

IACCM 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference and 3<sup>rd</sup> CEMS CCM / IACCM Doctoral  
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**CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION:  
Cometences and Capabilities**

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERCULTURAL TRAINERS<sup>24</sup>**

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Ethics in intercultural trainings is a topic that in the English-language literature is closely connected with the names of Judith Martin and Michael Paige. Until today, their publications are the only sources of explicit ethical rules in the field of intercultural learning and teaching. They advocate general principles based on a culture relativistic approach which closely resemble the anthropological '*Codes of Ethics*' and aim at maintaining the integrity of the trainer. As particularly critical aspects they discuss the aspired transformation of the learner's personality, his or her emotional shock as a result of cultural self-awareness, and the existence of power asymmetries in intercultural interfaces. As concerns ethical issues and responsibilities, Paige and Martin consider the intercultural trainer as the central figure, and they establish rules for him or her which relate directly to the practice of intercultural trainings and can therefore be easily understood by practitioners. They refer explicitly to two categories, the competencies of the trainer and the risk factors in the intercultural learning process, and they present a very detailed catalog of requirements for ethically responsible trainers. The authors do not claim to have exhausted the topic of ethics; rather, they insist that it is a very difficult and tedious field which will become more and more complex with the increasing relevance of intercultural trainings as a field of business.

In the German-speaking world, ethics in the intercultural field is still a very new topic. In the following I will discuss some ethical issues which came up again and again in my own practice of intercultural teaching and training. For the sake of clarity and in analogy to Kant's moral imperative concerning general human interactions I have chosen to present them in the form of ethical imperatives.

**1. Intercultural trainers should be mindful of the notions of culture and cultural difference they employ in their trainings**

The notions of culture and cultural difference are at the core of intercultural work. Their theoretical framing belongs to the intellectual domains of cultural anthropology and ethnology. For the design of their trainings, all intercultural trainers are thus dependent on knowledge "borrowed" from a field other than Intercultural Communication.

Ever since the first modern definition of culture by the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor at the end of the 19th century, the various anthropological schools have developed their own definitions of "culture". All of them emerged from the attempts of researchers to come to grips with the extant social reality, and by virtue of this they

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always reflect the Zeitgeist. The beginnings of intercultural trainings in the 1950s coincided with the predominance of the (then new) culture relativistic ideas which were an outcome of the upcoming anti-colonialist and anti-racist movements and the debate on human rights. The culture relativistic concept of culture perceived cultures as the specific, learned social knowledge of coherent and unified social units living in clearly defined territorial units. For that period of time with its relatively low mobility and its limited exchange of information, this definition of culture was probably quite adequate. “Culture” was viewed as objectifiable and was, at least for the industrialized societies, largely equaled to “national culture”.

This “classical” concept of culture could easily be made operational for the analysis of the everyday life of diplomats, employees in international organizations, development workers, business expatriates, exchange students or soldiers on peace-keeping missions – that is, those groups who sojourn temporarily as a foreign minority in a cultural majority, in other words: act in international contexts. For such contexts, “culture” was very well represented by the well-known metaphor of the ‘cultural iceberg’ which is based on the clear distinction between the visible and the invisible parts of culture and presupposes a causal relation between the two.

Until today, this older concept of culture still forms the basis of most intercultural trainings and is well-established through numerous ground-laying publications and handbooks. Its advantage lies in the fact that with its help interactions between members of different national cultures can indeed be predicted with a some probability and that misunderstandings can be analyzed with the help of “culture dimensions” (such as Hall’s, Hofstede’s or Strodbeck/Kluckhohn’s). Their disadvantage, however, is that they actually lead trainers to rely too much on rather generalized and simplified concepts of “national culture” and that more complex situations – as they are common in multiethnic or multicultural societies – cannot be adequately grasped.

In our present age of growing globalization, individualization, mobility, and world-wide flow of information many basic factors of intercultural encounters have changed dramatically. The fields of intercultural action can less and less be explained by means of clear cultural ascriptions. The idea of cultures as territorially bound and closed units has become highly questionable in many places in the world, most significantly in the highly industrialized regions. As a consequence, the idea of the determination of the individuals by their culture which was suggested by the culture relativistic approach is today criticized as being static and deterministic.

Therefore, in the present understanding of cultural anthropology, culture is conceived of as something fluid and complex, with structures that can be grasped only situationally and for the individual case. In this concept of culture, symbols, images, and subjective interpretations play a very important role. For the analysis of interactions in multicultural contexts this concept of culture offers a decidedly better tool. The asymmetrical relations between the members of the majority group and the different minorities in such societies usually leads to the increased production of subjectively felt or even imagined differences which can then function as self-fulfilling prophecies and develop their own dynamics and produce their own reality.

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Does the existence of the two rather different definitions of culture present a problem? Not really. In contrast to Tommy Dahlén, the radical critic of intercultural trainings, who wants to radically replace the classical concept of culture by the modern one, I would insist that in intercultural trainings today both concepts of culture can very well exist side by side and can be made useful. Thus, at the beginning of culture learning, the model of culture as an iceberg can very well serve as a first orientation. To the beginners it offers structures which enable them to organize their pertinent life-world experiences and to make the abstract concept of culture concrete for themselves. Depending on the context, the duration, the learning needs, and the goals of the training, the trainer can then introduce the second model, that of the cultural “backpack”. It conceives the cultural knowledge of the individual as an invisible ‘rucksack’ which one always has on one’s back, but is not obliged to keep it open all the time. The use of the ‘cultural baggage’ is rather flexible because the individual has the freedom to use it individually and situationally.

The two models do not necessarily contradict each other: There are contexts and situations which can be handled better with the help of the ‘iceberg’ model, and there are others that can be grasped more adequately with the ‘backpack’ model. The more competent the trainer can handle the two concepts of culture and be aware of their limitations, the more differentiated he will deal with intercultural realities, find the adequate theoretical approach to them and accompany the learners in the process of intercultural learning.

**2. Intercultural trainers should refrain from using cultural comparisons based on black-and-white contrasts**

In their choice of training methods trainers are highly dependent on handbooks, and it is in this field where the predominance of the American interculturalists is most visible. The sheer number of handbooks and training videos dwarfs everything that has been produced on the European market. In addition, the American books are made up in an attractive manner, their texts are easily comprehensible and their didactic is extraordinary. This is why many European trainers like to use them. The question is, however, whether the methods presented in these books are really applicable to the European situation.

Trainers practicing in the US say that they expect, among other things, to work with trainees who know no foreign languages, have no or only superficial experience with otherness, and want to learn quickly and in a practice-oriented manner.

It is probably due to these features that most methods to be found in US training handbooks tend to illustrate cultural differences by means of black-and-white contrasts. Thus, simulations and case studies, but also exercises on value orientations and intercultural dialogues usually employ extreme cultural oppositions. This is why they are, in the European context, usually perceived as “naive” or “simplistic” and do not achieve their didactic goals.

Similarly, the use of the method of the “culture assimilator” is highly problematic. The classical application of this method – the presentation of a simple story of a conflict between individuals with different cultural backgrounds, the presentation of four

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solutions and the pertinent explanations – is today criticized as being too simplifying and as leaving no space for creative thinking. Furthermore, critics today do not accept the idea of handling culture in terms of “right” or “wrong”, and even laymen recognize intuitively that cultures cannot be understood as closed systems providing unambiguous orientations.

Even the argument that these explanations contain valuable information about the given culture is not valid in view of the rapid culture change: that too often annihilates the topicality of these stories and turns them into documents of by-gone times. This is particularly true for the assimilators for the rapidly changing transformation countries, for example in East Asia or Eastern Europe. The recent attempts at updating the assimilator method cannot invalidate the fundamental criticism of their formalism and their tendency to convey a false feeling of security. A useful alternative is offered by the method of “otherness narration”: this method also uses short and simple episodes which are presented to the trainees with the goal of positioning and grasping cultural differences, of training change of perspective etc., but which are then made the object of analysis and discussion in the classroom.

**3. Intercultural trainers should be very critical about passing out “recipe-knowledge” to their clients**

Many intercultural trainers are familiar with the problem of being urged to present ready-made ‘recipes’ for behavior in difficult intercultural situations. How should they react to these demands? Ignore them or point out the risks of such cultural “dos and don’ts” or “culture portraits”? It is well-known to professional trainers that any reliance on such “recipes” is highly misleading and that they are “false friends” who can never do justice to the complexity of culture contacts. The reason for this demand for strict rules is all too well known: it lies in the insecurity arising in each intercultural situation, a fact that gave rise to the most widely known model in Intercultural Communication, Gudykunst’s ‘Anxiety/Uncertainty Management’ model. To the above demands one must add the popular expectation that intercultural trainings merely teach people how to avoid “cultural pitfalls”, an expectation that is even amplified by phrases such a “Fit for dealing with foreign cultures” or “Learning to avoid cultural pitfalls” in the advertisements for training seminars.

For the trainer this dilemma leads to a very difficult situation. Even if they, as people working in the service sector, are inclined to fulfill the wishes of their clients, ethically conscious trainers should make it very clear from the beginning that ‘recipes’ and ‘quick fixes’ are not at all sufficient for a competent and professional management of cultural differences. But this approach has of course its risks and can hardly be taken without professional integrity and didactic stability. In this situation, the reference to the analogy between culture learning and foreign language learning can often be helpful: in the same way as mere learning of an English dictionary cannot help a Chinese to form proper English sentences, the learning of a vocabulary of Chinese pitfalls cannot enable the European student or businessperson to understand the way of thinking of his Chinese partners.

**4. Intercultural trainers should be aware of the manipulative power of intercultural knowledge and competence**

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There is yet another problem which some trainers may not have been openly confronted with. It is, however, well-known to all those who in the course of their professional careers found themselves in the situation that they were asked by their trainees to tell them “cultural tricks” with which they can “pull their partners across the table”, or who were asked outright to take sides with the party that hired them. In all these cases the trainers are placed in the role of the ‘man in the middle’, a role that is well-known to professional ‘go-betweens’ such as interpreters or mediators. Already in the early phase of professionalization of intercultural trainers, Condon and Yousef were the first to point out the dangers of this role. They warned against the so-called ‘Malinche Syndrome’ to which professional cultural mediators can easily fall prey. The name refers to the role which La Malinche, the interpreter and mistress of the Spanish conqueror Cortes, played in the conquest of Mexico in the 16th century. It is known of her that she did not only have a talent for languages and learned Spanish very soon, but that she also adopted Spanish values and was thus able to support the Spanish conquerors in all the negotiations – very much to the disadvantage of her own people. Since that time, La Malinche stands for the unloyal cultural mediator who misuses his knowledge by making it available for only one party.

It is surprising that this problem is not addressed in any of the later publications on intercultural trainings and on the role of the trainer. In view of the world-wide increase in culture contacts, however, this issue has certainly gained new topicality: while in the earlier periods the learners and the objects of their learning were divided by large distances and barriers, today they increasingly find themselves in permanent physical or medial closeness to each other. From this follows the obligation for the intercultural trainer to maintain personal neutrality, an ethical demand that should be added to the catalog of criteria set up by Paige. In any training, the trainer’s loyalty should not be with one of the participating parties but with the task he or she has accepted. Observing this ethical demand is not at all easy for any trainer, because in case of conflict one must be ready to accept economic losses in order to maintain high ethical standards. This demand for neutrality is particularly difficult for all trainers who are natives of the culture that is addressed in the training.

**5. Intercultural trainers should be aware of the Western nature of intercultural trainings**

The question whether intercultural trainings as educational formats can be transferred universally to all learning contexts has rarely been discussed in the literature on trainings. The answer actually depends on the question of the universality or cultural boundedness of the conceptual, methodological and didactic repertoire of intercultural learning in general. Are ideas, formats, and models of training that have grown in the US-American context universally applicable – or are they rather a reflection of their original culture?

In the United States, the problem of the cultural boundedness of intercultural trainings was addressed quite early. In an unpublished paper presented in 1978, Robert Kohls formulated seven practice-oriented theses on the cultural specificity of intercultural trainings and laid open the implicit assumptions in US-American training

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formats which he called 'Western' or 'American'. Among these assumptions are, for example, the responsibility of the trainees for their own success in learning, the high value of the learning-by-doing method as well as a preference for experiential learning directed at emotions over cognitive intellectual learning. The first edition of the 'Handbook of Intercultural Training' in 1983 contained an article on the 'Westernness' of the sociological approaches in intercultural research, but there are no consequences drawn for trainings. In the third edition of the same handbook, Fowler and Blohm make an attempt to look at the applicability of various training methods across cultures. "Does It Work Across and About Cultures", they ask, but for most methods they come, strangely enough, to the conclusion that they are very well transferable into other cultural contexts; they make an exception only for self-assessment exercises and simulations.

So far we can rely only on the practical experiences of intercultural trainers who have worked internationally and who have paid attention to the aspect of the 'Westernness' of training methods. Due to their experience they know intuitively about the cultural coloring of the contents, the models, and the methods of trainings. But as long as there are no systematic studies the thesis of the 'Westernness' of intercultural learning methods remains an assumption. In view of the global diffusion of teaching formats and contents, however, the question becomes even more urgent. In case the thesis of the 'Westernness' of extant training methods should be confirmed, intercultural trainers will have to make an effort to adapt their trainings: if they want to work in an ethically responsible way, they must always be aware of the implicit cultural specificity of their teaching in order to adjust the process of culture learning to the needs of their trainees and their cultural environment. This is a demanding procedure for which there are as yet no models.

Until then one can add a few more questions to Kohls' theses and by answering them can try to elucidate the cultural relativity of the basic principles of trainings: Should trainers be moderators or rather transmitters of "correct" knowledge? Does the perception of difference always strengthen the motivation for intercultural learning, as Gudykunst's AUM-theory implies? Can one always lead a rational discourse about cultural differences in the way which Habermas postulates in his discourse ethics? Is intercultural learning possible without self-reflexivity? To each of these questions there will probably be a 'Western' and a 'non-Western' answer. An ethically responsible trainer should know both answers in order to find the best fit between his training design and the cultural orientation of the trainees.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

The discussion about the renewal of intercultural trainings is only in its beginnings. Meanwhile it has become clear that the European perspective on cultural diversity and intercultural interactions makes it expedient to critically assess the extant findings and practices for their applicability to the present social reality in Europe and to integrate the present state of sociological and anthropological research. My presentation has attempted to direct your attention to some very sensitive matters. I have to stress, though, that I have addressed only those topics which are – in my view – of greatest importance. I am well aware of the limitations of my paper, but hope to have given an impulse for systematic studies of the questions raised above.

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