Faux Amis?
Intercultural and Interpersonal Relations Between Americans and the French

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Writer and traveler Bill Bryson comments in his book, *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe*, “On my first trip to Paris, I kept wondering: ‘Why does everyone hate me so much?’”¹ Bryson’s words exemplify one of the many generalizations about the French—that they are rude, arrogant, inhospitable, and unfriendly. Other stereotypes of the French are that they: are cultural and language elitists, engage in endless discussions that never reach conclusions, are perfectionists, are reluctant to change, and show no respect for rules and deadlines.² In contrast, the French often label Americans as being overly friendly, superficial, loud, and uncultured. Other stereotypes of Americans are that they: believe that the American way is the only way, act before thinking, need to be first everywhere, are obsessed with money, and exaggerate greatly.³

While there certainly are people who may embody these stereotypes, in general these negative views through which the French and Americans view each other are broad, untruthful, and stem from cultural differences that are not understood. At the same time, however, although stereotypes and generalizations tend to be exaggerated descriptions of a culture, they also provide a window through which it is possible to examine cultural misunderstandings between Americans and the French.

It is important to note that the stereotypes, examples, and descriptions of cultural behaviors such as those that will be discussed in this paper must not be considered as the ultimate framework by which American and French cultures can be defined. They do not explain every characteristic or component of these two cultures and do not apply to every

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³ Asselin and Mastron, 36
individual; at the same time they are not oversimplifications that should be disregarded as unfounded and clichéd. These observations must be, in the words of cultural anthropologists Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, “…considered as illustrative of larger basic patterns rather than isolated fragments or mere generalizations.” With that in mind, one can appreciate these observations and inferences as devices that provide a way to begin comprehending cultural misunderstandings but which only skim the surface of deeper explorations.

The objective of this thesis is to provide observations of widespread patterns of French and American cultural behaviors, analyze these trends, and in doing so offer insight into the possibility of reducing the tensions that can arise from intercultural misunderstandings between Americans and the French. The main emphasis is not to completely explain every aspect of French or American society but instead to consider archetypes of cultural behaviors that are created, conditioned, and propagated by the dominant middle classes in each country.

One of the reasons why Americans and the French seem to have so much trouble understanding and relating to each other is because of the different ways in which they define interpersonal relations. There are numerous subdivisions within the topic of interpersonal relations, especially when examining them from an intercultural point of view, but there are several specific areas that particularly exemplify disparities between French and American cultures: public and private spheres, personal relationships, and cultural concepts of individualism and the self. Through an exploration and analysis of

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Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall. *Understanding Cultural Differences.* (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1990) xv
these three areas, one might begin to shed light on cultural interactions in order to find the logic behind misunderstandings between Americans and the French.

The French and Americans seem to have very different—almost contrary at times—ideas in terms of how they define ‘public’ and ‘private’ parts of their lives. This notion of public versus private is illustrated through various elements, such as in communication and behavior. For example, the simple act of smiling can take on very different connotations between one culture and the other. These differences can provoke misunderstandings between Americans and the French, and may be one of the many reasons behind why stereotypes are formed. Americans are stereotyped for smiling a lot—even too much—which gives them the reputation of being overly friendly and sometimes superficial. In contrast, the French are stereotyped for never smiling, which gives them the reputation of being rude and arrogant. In the United States, one may smile at a complete stranger as a way to be polite in certain social situations. When Americans pass someone they do not know on the street, there is a good chance that they will exchange glances and will smile, nod, or even say a quick “hello.”

But in France, smiling at strangers is behavior that can have entirely different connotations.

Jean-Benoît Nadeau, author of Pas Si Fous Ces Français, explains the French view on smiling: “Ne souriez que si on vous le demande. En France, quelqu’un qui sourit sans raison au premier abord est une pute, un hypocrite, un idiot, un colporteur ou un Américain, ce qui n’est guère mieux.” (Only smile when they ask it of you. In France,

someone who smiles for no reason when making a first impression is a prostitute, an idiot, a street peddler, or an American, which is hardly better.) The French do not have a particular aversion to smiling itself, but they reserve their smiles only for people they know well. This helps explain why the French may sometimes appear, at first impression, to be distant or unfriendly. Likewise it offers insight into why tourists in France, especially Americans who are accustomed to a more open and friendly public, may feel ignored or offended.

Americans and the French also differ on what information they consider to be public and private. In the United States, the subject of one’s name and occupation is typically public information that is readily shared, but in France, that information often is considered to be private. This is yet another example of one of the many cultural differences that can, with other disparities, lead to misunderstandings between Americans and French. As Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow, authors of Pas Si Fous, Ces Français! point out:

Cette réticence à se présenter par son nom peut être une des raisons pour lesquelles on accuse si souvent les Français d’être distants. Ces incidents n’ont pourtant rien à voir avec un manqué d’hospitalité ou de chaleur. Les Américains et les Français ont simplement des idées divergentes sur les informations que l’on partage avec des inconnus et celles qu’on ne divulgue pas.\(^7\)

\(^7\) Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow, Pas Si Fous, Ces Français! (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005) 43-44

(This reluctance to present oneself by one’s name can be one of the reasons for which people so often accuse the French of being distant. These incidents, however, have nothing to do with a lack of hospitality or warmth. The Americans and the French simply have diverging ideas on what information one shares and does not share with those one...
The French grow up in a culture in which they are taught that personal information—such as their name and occupation—should not be revealed to someone they do not know well, and a certain level of closeness must be reached between people before they open up to each other.\(^8\) Simply stated, the French reveal much less information in public than Americans do. As Gilles Asselin and Ruth Mastron explain in their book *Au Contraire: Figuring Out The French*:

A French person who reveals details about his or her private life to *un inconnu* (an unknown person) would be considered promiscuous in the sense that he or she is sharing intimate information with a total stranger in the same way he or she would with a spouse, parent, or close friend. This is not acceptable to the French, who open up only to their families and to friends with whom they have long and trusted relationships.\(^9\)

In contrast, Americans grow up in a culture in which names and occupations are typically some of the first topics of discussion when people meet each other for the first time. They may expect similar standards of social conduct when they go to France, and therefore may be surprised when they are treated differently by the French. It is quite possible that travelers who feel this way do not realize that what Americans consider to be public information may be considered private by the French. In fact, to the French, talking about one’s private life to those outside one’s intimate circles is often considered inappropriate and shallow.\(^{10}\)

Americans and the French have different views not only on what information should be part of public and private spheres, but also on the notion of privacy in relation to personal space. In the United States, privacy is often viewed as staying out of other

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\(^8\) Asselin and Mastron, 55  
\(^9\) Asselin and Mastron, 56  
\(^{10}\) Asselin and Mastron, 55
people’s business and also as having time to be physically alone, without others and without being interrupted. But in France, privacy is seen as more of a protective measure. As Asselin and Mastron explain, it seems that “…there is a stronger expressed need for privacy in France than in the United States in terms of physical privacy (protecting one’s territory) and psychological privacy (protecting one’s private realm).”

This concept of protection through privacy may partially explain why the French are sometimes perceived as rude and inhospitable. As Asselin and Mastron further note, “The French psychological privacy, the need to keep things to oneself or a tendency to not open up… often strikes Americans in France. There sometimes seems to be a wall around peoples’ private lives, the height of which varies according to the person they meet.”

The less a French person knows someone he or she is meeting, the higher that wall will be, and the more unfriendly and rude the French person can seem to someone like an American. I have noticed this “psychological wall” in my own experiences of meeting and interacting with several groups of French business students who study at Miami for a semester each fall. My fellow French majors and I were thrilled to have the opportunity to meet the French students, and upon meeting them we eagerly introduced ourselves, offering our name, our year in school, and other such ‘personal’ information. I was quite disappointed and frustrated with their responses; we were warmly welcoming them to our university and country, offering our friendship as a way for them to meet new people and be comfortable, and they hardly responded, seemingly indifferent and aloof.

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11 Asselin and Mastron, 53
12 Asselin and Mastron, 54
13 Asselin and Mastron, 54
Nevertheless, my friends and I were persistent; we continued to interact with the French students when the opportunity presented itself, and over time we discovered that the more time we spent with the French students, the more open and friendly they became towards us, and the more the protective psychological wall around them disappeared. In reflection, I now realize that the French students’ initial behavior when we first met them was more likely a product of their cultural norms than it was a display of indifference or unfriendliness towards us personally.

Although Americans also have a strong sense of personal privacy, they often express it more through the notion of a “body bubble,” which illustrates their desire to have a certain amount of space between them and anyone or anything else. Americans tend to prefer a larger physical space around them; a bubble of space that, if entered, sometimes makes them uncomfortable in certain situations. In fact, Americans tend to like open spaces in general, which is not surprising, considering the United States is a big country with a significant amount of open space. As Hall and Hall note, “There is an expansiveness to the American character that is undoubtedly related to the geographical size of the country…”\(^\text{14}\) Because of this, Americans tend to stand at a distance when talking to others, while the French tend to stand much closer when talking, sometimes even nose-to-nose, which Americans find very intrusive when talking to French people. I have noticed on multiple occasions that when I speak with my French friends, I find myself gradually backing away from them because I unconsciously feel that my personal space is being invaded. French and Americans simply do not have the same sense of

\(^{14}\) Hall, 141-142
physical boundaries and personal space, a fact that helps illustrate on a broader scale their differing ideas about notions of private and public areas of life.

Living space also reflects the difference of how French and Americans view private and public spheres. Americans may be surprised by the prevalence of walls, gates, shutters, and drawn curtains on houses in France, and may think that French homes give off a closed, unwelcoming appearance to match a perceived unfriendliness of their inhabitants. In contrast, French people may be struck by how American homes can be so large and open with numerous windows that seem to prevent any amount of privacy. Front lawns seem to blend into sidewalks and it can be difficult to tell where the private property ends and the public street begins. At the same time, the considerable amount of space that Americans tend to have also serves as an invisible wall of privacy within itself, lowering the need for actual physical boundaries. Many French people do not have the large amount of space that Americans take for granted, and therefore may exhibit certain behaviors (such as closing the window shutters) that protect their privacy and help compensate for the lack of space.

As Nadeau observes, “Les Français ont un sens prononcé de la vie privée et détestent être envahis.” (The French have a pronounced sense of private life and hate being invaded.) To the French, having so many large and open windows would allow strangers to see into their home and consequently would invade their personal, private lives. Nadeau and Barlow explain further in their book 60 Million Frenchmen Can’t Be

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15 Carroll, 14
16 Carroll, 13
17 Asselin and Mastron, 81-82
18 Nadeau, Les Français Aussi Ont Un Accent 44
Wrong, “The French house is a categorical affirmation of its owners’ privacy. You never see the inside of people’s homes from the street.” 19 French houses, with their infamous window curtains and shutters, embody the French notion of privacy. The action of closing the shutters on their houses and keeping their homes private parallels the way that the French seem to put up an invisible wall and appear “closed” when interacting with those in their public spheres. Nearly every French home has shutters framing every window, which are shut each night and separate the house and its inhabitants from the outside world. The concept of functioning window shutters is often foreign to an American; the majority of the time if a house in the States has shutters, they are strictly for aesthetic purposes.

As is illustrated by these observations and descriptions, the French tend to have a very distinct separation between private and public spheres. Who or what lies within those spheres typically cannot easily move from one to the other, and certain levels can be harder to reach than others. Polly Platt, in her book French or Foe?, illustrates these levels in terms of concentric circles which define certain spheres of public, private, personal and intimate life. And the concentric circles of the French are different than those of Americans because of the way that each culture views personal and private aspects of life.

The French generally feel no connection to people that they do not know, and this is especially true for French people who work in public places such as at stores, shops, banks, or the post office, where the counter physically and metaphorically separates the

19 Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow, Sixty Million Frenchmen Can’t Be Wrong. (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003) 36
people on either side of it. The French have very clear boundaries, by which they firmly abide, for what constitutes their relationships with specific people. Unknown customers in a French store are *les inconnus*—they are strangers whom the people who work at the store do not know and to whom they generally feel no connection. In France, unless the customer is a regular, he or she is a stranger and therefore deserves no special attention. French storeowners do not hate customers—they simply do not feel they should go out of their way for someone who is in the outer levels of their public circles. In contrast, American businesses, stores, and shops usually operate by the motto ‘The customer is always right,’ and they will do their best to ensure that the customer is satisfied. The American style of interpersonal interactions in the context of business is influenced by the high importance that the capitalist American society places on money. But in France, the customer is not always right because the customer is seen as a guest ‘invading’ the owner’s private sphere. So if the owner is not happy with the customer’s behavior or wants to do something a certain way, then the owner is right because the store is his or her property. Furthermore, French society does not view money in the way that American society does, so the way in which the French operate their businesses is not as strongly focused on the goal of earning a profit. A French storeowner may be more indifferent to a casual or first-time customer than an American storeowner might be, the latter of which would likely be influenced by American capitalist and entrepreneurial cultural values and would see a new customer as an important investment.

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20 Asselin and Mastron, 81
21 Nadeau and Barlow, *Pas Si Fous Ces Français!*, 44
These differences explain why Americans who enter French shops and other places of commerce may feel affronted and unwelcome. As Wylie explains in *Contemporary French Culture and Society*, “…the French do not hate Americans; they simply live in [*cercles*]. They live in their own [*cercles*] and are responsible for what takes place inside them, but they are not responsible for people outside of those [*cercles*]. They are indifferent to them. It’s not that the French dislike Americans. Generally speaking, they dislike people outside of their own [*cercles*].”

Despite these patterns of behavior in public and private spheres, the French are not hopelessly impolite and distant, nor are Americans excessively superficial and overly friendly. The two cultures simply view public and private life differently. Asselin and Mastron give a comparison that clearly illustrates this difference: “We often use the metaphor of a coconut and a peach to contrast French and American personalities. The coconut has a tough and not very appealing shell that contains pleasant meat and liquid within. The peach, on the other hand, is soft and inviting but has a hard core that is difficult or impossible to get into.”

As this quote illustrates, Americans generally seem to make friends easily and quickly, but their relationships may be superficial because their inner “cores” can be hard to reach. On the other hand, the French certainly can be very warm and welcoming, but they reserve that behavior for people they know well—people who have passed through the hard outer “shell” to be a part of their inner circles of private life. As Wylie explains, “The French personality, like the French house, has a

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23 Asselin and Mastron, 55
great wall around it, a protective wall that helps them survive."²⁴ Open, friendly, smiling Americans often find it quite difficult to establish personal relationships with the seemingly aloof and unapproachable French people, which can lead to problems in French-American relations.²⁵

However, despite these disparities between how Americans and the French view private and public spheres in interpersonal interactions, it is certainly possible for Americans and French people to understand and develop relationships with each other. There is no doubt that cross-cultural relationships take time and effort, but by examining and analyzing French and American views on interpersonal interactions, it is possible to gain insight into how those relationships can be formed and maintained.

In the same way that one cannot easily break through the hard shell of a coconut to reach the sweet fruit inside at first try, one cannot simply break through a French person’s psychological outer layers and move immediately to his or her private sphere. It is a gradual process due to the different way in which French and Americans define relationships, both platonic and romantic.

American friendships tend to be based on mutual interests, commonalities, physical proximity (such as being neighbors), and shared activities. Asselin and Mastron give specific examples of how American friendships can often form:

While working out at the gym, chatting over coffee after church, arranging carpools to kids’ soccer practice, hanging out at the mall, borrowing garden tools, and similar everyday connections, Americans discover common interests and


²⁵ Wylie, “Socialization” 59
affinities they can pursue with invitations to meals, to a movie after work, or to a football game on Saturday.  

In contrast, it is less of a cultural norm for the French to develop friendships simply from having shared space or activities. For example, the French are not as likely as Americans are to automatically consider their neighbors as friends or even acquaintances. Likewise, while colleagues from work may become well acquainted, it is not expected that they will become close friends. Furthermore, close friendships tend to rarely be made across social classes.  

In comparison to Americans the French seem to not be quite as willing to initially invest in a person’s friendship, but once they do, it tends to be a long-lasting commitment. Compared to the French, Americans seem to have a higher number of casual friendships that come and go more frequently. When the French form a friendship, they see it as an emotional investment that should not be taken lightly.  

This is why it can seem challenging to befriend French people: it takes a significant amount of time and effort to move from their public sphere into their private sphere. But once that happens, there is a well-established bond that will continue.

Jennifer Harlay, an American who spent 20 years living and working in France, recently left her job as a marketing manager at a French auto supply company and returned to the United States. In a personal interview, she talked about her experiences with French and American interpersonal relations. She particularly noted the different views on friendship in the two cultures:

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26 Asselin and Mastron, 81  
27 Asselin and Mastron, 81-83  
28 Asselin and Mastron, 83
We have such good friends over there [France]; we’ll never lose them. Our friends here [in the United States] are nice, but you solve your problems on your own… When we are struggling, our French friends are offering us money, a place in their homes, even though they don’t have lots of money or have a tiny apartment. You never see that from our American friends.”

Harlay’s words demonstrate some of the differences between how Americans and the French view and define the concept of friendship. Her personal experience is a clear example of the fact that while the French and Americans certainly both value friendships, they express them in different ways.

Even language illustrates the different ways that French and Americans view friendship. In American English, the word “friend” is used much more often and is used to designate a broader scope of people than the word “ami” is in French. While American English certainly has a variety of words to indicate different kinds of friends, ‘friend’ is used most often because it is a general term that encompasses many meanings, serving as a verbal shortcut that saves the trouble of explaining the differences between ‘friend’ and all the other terms available. Americans may even use ‘friend’ to designate someone they hardly know, which is presumptuous to the French, who clearly distinguish between different levels of friendship. The French language has a somewhat complicated array of various terms to designate even the most subtle of differences in levels of friendship, most of which are used. Un(e) ami(e) (a friend), une connaissance (an acquaintance, someone one knows superficially), une relation (mainly a colleague or other professional contact), un(e) camarade (a good pal from youth, school, university, or military service), un copain/une copine (a buddy, sometimes means girlfriend or

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29 Jennifer Harlay, personal interview, 14 Apr. 2009.
30 Carroll, 77-78
boyfriend), *un(e) ami(e) d’enfance* (childhood friend), and *un(e) meilleur(e) ami(e)* (best friend) all specifically indicate different levels of relationships, among which the French clearly distinguish. These differences are not always clear for an American learning French, and even after 12 years of studying French I have only recently started to notice them. However, after studying abroad in the French-speaking country of Luxembourg, traveling to France, and spending a significant amount of time around native French speakers, I have become more sensitive to how I use “ami” and “friend” and have started to make a conscious effort to distinguish between a true friend and someone who is more of an acquaintance.

It is not only the process of becoming friends that differs between French and American cultures, but also the way in which the friendships are defined and maintained. Americans tend to consider friends as people who understand, support, and are in agreement with each other, and who therefore generally do not argue or have strongly opposing views. Americans see arguing as a negative reflection on friendship that indicates instability and tension in the relationship. When their friends make mistakes, Americans feel it is their duty not to criticize and chastise, but instead to provide encouragement and give positive support.  

In contrast, the French generally do not believe that friendship needs to be solely based on commonalities. They prefer to cultivate distinction and avoid boredom; they expect to disagree and criticize from time to time and find it tedious to always be in agreement. French friends may be very direct or even frankly critical of each other, but

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31 Carroll, 78
this is part and parcel of interpersonal relationships and not necessarily viewed as insulting. In fact, the French appreciate criticism and argument as a way of gaining wisdom. In the eyes of the French, if friends only support and agree with each other, then they will never have the chance to learn from their mistakes and faults. Disagreement in friendships is used to challenge and motivate others, but does not threaten the actual relationship. As Asselin and Mastron explain:

Since the relationship is not based on agreement, it is not threatened by disagreement, and French friends expect one another to comment honestly on their actions and choices. Support can be expressed in confrontation as well as by acquiescence. The bond between friends is not fragile and can stand up to this tension, even be strengthened and deepened by it.

The French tend to highly respect those that are not afraid to be bold, state their opinions, engage in a debate, and offer criticism. This can be a challenging cultural adjustment for Americans to make, particularly because American culture encourages harmony, agreement, and the commonly heard ‘constructive criticism.’ Harlay discovered this challenge while working in France and it took some time for her to realize some of the differences in French and American interpersonal relations. During group meetings at her job, she had the tendency to hold back, patiently listen to everyone, and keep her opinions to herself. And she was shocked at how often her French co-workers would jump into the conversation, cut each other off, and get into passionate debates. “It was hard for me to adapt to that; I would shut up like an American at first. Like an American I prefer to hear what everyone else has to say first before making a decision. We

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32 Asselin and Mastron, 89
33 Asselin and Mastron, 89
[Americans] listen to what the group has to say, but not the French.” But over time she began to realize that her co-workers were not the ones acting out of place—she was:

It takes a while to understand it…. I thought, ‘if they debate with me, it means they don’t like me.’ But then I realized that if I don’t express my opinions and debate, I’m not very well respected because I don’t get involved. Even on our evaluations one French co-worker said that I should speak up more. It doesn’t matter if you’re right or wrong, just if you debate it. If you’re strong about that debate, then you’re in.

Because the French typically do not take friendship lightly and invest heavily in their friendships, they see their friendships as strong bonds that should not be weakened by petty disagreements or arguments. The same mentality is applied to romantic relationships in France. While in the United States cultural norms may cause people to think that couples who frequently argue have a weak or faulty relationship, in France couples often do not hesitate to argue because they see themselves as two unique individuals with different opinions and consider their relationship to be stronger than trivial arguments. As Raymonde Carroll explains concisely in her book *Cultural Misunderstandings*:

…the ideal American couple always agrees. No contradictions…no corrections…no admonition, no intervention, no advice, no disagreement, no radically different opinions, no fighting, no frowns, no disapproving silences, no reproaches, no anger, and especially, especially, no yelling. All conflict, all threat of conflict or suggestion of conflict, is a bad sign: the couple has ‘problems’ and probably will not last.

And in the same way that American friends are supposed to support and encourage each other, so should couples as well. Carroll also writes,

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34 Harlay, personal interview
35 Harlay, personal interview
36 Carroll, 65
...the absence of conflict is not enough: there has to be manifest support of the other, which must constantly be reaffirmed. If my companion is attacked, I must immediately defend him or her...I must not say bad things about her to others...I must encourage him in his wildest undertakings... And I do this... to show him or her my love. In order to prove my love completely, I must support him without reserve or hesitation...\(^\text{37}\)

In times of dissonance and argument between couples, an American may worry that the relationship is at stake and try to diffuse a tense situation by compromising or placating. As Asselin and Mastron explain, “The husband and wife in an ideal American marriage walk hand in hand through life, smiling sweetly at one another. The French ideal is harder to picture, but the couple may very well be gesticulating wildly, yelling at each other at the top of their lungs—but at least they’re not bored.”\(^\text{38}\) In contrast to Americans, the French may not think that even serious arguments indicate major problems, and feel that nothing truly essential is threatened by an argument. Harlay was struck by this French passion for arguing. “They will debate even with people they don’t know...but if you aren’t sensitive and can handle that, they’ll have respect for you. In France speaking your word tells who you are, establishes your credibility. It’s part of being French. Their emblem is the rooster—the rooster fights back. But being American is assimilation into society.”\(^\text{39}\)

In general the French do not fear an argument; in fact they love a good debate, especially about topics that can spark passionate conversations. Americans, many of whom are taught to avoid sensitive topics (i.e. politics and religion) in public conversations, are often taken aback by the eagerness and vehemence with which the

\(^{37}\) Carroll, 65  
\(^{38}\) Asselin and Mastron, 101-102  
\(^{39}\) Harlay, personal interview
French tend to discuss such “taboo” topics.\textsuperscript{40} For example, I particularly remember how the French students at Miami whom I befriended loved heated political discussions and constantly asked other Americans and myself questions about our political views. And there were several times at dinner when some of the French students were in such a passionate argument that the other Americans and I felt uncomfortable because of the mounting tension. We were worried that the discussion would end badly, but to our surprise by the end of dinner the French students were still on good terms. We learned first-hand that the French enjoy a good debate and love to show their opinions; arguing is often a game for them but is not harmful to a relationship. But in the eyes of Americans, as Asselin and Mastron note, “bickering, argument, and open disagreement are signs that people are not getting along well and that the relationship may be in danger of falling apart.”\textsuperscript{41}

Interpersonal relations and interactions between people of French and American cultures become further complicated because there is an element that the French consider highly important and Americans do not understand—the art of \textit{séduction}. For the French, \textit{séduction} —in the French, not American, sense of the word—is a very important component in interpersonal relationships, and also plays a significant role in making connection with \textit{les inconnus}. The French define \textit{séduction} as a means of attracting someone by being convincing and irresistibly charming; it can be playful, serious, or

\textsuperscript{40} Asselin and Mastron, 89-90
\textsuperscript{41} Asselin and Mastron, 89
both, and is a game that can be played by anyone at any time. Platt offers an example of the French idea of *séduction* and how it can be used in various ways:

Ande, my Serbian husband, came to France at 18 and absorbed Frenchness into his bones. I watch him checking in at the airport when his luggage is at least 10 kilos overweight. He goes to the prettiest airline checker, works his eyes, puts his foot on the scales till they register 100 kilos overweight, and works his eyes again at the agent. She bursts out laughing and waves him through without charging him a cent. In this scenario, Platt’s husband was irresistibly charismatic and “seduced” the airline employee into not making him pay for his overweight luggage. There was nothing sexual or suggestive about the interaction; instead Ande used the art of *séduction* to woo the airline employee and make a connection with her. Despite the fact that he was a complete stranger, *un inconnu*, and was in a public setting, he was able to get past that well-known hard outer shell of a French person’s personality, which is often so hard to breach. It can be possible in France to connect with a stranger, but it often requires some effort and the knowledge of the art of *séduction*. Platt concisely explains this concept: “You have to woo them delicately, patiently, skillfully from Them to Us. As the French would say, for circumstances as far from the boudoir as an Anglo-Saxon could imagine, ‘You have to seduce them.’”

The French concept of *séduction* is also connected to the idea of what Americans might call “flirting,” and many French consider it to be an implicit part of most male-female interactions in France, even in normal, everyday circumstances. There tends to

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42 Asselin and Mastron, 94
44 Platt, 63
45 Asselin and Mastron, 94
46 “Flirting” in this sense refers to the English verb “to flirt” and not to the French verb “flirter”
be an unstated assumption that men and women want to please and charm each other, and that mild flirtatiousness is harmless and good-humored as long as the participants remain in the category of friends.\textsuperscript{46} In France, cultural norms seem to be more open than those in the United States, and French men and women have a wider range of accepted behaviors that do not break social boundaries. But the United States, there tend to be more straightforward behaviors and unspoken rules of communication between the sexes in order to avoid misunderstandings or unintended sexual innuendo.\textsuperscript{47} French men and women generally can flirt with each other while still remaining friends, but for Americans flirting typically indicates a desire to take the relationship to from a platonic to a romantic level.\textsuperscript{48} Consequently, the way in which French men and women interact sometimes surprises Americans, and vice-versa.

In addition to having different views on personal relationships and private versus public spheres, Americans and the French have extremely different—nearly contrasting—views of individualism, which also directly affects the interpersonal relations between them. These diverging views stem from differing cultural ideologies and social structures.

Americans live in a capitalist, individualistic culture that fosters and places high importance on the idea of the “self.” In American English, there are over one hundred words that begin with the prefix \textit{self-}, including \textit{self-conscious}, \textit{self-realization}, \textit{self-esteem}, \textit{self-reliance}, and \textit{self-centered}. The French equivalent of the American \textit{self}
would be *le soi*, but it is not used in the same way and does not carry as much rank or value.\textsuperscript{49} As Asselin and Mastron assert, in the United States:

“…the self has taken on the importance of a ‘cultural quantum,’ occupying center stage in a person’s life, with activities chosen and carried out in order to satisfy or fulfill that self. American society encourages us with numerous success stories based on the achievements of a single individual, the self-made man or woman. Even the popular notion of leadership implies individual success when a person stands out from the crowd in order to lead a group.”\textsuperscript{50}

In widespread American culture, individualism means being independent, setting personal goals and attaining them, fulfilling one’s needs and wants, and defining oneself based on that independence. Furthermore, American individualism believes that every citizen has an equal chance to create and assert his or her sense of self, but it is that person’s own responsibility to do so. The American individual is ultimately self-created and self-reliant. As Carroll explains about the American self,: “‘I exist outside all networks.’ This does not mean that these networks do not exist or that they have no importance for me (an American), but that I make myself, I define myself. Whoever I am in American society, wherever I come from, whatever I have, I create the fabric of my identity, as is evoked, in a more limited context, by the expression ‘self-made man.'”\textsuperscript{51}

In addition, Americans tend to express themselves and their individuality through acting or ‘doing;’ they perform actions and pursue goals in order to express, develop, benefit, and fulfill the self and its desires, and place importance on their achievements.\textsuperscript{52}

On the other hand, the French live in an interventionist, centralized country that fosters a different kind of individualism. While Americans tend to assert their identity

\textsuperscript{49} Asselin and Mastron, 43  
\textsuperscript{50} Asselin and Mastron, 44  
\textsuperscript{51} Carroll, 145  
\textsuperscript{52} Asselin and Mastron, 45
separate of other networks and through their self-dependence, the French are more likely to create their identity based on and in connection with other networks. As Carroll explains:

In French culture….I am always a product of the networks that give me my identity…and provide the source of my energy. Consequently, whatever identity I assert, it can be questioned by anyone from the same network (in the extreme, by anyone of French culture), and very often this happens; my ‘true’ identity is always given to me by others. My French identity, therefore, will always be conferred by the other, the ‘true Frenchman or French woman’ whose French identity will in turn be defined by others. […] I am as much fed, carried, made significant by the network of relationships which defines me as I can be trapped, stifled, and oppressed by it. Without this network, I am out of my element…

Nevertheless, although the French tend to form their identity within the context of other social networks more than Americans seem to do, they are still strongly individualistic in their own way. However, French culture fosters a different notion of individualism than American culture does. In contrast to Americans who assert their sense of self through actively striving for goals and placing value on accomplishments, the French express themselves through ‘being’—through insights, ideas, or creative observations. They view individuality as a way to be creative and original, and to differentiate themselves from others. For the French, individualism is a personal liberty that allows them to express their internal psychology, but it is kept very separate from the broader social world. The domain of society demands that French citizens know and respect a strict structure of rules and codes, but excluded from that pressure is the private world of each individual, which seems to exist as a way to escape from an authoritarian society. The French learn from a young age to distinguish, balance, and separate between these two

53 Carroll, 145-146
54 Asselin and Mastron, 45
At its core, individualism in France is defined by the high value that the French place on their right to be different, to express their opinions, and to stand out from the group while still remaining part of it. Because French people are pressured from a young age to fit into the collective system of French society and obey the authorities on a larger social level, being able to personally differentiate oneself from others becomes very important.

Furthermore, despite being defined by other networks French individualism tends to ignore and negate other individuals, or as Asselin and Mastron say, “the Other.” To illustrate this point, they use the example of a French person borrowing and not returning a book from a public library in France. In essence, that person “….is indirectly saying, I don’t care if no one can use the book after me. I need it for myself, and after all, the city is there to provide for the public good. They will replace the book anyway.”

French individualism traditionally does not include or relate to others because in France, others are the social responsibility of the state. The French assert their individualism in the way they do because, as the quote illustrates, the responsibility of the citizens lies not on the shoulders of other citizens, but in the hands of French society.

This ‘anti-other’ French sense of individualism is the same mentality illustrated in the French attitude on public and private spheres and the distinct lines that allocate people in those various spheres. The Other is another way to describe the previously discussed inconnu—a person outside one’s private sphere. For the French, people in the category

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56 Asselin and Mastron, 45
57 Asselin and Mastron, 46
of ‘the Other’ are not instrumental to one’s growth and development; one does not need or expect positive feedback from them in order to thrive, and one is also not responsible for them. The French assert their individuality as they wish, regardless of other individuals, and often care far less about what other people think than Americans do.\(^58\)

In contrast, American individualism includes and depends on the Other in order to reinforce the self. Opinions, feedback, and support from other people are important to Americans, who tend to highly value what others say about them. As Asselin and Mastron explain, “The importance of the Other in American culture is illustrated by a strong need to be liked and a tendency for people to avoid, or at least soften, negative criticism when providing feedback.”\(^59\) The French certainly have their paradoxes when it comes to individuality, but so do Americans. Although Americans express their individuality through the idea of “self” and create and reach for goals that fulfill the self and its desires, they also rely on the support and encouragement of others to define themselves and place significant value on what others think. As Hall and Hall write, “Americans are outwardly oriented; concerned with appearances; preoccupied with what other people think, do, and say about them; and eager to be liked and accepted.”\(^60\) This reliance on others as a form of identity affirmation can cultivate a desire to conform to certain cultural norms and behaviors. Despite the fact that Americans strongly assert their individualism in certain areas of their lives, it seems that they generally like to be considered ‘normal’ at the same time. Wylie noticed first-hand how Americans differ

\(^{58}\) Wylie, “Socialization” \(^{60}\)
\(^{59}\) Asselin and Mastron, 47
\(^{60}\) Hall, 147
from the French in how they view individualism and conformity: “When I was looking for an average French village to study, I had to use the expression ‘un village témoin.’ Everyone would react with hostility to being called ‘average.’ Whereas, in America, one sees towns that advertise themselves as being ‘All-American.’” Americans’ prevalent desire to conform to cultural norms and others’ expectations helps explain why they strive to keep harmonic relations between themselves and others, why they may shy away from argument and confrontation, and why they are inclined to compromise or concede for the sake of salvaging a relationship. Despite their strong focus on individualistic independence, Americans tend to be preoccupied with a widespread desire to conform because of the pressure of certain social conventions. This is particularly evident by the ‘team player’ mentality, which creates a pressure to get along well with others, follow the majority, and keep smooth relationships. Needless to say, this desire to conform can limit their individuality. As Hall and Hall suggest, “Approval and popularity are strong motivators for Americans, who have a deep need to be accepted and liked. This American drive to be liked, accepted, and approved of…means they must inevitably sacrifice some of their individuality.”

The differing French and American concepts of individualism help explain why the two cultures view conflict and disagreement differently. Americans may shy away from criticism and argument, and are often afraid to assert their true opinions for fear of being disliked or rejected. In contrast, the French tend to express their individuality.

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61 Wylie, “Socialization” 61
62 Hall, 152
63 Hall, 152
through being creative, original and having strong opinions, which they will adamantly defend. This sheds light onto why the French seem to have a particular penchant for debates and heated discussions—it gives them the opportunity to express themselves and their beliefs and therefore assert their individuality. They may do so without regard for others, tend to be less worried than Americans are about what others think, and therefore are not as afraid to argue and defend their views and beliefs, even at the risk of offending others. As Harlay explained,

“Speaking your word is very important… it tells who you are, your individuality; it’s part of being French… We [Americans] say we have free speech but we don’t say just anything… But everyone in France is criticizing Sarkozy right now… oh my gosh, in France, you can say anything—they don’t care.”

Despite the French view of individualism that negates other individuals, France is a country that places a high importance on solidarity. Oddly enough, the French view of individualism, which can lack a regard for other individuals and even negate them, generally does not apply to social and political affairs, where the French instead tend to stand together against an institutional ‘Other’ such as the government. This is because the French have a widespread belief that there are certain social rights to which they are automatically entitled simply by being a citizen of the country. The French call this la protection sociale, and it is one of the most striking examples of how French differ from Americans in their views of individualism. In order to support the system, the French pay much higher taxes than Americans do, but they know that they will be compensated many times more by the system, which supports and cares for them. They tend to be

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64 Harlay, personal interview
65 Asselin and Mastron, 48
more willing to pay high taxes in order to receive the social rights to which they believe they are entitled, and which are provided through la protection sociale. As Nadeau and Barlow explain, “Les droits sociaux sont aux Français ce que les libertés individuelles sont aux Américains: essentiels.”66 (Social rights are to the French what individual liberties are to Americans: essential.) So while the French are adamant about asserting their individuality, they are less likely to do so in ways that contradict the social system. Even though their version of individualism tends to negate other individuals, it does not go against the greater social good. As Asselin and Mastron write, “The paradox between French solidarity and individualism can be summed up as follows: ‘On a personal level, I don’t care if my cigarette smoke irritates you, but I will hold up the other end of your protest banner as we march together against the government!’”67 This mentality helps explain the French ideas of solidarity and individualism, (and why the French seem to go on strike so often, something which often bewilders Americans).

A recent story on the news offers a good example of the French sense of individualism. Last month, March 2009, a group of employees at a Caterpillar Inc. factory in France protested proposed layoffs by holding executives of the company hostage. This incident was the third time within one month that French workers threatened with cutbacks have blockaded managers in their offices and demanded negotiations.68 According to Nicolas Benoit, a spokesman for the workers’ union, the workers were angry that Caterpillar had proposed cutting more than 700 jobs and would

66 Nadeau and Barlow, Pas Si Fous Ces Français!, 237
67 Asselin and Mastron, 48
not negotiate. Benoit also said that the workers did not want to harm the Caterpillar executives but simply wanted to negotiate with them, and were upset that the company did not show up earlier to two previously scheduled negotiating sessions.⁶⁹

This example demonstrates how the French sense of individualism can negate other individuals. The French tend to feel that it is their right to express themselves and their opinions, even if that means going to the extreme of taking someone hostage. Furthermore, these Caterpillar workers illustrate how the French sense of individualism asserts the notion of standing unified against an institutional ‘Other’—Caterpillar in this case. Many Americans may have been shocked by the behavior of the French Caterpillar employees, but Harlay understood that they were simply asserting their sense of individualism. As she said in her interview, “When I heard about it, I was laughing—that’s so typically French!”

It is clear that both the French and Americans have their share of complicated and contradictory elements in their cultures. These elements are very evident in interpersonal relations, particularly in the areas of public and private spheres, personal relationships, and concepts of individualism and the self, all of which are defined differently by both cultures. Exploring and analyzing cultural interpersonal behaviors between Americans and the French provides insight on various levels and demonstrates that both cultures have their idiosyncrasies and paradoxes. Nadeau and Barlow point out one of the most evident of these contradictions: “Les Nord-américains usent librement des noms et parlent sans difficulté de leur profession en public, tandis que les Français considèrent

⁶⁹ CNN.com
que ce sont des sujets extrêmement privés. En revanche, les Français s’embrassent et se disputent facilement en public alors que les Nord-américains trouvent plus approprié de le faire en privé. "(North Americans freely use names and speak about their profession in public without difficulty, whereas the French consider that these are extremely private subjects. On the other hand, the French kiss and argue easily in public while North Americans find it more appropriate to do so in private.) Americans and French people alike are often bewildered by such cultural ironies, but it is possible to begin shedding light on the reasoning behind them. One of the primary problems is that Americans who travel to France, as well as French people who travel to the United States, often may have the expectation that the culture, language, people, customs, and society will be relatively similar to their own because both the United States and France are a part of what is considered to be the western, civilized, modern world. Americans tend to forget that France is just as foreign to them as any ‘exotic’ far eastern country could be, and the same goes for French people and the United States. 71 This mentality often results in travelers being very surprised and sometimes frustrated at what they find, and can be the starting point for cultural miscommunication. Nevertheless, although cultural differences between France and the United States may be subtle, they are undoubtedly present—particularly in interpersonal relations—and recognizing their importance can help lead to understanding and acceptance between Americans and the French.

While this thesis identifies some of the major cultural patterns in the United States and France, it is important to keep in mind that without a doubt there are individual

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70 Nadeau and Barlow, Pas Si Fous Ces Français!, 43-44
71 Nadeau and Barlow, Pas Si Fous Ces Français!, 22
differences within each country that are affected by race, gender, class, and many other factors. The stereotypes and descriptions discussed here are not meant to encompass every French or American citizen, and there are many people who do not fulfill these stereotypes or meet these descriptions. Each individual certainly experiences, views, understands, and is influenced by his or her culture in slightly different ways.

Nevertheless, cultures contain a common framework that ties together individuals who live within them. Laurence Wylie explains this notion in his book *Les Français*:

> Chaque Français—comme chaque Américain—est différent de ses compatriotes par ses caractéristiques physiques et psychologiques. Mais certains traits de comportement distinctifs se retrouvent—dans une nation, une class sociale, etc.—chez un très grand nombre d’individus, souvent chez la majorité d’entre eux (jamais chez tous). […] Ce sont ces traits dominants qui permettent de parler de la “culture des Français” par opposition à la “culture des Américains.”

(Each French person, like each American, is different from his compatriots by his physical and psychological characteristics. But certain traits of distinctive behavior can be found—in a nation, a social class, etc.—among a large number of individuals, often among the majority of them (never among all). It is these dominant traits that allow us to speak of “French culture” in contrast to “American culture.”) Each culture has a framework consisting of various elements that are shared, familiar, and recognizable to people of the same culture, and that often become unspoken and accepted cultural concepts. Consequently these cultural frameworks have, at least to some degree, an impact on how individuals behave and on how they see themselves as well as others. As Hall and Hall explain further, “Even though culture is experienced personally, it is

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72 Wylie and Brière, 8
73 Carroll, 3
nonetheless a shared system. […] Because culture is experienced personally, very few individuals see it for what it is—a program for behavior.”74 This “program for behavior” refers to subliminal social rules and constraints that are unintentionally determined, cultivated, proliferated, and imposed on others by the dominating middle class. It is these values, beliefs, and behaviors that are often presented to foreigners who look at a culture from an outsider’s point of view and significantly impact their interpretation of that culture.

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74 Hall, xiii
References


