

Case Study #1

Module 4: Working Effectively in an Intercultural Environment

In my lab, the PI is from Germany but came to the US to run her own lab, and she has recruited quite a lot of postdocs from Germany, including me. There are a few members of our lab who are not from Germany, including my benchmate Susan. Every Friday morning the whole lab (including our PI) gets together for coffee and donuts in the break room down the hall from the lab, and we chat informally, but about work - our current research projects, or the most recent departmental seminar speaker. It's a way of exchanging ideas before we get going on experiments.

Of course, we speak English when we are talking about lab stuff, including during these sessions. But today, my PI and I were the first to arrive, and we started chatting about the World Cup in German before anyone else had joined us. Another postdoc, Susan, came to the door but turned around once he heard us talking. She came back later but after group meeting had been going on for a while. Emily, a new grad student I work closely with, walked in and sat down at the far end of the table, like she didn't know if she should join us yet. Eventually, others walked in, including Susan, and we switched to English as we all got started eating breakfast.

I didn't say anything at the time, but I left the meeting feeling uncomfortable because I realized that maybe this happens more than we notice and that others do not always feel included in the conversations when we are speaking German. I immediately thought about something that happened at a nearby university where students were speaking Chinese in the hallway and others in the department felt uncomfortable. At the same time, I'm torn - I'm not sure what I should have done differently because speaking German with my PI is part of what makes my relationship with my mentor special since we have this cultural connection.

Reflection Prompts:

1. What issues or questions does this case raise for you?
2. In this case, how could the postdoc maintain the special connection with their PI while being inclusive of others in the lab?
3. What should the next step be for the postdoc?
4. How does this case make you think about how you might manage this situation as a PI or supervisor in a future role?
5. What other behaviors in a research group setting may make people feel in a similar manner?