Addressing Ethnocentrism in Intercultural Training:

A training programme in the Relocation Sector

1. The Context

Founded in 1994 by Ileana Clapham, who had personally experienced the challenges of expat life, the company was built on a first-hand understanding of the challenges of international relocation. Ileana established a relocation agency in the Frankfurt area that grew into one of the most established local providers.

Clapham´s mission is to support international clients through one of the most significant transitions of their lives with a strong problem solving attitude.

Its operating model is based on a network of freelance consultants across Germany, supported by in-house coordinators who ensure consistent quality standards. In this sense, we are able to combine a nationwide coverage with strong local expertise.

Over the years, the company expanded significantly, including the strategic acquisition of a Munich-based competitor in 2019. Today, Clapham operates from three locations: Frankfurt, Munich, and Düsseldorf, and through approximately 70 independent consultants covering all Germany.

Leadership has remained closely connected to the company's founding values, with Ileana's son, Oliver Clapham, now leading the organisation. The company is an active member of EURA and has consistently gained EURA's Quality Seal since 2008. This confirms the commitment to deliver best practice and service excellence.

Supporting more than 800 assignees annually from all over the world, the company has developed extensive experience in addressing diverse cultural perspectives and relocation needs.

I joined Clapham in 2015 as a freelance relocation consultant before being offered a permanent position in 2019 in Munich, and I am currently employed as international coordinator. Originally from Italy, I hold a degree in Business and Economics, complemented by a qualification in Further Education. Before entering the relocation sector, I gained experience in business training and further education in different European countries, developing skills in communication and cross cultural dialogue.

With these premises in place, I was asked to develop the training programme that will be described in this paper. A working student in Intercultural Communication co-developped the programme. His background and support provided valuable insights throughout the programme.

2. Purpose of the Paper

This Paper examines the rationale and the theoretical foundations of an in-house intercultural training programme developed at Clapham. The programme was created in response to recurring challenges experienced by employees in their intercultural interactions with assignees, often leading to misunderstandings and subsequent insecurity.

Although employees demonstrated strong professional competence and dedication, the company's rapid growth brought additional challenges, including the integration of new colleagues from diverse professional backgrounds, some of whom had limited intercultural experience. The training therefore

aimed not only to address intercultural challenges encountered with assignees, but also to establish a shared framework for communication across the team.

The first step of the programme was to identify the challenges that each of us encountered.

We conducted individual interviews with employees to bring to light areas of difficulty.

The working student and I also took part in the interview as respondants as well as interviewers.

The interviews aimed to identify each employees' intercultural communication challenges, focusing on the cultures involved, the main areas of difficulty, previous experiences, and participants' familiarity with different cultural contexts.

Here are a couple of the challenges that emerged from our interviews:

- Some clients have very high expectations and demand services that are often unrealistic.
- For some clients it seems that all is going well, but then they give us bad reviews, or they complain with RMC consultants about us.
- Some ways of communicating do upset us, for example:

✓ US-Americans often begin emails very directly, without greetings or pleasantries (like: *Laura,* …). To us, this can feel abrupt and impolite, sometimes giving the impression that we have done something wrong.

The outcome of the interviews suggested that the main challenge was rooted in the assumptions shaped by our own cultural perspectives. These insights were explored through the concept of cultural lenses and ethnocentrism.

Furthermore, the outcome of the interviews identified some key intercultural dimensions that consistently generated misunderstandings and communication difficulties.

These findings provided the foundation for the theoretical framework of the training, which will be described in the next paragraph.

After identifying the key challenges, we developped a ½ day training session that combined informative and theoretical input, which will be described in the following paragraph, with hands-on activities and peer discussions. The programme was delivered face to face for the group based in Munich, while 2 further trainings were delivered online.

3. Theoretical framework

We adopted an inductive approach to develop the programme. Through semi-structured interviews, we identified employees' main challenges arising in intercultural interactions. The issues that emerged were subsequently interpreted and matched with established intercultural theories. This process allowed us to move from practical observations to theoretical understanding.

A potential limitation of this approach is that the interpretation of interviews outcomes involved a certain degree of the interviewers´ judgement. However, the interviews were open ended and extensive (up to two hours each), allowing interviewees to provide detailed insights. Moreover, several recurring patterns and themes emerged across interviews, which suggests a consistency of our interpretations.

The first concept explored is ethnocentrism, a starting point for understanding many of the challenges encountered in intercultural interactions.

The role of cultural dimensions also plays a major role in the training programme, particularly in their relevance for interpreting differences in communication styles and expectations. They offer practical tools to reflect on cultural diversity without pigeonholing individuals.

The following sub-paragraphs outline the key elements of the theoretical framework and their relevance in the training programme.

3.1. What is ethnocentrism and why does it matter in relocation?

William Graham Sumner, an American sociologist, introduced the concept of Ethnocentrism as "*the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it* (Sumner 1906 page 13).

To paraphrase Sumner´s concept, ethnocentrism may be described as the tendency to interpret other cultures through the lens of one's own cultural point of view. We all tend to perceive our own cultural group as the natural reference point against which others are compared. In intercultural contexts, this can lead to misunderstandings when behaviours of others are interpreted without awareness of different cultural characteristics.

A further perspective on ethnocentrism and intercultural awareness is provided by Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

Bennett, an American prominent researcher in the field of iĺntercultural communication, describes the different ways in which people can react to cultural differences, and underlies the possibility to gradually move from an ethnocentric approach, in which cultural differences are judged according to one's own cultural standards, towards an ethnorelative approach, where differences are recognised and accepted (1986, 1993).

The model identifies six stages: Denial, Defence, Minimisation, Acceptance, Adaptation, and Integration. The first three stages reflect stronger ethnocentric orientations, in which individuals tend to experience their own cultural standard as central reference point. The last three stages represent increasing abilities to accept differences and adapt one´s behaviour accordingly.

In contexts involving international mobility, this model provides a useful tool, as professionals supporting assignees moving internationally very often need to interpret communication patterns and act accordingly. In this context, developing intercultural sensitivity is indeed the key.

A key concept from Bennett's model is that minimisation is often the most challenging stage to address. The belief that "*we are all the same*" may appear inclusive, but it can actually limit the ability to respond effectively to diverse situations.

In the context of the training programme developed for Clapham´s team, the objective was to support participants in moving from minimisation towards acceptance: recognising relevant cultural differences while developing greater curiosity and flexibility in intercultural interactions.

An important element of our project was inspired by the Albatross Model (Gochenour 1977).

This *involves partecipants to observe the elaborate "ritual" of the "Albatross" culture which is an hypothetical culture. After the ritual has been performed, partecipants are asked to describe what they have just seen, and predictably, they provide descriptions replete with inferences and culturally-specific interpretations of behaviors. Finally, the instructor proceeds to explain the real meaning of the ritual in the Albatross culture: participants are invariably shocked at how deeply they have misinterpreted what they have observed. The discussion that follows includes how our deeply internalized cultural*

knowledge provides a cultural lens through which we observe reality (Carol C. Mukhopadhyay in Rice, Mc Curdy, 2004).

Introducing the Albatross model to the participants and dedicating time tot he following discussion sparked numerous "*aha moments*," opening up new perspectives.

3.2. **What are cultural dimentions and what are the ones that mostly challenged us?**

Cultural dimensions are models describing patterns of behaviour based on values and beliefs that tend to influence how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate and approach different situations.

In the context of intercultural communication, cultural dimensions offer a way to explore how different cultural perspectives may shape behaviours and interactions. It is important to keep in mind that differences between cultures are not about one approach being better than another, but rather about being aware of different assumptions and different approaches.

The following cultural dimensions emerged as critical factors from the interviews that we held within Clapham´s team:

3.2.1. High-context and Low-context communication - Edward T. Hall (1976 page 91) defines high and low context cultures: *A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite.* In this sense, high-context cultures rely more on implicit messages, including non verbal clues, while low-context cultures emphasise direct and explicit communication. In the specific relocation context, this cultural dimension explains differences in implicit versus explicit messages, and potential misunderstandings and miscommunication.

3.2.2. Power Distance - Geerd Hofstede (geerthofstede.com) describes Power Distance as *the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. It helps explain different expectations regarding hierarchy and workplace interactions.*

In the specific relocation context, this dimension explains different expectations about deference and level of service that assignees expect from Relocation Services. We believe that one of the challenges indicated in Paragraph 1 of this paper („*Some clients have very high expectations and demand services that are often unrealistic*") comes from this cultural dimension.

3.2.3. Trust - In her book „The Culture Map", Erin Meyer defines the difference between cognitive trust and affective trust: *cognitive trust is based on the confidence you feel on another person ´s accomplishments, skills and reliability. This is the trust that comes from the head. Affective trust, on the other hand, arises from feelings of emotional closeness, empathy and friendship . This type of trusts comes from the heart* (Meyer 2014 page 168).

In the specific relocation context, it explains how assignees from different cultural backgrounds may build credibility and professional trust differently.

With this theoretical foundation established, the next paragraph will focus on the practical application of these concepts and describe how they provide the foundation of the design of the intercultural communication training programme.

4. Application of the theoretical framework to our training programme

The development of our intercultural training programme was influenced both by the intercultural communication theories discussed in part 3. and reflection on professional experience and practice.

The programme began with a needs analysis consisting of qualitative interviews with each employee. Each interview explored employees' experiences with assignees, the communication challenges they encountered, and the strategies they had already developed to respond to such challenges. This learner-centred approach ensured that the training was built around authentic experiences rather than theoretical assumptions alone.

What is also important to mention is that we additionally conducted interviews with individuals possessing extensive intercultural experience, as well as representatives of frequently encountered cultural backgrounds. These provided additional perspectives to the project and offered some answers to the challenges that emerged within the team.

4.1.Adressing Ethnocentrism: Developing Cultural Awareness - Although employees reported a wide range of communication challenges when working with assignees, the needs analysis revealed a clear common pattern: many misunderstandings originated from ethnocentric assumptions. Employees often interpreted assignees' behaviour through the lens of their own cultural norms before considering alternative cultural explanations. Consequently, addressing ethnocentrism became the central objective of the programme, which aimed at helping employees recognise their own cultural assumptions and develop a more reflective approach to communication.

Throughout the interviews and the subsequent discussions, employees frequently realised that they had unconsciously evaluated clients' behaviour according to their own cultural expectations. The programme therefore approached ethnocentrism not as a personal failing, but as a natural, very human tendency that influences how individuals interpret unfamiliar situations. Recognising this tendency became an essential step towards developing intercultural competence. This reflection closely relates to Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). During the interviews, and also at the initial stages of the training programme, some participants expressed the belief that "professional communication is the same everywhere," reflecting Bennett's stage of minimisation, in which cultural similarities are emphasised while important differences remain largely unnoticed. During the programme, the presentaiton of the Albatross model rapresented quite a brakthrough: participants observed an unfamiliar cultural interaction without receiving any explanation of its meaning and were asked to interpret what they had seen. As expected, most of the partecipants immediately „fell into the trap" and therefore constructed explanations based on their own cultural values and assumptions. During the debriefing, participants discovered that many of these interpretations were inaccurate because they had relied on their own cultural framework. The exercise, together with the further group reflections and discussions based on authentic examples that followed, provided a powerful example of ethnocentrism and encouraged participants to suspend judgement and remain curious.

4.2.Connecting experiences to cultural dimensions - A further analysis of the interviews´ outcomes revealed common patterns, which were consequently connected to cultural dimensions. This process revealed that many situations initially described as "difficult clients" were, in fact, examples of different cultural expectations regarding communication style, hierarchy and trust.

4.2.1.Understanding Power Distance and Expectations in Service Interactions - One of the most significant themes concerned clients' expectations of service providers, which we interpreted through the lens of the cultural dimension of power distance.

In our interviews, several employees described situations in which clients expected immediate responses and highly personalised support beyond the company's standard procedures. During the interviews, the members of Clapham´s team often indicated to percieve this attitude as unreasonable. However, Hofstede's concept of Power Distance provided an alternative interpretation. In cultures characterised by higher power distance, service professionals are typically expected to demonstrate greater responsiveness and deference towards clients. In contrast, German professional culture generally emphasises clearly defined roles and relatively equal relationships between service provider and client. Introducing this theoretical perspective enabled employees to reinterpret these situations as culturally shaped expectations rather than personal demands. Lively discussions and role plays were implemented in the programme, following which we agreed upon possible solutions: it would not be realistic nor cost effective to become overly accommodating or to say yes to everything. Instead, the key is transparency from the very beginning. Clearly explain how we work in Germany, including the fact that there is a strong respect for personal time outside of working hours, such as evenings, weekends, and public holidays. It is also helpful to communicate that, like any professional service provider, we need to balance the needs of multiple clients. Transparency and managing expectations are key concepts in this case: when expectations are managed early and communicated openly, clients are far more likely to understand our way of working. Ultimately, by relocating to Germany, assignees will also benefit from the strong emphasis on work-life balance that is a hallmark of German working culture, as was confirmed to us in the interviews with individuals coming from different cultures.

4.2.2. **Understanding communication beyond words** - Another recurring challenge mentioned by the team involved differences in communication style. German communication is generally characterised by a rather explicit information exchange. However, many assignees came from cultures where communication tends to be more indirect. Employees often interpreted indirect communication as unclear and inefficient, while assignees might experience German directness as rude or insensitive. Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context communication offered an effective framework for understanding these differences. Rather than suggesting that one communication style was superior, the training encouraged participants to recognise different ways of expressing meaning and to adapt their communication according to the cultural expectations of individual clients. Also in this case, lively discussions and role plays were implemented in the programme. We agreed that the

key concept in this case is observation: paying closer attention to non-verbal communication, and asking open-ended questions were agreed upon as possible solutions to this challenge.

4.2.3. Understanding Trust Across different Cultural Contexts - Many members of the team observed that some assignees tend to remain hesitant in their relationship to us, and, for example, ask the same question to different members of the team as if to proof if we all give the same anwers. Within German business culture, trust is often associated with competence and reliability. In many other cultural contexts, however, trust develops primarily through personal interaction and relationship-building before anything else can be addressed. A solution we agreed upon was to invest more time in personal interaction and relationship-building, particularly during face-to-face meetings, recognising that professional trust is constructed differently across cultures.

All in all, the training programme that we developped encouraged participants to approach intercultural encounters with curiosity and adaptability. Employees were invited to share successful communication strategies they had developed through their own professional experience, creating a collaborative learning environment in which theoretical concepts and practical experience complemented one another.

Following the training, participants were invited to provide immediate feedback. Overall, the responses were highly positive. The Albatross exercise was consistently identified as one of the most valuable activities because it challenged participants to question their own assumptions and encouraged them to see things from a different perspective before forming judgements. Employees also appreciated the opportunity to exchange experiences with colleagues and confirmed that sharing their communication challenges across the team was very useful. Furthermore, participants reported a greater understanding that some international clients require more time and individual attention and that adapting to these different expectations is an essential part of providing high-quality relocation support.

The following paragraph will summarize the main outcomes of the programme and explore possible future developments and areas for further improvement.

5. Conclusions

This paper illustrates how intercultural communication theories can be translated into practical workplace strategies that improve communication with assignees in the relocation services.

One of the main insights of the programme summarized in this paper, is that the exploration of specific cultural dimensions can only follow the prior recognition of one’s own ethnocentric perspective. Awareness of one’s own cultural lens therefore represents the necessary starting point for understanding cultural differences.

While the cultural dimensions will vary depending on the culture involved and the type of service offered, the need to reflect on one's own ethnocentric attitude remains the key.

In this sense, the approach developed in this project has the potential to be adapted to other service organisations where employees interact closely with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.

From a personal perspective, the project has influenced the way I work. Conducting the research, designing the training session and interacting with my collegues encouraged me to see intercultural challenges as opportunities for reflection. I believe I have become more aware of my own cultural assumptions and now approach client interactions with greater curiosity and flexibility. This reflective approach has strengthened my confidence when working with assignees from diverse cultural backgrounds and has enabled me to contribute more actively to promoting intercultural awareness within my organisation.

The in-house training has also had a positive impact on exploring new business opportunities. In fact, we have started a pilot project with a client company, offering intercultural training sessions to their employees, with a focus on the challenges of moving to Germany.

Three main challenges of the project should be aknowledged:

First, as mentioned in paragraph 3, the research relied on interviews, during which participants shared their experiences and perceptions. These were subsequently synthesised and interpreted by us. Then we linked the emerging themes to established cultural dimensions. I am aware that this process may have introduced researcher bias, as the interpretation and categorisation of the data inevitably involved subjective judgement. However, this risk was mitigated by the fact that the analysis was not guided by predetermined expectations regarding which cultural dimensions would emerge. Instead, we remained open to the results arising from the data.

A second limitation concerns the evaluation of the training's long-term impact. As a small service company operating in a dynamic environment, the organisation must remain flexible and responsive to clients' needs and changing priorities. These constraints makes it difficult to conduct regular follow-up to support a significative change.

A third challenge concerns the reach of the training programme. The intervention was developed for in-house employees. At a later stage, it was offered to all our external relocation consultants as a series of live online training session. However, only a limited number of consultants took part. As consultants do work on a freelance basis, participation in training cannot be made compulsory. At the same time, this raises the question of why most of them did not take advantage of this opportunities for their own professional development. This fact highlighted that not everyone perceives intercultural competence as a priority. Future development of the programme should therefore identify ways to better motivate consultants and demonstrate the practical value of intercultural training in their professional practice.

Nevertheless, the positive feedback collected from participants after the training session, highlighted several moments of insight ("*aha moments*") and emphasised the value of shared discussion, learning from experiences, and looking for solutions together with other members of the team. This outcome suggested increased self-awareness and confidence. In this sense, I believe that the training session laid the foundation for continued self-reflection and provided participants with the tools to further develop their intercultural competence independently. I would be very happy to continue developing this project in the future, making any necessary adjustments to further improve it and adapt it to the evolving needs of everyone involved.

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