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Content

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Hospitality and the Perils of Culture
Essay

Abstract

The subject of this article is the entanglement of those levels and dimensions which constitute the background of intercultural encounters, and which are sometimes minimized in conventional intercultural discourses. The essay is based on a qualitative survey. Interviews with German women who left their country to accompany their expat-partner working in Syria offer valuable information about their experiences with the tradition of hospitality and their feelings of otherness and discomfort. The results indicate that projections, transferences and defense reactions take place, making an open-minded communication between cultures difficult. This group of accompanying partners was chosen because it can be expected that they are especially sensitive to differences on the following levels: gender, religion and the very different educational and cultural backgrounds of the two nations involved. These interchanges differ a lot from having an exotic holiday.

Key words: Intercultural communication, intercultural interaction, hospitality, expat experience

1. Hospitality and the Perils of Culture

In this article I would like to discuss issues of interculturality focusing on the concepts of hospitality and otherness. The assumptions described in this paper refer to my own research results. (Lauckner, E., 2012) The mainstream of research on interculturality is influenced by the question of how different cultural groups encounter one another on a similar level of respect and equality if they are interested in communicating open-mindedly. It is often neglected that projections and transferences take place. A projection is a defense mechanism in which a person rejects his or her attributes and ascribes them

to persons or objects of the outside world. In transference feelings are shifted from a person to whom they would normally apply, to another person. In the following I would like to approach the issue of intercultural interactions considering these two psychodynamic mechanisms.

In my research I interviewed Germans working and living in Syria about their feelings of otherness, relying on a qualitative study with an explorative character. These interviews were conducted to explore how this sample of people might encounter feelings of otherness, alienation and discomfort. A notable feature of this sample was that only couples were questioned, and they were questioned separately. In the case of couples travelling abroad looking for work it can be observed that although they are both exposed to structures and people in this country, one partner is in a more exposed position. In my sample it was mainly the women travelling as an accompanying partner whilst the men were busy fulfilling their task of the foreign assignment in an organization. In this article I mainly refer to the accompanying partners, in most cases women.[1] This approach was chosen because the situation of accompanying partners is more suitable to show how projections and transferences occur. Accompanying partners are - due to the lack of foreign employment – more directly confronted with the foreign and therefore feel trapped into using someone in the foreign country in a counterpart position as a projection screen.

2. Being Intercultural

In the context of the discussion about the notion of the noble savage Mario Erdheim writes: "The idea of the noble savage is always closely related to self-reflection: It is, on the one hand, a product of a specific questioning of own values and norms and, on the other hand, a reason for its existence in the first place. A counter-image of barbarism, which serves to justify one's own

1 In my sample only one man accompanied his female partner, while in all other cases the male partner worked in the country and the female partner accompanied him.

position, helps to prevent reflecting about one's own culture." (Erdheim, 1988, p. 55). Using the encounter of a German woman who accompanies her husband and a Syrian woman as an example, it is possible to unfold the mechanism which Erdheim describes, namely that a certain image is ascribed to the Syrian woman, which helps the German woman to justify and strengthen her position. Doing this makes it a lot easier for her not to reflect about her own role and position.

Like a mirage people described in the cases below discover what should not exist in themselves and should not be admitted in the 'other'. Moving forward, this mirage is separated from oneself. Thus used it helps to recognize the 'other' as something different from oneself. Soon this is regarded as a finished process, as something that took place in the past and is not reflected upon again. Therefore it is not noticed any longer that the 'other' is shaped by very different factors.

My example intertwines different levels in order to build a tableau. One level is shaped by the individual dimension deriving from intrapersonal experiences and reflections. This encompasses the interaction of the accompanying partner with her Syrian counterpart, a Syrian woman (it is taken for granted that this Syrian woman cannot be easily grasped, understood, or defined). Hospitality is understood as an experience and as a metaphor when the problems the German women may encounter are discussed in the following examples. Another level is the collective level, the expatriate community establishing its own world and its counterpart, the foreign society in the host country. In addition one also has to consider the national level. The chain of events triggered by the encounter prevents the parties from realizing and reflecting about their differences. A much more active behavior would be needed to allow an interpersonal reflection and a meaningful sharing of experiences.

3. Accompanying Partners

Focusing on the accompanying partners as a group it is possible to examine different levels of intercultural encounters leading to an entanglement of

personal and societal patterns. The focus on the group of accompanying partners was chosen because their decision to accompany their partner led them to be confronted with 'otherness' in a very special way, making them sensitive in a particular manner as already mentioned before. Therefore it is expected that projections of meaning, placing of differences and defense reactions can be observed:

Accompanying partners leave their home and are bereft of their job, their language and their social environment. They cannot continue their way of life so they get more and more dependent on their partners. This created dependency becomes more complicated to cope with and less dissolvable over the years. They leave a country with individualistic and performance-oriented societal values, which has very much shaped their perception. As I have observed many times, at their first arrival they take the illusion of the transferability of their usual way of live into their new environment and are curious about the exoticism of the 'other'. They prepare to leave their home expecting to continue their way of life. This is the moment when they are busy with saying goodbye, or perhaps full of pleasant expectations and anticipation. They might even forget that they will be judged by their hosts according to their origin: Germany. Later, after repeated journeys, this illusion wears off. Either way the place of origin in terms of nation and geography is not free of attributions. It is never neutral.

Arriving in the host country the accompanying partner is usually very busy again. One has to find and set up a flat and arrange schooling. Then one has to orientate oneself: Where can I buy necessities for everyday life? How are services like power and waste, which often differ a lot from home, organized? At this point the expatriate community becomes an important point of reference. It provides an explanation for everything.

In addition to this, soon after arriving a feeling of regression arises because of insufficient language capabilities. Grown-up people in the midst of their life suffer a setback and lack the ability to express what they want. See the following quote from the interviews:

> *"At the beginning you try to speak English and they don't understand you. They respond in a way you don't understand. Especially in the beginning this is horrible."*

According to my experience in Syria this provides a reason to close ranks with your own fellow countrymen in the expatriate community, while at the same time by doing this one is subjecting oneself to a certain prevailing construction of meaning. There mutual understanding, speaking the same language and well-known behavior patterns align. See the following quote from the interviews:

> *"If you are together with Europeans, you just behave, you are not reflecting about your behavior."*

There is an agreement within that group about what is good and bad in the host country. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with your fellow countrymen is a reaction of defense. At the beginning this is not directed against the host country and its culture, but it may become more cemented and biased in the end. It is a defensive reaction with the aim of regaining one's own stability in personality, in language and in the ability to act in life, like the one you were accustomed to before leaving.

These theoretical considerations draw the horizon in front of which the topic of intercultural encounters and hospitality can be unfolded. This horizon provides the background which is often neglected in the discourse about interculturality: The entanglement of different levels such as reciprocally existing preconceptions, defense reactions before you get to know someone more closely, being in a situation which cannot be influenced or changed on your own. It is a situation which is shaped by speechlessness. But the truth is that only by engaging in a meaningful conversation with one another could this entanglement be resolved. Only by approaching and interacting with the other is it possible to get to know and appreciate one another and thereby withdraw the foundation of projections and unmask them.

4. Hospitality

Because of the tradition of hospitality a German couple or family living in Damascus is invited into the house of a neighbor or a colleague from work. What is the essence, or the nature of hospitality? Hospitality is a cultural achievement, nourished by various sources. Many societies regard it as a holy custom or a religious duty which is even extended to your enemy. The right to hospitality stems from a time in which commercial offers of accommodation were unknown. It extends to a place to sleep, a dinner together with your host and protection from life-threatening attacks. The Bible tells the story of Lot, who protects his hosts against the inhabitants of his village, where he himself was regarded a stranger.

In the Arab world being hospitable is most likely caused by rough environmental conditions. Expelling someone from a tent would have meant certain death. In many towns guest houses were provided, where guests could stay for a while. In exchange they agreed to tell stories about the outside world. Here and there guests are expected to bring news and to tell stories to broaden their host's horizons.

While it is a duty to be hospitable, it is important to ask what this implies for the guest. Most importantly, he must not refuse drink and food, in order not to question the relationship with his host. It will be shown below that the individual and cultural background adds many more facets to this.

In the Christian cultural realm this duty got lost. It does not fit into a modern individualistic society in which time is scarce. To be able to freely dispose over one's time became an important value. Being invited in a foreign country and enjoying hospitality leads to feelings of discomfort. This discomfort results from the insecurity one feels, because this custom and its implications are not familiar, lest well known. See the following quote from the interviews:

> *"It is depressing for me to eat with a Syrian family, because one finds not topics for conversation. I feel like I'm very much under pressure, and I ask myself, if I behave adequately."*

Feelings of discomfort and insecurity arise from many aspects hospitality entails: One does not know how long to stay, what gifts one is expected to bring, and what topics can be addressed in a conversation. But first of all you have to solve the question of the kind of present you might bring for your host. For instance, in the Orient, flowers do not fall into the category of acceptable presents for one's host.

5. The National Dimension

Although the global level is the horizon of intercultural encounters, the national dimension has an impact as well. The encounter takes place between a person who has been socialized in Germany - Europe - and a person who has been socialized in an Arab country. From the point of view of the Arab country Europe is associated with colonialism and in its wake the fragmentation of space into nation states. At that time the inhabitants did not have nationalistic interests. They were confronted with a logic which was not their own. In turn, people from Europe travelling to the Arab world would have to settle their attitude towards their own historical past as well.

Observations from different sources confirm that this dimension is still relevant. In a recent Arab Human Development Report it is formulated: "*the Arab region is hobbled by a different kind of poverty - a poverty of capabilities and poverty of opportunities*" (Arab Human Development Report, 2015). Kassir couches it in the following terms: "*The Arab people are haunted by a sense of powerlessness; permanently inflamed, it is the badge of their malaise. Powerlessness to be what you think you should be.*" (Kassir, 2006, p. 4). Not giving in to the temptation of making binary comparisons, it is sufficient to point out that every encounter has a history. The relation of countries and its history is relevant for intercultural interactions.

Now let's continue to look at what happens at the hospitable encounter of the German and Syrian family, still keeping in mind that while the national dimensions get entangled, the gender-specific space unfolds, especially for the accompanying woman.

Are you supposed to shake hands with the male head of the family? This cannot be known in advance and has to be decided when you enter the house: In the case of a more conservative family the woman would decide to not shake hands; in the case of a liberal family, she could decide to do this. Right afterwards you are introduced. Here, as a woman, it is important to put a good face on the matter, because you have to bear being introduced without any reference to your individuality as "the wife of ..." Neither your professional background nor any of your interests are mentioned. This reduction appears quite unfamiliar because you are degraded to accessory to your husband. So, already at the occasion of the very first encounter this may trigger a defense reaction. Because the Syrian woman is also introduced as "the wife of ..." the defense reaction might include the Syrian husband of that woman as well, because gender relations like this are no longer accepted in Europe. In times of individualization and globalization European gender relations are (supposedly) freely negotiable, because in a partnership individual freedom usually should be maintained (cf. Beck, Beck-Gernsheim). See this quote from my interviews:

> *"You observe relationships between men and women which are not longer imaginable for us. This is unacceptable. I will never approve of the role of the woman, how I am being treated myself. Frankly, this is absurd and impossible and I don't want to live like that."*
>
> *Then food is served and it encompasses many different varieties. You need a topic to talk about, because to eat calmly requires a high level of intimacy with one another. The men are likely to talk about their job very soon, so what subject remains for the women? Quote from interview:*
>
> *"I just can't talk about cooking recipes endlessly."*

But where could one find a sense of commonality, some issues both parties have in common? The way the Syrian woman is presented in my material negates any commonality; moreover it does not even allow it to develop. Syrian women are not regarded as having equal rights. They are rather regarded as being dominated by their men. If you proceed from this assumption,

which is, according to my daily experience, widespread in the expatriate community, this makes it difficult, if not impossible to find a common topic of conversation.

In my interviews there is not a single passage that informs me (word missing) about the taste of the food or describes the food at all. It would have been easy to find commonality by starting just there. The interviewed person got stuck when describing how the dinner proceeded in general without mentioning if they enjoyed the food or if they explored alternative options for conversation. This would have meant to get involved with the 'other' and to get beyond one's own projections and defense reactions.

At least three explanations for the two quotes mentioned above seem to overlap here:

- Firstly, the national dimension, i.e. the colonial past could make a conversation more problematic in general because it is not easy to find the correct personal attitude towards the historical past, which is riddled with guilt und complicated chains of events. Instead of trying to disentangle this, and for example differentiate between gender relations and religion, the European culture is labeled as advanced as such. It is expressed that this opinion does not allow for compromises, which might be a hint for the intense emotions hidden behind such a statement.
- Secondly: Assuming that if even today women from Europe might be more dependent on men - at least more than they are willing to acknowledge, they would not admit their dependencies in a situation when accompanying their partners into a foreign country; and especially they would not admit it in the course of conversation with the Syrian counterparts. Seen from this perspective a clear-cut case of projection takes place. You observe or locate in the 'other', in this case the Syrian woman, what should not exist in yourself ('dependency') and must not be admitted.

Let me add one more aspect, namely the pressure of expectations implying the high demands one puts on oneself. In the third interview quote, see above

("*and I ask myself, if I am behaving adequately*"), these high demands are mentioned. A stranger is expected, as Jacques Derrida devises it, to "*behave adequately*" and he continues: "*The foreigner has not only rights, but also duties, of which he is always reminded, when he would be accused of behaving badly.*" (Derrida, J., 2007, 25)

According to this aspect the situation of being invited presents itself like this: I am sitting vis-à-vis my Syrian counterpart, without a common language, struggling with defense reactions, while still trying to maintain a high level of self-expectation to behave correctly. Judging oneself by this standard, every invitation appears to be a situation where you are rated, and you very likely receive bad marks, even though it is only the neighbor who invited you. This aspect very likely leads to transference, where you feel guilt. You feel that you should blame others for it, namely the Syrian family inviting you, who created the situation in the first place.

The famous German writer Christa Wolf concisely describes this facet of the right of hospitality, perhaps typical for the German culture, while travelling in Greece: "*The dinner is prepared, show that you are worthy of it. Food has its special dignity in countries in which it is not self-evident that everyone has a full meal everyday, in which profit-seeking behavior was not yet able to push aside the gesture of hospitality, which you'll gladly accept, even if invitations sometimes seem to be done for selfish reasons. We as foreigners are dependent on so much more, we, not able to speak the language properly, are even unable to decipher company names, we are dependent on pictures, gestures and smells.*" (Wolf, C., 1986, 24)

In this quote the author describes another aspect very convincingly, namely the degree of dependence on others in a country in which you are not even able to decipher letters. On the one hand this leads to a dependency on explanations because every-day codes have to be deciphered. On the other hand associations and sensual perceptions become more important. Alongside this helplessness she describes the discomfort someone from a rich country feels

when invited to a plentiful meal. How high is the chance to prove oneself worthy of the food?

The Syrian woman, the neighbor and the wife of a husband's colleague might be the person who could introduce me into this foreign society. She could teach me about her feelings towards her husband and towards her country. Still it is difficult to let this happen, because she is not regarded as emancipated in contrast to me and suddenly boundaries between cultures are experienced as too high and absolutely insurmountable.

Derrida intensifies the severity of the situation: "*He (the foreigner) must ask for hospitality in a language which is by definition not his own, in a language which is being imposed by the ruler, the host, the king, the master, the power, the nation, the state, the father etc. He coerces him to translate it into his language, and this is the first violent act.*" (Derrida, J., 2007, 21)

Summing up, an invitation is not only an event of communication and conversation. It is furthermore an issue of claiming one's status as a host. Many guests - not only do they not speak the language of their host country – find themselves in a situation in which they are at the mercy of a predetermined course of events which undermines any comfort in one's own behavioral pattern. Be this as it may, you as the visitor may have to accept that you are 'embedded' by certain habits and traditions, when you start your life in a foreign society. Perhaps this may be the only way to 'be yourself' in this society, if one follows Mario Erdheim, who writes: "*When an ethnologist lives in a Indian village and adapts himself to the eating habits, ... he suddenly realizes that many parts of his identity, ... are now bound to his eating habits. His concepts about feeling comfortable and of socializing and his self-consciousness are taken out of these intercourses, and are thus embedded into this oral tradition of eating habits, and when this is not provided for, he also lacks a part of himself.*" (Erdheim, M., 1991, 73)

6. To Conclude

The tradition of hospitality is a promising concept revealing many facets of 'otherness'. Furthermore the hospitality issue touches a lot of sensitivities the accompanying partners have to deal with from the outset. One could say that hospitality is the 'Beyond' of the ostensible self-evident truth, of the issues one is familiar with. Either long-term experience provides the know-how to handle the situation or, if experience is not at hand, you will have to directly address these questions in an open-minded conversation. This implies engaging in a conversation of equals.

The situation described here shows how the accompanying partner struggles to maintain her own self-evaluation (or self-esteem) and gives hints for traces of what the self of the accompanying partner is lacking. The Syrian woman provides the location where projections can be directed. Still, the German women try to maintain their positive self-evaluation by relying on projections and defense reactions, which lead to a self including a lot of unresolved parts like a draft with a lot of 'voids'. The encounters can be characterized by the surrender and the discomfort of the accompanying woman, who projects what she cannot bear any longer or what she is not able to acknowledge and to accept as her own.

Some of these projections can be related to gender-specific sensitivities. The German woman, who just quit her job, may feel that she has been robbed of 'being herself' (So-Sein) by being treated as the accessory of her male partner. At least to some degree she is permanently reminded of her "new" dependency on her partner as well. In such cases, at least for many women, the only possibility to regain a positive self-valuation seems to be by devaluing the 'other'.

Other sensitivities may be applied more broadly: In general if you come from a Western cultural background it may be hard to accept that you are 'embedded' and defined by the tradition of another culture. And, surely, a well-educated Westerner, accustomed to act and shape his environment, will have

difficulties to admit that he failed to behave adequately; that he is helpless; that he is dependent on others; and even temporarily is 'ruled by other masters'.

Another dimension could be added. Coming from a culture which is proud of being reflexive and which at least pretends to treat people equally, it is embarrassing that you no longer seem be able to access this ability in a situation like this, increasing your feeling of discomfort.

Any of those feelings of insecurity, alienation and discomfort could lead to projections and defense reactions, which hamper your ability to approach the 'other'.

My impression is that one has to search complementary explanations for these behavioral patterns. Sociologists maintain the thesis that in times of globalization and (supposed) gender equality societal conflicts are shifted from the public to the private. In the above-mentioned examples, conflicts are shifted into marriage or partnership (cf. Beck-Gernsheim, 1990, p. 53). If encounters like these take place at such extreme levels of distance, the social subconscious might provide for an additional and valid explanation.

This social subconscious enables people to avoid addressing the more shadowy sides of globalization. A not fully developed and thus imperfect emancipation provides a good example to exemplify this hypothesis. While an insufficient emancipation in Europe is neglected, unequal treatment in Syria is emphasized. What one split off during the process of individuation (and from then on remains in the social subconscious) is attributed to the 'other' in order to be in harmony with one's own self. European partnerships are strained by demands for more flexibility, while the Orient is seen as the opposite model of a complete standstill, which is even mystified by stories about harem life.

The cultural achievement of hospitality seems no longer to be able to mediate between cultures at the boundaries of societal evolution. People from Europe living in foreign countries seem to perceive hospitality only through the lens of being confronted with societal processes that European societies

left behind long ago. In the age of individualization with shrinking public space and expanding private spaces, this ritual of hospitality has become meaningless.

The interviewed German women may have experienced a regression such as described by Erdheim. They feel as if they have lost their own social space, that they have been thrown into a strange foreign country and are not prepared to mark or substitute the parts of themselves they are lacking. They rather passively accepted the expatriate community's interpretation of the 'external'.

Interestingly, a holiday turns the situation upside down. Here the sensitivities do not come into existence in the first place because you return to your normal life very soon. Thus the self retains its integrity and - in turn - people value each other highly, and one can more easily claim to be interested about essential aspects of a certain culture.

Only if these more subconscious dimensions are taken into account in the theory of interculturality and if the mutual projections and transferences can be made communicable, e.g. where someone comes from and how he or she sees the 'other' because of his or her origin, will it be possible for the 'other' to develop his or her own contours of 'being himself' (So-Sein). Thus the other might become visible through the fog of attributions. Not being able to acknowledge and accept your own attributes makes it impossible to get 'another' view of the Syrian woman.

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