8

Observing Cultural Differences: Dismantling Ethnocentrism in a Multicultural Environment

Ashley K. Barrett

As a young female American researcher in Northern Norway, I was in a foreign place. I had spent 20 h crammed into multiple planes, traversing the world to reach a peculiar city projected onto a peninsula in the Norwegian Sea.

I traveled to Northern Norway in the summers of 2011 and 2014 with specific goals in mind that carried hefty consequences if unaccomplished. I was there to collect qualitative research that would serve as the meat for two book chapters I had committed to write for two book projects co-sponsored by my home university and the Bodo graduate business school. Specifically, my chapters would investigate Norwegian workers' social constructions of meaningful work and workplace identity. How do Norwegians talk about what makes their work meaningful to them? Through communication, how do they jointly create and share interpretations about their work's meaning? How central is their work to their overall life satisfaction?

A. K. Barrett (✉)
Department of Communication, Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA
e-mail: A_Barrett@baylor.edu

F. Soelberg et al. (eds.), *Transformative Learning*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20439-5_8

Given that 2011 was my second year in my doctoral program, I began conducting these interviews as a raw, inexperienced, and frankly frightened doctoral student who was unexpectedly given an irresistible opportunity to travel across the world and peer deep into my and others' hidden assumptions about life. I set off to explore a remote Scandinavian location where people were robustly proud of their culture, heritage, and the ethical foundations on which their economic, governmental, educational, and social systems were balanced. But as the reality of my interviews set in, I quickly realized that my presence as an interviewer became a salient artifact, a reservoir of meaning that interviewees drew upon in a contrasting way to make sense of their own identities and workplace identity. It was clear that I, and my culture, was perceived to be different from them and theirs.

In fact, from the moments I first arrived in Northern Norway, I was quickly and acutely greeted by these perceived and felt cultural differences. Most evidently, it didn't take long to notice that people took their time and carried an inherent suspicion of social climbers and social hierarchies. Upon arrival to the modest and sparkling clean Bodo airport, I was graciously greeted by Jan—an animated Northern Norwegian professor and one of our hosts for the trip. He had made plans for us to first visit his home in a traditional Norwegian neighborhood before delivering us to our new homes for the summer. As Jan hurled my luggage into the back of his small navy hatchback SUV and slammed the rear door shut, I remember him casually saying, "yea, all the houses look alike here, just different colors." I thought, how odd. But he was right. As we twisted and turned down the curvy roads, passing roundabout after roundabout, red, white, blue, green, and yellow houses passed by my window—some with slopping roofs made of grass others with stone, but all had strikingly similar aesthetics. They were not ornate or packed with pretentiousness. There were no flags, political signs, or extravagant landscaping dressing the front yards. The houses were practical, simple, and yet beautiful. As my stay in the region lengthened, natives took turns explaining to me how the "Law of Jante" was a deeply embedded aspect of their culture and surmounted to something akin to a biblical commandment: "thou shalt not think highly of thyself." In a way, their conviction to explain

this ideology of equality to me felt like a purposeful and continued effort to inform me that I was different from their region's inhabitants.

As I conducted my interviews, this clearly drawn disparity between myself and my interviewees seemed to follow me around. Ann—a governmental employee who worked in the thriving tourism industry in Northern Norway—serves as vivid example. It shouldn't come as a surprise that the land of the Northern Lights attracts crowds of nature-obsessed fans, but if you need more evidence, remember that Northern Norway is home to the Lofoten Islands—a string of well-preserved islands draped across the turbulent waters of the Norwegian Sea and flush with rare wildlife including sea eagles, moose, otters, seals, orcas, and red foxes, in addition to a large variety of fish. Ann praised the staggering beauty of the Lofoten Islands, but she called Bodo home. Here, she worked on several governmental tourism initiatives that strategized how to brand Northern Norway, developed principals for sustainable tourism, and worked to strengthen the competitiveness of individual tourism companies. It was hard not to adore Ann. Her rosy cheeks and energetic brown eyes perfectly framed by square black glasses were always inviting, honest, and kind. When I asked her what made her work meaningful, I was surprised that my home culture played a prominent role in her answer. In a discussion about her value of workplace flexibility, she explained, "we have less focus on face time as compared to Americans. If we have a task, we do the task, finish it, and then we can go. It seems like some of those in the US like more being in the vicinity of their bosses … coming in before the boss, leaving after. And what actually is supposed to be done seems to be less important than just being available."

Another interviewee, Dorthe, was truly a force to be reckoned with. She was blond-haired and blue-eyed, yet had the mouth of a crass sailor. Although her dress was a little disheveled—her deep blue button-up shirt and khaki pants were intermittently wrinkled and her hair repeatedly fell in her face—her thoughts were organized and she was pleasantly abrupt. She worked for a private construction company, and while her clothing and word choices were masculine, there were feminine undertones to her personality. She was innocent, vulnerable, sensitive, caring, and attractive. At her request, we had decided to forgo the sterile university setting, and instead met in a coffee shop across town. I arrived early to nervously

comb over my questions and double- and triple-check that my audio recorder was setup correctly. She was 5 min late. Having singled me just as I looked up from my table, she briskly walked over, sat down, and extended her hand. As I shook it and introduced myself, I was startled by her confidence. We exchanged a few pleasantries, and then I stumbled through a few words in my explanation of my study and its intended goals. She smiled and graciously pretended not to notice. However, I could tell she wanted me to get to the point. As I eventually and very lucidly learned, she "wasn't about the bullshit."

Looking down to my interview guide, I first asked her if she could describe a less than ideal work experience she had encountered in the past—either in her current or in any preceding jobs. Her eyes widened and rolled as she shook her head from side to side. I could hear her laugh underneath a louder sigh. She gladly began firing off about an overbearing boss she combatted in a past job. Peppered within her colorful recount of this rocky relationship were stories of self-resilience, brashness, and well, not taking bullshit. She expounded, "at first, when the CEO hired me, he said 'Dorthe, you have too much on your plate. You are only capable of working 80%.' I said that's OK, I can work 80%. But then I had to travel all over Norway in addition to my 80% work, and they wouldn't give me extra money for the extra traveling hours …. I said no way. And so I left … I just told them, 'fuck off, I'm leaving … I don't like the way you're running your company' … I went in there and said, 'you're going against Norwegian law and reaching low in how you treat people, and I don't accept it.'"

At this point, I'm sure my brow was furrowed. I had so many questions, but for some reason I could not articulate a single one. Dorthe intuitively took note of the pause. (Was she the communication scholar or was I?) Providing needed context for the "outsider" sitting in front of her, she then started to describe how Norwegian law protected workers against unjust treatment like unpaid overtime and excessive working hours. Moreover, Norwegian legislation safeguarded workers' psychological safety, in addition to their physical safety, by mandating that all employees are treated with integrity and dignity, are allowed to communicate and establish social relationships with coworkers, and are both personally and professionally developed as a result of their working

atmosphere and role (see Barrett & Dailey, 2018). "Unlike what may happen in America," Dorthe continued, "these laws don't sit in a book somewhere collecting dust. We are made aware of them. I and others I've known aren't shy to insist on them." I was bewildered with her courage, unfailing systemic beliefs, and diehard conviction for those beliefs. I could never imagine standing up to a superior in that magnitude. As my affinity for her grew, my disdain for the American working culture simultaneously burgeoned. It was as if my ability to like was finite and a newfound appreciation in one area required a deflation in another. Throughout Ann, Dorthe, and others' interviews, I found it fascinating that I, unwittingly, was a living, breathing, moving, prototype of what they, as workers, did not want their working culture to become.

This revelation might have been debilitating for some researchers—an intersection they did not expect or feared to encounter. However, I anticipated—and even welcomed—it, all because of Qualitative Camp.

Qualitative Camp was an academic conference I attended before I was "set free" to conduct my interviews in the wild. Situated in Kjerringøy, Norway—a remote fishing village—Qualitative Camp was a perfect mixture of both business and pleasure. We lodged in a series of bright red wooded cabins lined one after the other up and down an aged wooden dock that overlooked the Norwegian Sea. The cabins—almost barn-like in that they were outfitted white shudders and doors and triangle roofs—were decorated with decks that served as an ideal location to breathe in and consume the quaint but hypnotizing scenery. Standing on that deck each evening, I would watch the colors in the sky dramatically shift into vibrant pinks, as other shades of orange, yellow, and green danced around and were mirrored in the still water banks in front of our cabins that extended out into the vast ocean. The sun would then turn a deep reddish orange, and dip behind a distant white-topped mountain, as if to play a game of cat and mouse. Yet during the Summer Solstice—a period of 2 months from May to July each year—the sun only hid, never entirely escaping. I was in the land of the midnight sun. Kjerringøy was undoubtedly a trove of aesthetic pleasures.

Yet Qualitative Camp was first and foremost a week-long conference, aimed to educate. Doctoral students traveled from around the world—the US, the Netherlands, Brussels, France, and Sweden, to name a

few—to present research to diverse crowds during the day. Our professors offered lectures and lessons in hermeneutics, ripple effects, and narratology. We routinely enlightened our worldly perspectives through rich, yet casual conversations set around conference rooms, but also fire pits, and even sailboats. These scholarly interactions were usually made complete by a few rounds of spontaneous guitar picking and heavily accented singing. Somehow our relentless faculty leaders always found a way to push our boundaries, spiritually, intellectually, and artistically. Perhaps the three are intertwined.

This multi-pronged educational experience taught me many lessons—and not just in writing styles, presentation tactics, and research epistemologies. Most importantly, I learned to appreciate people's cultural differences rather than inherently assume my outlook was right because it was familiar. Reflecting on this multi-faceted, intensely challenging but rewarding experience, it would be easy to look through rose-colored glasses. It would be easy to claim my tolerance for different cultural orientations and workplace values effortlessly surfaced early and metamorphed into a consistent adage, guiding my behaviors and experiences throughout the week. However, that would not be an accurate or realistic statement. In fact, it would disgrace my complex Qualitative Camp experience with superficial notions. Contrarily, I experienced what is coined "culture shock" in the academic literature upon first arriving at Qualitative camp. Culture shock is defined as the (sometimes debilitating) anxiety a person encounters when moving into a completely new environment, which is significantly different from their previous, normalized environment (Oberg, 1960). To reduce culture shock, we must actively attempt to reduce uncertainty, to start building familiarity. We must attempt to break down the barriers creating confusion and awkward situations, and instead view these situations as ripe for collaboration and learning (Glinkowska, 2016). We break down these barriers through openly communicating with each other; through not being afraid to second-guess assumptions that are so imprinted into our minds and behaviors that we may fail to understand their power unless through reflection.

My first 2 days at camp consisted of interactions that supported groups and social categorizations. Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorization Theory (SCT) inform us that human interaction ranges

on a spectrum from being purely individualistic on one hand to purely inter-group on the other. When social—or in this case cultural—categories become salient, people default to acting as representations of their groups. Their personal, individualizing qualities fade, taking a backseat to group characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As Tajfel and Wilkes (1963) argue, making "us and them" distinctions salient changes the way people see each other and communicate. When cultural distinctions become apparent—a natural occurrence in diverse educational settings such as Qualitative Camp—people perceptually enhance the similarities within groups ("we're the same") and dramatize differences across groups ("we're different from them"). This can create competitive inter-group behavior, yet it is born from a desire for positive self-concept and identity. As evidenced in Ann and Dorthe's quotes above, cultural groups become even more psychologically real when defined in comparison to other groups. As Hornsey (2008) notes, group members are "motivated to think and act in ways that achieve or maintain positive distinctiveness between one's own group and relevant outgroups" (p. 207). Thus, a social identity—generated through communicative juxtapositions that secure a positive uniqueness—"not only describes what it means to be a group member, but also prescribes what kinds of attitudes, emotions, and behaviors are appropriate in a given context" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 209).

When I first arrived at camp, these "us versus them" discourses were hyperactive.

Take my Dutch research partner, Tara, for example. Tara was late, often. She was usually the last person to join our lectures each morning, trickling in through the back door, always with a smile across her face. Although all the Americans had at times *skål'ed* one too many aquavit shots the night before, we were consistently there on time or minutes early the following mornings. We were sometimes red-eyed, un-showered, or entirely dependent upon coffee, but always present and punctual. This is perhaps partially responsible for what made Tara's perpetual tardiness aggravating for the American group. A few of us, always underneath our breath, started calling her Tardy Tara after a few days. We were bewildered by the fact that Tardy Tara never paraded even the slightest physiological symptoms of stress when she strolled into class late. She was never flushed; in fact, her complexion was spotless. She had perfect,

blemish-free porcelain skin adorned by a few engaging freckles that fell under each eye branding her with a stamp of innocence. There was never a single bead of sweat trickling down her face or even a glossy shine to it. When she spoke, her words were clearly pronounced, never distorted by dry mouth. She was never irritable, fatigued, or withdrawn. When walking in, she didn't look to the ground and scurry to her seat, non-verbally communicating shame or remorse. Quite contrarily, she walked in with her head held high, waiving to acquaintances in the room or studying the presentation slides as she shuffled her way through the tables lining the room.

As Americans, the unconcerned behaviors we saw married to her temporal transgressions were confounding. How was she not embarrassed when her tardiness stole the attention of others in the room? Did she not consider her overdue presence to be rude or to insinuate she was somehow lesser than? However, a glance into the literature on chronemics—or the study of how time is communicated, valued, and used—will quickly reveal that, because time is socially constructed, perceptions of temporal norms and standards vary across cultures. As Dawna Ballard's work routinely demonstrates (Ballard, 2007; Ballard & Seibold, 2006), the culturally diverse workplace is one context in which these diverging time perceptions can become evident, potentially ending in conflict. For example, Western civilizations such as the US formalize the duration and sequencing of events by strictly prearranging them and scheduling them in relation to an external calendar or clock. However, many nonwestern civilizations temporally locate activities and events in a spontaneous manner and have fewer specific boundaries, if any, regarding when something must occur or how much time will be allocated to complete it (Ballard & Seibold, 2006). These conflicting ideologies in how we approach and treat time at work are often hidden, but they carry significant meaning. Ballard (2015) claims these ideologies and constructions of time provide the criteria for how we measure activity, productivity, and a person's virtue.

Not surprisingly then, I was not ecstatic to find out that Tara and I had been paired together to complete an assignment during our time at Qualitative Camp. For me, up unto this point, Tara's habitual tardiness had outcasted her into a far-away land where questionable virtue lurked.

The goal of the assignment was to observe a collection of people boarded on a ferry transporting people from *Festvåg* to *Misten* and back. It was necessary to take this ferry to access Kjerringøy, which was just a short, scenic drive from Misten. Through careful observation alone, we were asked to construct a narrative about the ferry goers' lives. Who were they? Why were they there? Why this ferry on this day? What plot were they currently traversing? What other primary life characters accompanied them on the boat and what was the extent of these relationships? My first thought was that ferries have strict timetables, so completing this assignment was going to be a nightmare. Or would it be? If Tardy Tara missed the ferry, I would be forced to do this assignment solo, and that would mean having to navigate and negotiate fewer intercultural barriers in communication and critical thinking. The assignment would then be my own. I wouldn't tell on her for missing the boat and ergo the assignment. I had perfected this skill of not whistleblowing on derelict, indifferent student group members during my informative undergraduate years in college. We could even meet after I had completed the observations to do some of the analysis and make sure we were on the same page before submitting the assignment. This would be the equivalent of meeting the night before a presentation to inattentively throw it all together into one slide deck and pretend all presentation members are on the same page. I could do the research on my own. I could even polish it on my own. My mind started to find solace in the idea of solitude rather than be disquieted by Tardy Tara's undoubted future tardiness.

Although I had already devised this plan, it had to remain imprisoned in my head for the time being. After all, I couldn't openly admit to others, Tara especially, that I had entertained amusing visions of me merrily floating out to sea on the ferry, gazing back to shore only to find Tara trotting up to the dock. In my visions, Tara was always red-faced and in a frantic state. Her tardiness for once had tangible consequences. The ferry waits for no one.

So, with this plan concealed in my thoughts, Tara and I moved forward and separately browsed the ferry timetable PDF documents I found online. Through an email chain, we collectively decided we would take the 11 a.m. ferry departing from Misten on Tuesday. At that time, we could not pre-reserve a ticket, instead having to purchase it on site when

we arrived. The timetables on the Torghatten Nord—the seagoing public transportation company—website were introduced alongside an all-capitalized sentence exclaiming, "SHOW UP 10 MINUTES BEFORE DEPARTURE." Unlikely for Tara, I surmised. Looking back now, I realize how cynical I was of her. Yet, I had never had a conversation with Tara that lasted more than 5 min.

Days later, when Tuesday arrived, my iPhone alarm jolted me out of my slumber at 8 a.m. I always use the "circuit" ringtone when I set an iPhone alarm. Imagine a noise that reminds you of going round and round relentlessly and gets increasingly faster with each second you dare not turn off the alarm. Does this particular sound choice startle me awake? Yes. Does it perhaps also pierce my nervous system and cause undue amounts of stress to course through my body? Perhaps. But wakeability trumps comfortability when it comes to coercing myself to rouse at a mandated time. After getting out of bed at 8:15 a.m., I proceeded into my Westernized highly scheduled daily routine. By no surprise to myself, I reached the ferry station at 10:40 a.m.

As anticipated, I did not see Tara there when I arrived. Upholding a social norm of politeness, I went ahead and purchased her a ticket. It wasn't that expensive anyway. Yet as each minute passed, I drowned into a reassurance that my concealed plan would in fact become reality. At 10:56 a.m. this projected reality was shattered. Tara's curly blond locks and bright smile came bouncing around the corner from the parking lot. As she approached me—I was sitting on the curb next to the dock—I saw that she was as fresh-faced as ever. I also noticed for the very first time how tall she was. She practically towered over me. I informed her I had purchased her a ferry ticket, and the strangest thing happened. She reached down and wrapped her lengthy arms around my neck. I suddenly felt very small, both physically and psychologically. Had I been ridiculously narrow-minded about Tara and her virtue as a person? Up close and personal, she seemed so pleasant—her facial expressions communicated she would offer me all the time in the world.

From that point forward, Tara and I started talking. I learned about her Norwegian husband back home who surprisingly developed a food allergy to shellfish, tuna, and salmon during his adulthood. These hovering allergic reactions nearly chopped his food options in half, and given

Norwegian delicacies, positioned him as an unsatisfactory plate sharer. Although Tara was raised in Amsterdam, her mother was French and her father was German, which generated quite an unpredictable blend of conflict management styles in their household growing up. I learned how tolerant she was. She described how 30% of Amsterdam's inhabitants are foreigners, making it a very strong expat community. However, unlike other expats, those in Amsterdam often do not learn Dutch and make few if any Dutch friends—even if they live in the region for years. These protected bubbles of English-speaking communities didn't bother her however, or other Dutch people from her perspective. The Dutch have a long history of welcoming strangers into their country. Although it is a small country, the Netherlands have a limited internal market and thus were worldwide maritime traders dating back to the sixteenth century. They are still primary players in the global economy today. This open economic system has translated into an openness of thought regarding religion, sexual orientation, and cultural background. Finally and relatedly, Tara explained how extremes were largely absent in the Dutch society—be they political, economic, social, or legal.

As personal and professional disclosures were exchanged and reciprocated, I started to theorize how this combined notion of practiced tolerance and nonexistent extremes had impacted Tara's social constructions of time and timing. When I became acquainted with her story and who she was on an interpersonal level, I finally stopped stereotyping and judging her. Like a ton of bricks, it hit me that I actually admired her in several ways and appreciated her outlook. It was perhaps much healthier and smarter than my own. Throughout that afternoon, Tara and I successfully completed the assignment and our combined insights and lenses crafted a narrative that was much richer, detailed, and comprehensive than I ever could have generated on my own. When the ferry docked, I was angsty, ready to de-board, and sequentially jump into the next task on the itemized schedule hiding in my iPhone. However, Tara suggested that I pause and allow our research subjects to depart before us, thus generating added information to analyze and apply to our narrative. Why couldn't I see that was an important observation? This piece of information could be crucial to our narrative as the behaviors attached to beginnings and endings often carry enhanced meaning.

For the rest of my stay in Qualitative Camp, Tara and I were not only friendly, we were almost inseparable. We had successfully made the transition from walking stereotypes to sidekicks. She even made me late to morning lectures a few times. In these events, I realized her tardiness wasn't a product of laziness. Rather, Tara was often late because she dedicated a few extra minutes after everyone had left the breakfast room to chatting with the serving staff. She knew their names, their origins, and their favorite family member.

It is easy for Americans to be fooled into naively believing that people spanning this great earth praise the US culture for reverberating liberty and justice for all from sea to shining sea. However, Qualitative Camp taught me not to be ethnocentric, and quite oppositely, to open my eyes to newer, healthier conceptualizations of life. Throughout my time and research in Norway, I found it fascinating that our working culture was not only well understood by Norwegians, but cleverly used to fuel their engines of resistance that protected their way of life; to paint a clear picture of a hierarchical, power-hungry counterpoint to Norway's egalitarian society where workplace equality is not only highly valued, but demanded. Simultaneously, my time with "Tardy Tara" revealed that I carried my own constructed stereotypes regarding other culture's orientations toward work and time that bred frustration and judgment. Yet, we should appreciate these differences, learn from one another, and value our ability to do so in a culturally diverse environment.

This chapter was designed to highlight beautiful cultural idiosyncrasies, and the maze we must often crisscross in order to see and appreciate them in a multi-cultural environment. My experiences at Qualitative Camp trained and prepared me to be a conscientious interviewer throughout the rest of my time in Norway that summer and when I returned years later. My presence as an American, and the associated Americanized notions of work, predisposed my interviewees to offer "us versus them" distinctions, thus creating a form of response bias triggered by the interviewer. Yet after having accumulated lessons of tolerance and insight at Qualitative Camp, I not only welcomed these statements, I theorized how they could constructively inform both my research and my personal viewpoints of a healthy workplace and life. Everyone should be so lucky to be gifted with an experience akin to Qualitative Camp. In addition to

cultivating tolerance, it opens our eyes to a broader set of cultural norms. Taking from Tyler Cohen, "real cultural diversity results from the interchange of ideas, products, and influences, not from the insular development of a single national style." When we insulate ourselves and hide behind stereotypes, we welcome failure not only as academics, but as humans, colleagues, geographic neighbors, and friends.

References

Ballard, D. (2015, December 9). *Dawna Ballard: Timesmith* [Video File]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9JkJnb_jWU

Ballard, D. (2007). Chronemics at work: Using socio-historical accounts to illuminate contemporary workplace temporality. In B. Rubin (Ed.), *Workplace temporalities* (pp. 29–54). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Ballard, D., & Seibold, D. R. (2006). Communicating and organizing in time: A meso-level model of organizational temporality. *Management Communication Quarterly, 16*, 380–415. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318902238896

Barrett, A. K., & Dailey, S. (2018). A new normal? Competing national discourses and workers' constructions of identity and meaningful work in Norway. *Communication Monographs, 85*, 284–307. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2017.1372587

Glinkowska, B. (2016). Managing teams in the multicultural organization. *Journal of Intercultural Management, 8*, 55–69. https://doi.org/10.1515/joim-2016-0009

Hornsey, M. J. (2008). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory: A historical review. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*, 204–222. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00066.x

Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, 7*, 377–182.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.

Tajfel, H., & Wilkes, A. L. (1963). Classification and quantitative judgement. *British Journal of Psychology, 54*, 101–114. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1963.tb00865.x