

BABSON COLLEGE

Assessing Your Cultural Identity as an Individual

Experiencing Shanghai

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This summer, I spent one month in an internship program in Shanghai, China. I chose to focus this assignment on my experience working in Shanghai, comparing the Asian and Latin American cultures, because of China's unique business environment and culture. This experience made me more aware of my self-identity while facing many cultural business barriers on the way. I gained a wealth of cultural skills and knowledge, and deepened my interpersonal and communication skills by entering and navigating a foreign workplace. Most importantly, working in Shanghai made me more aware of my Hispanic roots and the influence it has on shaping my personality and style of communication, both within a business context and socially.

Nancy J. Adler affirms that there are six important variables that affect management communications between different cultures. In comparing the Latin American to the Asian culture, *relationship to others* is one variable they have in common. Latin American and Asian cultures are both collectivist societies. In my culture, this variable is accentuated more in the family sphere. In terms of business, networking is important, but personal suitability is still the main criteria for getting a job. In China, this variable is clearly appreciated in business relationships. The Chinese use the term *guanxi*, which translates to relationships, to refer to their network or connections. *Guanxi* is critical in doing business in Shanghai. Moreover, this concept also includes delicate patterns of mutual obligation. A coworker invited me to lunch once during my internship, so the appropriate thing to do to cultivate my *guanxi* was to invite him the next time. I was taken out to lunch and dinner very often in China, most of the time it was the norm to eat with company coworkers. Every dish was shared on a rotating circular table. Even though I loved this aspect of the Asian culture, being so group oriented made me realize how much I enjoy spending time by myself, simply meditating and thinking. It was hard for me to find a polite way to refuse lunch with the group, but I found a way of excusing myself and showing respect: by taking time to explore the city of Shanghai.

The differences between Asian and Hispanic cultures were explicitly seen in nonverbal variables of communication. *Kinesics*, or facial expression, greatly varies between cultures. In the Asian culture, showing respect and maintaining “face”, *mainzi*, are very important. Thus, the Chinese “disguise their emotions by adopting an expression that does not represent how they really feel” (Thomas and Inkson, 99). They smile to conceal negative emotions so as to avoid losing face. In the Latin American culture, we use many facial expressions when communicating; emotions are fully expressed. I consider myself a very emotional person and my facial expressions always convey how I truly feel. Crying and being overtly angry are healthy ways of expressing emotions. Besides facial expressions, Hispanic and Asian cultures differ in terms of *haptics*. China is a low touch culture, in which handshakes are the major form of greeting. However, Latin America is a high touch culture, in which physical contact is accepted. Kissing another person’s cheek is widely acceptable socially and within a business context. Being away from this type of practice made me aware of how much I enjoy using my five senses to communicate. I also realized that physical contact has become an unconscious reaction to me. Therefore, it was hard to refrain from doing so during my internship in Shanghai. I noticed that my high touch cultural background is an important part of my identity, but it might make others feel uncomfortable by sending the wrong message. Thus, I showed great CQ skills by trying to isolate that part of my personality in order to consciously stop myself from doing it.

Pondering back on my experience in Shanghai, I learned the importance of nonverbal signals in cross-cultural communications. In a country where I experienced the most intense language barrier of my life, being able to master the nonverbal cues and unwritten protocols in business was crucial. Furthermore, I became aware that the Latin American culture has lost the sense of respect that the Asian culture treasures so much. I would like to take that part of the Chinese culture with me and incorporate it into my ever changing identity. In addition, living in China was a proof to myself that I can stand out of my comfort zone and pursue challenging opportunities successfully. This challenging

experience made me reconsider my self-identity and acknowledge the fact that I am continuously shaping it. Before moving to Mexico or Babson College, I considered myself solely Peruvian. Now, after experiencing Peru, Mexico, US, Spain and China, I believe my identity is composed of different aspects of different cultures. Living in so many places and experiencing distinct cultures made me want to pursue a concentration in Global Business Management and potentially work abroad. I am proud to state that I am a mindful global citizen with an enhanced knowledge of different cultures and a wide array of cross-cultural skills, but with so much more to learn.

Bibliography

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