

Case Study #2

Module 4: Working Effectively in an Intercultural Environment

My PI is originally from Germany but did her PhD in the US, a postdoc at an elite research organization in Germany, and then came back to the US to run her own lab. She has a mix of grad students and postdocs from Europe, the US and Asia, split by thirds with about three to four in each group. I'm from Germany and am invited to dinner occasionally by my PI since we share culture and language. My benchmate Andrew is from an elite research institution in the Midwest in the US. We generally get along great, and share both research and personal interests.

Since joining the lab, one thing I have noticed is that Andrew can be quite vigorous and assertive in his questioning of other students and postdocs in our group meetings and in the larger research-in-progress meetings held by the research center where we work. His questions are smart and insightful, but sometimes they are delivered in a way that makes me uncomfortable. He jumps in quickly, assumes something is wrong or an idea won't work, and barely gives the speaker a chance to answer.

Yesterday, at group meeting, our PI was visibly upset at Andrew's inquiry of a first-year grad student from Asia and her initial experimental research plan. I could see since I was watching her reaction while Andrew was engaged with Xin. But she didn't say anything at the meeting, no one did.

Reflection Prompts:

1. What issues or questions does this case raise for you?
2. Where and how do you see cultures intersecting?
3. How could the postdoc maintain a special connection with their PI while addressing her own discomfort with this exchange?
4. What should the next step be for the postdoc?
5. How does this case make you think about how you might manage this situation as a PI or supervisor in a future role?
6. What other behaviors in a research group setting may make people feel in a similar manner?