Indian Philosophy and Intercultural Understanding

The ultimate manifestation?
Editor’s comments

Indian Philosophy and intercultural understanding

An Indian wise man once said, “If you are still alive, your purpose in life is not completed yet.” An intriguing thought about the meaning of life, strongly suggesting that we are all on a journey of self-discovery that is never-ending and that we are all here for a reason.

Going deeper, Indian philosophy emphasizes that we are all equal, interconnected and interdependent. Every living organism has a light inside and if you look closely, you can see all those lights – some not as bright as the others, but nevertheless there. Those with brighter lights can share and add light to others, thus enlightening the whole world. The real meaning of life is perhaps that.

These are some of the ideas expressed in our interview with Mithun Mridha, who has become a highly respected project manager. His success could be attributed to his knowledge of humanities, sciences and intercultural communications and his shrewdly applying it to the world of international business (starts on page 3).

More and more students are travelling and studying abroad, many living in hosting families. These students are, in most cases, interculturally prepared in pre-departure programs. What is often forgotten are the homestead families, who generally aren’t mentally-equipped to deal with an intercultural experience. A fascinating look at this phenomenon and how a study by Ida Castiglioni led to a major change in how these exchange programs are conceived (page 9).

Our correspondent in Montreal, Dan MacLeod, taking inspiration from the French satirist and poet Jean de la Fontaine, has written a fable about Toto, a tortoise with a multitude of prejudices. A humorously ironic essay on human nature (page 22).

There are many other pieces to read – Richard Lewis writes about the newly created SIETAR Russia, Jacquelyn Reeves describes the mystery of American small talk and, lastly, Matthew Hill provides us with a humorous summary of the SIETAR Europa congress in Leuven, Belgium.

Enough to keep your inquisitive minds well nourished.

Patrick Schmidt, Editor-in-chief

Contents
(for quick navigation, click on the desired article)

Editor’s Comments

Mithun Mridha
A passionate interculturalist in the world of Mergers and Acquisitions

The Ethnocentric Mindset of Homestead Families

SIETAR Russia
A fervent case for closer ties between Russia and Europe

The Mystery of American Small Talk Revealed

We are a normal family... aren’t we?

Pictures of the 2019 SIETAR Congress in Leuven

Toto, la tortue têtue

Book Reviews

Events, Workshops, Congresses

Impressum
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During my early childhood, my family moved a lot, living in the states of Bengal and Assam. Later on, we lived in Mumbai (Bombay), in western India.

When I was a toddler, my mother was still continuing her university education. She had to put me in a nursery when I was two and half. I'd be in school all day with older kids, often being bullied by them. Looking back, I think bullying happens in any country and stops when you reach your late teens.

My parents were overly ambitious about me, as I was their only child. They spent a lot of time following up on my studies, which resulted in me always being first in my class. Everybody would ask me, “How do you maintain first place? Do you get any extra help from teachers?” And I would answer, “I just spend time with my parents, especially my mother.”

What languages did you speak as a child?

Until four, I only spoke English and Bengali. From age five to six, I was living in Assam and confronted with Hindi and Assamese, which I had to learn. That was my first cultural shock. I’d hear new words and ask, “Why do they use this word?” I had no one to explain.

Additionally, my Dad worked with the Indian Oil Corpora-

**Interview with**

*Mithun Mridha*

*A passionate interculturalist in the world of Mergers and Acquisitions*

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tion, a very multicultural community. People came from all over India, speaking Assamese, Malayalam, Punjabi, Telegu, Tamil, Bodo, Gujarati and Nepali.

My parents are very outgoing and we were invited out almost every evening, or we had people coming to see us. This is something common to all parts of India and it taught me early in life to accommodate, to be hospitable, to open your door. We say "Atithi Devo Bhava", the guest is a form of God. Literally, it’s "God pays a visit to your house in many different forms."

So you’re being tested on how you behave with every person — you are supposed to be humble, to be kind, and to treat others with respect.

I found that travelling to so many parts of India, with all the different languages, is a journey into oneself. Also, it’s about the paradoxes of India, as modern as it is classical, ancient. There is no separation from work and life, everything is mixed, interrelated. A businessman might come to a meeting in a fancy car and a business suit and one hour later, you’ll see him in traditional clothes, offering a coconut and flowers in a temple. So these religious beliefs, rituals, practices, are all part of life, so intertwined that you can’t separate them.

India is extremely multicultural. Small regions of India are so diverse that you keep discovering paradoxes, a continuous change of scenery and normality. What is normal in one region may not be in another. Western professionals talk about India as a culture. It’s very difficult to boil down everything and frame it as Indian culture. There are so many cultures within that culture.

And then there are differences in food. For instance, the way oil is used. In the east and northeast, they use mustard oil; in southern India, coconut oil; in the west, groundnut and vegetable oil.

When my parents moved from Assam to Mumbai, we were invited by my Dad’s boss, whose family came from Kerala. The dinner consisted of 12 main dishes, very well served. I had the feeling the family spent two days preparing that dinner. But I just couldn’t eat because it was cooked in coconut oil. For somebody born in Bengal, coconut oil is associated with hair oil or a massage oil, not an edible oil.

But the reverse phenomenon occurred with our neighbors' children, who became my friends. I was so close to them, we were either at my parents' or their place. They gradually got used to my mother’s food to the point they would fight to have the bigger portion. However, they didn’t know she was using mustard oil, which they couldn’t stand. After six months, she told them what they
were eating was cooked in mustard oil and it was a big eye-opener for them.

At what age did you move to Mumbai?

I was six and stayed there through my junior college (Baccalaureate/A levels) in science stream. I attended LEMS, a Hindu school, which meant we celebrated all the Hindu festivals. We also had a moral-science class, where we were made to recite hymns and poems from the Vedas. And something unique was computers and classes in programming from the age of nine. We also had courses in meditation and professional values, which was not the case for many other schools.

English and Hindi were the default languages of instruction. And almost everyone spoke Marathi, the regional language of the state of Maharashtra. In schools, I had always English as my first language, Marathi as my second, Hindi as my third. We’d switch languages all the time and everyone understood. You master each language so well you can put all those different parts together.

For doing my A levels, I went to St Xavier’s College, which is affiliated with the University of Mumbai. It’s actually a Jesuit school and teachers were always available to the students. It was so much fun that students would stay after classes ended. The college put much importance on our complete development — arts, communication, public speaking, even festivals. Malhar, the annual festival of St. Xavier’s College happens to one of the most awaited inter-collegiate events in India since 1979. It encouraged us to be a complete person, not a bookworm.

After completing junior college (A Levels), I did a bachelor’s degree in manufacturing engineering at NIFFT Ranchi, in the eastern part of India. During my studies, I was doing volunteer work with a lot of NGOs in small villages, installing solar panels. A lot of the people were French and German and they encouraged me to learn their languages. So I started to learn French in Ranchi and German at the Goethe Institut in Calcutta. For two and half years, every weekend I’d take a nine-hour trip from Ranchi to Calcutta. Nothing came easy; it was a lot of effort over time but, looking back, it was well worth it.

That’s a highly unusual accomplishment. How did you end up living and working in France?

I had two options after finishing in Ranchi, an internship with a small German supplier near Stuttgart or a master’s at ESSCA in Angers, France. I decided on the latter to gain more knowledge about business.

After finishing my master’s, I started to do project man-
Management. My first job was at Bouygues Construction, in finance, overseeing infrastructure projects in Jamaica, South Africa, South Korea, Croatia, Hungary, Florida. They were my first real intercultural encounters, as I was continuously interacting with local controllers. For instance, in Croatia, the local person had studied in France. He was the perfect bridge to the French teams.

Upon reading your CV, you seem to have developed the reputation of an effective intercultural project leader. How did that come about?

It was quite by chance. I was never trained to work with diverse groups, I learned almost everything on the actual projects. It started with a Belgian team which outsourced 60% of engineering project management activities to India. The promise of outsourcing operations was that the outsourcing was to reduce costs. Initially, everybody was very happy with the results but around the eighth month, it became clear Belgian management was spending too much time communicating with the Indian team. In the end, they weren’t saving in costs.

At that point, I was asked to moderate the weekly meetings, which I’d never done before. I tried to apply the rules of what each team was responsible for. I asked them if they understood what they had to do over the next week. Were there any points they couldn’t handle on their own level? Were there any other decisions needed? Were there examples of similar work they could send to the other team? Was there a mutually agreed and accepted definition of “completed” tasks and deliverables?

I did exactly the same with the opposing team. Then I made a task list, visible to both the teams. In a nutshell, I was making sure the Indian team understood exactly what responsibility they had and vice versa. They liked it so much I was asked to continue for months. A lot of best practices came out of this facilitation.

So you learned on the job how to be an intercultural facilitator?

You could say that. Shortly after finishing the project with the Belgian team, I was contacted by a fellow interculturalist to do Indian training for a French client. It went so well I was asked to do many more and, over the next few years, managed to train over a thousand people on Indian culture. My understanding and tips are largely a sort of learning-by-doing, always rethinking if what I advised was right or wrong.

And I started to read all the major intercultural books — Richard Lewis, Fons Trompenaars, Edward Hall. I received
training on tools such as Cultural Detective, Virtual Performance Assessment (VPA), Country Navigator, GlobeSmart and Diversophy.

I joined SIETAR Europa in 2014, then later changed to SIETAR France. It’s a family that’s very inquisitive and open, with a shared dream of our world. I’ve been a member of several groups but have rarely found one with so many passionate people. I’ve been participating in events organized by SIETAR Austria, France and Germany. I also support fellow members whenever they need help. I have a busy schedule but, whenever I can, I will help.

I can’t help but think that the possible explanation for your passion as an interculturalist is the interlocking nature of Indian culture and Hinduism. The Hindu way of thinking permits an assimilation of cultures, languages and religions. Most importantly, it urges all to unite body and mind on a higher, spiritual plane in order to “know the truth of the universe”. Your thoughts on that?

I think something that comes deeply from Indian philosophy is that we are all equal, interconnected and interdependent. My teachers in India always told us that we all have a light inside us. Actually, when you observe the world, you can see all those bright lights. Some are not as bright as others but you see them all.

If you can share and add light to others, you can enlighten the whole world. We can look very different, might act very different, but finally we belong to the same system. We are all part of each other.

For me, the meaning of life is first self-discovery. It takes years and years and, for each one of us, it’s a journey that is never over. But you discover new things. For me, the meaning of life is to find what your calling is because we are all here for a reason.

A wise man once said, “If you are still alive, your purpose in life is not completed yet”. In each of the teams I work with, I tell them it’s okay to not agree with each approach, each process. We can be angry at each other, shout at each other, but what is very important to know is, just because we’re having an angry conversation, it doesn’t mean we should stop talking to each other. We’re all members of the family and we might not agree with each other but we should still listen to each other’s opinions, accept them, still be together in the same house. This is something I strongly believe in.

Something I always tell my team members is each project is about co-creation, about the collective wisdom and experience of a group. For all big endeavors, we need to exploit this collective wisdom and experience. The intelligence of the group is much more complete and balanced than the
Mithun Mridha — continued

The goal in this universe is to try to attain a better version of ourselves. SIETAR provides one path in attaining this.

intelligence of a person, which might be influenced by momentary emotions. The group as a whole is above it and can decide more intelligently. It will only be possible if we synchronize ourselves, embrace our diversity to work together. This is the basic step. If we don’t have this checking in with everyone, you don’t have this synergy.

This touches on the subject of perfection. We are never perfect. We should strive toward perfection but equally important is to remain practical.

There’s a national award-winning Bengali movie – Ekti Jiban (1988) directed by Raja Mitra, about a school teacher (played by Soumitra Chatterjee) who has one dream, write the best complete Bengali dictionary in the world. He remains in deep poverty, grows old, never finishing that book. It’s a sad ending. I’d say, Don’t try to write the most perfect book to the point that it’s never finished. Do a second version of the book to improve it and add more. The focus of life is to try to achieve good quality and at the same time remain practical enough to say it’s done, it’s complete.

We should have a goal, try to attain a better version of ourselves. We’re always working with one version and trying to come up with a better version. We should never beat earlier versions of ourselves because they are us. Be at peace with all identities that we have in past memory, which have created our perception, our personality, our character. Accept all the good and negative aspects and try to create a better version.

Your thoughts on how to attain a more complete self are indeed most interesting. Now, to round up our interview, how do you see the future of SIETAR?

Our world is becoming more and more complex, unstable, crisis-oriented. In these conditions, doing good is not enough, especially for the younger generation who want to get into a career. They have far different expectations regarding the job market. And it’s here I see SIETAR as a community that binds people. If SIETAR can accompany this new workforce by helping them to adapt to the changes, impart intercultural knowledge by walking the talk, we’re going to have a future.

I’m not the one who wants SIETAR to be the most visible organization. I see SIETAR as an impactful organization for change. And to do that, SIETAR should associate with many other organizations from diverse focus areas and create joint events and seminars. The events should provide unique ways for members and guests to meet, interact and re-invent intercultural relationships.

For an ingenious, interdependent and interdisciplinary future, I think that’s where SIETAR should be going.

Interviewed by Patrick Schmidt
The Ethnocentric Mindset of Homestay Families

A study by Ida Castiglioni on the intercultural experience within hosting families when receiving an exchange student

Report edited and adapted by Patrick Schmidt

As interconnectedness has grown in most countries, the need for promoting ideas and practice of global citizenship, i.e. intercultural communication, has increased. Its very nature – different languages, behavior patterns and values – makes it imperative to avoid assumptions of similarity, to stimulate consideration of others. International exchange programs are designed just to do that.

However, most pre-departure preparation programs are primarily focused on the students with the goal of maximizing the students’ intercultural sensitivity. What is often forgotten are the hosting families; they are also part of the equation. As this pilot study will point out, the hosting family is in most cases inadequately prepared in terms of intercultural skills to generate a mutually satisfactory exchange and intercultural learning.

The research was carried out in 2011 with two groups of hosting families, all living in the Lombardy region, whose main city is Milan. One group (16 families) had hosted within the Intercultura AFS (originally American Field Service) program, designed for students. The second group (10 families) had hosted within the Fondazione Don Gnocchi program, a medical group working with disabled teen-agers. Both groups were similar in being exposed to members of different cultures in their homes for a significant amount of time (one to 12 months), with a similar role of surrogate parent to provide guidance and care.

Semi-structured interviews on site were conducted and intercultural learning was assessed by using the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), developed by Milton Bennett. The interview questions aimed at gathering information in four areas: 1. general attitude towards cultural difference and cultural self-awareness, 2. ability to observe critical incidents, 3. ability to frame events during the exchange, and lastly 4. transferability of intercultural learning and experience of global citizenship.

In order to have a common definition of “culture”, the interviewers read the interviewees the following:

Culture is the learnt behaviors, beliefs, and values generated and maintained by a group of people who interact among each other within a given boundary such as nationality or ethnicity. More simply, culture is a way to perceive and organize in a collective way the experience of the world.

Despite the effort to establish common usage, the term “culture” turned out to be somewhat problematic. Respondents avoided the word for the most part or treated culture as a problem. In some cases, the idea of culture was rejected in the sense that people said:

“We’ve had the luck to have him in the house… He has never manifested symptoms of his culture.” (Italian parent referring to a homestay from Zimbabwe).
Homestay Families... — continued

In another case:

"With N, we didn’t even have the problem of religion, since she was Catholic, while the state religion in her country is Buddhism" (Italian parent referring to a homestay from China).

Generally speaking, the host families felt culture “was not an issue”. When asked about cultural misunderstandings that might have led to tension or resentment, all interviewees responded that no such a thing ever occurred during their hospitality. Culture difference, for the majority of interviewed people, was a matter of curiosity, and at the same time difficult to talk about. And the concept of critical incident, that is to say of a practical example that might illustrate a cultural pattern, or even a linguistic misunderstanding, is unknown in the sample.

The difficulty of denoting culture in subjective ways could be a "national cultural problem", that is to say Italians are not inclined to think about culture in these terms. While it is true that for many Italians the word “culture” tends to coincide with objective culture (artifacts, art and institutions), it is hard to imagine that all respondents, after hearing the definition of subjective culture, could not remember any significant moment that they could attribute to a potential cultural characteristic as opposed to a personality trait. Instead, it was as if respondents were denying the experience of culture — a form of ethnocentrism in DMIS terms.

Sources of information
Families were asked what sources of information they chose, if any, about the guest’s national culture. Many people of the AFS group mentioned internet research, i.e. geography, history, politics and food (ways of cooking). The DGF group was provided by the organization with a basic vocabulary booklet in English, Italian and a local language. The most interesting finding for the DGF group is that all interviewees reported on two major observations about the cultural patterns of their guests: the first was attention to time as experienced in Africa; the second was the attention to the behaviors concerning the use of water in the house. Apparently, these two frames stuck on people from the briefing and “tranquilized” them about otherwise somewhat unusual behaviors or major personal attributions.

The lens of the DMIS
The predominant experience of cultural difference of both groups was ethnocentric (denial, defense, and/or minimization), with a few exceptions of people who might have been experiencing acceptance. But even in that case of early ethnorelativism, there were trailing issues of ethnocentrism, having to do with the defense position of reversed superiority (they are better than we are):

In a certain way, we’ve tried to preserve these differences...
Homestay Families... — continued

our preoccupation was not to ruin him and so we wanted to preserve those things we though were healthy values that we were risking to contaminate... now that he’s back to his country, we can say he’s the usual G..., simply guy... it was a relief for us because had the same fear... in this somewhat disolute world of kids with the cell phone of the decadent West (Italian parents, homestay from Chile).

On the same note of reversed defense, here are some more examples from both groups:

We had been told they liked to eat pizza and L. “obviously” did not like it. I must say that talking about culture, I had some expectations related to his needs, which in fact he never manifested. He was an example of simplicity. He was happy with nothing... L. when coming home, did not want to eat chips but fruit, for sure better habits than our children (Italian female parent, homestay from Zimbabwe).

He was very cordial... perhaps more cordial than people here… yes, a kind of education that we don’t have here sometimes (Italian female parent, homestay from Zimbabwe).

Nevertheless, the most commonly displayed worldview was one that aimed at minimizing differences:

I’m an antiracist by definition, meaning that I don’t see differences, for me, we all are human beings (Italian male parent, homestay from Zimbabwe).

Is the hosting experience “positive” if there is assimilation? There was an explicit effort on the part of some families to make their guests understand and assimilate a “better” way of being in the world... Again, this is traceable back to an ethnocentric approach to the world. In any case, as part of the sentimental experience, it was trying to behave like a good parent. There was of course a transmission of values and ideals, which, despite good intentions might create confusion in the goal of hospitality. Is it an exchange? Is it an immersion into the life of a family and a country? Is it an experience of personal development? Is it really a mutual chance to learn about a different culture? Here are some puzzling examples:

A Chinese person cannot afford to say no, to smile, to express emotions. This is because of education, culture, specific ethnicity. All of this really struck us. We have discovered that after she had gone back to her country, her mentality went back the way it was (Italian female parent, homestay from China).

She took our habits after a week, for me it was like having another daughter, an Italian. I did not think she was a German girl (Italian female parent, homestay from Germany).

In another words, at best, the result of this experience for most families was one of minimization, where by making the guest become part of an enlarged family, all differences are erased. What seems to be implied in the responses from
Homestay Families... — continued

Following the publication of this study, the AFS International revamped its handbook for hosting families.

interviewees is that it is expected that the student or guest make the effort to integrate, where they were actually assuming assimilation.

Conclusions
The research has underlined a problem of our digital era: without a scaffolding people don’t know where to put information about a culture randomly gathered through research engines. Thus, looking for general information on the web did not generate usable information for most of the people. The lack of a cultural guideline does not allow people to frame events as cultural ones, therefore any communication event is almost exclusively defined as an interpersonal issue.

The content analysis shows that almost all respondents of both groups are experiencing cultural difference at one of the ethnocentric stages, as described by the DMIS. People at defense were equally distributed in the polarization: we are better/superior/more fortunate than they are; they are better/simpler/knowledgeable about real values of life than we are. A good number of statements can be placed in minimization and few respondents seem to organize their worldview in acceptance terms, yet with trailing issues in ethnocentrism.

As criticism, this research was only conducted with Italian families in a given regional area. Suggestion for further investigation would be to extend the same research to a larger sample, both in Italy and abroad and compare results for perceived intercultural learning. Besides, it would be interesting to know if the “problem with culture” is only an Italian issue or not. Finally, at a societal level it would be important to know in what ways these kinds of programs impact the raising of consciousness for global citizenship, for personal commitment and social responsibility.

An immediate consequence of this pilot research, AFS International started a process of re-thinking the families’ learning experience and the result is a new full handbook (The New AFS Host Family Intercultural Learning Journey 2016) for local program managers and volunteers on the guidance of the adults’ experience in the framework of global citizenship education.

Should the reader wish to read the full academic version of Ida Castiglioni’s report, you may get it at:

https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.12828/92144

Dr. Ida Castiglioni is a professor of the sociology of cultural processes in the Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca, where she teaches intercultural relations in the programming and management of social services and public policies program.

Following the publication of this study, the AFS International revamped its handbook for hosting families.
SIETAR Russia

A fervent case for closer ties between Russia and Europe

By Richard Lewis

With the unflagging encouragement of Russia’s Ambassador to Great Britain, His Excellency Alexander Yakovenko, I have given several cross-cultural workshops in Moscow over the last few years and twice addressed the Likhachov Conference in St. Petersburg, an event reported as the largest ‘humanitarian forum’ in the world, with 1500 affiliated organisations.

Against this background, I was particularly interested in the news that SIETAR Russia had been formed last year and that some representatives would be present at SIETAR Leuven. During the congress I was able to attend a session where the Russian delegates discussed their plans and aspirations for future programmes and expansion. Several of the Russian participants are already actively engaged in giving workshops in Kaliningrad, Helsinki and Moscow and impressed me by their knowledge of the field of cross-culture and their evident maturity as practitioners.

Two years ago, Ambassador Yakovenko – himself a speaker at Likhachov Conferences – invited me to hold a workshop in the Russian Ambassador’s Residence in Kensington Palace Gardens, to which all other Ambassadors in London were invited. The title of the seminar was “When Cultures Collide” in general, but also spotlighted to some extent Russian characteristics that facilitate intercultural understanding.

The fact that Russian territory and governance embrace two continents – Europe and Asia – endows the intellect of many Russians with a Eurasian mindset unmatched by any other nationality. This is of course a collective endowment and includes such marked Asian traits as stoicism in adversity, self-sacrifice, adaptability, automatic respect for the elderly, courteous manners, indirectness and collective pursuit of justice.

Russians, nevertheless, have a long history in Europe, therefore they possess a European breadth of vision corresponding to (and generally wider than) that of western European nations. These shared characteristics with Western Europe are illustrated in the following table:

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<th>Characteristic</th>
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<td>Imagination, vision</td>
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<td>Physical bridge between East and West</td>
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With the unflagging encouragement of Russia’s Ambassador to Great Britain, His Excellency Alexander Yakovenko, I have given several cross-cultural workshops in Moscow over the last few years and twice addressed the Likhachov Conference in St. Petersburg, an event reported as the largest ‘humanitarian forum’ in the world, with 1500 affiliated organisations.
The cultural integration of Russia into Europe in the 21st century

France was a major actor, politically, culturally and militarily, in European affairs in the 17th and 18th centuries. Britain dominated the 19th century because of her early Industrial Revolution. The 20th century saw two World Wars, followed by the formation of the European Union, where France and Germany rivalled each other for leadership. Currently, Germany is the most prosperous economically; the 29-strong membership complicates the direction of Europe’s cultural development. Russia is by far Europe’s largest and most populous nation, as well as being a Eurasian power. To what extent may she influence cultural trends and integration? What will be her role in contributing to world intercultural congruence?

One thing is for sure: the vast land area of Russia with her 9 time zones and numerous physical neighbours (land borders) means that she can never be just a simple, detached nation, remote from others’ affairs. Therefore she has no option, eventually, but to aspire to Eurasian leadership.

The candidacy for Russian leadership is persuasive and significant

For many centuries the long-suffering Russian peasants, ill-favoured by cruel geography and denied (by immense distances and difficult terrain) chances to communicate amongst themselves, were easily manipulated by those with ambitions to rule. The Orthodox Church, the Czars, the Soviets, all exploited these hundreds of thousands of pathetic clusters of backward rustics. Cultural development was slow, uneven, and unknown to other countries. In the 19th and 20th centuries Russian literature, music and arts impressed themselves upon European consciousness, but it was not until 1990 that the characteristics of modern Russian mentality became more visible. In the last three decades there is ample evidence of the growing interest amongst Russians themselves in aspects of intercultural issues with other peoples. Their contribution is becoming increasingly important. The following factors would suggest they will become major players in humanitarian forums, including SIETAR:

• Breadth of vision enables leadership qualities
• The vast land area gives her multiple international connections (through common borders). Only Russia can serve as a bridge between East and West
• Additionally, at sea she is a Pacific power, an Arctic power, and an Antarctic power
• Her vast resources, in oil, gas, minerals and other commodities foresee a powerful economy
• Her historical artistic record (literature, music, opera, ballet, painting and sculpture) confirms her cultural and moral preeminence on a par with any major European country
The Mystery of American Small Talk Unveiled
by Jacquelyn Reeves

Small talk delights and confounds us, and it is worth asking why. In this short humorous piece I will confine myself to American small talk, as there appear to be different variations on this tune, as Mark Twain might also have pointed out if he had written more about American English and less about the German language.

On the one hand, it can feel overly factual and too easy, (are they making fun of me?). On the other hand, it is full of ambiguity and hidden meaning. But do you KNOW what that meaning is? It is a way of getting to know you quickly, whatever the circumstances, sharing information, getting the real information fast or just having some fun in a bored moment.

Hence I share with you a “Small Talk Vignette” from one of my trips in the US. Although I am American, I have felt like a foreigner in the US at various times, and this was one of them:

My sister and I decided to take a trip to one of my favorite parts of the world: Zion National Park near St. George, Utah. So we packed our bags and one of her children, Lucas, and made our way West. In Denver we had a layover before flying on to Las Vegas (where we would rent a car and head into the desert) and as in any airport, we had a limited amount of options as to how to spend our time. My choices were sophisticated. Would it be the bookstore, finding a seat with a view of the runway to journal or get a coffee? In front of me stretched the ubiquitous Starbucks line and after very little thought, I stepped into it.

I should say that at this point in my life I was quite used to the “German” way of seeing things, meaning I was living in Berlin, fluent in German and only visiting the US to see family and sights. This certainly would’ve made this experience more heightened than for the normal American. But this story is as true as it could be.

Being in this particular comfort zone, as I say, when I stepped into the line, I did what we did at that time in the U-Bahn of Berlin and all over the city. I pulled out my book and began to read to while away the time and do something to entertain myself while being productive. (I did not have a smartphone yet!) There was one subway line in Berlin I dubbed “the library line” because the atmosphere of the train was so close to that of a study hall.

In this case, I was reading one of the books recommended by my women’s group in Berlin, Elizabeth Gilbert’s splendid *Eat, Pray, Love*. Just as I was getting settled into Liz’s problems with her husband, I felt a tap on my shoulder. “what the..?”, I thought, as I know literally no one in Denver and really at this point the US was not so much my first home anymore. “Who could that be and what could they want
American small talk…
— continued

from me?” Well, I did not have to wait for long to find out, although the answer did not come in a structured way I could comprehend easily. Here was my answer:

“Watcha reading?” said a friendly face when I turned around to confront the invading shoulder tapper.

With a blank and surprised expression, I showed her my book cover. “Eat, Pray, Love”, I said weakly.

And then with a pounce and a cackle of delight:

“Isn’t that a great book? Did you see the movie? Wasn’t Julia Roberts wonderful? I mean, simply stunning, right?”, at this point I was nodding and making small talk noises that are inbred in me as an American. “Yes”, “right”, “Oh, really”? coming out of my mouth at regular intervals in between nods and light smiles. (I don’t even know I do this!)

She continued:

“Do you write? (me: yes). Do you know Rome? (me: no). I am absolutely determined to go there one day for my own pilgrimage like hers. (me: nods understandably). Although, to be honest” (she cocked her head), “we’re having a few financial problems right now, so we can’t go there right now (with vocal emphasis as her body tenses with dramatic vigor and her eyes narrow to look into mine. I look back, I know what she means at least in the here and now).

And finally:

“But it is on my list, I will get there!” (me: yes, hallelujah!) And with a whoosh of air, energy and karma, “There’s nothing in life worth doing that doesn’t have its own struggle, you know! You only live once, time to get out there and make it happen!” (me: exhausted).

At this, we both arrive at the coffee counter. I dazedly order my coffee and she orders hers. I pay for my coffee and she pays for hers. After we received our coffees came the (for my part) uncomfortable part of saying goodbye. How would it end? Would it be a demur goodbye with eyelids lowered, a denial of intimacies shared? Would it be a hearty farewell? The parting of one pioneer from another as we head into frontiers unknown?

In the end, the finale came as a surprise as well, as it does with all professional small talkers, those professional connectors of people, information sharers and entertainers rolled into one. She simply turned to me, quite profession-
ally, leaned in conspiratorially and said, “Now you see, wasn’t that much more fun than reading your book?” and with a wide and friendly smile as big as the western blue sky, she disappeared into the throng bearing a caffe latte. Me? Yes, as a matter of fact.

At this point, you may be shaking your head, reliving your own small talk encounters in airports throughout the world or wondering how you can make this happen for yourself. My advice to you, dear friend, is to find an American! I have worked with hundreds of people from all different nations and backgrounds, and the vast majority tell me that this happens to them specifically with Americans. Put yourself in the experimenter role and try it for yourself!

And the handy graphic above I’ve created to help you find your way.

Want to talk more? Get in touch: Jacquelyn@reeves3c.com. And if you like the graphic and would like a copy of your own, email me!

Jacquelyn Reeves is a USA culture expert who conducted more than 40 training days in 2018 focusing partially or primarily on the culture of the USA. She developed the Small talk model in order to better display the roll that small talk plays in the US society as a motor of mobility. Often overlooked, it is the key component that connects and networks people in the US.
What a week.

A week at the SIETAR Europa Congress 2019 in Leuven has fed our collective brains, hearts, stomachs and livers (if a liver can be fed.)

Overall, the event was a great success led by outgoing President, Joyce Jenkins. Joyce is the definition of an inclusive leader – combining leadership with latitude to develop purpose in an enthusiastic tribe of followers, ready to sweat a little, get creative, make decisions and get stuck in. There were many many dramas along the way (town, venue, gala, menus, rooms, people, tickets, buses, etc, etc.) And the lunches – we will get to that later. The end result was the transfer of much wisdom to a large group of intercultural enthusiasts in an effective manner in a beautiful town that was fit for purpose (Muntstraat in Leuven had end-to-end restaurants and easily contained the learning hordes.)

The Leuven Town Hall Reception
Diversity and Inclusion
The inspired suggestion for this year’s Congress theme gave the amorphous and sometimes stagnant essentialist version of culture, something substantial to work with and the results were impressive. Inclusion is where the rubber meets the road and the presenters with practitioner experience brought their experiences to life in a unique and memorable way for many of us. The topics of colour, racism, LGBTQ, as well as the prejudiced brain, polarisation and ethics got traction and the attention of this, sometimes, critical SIETARian crowd.

Quality – Walk the Walk and Talk the Talk
When I drew attention to the frequent lack of original content and questionable quality of some presenting seen in the Dublin sessions and keynotes of 2017, I was unfriended by some pretty big names – sometimes the truth is painful to hear.

I am happy to report (not just so that you stay friends!) that both content and presentation quality seem to have bounced back to the Valencia standard of 2015.

The selection of papers for inclusion in the programme was BLIND. If ever an event was aligned with its topic, this has to be proof positive of that healthy intent. – A bi-product of this meritocratic process was that some big names where not on the programme.

Whilst there are still issues — keynote speakers reading from their papers in “monotone”, some under rehearsed sessions with avoidable errors and the like. – Speaking personally, I only had one sub-par experience during the whole event.
We are a normal family...  
— continued

Confession  I am sorry to say I missed the "Obama-like" opener with Leuven Mayor, Mohamed Ridouani. My loss.

Super Stars  
It was a very broad programme with up to 9 simultaneous choices at any one time, so I can only talk about the ones that I witnessed first hand.

***Shannon Murphy Robinson – An easily accessible introduction to the neuroscience of bias, culture and behaviour. Educational.

***Seyda Kutsal – Buurman – Giving regular folk (outside the police force) a chance to experience the strong feelings generated by the Brown Eyes, Blue Eyes experiment for themselves. Profound.

***Christoph Bader – Bringing something NEW to Brexit / Trump / Popularism! That is rare these days – Using the vehicle of collective memory, we were asked to apply its cult-like methods to the "other side" and come up with some pithy slogans to balance out fake news. Therapeutic.

***Christine Wirths and Lies Wouters – Digital learning – Giving us the chance, with a real case, to come up with our own attempts at constructing a digital learning programme. Inspiring and encouraging.

***Jackie van der Kroft – Reliably excellent, Jackie took us beyond conflict to the anatomy and mitigation of polarisation and asked us to apply some suggested methods in our own world. Outstanding.

***Monika de Waal, Natasha Aruliah & Henning Zorn – Sharing their life stories as 3 "outsiders", trialogues around difference and discussions of feelings and implications – a richly experiential event.

***Alan Richter – Using ethical dilemmas and dramas and asking us to unpick them and choose a response – our results were then compared with global data and analysed. – The slickest show in town! And, finally,

***Sue Shinomiya – Ikigai – Finding one’s life’s purpose – The perfect post Gala session – Engaging enough to keep everyone zoned in, beautiful enough not to over challenge our fragile state. Elegant.

***Films – A reduced film track curated by a knowledgeable team and with the chance to see the most popular ones again on day 3. Moving.
We are a normal family... — continued

The author charming fellow Sietarians with his bubbling personality.

Challenges – The vast voluntary team had much to cope with, not least their own size – steering committee – 10, congress team – 21 and assistants – 12. (You probably need another committee to handle all of the 43+ volunteers!!!)

The venue – The concrete medical school was funky though not always fit for purpose. Arriving at the hospital entrance (never trust a taxi driver who says, “Ah, yes, I know exactly where that is…”) we went past real medical patients, walked along many corridors only to be finally denied by a double set of locked doors. Signalling with my mobile phone light attracted the attention of the people in the registration hall but they could not blow the locks on the doors (a competence beyond university professors it seems.)

The lunches – Yes we are finally here. Let us reframe this moment to get most benefit from our collective experience. – The lunches were a bonding disaster that unified a diverse crowd in a common complaint. I am put in mind of an old Jewish joke about Catskills catering – “The food is horrible here – and, such small portions.”

In the end we all survived, ate and laughed. Apparently, the first choice venue went bankrupt before our event so a few brave souls found the substitute venue and persuaded them to host the do. The last minute instruction to select our food choices meant that, inevitably, many did not see the e-mail and respond in time with their input. For them it was a fixed menu. But no more moaning – IT WAS A FREE OPEN BAR WITH BELGIUM BEER! – Come on.

In conclusion
Where else can you guarantee bonfemmie and bonhomie like that? (New Word – bonfemmie!!) Is there anywhere like a SIETAR Europa Congress as a place where you can tell your story and be respected, included and truly heard? – I don’t think so. We have something precious here that is safe, user friendly and staffed entirely (with two exceptions) by volunteers. Wow.

Thanks
Thanks to the steering committee of 10, the 21 strong congress team and, especially, to the 12 hard-working assistants.

Next
See you in Malta, May 2021.
A few, revealing pictures of the SIETAR Congress in Leuven
Il était une fois...

Toto la tortue têtue

by Dan MacLeod

Toto was a tortoise, not a turtle, and if there was one thing he hated it was to be mistaken for a turtle. Of course he hated other things too, most things in fact, beginning with turtles, which he saw as too primitive to have escaped the bounds of water, the bonds of water. So backward they can’t see they’re in prison, he’d say, usually to himself because he was usually alone.

That the world was 70% water didn’t occur to him. First because he was unaware of that fact but mostly because it was obvious anything living in water was too low on the evolutionary scale to merit consideration as a fellow animal.

In any case, he only thought of turtles when he was mistaken for one, usually by porcupines, who are stupid to begin with, or moles, who can barely see. As far as himself, he made sure to never come into contact with them. He drank at the stream, not the lake, and when he took a bath, which was rare, he went in from the rocky shore, not the beach where the turtles liked to swim.

He also didn’t like porcupines, who stank, or moles, who lived in the ground which was almost as backward as living in water. And he didn’t like beavers, because they made water invade the land, and squirrels, because their manic movements annoyed his quietude.

He also didn’t like birds who didn’t stay in their trees, out of eye and ear. Didn’t like to see them drop in from nowhere, as if from another dimension, and hop around like schizophrenics. As for ear, the only ones he heard were seagulls, squawks so loud they vibrated down their legs into the ground, which hummed like an electric bass and drove...him...insane. If he was sleeping, his head would jerk out and, especially, up, away from the onslaught, and he’d hurry away from the shore.

There were animals he liked. He thought bears majestic although he’d never met any, only heard tell and, once or twice, seen one loping along in the distance. And he thought deer and moose beautiful. To him, they all represented higher creatures. Bigger, more agile, travellers too, more interesting lives. But because he never knew any he never knew how many more lives he’d lived than them.

He only vaguely remembered winter endings and spring re-beginnings, never saw the years, had no idea he’d lived more than any animal alive. He could have known. He had any number of relatives, an ex-wife just down the road, children who’d presumably had children. None of that interested him.

He liked to eat, mostly liked to sleep, and sometimes he’d go exploring, move from one place to another he’d once been but no longer remembered, a new life. That was enough. And he was always at home in his shell. There’s no place like home, he often said to himself.
At the end of the last SIETAR congress in Leuven, Shannon Murphy Robinson received the award as the best speaker for her presentation on neuroscience and inclusion. Her passionate, informative talk highlighted key ways the brain can work both for and against inclusion. And it’s no surprise that her book, *Neuroscience of Inclusion*, co-authored with Mary Casey, is like her talk. It offers a new understanding on how we can work across cultural differences effectively.

Reviewing the latest brain research done with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), the two authors report on how neuroscientists can now scan the brain in real time as it engages in critical thought, analysis and problem-solving. And what these researchers have found out about inclusiveness toward other cultural groups is that it’s a difficult task. Simply put, the brain prefers people who look like us over people who don’t and it only takes about 200 milliseconds to do this. Second, brain circuitry is constructed in a defensive “survival mode”. It registers differences as a threat, which means it makes quick decisions on whether a person is a friend or a foe. This, in turn, triggers other circuitry: moving-toward or moving-away behavior.

Essentially, the brain has an unconscious *us* bias for similarities, a built-in tendency to create “in” and “out” groups in order to ensure our survival. When looking back at evolution, cooperation occurred within groups, but not between groups. It has not changed much today, despite all the rational arguments that we need to be inclusive in a globalized world. As one researcher clearly pointed out, “There may not be lions or bears roaming the halls of your organization, but people’s brains are oriented to perceive threats.”

Yet, there are ways we can override the brain’s defensive tendencies and even re-pattern our natural dynamics. Authors Casey and Robinson make an enormous contribution to intercultural communications by offering brain-based strategies and tools for working across differences that outsmart the defensive brain to build trust, foster creativity and generate constructive interactions.

One strategy is to engage in a “care frame”, meaning one consciously engages a feeling of appreciation towards another person--or group of people--as we communicate with them. This attitude reduces perceptual narrowing and supports the higher brain (pre-frontal cortex) in staying focused and empathic. Positive thoughts and feelings from one person are directly replicated in other people’s brains through the “mirror neuron” system. The more we consciously engage in positive regard, the more the brains of others mirrors a positive response, creating an “upward spiral”, thus better intercultural communications.

This book is an excellent survey of the latest research into the mind and provides a scientific foundation for increasing inclusion. A definite read for all SIETARians.  

Reviewed by Patrick Schmidt
Sponsors of the

Sietar Europa Congress

in Leuven, Belgium
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editor’s Comments</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mithun Mridha</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A passionate interculturalist in the world of Mergers and Acquisitions</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ethnocentric Mindset of Homestead Families</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIETAR Russia</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A fervent case for closer ties between Russia and Europe</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mystery of American Small Talk Revealed</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are a normal family... aren't we?</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures of the 2019 SIETAR Congress in Leuven</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toto, la tortue têtue</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Reviews</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events, Workshops, Congresses</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Book Reviews**

**Events, Workshops, Congresses**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editor's Comments</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mithun Mridha</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A passionate interculturalist in the world of Mergers and Acquisitions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Ethnocentric Mindset of Homestead Families</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIETAR Russia</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are a normal family... aren't we?</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures of the 2019 SIETAR Congress in Leuven</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toto, la tortue têtue</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Reviews</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events, Workshops, Congresses</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sponsors

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Book Reviews

Events, Workshops, Congresses

Contents
(for quick navigation, click on the desired article)
IESEG and IACCM conjoint CONFERENCE in Paris
31 October – 2 November 2019

Intercultural competencies for a disruptive VUCA world. Exploring creativity, innovation, resilience and resistance in intercultural research, training and management

While globalisation with its quick flows of people, information and technology has been a fact for many years and many lessons have been learnt, the ever-increasing scale and pace nonetheless adds to the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA) the world finds itself in today, with the challenges posed seemingly increasing rather than decreasing.

The conference theme thus focuses on creativity and innovation as we want to explore new approaches and ideas to familiar problems that nonetheless present themselves anew every day.

Exploring these VUCA dynamics and how intercultural competence is and can be used to navigate these challenging waters therefore seems to be more important than ever. The conference aims to continue the dialogue between scholars, trainers and practitioners as all three groups will contribute valuable insights to this discussion and to explore together new and creative ways of promoting and embedding intercultural competence in organisations and to managing in a VUCA world.

We are looking forward to seeing you in Paris.

Conference Chairs: Grant Douglas (IESEG, France) and Barbara Covarrubias Venegas (IACCM and FHWien, Austria)

Web: iaccm-congress.ieseg.fr Contact: iaccm2019@ieseg.fr
Events, workshops, congresses

SIETAR Europa Webinars

Sept 17th, 2019, Tuesday 18:00-19:00(CET)
Speaker: Maria Mihaela Barbieru Topic: “Communication and Emotion in Intercultural Mediation” Authentic intercultural relationships could not exist if the main tool of the relationship did not exist. The communication process implies knowing how to express our needs, taking into consideration the others and being able to listen to the needs others may express. Communication and emotion can become sources of conflict, but if both factors are properly managed, communication and emotion can become the keys to resolving conflict. An approach to resolve conflict is called intercultural mediation.

Oct 23rd, 2019, Wednesday 18:00-19:00(CET)
Speaker: Tamara Thorpe Topic: “Fostering Age Inclusion in the New Millennium” Economic shifts in the new millennium have made the multi-generational workforce a reality. For the first time, organizations have up to four, and in some cases five, generations in the workplace. The audience will explore generational differences and what strategies work best to overcome these hurdles (focus: Germany and northern Europe)?

Nov 14th, 2019, Tuesday 11:00 - 11:40 am (CET)
Moderator: Gabriela Weglowska, Joanna Sell Topic: “How can we use new learning technologies and the latest research in neuroscience to maximise the learner experience in intercultural skills training?”

Bath, United Kingdom

9-13 and 23-27 September 2019
Developing intercultural training skills and Designing and delivering intercultural training. These two courses are designed for experienced trainers from fields such as language training, communication skills training, who wish to learn more about the theory and practice of intercultural training.

Information can be obtained at: www.lts-training.com/ or contact adrian.pilbeam@lts-training.com

Paris, France

31 October - 2 November, 2019
Intercultural competencies for a disruptive VUCA world. Exploring creativity, innovation, resilience and resistance in intercultural research, training and management. Many lessons have been learnt, nonetheless with the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA) the world finds itself in today, the challenges posed seemingly increasing rather than decreasing. The conference theme focuses on creativity and innovation as we want to explore new approaches and ideas to familiar problems that present themselves anew every day. Web: iaccm-congress.ieseg.fr

Krems, Austria

Dec. 5 - 8, 2019
Applying the New Paradigm to Intercultural Training” conducted by Milton Bennett at Donau University. Open enrollment in addition to students in the Intercultural Masters program. Contact: alexandra.zeilinger@donau-univ.ac.at

Online Everyday

The SIETAR Europa group, discussing

Competence in the Intercultural Profession

on LinkedIn, has now over 8000 members. Plus it offers videos, articles, books, tools for the intercultural profession. To join, click here: https://www.linkedin.com/groups/2740568

For more information, contact George Simons at diversified@com.com