

## Cultural Case Study

A group of friends were eating at a café near their college. Terry was an American with German ancestors. He avoided showing emotions in public and preferred private affection. Carol joined them, laughing and smiling broadly, loudly saying how great her day was going. She gave Terry an unexpected hug and kiss.

Terry was embarrassed and felt like she was in his space. But, instead of getting angry, Terry realized that Carol's Italian culture and upbringing were much different than his. Intense displays of emotion in public are seen as appropriate for Italian Americans, while his culture valued staying calm. Terry explained how her loud and dramatic greeting made him feel. She offered to be quieter and to ask before kissing him in public.

Katie sat with them and listened while they were eating. During the conversation, she looked down at the table, and Terry wondered if she was paying attention. Katie had Latino parents from Mexico. In their culture, looking down while talking was a sign of respect. She would also patiently wait until the person who was talking "got to the point" before she spoke. Then, she smiled and touched his arm, using her hands for gestures. Terry realized that Katie's nonverbal behavior was part of her culture. Even though it was different than his, it was good.

Ryan started talking about a problem he was having with his teacher, complaining quickly and loudly with slang and some swearing. Terry was uncomfortable when the outburst sounded angry and Ryan looked agitated. Since Ryan was an African American, his intense conversations were sometimes mistaken for aggressiveness. But his friends knew he was not a violent person. His different communication style was partly from cultural upbringing and from knowing that discrimination exists.

Ryan was willing to stop swearing when his friends asked him to. Then his friends explained some things they heard from some of the other students about that teacher. He realized that his teacher was not singling him out because of his culture.

Mai was another friend who sat with them. She was an Asian American woman who was sensitive to her friends' feelings. When she disagreed with them, she

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didn't want to challenge them in public. When disagreeing, she often said "yes" to mean "I hear you" instead of saying "No". She realized that her culture taught her to promote harmony, and not to be assertive. But she learned to express herself with her friends while allowing them to "save face".

She was careful not to smile very much to men, because smiles may be seen as a sign of sexual interest in her culture. She learned to talk respectfully, especially to people who were older or in authority. Mai usually called people by their formal names and spent time with pleasant "small talk" before getting to the main point.

This group of friends could easily misunderstand each other's nonverbal behavior and communication. Instead, they are aware of cultural differences, as well as social, gender, and other individual differences, so they can see things from other points of view. They continue to value each other's similarities and differences and learn more about culture care as they spend more time together.

*What are some of the cultural similarities in the case study?*

*What are some of the cultural differences?*

*What are some ways they showed sensitivity, respect, and tolerance?*

*Share an example of cultural conflicts you have seen or experienced. What have you learned today that could help in that situation?*

Lane, S. D. (2008). *Interpersonal communication: Competence and contexts*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.