



## **Constructing Intercultural Dialogues** Case Study # 13

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### **A Dialogue about Caste: Managing Uncomfortable Conversations**

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#### **Context**

I have been an interculturalist for eight years now. It has been quite a journey. I have been surrounded by brilliant, like-minded interculturalists and anthropologists since pursuing my MSc in culture and negotiations at a university in France. My school had students from more than 20 nationalities and at least one person from each continent. It was the perfect place to learn about cultures, not only within the classroom but also outside of it. Most of us were there to get an academic perspective on cultures we grew up reading about in books or watching on television but had not yet experienced in person. However, even though an organization can create a safe space in which members of different cultures can fraternize, it is difficult to always control day-to-day interactions.

For this case study, I would like to highlight an interaction that took place at a social gathering of fellow students of intercultural studies. At that event, I was one of the only Indian students. During an interesting conversation about similarities in cultures with German and French peers, the conversation drifted to talking about the class system in French society, which led to the German student asking about my caste. Although I tried hard to not let the feeling surface in my words or actions, I felt embarrassed. I recognized that the feeling came from the fact that caste-related discrimination still exists in India. I realized that even though the conversation was difficult, it was necessary to continue with awareness and compassion, making it a dialogue that could be a learning experience for everyone.

#### **Participants**

The conversation took place at a formal social gathering of college students who training to become professionals in intercultural domains. The dialogue happened between me, an Indian

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who had been living in France for one year, a German exchange student pursuing anthropology, and a French student who was my classmate. All individuals in the dialogue were well equipped to have a nuanced conversation about culture and approached the conversation through an academic lens.

It is worth mentioning that there were passive observers to the conversation as well, which might have added to my feeling of embarrassment – the concept of "saving face" being prominent in Indian culture.

### **Description**

Social gatherings like these were quite common among the students in this school, at this time. They were not only a way to get to know each other personally but also helped in the exchange of ideas and networking. As future interculturalists, cultural anthropologists, and intercultural communication professionals, we were going to be in situations that would require us to assign cultural context for people's behaviors, and parties like these were a perfect setting in which to have nuanced, uninhibited conversations about history and politics and how these affect cultures.

French society is quite open about criticism and many members feel no shame in openly addressing the challenges of the country and the social injustices. This openness in questioning injustices gets attributed to the French Revolution and the debate culture, where opinions are not always taken personally. Germans are known for their direct low-context communication. I believe both of these factors influenced the question that I received about my caste.

I am a practicing Hindu and am open about it. In India, caste has been a very real part of my life. Discrimination based on caste is punishable by law in India, but at a social level still prevails, especially in lower socioeconomic strata of Indian society. To tackle centuries of discrimination, one of the solutions enacted by the government was to create quotas. Scheduled castes and tribes in India are therefore now granted quotas in schools, colleges, jobs, and other government institutions.

In every bureaucratic form I have completed, therefore, I have had to identify myself either as "General" or "Scheduled caste." Scheduled castes are people historically deprived of



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opportunities due to caste identity. While in India, there was always a sense of distinction in society. As a young woman of the "General" category, I remember thinking how reservations and quotas were unfair to me. I did not realize the implications it had and the injustices that still existed.

Since I was the only Indian person in the room, I felt a certain pressure. The Republic of India is made up of 1.3 billion people, and it is difficult to speak about the country from the perspective of 1.3 billion people!

As mentioned previously, saving face is ingrained in collective society in India, where how you are perceived by society is an essential part of integration and trust building.

Comments about the country, good or bad, are often taken personally. Asking me about my caste would inevitably lead to a conversation about privilege and discrimination. This would mean that the first step for me would be to accept my privilege and then discuss the religious, historical, and political implications of caste. These are not dinner table conversations in India, as there are such varying opinions on this.

At the same time, I realized that avoiding the conversation in this situation would deprive us of an opportunity to explore just the sorts of nuances of culture we had signed up to study.

### **Dialogic features**

During the conversation, I realized that I had to be flexible, and I would have to lean away from my dominant style of communication, which (obviously) has been influenced by my experiences within Indian culture. During the conversation, I was direct in explaining that asking questions about someone's caste could be considered a difficult conversational topic, especially for Indians who have faced discrimination as a result of revealing their caste identity.

My French and German colleagues were quick to apologize for their lack of understanding and mentioned that it would be completely acceptable if I did not wish to continue with the conversation.

However, my response to the situation was to have a dialogue that helped my colleagues understand the nuances of intercultural diversity in India and what we can learn from it. For the

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first time in my life, I said what my caste was out loud and what it meant, describing also the historic significance of caste and its place in modern Indian society.

This led to quite a few revelations for my colleagues and an understanding of why discussing the topic of caste with Indians who do not view culture through an academic lens can find it a difficult subject.

### Lessons learned

This dialogue was a new experience for all of us and was a window into the type of difficult situation we can expect to encounter as interculturalists. Here were the key things we learned:

- *Assume good intent.*  
The world is in flux right now and, in the age of algorithms deciding what content we consume, it can be difficult to form non-partisan opinions. It is better to form opinions through dialogue with a person who has a lived experience of a subject. We should approach conversation with the expectation that all parties in the conversation intend to learn and grow.
- *Maintain flexibility in communication style.*  
In an intercultural interaction, it helps to go back and forth between styles of communication. In this situation, being direct about the difficult nature of the question asked by my colleague led to empathy rather than conflict. Even though it takes time to maneuver between different styles, this is a skill that can be improved through just this sort of intercultural dialogue.
- *Stay open.*  
We should stay open to difficult conversations. Instead of avoiding potentially challenging conversational topics, we can instead learn how to approach them. After all, how will people ever learn if not from someone with the local knowledge they do not yet have?



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