Don't Pop My Bubble: The Conundrum of Cultural Codes and "Meeting in the Middle"

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**ABSTRACT:** The question of navigating cultural codes and nuances has been widely debated in the field of interpreting, with scholars advocating either for interpreters to be active cultural mediators for the people they are interpreting for, or to steer on the side of remaining culturally neutral. However, these perspectives have not adequately addressed the issue of cultural collisions and unspoken norms that may be prevalent in the backgrounds of the interpreters themselves, namely those located in Minnesota. My paper addresses the issue of cultural assimilation in interpreting, with special attention to the implicit cultural rules prevalent in Minnesota. The specific material examined in this autoethnography includes personal narratives and anecdotes related to navigating the clash between Scandinavian cultural roots and the influx of immigrants from diverse backgrounds in Minnesota, most notably Colombian culture. In my autoethnography, I will be looking at personal experiences and narratives of cultural collisions, emphasizing the challenges posed by unspoken social rules. I aim to show the impact of implicit cultural norms on interpersonal relationships and the need for interpreters to embrace a "meeting in the middle" approach. I will discuss the reservedness, avoidance of physical affection, and passive aggressiveness ingrained in the Minnesotan mindset, juxtaposed against the more expressive and touch-oriented cultural practices of latino immigrants. Through these comparisons, I intend to reveal the previously misunderstood connections between cultural assimilation and effective communication in interpreting. I argue that interpreters must cultivate self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and communicative autonomy to bridge the gap between diverse cultural perspectives, not only for the users of the interpreting service, but also for the interpreters themselves. In conclusion, this project, by closely examining personal narratives and cultural clashes, sheds new light on the neglected issue of implicit cultural norms in Minnesota and emphasizes the crucial role of interpreters in fostering cross-cultural understanding through a "meeting in the middle" approach.

Minnesota. The Land of 10,000 lakes. The birthplace of tater-tot hotdish, Prince, passive aggressive neighbors, and saying long goodbyes. The North Star state is now home to nearly half a million immigrants from a plethora of countries. However, starting in the nineteen-hundreds, immigrants from Norway, Sweden, and Germany began calling Minnesota their home. A lucky few of those people were my family, who came from Bergen, Norway and Ed, Sweden. Looking into the present, the majority of immigrants now arrive in Minnesota from Mexico, Somalia, India, and Laos; though it is not limited to those countries. In 1997, the mother of my best friend (practically my sister) immigrated to Minnesota from Bogota, Colombia. Her daughter, born to an American man and Colombian woman, had to navigate the world, Minnesota in particular, guided by the perspectives she was raised under and she learned harshly from what she encountered along the way.

In David Lawrence Grant's essay “People Like Us” he remarks: “There's a running joke about the Swedish (or Norwegian or German) farmer who loved his wife so much, he almost told her.” That culture is a part of a larger now Minnesotan mindset. A mindset where us Minnesotans seldom give hugs or warm touches, where we maintain our personal-space bubbles, and swallow
down our emotions, and avoid intimacy even with our own family and friends. Not only that, but the regulations of this mindset are often unspoken. Meant to be assumed and followed. Yet it seems ridiculous in a state of so many newcomers, of which we as Minnesotans boast about, that we expect newcomers and their families to seamlessly adapt to social rules that are implicit and seldom articulated? Are we to throw these rules out altogether? How can we solve this paradox?

In this paper, I will contend that it is imperative for future interpreters, in this case, interpreters from Minnesota, in order to embrace our roles as leaders of communication, we must master the art of "meeting in the middle." This involves a deliberate effort to disrupt the familiarity of our own cultural bubbles, whether ingrained consciously or unconsciously, enabling us to cultivate a heightened level of acceptance towards others. By purposefully dismantling these cultural confines, we position ourselves to interpret with greater efficacy and nuance, facilitating more meaningful cross-cultural understanding.

I absolutely hate hugging. I have always hated it, and I think I probably always will. None of my family hugs each other, and if we do, it is that awkward side hug that lasts for twenty seconds and is not enjoyable for anyone involved. For many of the Minnesotans I have encountered, certainly the Scandinavian ones, we can relate to this reluctance to participate in physical touch. I remember a time when one of my friends tried to hug me in third grade. When she went in, I looked at her like she had killed someone. For some reason that felt wrong, like she had violated some unwritten law about my bubble and personal space. I mean, my parents and I rarely hug, why would you be able to? At the time, I felt like she should know not to go hug random people, even her friends. I mean that is psycho behavior, right? However, that “psycho hug girl” is now my best friend.

When I recently brought this up to her, she told me it reminded her of a story about one of the first times her Colombian family (her mother’s family) met her Minnesotan and Scandinavian family (her father’s family). She said: “My tia Louisa kept trying to hug my uncle John. He physically ran away from her on multiple occasions all around the house because it was so bizarre to him that a woman other than his wife would ever want to hug him, or even touch him. All she wanted to do was say goodbye.” She continued discussing the physical touch aspect of her dominant culture: “I was raised mostly by my mother without a lot of insight into American or Minnesotan culture. For me, I love hugging and kissing. Latino culture in general is a lot of physical touch. It is normal. When I went to elementary school, I found out quickly that that is not how you greet people. Your peers I mean. Nobody wanted hugs. This became an ongoing issue for me as I grew up. And it has been a learning experience throughout our friendship.” One of the many unspoken rules of Scandinavians, and many Minnesotans is our apathy towards physical affection. Personal space is highly valued, and greetings are often more restrained, like a simple handshake or a wave. While listening to this, I could relate to the running uncle, but it would be ridiculous to assume that her aunt would ever know not to hug family. It defied everything that she had ever known.

My family has lived in Minnesota for decades, and the culture they came here with, the culture of being reserved, avoiding conflict, valuing personal space and privacy, all became the accepted attitudes here. When I think of my upbringing, I never had to learn these rules because they were ingrained into the makeup of my family. That is how we came here and acted, and we continue
to pass those behaviors down to our children. Except for maybe the first family members to arrive here from Sweden or Norway, we never truly had to adapt that much to the cultural traditions and attitudes of Minnesota. I have never had to adapt. I never had to get used to not hugging and kissing people just because it is the polite thing to do. I never really have had to “meet in the middle.” And hearing the experiences of my best friend made me realize this: “Here it was such a weird thing to hug someone outside of your family. Eventually I stopped hugging. I hated that rejection I received, which was hard. I had to learn what settings I could do what things in.” From what I have gathered, the feeling of rejection is a common sentiment felt by those who reside in the Minnesota landscape, who are not adapted to what I like to call the “Minnesotan mindset.”

Growing up, I lived in a pretty strict household. My parents had their boundaries, but many of those boundaries or requests were rooted in a strong sense of passive aggressiveness, and the expectation that I should know what I am supposed to do, without them having to say anything to me. Body language, facial expressions, and small remarks would often be my signals to understand my parents’ tasks and frustrations with me, which differ greatly from my best friend. To her: “My mom and her discipline was very clear. Boundaries were set. I know what I can and can’t do. I just think that I would rather advocate for myself in the moment, than keep it in and talk about it later, or never. I don’t do well with passive aggressiveness.” Like in the words of David Lawrence Grant: “The phenomenon we know as Minnesota nice is much, much more than just a set of behaviors: It's an entire way of looking at and understanding the world that sits at the very heart of the culture here. Unlike any worldview, it's just as full of rules – both spoken and unspoken – and it is full of truths, half truths, lies, damned lies, and contradictions.” I continually observe that Minnesota culture is riddled with paradoxes and contradictions, where people may say one thing but mean another, or where the emphasis on politeness can sometimes lead to a lack of direct communication, and to an increase in confusing passive aggressiveness. All of these factors seemingly contribute to the consistent rejection of those who are not in the “know” and really the only way for them to learn these rules is to be rejected.

I have very infrequently been not in the “know” about social rules that guide society in my life, as I have lived in Minnesota my whole life. However, there have been instances that have pushed me out of my comfort zone. One of these events was my best friend's family celebration of novenas. From what she had explained to me, the nine days before Christmas, every night her family will go to a different family member's house to pray, sing, eat, and in her words “chismear.” I attended night five of these novena celebrations, and immediately as I entered the threshold to her home, I was greeted with touching, hugging, and very personal questions. Too much of everything for my liking. When the singing began, they made me sing a few of the lines by myself, like a solo. I remember whimpering out the notes to a Christmas tune, as my face turned more and more red. Did they not understand that it is not okay to put people on the spot like that? Why would they think I would be comfortable with that? As the night progressed, everywhere I sat, I was immediately met with two people on either side of me, legs touching each other, with a few hand touches or back pats. I could have easily dismissed the novena celebration as an uncomfortable and strange experience, something to be avoided for the rest of my life. However, the realization struck me that this was a significant part of my best friend's family and friends' culture. Instead of hastily labeling it as weird or despising it, I pondered on the subjective nature of expressing love and care. Who is to assert that their way is inherently
better or worse than mine? Perhaps, I thought, they were unaware that hugging and touching might be perceived as odd by many Minnesotans and Scandinavians. What if, instead of resisting, I chose to be more open-minded and meet them in the middle?

Within the pages of *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Azaldua, she writes: “Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incomparable frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision.” The experience at my best friend's family celebration of *novenas* was indeed a cultural collision for me. Gloria Anzaldúa's words resonated deeply with this experience, highlighting the clash that can occur when two distinct cultural frameworks intersect. As Anzaldúa notes, individuals navigating multiple cultures often receive conflicting messages, leading to a cultural collision or "un choque." Over time, I've had to navigate this collision, finding a middle ground that respects and acknowledges our wide cultural differences. And ever since *novenas* I have been working on bridging that divide: When I asked her about if I have been successful in this, she responded: “When we came back from college, I physically wanted to show how much I missed you. Instead, I had to verbalize it. You used to never say I love you. I wore you down though, you say it now. And you hug sometimes.” This shift from physical gestures to verbal expressions of love highlights the negotiation and compromise within our friendship, at least on her part because she has so often been forced to compromise her cultural behaviors for my own. In acknowledging this, I have started taking actions like saying “I love you” and hugging occasionally to try and minimize that communication barrier between us and our cultures.

Thinking of a recent occurrence, I remember this year when I told my best friend about how I celebrated Thanksgiving, she looked at me with pity. Her face scrunched with that “what a bummer” look. I then thought to myself: is a Thanksgiving celebration with six people not normal? Do more people involved in a celebration make the celebration more meaningful? This introspection prompted me to reevaluate my perspective on the concept of the nuclear family versus the extended family, a viewpoint ingrained in many Scandinavians and, by extension, Minnesotans. In my cultural milieu, the emphasis tends to be on cultivating close-knit relationships within the nuclear family—parents, grandparents, and perhaps a few uncles, aunts, and cousins. Curious about how my best friend viewed this distinction, I inquired about her feelings regarding the nuclear family versus the entire family. She responded: “I feel like my Minnesotan family is focused on just the nuclear family. On those families. When we see them it's very cordial. I value the entire family, rather than just the nuclear. This might be a little too metaphorical but I imagine family as the universe. Our solar system is the nuclear family. While it seems like it is the most important, because you are most comfortable with it, every part of the universe is needed. It is important.”

And yet, as she ranted to me about how Minnesotans really only value their nuclear families, and how she believes that is wrong, she was also failing to meet in the middle. While yes, she values the entire family; I value those that I have grown up with, who I have allowed into my reserved spaces and feelings, and for me this signifies closer and tighter bonds with those people. And those people just so happen to be my nuclear family. There is no wrong or right answer, just different ones. Gloria Anzaldúa writes: “Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors...
connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning “tierra entre medio.” Anzaldúa's concept of bridges, as thresholds to other realities, resonates with the idea that our perspectives are shaped by the connections we form and the spaces we navigate.

This made me think: How can we meet in the middle when the cultural rules in Minnesota are implicit, unspoken, and often unacknowledged? The predominant Scandinavian culture guiding these social norms adds another layer of complexity. Ignoring this cultural influence seems dismissive of the rich tapestry that shapes the social fabric of the region. Anzaldúa's term "nepantla" referring to the liminal spaces between worlds, becomes a metaphor for the cultural landscapes we navigate—a terrain where transition and changing perspectives are constant. The challenge of meeting in the middle is further compounded by the reluctance to acknowledge the existence of differing perspectives. The unspoken nature of the rules in Minnesotan culture creates an atmosphere where discussions about cultural differences are often brushed aside. The "quit yer belly achin" attitude, rooted in the local culture, reinforces the idea that newcomers should assimilate without complaint. David Lawrence Grant in “People Like Us” writes: “Assimilate, and do it quickly; understand that, if you are still having problems after you've had a couple years or so to settle in, then we're going to start seeing your very presence here as a problem.” This resistance to acknowledging the presence of a cultural divide perpetuates a sense of isolation for those who do not conform to the implicit norms. Admitting that there is no right or wrong answer becomes essential in fostering understanding and compromise. The cultural collision, as described by Anzaldúa, requires a collective recognition that diverse perspectives exist and that bridging these gaps involves a willingness to navigate the nepantla, the “in-between spaces” where cultural differences coexist.

In the ongoing discourse about cultural differences between my friend's Colombian background and the implicit social norms in Minnesota, another layer is revealed. While she passionately critiques the perceived insularity of Minnesotans, she, too, expresses a desire for assimilation into her Colombian culture. It becomes evident that the challenge of meeting in the middle is not limited to one cultural perspective; rather, it is a two-way street where both parties grapple with the idea of adapting to the other's cultural norms. The notion of assimilation, while understandable from an individual's perspective, poses a significant obstacle to the process of meeting in the middle. Both sides seem to harbor expectations for the other to embrace their cultural practices, leading to a potential impasse. Anzaldúa's concept of bridges, as symbols of shifting consciousness, becomes increasingly relevant in this scenario. The need for a connector, a passageway between these cultural worlds, becomes evident, but the question remains: Who is to bridge the gap when neither party seems willing to fully embrace the other's cultural nuances? My answer to this is that self-awareness and communicative autonomy are crucial factors that could resolve many of these issues. Having an awareness of one's own cultural biases, expectations, and the willingness to step outside the comfort zone are essential for fostering understanding. The acknowledgment that cultural assimilation might not be the only solution opens the door to a more nuanced approach, one that involves mutual respect for the diverse perspectives at play. Essential to effective interpersonal understanding is not only being mindful of the behaviors of those around you but also recognizing the influence of your own thoughts and actions, shaped by your life experiences, by being self aware.
In the context of communication, interpreters play a vital role in facilitating understanding between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. An interpreter with cultural competency not only translates language but also bridges the cultural gap by conveying the nuances, context, and unspoken aspects of communication. They serve as intermediaries, navigating the *nepantla*—the in-between spaces where cultures intersect. When interpreters lack cultural sensitivity, miscommunications can easily arise. This deficiency may manifest in various ways, such as misinterpreting subtle nuances in language, failing to convey the intended tone and emotion accurately, providing inappropriate literal translations, and being unaware of cultural taboos and sensitivities. Additionally, a culturally incompetent interpreter might struggle to navigate nonverbal cues, misunderstand communication styles, and overlook the broader cultural context of a conversation. Interpreters who are well-versed in cultural competency and self awareness contribute to creating an atmosphere of openness and understanding. They can help navigate the unspoken rules and expectations that may be unfamiliar to one or both parties, and help each party communicate as effectively as possible.

*The Community Interpreter Handbook* defines communicative autonomy as an individual's ability to “maintain responsibility for and control over one's own communication.” Through effective communication, interpreters can facilitate a more comprehensive exchange of ideas, fostering an environment where meeting in the middle becomes a collaborative effort rather than a one-sided endeavor. It is imperative that people have control over how they communicate, and through that communication, how they are being perceived. Because our manners, language, behavior, and actions are measured against our values and principles, having autonomy over how you communicate and demonstrate those values and principles to others is the interpreter's primary goal, and that can really only be done if the interpreter is self aware and willing to “meet in the middle.”

In navigating the intricate tapestry of cultural collisions and convergences within the vast expanse of Minnesota, it becomes evident that meeting in the middle is not merely a suggestion but an imperative for fostering understanding and unity. From the historical roots of Scandinavian immigration to the contemporary influx from diverse corners of the world, the state has evolved into a mosaic of cultural influences. As we navigate the world and interpreter space, it is clear that empathy, understanding, and a shared commitment to navigate the *nepantla,* the in-between spaces where diverse perspectives intersect, is crucial. Meeting in the middle is not a mere destination; but an ongoing journey, a collective effort to build bridges, break down barriers, and weave a more inclusive social fabric for all who call Minnesota home.
WORKS CITED

