

The Car Seat of American Values

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WRITER'S COMMENT: My professor provided two essay prompts for this assignment. The first required a research essay on media in international relations; the second asked for a reflective piece on an encounter with another culture. To be honest, I was not particularly excited about either prompt and chose the latter because I thought it would be easier to write. However, as I began to brainstorm and eke out a first draft, I realized I might actually have something to say. I began to write with purpose and intention. The essay grew larger than a mere assignment, as I considered the current U.S. political climate and the global picture. I was no longer writing to meet a word count; I was urgently writing for others to hear.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Students in 102D: Writing in International Relations have the option of writing about their experience with another culture for their first paper. They read Rosa Klein-Baer's prizewinning essay, "Lost in Translation," (from the 2012-2013 volume of this book) as an example. It was immediately apparent that Michaela's essay would be a contender for a coveted place in this volume. Most students highlight the ways in which other cultures are different from ours, but few have the depth of thought required to put their own biases and culture into sharp relief for the reader to really see how culture informs us all.

– Karma Waltonen, English Department

The baby refused to stop screaming. The infant's mother made several attempts to soothe her. She quietly sang a lullaby. She stroked the baby girl's head and hands. She waved a toy at the baby's face. But the infant would not be pacified. Eventually the mother gave up and ignored her daughter, staring straight ahead instead. There was a collective sigh as myself, the mother, the father, and my coworker resigned ourselves to discomfort and a mild headache.

The baby was screaming because she was strapped to a chair on all four sides. The chair was strapped to a confined space that was moving at forty-five miles an hour. The "chair," of course, was a car seat, and the "confined space" was a silver Toyota Tacoma. The car seat was required by law, or so my coworker tried to explain to the parents in hurried Dari—a form of Persian—while they stared back with blank faces. We had been forced to pull the car over when the mother unstrapped and held her daughter in transit. I could not blame the parents. They had just arrived to the United States from Syria, and in fact they had not been in a car before. They did not understand the necessity of a seat belt and why the mother could not hold her daughter "just this once." They did not understand that if we were caught seatbelt-less by a police officer, I would be responsible for the ticket. The baby, of course, had never been in a car either; she certainly had never been buckled in a car seat. Suddenly I thought to myself, I would be screaming too if you strapped me to a chair and the whole world started moving. Seat belts, something I considered commonplace, were actually a cultural phenomenon.

I often encountered culturally informative situations such as this while working as a Cultural Orientation and Logistics intern for the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Sacramento. The IRC is a non-profit, funded by the government and donor contributions, that works with refugee families for ninety days to facilitate their resettlement in the US. The IRC assists with a myriad of processes: social security numbers, English classes, visas, bank accounts, vaccinations, and public school enrollment. Often ninety days is not enough, nor is the IRC's limited budget. While refugees are processed from all over the world, the IRC predominantly serves Syrians and Afghanis. Refugees from the same country are impressively diverse. While some speak English, have attended college, and understand for example the concept of a bank, others do not know any English, do not have last names, and do not understand why bother to lock the door at night. These diverse refugee

needs further complicate the resettlement process.

Before interning with the IRC, I ascribed to the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality of American capitalism. When it came to matters concerning refugees, my opinion was this: in America, if an individual worked hard, they would succeed. In my mind, a refugee’s success concerned their willingness to work rather than the obstacles they might face. This mentality functioned for only a few weeks of my time at the IRC. After working directly with the people who must “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” I discovered the quandary that was their life and was compelled to reevaluate my outlook.

I had never before considered the litany of obstacles a refugee faced in daily tasks like grocery shopping or transportation. When refugees inevitably had questions concerning such tasks, they phoned the IRC. One of these phone calls was particularly salient. A man and his wife inquired the location of a grocery store. For myself the answer was easy: drive to the address listed on my phone. But this couple did not have a cell phone or a vehicle. As I struggled to invent a viable response, the husband introduced yet another dilemma: his wife was sick and he did not know what to do. He also informed me that he did not have a job, and neither he nor his wife spoke English (they were speaking to me through a three-way call with a translator). I had toyed with the idea of giving verbal directions to a grocery store, but I realized the couple could not read the English street signs. As I mentally juggled health care options, English classes, and the nearest Safeway, the husband exclaimed, “We want to work, we want to work!” His tone was almost a wail. “We understand that in America you must work. We want to work. We have no money.” Panic set in as I seriously considered how long before the couple was homeless. I faltered and desperately grasped for something to say. The notion that this couple was going to somehow pull themselves up by their bootstraps quickly became ludicrous. In fact, they were referred to Intensive Case Management to receive help for their serious condition. Confronted with refugee realities and my own sense of empathy, I was forced to abandon my “bootstrap mentality.”

While it is common to encounter something that defies our ideological framework, I found my experience particularly disconcerting. I was troubled by the shame I felt as I laid aside assumptions in favor of deeper understanding. Had I taken but five minutes to consider the situation of a refugee, my preconceived notions would have unraveled

on the spot. But the problem was that I had not taken five minutes. In fact, after interacting with refugees daily, I still had not abandoned the mentality, because I had not taken time to consider. And I had not considered because it was not a scenario I personally confronted. In other words, what a refugee faced was not my problem. I was ashamed by how flippantly I had assumed that because I could easily maneuver in America, anyone who could not was simply lazy.

After discarding my poorly conceived American values, I thought I had seen the last of my cultural bias. I was ready to approach refugees and their legitimate struggles from a place of compassion. But cultural bias struck again. While my first blunder was linked with American political values, my second misstep was enmeshed in cultural relativism and feminist values. I was not expecting this. I had studied cultural anthropology and made peace with the fundamental asymmetry of cultures worldwide. I personally ascribed to values of acceptance and diversity. Before my internship, I considered myself culturally aware and welcoming towards different ways of life. My interactions with refugees revealed that reading a few ethnographies in the classroom by no means immunized me against cultural bias.

Male refugees often spoke English upon their arrival to the United States, usually due to employment in their home country. Those who could not speak English were impressed with the necessity of learning the language and were enrolled in weekly English classes. Female refugees, however, never knew English prior to their arrival and were always enrolled in English classes. Weeks later, it would often come to light that the women were not attending their classes. When I phoned the family to address this issue, the husband—for the women never answered the phone—would typically inform me that his wife did not need to learn English. Moreover, husbands would say, their wife had to stay home and care for the children; she did not have time for English classes. After hanging up the phone, I was always irked by what I perceived as a block on the husband's part to his wife's potential progress, as well as the progress of the whole family.

Conflict also arose in the mandatory adult Cultural Orientation classes. After class, all participants were individually assessed on content comprehension. Women often failed to pass this assessment. Their failure manifested feminine absence from the classroom rather than feminine intelligence. Even though only adult attendance was required, mothers

and fathers typically brought their children with them, as they could not afford a babysitter. This was certainly understandable. However, refugee families often had at least three young children, if not seven. Due to limited IRC resources, child care was nonexistent, so anywhere between seven to fifteen children endured a four-hour class. When the children inevitably began to fuss, the wives would take the children outside. Often the mother and children did not return. In this way, women missed information regarding 911, access to medical care, and future academic opportunities.

Cultural friction did not define my entire IRC experience; I was, in fact, fascinated by Syrian and Afghani culture. However, I was frustrated by the conflicts from a values standpoint. While I appreciated Syrian and Afghan culture in general, I specifically disagreed with the refugees on women's roles. As women filed out of the Cultural Orientation class to tend to children, I found myself wanting to shake the men by their shoulders. When I hung up the phone and sighed because another mother had dropped out of an English class, I considered calling right back to share a thing or two about feminism. If a wife ever so slightly contradicted her husband, I interpreted her comment as an act of rebellion, and I secretly rooted for her. I fantasized that the women I met would one day discard their headscarves, don a pair of shorts, and enroll at a university. In short, I dreamt that liberation would enable them to become successful American women.

Reflection upon the Cultural Orientation classes and failed English attempts revealed how shallowly founded my conceptions of acceptance and diversity truly were. I accepted different cultures, but only the parts with which I agreed. I celebrated other cultures' differences, unless their views on women were a little too different, in which case I felt they should change. My reaction to a different culture went beyond a desire for female refugee revolution. It was not just that I wanted these women to change, it was that I wanted them to change into me: a free-thinking, college-attending and headscarf-less woman. I can only conclude that I desired transformation because I thought I was better. I had committed the grave anthropological sin of assuming that difference implies superiority. My judgement clouded by my assumptions, I could not see that these women did not need saving. There was nothing to support the idea that these women wanted or even needed feminism or a college degree. To strip a Syrian or Afghan woman of the culture orienting her life and to tell her

that she must adopt American feminist values would be as traumatizing as planting me in the Middle East and telling me to behave accordingly. Just because I viewed her culture as restrictive did not mean she viewed it that way. I came to understand restriction and liberation as cultural constructs themselves. Forcing liberty upon a woman was itself a form of restriction.

The error of my assumptions became even more salient when I considered the Cultural Orientation classes that I led. I was absolutely required to cover diversity and acceptance so I always said something to the effect of, "There will be many differences between your culture and American culture. In America, every one has equal access to rights regardless of race, sex, or religion. You do not need to agree with these values, but you must respect others and their rights, and they in turn will respect your rights." At the time, these words meant nothing to me; they were merely part of the script. Self-reflection exposed the irony of my words. Acceptance and diversity was deemed central enough to American culture that the IRC required its address. But it was not something that I, an American, was practicing. Here I was, welcoming refugees to America and instructing them on tolerance and diversity while simultaneously refusing to accept their values concerning women.

When confronted with Syrian and Afghani cultures, I experienced conflict much as did the baby in my white Toyota Corolla when confronted with a seatbelt. Fortunately, both parties matured past that initial conflict: I recognized personal bias and the second time I drove the refugee family, the baby demonstrated her mastery of seat belt acceptance with a smile. Eventually her family's ninety days with the IRC expired and their file was closed to make room for the next family. The car seat debacle remained with me, however. It represented an object lesson specifically when applied to refugees, and more generally concerning culture at large. The baby's violent reaction to the seat belt represented a difference in values and priorities. While I valued safety and the laws concerning seat belts, the child valued her free space. Conflict arose due to the discrepancy in the values in much the same way I experienced internal conflict when confronted with a culture that challenged my beliefs regarding women. While the infant must always be buckled in the car seat for the sake of safety, the culture of refugees should not be strapped to the car seat of American values on the basis of superiority.