

Offering Compliments Across Cultures

It's a valuable art, says **Katarzyna Richter**, Cross Cultural Psychologist.



Katarzyna Richter

We all love compliments, don't we? Though offering one can get tricky especially when you're staying in a place like the

Middle East, a melting pot of cultures. What works in one culture may not in another!

In the Arab world compliments are a long observed tradition as well as a communication tool for everyday interaction. They are usually lengthy and poetic. For instance, "the world enlightens your face" and "may Allah make all your days beautiful". It's also important to compliment often. In other cultures this may be regarded as dishonest or manipulative. But for people who were brought up expressing kindness frequently, the expression of warm words is a sign of the respect.

Another aspect is complimenting objects like clothes, accessories and home décor. In most Arab countries as well as Russia, Ghana, Greece, Turkey and Romania such a compliment may oblige the person to give the item to you.

There is a Persian cultural practice, shekasteh-nafsi or modesty under which one is expected to downplay one's own talents or achievements while praising similar traits in others. The person who is complimented must devalue the flattery and offer one back; or reassign the value of the praise back; or compliment a family member or God.

Many Asian countries like China, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, India and Japan pay a compliment by describing the qualities. For instance, in Korea the compliments most frequently used are "chakhada" (good natured), "bujireundhada" (diligent) and "yeeuibareuda" (polite). Asian cultures also do not begin the compliment

with "I". For instance, "I like your dress" or "I think your hair looks lovely", since doing so focuses attention on the interlocutor. Performance or personality is praised more often than appearance.

In Japan and Korea, compliments are readily deprecated. For instance, the most common Japanese response to a compliment would be "Le, Le" (no, no) or "Sonna koto nai" (That's not true). This is because modesty and shyness are expected social norms.

This is different from individualistic Western cultures like America and Europe where being genuine and honest is most valued, even if someone's feelings can be hurt. In such settings, compliments are usually given before or just after criticism in an effort to balance the impact on the listener. Freely given compliments, without criticism can be immediately accepted without a compliment in return.

Reaction to the Same Compliment, Across 3 Cultures

Mrs Lee: "Ah, your daughter so beautiful! Make you so proud!"

Mrs Wang: "Oh no! Not really. She actually very ugly – just using some good make-up – ha! ha! You are the one proud – your daughter so clever! Top of the class!"

Mrs. Lee: "Aya, no! Not at all! She quite stupid but she has good teacher."

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Mrs Lee: "Ah, your daughter so beautiful! Make you proud!"

Mrs Jackson: "Oh thanks – yeah, she's pretty awesome, isn't she? And she's top of the class too! I'm so proud of my baby girl. She's just the best daughter any mother can have. Well, see you next week ..."
(Walks away)

Mrs Lee (to herself): "What a conceited, boastful woman with no social sensitivity!"

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Mrs Lee: "Ah, your daughter so beautiful! Make you so proud!"

Mr Ahmed: "Yes, thanks to God. May she be blessed with good life, God willing and protected from evil eye."



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