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Critical Cultural Analysis Project Part 2 – Cultural Biography: Know Thy Neighbor

“Yeah, definitely, I think I’ve changed a lot...My goals and dreams were so narrow...*Now I dream big!*” This reflection comes from Dania, a Kazakh international student at Penn State. She has been studying in the US for four years, funded by the government of Kazakhstan, where she first earned a BS in computer hardware. After earning her first bachelor’s degree, she moved to Philadelphia to study English UPenn for two years. Now she is majoring in Information Systems at Penn State. Dania speaks Russian as her first language, she knows Kazakh as well, and English is her third language. I interviewed both Dania and her husband Oleksy,<sup>1</sup> focusing mostly on Dania’s experiences since I do not know her as well her husband, who is a good friend of mine.

In Dania’s responses, I identified four trends that will inform my teaching: 1) economics affects culture; 2) comparing experiences in different cultures can deepen self-knowledge; 3) emotions related to “stereotype threat” (Steele, 2006) and “deficit remedial ESL identity” (Marshall, 2010) can linger for years, but encouraging words are helpful; and 4) living in the US changes students’ sense of identity, making it harder to relate back to their home communities.

Dania’s discussion of her hometown affirms the role of economics in cultural identity (Nieto, 2007, pp. 140-142). When I expected her to talk about cultural traditions, she shared a lot about the bleak economy. Her hometown is located close to coal mining operations, which

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<sup>1</sup> Both *Dania* and *Oleksy* are pseudonyms.

employ about 70% of the population. Many family members work in the coal industry, and these jobs are difficult, hazardous to their health, and low-paying. Russians own the coal companies, so there is probably a lot of corruption. Due to high crime rates, she was not very involved outside her home, so she read many books at home growing up. No one seemed to care about enacting economic reforms, and she portrayed this situation as causing a narrow-minded, hopeless mentality:

I don't want to say bad things about my culture, but they have very...narrow minds about their lives. They just work...I think it's because of money, lack of money, and their life so simple, just job and day offs. That's it. They don't travel, they don't do fun things, and their children usually do the same things. It's so pity, and I feel so bad about it, because I was a part of it, and I used to do the same.

The emotions in her voice sounded critical and ashamed of her community, even though they seem to be victims. As a teacher, I will remember that students may feel ashamed of their backgrounds when they compare them to the US. I will also be aware of how background can affect students' approach to knowledge, since she said many people usually did not develop curiosity due to the need to survive. Coming to the US definitely broadened her perspective, and I see students' new-found optimism to "dream big" as a huge resource in the classroom.

Second, the interview demonstrates that doing comparisons are necessary for deeper reflection about culture. At the beginning of the interview, it seemed a bit difficult for her to articulate Kazakh cultural trends. At first she discussed mostly "surface culture," so I used the term "mentality" to help her focus on "deep culture" (Nieto, p. 137). Later, when I asked her to compare the US and Kazakhstan, she had a much easier time reflecting on Kazakh culture. She shared differences related to Kazakh collectivism due to their economic needs. She discussed differences in gender roles and how people treat the elderly, since US retirement communities were shocking to her. There are also differences in the ways kindness is shown. In the US, kindness is often shown to strangers met in daily life, but not so much in Kazakhstan. However,

Kazakhs are extremely kind to guests in their homes. In order to reflect upon Kazakh culture, comparing it to US culture definitely helped. For my teaching, I will encourage students to use comparison, between historical periods, languages, and belief systems, to learn about themselves.

Dania also experienced something akin to stereotype-threat, as theorized by Steele (2006), as well as an ESL “deficit identity” (Marshall, 2010). When she took CAS 100A Effective Speech this spring, she felt nervous that Americans would laugh at her English.<sup>1</sup> I then explained that African Americans also often feel a similar fear of stereotypes, and this helped her to reflect more on how she felt afraid that Americans would think she was from an inferior country.<sup>2</sup> However, making friends in this speech course reversed her perception, and she distinctly remembers a student praising one of her speeches.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that she did not develop this level of comfort until her fourth year in the USA. I will thus remember how I hold the power either to affirm or to discourage someone who feels insecure about his or her language use.

Finally, the impact of living in US affects both Dania’s and her husband’s identities, making it harder for them to relate with people back home, and this was a surprise for them. They just returned from spending a month back in Kazakhstan, and Oleksy said he had two culture shocks: first coming to the US, and then visiting Kazakhstan. Dania said she felt sad to see people’s narrow-mindedness. On the other hand, she sees her evolution in the US positively:

My mentality has changed. I started to think about volunteering, like, working for *free*. This is like, a crazy idea, right, in Kazakhstan. It is *not usual* to work without being paid. So yeah, I want to do something for free, for people, to help people, and I changed my mind, actually. My goals and dreams were so narrow, like—*Now I dream big!*

Overall, Dania and Oleksy gave me a lot to consider when teaching international students. I am now more aware that students may feel stereotype-threat as well as shame about coming from a developing country, so I will be sensitive to the need for affirmation. I learned

that due to expanding their perspectives in a new country, students may come to see their home community as narrow-minded, which can be painful as it becomes harder to share one's new interests with family and friends. Comparing experiences in diverse cultures is also a powerful learning tool, and in the classroom I will encourage the kind of optimism that students like Dania have gained.

### References

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<sup>1</sup> "Yeah, when I took my CAS class, CAS 100, I was very shy because I thought that Americans would think that I'm not very good in English, and I was afraid...because I thought Americans are very...what is the word...confident. They will laugh at me. Yeah, I thought that they were not friendly, that they would talk behind my back, that I came from another country, that I'm not very good at English, and I was afraid about it, but then I realized that they are very friendly, that I am not worse than them. Even Americans have some fears with speech."

<sup>2</sup> "I usually afraid of Americans...We were taught that Americans think that they are the best nation in the world, that America is the best in the world, and that's it...and you are trash and garbage from dirty country from the third world. And I thought the same, but after this class I changed my mind."

<sup>3</sup> She distinctly remembers a fellow student praising one of her speeches: "Then after that [speech], one American classmate came to me and said, 'Oh, you were so good in your speech!' Yeah, he told me encouraging words, and I felt so confident!"