

Case Study/Text:

Between borders (*Negotiating Identity Across Palestinian, Jewish, and German Worlds*)

I can still picture myself standing in the courtyard of my school in East Jerusalem, the Palestinian flag rippling above us as I pressed my hand against my chest, my voice joining many other children singing the Palestinian anthem. To me, it felt natural. At that age, identity was not something I questioned; I did not feel different from other children, though I knew I looked different. The classroom made me Palestinian, at least for the morning hours. By the afternoon, my identity shifted again. At Liberty Bell Park in West Jerusalem, I played soccer with my Jewish friends. The laughter was the same, the games familiar, but the voices around me carried another rhythm, which was Hebrew instead of Arabic. As a child, I often wondered and asked my mother why these two groups, living less than two miles apart, never played together. At the time, I accepted it as ordinary. Only later would I realize that I had grown up in a city where identities were formed like borders on a map, making who belonged where, and with whom. Looking back now, I see how my childhood unfolded across three cultural worlds. My home in East Jerusalem was shaped by a Palestinian environment, my afternoons in the park felt distinctly Jewish, and at home I was the son of German parents, an identity I inherited at birth. Each setting demanded a different version of myself. These experiences imprinted in me a sense of cultural hybridity, but also left a remaining strain of uncertainty: Who am I, and what defines my identity? Is it my language, my passport, my appearance, or the communities that I am connected to? These questions are not only personal reflections but also classic intercultural communication questions, pointing to how identity is constantly negotiated at the intersection of language, culture, and perception as identified by Ting-Toomey's (1993) Identity Negotiation Theory, which stresses that identity is not a fixed entity but is co-constructed in communication.

This perspective resonates with my personal childhood experience moving between the different spaces of Palestinian, Jewish/Israeli, and German culture.

When my family moved to Germany, those questions returned with a new intensity. Outwardly, I resemble my German peers, but inwardly, I carried a Middle Eastern soul. I still remember vividly my first day of school, unable to speak German, I felt exposed and anxious. My teacher remarked to my mother about the difficulty of teaching me "our mother tongue," even though the language in question was not mine at that time. The consequence was that I was placed in a special class for immigrant children, and there, among classmates from Turkey, Iran, Russia, and

Poland, I rediscovered belonging. We did not always share the same words, but especially with the children from the Middle East, I shared distinct cultural gestures and customs. My closest friendships that lasted till today were with children from Turkey and Iran, whose cultural

background gave me a sense of familiarity. The major change came when I went off to college, where the majority of my fellow students were German, which had the effect that I developed a

stronger connection to my German identity roots, and when asked, I tell people I am German also for the sake of simplicity. Nevertheless, I notice a phenomenon in my life today. Every year, I travel between Germany, Jerusalem, and the USA. The moment I set foot on the land and encounter other people, it seems as if I flick a switch and my identities adapt to the culture.

This

phenomenon can be explained with the Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973), which suggests that individuals adapt their communication through strategies such as convergence and divergence (Dragojevic, Gasiorek, & Giles, 2016). In detail, convergence occurs when a speaker adjusts their speech in tone, quality, and language to become more similar to others. In contrast, divergence emphasizes the differences where the speaker maintains and preserves their habitual style. Additionally, Giles et al. (1979) CAT distinguishes between two key motives: The “Affective motives” relate to the process of maintaining or enhancing identity and social approval. “Cognitive motives”, on the other hand, relate to improving comprehension and communicative efficiency. In my own life, I have identified a mixture of both defined motives. I converge linguistically and nonverbally, depending on the cultural context in which I am placed, and as half of my family lives in Jerusalem and the other half in Germany, I am challenged to find a balance between convergence and divergence, driven by the need to be understood and accepted. These early experiences taught me lessons that scholars would later name: The fluidity of identity, the process of accommodation, and the negotiation of belonging.

The Intercultural Communication Competence (Chen & Starosta, 1996) identified three interrelated components in their model which are “sensitivity” (the ability to be open and not judgmental), intercultural awareness (the cognitive ability to understand one’s own culture and that of others), and intercultural adroitness (the behavioral ability to enact appropriate skills such as message clarity, self-disclosure or empathy). In graduate school, I can finally recognize that these experiences were not just childhood memories but early lessons in intercultural life. Reflecting on my own biography, I can see how I developed these traits long before I knew the theory. Despite the challenges I faced growing up, the traits I once thought of as survival skills have become my “communication superpower,” empowering me with adaptability and empathy

for the “other” which are at the heart of what it means to communicate, especially across cultures.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the author’s experience illustrate that identity is not a fixed entity but can shift depending on context? Have you ever had a similar experience?

The author illustrates the fluidity of identity through the ever-changing environments of the storyteller’s perspective, and emphasizes the adaptation the storyteller experienced on a day-to-day basis with differentiating cultural groups growing up in Jerusalem. The author demonstrates this idea well by describing the different environments the storyteller found themselves in daily and highlighted their ever-changing attitude and actions whenever they would find themselves in a new one. I can relate to this very much because I moved around a lot growing up, and my environment was constantly changing, with new social structures and experiences being consistently thrown onto me. This consistent change doesn’t really bother me though, as I appreciate being able to see social issues from different perspectives, meet tons of new people I never would have met before and experience different cultures that some others may never get to experience. I think this Communication Accommodation theory is a very concrete one and I think being able to experience a melting pot is a great thing as it can be very eye opening to others.

2. Communication Accommodation Theory suggests that people adjust their communication to be better understood or accepted into a specific group. Have you ever changed your language, accent, or behavior to fit in with a group? If yes, how did it feel?

Absolutely, and at first, to me, it felt wrong. At first, I was just unapologetically myself (which I still am today), but when you take someone or something from one environment and place

them in another, there is likely going to be conflict as each place has its own communication, customs, tradition and practices. It would be disrespectful or embarrassing if that person who had just changed environments wouldn't try to adapt to them to a certain extent. Imagine if you took an individual who grew up their entire life in the countryside and then placed them in the middle of a big city where they could never feel isolated; that same person would probably experience major culture shock and would have difficulty on their own if they didn't adapt to these new environmental factors. The exact opposite has happened to me before, as well as confronting cultures completely opposite to the ones I had originally known, which made me appreciate the theory/practice more. Adjusting to an environment and practicing Communication Accommodation Theory is more than important for not only communication, but a person's survival.

3. Identity Negotiation Theory argues that identity is co-constructed in communication. Can you think of a situation where your identity felt shaped by how others saw or treated you?

I guess so, it's difficult to describe though. I never really got the opportunity to pursue my own passions and interests as much as some other people have, and it would be conflicting when I would see many other people around me be so passionate or knowledgeable on many topics or traditions, I knew surface level about. With moving around so much growing up you also get used to depending on yourself rather than others, as the people you knew won't be there that long, which is both empowering and depressing to think about. So, your practically forced to negotiate your norm to an ever changing one where people will only judge you on a superficial, surface level, so your physical identity becomes very presentable in public and the rest of what makes you, you, like your intentions or ideas become very closed off and private.

4. The narrative describes how soccer and education became a bridge between the different cultural influences. What everyday activities could function as tools for intercultural connection?

Sports are a great way for people to bond, especially if you are gifted at them. If not, individuals can bond over many different arts or traditions as well. Culture can also be a major uniting factor, especially in the terms of mono-culture where as most people know or experience these acts or interests most people can relate to. You could even go as shallow as bonding with someone over food. There is no limit to everyday activities you could bond with someone over with, and those activities should only grow even more in the future.