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Person to Person in France

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Katherine Thomas

France

May 11, 2013

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in France

My friend Caro is 25 years old and still lives at home. For someone her age to be living at home, in the US, is considered “lazy” or “unsuccessful.” In France, it’s much more common and completely normal. The family is very important in France and there is not as much of a rush to move out and start living on your own. Living on your own is expensive, moreover, if you’re a student, it makes sense to profit from the support of family life until you are done with your studies. She doesn’t often invite friends over to her apartment because it’s small and there are 5 people in her family. In general, the home is a more private area so only close friends are invited over. But Caro spends all of her time with friends in more public spaces rather than at home, which is quite opposite to my habits in the US.

In the United States, casual friendships are more common. Moreover, there is really only one word for ‘friend’, there is also “acquaintance” but it’s used much less. Someone I’ve known for a few weeks but who I’m getting to know, is a friend. Someone I’ve been friends with since childhood, is a friend. Someone I work with who I also get along with, is a friend. In French, there are several different words for ‘friend’ to imply what kind of relationship you have with that person: ami/e- a close friend, someone you trust; copain/ine- a friend that you hang out with but who’s not necessarily very close; collègue- someone you study or work with, more of an “acquaintance.” I asked Caro about her different groups of friends and she said, “I only have one group of “friends,” (amis), people I’ve known since high school. People I’ve met since then are people I really like and get along with but it’s not the same. Maybe some of them will become friends, but for now they’re just my colleagues from the movie theater, and from my accounting class.” I think that fortunately this year I fell into the “ami” category. Even though we’ve only known each other for

nine months, and been close for 5, there is something special about “international” friendships. In the United States I feel as though I have lots of different groups of “friends” but now when I think about those groups in my head, I know who are true friends and who are just acquaintances. My friendships with my French friends and acquaintances have taught me a little bit more about the importance and meaning of friendship. Caro values loyalty and honesty in the people she trusts. I find that, although there are bad apples everywhere, perhaps friendship is a bit “lighter” or more casual in the states. Ever since middle school, I can’t remember a year where there hasn’t been some kind of girl drama. Girls in France, just like Caro when I first met her, are much more reserved and almost un-trusting, until they get to know you. But once they trust you, it’s for good, and that is usually mutual. I too share the same values but in a culture where more casual friendships are more common, perhaps trust for one another indirectly loses its importance, whether we like to think of it that way or not.

Since Caro is a good friend, it was not just this interview that opened my eyes but simply having a friend with/in a different culture. My French friendships revolve around a completely different context, the kind of interactions, where we interact, and how, are not 100% the same as they would be in the US. But having this interview did help me come to conclusions about how friendships work in both countries.

Interview: Caroline Rémi (Friend)