What Pip Taught Me

I have found that learning about cultural differences is better found through a relationship than by a simple interview. When I think about all of the valuable things that I have learned about English culture from Phillipe Dubern, a North Hampton England native, I did not learn them from our informal interview. I learned most about him and our differences through the time I spent with him. I learned what he was passionate about, what he did not care about, and how surprised we were at each others’ differences. To understand the differences between Pip and me and our cultures, it is important to know some background information, the opinions that we have had about each other, the opinions that we now have, and how our relationship has molded because of these.

Phillipe, as I call him Pip, decided to come to America two summers ago to work at Timber Pointe Outdoor Center, an Easter Seals Camp. He had never been outside of England and was anxious for the experience, but apprehensive about not only the culture shock that he might experience, but the position that he was going to be taking on: a counselor for children and adults with disabilities in the not-so-urban area of central Illinois. Pip soon found that he was right in his apprehension, he did experience culture shock but it was not long before he began to enjoy the differences and his new “home away from home” in a cabin shared with campers and counselors in the woods. When I asked Pip what one of things was that he was most surprised about upon coming to America, he said, “I could not believe how spacious it was. England is so cramped and busy, much like New York City and Chicago.”
I met Pip in his second summer in America. I would have never thought that he was the type of person that I would become good friends with, but I think that we were both equally intrigued by our cultural and personality differences. The major difference between us is religion and part of the reason why we became friends. One day when I was working at the pool, he told me how surprised he was at Americans and their religious lifestyles. Basically, they call themselves “Christian” but do not live a lifestyle that follows their belief system. He said that was why he was interested to talk to me, because I am different from others; I live for what I believe. In England, religion is more ritualistic and more of an emphasis is put on that aspect of it.

When I interviewed Pip, I focused on the differences between Americans and the English that either surprised him, or just differences that he had encountered in general. One that I had not expected him to say was that Americans are more open-minded. Based on my impressions of him, I figured that England would be more open to differences. Specifically, he said that America is more open to homosexuals and people with disabilities than in England. After discussing this matter for a while, we both decided that part of the reason for this is that the majority of his time spent in America had been at the Easter Seals Camp where everyone is very adaptive and accepting of disabilities. After thinking on a broader perspective, he said, “Even in airports and malls, there are more possibilities for people with special needs.” In England, there are not proper special education programs or systems for main-streaming children with special needs. In regard to homosexuality, there is no real explanation except that America is just more accepting in his opinion. I have analyzed this to be because of the people that he was around during his time in America were simply more accepting.
Another difference that he spoke about was the American way of displaying hospitality. In England, even familiar guests are served and preparations are made before they come. Pip explained that his “mum” always does an extreme amount of work to prepare for guests whether they are regular visitors or not. She makes sure that everything is in place and that food is prepared. When they arrive, she then serves them. Pip was pleasantly surprised about the different way in which Americans treat guests. He said, “I think that people feel awkward when my mum goes to a lot of trouble for them. I like that Americans don’t do as much; I am just not used to it.” I found this difference interesting as well. When people come over to my home, my mom usually expects people to make themselves at home. I think that the level of comfortableness that one feels in the home of another is a good measure of how comfortable the relationship is between the two. This is a difference that I am glad that we have. It makes me feel good when my friends can come over to my house and feel comfortable enough to get what they want to eat or find what they need in my house.

Some characteristics that I noticed about Pip that set him apart from Americans are his use of paralanguage, chronemics, and language. The pitch in his voice usually ends on a higher tone than he starts the sentence. This characteristic was easy to identify because after spending very much time with him, I started to notice myself doing it also. I think that this is definitely a culture-influenced trait because I have noticed other English people doing the same. I have also witnessed several occasions when Pip’s use of chronemics has frustrated people, including myself. I think that this is because everyone in America is on such a strict time schedule and puts a big emphasis on punctuality. In England, schedules and punctuality is not valued as much and therefore it
was easy for me to notice this difference. The use of language by Pip was different and noticeable. Pip uses different words for different objects or feelings and it is confusing initially but soon after it is easy to understand. For instance, the English use “loads” to measure while we would use the words “a lot.” Another is that he calls a bathing suit a swim costume, a sweatshirt is a jumper, and soccer is football. There are many more differences in language that can sometimes be confusing when dealing with feelings but with objects, it is simple. These differences are usually nothing that would affect a relationship between two people. The language difference could be more of a barrier but since we both speak English, it seemed minor.

Pip and I were talking once about our first impressions of each other and I think that this reflects our stereotypes of each other’s cultures and some intercultural barriers that we struggle with. He said that he thought I was shy and serious when he first met me. This was likely due to the fact that I was dealing with the barrier of anxiety when meeting him. I remember being very conscious of the fact that he was different from me, from England, and I did not want to say anything to make me look bad or un-accepting. I think when one is so focused on doing the right thing, it makes them look cold or un-friendly.

I arrived at camp a week before Pip did this past summer and had the opportunity to hear about the other counselors. All the time that I was there, I had developed a picture of Pip as a “preppy English guy.” There are few reasons why I had this image of him before I met him. One is because I had met another counselor from North Hampton, England and considered him to be “preppy.” So, I assumed that Pip would be the same. I also had developed an opinion from watching movies with Hugh Grant, a British man.
playing a “preppy” part in most of the movies that he is in. When I met Pip, with his lip ring, spiked hair, and wearing a “Good Bush/Bad Bush” shirt, my opinion quickly changed. I think that this, in particular, shows how wrong stereotypes can be. I based what I had expected all English people to be like off of one other person that I had met from England and an actor. I feel so ashamed to have ever thought that way.

My image of people from England is different now; I do not actually have a certain image of them. Not only did my stereotype change because of physical appearance, it changed yet again when I got to know him. I had decided that I am not the type of person that a guy with a lip ring and tattoos would want to be friends with. However, I was wrong and found that he did want to know me and that we had a lot more in common that I thought we would. I realized that he is a very deep individual that I enjoy talking to. I learned that I should not make assumptions of anyone based on another person because I found out how wrong they can be. I know that I would not like anyone to make assumptions of me based on other Americans because everyone is so different in America, much like in England.

The differences between Pip and I are not due to our culture necessarily, but I account them more by our personalities, experiences, and values. In recognizing this, it is also necessary to acknowledge that our personalities, experiences, and values are shaped in part by our culture. It is difficult for me to understand this completely but I have realized that we would be different people had we not been raised in the countries that we were. Meeting and getting to know Pip has helped me to better understand this and move out of the minimization level of intercultural sensitivity where I was only willing to recognize very obvious differences of cultures like language and food. In the
minimization stage, I assumed that everyone was the same and brought up with the same types of values and beliefs.

I have ranked my current intercultural sensitivity stage at the acceptance level. In this stage, I have noticed myself being more interested in cultural differences. I am now aware that there is not a set format for the way we should be raised or brought up. There is not even a right or wrong for what you call you the garment that you swim in. It is possible that due to my level, I am still not fully recognizing our cultural differences.

I am really excited that I get an opportunity to learn even more about Pip’s culture when I study in London next semester. With the experience of studying abroad and being immersed in another culture, I am certain that I will grow to the adaptation stage of intercultural sensitivity. In the adaptation stage, I will be able to take on other perspectives and change my behavior in order to “fit in” culturally.

I have recognized several ways in which Pip is culturally different from me but they do not matter in our friendship. We have a great friendship that would not be changed based on whatever country we were raised in or live in currently. Regardless of our differences, we are people that enjoy each other’s company and insight. I have learned a lot from Pip in regards to his culture and life. My experience in getting to know him as a friend has helped to me to grow from minimization to acceptance level of intercultural sensitivity.

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