about a painful memory of being discriminated

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against because of her black skin colour. I see that her body is there in that old scene, living through it again. I am deeply touched. My body holds my breath like my trainee's body does. There is something of an atmosphere of shame in my body as I sit there. I want to disappear. I take a deep breath which comes out with a sound. It is as if my body wants to say 'I do not want to disappear'. After that sound, she moves her head up and looks at me, at my eyes first and then down to my white arms. She stops there and says "you are white" and I say "yes, I am". I feel in the spotlight being looked at. And she adds "and you are German" to which I respond again with "yes". This moment we fully saw each other. We talked about this special moment in later sessions and what it meant for our work.

On a different occasion in my work with a male black trainee I felt that my Germanness had to come out of me to invite the Jamaican side of him. I recall a session he told me about Jamaica and how he felt there during his visits. And I told him about Germany, how life is there and what I miss most in the United Kingdom. Afterwards he told me how he valued these sessions and that this had meant a lot to him.

I also did not know, whether and how I could work with touch. I had to trust my own body, that my body would know. I remember a young female client who came to see me over a period of some years. In one session she sat there in front of me crying. We had talked about her relationship with her mother, all the pain and the sadness came out of her. I noticed that her hands were holding on to each other. I was so touched by that, how she must have learnt to hold herself. Similarly to my work in Germany I held this in my mind, not sharing it yet. My hunch was that this would be too exposing and might shame her. This was what her over-controlling mother had already done to her too much. A few months later in a similar scene I had the same perception and this time I shared this with her. She listened and cried. I did not offer to hold her hand, even though I could sense that her hands wanted that so much. It was about six months later when she asked me whether I could hold her hands. At first we talked about what had happened and how that felt for her. And then my hands held her hands. We had to move a bit closer to each other. In a way her and my hands talked to each other in an universal language without words. Sometimes I did struggle just to notice these impulses of mine and then to hold them in my mind. I so wanted to help right away, to give what needed to be given. And sometimes I saw myself in the client. I so desperately needed to be seen, to be touched in this foreign culture. I was very fortunate that I found a supervisor who did this, she saw me as a professional woman who sometimes struggled in this foreign culture.

A final scene comes to my mind. As part of a post-graduate Certificate Course in the Supervision of Counsellors we sat together in a smaller group. We shared our ongoing struggles and challenges to work inter-culturally. A colleague expressed her feelings of being overwhelmed in her work with a Greek student. Everything this client would say sounded for my colleague's ears "totally hysterical". I felt safe enough to express my doubts of being able to reparent an English client not even knowing the usual lullabys and finding the right English tone. And then the door opened and the Course facilitator came in. We all instantly changed subject. It was as if we were not meant to have these thoughts and feelings; that they would not be acceptable.

Epilogue

A few months ago I moved back to Germany, back into my own culture. And I am a stranger again. Germany has changed in the years I have not lived here and I have changed. The adventure will start again.

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Selected Literature

In the following I am including a list of books and articles which have inspired me and might be of interest for the reader:

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