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# An American Student's Transformed View of French Culture

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# **An American Student's Transformed View of French Culture**

## **Honors Project**

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Julie Kessler

### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this project is to compare American stereotypes of French culture to a student's interactions with French culture during a yearlong education abroad program at École de Management Strasbourg in Strasbourg, France, to see which commonly accepted stereotypes deserve to be dispelled, and explain those which may be acceptable from a more informed perspective.

I lived in Strasbourg, France from August 2016 until May 2017, and during that time, I tried my hand at ethnographic research. Strasbourg is in the Alsatian region of France, and it has more Germanic influence than other regions.<sup>1</sup> I spent a good amount of time in Paris as well, but many French will be quick to tell you Parisians are Parisian, not French. I also saw Nancy, Marseille, Lyon, and some smaller villages including Castellane and Digne. I outline what I have seen because it highlights how much has been left unseen. Unfortunately, I was not able to experience the northwestern most region of Brittany because friends have convinced me there is much to see, and I am confident there are more subcultures of France that I missed out on completely as well.

I can write about the France and the French I experienced, but clearly this is limited. To compare, I would feel no more confident writing about the United States and Americans because I've never been west of Colorado or northeast of New York City. Here, I intend to write about the France and French of my experiences, and how first-hand experiences with French culture impacted my understanding of stereotypes in a greater way. The goal of this project is to compare American stereotypes of French culture to a student's interactions with French culture during a yearlong education abroad program at École de Management Strasbourg in Strasbourg, France to see which commonly accepted stereotypes deserve to be dispelled, and explain those which may be acceptable from a more informed perspective.

I am an average graduate of an above average Ohio high school. In that high school, I learned an average history of an arguably above average country. My history education included

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<sup>1</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Alsace." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 25 Aug. 2017, [www.britannica.com/place/Alsace](http://www.britannica.com/place/Alsace).

the Boston Tea Party and World War victories, and even a field trip down our own historic Main Street with Underground Railroad destinations.<sup>2</sup> It excluded Japanese Internment, the Trail of Tears, and Chinese immigrants' impact on the Gold Rush. We, the youth of this country, are raised to be proud of America's history, which would be inherently more admirable if we saw our history through the eyes of all Americans, not just the white population. As Springboro High School is over ninety percent white,<sup>3</sup> this may be history through "our" lens, but this history glanced over many significant events that would be very important to a history seen through multiple lenses. For that reason, I feel as though my high school history education did me a major disservice. Thankfully, I came to learn America's history with a multicultural lens at Bowling Green State University (BGSU).

My freshman year, I took an American Culture Studies course, Cultural Pluralism in the United States. I should specify that I enrolled in the course because it filled an Honors general education requirement; I had friends in the course with me, and I took it out of obligation, not because I desired to take an American Culture Studies course. In Professor Sloane's course description, this class was an, "Interdisciplinary exploration of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation in the United States."<sup>4</sup> Now, I identify this class as my first experience of applying critical thought, and considering the implications of my coursework on my life and the world around me. Professor Sloane had us keep journals as we interacted with content throughout the semester, and I think my thoughts were properly conveyed in one journal entry as

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<sup>2</sup> Fischer, William. "Springboro Area Underground Railroad Historical Marker." *Historical Marker*, The Historical Market Database, 16 June 2016, [www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=13716](http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=13716).

<sup>3</sup> "Home." *Profile | Springboro, Ohio (OH)*, Public School Review, 1 Jan. 2018, [www.publicschoolreview.com/springboro-high-school-profile](http://www.publicschoolreview.com/springboro-high-school-profile).

<sup>4</sup> "BGSU Course Catalog." *Course Catalog*, Bowling Green State University, [www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/catalog/Summer-2015/CCLGprint021315.pdf](http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/catalog/Summer-2015/CCLGprint021315.pdf).

I wrote, “I can be proud to be an American without thinking that America is free of stains; I hope our educational systems start to realize this sometime soon.”

A frustration with my own lack of exposure to an honest picture of American history aligned well with class discussions about stereotypes and their impacts. The word stereotype is defined as “a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.”<sup>5</sup> My Management professor, who has a background in Psychology, is quick to remind me that our brains apply stereotypes as a way to simplify our worlds since the quick connections we make reduce the amount of processing needed to understand a situation. Humans did not intentionally create stereotypes to be judgmental, but stereotypes become problematic when they cause people to make assumptions that are, by definition, “oversimplified... prejudiced... or uncritical.”<sup>6</sup>

Professor Sloane, the American Culture Studies professor, encouraged our class to listen with a keen ear as groups told their own histories. One of the texts we turned to was Ronald Takaki’s *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, and we also read essays, poetry, and short stories by authors of various cultural backgrounds exposing their particular group’s experience in America. Through learning from these varied first-person accounts, Professor Sloane taught us the respect in letting people tell their own stories about their experiences. He taught us how, in our lives, there is value in choosing to be curious and learning what you can about a person or their culture through direct questions and observation rather than through careless assumption or stereotyping.

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<sup>5</sup> “Stereotype.” *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, [www.dictionary.com/browse/stereotype](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/stereotype).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

A couple years after taking my American Culture Studies course, as I was preparing to study abroad in Strasbourg, France for a year, in the forefront of my mind was the thought that I need to let the French tell me their story. In the back of my mind was the pining curiosity that maybe everything I have been conditioned to expect of France will be incorrect. I prepared for this year of experiential cultural research by reading all I could about France. I read what American authors said about France and the French, I read what French authors said about France, and then I finally read some about what French think of America and Americans and what Americans think French think about America and Americans. That last bit was mostly just for curiosity's sake, but also to have an idea of some of the assumptions people may make about me because they could influence the way French people interact with me.<sup>7</sup>

During my time in France, I admit I hoped to find stereotypes laced in misunderstanding or ignorance that I could easily explain away. However naïve it was to believe stereotypes were created that paper-thin, that was the mindset I walked in with as I approached this experience. In ignorance, there is bliss, however. Entering this experience hypothesizing to negate all stereotypes gave me the chance to wrestle intensely with the origins of our American beliefs of French culture. Often, I found my own culture was the greatest influencer of the lens through which I saw French culture. I was quick to default to assuming that my country's way of doing or acting was correct, and I therefore, naturally, associated a different way of acting as wrong.

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<sup>7</sup> Carroll, Raymonde. *Cultural Misunderstandings: the French-American Experience*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.

This behavior was mentioned in my readings<sup>8</sup>, but I never saw its importance until I experienced it. I realized this is precisely the personal flaw I needed to identify before I could fairly study French culture, so I feel this personal struggle adds value to my evaluation.

Isn't it funny how not all Americans are overweight, and not all French are thin? French men are also 0.2 inches taller than men from the United States on average;<sup>9</sup> isn't that weird, because society taught me they were stereotypically short, wearing striped shirts and berets? As I begin to discuss prevalent stereotypes of French culture, I believe it worthwhile to focus on this comment from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."<sup>10</sup> There are about 65 million French people in the world<sup>11</sup>, and the only story Adichie references does not apply to all of them. There are about 325 million American (United States) people in the world<sup>12</sup>, and similarly I would resent a story that aimed to describe each of us as one. All this said, there are stereotypes which are typically used to characterize both of our nation's populations, and through my research I have formed opinions on the validity of these stereotypes Americans commonly place on the French.

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<sup>8</sup> Drewelow, Isabelle. "The influence of instructed learning on American college students' cultural assumptions about the French language and people." *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A* 70. (2010). *PsycINFO*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

<sup>9</sup>Villines, Zawn. "What Is the Average Height for Men?" *Medical News Today*, MediLexicon International, 30 June 2017, [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/318155.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/318155.php).

<sup>10</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "Transcript of 'The Danger of a Single Story.'" *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, July 2009, [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en).

<sup>11</sup> "Countries in the World by Population (2018)." *Population by Country (2018) - Worldometers*, Worldometers, [www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/](http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

My research of French culture led me to expect certain cultural norms, which are different than those in the United States. These cultural norms are typically what manifest into stereotypes over time. I will discuss the following stereotypes:

1. French culture is closed, people are not nice<sup>13</sup>
2. French social classes are apparent<sup>14</sup>
3. French people are dirty<sup>15</sup>
4. French society is effeminate, lacks strength<sup>16</sup>

The first of these norms, maybe the most prevalent in my readings, was to expect French culture to be closed, and to expect French people to not be nice. The main idea is that French people would be less willing to open themselves to new friendships, or personal conversation beyond exchanging pleasantries. Approximate synonyms I find with closed include cold, private, inexpressive, and, maybe a bit of a stretch, but also rude. I think because of the lens Americans approach the French with, rude can be included here, since we often assume a lack of expression of niceties as rude. In France, a waiter who does not make small talk is not rude; to clarify, is different than when a Parisian insults you on the street. As an aside, that level of rudeness is a stereotype of Parisians that I do not intend to comment on because I never paid enough attention to try to generalize Parisians in whole; I met both kind and unkind Parisians, and my sample size is too small to draw meaningful conclusions. Back to the waiter comment: waiters in France tend

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<sup>13</sup> Carroll, Raymonde. *Cultural Misunderstandings: the French-American Experience*. University of Chicago Press, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Slowinski, Betty J. "The French World Of Business: Culture And Commerce. The Case Of The Wharton School." (1993): *ERIC*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Mastron, Ruth, and Gilles Asselin. *Au Contraire!: Figuring Out The French*. United States of America: Intercultural Press, 2001. *Book Review Digest Plus (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenthal, A. S. "The Gender-Coded Stereotype : An American Perception Of France And The French (English)." *The French Review* 72.5 (0001): 897-908. *FRANCIS*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.



to be career waiters who are well trained and appreciated by French society for their expertise.<sup>17</sup> In a French restaurant, it is not their job to be especially nice and check in multiple times, but rather to ensure your meal is an exquisite dining experience based on French dining standards, which are, imaginably, different than American dining standards.<sup>18</sup> The “closed and not nice” stereotype so transparently stems from the lens with which Americans are perceiving the French.

Luckily, I had a long time to experience French culture in Strasbourg. During that time I was able to build relationships that helped me better understand France and French people, and, to an extent, overcome my American lens. These relationships were built almost solely through my involvement with the EM Strasbourg women’s soccer team. Becoming part of this team was undoubtedly the biggest added value to my evaluation of French culture. In October 2016, I joined the team because they needed a goalkeeper, and I played on the team until April 2017. My team embraced me as their goalkeeper from the very beginning, but I believe my understanding of French people reached its pinnacle around mid-spring when they also embraced me as a friend. The relationships I built with this team over the course of the year gave me great insight into the stereotype of French people being considered rude. Whether Americans say French are rude, cold, or unkind, I believe these labels all come from a similar feeling we experience while interacting with French people we do not know, and feeling they are closed off to us.

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<sup>17</sup> Lentz, Cheyenne. “Why Americans Think French Waiters Are Rude - and Why They're Wrong.” *INSIDER*, *INSIDER*, 12 Mar. 2018, [www.thisisinsider.com/american-tourists-believe-french-waiters-are-rude-2018-3#he-never-cracked-a-smile-the-entire-time-i-was-there-2](http://www.thisisinsider.com/american-tourists-believe-french-waiters-are-rude-2018-3#he-never-cracked-a-smile-the-entire-time-i-was-there-2).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

My previous comment about American culture influencing the way I view French culture<sup>19</sup> is no more applicable to my own experience than when I was feeling that the French people I met were, more often than not, cold in their interactions with me. I think, firstly, as Americans we need to remember that the world sees us, generally, as very open people. If we are very open, then the French do not have to be extremely closed in order for us to experience a big difference.

To digest this stereotype and really understand its roots, I needed to interact with it. When I joined the soccer team, as I stated before, everyone treated me kindly enough because they were happy to have a goalkeeper. I was an asset to their team, so of course they were not unkind. A couple of the girls were particularly kind and welcoming to me, but in general, I felt much less connected to the girls than I would feel toward American teammates. There was a language barrier preventing close relationships with more than half of the girls on the team, but it felt like more than that at times. It felt like they weren't comfortable with me. Honestly, it was just fine for me from the beginning, because I enjoy playing sports for the love of competition, but once time wore on and I did build relationships with all of the girls on the team, I realized how much feeling like a part of their team enhanced my experience.

At some point in the spring, I somewhat subconsciously realized my coaches and the girls on my team were some of my closest friends in Strasbourg. I spent more time with them than anyone but my roommate and best friends. These friendships became obvious to me, no longer subconsciously understanding I was their friend but fully comprehending they cared for me,

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<sup>19</sup> Lévy, Bernard-Henri. *American Vertigo*. Paris: Grasset, 2006. Print.

when I was injured during one of our games. I remember so clearly the moment I came out of the goal box to shut down a breakaway against a woman on the European Parliament's soccer team. She was strong, and likely not French I would guess, based on her intense athleticism<sup>20</sup>. In a rapid series of events, I got the ball, but she managed to injure my right shoulder in a way that I found crippling. I tried to get up and play through, but as the ball was in my left hand, I tried to put pressure on my right arm and immediately collapsed in pain. My coaches refused my argument, and insisted teammates take me to the hospital immediately after the game. In the hospital, my friend translated everything for me, and made sure my concerns were properly communicated as I was seeing the doctor and various nurses. Luckily, nothing was broken or torn, so pain medicine, discomfort, and icing were the extent of recovery.

Although unfortunate, this injury proved to me how much my coaches and teammates cared for me. In an instant, they dropped everything to take me to the hospital at midnight, even when I argued it should wait. They checked in on my recovery, and put concern for my health before the success of the team always, which was honestly hilarious to me, because at the point that I learned nothing was broken or torn, I had every intention to play through any and all pain. There was no question these French people I had met just six months prior were friends to me, even more than they ever were teammates or coaches.

By the end of the year, I felt I was as much included in our teams' social circle as anyone. I was invited to go to parties with teammates after a big competition, or play pick up games with the men's team once the weather was nice. I was invited into homes for dinners or coffees, which

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<sup>20</sup> Sciolino, Elaine. *La Seduction: How The French Play The Game Of Life*. United States of America: Times Books/Henry Holt, 2011. *Book Review Digest Plus (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

means much more than being invited into an American home because it is a more intimate gesture in France<sup>21</sup>, so these experiences were particularly special to me. Once, we even had a team gathering to eat crêpes. All these efforts I took as a huge compliment; some of these invitations were due to our coach's emphasis on team cohesion, but many were spontaneous, friendly invitations. Also, a day before I left Strasbourg, my team held a dinner to bid me farewell. They gifted me my kits and captain's band, a poster signed by all with kind messages in both English and French, and delicacies from Brittany, which were given with extreme kindness from a teammate who mourned my departure of France before I saw her home in Brittany.

French, in their characteristic of being cold, tend to be closed with their emotions as well. Goodbyes, therefore, were challenging for me, as I am more prone to be emotional; I'm not sure whether I should thank my country of origin or just a high level of sensitivity for that. I was very touched by all of the sentiments of this dinner, but I held my tears until the final conversation I had with my goalkeeper coach, a friend who had become quite dear to me. I laughed because there were no tears, but plenty of emotion in his face as well. My argument from this entire experience is: sure, French people are more closed than Americans, but it is not a negative characteristic; it is plainly a characteristic. Additionally, when the people who are known to be cold treat you with warmth and openness, it is sincere in a way that makes me want to claim this is a real positive characteristic about French people.

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<sup>21</sup> Prevos, André J. M. "CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDING: THE FRENCH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE By Raymonde Carroll, Translated By Carol Volk." *SubStance: A Review Of Theory And Literary Criticism* 19.1 (1990): 99-101. *Humanities International Complete*. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

An interesting subconclusion I draw from this discussion of the French and their lack of openness is the natural human tendency to dichotomize right and wrong. For example, people subconsciously believe United States, open, good, right versus France, closed, bad, wrong. Cultural norms are not this simple, and prejudice, or pre-judgement, even unintentionally leads people to draw unfair conclusions about other groups that behave differently. This serves as a reminder to me that while many stereotypes are rooted in truths, they grow into misrepresentation.

An observation that surprised me was the levels to which these French stereotypes applied to different people in France. The stereotypes I generally confirm misrepresent some of the French people I met significantly more than others. Of my friends who were French citizens, I definitely noticed some were “more French than others” even though that sounds counterintuitive or simply incorrect. It seems like one would either be French or they would not, but are their degrees of French? There’s the French with ancestors who have lived in France since long before Napoleon, and then there’s the French with ancestors from Asia or Africa; does this make the latter group inherently less French? It’s a peculiar thought to me because my program advisor, Dr. Price-Kreitz, was born in the United States to two American parents, and then studied in France, married a French man, and moved to Strasbourg permanently. By my previous logic, she would not be very French, but my numerous interactions with her suggest she is perhaps the most French person I know.

Maybe my perception of these degrees of French I mention have less to do with the depth of one’s French roots, and more to do with the extent to which they emulate the stereotypes

Americans have created for French people. For my program director, Dr. Price-Kreitz, I think her embodiment of French characteristics as I understand them is the main factor which causes me to believe she is extremely French. Various teammates who were proud of and forward about their Reunion Island or Cameroonian roots, I think seemed less French to me because French stereotypes I've studied describe these peoples' behavior less.

The way these French people conform to certain French stereotypes less than other French people opens up an important discussion about subcultures and assimilation versus cultural pluralism. Professor Sloane's course stressed the value of cultural pluralism, and the ways in which different immigrants' cultural backgrounds have created a beautiful mosaic picture in the United States.<sup>22</sup> My experience in Strasbourg reminded me while the stereotypes I studied may apply to the largest population in France, they do not apply to everyone, and they absolutely do not take into account the value that is added by the people who choose to contribute to cultural pluralism in France instead of assimilating as much as possible.

Discussing this contribution to cultural pluralism in France as opposed to assimilation closely aligns with my thoughts about established social classes in France. The idea of France being a classist society was taught to me in my European Management coursework, so I'm not sure it deserves to be dissected as a stereotype, but rather a characteristic. The characteristic of accepted power distances and social distances seems wrong to me, but I stop myself. Who am I to shame a culture for its power dynamics or its social structure? The United States surely has a level of social inequality that is shameful if you bring yourself to thoughtfully consider it, but I

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<sup>22</sup> Takaki, Ronald T. *A Different Mirror: a History of Multicultural America*. Little, Brown & Co, 1993.

think we feel better about ourselves by publicly feigning respect and concern for everyone equally. Also, the French pride themselves in honesty of expressions, so they see even our sincere smiles as false considering our lack of social concern.<sup>23</sup>

The French may adhere to a more classist system, but I'm sure they would argue fair points about American inequities<sup>24</sup>, for example, at least a striking majority of the French believe everyone is deserving of health care.<sup>25</sup> *And*, they support that belief by voting to put their money toward it. The French have less of their population in poverty, and a significantly larger middle class than the United States.<sup>26</sup> Is their more classist system any more destructive than our apathy? Maybe their version of different is, again, not wrong.

It's interesting to consider, though, how French may treat foreign people since we do not belong to their class system at all. I think they create somewhat of a class system for foreign people as well; for example, many French people I interacted with may have likely had a higher level of respect for me because I am from the United States and a student than they would have for a person seeking refuge from a politically unstable country, but also they may not respect me nearly as much as they would respect a European student who spoke French. In an effort to understand French people further, I tried to think as they might've as they perceived me, since I

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<sup>23</sup> Guiliano, Mireille. *French Women Don't Get Fat*. New York: Knopf, 2005. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Kochhar, Rakesh. "Through an American Lens, Western Europe's Middle Classes Appear Smaller." *Pew Research Center*, 5 June 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/05/through-an-american-lens-western-europes-middle-classes-appear-smaller/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/05/through-an-american-lens-western-europes-middle-classes-appear-smaller/).

<sup>25</sup> Shapiro, Joseph. "Health Care Lessons From France." *National Public Radio*, 11 July 2008, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92419273](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92419273).

<sup>26</sup> Venturi, Richard. "Up Against the Wall: The French and American Middle Classes." *French Stratégie*, Feb. 2018, [www.strategie.gouv.fr/sites/strategie.gouv.fr/files/atoms/files/the\\_middle\\_class\\_web.pdf](http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/sites/strategie.gouv.fr/files/atoms/files/the_middle_class_web.pdf).

am being so forward in my perceptions of them. While this classist element of French culture<sup>27</sup> did seem like a fair evaluation from my experiences, there is one popular stereotype I never did find to be fair.

That unfair stereotype Americans place on French is claiming they are dirty. Of all the stereotypes I discuss, this one entertains me most, because I simply did not notice any difference in society's level of hygiene when I was in France. I did not ask friends if I could count their showers or obsessively look for greasy hair, but I like to think I rode public transport enough to know if people generally smelled enough that I thought we should judge an entire country's people for it. I was often around athletes, so maybe my sample is tainted because this group of people was more active than usual, and therefore sweated and showered more often than the average French person; however, I am the first to notice my own body odor, so I would assume I would notice the body odor of people around me if it were uncommonly unpleasant. Based on my readings, I do believe French people may shower less often than Americans, and I want to be clear that I am not trying to argue this is untrue. I do argue, however, that if they do shower less, their bodies are probably accustomed to this practice, and they do not smell the way my body would if I showered in a similar pattern. My way of evaluating the stereotype that French people smell may be extremely unscientific, but without being led to believe otherwise, I believe this stereotype is unjustified.

Another stereotype I find to be unjustified is the claim that the French are effeminate and lack strength. By definition, effeminate means to be said of a man or boy, "having traits, tastes,

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<sup>27</sup> Nadeau, Jean-Benoît, and Julie Barlow. *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong: Why Love France but not the French*. Schiedam: Scriptum, 2004. Print.



habits, etc., traditionally considered feminine, as softness or delicacy.”<sup>28</sup> To me, that statement does not describe the French men I interacted with any more than hypermasculinity, “a sociological term denoting exaggerated forms of masculinity, virility, and physicality.... the view of violence as manly... and callous behavior toward women and a regard toward emotional displays as feminine,”<sup>29</sup> describes American men. With these definitions in mind, I find it easy to agree men from France and the United States are both masculine, and therefore by definition, “having qualities traditionally ascribed to men, as strength and boldness.”<sup>30</sup> During my time in France, I witnessed a number of events in which I found France, as a people and as a nation, to be very strong. These events stemmed from the recent spike in terrorism, which has drawn special attention to France, and led citizens, globally, to question the safety of France.

I remember I actually heard about the Bastille Day attack on Nice on my way to the French Consulate. Up until that point, I had heard about terrorism plaguing France, but I had never thought much of it because I am an American and Americans are, stereotypically, very good at avoiding world news. Also, our study abroad director at BGSU was quick to dispel any of our concerns by reminding us that French students are more afraid of studying in the United States than we are to study in France because of the numerous school shootings the United States has been victim of. Hearing this made me consider my own perception of complete safety in my classrooms on campus and in school growing up; I have always felt safe in the United States, and if I think critically about why I draw the conclusion that I am completely safe here, I find flaws in my own logic.

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<sup>28</sup> “Effeminate.” *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, [www.dictionary.com/browse/effeminate?s=t](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/effeminate?s=t).

<sup>29</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Hypermasculinity.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 25 Aug. 2017, [www.britannica.com/topic/hypermasculinity](http://www.britannica.com/topic/hypermasculinity).

<sup>30</sup> “Masculine.” *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, [www.dictionary.com/browse/masculine?s=t](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/masculine?s=t).

Hearing about the Bastille Day attack on my way to my French long-stay VISA appointment was the first time I ever considered that maybe I do feel extremely safe, from a national security perspective, in the United States. I have grown up exposed to so much indoctrination of idea that America is so strong. It's so safe. No country would threaten us because we have such a strong military. I grew up not thinking but knowing that our military comprises the good guys, and we keep our military strong in order to fight the bad guys around the world. Never ever fighting on American soil, though. There's so much hype over our security that I really entertained the idea that going to France may not have been a good idea because they have had numerous events where innocent people have been killed by terrorists.

Then, I consider how imperfect the United States' national security is. We experienced 9/11. We experienced the Boston Marathon attack. Countless school shootings are creating a climate where parents justifiably worry as they send their children to school.<sup>31</sup> My mom and I talked a lot before I left for France, and it took us no time to remind ourselves this fear of terrorism should absolutely never change my decision to live my life to the fullest. I should never live in fear, Mom reminded me. "That's how evil people win," she said.

I did not live in fear in France. In Strasbourg, on my first day I saw armed militants surrounding the cathedral, and at first I was intimidated. My friends quickly explained to me that those were the good people, and they were keeping us safe. I learned armed militants were to be expected in all larger cities, and they should make me feel secure, not scared. A very cool truth

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<sup>31</sup> Wilson, Chris. "How Many School Shootings Have There Been Since Sandy Hook?" *Time*, Time, 22 Feb. 2018, [time.com/5168272/how-many-school-shootings/](http://time.com/5168272/how-many-school-shootings/).

about my time in France is that during that year, more often than not, I saw evil people lose. There were terrorists arrested in Strasbourg, within a quarter-mile of the bus station I always used, Place de l'Étoile, and within a mile of my home, Residence la Marne. They were arrested for planning a large-scale attack on Disneyland Paris.<sup>32</sup> These arrests made me unsettled at first, and then I considered the strength of the French police force to have found these people plotting from Strasbourg; this made me feel very safe.

These arrests also took place just before the opening of Strasbourg's Christmas Market. We were all aware of the possibility that Strasbourg's own Christmas Market could be a target for terrorism. In both 2014 and 2015, Strasbourg's was voted "Europe's Best Christmas Market" by over 70,000 European voters; imagine how many people gather in the popular island of Petit-France.<sup>33</sup> Our seemingly justified fear did not stop us from enjoying the Christmas Market in Strasbourg about every other night for a month and a half. Sadly, the day I was leaving Strasbourg for Lisbon for Christmas holidays, there was an attack on Berlin's Christmas Market.<sup>34</sup> Again, this attack reminded me the validity of the tinge of fear I felt in Strasbourg during December, especially since one of my dearest Strasbourg friend's parents were in Berlin at the time. The Christmas Market attack occurred in Germany, not France, but it felt very close to me. I think at that point in December, I came to peace with the realization that I was going to continue living my life despite the small fear I did house. I deem this a good and important

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<sup>32</sup> Robinson, Julian. "ISIS Planned to Attack DISNEYLAND PARIS, the Champs-Elysees Christmas Market." *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 24 Nov. 2016, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3968412/ISIS-planned-attack-DISNEYLAND-PARIS-Champs-Elysees-Christmas-market-Metro-station-cafes-police-HQ-WEEK-cops-reveal.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3968412/ISIS-planned-attack-DISNEYLAND-PARIS-Champs-Elysees-Christmas-market-Metro-station-cafes-police-HQ-WEEK-cops-reveal.html).

<sup>33</sup> Guernier, Pierre. "Discover the Strasbourg Christmas Market." *French Moments*, French Moments, 24 Oct. 2017, [frenchmoments.eu/strasbourg-christmas-market/](http://frenchmoments.eu/strasbourg-christmas-market/).

<sup>34</sup> Hanna, Jason. "Berlin Christmas Market Attack: The Victims." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 23 Dec. 2016, [www.cnn.com/2016/12/23/europe/berlin-christmas-market-attack-victims/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/23/europe/berlin-christmas-market-attack-victims/index.html).

decision because the scariest news I learned related to terrorist activity in France was, again, a situation where evil people lost. Police arrested terrorists the day before a Marie Le Pen rally in Marseille, France<sup>35</sup>; I was in Marseille on those days, and if the attack had been successful, due to its scale, it is no stretch to assume I would have been affected. During that trip to Marseille, once I heard the news I felt extremely uneasy, and it took me much longer to feel an appreciation for my safety rather than heightened fear.

I worry this fear of terrorism may sound melodramatic out of context. For example, why am I not constantly afraid of school shootings in Bowling Green, Ohio? Statistically, there is a similar or even greater likelihood I would be affected. I think when you take yourself out of a comfort zone, be it my home country, which loves to boast of its national security, or any other comfort zone, it is only natural to worry more. There is just this underlying thought that at the end of the day, I am an outsider to this culture. It is not mine. I do not trust it to prioritize my safety the way I assume the United States would. Perhaps these assumptions are unfair, but they do still seem worth mentioning. It has been an interesting experience, however, watching the aforementioned events transform the way I view France and French culture. I respect its police force and military for being vigilant, and keeping me personally safe. I respect its people for showing next to no fear in a climate where fear may have been warranted. Finally, I respect France for its level of strength, a contrast to a stereotype of being weak, and for reminding me that I live in a world where, overwhelmingly, evil does not win. I learned in France that I can feel secure in a country that is not my homeland, and this was even in a country that Americans say

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<sup>35</sup> Leicester, John, and Lori Hinnant. "France Says It Thwarted an Imminent 'Terror Attack' Just Days before Presidential Vote." *Global News*, Global News, 18 Apr. 2017, [globalnews.ca/news/3385794/france-terror-attack-just-presidential-vote/](http://globalnews.ca/news/3385794/france-terror-attack-just-presidential-vote/).

to be weak or effeminate. I still believe stereotypes are rooted in truth, but I did not personally witness the rooted truth underlying this stereotype Americans place on French.

In summary, I discussed stereotypes that (1) French culture is closed, people are not nice (2) French social classes are apparent (3) French people are dirty, and (4) French society is effeminate, lacks strength. First, I talked about my experiences with French soccer teammates, and how a tendency to being closed or less outwardly nice did not indicate an aversion to me. Now these are dear friends of mine, and being welcomed into their lives in an open way over time is extremely sincere and appreciated. While I do not disagree this stereotype is valid, I think Americans need to remember their own lens through which they are perceiving the French, and remember that different is not necessarily wrong. In a second discussion, I reveal I did witness more awareness of social classes, which seems like a negative aspect of French culture to me. In evaluating, I encourage thoughtful consideration of how the French support different social classes, even though they may openly acknowledge a separation Americans do not so openly acknowledge. Next, I negated any experience with French lacking an appropriate level of cleanliness; I noticed no difference in hygiene between Americans and French that would justify this stereotype. Finally, I talked about my experiences with terrorism and thoughts about national security to explain my perception of France as a strong country rather than the stereotypical claims that French is weak and effeminate.

The discussion about stereotypes Americans place on the French consistently makes me wonder about the pervasiveness of stereotypes in our perception of the world as a whole. How often am I using these shortcuts to simplify decision-making, and in turn creating a caricature of

the world around me? This is a problematic thought to me. Who and what am I minimizing? My experience trying to remove the lens, or blinder, that clouds my vision as I perceive the French has taught me about looking past stereotypes in the United States, too. I find it interesting that I had to leave for a year and 'let the French tell me their story' in order to realize I may only be listening to my own story of the United States as well.

In conclusion, I have found it quite empowering to study these stereotypes Americans place on the French. It has been an inspiring experience to learn critical thinking skills as a freshman, practice them in the context of an American cultural studies course as a sophomore, and finally immerse myself into French culture to apply the skills I learned to a completely new environment as a junior. That progression took place over my first three years at BGSU, and I have spent my senior year wrestling with winding thoughts to draw these conclusions. I emphasize, these conclusions pertain to my experience in France, primarily in the Alsatian region, and I believe if I spend another year in France, these thoughts could change or develop further. These conclusions are written through the lens of an American business student who had an extremely positive education abroad experience. Lastly, these conclusions are mine; they are based on valid, thorough consideration and evaluation, but they are mine.

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