

A Guide for us-american students to understand
and communicate with Germans

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Introduction to the training material

The training: goals and theoretical background

According to the German proverb "Andere Länder, andere Sitten", each country has its own customs and habits. This statement provides the basis for the following training program. It is assumed that cultures do not only differ in such obvious areas as architecture, art clothing, food, and customs, but that there are parallel differences in the way people think, feel and act. The culture in which someone lives profoundly influences how he perceives his surroundings, how he behaves towards others and how he interprets the way people act. People of the same culture share certain values, norms, rules and attitudes. Consequently, the aims that are important to people, what they expect of others, what they consider to be right, normal or just acceptable, and what they experience as foreign, provoking, abnormal or wrong are also dependent upon the culture in which people live in.

These values, norms, rules, and attitudes which have an extensive effect on the perception, thinking, judging and acting, especially those within interpersonal relations, are called central Culture Standards. Culture Standards are "the game rules" for social interaction in a culture.

From early childhood we automatically adopt the "rules of the game" dictated by our own culture which then regulate our behavior. This process of adopting rules is the same as learning the language from the people with whom we are living. We learn what is expected in order to be "well behaved" as well as what is considered right and wrong. This is true for an aborigine who grows up in the outback of Australia as well as for someone who was born and raised in central Chicago. Since our ways of perceiving, thinking and acting are orientated and

based on the standards of the predominant cultural, cultural psychology describes "culture" as a 'system of orientation'.

It is not a question of pure chance that Culture Standards are formed within a society. These standards have to be regarded as the result of a historical development, since people act and react to their surroundings. This means that people adapt their behavior to the predominant circumstances of their environment such as the situation of nutrition, density of population, climate, religion, technical standards, science, economy or politics. Accordingly, Culture Standards are quite stable, but not entirely rigid and timeless. Culture Standards can shift as a reaction to changes of the environmental conditions. This means that this is a slow process which normally takes place over several generations. More informations about cultural standars in: Schroll-Machl, S. (2011).

In the various cultures different and sometimes contradicting Culture Standards take effect. It depends on perception, the thoughts and the methods of evaluation and action that have been established among the members of a culture. There are patterns of behavior which one culture sees as desirable, normal or acceptable, whereas in another culture they may be regarded as misbehavior. For example, in one culture it may be obtrusive to start a conversation with strangers, whereas in another culture it might be regarded as unfriendly to be reserved or distant.

These facts are not unproblematic: When people come into a foreign culture they know little or nothing about the foreign Culture Standards. Consequently, they tend to perceive and evaluate everything they experience in context to the Culture Standards of their own country and will react correspondingly. Behavior within a foreign culture is measured against the standards of behavior within one's own culture. We wrongly expect the inhabitants of the host country to behave similarly to our compatriots and we also think that our own behavior is always properly understood when we are abroad.

As a consequence unexpected difficulties may arise. We often misjudge the scope of action as well as the consequences

of our own actions. Manners, previously reliable, suddenly turn out to be inadequate. The inhabitants of the host country often react totally differently from what we expect. When we judge their behavior things remain unclear or are misunderstood. This is because we misinterpret their actions. Even well-known gestures can have an entirely different meaning in a foreign country. This leads to the fact that an encounter with the members of a foreign culture does not always go as smoothly as we are used to when we meet people in our home country. Uncertainties, conflicts and misunderstandings are common place.

In order to cope with these kinds of frustrating or trying situations better known as "culture shock", it is necessary to know and to understand the Culture Standards of the host country well enough to apply and integrate them into one's own perception, thoughts and actions while in the foreign culture. This process of "inter-cultural learning" usually takes place in the practical experience of meeting the local inhabitants of the host country. Inter-cultural learning can, however, also be indirectly conveyed through such materials as this very training manual held in your hand. In order to have a good start in your new environment, even before going abroad you can prepare yourself quite effectively by learning about your host country's predominant Culture Standards. It does not matter if one goes abroad for professional reasons or just wants to get to know the country and its inhabitants. With the help of this training manual, even people who have been living in a foreign culture for some time and who already have a profound experience in associating with the inhabitants, can gain further insight. It provides the basis for a deeper understanding of the foreign cultures behavioral patterns.

This training program is based upon the Culture-assimilator-Training -Method which has the best tested effectiveness record than any other method. The Culture-Assimilator-Training makes the assumption that people do not only note what

happens when they watch other people's behavior, but at the sometime search for an answer to the question why someone acts in a certain situation in a particular way. "why does she look so serious?" - "Was he just joking or did he want to insult me?" - "Why has he just changed the topic of our conversation?" - "Why doesn't she say anything?", we keep asking ourselves these kind of questions, and we give ourselves an answer even if we are not aware of it.

Psychologists call the process of finding 'the reason' for a particular action, "attribution". By your own experience, you probably know just how easy it is to incorrectly interpret other peoples' behavior. We might even make an inappropriate assumption when we have a choice of possible interpretations for someone's behavior. Everybody has experienced it from time to time. A person says or does something which is totally misunderstood by another. "I didn't mean it that way", we can hear ourselves and others saying.

Misunderstandings, difficulties, or even conflicts occur especially among people of different cultural backgrounds. These problems surface because they do not understand the reasons for their counterparts behavior or they assume false reasons based on their own culture. It is important for effective inter-cultural communication not to guess at the cause of a certain behavior, but to learn first hand the point of view from the inhabitants of the host country. Once you have an understanding and a feeling for why the customs and behavioral patterns are the way they are and not the way you think they ought to be, then you will be able to make realistic attributions. This makes it possible to understand, to foresee, and even to influence behavior within a foreign culture.

The Culture-Assimilator-Training makes it possible to learn the skill of making appropriate attributions corresponding to the foreign culture. The training participants will be given a variety of typical daily situations which are often critical turning points for the acceptance and understanding between visitors and members of the host country. The chosen situations are known

as "stumbling blocks", which often create confusion, misunderstandings and conflicts for many foreigners. For each episode there are four possible explanations for the native's behavior. Only one explanation is correct from the foreign point of view. The other alternatives are misinterpretations which arise from ignorance about the factors that influence a culture, or they arise from prejudices and wrong ideas about the foreign culture. The trainee has to choose the alternative he considers to be the best, in order to explain the situation from the host culture's point of view. Each explanation contains information as to why it is appropriate or not.

In short: A Culture-Assimilator-Training is the psychological adaptation between two established cultures.

This training program is especially targeted for American university students, but all exchange students, people on business and tourists can use this information to prepare themselves for a stay in Germany. The situations used in this manual are general enough to be transferable in other areas of life. This training program could also greatly aid any young German wishing to go to America for a longer period of time, since these German behavioral patterns are thematic for reoccurring misunderstandings, conflicts and feelings of alienation between Germans and Americans. In a nut shell, this book is addressed and written for all those people who are interested in the German-American cultural differences as well as for all of those who are curious and interested in how Germans appear and are seen by their foreign visitors.

More informations about trainings in: Thomas, A., Kinast E.-U- & Schroll-Machl, S. (2010); Landis, D., Bennett, J. M. & Bennett, M. J. (2004).

How this training program was developed

These critical interaction situations come directly from interviews done with American students while staying in Germany. The Americans were primarily interviewed about their experiences dealing with Germans and in particular about the situations where the German's behavior seemed strange, surprising, incomprehensible, unexpected or confusing to them. These included situations in which the Germans acted in a completely different manner than any American would have under the same circumstances. From the interview material we chose the situations that complied with the following criteria: 1. Normal reoccurring events that could be interpreted as typical German behavior; 2. Situations that are confusing and/or that could cause conflicts for Americans who misinterpret German Culture Standards and customs; 3. Easily explainable situations in context to German Culture Standards; 4. Situations relevant to our target group.

A selection for these episodes was compiled into a questionnaire that was then presented to German and American students. They were asked to explain in their own words why they thought the Germans acted in these particular situations the way they did and not another way. Group discussions were then led with the German students. They were asked to find explanations for the 'German' behavior in the various situations, from a German point of view. The answers provided by the American students were used to show which situations are most commonly misinterpreted by Americans. The questionnaire responses also provided many of the ideas used to create the incorrect answers, which were necessary, to complete each chapter's story.

The critical interaction situations were then further analyzed with a multiple-choice questionnaire. The German and American students were then asked to mark the correct explanation to each chapter. It was anticipated that the

Americans, with little or no experience in Germany or with Germans , would have more difficulties identifying the appropriate explanations than the Germans. For this reason the statistics were carefully analyzed, checking to see if the Germans on the whole marked significantly more right answers than the Americans. Each was also analyzed based on the difference between the representative explanations from both countries. Furthermore, we calculated the distribution of the correct and the incorrect answers based on German and American nationality. The end product of this research is an inter-cultural training program containing 26 chapters.

Parallel to the above mentioned research project, we were working on a system of categorizing each critical interaction and its influence on the Culture Standards, in an attempt to characterize the German Culture Standards. These Culture Standards were then compared with other literature which deals with the differences between Americans and Germans. Finally, the responses to each question were recorded and thereby the foundations to understanding the historical and cultural significance of culture standards are laid.

The structure and use of this training program

The Training program is subdivided into ten units each of which treats a central German Culture Standard. One or more aspects of the typical differences between Americans and Germans will be focused on in each chapter. It is the task of the reader (trainee) after reading each chapter to choose the explanation, among the four alternatives, that best describes why something was done from a German point of view. The users of this training material should, therefore, think about why the Germans acted in the way that they did and not differently. After the user decides in favor of one of the given alternatives he should read the response given on the next page. There the

response will be explained in detail. Should it not be the correct answer then another response should be chosen, and so on, until the right answer is found. This step by step process will sharpen the interpretation skills of the trainee to the point that he will be able to see and do things the way a German would.

We recommend that the trainee think about each answer, carefully analyzing to what extent he thinks each answer is correct or not correct. This is very time consuming but the benefits will be well worth the time. When you know how and why certain interpretations of German behavior are incorrect then you will be far less likely to make the same mistakes yourself. The responses to the incorrect answers are however very informative, contain interesting and useful information that could be useful to anyone staying in Germany.

At the end of every unit the Culture Standards will be explained as well as the historical development of these standards. This is done in an attempt to explain the situations that are at first difficult and problematic for Americans. Many of the behavioral differences were, and still are, historically based, thus forming an important part of the German culture. The sooner you accept that customs and Culture Standards are the product of human individuality and the evolution of time, the sooner you will be able to accept and fit into unknown and foreign situations.

For a quick overview of all the main important German Culture Standards the list at the end of this book is a good reference.

Tips on how to use this training program successfully.

This training program is devised in such a way that individuals and or groups can work at their own pace. Under the direction of a competent trainer the information contained in the various chapters is ideal for roll playing. By discussing the individual situations and Culture Standards the learning effect can be greatly heightened. It is advisable to do the training units in sequential order because they often contain follow-ups from previous chapters. In any case, creating enough time and a relaxed atmosphere will greatly aid in getting the full benefit out of this training program. Regardless of whether you are working alone or with others, you should try to imagine how you would have reacted to the situations described in this text.

The image of a culture, within the context of a Culture-Assimilation training program, is like a caricature. The picture created is a simplified version of the original, however the main representative attributes are exaggerated to make a particular point. You shouldn't expect all Germans to behave identically to the way they are described in these situational sketches. That would be giving you the wrong impression. One has to keep in mind that each culture is made up of many different individuals. Every individual within a culture reacts differently. Just think of the difference between one generation and another. The main German culture standards definitely have an influence, never the less, on each individual German. Culture standards should not be regarded as rigid predetermined behavior, but as typical behavioral tendencies.

The difference between two cultures is the main objective of the culture assimilator training. It should , however not be forgotten that Germans and American have a great deal in common as well. Many Americans even state that, from all the countries in the world, Germany is the most similar to America.

Finally, you should be aware of the fact that the culture assimilator training can produce an early ‘culture shock’-like experience. You will be confronted with many of the problems awaiting you in Germany. The difficulties arise when you have to question everything about your culture that you have up until now accepted as normal; the customs, the norms and the values. This effect can be accredited partly to the fact that the Culture Assimilator Training deals almost exclusively with the negative situations that are difficult to understand. You should try to keep this in mind while working through this training program and remember that once you are in Germany there will be many situations that will work out even more positively than expected.

It is a good idea to have a careful and tolerant attitude toward the people in another culture. This positive attitude will help you accept the fact that things are different in another culture. Once you have accepted that there will always be potential conflicts in a new culture then you are on the road toward intercultural success.

Literature

Landis, D., Bennett, J. M. & Bennett, M. J. (Eds.) (2004). Handbook of intercultural training, (3rd Ed.),Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Schroll-Machl, S. (2011). Doing business with Germans. Their perception, our perception. (4th Ed.) Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

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The Training

Unit 1

The Culture Standard that is presented and analyzed in the following chapter is largely responsible for many of the misunderstandings between German and American students during the first stages of their acquaintance. We focus on how Germans interact with strangers and how friendships develop in Germany. Knowledge of the relevant German behavioral patterns as well as the guidelines for social interaction in Germany is of essential importance to Americans. This knowledge will help to avoid misinterpreting German behavior and help alleviate receiving a negative impression of the German culture. Due to the fact that this Culture Standard plays an important role in all of the following training chapters we feel it is the obvious choice to begin with.

Chapter 1

Whether while taking a walk or just being out and about Jane often said "Hallo" to the people she ran into just as she was accustomed to doing at home. Instead of responding in the expected way most people looked puzzled as if they were wondering, "Why is this person talking to me?" and simply walked on without an answer. Jane became insecure and could not understand why the people didn't react to her greeting.

How would you explain these people's reaction to Jane?

1. Greeting a stranger with "Hallo" is regarded as an insult in Germany.
2. In Germany it is not common to address strangers in the street.
3. Due to her accent the Germans realized she was a foreigner and did not want to greet her.
4. If Jane had said "Guten Tag" instead, the chances of a response would have been greater.

Chapter 1 Explanation

1. In Germany, greeting a stranger with "Hallo" is regarded as an insult.

Although saying "Hallo" is also a common way of greeting someone in Germany, especially among young people and students, it is not always the most appropriate word to use. Usually people greet each other with "Hallo" when there is already a certain degree of acquaintance and closeness between them. This "certain degree" could be, for example, that they live in the same residence hall, attend the same seminars, go to the same pubs or that they have spoken to each other at some point in time or have seen each other occasionally. However, it would hardly be taken as an insult by any young German to be greeted by a total stranger in this manner. It is very probable that he or she will think you have confused them with someone else.

This is different with elderly people or people in a position of authority. To greet ones professor or employer with a casual "Hallo" might well be interpreted by this person as a sign of presumptuous behavior or disrespect. The person who says "Hallo" is placing him or herself on the same level as the person who is being greeted, thereby implying a degree of intimacy which in the eyes of a German, he or she is not yet entitled to. In such a situation the formal "Guten Tag" is preferable. The same applies when greeting sales assistants, bank clerks, waiters or waitresses and doctors.

In short: among young people it is generally safe to say "Hallo". With all other people - even if you have known them for some time - it is better to stick to "Guten Tag". Therefore the answer you chose was not entirely wrong. However, there is a more accurate explanation of Jane's experience, read the account of the episode again, and try to find it out.

2. It is not common in Germany to address strangers in the street.

In Germany the only people likely to greet you on the street are your acquaintances. One does not greet strangers nor does one expect to be greeted by them. The Germans' reaction to Jane signaled neither rudeness nor rejection but rather confusion as to why they were greeted by her. In the same situation some Germans would have returned Jane's greeting but they would have been quite surprised. To make this absolutely clear: friends, acquaintances and colleagues you encounter on the street should be greeted. People you know by sight can be greeted but don't have to be. Strangers are generally not greeted.

The same pattern applies to gestures. German people do not smile half as much as American people do. In Germany one does not smile at just anyone on the street. Smiles are reserved first and foremost for meeting friends or acquaintances. This behavior is related to an attitude which influences to a great extent the social interaction between Germans. Depending on the degree of intimacy and closeness one has established in the relations to one another, different behavioral patterns and guidelines take effect. This does not mean that Germans are cold or unfriendly. Germans simply differentiate, in this area, to a much greater extent than Americans - a characteristic which can, at first, alienate an American visitor.

3. The Germans realized from Jane's accent that she was a foreigner, there-fore they did not want to greet her.

No, this is definitely not true. If a German had acted as Jane did, he would have encountered the same reaction. Read the episode again and look for a better answer.

4. If Jane had said "Guten Tag", they would have answered her.

"Hallo" is a common greeting but mainly used among young people. To greet people you are not closely acquainted with in this manner may very well be regarded as disrespectful as it implies a degree of intimacy which, by German reckoning, you are not entitled to. Such a greeting would not be received favorably. In such a situation the formal "Guten Tag" is very much preferable. The same applies when greeting sales assistants, bank clerks, restaurant staff, and doctors.

In short, among young people it is generally safe to say "Hallo", with all other people - even if you have known them for some time - it is better to stay with "Guten Tag". However, even if Jane had taken all this into account and had greeted everyone with "Guten Tag", she would have still have encountered the same reaction. Why? Read the account of the episode again and try to find the answer for her.