

Intercultural Skills – A Journey of Lifelong Learning

Serap Altisnik. European Women's Lobby, Brussels

The fact of being born in one country in the heart of the family from another (that is, being an immigrant) conditions everyone from their birth and determines both the perception of their identity and the relations they establish with those around them. Quite often, this condition favours the development of a special sensitivity, an ability to adapt to and learn from other cultures that is very valuable in many aspects of life, such as professional career and social relations. As we enrich our intercultural baggage, it is less important to decide to which place, country or nation we belong, as our identity is the result of many interactions from several places that, in the end, make up a very favourable aspect of globalisation.

Even at the age of 42, I am still exploring the issues surrounding identities. And I am certain that this is something that I will probably do for the rest of my life. Today, I strongly believe that the construction and perception of identity is not only fluid but constantly evolves. I started thinking about my national identity at a very young age. Living in Hanover as an only child in a Turkish family, I grew up as a migrant daughter in Western Europe. And today, I can still remember how strange it felt to celebrate Muslim holidays such as Eid al-Fitr within the four walls of my home but not amongst the wider society. Our holiday was not a public one and, as a result, I left my house to go to school as if it was any other day. And this was the day that I began to reflect on my identities.

After public school, I also went to a Turkish school to learn about the history, politics and culture of Turkey as well as attending a cultural

centre for Turkish folk dancing, where I met other Turkish youths from all walks of life. This was also when I developed relationships with other people from different backgrounds. Like me, they also attended schools based on their parent's nationalities. And because of these experiences, I have strengthened my intercultural skills. The majority of my friends came from immigrant families (e.g. Italy, Croatia and Greece) and some Germans also joined our group. Therefore, I was often regarded as the Turkish girl by my teachers and peers. And, as a result, I felt like I belonged to a group where people originated from different nations. We were "migrants" even though at that time I had no understanding of what the word even meant.

The best thing about being a daughter of two immigrants is the linguistic freedom. Being bilingual has enabled me to become fearless when it comes to learning new languages,

appreciating new cultures and adapting to new environments. Indeed, I not only love the accuracy and variety of the German language but also how flowery and lyrical Turkish is.

Although the significance of whether I feel Turkish or German has decreased over the years, the intercultural experience from my childhood was formative and accompanied me during my time at the University of Hanover.

At university, I founded a student party called International List. We campaigned to resolve students' problems, and it was mainly targeted at people with migrant backgrounds. The issues we tackled included access to jobs during term time (a problem many migrants face on a daily basis). The experience I gained as a young Turkish woman living in Germany motivated me to become the first elected foreign and international relations officer for students at my university.

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During my professional life after university, I undoubtedly also benefited from my intercultural skills in many situations. And of course for intercultural skills, first and foremost you need a high degree of sensitivity.

So I learned very early on to empathise with the perceptions of culturally different people, to understand how they think and, consequently, how they act. And, as I am now working and living in a city as international as Brussels, with so many nationalities existing together, this is still an everyday challenge.

In this context you have to decide between an open or closed approach to people. I do not have to make every new cultural peculiarity my own but I do have to constantly ask myself

whether I am willing to accept new things. Otherwise, I would deny experience because intercultural coexistence always means I can learn something.

So I am still moving between cultures. But I would like to qualify the last sentence because today I meet many people – myself included – who operate with different cultural identities, where the traditional notion of cultures applies less and less. I embrace other cultures but it is important for me to also make sense of my own cultural experience. Only if I am clear about my own cultural identity am I in a position to relate it to others, and in particular to facilitate respectful communication. Conversely, I assume that my counterpart is willing to approach other cultures and try to understand them. This is an expectation that is also challenging for me as I am expected to be the spokesperson for my culture and have all the answers. This is very important in terms of stereotypes as I am constantly confronted by people who are homogenously ethnically socialised and probably therefore expect a kind of one-dimensional behaviour in other cultures as well. This is a mistake but sometimes observed in conversations. Making these people understand that ethnic attribution does not work also seems to be a lifelong task for me.

In the context of my work at the European Women's Lobby, which acts as an umbrella organisation for women's rights organisations from all over Europe, it is of course particularly necessary to have intercultural skills. After all, we represent and work with organisations from different regions of Europe. During my work I also realise that the number of people who possess such skills are increasing. I think it is a positive development, which has come mainly from the free movement of workers within the European Union. This opportunity to live in another country and work as well as develop a higher level of intercultural skills has increased immensely. For me, this kind of globalisation

is amazing! Leaving Germany has also been an interesting experience. And this is because, when I was in Germany, I was regarded as a Turkish woman yet in Brussels I am seen as a German woman. And I think these perceptions are quite remarkable.

Finally, deciding which nation I belong to was quite important for me. I think it has

something to do with my search for identity as a teenager. But over the years, other things have come into play, changing my perception of my identity. And I think it has a lot to do with the fact that I am a feminist. But the discrimination I faced because of my immigrant background and the ways in which I have learned to cope with it have been very helpful.