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PROBLEMS THAT ARISE
IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT:
AFRICAN AND WESTERN CULTURES

One of our University's most prized treasures is its diversity. The Catholic University of Lublin welcomes students from all four corners of the earth. Such a strong presence of different nationalities creates many new opportunities for the University and its students. New ideas and cultures blend, benefiting everyone in the process. We gain a new understanding of the world. We meet foreign knowledge and perspectives that help us develop our own philosophies and views. In discovering other people, we discover ourselves as well.

The presence of multiple cultures is always valuable; however, issues often arise in multicultural settings. Like in any other place with a vast array of opinions, views and norms, miscommunication and friction will certainly occur. Every multicultural environment experiences misunderstandings based on differences in forms of expression, attitudes, social norms, behaviours and so forth. Misunderstandings may snowball into problems which, if left unattended, may result in distaste and division among groups. For that reason, it is pivotal that we identify possible problems before they grow out of control. As a class representative of a multicultural group of students, I find identifying and solving potential problems crucial in keeping a healthy and friendly atmosphere in the classroom.

Most of my classmates come from Africa, mainly Nigeria. The others originate from Europe except one person who came from Asia. We study Applied Anthropology where we focus on the question "What it means to be human?" We examine various aspects of humanity from human biology to

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economy, culture, languages, philosophy and many others. The objective of the course is to provide us with tools and skills useful in many human-related fields, such as academia, business, government, international organizations (EU, United Nations, World Bank, etc.), and the list goes on. It is an English-speaking course that attracts people from everywhere. After just a few months together, differences between the African culture and Western culture became visible.

These differences come to light almost daily. They could manifest in small interactions, such as using dissimilar expressions to convey the same meaning, or bigger situations such as choosing activities when we meet outside the University. To illustrate the former, an African friend asked me if I had two pens. I fished out two extra pens and I gave him both. I assumed he might need one for himself and the other for someone else. After I handed them to him, he looked at me confused, asking why I gave him two pens. It turns out that by “Do you have two pens?” he meant the one I was just using and the spare one that I could give him. An example of the latter took place at a bar our group went to. In the place, we had two options: either spend our time talking by the tables or go play pool billiards. It caused a division in the group. Most of the Africans wanted to play pool while most of the Westerners wanted to stay. In the end, both sides compromised, and we spent half of our time at the tables and the other half at the game.

To build a good, healthy environment in the group, there needs to be a mutual understanding and respect for everyone. It is necessary to be aware of our differences and habits however it shouldn't be an obstacle to creating new relationships. In this essay, I will talk about my first-hand experiences in dealing with such a diverse group and the potential issues I noticed.

The main problems I noticed in my group can be categorised into two types. Frictions between cultures and behaviours may lead to the isolation of groups. Frictions between cultures mean misunderstandings and/or miscommunication due to cultural differences. For example, something in one culture may be acceptable while in another it may be considered rude or improper. In a real scenario, such misunderstandings can permanently change people's views of each other's cultures. Behaviours that may lead to isolation are behaviours I have seen within my group that may inhibit or limit integration with people from other cultures. Exposure to other mindsets is the first step in understanding them. It also eliminates any uncertainties or fears regarding other cultures.

I will explain some general cultural differences I noticed between Westerners and Africans and how they may relate to the problem of friction mentioned above. Firstly, Africans tend to be straightforward and direct with their thoughts while Westerners often stay silent about their views or sugar-coat their comments in order not to hurt others. For Africans, it is better to be honest about their thoughts and desires. Bottling emotions can be harmful to both individuals and causes tension in relationships. It was one of the first differences I noticed. For example, when our class was taking pictures during a Red Cross conference, the cameraman kept asking us to smile more. After reviewing the pictures, many of the Africans evidently showed fewer teeth than the Westerners. This was because Africans don't feel as much pressure to show emotions they don't feel. Unlike Westerners who are taught to show the "correct" emotions at certain times like, for example smiling wide when taking a picture.

On the other hand, Westerners prioritize other people's feelings. They focus on other people's perceptions and emotions. If someone makes an error, Westerners often try to minimize their embarrassment by not approaching the person directly or not mentioning the issue at all. They allow the person to figure out the issue without being put in an awkward position. It is visible in the classroom whenever a student or a professor makes a mistake. Westerners prefer to avoid bringing up the issue or asking for another example unless asked directly. This difference isn't a problem in and of itself; however, it could cause misunderstandings. To Africans, Westerners may seem dishonest while to Westerners, Africans may seem cruel or rude.

Secondly, Africans are much more expressive than Westerners. Africans like to show their emotions and enjoy themselves in the good company much like most Westerners. This trait is linked to being open and honest. Their expression takes the form of heated debates, music or laughter. Westerners also like to have fun, but they do so slightly differently. Westerners are more reserved and quiet compared to Africans. They speak quieter when out in public for example. Due to this difference, African gatherings tend to be considered loud by Western standards. Being loud in a public space is seen as rude and disruptive in Western culture. Our group had to always monitor our volume whenever we met outside the university. For instance, we like to play our own music in public, but we try to balance the volume, so it doesn't disrupt those around us while also allowing us to relax. So far, we avoided possible confrontations. In some places, the staff provided us with a solution that would be considerate to both groups. At one bar, we were given a sepa-

rate room away from the usual tables, much to our delight. Our volume didn't disrupt other customers and we had fun.

Isolation is the lack of communication with others outside our main environment. It is natural for people to gravitate towards their own kind, but this shouldn't interfere with mingling with other cultures. I have seen this in all multinational groups everywhere. People feel safer and more comfortable when with people from their own country. It is a tribal instinct within all of us.

On university grounds, it is not uncommon to see Africans and Westerners in their respective groups. However, it is also necessary to interact with people outside our circle. Both Africans and Westerners should make an effort to interact with each other. Same with any other ethnic group. An overly limited circle of friends may lead to isolation from the rest of the world. It is a possibility everywhere, however as Poland hosts more Westerners than Africans, Africans are more at risk of isolation.

Visiting a different country for a longer period of time (for example, to study) is an enriching experience. I lived in Ireland my whole life before moving to Poland to study Anthropology. I have lived here for about seven months as of writing this essay and I can confidently say that coming to Poland was one of the best decisions I made. The Catholic University of Lublin has a high population of students from abroad, particularly in English-speaking courses like the Applied Anthropology course in the Faculty of Philosophy. The medley of new people from unfamiliar places gave me new perspectives and ideas. So far, I have learned a lot from being exposed to worlds outside my own. For instance, I gained new knowledge and views on the political situation in China after talking to my friend from Malaysia or the social problems occurring currently in Nigeria from my Nigerian friends.

Another big obstacle to the integration of both cultures is the language barrier. In theory, both Polish people and Africans can speak each other's language. Most Polish people in Lublin know the basics of English while KUL offers Polish classes to foreigners. This ability for basic communication weakens the need to learn the language fluently. Learning Polish or English isn't a priority when you can easily take care of daily business using what you have such as asking for the bill at a restaurant or asking for directions. It decreases the motivation to learn a foreign language. Without the language, it is almost impossible to have a conversation with someone of another culture leading to the notion of isolation.

The presence of diversity is beneficial for society. We should welcome it, try to understand it and seek to preserve it. However, where there are people,

there will be misunderstandings, disagreements and problems. In the multicultural environment at our university, such problems often involve the ingrained cultural differences between us and, if unresolved, may lead to friction between groups and isolation. We must keep our minds open and avoid judging others based on first impressions. Every individual is unique in their own way, regardless of the place of birth. Once we accept and celebrate our diversity, our community will flourish.

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The essay presents observations of a student regarding cultural differences in Polish university environment. The author notes differences in various fields of functioning of her group: concerning the rules within the university and outside of it - in the area of everyday life. They are focused especially on those elements that - although obvious - do not always serve to shape open attitudes towards other people.

Keywords: diversity; cultural barriers; university; multicultural settings; African friends

PROBLEMY POJAWIAJĄCE SIĘ
W ŚRODOWISKU WIELOKULTUROWYM: KULTURA AFRYKI I ZACHODU

Wypowiedź jest prezentacją spostrzeżeń studentki polskiej uczelni na temat różnic kulturowych w środowisku uniwersyteckim. Autorka notuje różnice na różnych polach funkcjonowania jej grupy: w porządku reguł uczelni, jak i poza nią – w obszarze życia codziennego. Skupia się zwłaszcza na tych elementach, które – choć oczywiste – nie zawsze służą zrozumieniu i kształtowaniu otwartych postaw na drugiego człowieka.

Słowa kluczowe: różnorodność; bariery kulturowe; uniwersytet; wielokulturowe środowisko; afrykańscy przyjaciele