

diversophy® & An Estonian Expat Woman in France

Enculturation is a steep learning curve. As an expat woman like me, you may have or be seeking a successful career abroad, or you may have followed your partner to a strange land, hoping to establish your own goals and professional or personal agenda. Please join me as I share some learning experiences that have helped me to understand new surroundings and have given me a basis for enjoying my life as an expat.

Mentality has a huge impact in our life and on experience abroad, so what I tend to make of my expatriate life really does matter. The most beneficial thing I have learned was how to be observant, put myself in the other person's shoes as well as come to see that the differences I and others carry can make for an interesting mix. It is all too easy to judge, to jump to unwarranted conclusions if I can only see the world as I see it and not as others see it. Judging and generalizing easily lead me to become discouraged by differences, so that I end up cocooning with familiar people and surroundings, encapsulating myself from the local way of life. However, because it is normal to feel disoriented in a new environment, I need to remind myself that anything that doesn't kill me makes me stronger.

Where to start? "Know thyself." For cultural learning to take place, I first need to know my own culture. What is it helping me to do and what is it keeping me from doing in my new environment? How does my cultural baggage affect how I feel and speak or deal with others? Being abroad brings me face-to-face with who I am and how I behave—especially when I don't "get it right" and my best efforts fall short. Under stress, I am challenged to keep an open mind, to observe as well as ask good wh-questions, exactly the opposite of what I am most tempted to do—be upset with and blame my hosts and their world.

So, being an expat woman in France invited me to take a good look at my own culture. It asked me to ask myself about the core values I carry as an Estonian woman. How, with experience, could I make myself to home in a new environment? Despite a degree in intercultural studies, I now had to face for real my desired challenge of becoming a successful intercultural go-between for others.

Fortunately, I have had an avenue to explore and clarify my cultural endowment. Over the past year and a half I have had the opportunity to both research my background and explore my daily experience abroad in a project to create *diversophy® Estonia*. This is a learning game, part of a series of intercultural tools on how to work and socialize successfully with others, in this case with Estonians like myself. It was a way of telling others about me and asking them about how we differ. It was scary—was I getting it right? It was satisfying—I was learning and sharing.

Now I am hooked—I want to go deeper. My next project, now underway, is researching Estonian values as Estonians see them in order to develop a training tool for the *Cultural Detective® Estonia*, an effective series of tools that looks at and uses core values for building

bridges across differences. As expatriate women we are all cultural detectives looking for clues to unravel the challenges we face and make sense of the stories we have to tell in search of more happy endings. My project involves interviewing people to uncover how values are implicated in stories they have to tell and then turning them into critical incidents that others can analyze and learn from. (If you have stories to tell, please get in touch—I'd love to hear and share them.)

Moving abroad? Congratulations! What an exciting opportunity—there are so many new things to learn and do if you and I are curious and open to those changes. For example, attitudes toward time: does a 9am appointment mean 9am, 8.50, any time between 9.30 and 10am, etc.? How close is “in your face”? Will I explore these differences, or will I just let them annoy me?

If you happen to be a single woman like me, you may experience risky situations related to your singledom and the downsides of being seen as the “weaker, more vulnerable sex.” Self-doubting questions such as, who can I trust and turn to in face of problems, what is appropriate behavior in a meeting or social situation in this country, what do they really mean it when they say “Come and see us soon?” or, if they say, “It’s an interesting idea,” is it what they mean or do they actually find it annoying? Finding the best way to give feedback can be puzzling to many.

I would like to recommend [diversophy®](#) (wisdom about differences)—not just because I am the creator of a game, but because it is an intercultural learning tool that immerses you in the cultural context you want to learn about. There are more than 30 specific cultures covered, plus general topics such as Cultural Competence—about the skills that are needed to work and live successfully across cultures, etc. These are handy tools that help bridge our own culture to that of others as well as provide a mirror to our “souls”.

This learning tool poses real life situations in a safe environment and participants learn through sharing and analyzing. The tool also helps create empathy and tolerance for each other’s differences and those posed by the culture under study. For example, when we say “no” do we actually mean “no” or just say it out of politeness, expecting the other person to repeat the request? When we don’t respond to a fact and remain silent, are we in agreement or in disagreement?

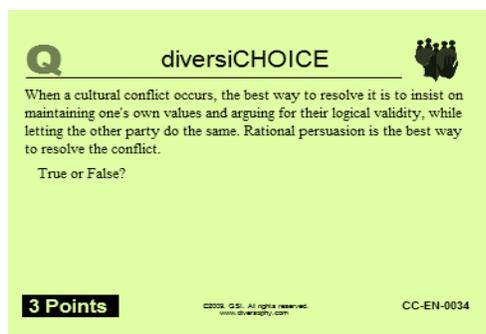
I often feel like a child – scared, fascinated, or happy in face of myriad of possibilities that expatriate life offers. I think even as adults, we are still children deep inside. As children learn best through play, so do

adults. The power and the joy of learning through games derive from the presence of four elements of play that occur naturally in almost all cultures.¹

- **ΑΓΩΝ** the classical Greek root of our word “agony”—how we feel when giving our best effort, struggling against the odds, entering the “home stretch,” or “hitting the wall.”
- **ΑΛΕΑ** the sense of unpredictability, chance, not knowing what will happen next—“the luck of the draw,” “the roll of the dice.” (*Alea* was the Roman word for a game of dice.)
- **VERTIGO** disorienting the mind & senses, “topsy-turvy,” losing the normal frame of reference, our customary bearings.
- **ΜΙΜΟΣ** miming, imitation, entering another's reality, playing a new role, “walking a mile in someone else's shoes.”

diversophy® is a collection of factoids, critical choices, risks, wisdom and reflective questions played by anywhere from three to eight people around a table taking turns, picking up a card and facing the challenge, as in life, to whatever has come their way. The color-coded card categories are named to fit each challenge: **diversiSMARTS** cards test one’s factual knowledge about a culture, **diversiCHOICE** ask us to choose appropriate behavior in our new cultural setting, while **diversiRISK** cards subject us to surprise happenings in an unfamiliar context, some positive surprises, and others disappointing results from our behavior or mere presence in alien surroundings. **diversiGUIDE** cards give us wisdom from the new culture itself and from those who have fathomed it well, while **diversiSHARE** cards ask us to compare the new culture and approaches to everyday human situations with what we were raised to believe or do.

Developing **diversophy**® (wisdom about differences) in a playful way can save us some stink and mess as we try to cope with work and life away from home. Let’s play! Here is a sample selection of cards that you can experiment with.

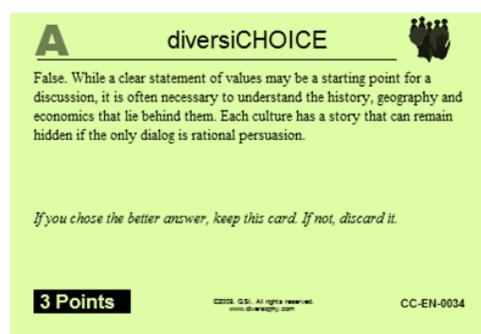


Q **diversiCHOICE** 

When a cultural conflict occurs, the best way to resolve it is to insist on maintaining one's own values and arguing for their logical validity, while letting the other party do the same. Rational persuasion is the best way to resolve the conflict.

True or False?

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A **diversiCHOICE** 

False. While a clear statement of values may be a starting point for a discussion, it is often necessary to understand the history, geography and economics that lie behind them. Each culture has a story that can remain hidden if the only dialog is rational persuasion.

If you chose the better answer, keep this card. If not, discard it.

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¹ These four game elements were first identified by the French psychological anthropologist Roger Caillois (1913-1978), in *Les Jeux et les Hommes: le masque et le vertige* (Gaillmard, 1967). They were recently described in detail in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (Harper, 1990).

Q **diversiGUIDE** 

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."
Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa

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Q **diversiRISK –** 

You just can't take it any more! Ignorance, negative attitudes, little insults about your cultural identity have built up to the point where you feel rejected, dismissed and so frustrated that you feel like angrily attacking the people around you. Instead, you withdraw and no longer contribute actively to your work team.

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diversiSHARE **F**

Your experience tells you that the French are not "wasting time" when not working toward a specific goal. They simply have different, looser attitudes toward deadlines. Given this, how do you convey a sense of urgency to a French counterpart, particularly if you are in an overseas office and can't have a strong effect on the decision making process in France? Share with your team.

After you share, your teammates will make a French gesture that says, "Let's get on with it," or, "Let's get to work!" Looking determined they bring both arms in front of them and clasp the hands and rub palms together a couple of times. Keep this card.

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diversiRISK – **F**

In France, "No," is not the end of the conversation, it's the beginning. You left the debate too soon!

How might you think, feel or react in this situation? Tell your team, and then discard this card.

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diversiRISK + **F**

You go as high in the hierarchy as you can to find the decision makers in your work with a French organization. This pays off in both speed and the quality of decisions you are able to bring about.

How might you think, feel or react in this situation? Tell your team, and then keep this card.

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diversiGUIDE **EE**

Tee tööd, siis tuleb ka armastus.
(Work, and love will come.) This is often used ironically.
A.H.Tammsaare (1878-1940), Estonian author of Truth and Justice (Tõde ja õigus), a pentology (1926–1933)

After reading this card aloud, any team member, including you, may comment on it. Keep this card.

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Q **diversiCHOICE** **EE**

You give a task to your Estonian employee and say you are available if she or he has questions. Rarely does anyone come to you with questions. This means that he or she:

- A. Prefers to find her or his own way to do the task.
- B. Has found a peer to help when needed.
- C. Expects you to regularly check on how she or he is doing.

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A **diversiCHOICE** **EE**

A. most often, followed by B. Estonians generally like to work on their own and at their own pace. They expect you to tell them what you want them to do, not how to do it. If you start checking on them, they will feel incompetent. They may find it difficult to ask for help from a superior so you can check in a roundabout way by offering to clarify the task or making it easier to understand and deal with.

If you chose the best answer, keep this card. If not, discard it.

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diversiSHARE **EE**

Many Estonians believe in alternative medicine and home remedies. They also tend to seek further advice from a healer after getting a diagnosis from a doctor, for example. Do people prefer traditional or alternative medicine in your culture?

After you share, ask your team mates if any of them have ever called out ghosts or spirits of dead people. Keep this card.

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diversiGUIDE **EE**

Saada suureks vaimult.
(To become great in spirit.)
Jakob Hurt (1839-1906), founder of the Estonian national ideology.

This cornerstone of Estonian cultural heritage tells its people to value wisdom and strive for intellectual values.

After reading this card aloud, any team member, including you, may comment on it. Keep this card.

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Q **diversiCHOICE** **EE**

You want your Estonian employee to do a more urgent task. You should:

- A. Tell him or her emphatically in word and gesture that it is urgent.
- B. Not worry - Estonians are good at multitasking.
- C. Tell the person clearly and politely what needs to be done by when.

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A **diversiCHOICE** **EE**

C. Estonians tend to focus on finishing one task at a time and don't feel comfortable with interruptions, so be clear in a polite way. Often you can gauge it through silent protest.

If you chose the best answer, keep this card. If not, discard it.

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diversiRISK – **EE**

You are offended by the show of opulence in Tallinn. You realize that many Estonians strive for elitism, i.e. it's important to drive a good make of car, have a private house (even if it means a huge mortgage), etc. Success and competition are important in Estonian society. You wonder--at what cost?

How might you think, feel or react in this situation? Tell your team, and then discard this card.

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diversiRISK + **EE**

You observe that many Estonians feel uncomfortable when strangers touch them. You do not feel offended if they do not touch you. You avoid stereotyping them as "cold Nordic people."

How might you think, feel or react in this situation? Tell your team, and then keep this card.

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diversophy® games are now available in three media: in paper card form, as Android apps and in a Second Life virtual environment. For those teaching or working in organizations, customized versions are possible on request (e.g., PowerPoint and Flash versions). In addition, it can also be fitted to your own e-learning platform. For more samples and information about the history and use of the games, please check www.diversophy.com. If you would like to find out more or have any comments, please get in touch.