

## Germany is a country far removed from its stereotype

From sexual liberation in the east to tight-fisted raunchiness in the south, Germany's many characteristics defy single definition.

Southerners are tight-fisted but raunchy, provincials are easier to please, easterners are sexually liberated and Berliners are hard to shock.

At least that is the view of a young woman who has crisscrossed Germany and observed its different tribes from the somewhat improbable vantage point of poles in table dancing clubs.

"On the one hand, you have a disadvantage working in the south because the people are a bit tight-fisted," says the woman, who has published a book, *This is Niedersachsen und nicht Las Vegas, Honey* (This is Niedersachsen and not Las Vegas, Honey) under the pseudonym Funny van Money (she declines to give her real name). "But you also have advantages – they are a bit quicker and easier to stimulate because they are faster to get excited about the programme offered."

The author now lives in Berlin, where she says it is not so easy to make money as table dancing clubs are not the novelty they are in other places.

"There are some differences between the bigger and maybe more liberal cities and the small villages. They [dancers] are also working in villages with 1,000 people living there or so and it's easier to make some money in those places because the guests are easier to please somehow."

But it is in the east that she feels most comfortable.

"In the east I have always found people to be especially nice and really the way the region ties together – the land itself and the history. I am such a fan of the east."

The country she has observed is very different from British stereotypes of black forest gâteau, punctuality and efficiency.

These days, gay conservative politicians no longer turn heads and Turkish Germans – the country's biggest ethnic minority – are not only able to get German citizenship, they also tell some of the funniest jokes.

Trains no longer run with the punctuality they once did and the joke that Berlin's new airport has become – once due to open in June of this year, now postponed to autumn of 2013 amid a shambolic trail of errors – has stretched the image of German efficiency to its limits.

"The cliché of hard-working, punctual, ambitious Germans is hard to do away with, both in the way Germans perceive themselves and are perceived by others – but Germans are in fact much more diverse, fun-loving and tolerant than the stereotypical image of them would have it," according to a new study by the consumer research institute Rheingold Salon, based in Cologne, called *The Double Life of Germans*. "They are also much slyer and less orderly than popularly thought."

L2 Semester 1.

Lesson 1: Cultural differences.

Constanze Stelzenmüller, a transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund in Berlin and a keen cultural observer, says that Germans have become more complex, more interesting, over the past decade.

"You now have openly gay conservative parliamentarians, conservative MPs with multiple cultural identities, and multiple passports, saying: 'You know what, I'm German.'

"It took us longer than everyone else, but it is happening and I think it's made my country significantly more attractive."

Stelzenmüller, who spent much of her childhood in Britain and the United States, adds that Germany is also far more relaxed than it once was.

"I'm hyper-conscious of how Germans define themselves and what policies they use for that. So I've found it a big relief that it has loosened up."

One of the best indicators of the change is what has happened on the comedy circuit, where some of the country's best standups are now German Turks.

Fatih Çevikkollu, who was born in Cologne in 1972 to Turkish parents, came to fame with his show *Fatihland* in which he explores his intercultural identity through the genres of standup comedy, cabaret, hip-hop and rap. Other success stories include former police officer Murat Topal, the 37-year-old son of a Turkish *Gastarbeiter* and a German office clerk, and Kaya Yanar, who makes jokes about apple strudel and baklava and is a big hit in Germany as well as among German-speaking Turks in Istanbul.

"Comedy in Germany has changed in very interesting ways, and the fact that hyphenated identity Germans have captured a very important segment of that is very important," Stelzenmüller believes. "It takes a certain type of confidence to claim that you are at home and you can claim roots, to say: 'You know what, I'm going to play the two against each other and make them rub sparks.'

"When that type of thing becomes mainstream, then something important has happened."

She also cites the example of the German-Turkish actor <sup>→ shae</sup> Sibel Kekilli who, among her other roles, plays a mistress of the character Tyrion Lannister in the hit US TV series *Game of Thrones*, the first time a German-Turkish actor has made it into the American big time.

"There's been a real shift in how people accept multiple identities. In a country like this, that vainly tried to perpetrate a totalitarian idea of racial purity, that matters all the more."

*The Guardian online*, Sunday 16 September 2012

### Comprehension questions.

1. Identify each stereotype in the article and note down how each one is characterised.
2. Describe the general German stereotype.

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3. Would you say that the British idea of the German stereotype mirrors that of the French, or not? List the similarities and differences between the two perceptions.
4. What are the differences between large and small cities?
5. Who is Fatih Çevikkollu and what does he do?
6. Find synonyms for the following words:

- devious
- a researcher
- to no avail
- previous
- organised
- stingy
- popular
- to get rid of
- to quote
- to characterise
- detached
- to be behind/to be responsible for
- a section
- to relax
- to tour
- a broad perspective
- vulgar

7. Paraphrase the following three paragraphs. You may retain the highlighted words.

*These days, **gay conservative politicians** no longer turn heads and **Turkish Germans** – the country's biggest ethnic minority – are not only able to get German citizenship, they also tell some of the funniest jokes.*

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Icebreaker

1. How would you define a stereotype?
2. What stereotypes are there of the French? Do you agree with them and why?
3. How are the Germans perceived by the French?
4. How do you feel about these stereotypes and are they still relevant today?