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Researchers should learn the local custom for introducing themselves to colleagues.

WORK ABROAD

Visa to visit

Researchers working outside their home country should be careful to brush up on local customs.

BY BARBRA RODRIGUEZ

Travel abroad as a graduate student, postdoc or visiting researcher can be daunting. You may be blindsided by cultural values and behavioural protocols that are vastly different from those of your home country, and snags may arise over tacit conventions on what to say and how to act, both in and out of the workplace.

Preparation is key if you want to avoid gaffes and missteps. So before you leave, consult websites and books such as the *Culture Shock!* series (published by Marshall Cavendish). That

way, you'll be able to familiarize yourself with the mores of your host nation and learn, for example, how people greet one another (see 'Proper introductions'), manage conflict and share lab resources.

Once abroad, chat often with colleagues and others, both in the lab and outside, and socialize whenever possible. This will help your colleagues warm to you. It can also help you to distinguish individual personality traits from broad cultural tendencies. Whatever your approach, making an effort to respect your host country's culture builds goodwill. "They don't mind if you make mistakes," says Adrian

Moore, a British team leader at the RIKEN Brain Science Institute (BSI) in Saitama, Japan. "There's one rule for foreigners and another for the Japanese."

Many nations, particularly those in northern Europe, use direct communication styles, which can feel jarring to people from other cultures. Amanda Henry, a physical anthropologist from the United States, was taken aback by frank comments from German colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig. Technicians in her lab told her candidly about the 30 or more attempts they had already made to identify an experimental contaminant. "It was, 'We tried this and it didn't work. We tried this and it didn't work,' over and over, without trying to sugarcoat it or focus on fixing it, as Americans would do," Henry says. Her words of encouragement were met with stiffened bodies and a reply that they weren't upset. "I had totally read an emotional response into something that was entirely rote for them," she says. "Now I try to hear what is there, rather than interpret — and I usually ask for feedback."

Seeking the opinions of others becomes especially important in cultures where people tend to communicate indirectly in the lab. Despina Goniotaki, a neuroscience PhD student from Greece, learnt that she had to deliberately reach out to Swiss colleagues at the University Hospital Zurich for advice. They were hesitant to give potentially negative yet possibly crucial feedback. "I presented my first cell-surface biotinylation study during an official lab meeting, but I had to arrange a meeting afterwards with a postdoc about what else to try."

EMOTIVE DIVIDE

Direct communication is one thing; expression of emotion is another. Lisandra Zepeda, a bioinformatics graduate student at the University of Copenhagen who is from Mexico, recalls her surprise when a Dane who had lost essential computer data merely frowned and said: "OK, I'll think about what to do next." "Somebody in Mexico would scream 'Ah!', but she just kept quiet," Zepeda says.

Reserved cultures can seem unfriendly to researchers from countries where people wear their feelings on their sleeves. Goniotaki, who is finishing her fifth year in Switzerland, says the lack of reaction when she grumbled or talked excitedly about experiments during breaks has meant that she speaks up less nowadays. "I would get indirect comments about how sometimes I would overreact about things that lab mates considered not so important," ►

► she says. She has developed friendships with Swiss people, but prefers to use exercise or playing the piano when she feels the need to vent frustrations.

Finding the right outlet to meet personal and professional needs also helps when dealing with challenges that relate to hierarchy. Developmental neuroscientist Douglas Campbell at the RIKEN BSI recalls that a graduate student's practice talk for a thesis defence livened up after the principal investigator left. Until that point, his colleagues had felt inhibited because of Japan's emphasis on seniority. "The lab members then shared their opinions for several hours," says Campbell, who is now a visiting scientist at the Technical University of Munich.

Other potential stumbling blocks include expectations about boundaries — both literal and figurative — between personal and professional life. Kelsey Glennon, a US population geneticist at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, found that she had to ask her students not to stand so close to her. "They're good at accommodating for my American sense of personal space and laugh about this," she says. Shira Raveh-Rubin, an Israeli postdoc at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, was taken aback when she mentioned her children to lab mates and an awkward silence ensued. She eventually found some Swiss colleagues who were more receptive to family-oriented conversations, and who shared their own stories when she mentioned family

matters. "I found that if I don't open up, then I become depressed," she says. "You have to respect others, but still really be yourself."

Cultural differences may be much less obvious, and awkward, in a large international lab: expectations for newcomers may be looser, and colleagues more accommodating, than is often the case in a lab where most people belong to the same culture. Dulce Vargas Landín, a Mexico City native and PhD student at the University of Western Australia in Perth, is now on her third overseas venture; her current lab mates hail from Croatia, India, Vietnam, Italy and Brazil, among other places. She says that their diverse approaches balance out individual differences, such as those relating to the expression of strong feelings. "It's a good result when the lab is heterogeneous," she says. "Not too much drama and you get work done."

START EARLY

Junior scientists can evaluate potential labs through study-abroad programmes such as EuroScholars, or through summer programmes or internships at institutions such as the RIKEN BSI and the Technion Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa. Graduate students, postdocs and visiting researchers can also find out beforehand whether their prospective principal investigator has worked abroad — a plus. "[Those who have] learn how to deal with different personalities and cultural backgrounds," Vargas Landín says. For instance, during a lab presentation, her Australian leader redirected questions from a

German colleague that Vargas Landín suspects were becoming too narrowly focused.

Once you're in your new country, it can be useful to have a cultural adviser, such as a language coach, who can help you to understand what sorts of issues could affect your

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relationships, and what people are likely to expect of you. Your institution may set you up with such an adviser in your host nation. You should also aim to befriend a local colleague who can fill that role. But

if you find yourself clashing with someone, it's best to speak first with the person directly concerned instead of turning to other people. That's the advice of Anne Copeland, a clinical psychologist in Boston, Massachusetts, who helps those who live and work in unfamiliar cultures. "We jump to blaming a person's character," she says. "That's too bad, because often it's a learned cultural difference."

Socializing with colleagues outside the lab can often provide insight into how people interact and help you to understand how, and when, to recalibrate your behaviour. For example, you might join in at the tea breaks that serve as social glue at many research institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa. Jonah Choiniere, a palaeontologist from the United States who is a faculty member at the University of the Witwatersrand, initially struggled with the idea of stopping work for morning teas. But he has come to appreciate them in the past four years. "It is an effective way to disseminate information and remain on good footing with your colleagues," he says.

Shared lunch hours and breaks are commonplace in France, Australia and elsewhere, and after-hours gatherings occur regularly in Asian and other nations that favour formal work relationships. "You break the ice by going out drinking and to dinner," says Moore, in Japan. "That's where they test you to find out who you really are." He says that colleagues and senior researchers are more likely to tell you in these settings if there is something they are unhappy with you about — but that none of this should be discussed back at the lab.

The reward for putting up with cultural friction away from home can be a more accepting approach to others when you return. These experiences can strengthen interpersonal and leadership skills. "Before I started travelling, I would have just gotten mad whenever there was a lab conflict," Vargas Landín says. "Now, if someone is from a different culture and thinks there's a better way to do an experiment, I can give it a try. And maybe we'll discover a new way to do things in the end." ■

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RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Proper introductions

Greetings can vary greatly between cultures, says Terri Morrison, lead author of the book *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands* (Adams Media, 2006), which provides business travellers with cultural overviews and relationship tips for more than 60 nations. Here are a few pointers to starting relationships well.

- **Formality.** In Germany, China, Japan and elsewhere, you should address a supervisor or colleague by surname only for some time. A good approach is to wait for an invitation to use a first name.
- **Personal information.** As with surnames, use comments from colleagues to guide how much to share about your private life. Natives of some host nations may be looking for shared interests. If so, you might mention possibilities such as parenthood, sports or a local delicacy.
- **Handshakes.** Those in Asian and other nations such as South Africa may prefer gentle handshakes. In Japan, it is helpful to stand far enough away from the person you're greeting, especially in formal settings,

to allow room for a bow (with eyes cast downward). A careful exchange of business cards may follow. Researchers from the United Kingdom, northern Europe or the United States, where a firm handshake and steady eye gaze suggest reliability, should remember that these behaviours can signal aggressiveness in Asian and other nations. In South Africa, a more extended type of handshake is common among some cultures, such as the Sutu and Zulu tribes. Tribal members may change hand positioning, and continue to hold hands after the handshake.

- **Interaction focus.** The United States and nations in northern Europe value workplace accomplishments and productivity, so researchers from those regions tend to use succinct greetings. Conversely, those from Latin America, Greece and the Middle East, among other regions, often view greetings as a step towards building a relationship that helps to establish your credibility. They prefer a conversation to a quick handshake, so making time for that is important. **B.R.**

CORRECTION

The Careers feature 'Visa to visit' (*Nature* **536**, 365–366; 2016) wrongly stated that Kelsey Glennon asked students from indigenous tribes not to stand so close to her. She actually made the request of all her students.