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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in France

What surprised me the most about French lifestyles, norms, and habits? Well, after interviewing and living with my host mom for two months now, I have narrowed it down to one giant surprise: the role of children in the household (the main topic of my interview with my host mother). First, I have to explain the roles of children in the household. A child in France is perpetually a child (even when they are twenty-four years old). The mother of the household does everything from making dinner every night and running the errands, to doing the laundry and changing the sheets. What do the children have to do? They are required to spend about an hour or more every night eating dinner with the family and studying. This being said, almost every child in France (until they are finished with school, college included,) lives with their parents. How is this different from the United States? Well it is extremely different in three different aspects: one, once a child in the United States leaves for college, he or she is expected to be able to live on their own (feed themselves, do their own laundry, work, and study). In France, the children don't have to work, feed themselves, or do their laundry. Now, an American might think this lifestyle seems amazing (who wants to do chores, right?) Wrong! This style of living is very hard for an adult American (18 years and older) to adapt to. In the beginning it was lovely, but after two years of being on my own (taking care of myself and doing my own laundry the way I like it to be done), it was very difficult for me to go back to "being a child." Americans tend to be very independent (one of aspects of being raised in an individualistic culture), and not being able to go to the store when I really want to eat a certain thing for dinner or doing my laundry when I want a certain pair of pants to wear has been very hard for me to adjust to. I also

often feel like my privacy is constantly being invaded. Now, after stating this, I must make something very clear: I absolutely adore my host mom. I have had the most amazing experience with her, she has taught me so much, and I couldn't have possibly integrated into the French culture as well as I have if it hadn't been for her. I am merely stating one of the biggest challenges I have had to overcome.

There are a lot of similarities between my host mom and I. We both have similar values like having good manners (at the dinner table, in the store, on the street), respecting elders, and the importance of family. One thing that she did not fail to mention was how important it is for one to always look his or her best even if he or she is only running to the store for milk. The French rarely wear yoga pants or sweat pants in public unless they are working out (in which case they typically wear a matching sweat-suit of bright colors (like blue and yellow) with matching shoes. This, to me (a personal lover of the top-knot and yoga pants look), is a huge difference between France and the United States. I would need five more pages to sufficiently cover and explain all the differences between France and the United States, so I am going jump to one of the biggest cultural differences I have observed: my host mother (and most other French people) is *very* direct and straightforward. This particular difference often leads to misunderstandings between she and I, because to me, (an American), it makes me feel bad. She directly states everything I do wrong in a blatant, upfront and matter-of-fact manner, and, if I do something to make her upset, she clearly expresses her exasperation and anger. This is good for learning, but it is often embarrassing for me, especially when she seems upset about what I have done. But here is the catch: she completely forgets and forgives by the next day. So, this being said, I don't think she has ever truly gotten angry with me (even though she *has* thrown her

hands up in the air in exasperation with me). This particular cultural difference has definitely made me understand the American culture a different way.

I always thought Americans were pretty truthful and upfront about most things. For example, I have always said, "I would rather you tell me upfront that you're mad at me than to have you be upset with me and hold it in." But, what I didn't realize, is that Americans (at least in my family and in the northwest) are pretty indirect. One might disagree with me on this, and there are probably many incidents where Americans are NOT indirect at all, but I would just like to elaborate on this idea a little:

I recently talked with a French woman who had lived with a host family and studied in the United States for a year. We were talking about our host families, and she began to tell me a story of a particular incident that still brought tears to her eyes. She said, "The first week or so after I arrived in the United States, I asked my host mother if she needed help after every meal, and every night she said no. So I figured she never wanted help, and stopped asking. About three months into my stay, my host mother yelled at me asking me why I never helped with any chores and why I was so lazy." This poor woman could not understand why her host mom hadn't just told her to help. After I had time to sit and think about her experience, I figured out this: how would a young French woman, who has lived in a very direct culture her whole life, know how and when to help the typical American house mom with the dishes when she says, "Oh no, Dear! I don't need any help with the dishes"? Or how would she know her host mom is upset with her (specifically) when she stomps out of the room and slams the door one day? If a French person is upset with someone, they will tell that person immediately. It also seems American women tend to hold everything in and let the small things pass until everything builds up and explode at one giant moment. In no way is this specific conclusion a true fact, it is merely a conclusion I have

formulated from my own observations (and it continues to morph and change the longer I stay in France). As for the interview with my host mom: well, almost every conversation we have is lovely, so I often enjoy talking to her. She is more than happy to explain and teach her culture to me, and I am happy to learn it.