

11-7-2015

Person to Person in France

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Mary Beth, "Person to Person in France" (2015). *2015-16 Field Notes*. Essay. Submission 6.
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November 7, 2015

Examining U.S.-France Cultural Differences

I interviewed my language partner, Pauline Jouve, during our weekly conversations. I found that we are similar and different in a lot of aspects. On the surface French culture is very similar to American culture, however, now that I'm living and experiencing the French culture, I can see just how different they really are. I find that the French culture has many rules and structure in social rules and interactions. Even seeing a friend on the street, there is a standard way to say hello without the awkward, "Hi, how are you," as the person you are talking to has already passed. There are certain expectations and very specific interactions; kiss-kiss on each cheek, and a simple "Bonjour." Table manners are also very structured. For example, it is more polite to keep both hands on the table as opposed to under the table on one's lap. I also find that in the United States, meals and family time are not as valued on such a regular basis. Each weekend, the French family eats a large lunch together. In the United States, I find that there is the idea of "family time," but it is more irregular and not such an integral part of the culture as a whole. It appears that the French culture is very strong in its practices. It may seem old fashioned, but it is evident that it exists to maintain the history of the idea of French living and values.

The French and Americans share many common, basic values. The French, like Americans, value hard work, education, liberties, and family. It is evident that families are very close. Many students study near their hometowns and live with or near their families. In the United States, while it is common for students to move away from their families for college, family visits are always anticipated and valued. Our differences, however, majorly contrast. A major topic of discussion in class is the difference between individualism and collectivism found in American and French cultures, respectively. The American culture is very individually driven; the competitive, powerful, and forceful nature of our

workforce and social life exemplifies our individualistic nature. In contrast, the French are more focused on the “greater good.” This is seen in the very structure of the cafés on the street. The close, small tables are perfect for the close and quiet conversations that the French conduct. There is much more of a feeling of community and mindfulness for others around.

The interview experience was really fun because it was a good chance to openly discuss these topics that are so integral to a study abroad experience. It allowed me to not only learn about French culture, but to learn more about American culture. I find that the French have a unified, solid belief system whereas the United States has a wider variety and assortment of systems and methods. The interview was an interesting way to examine and contrast the values I am living with compared to the ones with which I grew up.