

Navigating Cultural Differences - Methodologies

When Angela had first signed up for an intercultural training programme, she had expected practical advice about meeting people from different backgrounds. The instructor taught them about cultural profiles and how they could be a starting point for understanding intercultural differences.

By the end of the programme, Angela had begun to appreciate the approach. She understood the profiles as maps. A map could not tell you everything about a place, but it could give you an idea of where you were going. You still had to walk the streets yourself, talk to people, and discover what the map did not show.

She was still thinking about this when she crossed the university campus one sunny afternoon.

“Angela!”

She turned around and saw Mary approaching her, carrying a coffee in one hand and a stack of papers in the other.

“Hey,” Angela said. “I was actually just thinking about the training I told you about.”

Mary smiled. “The intercultural programme? How was it?”

“It was good,” Angela replied. “Really interesting, actually. We talked a lot about cultural profiles and how they can help you understand where people might be coming from.”

Mary’s smile disappeared almost immediately.

“Cultural profiles?” she asked.

Angela noticed the change in her voice. “Yes, but not in a bad way. More as a starting point. You learn about possible patterns and then build your knowledge from there.”

Mary stopped walking.

“A starting point for what?” she asked.

Angela looked confused. “For understanding people from different cultures.”

Mary shifted the papers under her arm. “That sounds exactly like the kind of thing that people use to make assumptions about others.”

“No,” Angela said quickly. “That’s not what I mean. The whole point is to become more understanding.”

“But understanding based on what?” Mary asked. “Based on a profile that somebody else created?”

Angela hesitated. “Well, based on research, experience, general patterns—”

Mary let out a short laugh, but there was no humour in it.

“General patterns,” she repeated. “That sounds harmless until you are the person people are making generalisations about.”

Angela felt herself becoming defensive. “I’m not saying everyone from one culture is the same.”

“I know you’re not,” Mary said. “But that is often what happens. People say they are only trying to understand, but then suddenly they already think they know you. They expect certain behaviour from you. And when you don’t behave the way they expect, they act surprised.”

Angela looked at her friend more carefully. “Has that happened to you?”

Mary was silent for a moment. "More than once," she said finally. "People have made assumptions about my family, my values, the way I was raised. Sometimes they thought they were being respectful. They had read something about my background, and then they acted as if they understood me before they had even listened to me."

Angela nodded slowly. "That must be frustrating."

"It is," Mary said. "And sometimes it is more than frustrating. Sometimes those assumptions affect how people treat you. You can be excluded because someone thinks they know what you believe, what you are capable of, or how you will behave. So when you tell me that profiles are supposed to help us understand people, I get nervous."

The two women stood quietly for a moment as students passed them on their way to lectures. Angela wanted to explain her position better, but she was not sure how.

"I understand what you mean," she said. "But I still think there can be value in learning about cultural differences. If we know absolutely nothing, don't we risk assuming that everyone experiences the world in the same way?"

Mary crossed her arms. "Maybe. But I would rather start with the person in front of me than with a profile."

Before Angela could answer, a familiar voice called out from behind them.

"Why do you both look like you're about to start a debate society?"

They turned and saw Kim walking towards them with a backpack slung over one shoulder.

"Perfect timing," Mary said. "We need a third opinion."

Kim raised an eyebrow. "That sounds dangerous."

Angela and Mary explained the conversation. Angela described her training and why she found cultural profiles useful. Mary explained why the idea made her uncomfortable and why she believed that profiles could easily encourage stereotyping.

Kim listened without interrupting. When they had finished, she looked around the busy campus.

"You know," she said, "we talked about something related to this in my anthropology class today."

Angela and Mary waited.

"Our professor asked us to think about how quickly we interpret what we see. Not just other cultures, but people in general. We often believe that we are observing, when actually we are observing and immediately adding a story."

Mary nodded. "Exactly."

Kim smiled. "Maybe. But I think both of you are also doing something similar. You're arguing about what we should know before we meet someone. What if we started by paying more attention to what is actually happening?"

Angela looked at her. "What do you mean?"

Kim pointed towards a row of benches near the library.

"Come on. Sit down with me."

They found an empty bench overlooking a busy part of the campus. For a few moments, the three friends simply watched people walking past. Some students hurried across the square while looking at their phones. Others stood in groups, talking and laughing.

Then Kim nodded towards a group of students sitting on the grass.

"Look over there."

Among them was a young woman wearing a hijab. She was speaking to two friends and laughing.

Angela noticed her first. Almost instantly, a thought appeared in her mind. Oppressed.

The thought surprised her because she had not consciously chosen it. She knew very little about the woman. She did not know her name, her family, her beliefs, or why she wore the hijab. Yet the idea had appeared almost automatically.

Beside her, Mary shifted slightly.

"I know what you're doing," she said to Kim.

Kim looked at her. "What?"

"You chose her because you knew we would interpret the hijab."

Angela looked at Mary. "You thought it too?"

Mary sighed. "For a second."

Kim nodded. "I did too."

The three women were quiet.

"It doesn't mean you are terrible people," Kim continued. "We all have ideas in our heads that come from somewhere. The media. Stories. Politics. Films. Conversations. Things we learned as children. Sometimes we see one thing and an entire explanation appears before we have time to ask where it came from."

Angela continued watching the woman.

"But isn't that natural?" she asked.

"Yes," Kim replied. "That's why I think the important part is what we do next."

The woman on the grass threw her head back and laughed at something one of her friends had said. A moment later, she opened a laptop and began pointing at something on the screen. The others leaned closer. Books and notebooks were spread around them.

"She looks happy," Angela said.

Mary gave her a sideways look. "Happy people can still be oppressed."

"I know," Angela said quickly. "That's not what I mean. I mean... we don't know enough to decide anything."

Kim nodded. "Exactly. We can watch. We can notice. We can ask. We can learn. But we should be careful about turning one visible detail into a complete story about a person."

Angela thought about her training. She imagined the cultural profiles she had studied and then looked again at the woman with the hijab.

"I can see your point," she said. "But I still don't think my training is useless. Maybe the problem is not learning about cultures. Maybe the problem is forgetting that knowledge is only one part of meeting an actual person."

Mary looked thoughtful.

"And maybe," Angela continued, "the profiles should never become the answer. Maybe they should only make us ask better questions."

Mary was still not entirely convinced. "As long as people remember to ask."

"That," Kim said, "is probably the difficult part."

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