

Touching a Culture

By John Krauskopf

Iranians like to be physically closer to others than most people from other cultures. One noticeable way this manifests itself is what cultural observers call “speaking distance.” Americans have a relatively long speaking distance. If one observes conversation groups of Americans standing around at a reception, most of them stand about arm’s length from their conversation partners. Whenever circumstances force two Americans to get closer than that, both parties become uncomfortable and have the feeling that their personal space is being invaded. This sense of someone being too close can affect how a person feels about what the conversation partner is saying. Americans might feel that a person standing “too” close is aggressive and even threatening. That feeling often makes it difficult to focus on the content of the words being spoken. On the other hand, a person from a culture where the speaking distance is much closer would feel that an American conversation partner who stayed at arm’s length was distant and unfriendly and might find it difficult to trust what he or she says. When an Iranian moves in close, a typical American’s reaction is to pull back a little until the distance is comfortable again. At a party, I have watched an American slowly retreat across a room because an Iranian conversation partner kept trying to get comfortably closer until the American found his back against a wall and the Iranian could finally set his comfortable distance. Neither party had a clue as to why things seemed a little out of balance.

Cultures with a short speaking distance are also usually cultures where touching other people is common and acceptable. In Iran this would apply to men touching men and women touching women but not cross-gender touching. For those who aspire to be fluent in a foreign language, comfortableness in those behaviors such as touching that are appropriate in the target culture should also develop along with verbal fluency.

During a Peace Corps Iran training program at the School for International Training in Vermont, I was involved in an inadvertent demonstration of this phenomenon. I was standing near the library talking with three American trainees. In the middle of my conversation, two of the Iranian male Farsi instructors came running up to me, interrupted my conversation and started talking to me in Farsi. As soon as the Iranians left, I turned my attention back to the Americans and finished that conversation.

No sooner had the trainees gone on their way than Susan, who had been standing nearby, came up and asked me if I had been aware of my behavioral changes as I switched from English to Farsi and back to English again. I said, "What changes?" A graduate student taking a class in cross-cultural communication, Susan had noticed several ways I had changed when switching between my two conversations, and these changes illustrated exactly what she had just been studying. In addition to the change in the language spoken, Susan first noticed the speaking distance. I had been standing about arm's length from the Americans. When the Iranians came up and we began conversing in Farsi, they stood much closer, not more than a foot distant, literally "in my face." Not only that, there was a lot of touching. Both men embraced me at first, and one clasped my hand for much of the conversation. The second man fiddled with my coat buttons as we talked. Susan also pointed out changes in my posture, gestures and tone of voice. When the Iranians left, I automatically reverted to English but also to my previous stance, tone and distance to finish my conversation with the trainees..

Susan's question to me was this: had I been aware I was doing these things at the time it was happening? The answer was no. Until a third-party observer told me what she had seen, I had no awareness of the behavioral changes. I just did them. This represents fluency of cultural communication, and this skill should develop and needs to develop closely parallel with increasing fluency with the spoken language. In fact, as language fluency improves, the student will be held

to a higher and higher standard of cultural behavior, but there is no paper test to measure competence. I was an eager and sincere Farsi learner, but I always had gaps in my vocabulary and made a number of grammar mistakes. My Iranian friends appreciated my effort and so cut me some slack if I also stumbled on some of the cultural expectations.

Not everyone makes this connection, however. In one Iran program, we had a trainee who held an MA in Persian literature from UCLA. His spoken Farsi was much better than mine, but he failed to understand the connection between his verbal skills and non-verbal behavioral fluency. Our Iranian instructors felt that, since his language facility was at such a high level, he should have known that the words he spoke and also his behavior were offensive. What the young trainee said and the way he said it annoyed and affronted the Iranians, and the young man never picked up on their cultural feedback. They tried to help him, but in the end, all fourteen Farsi instructors asked us not to send this young man to Iran (and, if we did decide to send him to Iran anyway, NOT to send him to the city where they lived.)

At the beginning of my second year as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I escorted several newly arrived PCVs to Khuzistan, the province where I worked. Carl, who was to be my new roommate, was wide-eyed, absorbing all of the new things he had seen and experienced during his first few days in country. Perhaps the topper for him came after landing at the Ahwaz airport. As we walked down the stairs from the plane and across the tarmac to the gate, I recognized Mr. Bagher-zadeh, one of the school principals I worked with, who was there to meet his brother, arriving on the same plane. He spotted me and ran over to give me a warm embrace and a kiss on both cheeks. By this time, the greeting seemed natural enough for me, and I didn't think anything about it. However, Carl was clearly as much taken aback by watching me as by the 106°F temperature in September in Ahwaz. The behavior that startled Carl and the choice of language were connected. Of course, the language Mr. Bagher-zadeh and I used in

exchanging our greeting was Farsi because my colleague didn't speak much English. Although I couldn't have held up my end of a conversation about philosophy, I was able to handle this social situation comfortably in Persian. Probably if Bagher-zadeh had been bi-lingual and had greeted me in English, I would have missed out on my hug.

Experiences like that are steps in the cultural learning process for an observer such as Carl as well as for the participant. I can still remember an incident that showed me I had attained enough language fluency and cultural competence so my Iranian friend, Mr. Zarghomi, at least for a brief time, forgot that I was a "foreigner." Zarghomi, a fellow English teacher, and I were strolling through the Ahwaz bazaar doing some shopping and visiting. Because Ahwaz was a new city, the bazaar there was not an exotic and traditional covered passageway of shops but was more like a busy street with long rows of whitewashed Arabic arches covering the sidewalks and providing shade for the shops on each side. Zarghomi had been to the U.S. on a Fulbright scholarship so his English was more idiomatic than most of my fellow teachers. Further, he had had direct personal exposure to American cultural norms that most of the other English teachers in Ahwaz didn't have.

Our excursion had gone on for fifteen minutes or so and Zarghomi had kept the conversation in Farsi, in part because it was his country, and naturally he was more comfortable in his first language. Besides, he thought of himself as my Farsi teacher as well as a colleague. I was struggling but held up my end of the conversation. At one point Zarghomi decided we should go to a shop on the other side of the street, which was full of the usual chaotic Iranian auto traffic. Zarghomi took my hand and led me through the danger zone. On reaching the arches on the opposite side, he kept holding my hand. We strolled along like this for a couple of blocks. Because of the rarity of holding another man's hand in my culture and also my limited personal experience at this touch level, I was fully aware of the contact. But I'm pretty sure Zarghomi wasn't. We chatted about

various things until I wanted to tell him something but lacked the vocabulary. I really wanted to complete my train of thought so I switched to English. The change of language reset Zarghomi's cultural and behavioral fluency --- and he dropped my hand.

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