

American openness...or is it just superficiality with a smile?

Historical reasons why American and German social interaction is so different

by Patrick Schmidt

Let's begin with a couple of typical exchanges between Germans and Americans, the kind of thing you've probably experienced many times.

1. At a cocktail party in Frankfurt

Dr. Günter Grüber: Dr. Preston, I am pleased to see you again.
Dr. John Preston: Hey Günter, how are you?
Dr. Günter Grüber: Fine, thank you. I'd like you to meet a colleague of mine, Dr. Manfred Schwarz. This is Dr. John Preston.
Dr. John Preston: Manfred. A pleasure to meet you.
Dr. Manfred Schwarz: It's my pleasure entirely, Dr. Preston.

2. At an office in Stuttgart

Scott: Where do you want to go for lunch?
Gerhardt: How about going to *Zur Alten Post*?
Scott: That sounds great. Let's have Karl join us?
Gerhardt: I don't know him. Who is he?
Scott: You know. He's the new guy who started in Wolfgang's department yesterday.
Gerhardt: But you can't just invite a stranger just like that.
Scott: Why not? It's our chance to meet somebody new!

These two dialogues demonstrate the implicit intercultural differences between the two countries — American casualness clashing with German formality.

The first is an obvious, but none the less real, example of formality clashing with its opposite. American insouciance — which Americans, not surprisingly, call being *happy-go-lucky* — can be perceived by Germans as a positive trait, however surface heartiness can also be tiresome.

It's a good bet that meeting would have featured hearty handshakes, the first accompanied by a slap on the back: Günter is, after all, an "old buddy" (meaning that he and Dr. Preston met last year at the same conference). Those handshakes would have been rather lopsided affairs as well, with Dr. Preston pumping from the shoulder. Still, *politesse oblige*, the Germans would have tried to respond with something approaching equal enthusiasm. They might have wound up smiling a little too much and taking an unconscious step back upon having their hands released but, all in all, what can you do? Being overly friendly isn't the worst social crime.

Americans often come across like big, happy dogs and Germans have learned to deal with it. They joke about it among themselves, see it as kind of endearing, if somewhat trying. However, there *is* a clash here and it occurs in the last line.

One cannot readily pull one's hand away while being showered with good cheer but one can certainly re-set the clock verbally. To say "Dr. Preston" on the heels of his first-name greeting is a rebuff on either side of the Atlantic. A German would hear it as clearly as a slap in the face, would respond by adopting a totally formal approach from then on.

The American hears it too. He knows he's being asked to remain at a distance; it's what he calls being *stuffy* and he knows the cure....Persistence. He's convinced that Germans would be happier if they could just learn to loosen up. The next line in this conversation will almost certainly be, "Call me John!" Americans never seem to take a hint!

The second exchange — just as obvious but, once again, none the less real — shows how the two cultures establish relations. Gerhardt would be more inclined to go to lunch with Karl to discuss business affairs. Then, once the latter has something to offer in the way of conversation or ideas, it might become a habit.

Americans are happy-go-lucky. Act happy, be lucky. Be friendly, make a friend. Karl's probably a good guy, let's find out! When a new colleague shows up in an American office, the first thing his or her co-workers will do is invite that person out for a few drinks. "Innocent until proven guilty" with the added dimension that few are found guilty, few are rejected.

Basically, you're "in" unless you do things that force the group to push you out. American friendliness starts off on the right foot too: big handshakes, first names, jokes, drinks, maybe karaoke...Hard *not* to get along under those conditions.

That Germans are comfortable when somewhat distant is something Americans can't understand, not intuitively. It *feels* wrong to them. They look at what Germans consider a socially-comfortable setting and see a lot of people acting like they're uncomfortable. Americans feel it is their duty to correct the situation. After nearly four centuries, the New World is still at odds with the Old.

The U.S. was founded by northern European settlers, mostly from Great Britain, fleeing religious persecution. Forced to begin again elsewhere, they had little use for the traditions of the societies which had rejected them.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas, coinciding with what would shortly become the American Revolution, were a good foundation for the world's first attempt at democracy. Equality was a revolutionary concept, in tune with the American times. A belief in the goodness of nature, and that it was man's nature to be good meant that a man could *better himself* as well, improve his condition in life.

There was an economic benefit to all this: by believing in the good of others and making a point of establishing goals "for the good of all", society becomes more efficient, dynamic in fact. Mutual trust tended to eliminate the *a priori* negative judgment, the time-consuming process of doubting. It was exactly what America needed to develop itself.

When building a nation, decisions have to be made quickly. "Yes or no" and "time is money" become the norm. A simplistic notion of life which ignored the complexities and nuances that existence continually presents, this *can-do* approach turned out to be incredibly successful for both immigrants and their American offspring. Yet another reason for having little patience with rigorous European behavioral codes, traditions, sentimentality in general.

Inevitably, naïve trust in humanity blended with rich natural resources gave way to a unique behavioral trait: the “pursuit of happiness”. It was a race open to anyone with energy and determination, so much the better if they had vision, new ideas of their own. Opportunities were overflowing and all were invited — no, taught — to move up the social ladder.

Upward mobility relies heavily on positive reinforcement coupled with material rewards. Alexis de Tocqueville noted in “Democracy in America” (1831): “In dealing with strangers, Americans seem to be impatient with the slightest criticism and insatiable for praise.” They tend to view strangers as potential friends, he pointed out, and also as potential allies on the road to success.

The increasing presence of immigrants — beginning massively with the Irish during the Great Famine (1845-1849) — meant new strangers, waves of them. They needed help getting started in America and quickly learned to reach out to people they didn’t know. They didn’t have the luxury of keeping others at a distance.

Early Americans didn’t have to worry about privacy either, especially as they rolled toward the Pacific coast in the latter half of the 1800s. On the contrary, the problem was how to find companionship in the wide-open spaces. And friends and allies were necessary to conquer nature and build the country. Being open and inclusive was the logical answer yet again.

Upon his retirement in 1796, George Washington is said to have sent a servant to wait at the crossroads near his Mount Vernon (Virginia) estate “to invite any casual passerby to enliven the dinner table with news of the outside world”. Loneliness would be a recurring theme in American frontier literature throughout the following century.

This has not been the case in densely-populated, urban Europe, where privacy has always been harder to come by. Even more importantly, centuries of tribal warfare, pestilence and upheaval meant that strangers came to be viewed with distrust. One gives more thought to the threat of potential enemies than the possibility of making new friends.

It is, therefore, an Old World reflex to be cautious when dealing with people one doesn’t know. Germans, in particular among Europeans, are sensitive about keeping a respectful distance. Greg Nees, American author of “Germany — Unraveling an Enigma”, points out that the former are “accustomed to meeting strangers and being welcomed openly by them. Whereas Americans often equate formality with unfriendliness and lack of ease, Germans have been raised to view reserve and formality as the proper signs of respect for people they don’t know well.”

Parallel to trusting and talking to everyone they meet, Americans firmly believe in showing their material wealth. Because there is no overt class system in the U.S., people define “standing” by what they’ve accomplished; they strive to excel and want to be recognized when they do. They are happiest when success can be specifically measured via scoreboards like sales figures, bestseller lists, TV ratings, I.Q.s and, of course, salaries.

Material appearance and success in business—not family name, education, or social class—are the basic driving forces of Americans. From this perspective, it’s easy to understand why they essentially *invented* the field of business administration.

The need to achieve, to move up the social ladder, goes hand in hand with the “pursuit of

happiness” and is deeply embedded in the U.S. mindset. Americans continually believe that great opportunities lie just over the horizon, yours with the next job. Americans almost never think of themselves as poor. It is perhaps unique in the world that America’s lower and middle classes see themselves as merely “pre-rich”.

All in all, Americans want to be quick in making deals and thus have little time to form real relationships. They are continuously on the move — geographically, socially, economically. The end result is that they have developed strategies to interact quickly (or as many say “superficially”) with people.

Historical reasons of American “superficiality”

Early immigrants in America adopted a new philosophy

— if one believes in the good of others, society would become highly efficient and dynamic



— mutual trust would eliminate doubting and judging

— decisions could be made quickly - ‘time is money’

© Patrick Schmidt, 2003

Historical reasons of American “superficiality”

Oversimplified trust + rich natural resources =

“pursuit of happiness”

This means, view strangers as friends, take up the many opportunities, and you will acquire material goods and move up the social ladder



© Patrick Schmidt, 2003

Historical reasons of American “superficiality”

Americans have a restless “need to achieve” to acquire material wealth

There is no overt class system. Only by showing what you have measurably accomplished, you distinguish yourself. Happiest when results and success can be documented — sales target, bestseller list, I.Q.s and last but not least, salary.



© Patrick Schmidt, 2003

Historical reasons of American “superficiality”

To sum up:

Americans want to make deals quickly (subconsciously feel one is moving up the social ladder, leading to “the pursuit of happiness”) Thus, they are always on the move — geographically, socially, economically. The end result is they have developed strategies to interact fast (“superficially”) with many people.



© Patrick Schmidt, 2003