

A Brief and Practical Cultural Comparison of the United States and Germany

The prompt is to compare the place I came from and MIT: although I came from Ohio, I think to compare Germany, where I worked for a summer, with America to be easier, more interesting, and for this purpose more informative.

An easy first difference to note between the people in Germany and Americans is facial expressions. Immediately after stepping into Germany one notes that people have no facial expressions! Certainly when a German is walking around in the street the face is very closed and expressionless. Among friends facial expressions do appear, but they are much more understated than American facial expressions. I always felt as if I were wearing my entire self on my sleeve when I was among the Germans. I could tell by the way they looked at me that my smile was too big or my eyebrows would go too high when I was surprised. Of course when I returned home I noticed instantly that people once again were using their faces to communicate.

Another difference, but one that took me a week or two to notice, was interrupting. The Germans do not—do NOT—interrupt each other when they are speaking. On my first day of work, while my supervisor gave me instructions, I tried to interject “uh huh” or “yes, I understand” once a while—I think a typical practice in America. But he ignored my small recognitions and plowed on. I thought this was strange but as I watched and listened to more conversations I realized that they were really quite strict about not making any kind of interruption while another is speaking. Another person begins to speak only well after the first person is clearly finished speaking. After I got used to this custom, I liked it immensely, and have carried it back home.

Another, but smaller difference, is waving. Germans generally do not wave at each other. Americans have a tendency to wave furiously when they see each other, but Germans generally do not do that. They prefer a handshake and a verbal recognition—Good day, or good evening. And they also never ask “how are you?” unless they really mean it and they want to know. Which isn't very often. Americans, on the other hand, ask, “how's it going?” as a greeting, and they never actually mean, “I am interested in your well-being.”

Shoes and clothing were another big difference. I wear running shoes habitually. It's quite common in the States to wear running shoes or sneakers as everyday going-around shoes, but in Germany they simply do not do that. In fact I found that whenever I saw someone wearing sneakers, they always had a few other telltales about them that screamed, “American Tourist!” And of course my coworkers did call me out for wearing sneakers.

Finally, crossing the street. The Germans do not jaywalk. They always cross in the crosswalk and they always wait for the signal. In the States you can go more or less wherever your feet can carry you. But in other places it is not so. I think I could list maybe five other clear differences, some of them more complicated, some of them simple. I've definitely left out some of the more social ones, such as how is authority treated, or who is in charge at a meeting at work and how are they treated, or how is it appropriate to act among friends. But I think the key item I've learned from living abroad is that the way of doing things in one country penetrates to the smallest and most ubiquitous items imaginable, right down to small details of body language, such as how one swings their arms as they walk, or details of facial expression. My personal theory is that these tiny details are everywhere and even if we are not conscious of them, they accumulate into a big huge noticeable mass. This mass of cultural differences can mark you as a foreigner, and it can make you feel foreign and uncomfortable as well, if you don't pay attention and aren't ready for it. To experience these differences is one reason why I want to live abroad again, so that I can refresh my outlook on the small things and learn a new way.