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Case Study   *Praxisbeitrag*

Managing Intercultural Encounters: Border Control at an Indian Airport

Interkulturelle Begegnungen managen: Grenzkontrolle an einem indischen Flughafen

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Abstract (English)

This case study shows that experiencing a new culture can be challenging. Through a detailed reconstruction of a cross-cultural encounter, the case depicts a wide range of issues one may face in this scenario. These issues include cultural differences, differences in values and norms, communication styles, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination, which can all lead to tensions and conflicts. By addressing these topics in the case study, intercultural sensitivity and competencies, as well as problem-solving skills, can all be developed.

Key words: cultural differences, values and norms, stereotypes, intercultural competence, conflict management

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Fallstudie spiegelt die Herausforderungen interkultureller Begegnungen wider. Durch eine detaillierte Rekonstruktion geht die Fallstudie auf ein breites Spektrum von Themen ein, welche innerhalb interkultureller Begegnungen auftauchen können. Dazu gehören kulturelle Unterschiede, Werte- und Normdiskrepanzen, Kommunikationsstile, Stereotype, Vorurteile und Diskriminierung, die zu Spannungen und Konflikten führen können. Durch die Auseinandersetzung mit den Themen dieser Fallstudie lassen sich interkulturelle Sensibilität und Kompetenzen sowie Fähigkeiten zum Problemlösen entwickeln.

Schlagwörter: Kulturelle Unterschiede, Werte und Normen, Stereotype, interkulturelle Kompetenz, Konfliktmanagement

1. Introduction

Being a research method as well as a teaching method case study has a long tradition across the disciplines. Defined as a replicate of the reality, in which real problems emerge, the case study method has demonstrated huge potential in teaching by marrying theory and practice. Concerning the field of intercultural communication, previous case studies tend to focus primarily on analyzing a certain aspect of intercultural encounters. Characterized by critical incidents, these case studies provided a problem-focused description of the event, however, didn´t take the full account of how the event is perceived by the protagonists, how their communication process looks like, and how the problem-solving attempts become effective.

To address these dynamics, this case study adopted a more holistic view by presenting the event on full scale as experienced by the protagonist in real life. Meanwhile, various theoretical concepts are embedded in the case as well, which makes a multidimensional analysis of the case possible. Besides, different solutions based on individual perceptions of the situation can be elicited. Drawing on the personal experience of the author during an academic visit to India, this case study aims to address fundamental issues while confronting a new culture for the first time. These issues cover a wide range of theoretical concepts as discussed within intercultural communication studies. The case has been reconstructed based on the field notes of the author as well as the discussion with the Indian host of the visit, to make sure the elaboration is close to reality.

2. Synopsis

This case study shows that experiencing a new culture for the first time can be a huge challenge. To cope with such challenges, we need to identify the cultural differences between people and understand their impact on cross-cultural encounters, particularly by analyzing the different values and norms on both group and individual levels. On this basis, intercultural sensitivity and competence, with its desired attitudes, knowledge and skills, can all be developed to guide the best practices necessary for such engagements.

3. Learning objectives

The main purpose of this case study is not to give students a standard answer about what is right and what is wrong. Instead, it will help students to realize the common problems that are faced in intercultural encounters, how to understand the nature of them, and finally how to apply relevant theories that can solve these problems.

This case is designed to be taught in a first-year postgraduate course on cross-cultural management, or as part of a module on international management. In particular, the case covers a wide range of topics, which include culture and cultural differences, values and norms, stereotype, prejudice, discrimination, power relations, communication styles, intercultural competences and conflict resolution.

The main learning objectives of this case study include:

1) Demonstrate understanding of different cultural concepts. Critically analyze cultural differences and their impact on cross-cultural encounters;

2) Cultivate intercultural sensitivity and ambiguity tolerance by comparatively studying different values and norms on both national and individual levels;

3) Identify and develop the desirable attitudes, knowledge and skills for effectively managing cross-cultural challenges;

4) Apply problem and conflict solving strategies to cross-cultural issues, and present informed arguments in support of culturally sensitive and socially responsible behavior in business.

4. Case description
Background

After getting a travel grant approved, Professor Li planned a brief academic visit to a university in southern India.

The aim of the visit was to meet his friend Professor Sam and to discuss a joint research proposal in detail.

As it was his first visit to India, he consulted a leading travel agency in town about his visa application before the trip. Since the planned stay in India was only for a week, the agency recommended applying for a business visa rather than an academic visit visa.

After getting his visa, Professor Li booked a return-flight from Frankfurt to the Indian city with a flight duration of around 14 hours each way, with a brief layover in between. Since the arrival and departure timing at the Indian airport would be very early in the morning, Professor Sam was kind enough to book an airport pickup service for Professor Li.

The Protagonist

Professor Li was born and raised in China. By the time he set out to visit India, he had been living and working in Germany for nearly 10 years, holding a German passport. He was teaching cross-cultural management and organizational behavior at a university in Germany. Although, at the time, he had never been to India yet, he still believed that his knowledge and experience in the field of cross-cultural management would certainly help him out, and he was very much looking forward to the new adventure.

Arrival at the Airport

After more than 13 hours of flight, Professor Li's plane landed in the Indian city at 3:30 am local time. As soon as he got off the plane, he immediately felt the heat and humidity of the local climate, which contrasted sharply with the winter in Germany.

Although the long-distance flight was very exhausting, Professor Li was still curious about everything around him. Looking around, he noticed that many of the passengers in the airport hall were Muslims and very few were white. At the border control, a young staff member kindly led Professor Li to the queue and helped him to fill out the entry form for foreigners.

There were five counters handling the border control procedures in the center of the hall. Unlike a counter you would find in a bank, each counter had only a simple desk separated by lines. Each desk was equipped with a small box with a god-like figure painted on it. Due to its bright colors and terrifying facial expression, the small painted box could easily be noticed from a distance of up to ten meters. Professor Li thought this was the local religious etiquette, but as he walked in he found that, surprisingly, camera equipment was placed in the box. This Indian feature impressed him very much.

Conversation with officers at the Border control

After waiting in the queue for about 20 minutes, it was Professor Li's turn to get his passport checked. While examining his passport and comparing his appearance to the photo, the border inspector asked: "Where are you from?"

In a slightly British accent, Professor Li answered: "From Germany." The inspector didn't seem to be satisfied with the answer and asked again: "Which country are you from?" A little confused, Professor Li replied: "Isn't Germany a country?" The border inspector then voiced his doubts and said: "But you look like Chinese." Despite the fact he did not like this kind of judgement, to avoid unnecessary tension, Professor Li tried to explain: "I was born in China, but I'm a German citizen living in Germany."

After examining his credentials, the officer asked again: "Why are you coming to India?" "For an academic visit", Professor Li replied. "But why have you applied a business visa instead of a research visa?", the officer continued. "Well, I did consult a travel agency who were experienced in such issues before. I had them apply the appropriate visa. Actually, the main purpose of my visit this time is to explore the possibilities of research cooperation with my Indian colleague, not the research itself. As far as I was informed, the research visa

applies only to academic stay of more than 6 months", explained Professor Li. In spite of this, the officer suggested that this might be a mistake and signaled to a colleague at the other end of the hall for more advice. "What is your profession?", the inspector continued to inquire. "I'm a Professor", Professor Li replied. "Oh really, in which area?" The inspector seemed to be quite interested in Professor Li 's work. "Cross-cultural management and organizational behavior", Professor Li added. "Can you show me your name card?" The inspector attempted to get more evidence. As required, Professor Li then pulled out his wallet and handed him a business card.

After examining it, the officer took a note of the information on the card. Then, he asked Professor Li whether he could keep the card. Professor Li did not think it was necessary, since he saw the information on the name card had already been documented by the officer. So he decided to decline in a more indirect way by saying: "Well, I'm so sorry that I don't have many cards at hand. Since I'm going to meet a bunch of scholars here, it would be nice if I could have that card back."

The officer did not seem to be happy with this, but still returned the name card. Then the officer continued to ask: "How long are you going to stay here?" "For 6 days." "Who is your contact person?" "Professor Sam. He was the visiting scholar at our department last winter." He continued to ask Professor Li for more detailed information about Professor Sam.

After answering a couple of questions, Professor Li was getting more and more tired and impatient. Knowing that all answers to the questions asked so far had already been stated in his visa application form (e.g. contact person, institution, address etc.), which should have been forwarded to the border control as part of the control procedure, he could literally not understand why the officer had to ask them all over again, while a long queue was waiting outside in the hall.

As well as that, the officer kept asking for the mobile phone number and postal address of Professor Sam, which made Professor Li quite uncomfortable. Since he did not think it was appropriate to give the mobile phone number of Professor Sam to a third person without his consent, he refused to comply, which probably made him look even more suspicious to the border control staff.

Meanwhile, the other officer whom the inspector had signaled came to the counter. After talking about the case of Professor Li for a while, both officers did not seem to be able to find a solution. As a result, the officer in charge continued his search for information on the PC, while the other – taking advantage of the waiting time — began to engage in small talk with Professor Li. He asked questions such as how he went to Germany, whether he is married, whether he has children or likes the German people and so on.

Although Professor Li was not at all interested in this small talk, he felt that he had to respond, as this officer seemed to be friendly and curious. The questions asked might also be routine for a border control officer.

With more and more flights arriving at the airport, the number of passengers waiting in the hall began to increase. However, the officer in front of Professor Li showed no sign of wanting to speed the process up. Looking at his watch, Professor Li found that it had been an hour since his plane landed. He began to worry whether the taxi driver outside would be patient enough to wait.

Finally, the officer in charge looked up and said to Professor Li: "You can't go, unless you provide us with the mobile phone number of Professor Sam, your contact person." Being extremely tired and wanting to get through this endless inquiry as fast as possible, Professor Li helplessly gave in, in spite of having reservations about handing over a mobile number without Professor Sam's consent. To his surprise, the officer did not

input all the provided answers into the PC, in front of which he sat. Instead, he just scribbled them down on a rough looking notebook. Finally, Professor Li got through this stage of the border control process.

Baggage claim

After passing the border control, Professor Li was relieved. He went out of the hall to get his luggage downstairs. Just down the stairs, a narrow corridor was crowded with people waiting in line. Seeing the other passengers entering the queue one by one, Professor Li asked a young man in the queue, presuming he could speak English: "Excuse me, do you happen to know what the line here is for?" "Security check", replied the young man immediately. Quite puzzled, he asked again: "Didn't we go through security check before boarding the plane? Why do we have to do it again before luggage claim?" The young man seemed to have no idea, but speculated: "Probably to prevent drug smuggling." Seeing more and more passengers crowding in the corridor, Professor Li unwillingly joined the queue. The speed at which the queue moved was not nearly as fast as the speed at which new passengers were queuing up. The thought of not being able to get in touch with the taxi driver waiting outside added to Professor Li's worries. Looking anxiously around the crowd, he found that most of the waiting passengers were locals, many of them dressed as Muslims in robes and scarves. Just then a small group of people pushed forward from the back of the line. Leading the way was a man of local appearance, an airport worker or a tour guide, who kept saying "Please step aside!", followed by five or six white people, who went straight to the baggage claim area. Looking at the huge crowd in front of him and this small group of people who were "queue-jumpers" for some unknown reason, Professor Li felt even more frustrated. After another hour or so, it was Professor Li 's turn to go through the security check. He noticed that there was only one staff member at the single security gate. To his surprise, the staff member did not check every passenger at the same security level as the duty required. In any case, to Professor Li's delight, the taxi driver did not stand him up after his luggage was picked up.

Border control on the Return flight

Professor Sam received Professor Li's academic visit with great hospitality, and the talks between the two sides went very well. The week-long visit finally ended. Professor Li said goodbye to his colleague with a light and cheerful mood.

On the day of his return trip, Professor Li arrived at the departure hall of the airport at about 1 am. Due to the small number of passengers, he soon arrived at the border control counter. After receiving his passport, the border officer examined it carefully, checking the information on his computer from time to time. Later, the officer asked the same questions that had been asked at the time of entry. After being told by his colleague Professor Sam that such inquiries in India were routine, Professor Li answered them all again, as truthfully as he could.

After the inquiry, the staff did not immediately release Professor Li and continued to operate on the computer for a while. A few minutes later, Professor Li asked tentatively: "Is everything ok, officer?" The staff member answered with a straight face: "No problem. Please wait a moment!" After some time, Professor Li asked again if there were any problems. The answer was the same. Looking at the passengers from other windows successively pass the border control, and the number of people in his queue gradually increasing, Professor Li began to lose his patience. After waiting for about half an hour – which was much longer compared to the average processing time — he couldn't help asking: "Hello Officer, how long will I have to wait here? If there is no problem, as you said, please let me go. If not, please tell me how I can help you." The border control officer ignored Pro-

fessor Li's inquiry and just called his supervisor for consultation. After the two talked, the supervisor told Professor Li that he needed to speak to Professor Sam immediately. Professor Li was terribly shocked by this demand, which he thought was an unreasonable one to make. For him, dialing someone's mobile phone number at 2 am in the absence of any special or urgent situation was awfully rude. He would never do such things to anyone, let alone Professor Sam.

As a result, he tried to refuse this unreasonable request by arguing that Professor Sam must have turned his mobile phone off as everyone would do at so late an hour. Despite this, the border inspectors did not give up. Seeing no room for negotiation, Professor Li helplessly handed over the phone number of Professor Sam to the officer, hoping that his mobile phone was off. After successfully talking to Professor Sam, the border inspector finally released him. Feeling terribly sorry for his host on the one side, and angry at the control staff on the other side, Professor Li grabbed his passport from the staff and made his way to the boarding gate.

5. Study questions on the case

1) Even though airports are facilities that have an international standard, what do you believe to be "different" or "unusual" about Professor Li's experience at this particular airport?

2) How would you understand the relationship between value, norm and culture? Which norms did Professor Li follow? How much do these norms differ from those followed by the border control officers at the airport?

3) What do you think are the personal prerequisites for a successful cross-cultural encounter? How far did Professor Li fulfil these prerequisites?

4) Which discomforts, problems or tensions did Professor Li have to deal with at the airport? How did he handle them respectively? Which key issues does each problem or tension indicate?

6. Instructor preparation

In the design of the teaching plan, the following three-step model "experience-theory-practice" is applied:

Experience: As the actor of cultural practices, everyone's behavior reflects not only personal values and preferences but also cultural norms to a certain extent. When individuals from different cultures meet in a particular context, the uncertainty often comes from the perceived strangeness of the other. In fact, those who lack cross-cultural experience, also lack the possibility of recognizing their own cultural values, norms, and behavioral patterns through the mirror of the other. To make the students aware of their general attitudes towards unfamiliar cultures and people, it is essential to have them recall and reflect on their previous cross-cultural experience in the first place, whether it is positive or negative. Possible teaching methods include brainstorming and group discussion.

Theory: Through the reading of associated theories before class, students will be able to identify the core issues and challenges in the case and understand their nature from different theoretical perspectives. In addition, a thorough understanding of concepts and approaches inherent to intercultural encounters will be facilitated as well. Possible teaching and learning methods include lectures and literature reading.

Practices: Based on theoretical knowledge, students will analyze the performance and coping strategies of the main characters in the case. They will also discuss better solutions and their own preferred approaches to the same scenario. Accordingly, their problem-solving skills in practice will be improved, while new knowledge will be gained by evaluating the applicability of theories in practice. Possible teaching methods are group discussion and role play.

7. Suggested reading

To get students prepared for discussion, they will be given the following readings before class. Other readings that may help instructors lead the discussion will be listed in the references below.

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