

# Smile – We're All Cats or Dogs

Debbi Baron, an American in Paris, compares how the French and Americans react to strangers

The topic of cultural similarities and differences between, American (me) and the French (me by proximity) has always been fascinating and it is safe to say that we approach life from distinct points of view. A blog I read the other day made me smile because the topic was, well, about smiling and the French. A noticeable cultural difference if there ever was one! The author described how Parisians are a particularly unsmiling lot compared with our American penchant to the smile when out and about.

Having lived in Paris for well over a decade, I can say from experience that this observation is generally true. Not ALL Parisians frown ALL the time, but it tends to be their default public face. It's useful for neophyte or bewildered American travellers to France to know what's behind this difference, so an explanation is in order. Cultural analysis is tough to address without generalizing and using stereotypes,

so for argument sake I'll use some commonly held stereotypes and some analogies to illuminate this noteworthy topic.

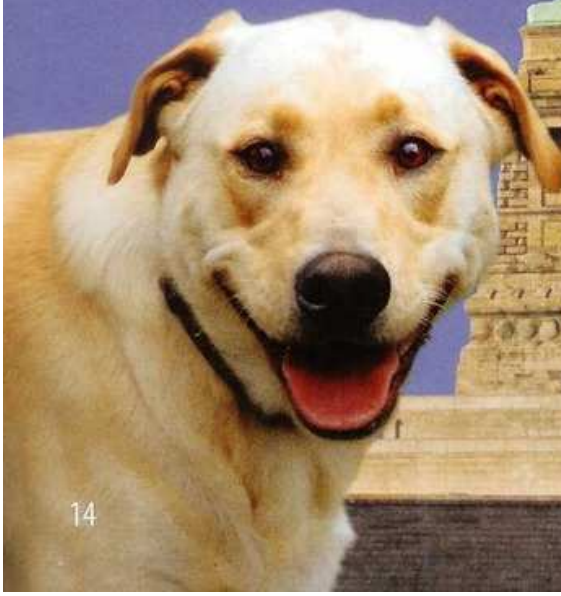
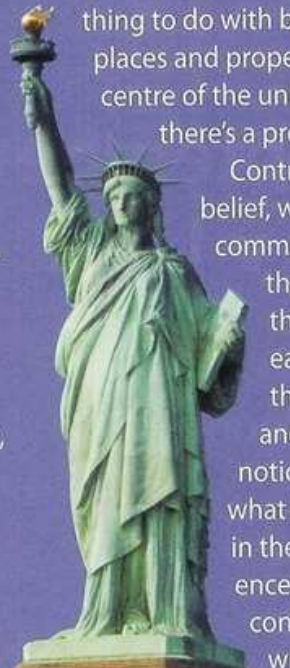
Let me clear up one important thing first, Parisians are to the French like New Yorkers are to the rest of Americans. Suffice it to say that there is a reason Parisians believe they share a bond with New Yorkers. It has something to do with big over-crowded places and propensities towards centre of the universe thinking. Now there's a provocative start!

Contrary to popular belief, we have more in common with each other than differences and the divergences are easy to spot because they are significant and immediately noticeable. Very unlike what I experienced living in the UK, where differences were subtle and confusing. Let's start with 'French people are so arrogant!' Allow me to offer up an animal analogy – when confronted with a stranger, dogs wag their tail and

investigate immediately whereas cats act aloof and observe from afar until they choose, if ever, to engage. Staying in the realm of gross generalization, in my experience Americans are like dogs and the French are like cats. With me so far?

North Americans, and indeed most Anglo-Saxons, lean towards affability when it comes to dealing with strangers. For the French, the opposite is true; someone unknown is dealt with at arm's length from behind an ever-present façade that protects one's privacy. When there is no relationship with someone, the French "will recreate distance with silence, the American with conversation...". The French perceive silence as neutral while most Anglo-Saxons perceive it as unpleasant at best and intimidating at worst. Americans are immediate and friendly, while just like cats, the French are reserved and gradual. It is this reserve one sees on the street. Our 'nice until proven unworthy' Anglo-Saxon demeanour is distinctly contrary to 'wary until proven worthy' French behaviour.

Like the cat, the French want proof that a more in-depth exchange with an unknown is going to be worth their effort. Underpinning a French person's vision of oneself is the belief that the individual is sacrosanct above all else. Being reserved guards against squandering their hard-earned knowledge and intellect, which for the French is tantamount to being a distinct, indivis-



ible entity, i.e., an individual. In being an individual, one has responsibilities towards the less fortunate. Curiously the 'I' sustains the 'WE' via a 'Supreme Being', otherwise known as the government. This allows the revered ONE to acquit themselves of their duty and to whinge about it at the same time. To the French, Americans are individualists whose responsibility to society lies in making sure one takes care of oneself; others are expected to do the same and not whinge about it.

Privacy notwithstanding, this French individual with societal responsibilities will not hesitate to - in fact believes they have a duty to - correct and even debate with anyone, about anything! To the French, knowledge is all-powerful, hence imprecision needs to be put right immediately. Candid and above all very direct, they can be quite abrupt and peremptory. For a lovable American golden retriever, this will seem like impatience verging on rudeness, since for us, tactful diplomacy tends to be our first approach with strangers. But picture a cat thumping its tail as the hand of the 'tail-wagger' approaches. Stereotypically for a French person, the American tendency toward politeness, i.e., 'niceness' is seen as very naïve and smiling at everyone misplaced, so their hiss shouldn't be a surprise to you. Even worse for them is British 'diplomacy', which translates as beating around the bush and obfuscation and deserves a big swipe of the paw.

But once the wary, tail thumping hisser has assessed their adversary, their own kind or others, let the games begin for they place very high value on the art of conversation. Luckily for me, since I grew up in a family of cat loving debaters, the first French business meeting was not too much of a shock and the first dinner party was actually amusing, if not electrifying. For the rest

of my poor happy go lucky associates, these were downright traumatising! Northern logic and southern passion combined with the rigours of Cartesian education allow the French to process and explain their points extremely rationally and forcefully. Discussion is a game, an opportunity for debate and passionate argument on any topic, during which you will witness high drama, if not downright stropiness.

Americans in general tend to blanch at the intensity and speed of these discussions, which unnervingly end with no conclusion drawn and are usually conducted sotto voce, as are most verbal exchanges here. Since they are perceived as entertainment and proof of conviction, the French often protest that Americans lecture rather than converse as we insist on an outcome, which the French perceive as not the point. To them we converse at high decibel levels, which French people see as rude and an invasion of others' privacy. Amusingly during these 'intellectual exchanges' we do share one common trait; the French interrupt each other just like any of us good North Americans (conversely not like the British). So be prepared, en garde! my intrepid Rin Tin Tin, if the cat has decided to play with you, enter the game and participate appropriately.

So, unrepentant smiles and niceness versus the assertive socialist individual, what to make of it all? These differences are actually variations on a theme for our two proud democratic cultures. Understanding these divergent outlooks could help you discover that the French are among the friendliest and most helpful people around (always remembering Parisians and New Yorkers are in a category unto themselves). When you get a chance to venture across or under the Channel, put this analogy to the test. Try some cat behaviour and see if you find a similar response. If not you can always bark and wag your tail, smile and kill them with niceness. After all, these are part of our American armour. ★

