

# Understanding the “Other”



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Communicating and interacting in a different culture can be a challenge, but it's easy to think of that challenge in terms of how it affects you, without giving much thought to how things must seem to someone from the other culture. However, once in a while you get a glimpse of what it must be like for someone else, which helps in understanding the “other.” I had one of those awakenings recently when a student told me what had happened to him in a foreign culture my own, in the United States.

This Korean university student had been in an exchange program, living with an American family for several months. He talked about how much he enjoyed the experience and learned from it. There weren't too many problems for him in adjusting to everyday life with an American family, except for one thing.

The teenage daughter in his host family often seemed to be angry with him, particularly at mealtime. The student couldn't understand it, but he was too circumspect to directly address her anger. His mealtime discomfort continued with the feeling that his exchange “sister” was angry, even affecting his appetite. He was bewildered about what was making her upset. Her fury seemed to focus on him at mealtime especially, and he had no clue as to what it was all about.

Finally, at dinnertime several weeks into his stay, she burst out with it: “Can't you just ask someone to pass you something once in a while?” she shouted, visibly upset. He had no idea that the way he had been behaving at mealtime had been anything less than perfect.

You see, for this student, reaching for a serving of mashed potatoes or beans or gravy in front of the person next to him was perfectly acceptable, as is done when eating a Korean meal with many side dishes shared by a group of people. To ask someone to interrupt their eating and pass a serving plate would have been extremely rude behavior in the way he had learned to do things. To him, it seemed so much simpler and easier for everyone if he just reached for what he wanted. By his standards, he was doing things the right way by reaching for something rather than asking someone to pass it.

Linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar, M. (1994). *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. New York: William Morrow & Co. writes about the problem of understanding another culture in terms of “Number One” thinking. “Number One types,” he notes, have a hard time understanding that anything other than their way of doing things is possible, or even deserves to be considered. “Number One” thinking is our immediate natural response to the unfamiliar in an intercultural encounter. But, he suggests, we need to go beyond this kind of thinking to understand each other.

For both my student, and his exchange “sister,” the idea that there could be another way of behaving at the dinner table that was just as proper was a totally new idea. I don't know if the American teenager learned anything from the incident, but my student certainly did. So did I.

To understand what's going on in the confusing world of inter-

cultural communication, we need to do our best to get out of our natural “Number One” mindset that tells us that the way we grew up with is the only way, or the best way, to do things. We can never truly understand each other or feel comfortable with people outside our hometown or homeland unless we stop looking at the differences as somehow “less than” and begin to try to put ourselves in the shoes of a person in the other culture.

Whether it's being reached in front of at dinner table, bumped aside on the sidewalk, or pushed from behind while waiting in a line, it's easy for us “foreigners” in Korea to give in to that first reaction: Number One thinking, and assume that what bothers us is incorrect or rude behavior. At times like this, it's important to remember that rudeness is in the eye of the beholder, and learning a little bit about why people from another culture behave the way they do can be a lot more comfortable way to co-exist than just writing it off as one of those things you'll never understand that bothers you.

In your daily life in Korea, you might do well to remember the student who was doing everything he could to be on his best behavior in strange surroundings but still got shouted at for doing the “wrong” thing. It can help to try to learn and understand why people do things the way they do. If we all think the way we behave the way we learned as we grew up is the only right way to do things, how can we expect to understand that there might be another way to behave that is just as acceptable to somebody else?