

Sojourner and Host Role Reversal:
An Analysis of Intercultural Relationships and the Roles People Play within Them

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I consider myself to be a fairly culturally competent person. Well, after a year abroad I sure hope I am. During my time, abroad and lots of reflection upon my return the importance of being culturally aware as well as the value of seeing things from different perspectives was not lost on me. I found myself craving the sort of exciting and novel interactions that I had become accustomed to abroad. After my tumultuous first semester transitioning back to life on the Bluff, I was delighted to learn that it was not only part of the course to learn about intercultural experiences but to seek them out. In a world that becomes more connected by the minute, being culturally is not only a skill but a necessary trait of all global citizens. This project allowed us to practice this mindset in a controlled setting and right in our backyard.

Despite a bit of anxiety with the “hey want to go get coffee and hang-out with me for a class” awkwardness, I was excited about the possibility of meeting new people, learning about them and possibly making a new friend. After my first papermate fell through I was lucky enough to find not one, but two papermates. Megan and Jenna are both from Australia, near Sydney and Perth respectively but both go to University in Fremantle at Notre Dame. Since they both are only at UP for a semester I was excited to talk with them about their experience studying abroad since my study abroad experience was such an incredible time for me. My enthusiasm for meeting people and hearing people’s stories defiantly served me well during this project. My extroverted nature and people-centered personality allowed me to converse without too much of the awkward tensions that come with new interactions. But I did notice my student journalist brain coming in a bit too often wanting to ask more questions than would be normal for most people. I quickly realized that if that was authentic to me then I shouldn’t not do it just because it isn’t the expected course of action. After a bit, I could re-focus my energy on just

being present in my interactions with Jenna and Megan and realized that asking questions didn't have to be awkward or intrusive it was the way I get to know people and that is just fine. There were a lot of moments in our interactions worthy of study but there were a few that stood out throughout all our interactions.

In this paper, I will explain the roles of sojourner and host changed over the course of our relationship through the lenses of Cultural Fusion Theory and Language Rules. These two theories will explain the roles we all played in each other's cultural adjustments.

I've been a sojourner before. Getting accustomed to a new place, especially one culturally different from yours, can be a difficult adjustment. For me, it was not going to Austria that caused the most uncomfortable adjustment, it was returning to the U.S. and to University of Portland. After my first coffee date with the girls, I had assumptions on how the semester would go. I thought we would go get coffee and hang out as well as I would have the opportunity to help them get to know Portland and act as a "tour guide" to their new home for the next couple months. I was excited about this because I love helping others and since I am an actual tour guide at University of Portland, that ambassador mentality is engrained in me. I was surprised when in some of our conversations I felt like the outsider, I felt like the sojourner instead of the host. That is exactly the phenomenon I find worthy of a deeper look.

Stephen M. Croucher's Cultural Fusion theory lays out a framework to explain the way people acculturate into a dominant culture while maintaining aspects of their own culture. At the same time, the host culture "fuses" with aspects of the minority culture to create a mixing pot of intercultural identity. The conditions and assumptions drawn out in this theory give meaning to the interactions I had with Jenna and Megan. Croucher references the phenomenon of hybridity and formation of hybrid spaces, Croucher builds upon this by saying that as much as newcomers

are influenced by their new environment their new environment is influenced by them. This is vastly different than theories of acculturation or deculturation in which those who are new to a culture are encouraged, or forced, to abandon their home culture in an effort to integrate better into their new one. That is the type of cultural adaptation my grandmother had when she moved to the US from Germany when she was little. She was told not to speak German and to almost denounce her roots because of the cultural and political tensions that encompassed “being German.” In the present day, we see this with immigrants who are not treated well until they sound, act, and most problematic- look American. But in my own intercultural experiences I have seen that it doesn’t have to be one way. I might not be all Austrian but I’m also not all U.S. American, I have adapted to both parts of my identity and the places I call home.

In my interactions with the girls I expected it to be me helping them adapt to U.S. American culture when in reality, our relationship was more symbiotic. They helped me adapt back to life here as well as allowed me to be a sojourner into their culture without ever leaving Portland. The conditions laid out in this theory state that in order for cultural fusion to happen, “newcomers are primarily socialized in one culture and then move to a new culture,” (Croucher 2016). This move from native to novel culture is something many people face in their lifetime, whether it is a smaller scale cultural shift like a new school or job or one that crosses borders.

The cultural milieu we are brought up in socializes us and that becomes our normal, with cultural fusion the move to the unfamiliar allows room to expand your cultural identity, not to completely change it. With Megan and Jenna this condition was present. Both spent their whole lives in Australia, and haven’t had many opportunities to travel. That being said, they are very enculturated into Australian culture, making them the perfect participants in the cultural fusion process.

The second boundary condition states that “newcomers are to some extent dependent on the dominant culture/environment,” (Croucher). This was true in our interactions, as the host, they did rely on me to know where the parking was at the trailhead, what level of difficulty the hiking trail was, best places to go in the city. Some of those I could help with, others I felt as clueless as they did. But in some of our interactions it was apparent that they looked at me to make the decisions. At the same time, I heavily relied on them to explain aspects of their culture to me and to share knowledge of aspects of their lives in Australia that I would have no other way to gather.

Like in all relationships, there was a give and take. We all brought something of value to the others. For me that was familiarity with Oregon and living majority of my life in U.S. American culture, for them it was expanding my knowledge of Australian culture. This communication across cultural barriers is essential in the world we live in today, Croucher said “At the same time, the dominant culture is increasingly dependent on newcomers in a globalized economic and political world,” (Croucher).

Building off of the boundary conditions, Croucher bases cultural fusion theory off of assumptions that drive the way people behave. Borrowed from Young Kim, the first assumption is that humans have a drive to organize and a capacity to adapt to environmental challenges. I noticed this in myself more than in Jenna and Megan. For me, being in a different environment than while I was in Salzburg was extremely challenging. Despite U.S. American being my primary culture, I felt like a newcomer and the challenges that entailed were difficult as Croucher said required a willingness to adapt and most importantly for me “strength of ties to the minority community,” for me that was my fellow Salzburgers. For Megan and Jenna, they kept in close contact with friends and family in Australia, they said this made them less homesick and more

excited to share the places they got to see and things they got to experience with people in Australia. Our experiences mirrored each other's in a way and allowed me to play both the role of sojourner, in U.S. culture and Australian culture as well as sojourn into their culture too.

The second is that people have a desire to maintain their cultural identities. This was also true in our interactions; they were not trying to act more American and I wasn't trying to mask my U.S. American-ness or my sprinkling of Austrian culture. The three of us entered conversations with curiosity of the other culture but not the intent to make that our own. As stated in the theory, we can maintain and foster our identities while still adapting and even thriving in a new environment in which you are the minority culture. In my interactions with the girls, even though in the big picture they were the minority group, when it was the three of us I was the outsider. Both are Australian and both are education majors so it was interesting to see how we communicated with one another.

On one hand, we followed the third assumption of this theory pretty well, fusion of the individual and the environment occurs in and through communication, by talking about ourselves and through self-disclosure of our cultural identities but there were many times that despite speaking the same language, barriers in communication were present. This is where Language rules came into play.

I chose the lens of language to fit within the cultural fusion theory because of the way we communicated with one another including the words we used. I assumed that since we all spoke English, the possibilities for confusion or misunderstanding would be low, but our interactions were not without little moments that caused a pause or a need to further explanation. During our in-person interactions there would be words the girls would say that I had a different word for. In person, it was easy to either gauge the context on my own or ask for a little clarification.

However, over text it was a little trickier to know the tone of a message or the meaning of some of their colloquiums. This caused a bit of uncertainty on my part and this is because they were breaking the language rules I know to be true. For instance, when they were talking about how classes transfer they said “the units here match the ones at home” although I could put it together. That broke my semantic rule for the meaning of “unit” to me it is a way of measuring something or an apartment but to them it is what I could describe as a “credit” or a “class.”

Another aspect that was affected was the pragmatic rules of language. This is the context that is present in language, I found it very hard to understand this condition during the digital plan making process with the girls. To me, sending messages without punctuation or emojis seems foreign and even rude sometimes. Unlike my other friends whose text style I know well; Jenna and Megan were new to me so I didn’t have a good sense of what was normal for them or what was them being annoyed or excited. This gave me some uncertainty because if I say “sure” with no exclamation point, it might mean I am a little annoyed or not jazzed about a situation for the girls, that was a normal response to making plans. Sometimes they accompanied it by a smiley face sometimes not and it gave me moments where I thought “do they actually want to go or do they just feel obligated”. This was because their pragmatic rules were not matching up with mine, causing this awkwardness or tension I was feeling. Language is so powerful and over the course of my time with them I realized that the impact of language goes beyond learning a second one or having classic language barriers. It can also create problems if rules are broken in your native language.

The environmental impact of cultural fusion was a big part of the experience with Jenna and Megan. Oregon is very different than the physical environment they are used to and getting to know the place through its natural spaces was important to their fusion to Portland’s culture.

During one of our first meetings they both told me things on their “Oregon bucket list” and I wanted to help give them suggestions or even go with them. We went over to Forest Park, it was a first for all of us-surprising since I love hiking,

Croucher’s theory also contains axioms, statements that can show how these assumptions can create patterns that show this interaction between people and cultures. It theorizes that “Cultural Fusion involves both acculturation and cultural maintenance,” (Croucher). This is exactly the interactions I experiences with Jenna and Megan, not only were all three of us getting enculturated to U.S. American-ness, they were conducting maintenance on their Australian culture by staying connected with people back home and going to an Australian coffee shop while I was doing the same with Austria by making my favorite Austrian foods and spending time with my Salzburgers. To me that was the most important part of our time together, finding common ground where we could both explore a new culture and reminisce on the one we missed. I think the most valuable part of intercultural conversations is creating a platform for people to grow; the host and the sojourner. I hope that our interactions were as beneficial for them as they were for me.

Works Cited

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