

An Autistic Asks Other Minorities: Life on Campus

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MS=Dr. Melike Schalomon

LG: Hello everyone. My name is Laura Gilmour and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Alberta in Canada. As an autistic student, I have often felt I don't understand many of the things I am just expected to know. Many of my friends and colleagues I have got to know well in my university years are immigrants rather than other neurodiverse people as they also face this experience of integrating into a culture that is not their natural way of thinking and being and masking to some degree.

Today I bring you Dr. Melike Schalomon who is my former research supervisor and who had the experience of attending university in Canada as an immigrant from the late 1980s to 1999. She must have liked Canada as her and her husband settled here and raised their family and are in no rush to go anywhere else (laughs). She is currently an associate dean at MacEwan university in Edmonton, Alberta.

Before I turn this over to Melike, I will delve into a little geography so you can figure out where exactly IS Bavaria, Alberta, the Maritimes. Bavaria is a state in the country of Germany but Melike comes from a remote rural mountain community in Bavaria which has distinct culture and tradition that is different from the rest of the state. The Maritimes in Canada are the Eastern Canadian provinces on the Atlantic oceans. Some elements of Maritime culture originate from the pre-Germanic states. Alberta is a non-coastal Western province. Even within the same country, culture differs from region to region.

I will now turn this to Melike.

MS: My name's Dr. Melike Schalomon. I moved to Canada 34 years ago, just having married a Canadian so I was not actually classified as an international student but I come from Germany so English was not my first language. I had never lived in Canada before so starting university here to me was very much an international experience where I was dealing with a different educational system with a different language.

LG: mmm hmmm. In my case, being a student on the spectrum, I have lived in various parts of Canada with different cultures such as the Maritimes where people talk much more rapidly and the cadence of speech is quite different and also besides all that moving all around the country, being on the spectrum, sort of cultural norms are different too. For example, I find it uncomfortable if I'm trying to learn a concept, making direct eye contact and listening at the same time and in some cultures it's actually considered disrespectful to make eye contact with superiors just as an example when I was looking into cultural research. Now I'm going to turn it over to Melike to reflect a

little bit on the communication style across cultures and then back to me with another example.

MS: Yeah, I was really surprised, I must admit when I started here as a student that I was actually facing barriers. I hadn't conceptualized myself as being different. It's interesting how small things suddenly become really big in interactions. A couple of examples from my undergraduate days are:

First of all, I have a very different sense of personal space from the majority of Canadians. I like to have the door closed on my office. I like to stand at a certain distance from people and it's a cultural difference. It's not something one would go up to someone and say "Don't stand too close to me, it makes me feel uncomfortable" or "I don't enjoy hugging people a lot because it's not part of my culture." It may offend people when you say those kinds of things so you don't say it but then you find yourself in situations where you are feeling uncomfortable a little bit or awkward. You don't quite know how to respond.

Another example would be, I grew up in Bavaria where language can be, let's say, more "colorful" (laughter) than it is in Canada and there were a couple of occasions in class. I remember running a lab and something going really wrong and I'd have to start over again and I said a swear word and the entire class basically dropped what they were doing (laughter) and turned around and stared at me. I did know cognitively that this wasn't an acceptable behavior in Canada but it wasn't something that was at the top of my mind in the heat of the moment and it was something I had to learn and it was difficult to explain this to other people who just thought I was being rude crass that this wasn't considered something really horrible to say where I had grown up.

LG: Same with one of the towns my family and I lived in in my childhood in rural Newfoundland. There was a certain word that was a common slang word in the town and it would be like "Hello it's a bleepin nice day" and even little old ladies and kindergarten teachers would say it and it was nothing to use that word whereas here in Alberta people don't swear in public places. It's very much behind closed doors.

As far as that whole hugging thing, even to give hugs with friends and family, I sort of have to plan it out and initiate it with my own sensory issues and sometimes that is perceived as rude.

MS: Yep, it can make for some awkward situations with people where you really don't want to offend them. You quite like them. This has nothing to do with it but you feel awkward and even if you don't say something, I think we pick up on the fact that the other person is not feeling entirely comfortable and that makes us uncomfortable. So, it does make for some awkward interactions.

LG: In addition, I find one of the biggest things that gets to me, sort of, the one experience I had TAing or in general working in groups or in general communication is I'll say things like it is. Like I'll say "This needs work and you need to fix the grammar in this, and you need to do this, this, and this in a list. Whereas, some people in evaluation, they prefer the "sandwich method" of "you did this really really good," "you need to do this," and "you did this really really good."

MS: Yeah. I think I face this in grading and I've had those kind of discussions with colleagues where they say you have to make sure that you're giving a lot of positive feedback. Again, the culture where I grew up, we're more blunt. If there is something critical that we can say, we will say that, not because we're trying to make the person feel bad but because we feel that by giving critical feedback we are giving them an opportunity to fix whatever is the issue to address it and to do better the next time. There are students where that is unproblematic. There's other students who feel that it is being overly critical and I have to be cognizant of that in my interactions with students so I try very intentionally to say good things and when something is done right and not to say "this is right I don't need to say something about it, there's no learning opportunity but to actually give the feedback. "This was done well," "This is right," "This is exactly the way you should continue to do things." That's not something that would have occurred to me in the past. It was something I had to learn.

LG: I get as a person on the spectrum is that whole "You talk too fast, too loud thing.

Laughter

MS: Yes, I often get I talk too much and I talk in very long sentences and again I think that's sort of a cultural and language issue where I find that sometimes to me, Canadians, at least initially when I moved here sounded very choppy with short sentences. I tend to make long sentences that are convoluted to Canadians and that was something I was struggling with when I was at university in terms of writing papers where I had been considered quite a good writer in Germany and some of the feedback I got on my writing in Canada was quite negative in that my language was too verbose and too convoluted.

LG: I've been torn apart for a lot of run-on sentences for my things in assignments and sort of that over-wordiness and using big words, especially even in internet forums or group chats in subjects that aren't academic, people will just tear me apart and say I'm being annoying.

MS: Yeah

LG: Often within a culture there's sort of a whole bunch of shared ideas and sort of, subcultures that are social norms that everyone knows and sometimes they're even included on IQ tests. For example I saw a painting in a grocery store recently of this guy

called Connor McDavid. He's a famous hockey player that's well known in Edmonton and I had to ask who he was.

Or another time which was directly related to University, I was online collecting data for my Master's research and this person online messaged me through this virtual world where I also had a profile picture of myself and asked me to name the U of A mascot when I was advertising for the survey [for collecting data from virtual world users to answer research question] and I didn't have any idea who this mascot who was supposedly called "Gooney" was because I paid no attention to these university sports so they called me a fake U of A student and said that my picture, because I sort of have a utilitarian style that I didn't look like someone who would be a university student. I just kind of laughed because you get all kinds when you do online surveys but it sort of made me think I wasn't what they were expecting.

MS: Yep. I find that sometimes in terms of what things are important to me and what things are important to other people. So for example, to me personally, the way I dress is not that important. I don't feel the need to dress in a particular way to impress people with who I am and that works quite well usually in the university context but for example earlier today I was meeting with a lawyer and I felt distinctly underdressed. So it's a cultural thing and then it depends on the particular situation.

LG: I feel that very much so at poster presentations I'm often underdressed where I think I'm quite well dressed. I'll sort of put on something like a wrap around scarf and say well that's my jewelry and skip the makeup and just if my hair is brushed and I'm wearing clean clothes, I'm dressed.

MS: Yep, then again I think the culture comes into it, also what is considered being nicely dressed. Where I grew up wearing fabrics that are particularly nice is nicely dressed. It doesn't mean it has to have a particular cut or it has to be a suit to be nice. You can be very nicely dressed if you're wearing something that's made from a good fabric, say a linen fabric.

LG: Thank you. I wonder if you can share, you had told us years ago in neuropsychology I think and you may or may not remember this. You'd mentioned something about an IQ test sample of general knowledge in a psychology class where you were asked a political question that you didn't know and that the other students knew.

MS: Oh That was a long time ago. We were learning about IQ tests. On IQ tests often have a number of information questions where you start with the easy questions and get to harder and harder questions and if a person can't answer a certain number of questions in a row, they're not even asked the remaining questions cause they're more

difficult and the idea is they wouldn't possibly be able to answer it and I found a couple of the questions that were considered easy I couldn't answer because this was something that was very much cultural and was simply not information I had come across. On the other hand, I remember the very most difficult question on that particular IQ test we were learning about was about this obscure German philosopher who happened to live in the town where I went to university in Germany so to me, that was a very easy question. That demonstrated to me just how much IQ tests are culture bound. Whatever particular culture you're coming from will influence what is an easy question for you and what isn't whereas that is one of the well know biases in IQ testing is that they are very much culturally specific.

LG: Yes whereas I'll remember the heights of famous skyscrapers or obscure facts from classes I took years ago in areas of special interests but if somebody asks me to name a hockey player of the Edmonton Oilers I may not be able to.

MS: (laughs) I may not be able either to do that but having worked with students from different cultures and students with different backgrounds. This doesn't have to be that they're international students. I mean I've worked with you in the past. You have to be cognizant of this that just because someone doesn't know a particular piece of information that doesn't really tell you a lot about the person. It may just be what they have access to or what they have a personal interest in or what their culture values and you have to be really sensitive to the fact that people value different information or different skills. Just because you find that something is important doesn't mean that someone else does.

LG:

It was a pleasure engaging in conversation with Dr. Melike Schalomon and comparing and contrasting our experiences. As discussed in some of the presentations on universal design for learning, changes that can help one group of people can also help everyone. For instance being respectful and inclusive towards those who think and act differently than you and to take the time to assist somebody who needs additional explanation on something that "everyone knows" will help all diverse students and faculty and not just autistic ones.

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