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# International marketing managers' cultural sensitivity: relevance, training requirements and a pragmatic training concept

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## Abstract

With the shift from national to international and global business, new challenges have emerged for managers engaged in transnational business activities. The complexity of the tasks involved in international marketing requires an approach that demonstrates cultural sensitivity. As a consequence, the question arises as to whether international marketing managers are well-prepared to deal effectively with culturally overlapping situations.

While it is widely accepted that culture is substantially affecting international marketing decisions, pragmatic concepts of how to achieve cultural sensitivity in international marketing are lacking. This paper aims to narrow this gap. The importance of cultural sensitivity in international marketing is highlighted, training requirements are identified, and a recently introduced concept of culture is assessed for its usefulness and applicability in an international marketing context. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Cultural standards; International management training; Cultural sensitivity

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## **1. Introduction**

Looking at the development of business activities over the last few decades, one trend is clearly discernible: the shift from local or national toward international or global business. Targeting markets beyond the home market implies that marketing activities become considerably more heterogeneous and complex than those carried out in the domestic market. This is due to differences in government policies, rates of economic development and growth, the socio-cultural environment, or consumer attitudes and behaviour (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 1996; Douglas & Craig, 1995).

As a result, most international marketing tasks are non-routine tasks that require a multi-faceted range of actions, as they are often worked out in co-operation with or tailored to people with a different cultural background. For example, advertising depends on culture-specific influences, such as differences in communication styles, communication objectives, information processing, cultural attitudes or linguistic characteristics. These specific conditions determine the nature of advertising practices in different markets. In addition, advertising may also be used to stimulate changes in social behaviour. However, walking this tightrope requires not only knowledge of different advertising techniques but also emotional sensitivity to assess the techniques' appropriateness in a different cultural environment (De Mooij, 1998; Usunier, 1996). This example is representative of many international marketing situations that call for not only cognitive marketing skills but also, at the same time and equally importantly, non-cognitive, emotional abilities with respect to handling foreign cultures.

How should international marketing managers prepare themselves for these culturally overlapping situations, where they may be confronted with stereotypes such as "it is the manager's instinct or character which determines success or failure in these situations", or, in order to understand cultural differences and to avoid "culture-caused" errors, be led to believe that reading travel guides, international marketing textbooks and complying with general rules of manners is sufficient (Jandt, 1995; Samovar & Porter, 1997)? Many firms still demand cognitive skills such as a certain professional background or the command of a foreign language as key prerequisites for international marketing assignments (Deresky, 2000; Mendenhall, Punnett, & Ricks, 1995; Thomas, 1991b). As outlined exemplarily in the case of advertising, "knowing" about the differences between markets is no longer sufficient. International marketing activities require "soft" skills such as understanding the way people think, the way they relate their wishes and desires to actions and how they combine them with feelings. In a theoretical context, the development of this cultural sensitivity has been discussed extensively. Most approaches, however, still lack practical application (Adler, 1997; Mendenhall et al., 1995; Usunier, 1996).

The objective of this paper is threefold: (a) draw the attention of scholars to the fact that—despite the undisputed impact of culture on international marketing decision making—no operational concepts are at hand of how to develop cultural sensitivity among international marketing managers; (b) assess the usefulness of well-established cultural concepts for their applicability in cultural sensitivity training; and (c) report on a recently introduced, robust and parsimonious cultural concept

and demonstrate its practical scope and limitations for international marketing training purposes. Consequently, the paper first discusses the relevance of cultural sensitivity in the context of international marketing management. Based on these insights, typical training requirements are identified and existing cultural concepts are assessed with respect to their applicability for culture sensitivity training. In the core part, the concept of cultural standards initially developed in psychology by Thomas and co-workers (1991b, 1996) will be transferred to the international marketing context. The new concept is outlined in detail and evaluated for its benefits and limitations in international marketing use. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research in this area.

## **2. Cultural sensitivity—a key determinant of cultural competence**

Extensive research across disciplines has investigated the question of how to create culturally competent managers (e.g. Chen & Starosta, 1996; Hinckley & Perl, 1996; Post, 1997; Shanahan, 1996; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). From the numerous definitions of competence, one subsumes the ongoing discussion quite well: competence may be described as (work-related) knowledge, skills and aptitudes, which serve productive purposes in firms. It distinguishes outstanding from average performers (Dalton, 1997; Kochanski, 1997; Nordhaug 1993, 1998).

When operationalising cultural competence, previous research has focused mostly on one of the following dimensions: the affective (motivation), the cognitive (knowledge) or the conative (skills) dimension. However, as results have shown, this emphasis on just one dimension falls short of depicting this complex construct. Therefore, more recent attempts to measure cultural competence integrate all three dimensions. Among these holistic approaches, the so-called “Third Culture Approach” by Gudykunst, Wiseman, and Hammer (1977) has found a particularly widespread reception in the field. Under the “Third-Culture” approach, a manager displays cultural competence, when he/she interprets and judges culturally overlapping situations neither from an ethnocentric perspective nor from an idealised host culture perspective, but assumes a neutral position. To achieve this neutral position, Gudykunst et al. (1977) stress the importance of the affective component of cultural competence, which may be called cultural sensitivity. In their model, cultural sensitivity is a prerequisite which instils the acquisition of knowledge (cognitive dimension) and skills (conative dimension). Gudykunst et al. (1977) see cultural sensitivity as the psychological link between home and host culture. This notion clearly contradicts the current business practice mentioned earlier, where language or professional knowledge and skills are deemed key prerequisites for successful foreign assignments.

This Third-Culture Approach lends itself well to understanding the Concept of Cultural Standards which we can apply to the discipline as a suitable tool to train cultural competence. As will be described later in more detail, the concept of Cultural Standards places a strong emphasis on the affective components of cultural competence, but at the same time provides the trainee with knowledge and skills needed to successfully handle culturally overlapping situations.

### 3. Defining culture-sensitive marketing activities

The driving forces of globalisation, such as converging market needs, advances in international transportation networks or the dramatic improvement in communication technology spur the dynamic changes in today’s international business. Moreover, the pace of these developments is more than likely to accelerate and makes it possible to envision that the future of international business is vastly different from today. No longer will international managers be able to succeed solely on their domestic cultural understanding skills alone, but they will have to change and adapt quickly to cultural differences and environmental changes (e.g. Keegan & Schlegelmilch, 2001; Mendenhall et al., 1995; Parhizgar, 1999).

As Mendenhall et al. (1995) put it, international managers are not the only people to deal with a complex and uncertain environment; the nature of international business in itself is already highly complex and unstable. In analogy, we attribute this complexity and instability to international marketing managers’ professional activities at least to the same extent. They not only have to deal with internal stakeholders, such as the home and the host country organisation, but are involved in multiple interactions with external contingencies such as the host country’s consumers, distribution partners, market research institutions or advertising agencies. Several fields of marketing where culture and culture-sensitive actions matter are outlined in Fig. 1. In the following section, some of the typical international marketing tasks that require cultural sensitivity will be discussed in more detail.

Three key areas of international marketing activities in Fig. 1 are singled out to depict how critical cultural sensitivity is appropriate for their success. This selection is made for demonstration purposes. It should not be interpreted as a value judgement

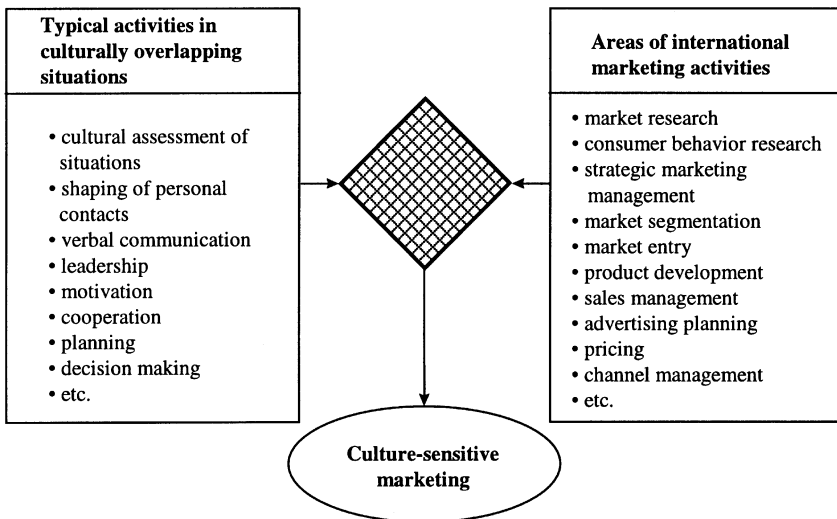


Fig. 1. Areas of culture-sensitive marketing.

indicating which international marketing activities may require more cultural sensitivity than others.

In international market research, the main difficulties lie in establishing cross-national equivalence at various stages in the research process (Cavusgil & Das, 1997). While in the home market the researcher can usually rely on personal experience to avoid failure, cultural sensitivity is vital for getting meaningful and high quality results in an international research setting. The host country's different cultural environment calls for culture-sensitive activities when assessing potential research problems, carrying out field activities and interpreting the findings derived (Craig & Douglas, 2000). Without the appropriate knowledge and the relevant cultural sensitivity, misinterpretations are the rule, as numerous examples show. One of the most well-known international marketing research failures was produced in a Reader's Digest study of pasta consumption in Europe. It detected that French and German consumers eat significantly higher amounts of pasta than Italians. This false assumption was based on an ill-defined phrasing in the questionnaire. Ignoring the idiosyncrasies of Italian cuisine, in which fresh and therefore unpackaged pasta is much more frequently used, respondents were asked the questions with regard to packaged and branded pasta (Cundiff & Hilger, 1988).

Strategic planning in international marketing is another area that has to focus on cultural aspects (Terpstra & Sarathy, 1997). Meaningful industry analysis and environmental scanning, a prerequisite for strategy formulation, has to take into consideration the behaviour of competitors, typical trade terms or managerial attitudes (Terpstra & David, 1991). To deal with foreign environments, not only culture-related know-how is the key to success. In order to properly understand and eventually anticipate, for instance, competitive reactions, cultural sensitivity is crucial.

Finally, in international sales management, international negotiations are highly culture-sensitive situations. Following the model of work-related values by Hofstede (1991, 1997), cultures with high uncertainty avoidance spend considerable time investigating the culture with which they will negotiate. They also require a great deal of information before they are willing to make a decision (Samovar & Porter, 1997). This, however, is only a very rough insight into a complicated field of action. Most likely, direct negotiations are much more influenced by individual patterns of behaviour which are embedded in the local culture (Ghauri & Usunier, 1996). To overcome these barriers in culturally overlapping situations, especially in relationship-prone societies, it is important to train personnel not only in certain models of culture but also in developing cultural awareness, empathy and emotional acceptance.

Given these examples of international marketing activities, the need for cultural sensitivity seems undisputed. However, the question arises as to how these demands can be translated into adequate training tools. This is addressed next.

#### **4. A cultural sensitivity training outline**

When developing cultural sensitivity in the context of international business, a major focus lies in preparing managers confronted with culturally overlapping situ-

ations with respect to two goals: (1) identifying features of the host country's cultural orientation systems which have an effect on activities and actions; and (2) incorporating these features in their spectrum of actions to accomplish specific marketing tasks under foreign cultural frameworks and in interaction with partners shaped by these frameworks. As will be explained later on in more detail, cultural orientation systems are developed through socialisation within a specific cultural environment. They influence perception, thought, values and behaviour of society members and, in their way, establish membership of this society.

Despite the high failure rates of international assignments due to a lack of international managers' cultural sensitivity and the unsuccessful integration of family members into the host culture (e.g. Bird & Dunbar, 1991; Black, 1988; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Harvey, 1985), participants in such training most commonly do not expect major difficulties regarding their competence in culturally overlapping situations. They have hardly any idea about which effects cultural differences can have on private and business matters (Bittner, 1996; Bittner & Reisch, 1994). Taking these circumstances into account, an exemplary sequence of training issues in intercultural preparatory programmes is outlined below.

#### *4.1. Create a learning need*

The first step in a "culture training" is to create awareness among the participants that a confrontation of different cultural orientation systems is bound to lead to problems in interaction. Participants need to realise that misunderstandings are not a result of personality or character but are due to the unreflected transfer of home-country cultural patterns. In this phase, it is also necessary to encourage reflection on one's own culture and personality. This facilitates learning success and prevents the establishment of learning barriers (e.g. Bittner, 1996; Goodman, 1994).

#### *4.2. Put received judgements into perspective*

This training step aims at understanding and accepting different cultural standards which represent the operationalisation of a country's cultural orientation system. This training phase focuses on the fact that the mere knowledge of a different cultural framework does not necessarily lead to a willingness to accept and to adjust to these conditions. This training step addresses the problem of different cultures' significance and superiority, which often results in highly visible ethnocentric arrogance (Hentze & Kammel, 1994). The learning effect consists of questioning internalised values, which are often accepted without reflection and are therefore seen as superior to others.

#### *4.3. Partially adopt local judgements*

This training step demonstrates to trainees why the majority of interaction partners in the target country appreciate their own culture as it is. This appears necessary in order to partially adopt cultural values. Mentally, it imposes entirely different behav-

ior on the trainees than merely accepting the fact that some aspects of one's own cultural orientation system are (unfortunately so far) not common in the target culture (e.g. Bittner, 1996; Landis & Bhagat, 1996).

#### *4.4. Weighting the personal influence*

Here, the training intention can be subsumed under the label of "training humbleness". Due to the intensive analysis of intercultural matters, the trainees realise that opportunities to influence a local culture are far less than expected before the training. Bittner (1996) calls it the path from a manager's self-understanding as a "high-carat manager" towards a "mediator between cultural worlds". This changed perspective can produce massive insecurity which needs to be dealt with adequately. For a final integration of single training steps, it seems desirable to give a robust orientation framework (Bhawuk & Triandis, 1996).

This leads to the fundamental question of which concept of culture represents the theoretical foundation for such a training. For the purpose of developing cultural sensitivity, the concept of culture selected should provide extensive coverage of the complex phenomenon "culture" and, for applicability purposes, be action-relevant rather than merely abstract. In the following section, key concepts of culture are presented and evaluated for their practical relevance to cultural sensitivity training.

### **5. In the "jungle" of cultural concepts**

Literature abounds on the notion and concept of "culture". Even attempts to systematise the findings presented there into different "schools" only yield highly complex and sophisticated categorisations (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984). According to Ajiferuke and Boddewyn (1970), this is mainly because culture is a universal term that has as many meanings as people use it.

From an international marketing research perspective, the different notions of culture can be assessed with respect to their pragmatic qualities, such as manageable complexity, reasonable cost of data collection and their applicability and relevance to everyday marketing activities. A way to take these demands into account is to systematise the various concepts of culture along two dimensions: first, the concept's methodological focus, and second, the scope of variables that depict "culture" (Fig. 2). A categorisation in line with the methodological focus of a concept opens up two opposing directions: first, a body of research based on a positivistic approach, which captures the phenomenon of culture exclusively through collecting relevant data by means of questionnaires (Hofstede, 1997), and second, research work comprising highly interpretative approaches, such as "objective hermeneutics" (Oevermann, Allert, Konau, & Krambeck, 1979). The second dimension, which relates to the scope of variables that depict culture, is based on how many cultural aspects are considered within the research design. Even within this dimension, two approaches may be differentiated. The universal approach focuses on only a few aspects or cultural dimensions which are characteristic of many different cultures

**Cultural aspects  
included**

many	e.g. Triandis et al. Kluckhohn/Strodtbeck	e.g. Geertz, Gannon
few	e.g. Hofstede, Trompenaars	e.g. Hall
	positivistic	interpretative

**Methodological  
position**

Fig. 2. Typology of culture concepts.

and are selected particularly with regard to their stability across cultures. In contrast, the culture-relativistic approach is based on the notion of culture as a context made up of a large number of single cultural aspects. This set of variables serves as a framework for analysis through which significance and meaning is added to individual actions only. The typology (see Fig. 2) depicts all the above-mentioned culture concepts and can be considered as a first, but by no means exhaustive, approach towards systematisation.

Although this typology does not entirely do justice to concept specifics, it can be used to position and assess the approaches mentioned above in view of their applicability. The works of Hofstede (1991, 1997), which are grounded on a value-based concept of culture, or of Trompenaars (1993) are typical examples of some positivistic orientation which includes only a few cultural dimensions (lower left quadrant in Fig. 2). In contrast, Hall's (1990) widely used concept of culture is characteristic of an interpretative approach, which focuses on three cultural aspects, namely, the context of verbal communication and the way people deal with space and with time. Geertz's (1993) concept of culture is a context-related and culture-relativistic one. It can be considered as a typical example of an interpretative approach which includes a large number of cultural aspects. Finally, the concept of "subjective" culture by Triandis, Vassiliou, Vassiliou, Tanaka, and Shanmugam (1972) or the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) represents a positivistic and context-related approach.

In order to assess the practical applicability of different types of cultural concepts from a marketing perspective, the following criteria were used: (a) relevance for culturally overlapping marketing situations; (b) coverage of the phenomenon of "culture"; (c) cross-cultural explanatory power; and (d) economy of data collection. Cul-



ture concepts are particularly well suited for analysing cross-cultural activities, if they allow for specific behavioural measures to be deduced. Furthermore, their applicability will increase the more a broad-based coverage of experienceable cultural similarities and differences is obtained. Considering the geographic scope, culture concepts that may be applied more universally are considered preferable due to the increasing globalisation of markets. Finally, the economy of data collection and interpretation also plays an important role in its assessment with regard to practical relevance.

Based on these arguments, none of the concepts outlined above—as reflected in the typology in Fig. 2—is ideally suited to be applied in international marketing (see Table 1). While a multi-faceted concept of culture results in a more extensive coverage of “culture” and leads to more precise behavioural instructions for marketing activities in culturally overlapping situations, its universal applicability and economy in collecting data is low. A similar trade-off prevails in an assessment along the methodological dimension. The more interpretative the approach, the higher its managerial relevance and coverage of cultural phenomena is. In contrast, these approaches, however, lack cross-cultural explanatory power and economy in data collection.

None of the extreme positions in Fig. 2 is appropriate when it comes to developing cross-cultural sensitivity training to carry out international marketing activities effectively. On the contrary, concepts of culture offering a limited range of cultural variables are more suited to conceptualising sensitivity training. A mid-range complexity facilitates the collection and processing of information among trainees. With respect to the methodological dimension, a mix between positivistic and interpretative approaches seems particularly favourable, as it prevents an overemphasis on “objective” cultural aspects and establishes a balance between universality and economy.

Table 1  
Assessment of the practicability of cultural concepts in international marketing management

Criteria	Concepts of culture			
	Few aspects		Many aspects	
	Positivistic	Interpretative	Positivistic	Interpretative
Coverage of the phenomenon “culture”	– –	–	+	++
Relevance for culturally overlapping situations	– –	–	+	++
Cross-cultural explanatory power	++	–	+	– –
Economy of data collection	++	+	–	– –

One culture concept that represents these middle positions and meets sensitivity training demands in a cross-cultural context is the concept of cultural standards developed by Thomas et al. (1991b, 1996).

## **6. The concept of cultural standards**

The concept of cultural standards, whose cornerstones are outlined in the following section, has its origins in various disciplines: cross-cultural psychology and communications research as well as in international exchange research and socio-psychological attribution research.

### *6.1. Notion and definition of “culture” in the concept of cultural standards*

Based on the assumption that a person’s capacity to act requires sufficient orientation in his/her home environment, Thomas et al. (e.g. 1989, 1991b, 1995, 1996) argue that this prerequisite is not always met in culturally overlapping situations. In general, people enter intercultural interactions and activities relying on information and experiences that are shaped by their own cultural background. Consequently, conflict-ridden and straining incidents occur due to the clash of the contrary cultural orientation systems of the people involved.

Cultural orientation systems are developed through a process of individual socialisation within a specific cultural environment. According to Thomas et al. (1991b, 1996), they are universal for society members but specific to each society, organisation or group. The cultural orientation systems are formed in a society and passed on from generation to generation. They influence perception, thought, values and behaviour of society members and, in their way, establish membership of this society. Consequently, culture may, if it is considered as an orientation system, provide a framework that helps society members to structure their behavioural field and enables them to find independent ways of coping with their environment.

As cultural orientation systems are specific to a society, the modes of behaviour of people from foreign countries with different sets of cultural rules can only be vaguely anticipated. As a result, inappropriate actions and reactions, misunderstandings, misleading situations, a feeling of uncertainty and, at worst, an inability to react or interact may occur (Thomas, 1991b; Thomas & Hagemann, 1996).

### *6.2. Cultural standards*

Cultural orientation systems are operationalised by means of so-called cultural standards. These standards comprise all ways of perception, thought, judgement and actions which are considered normal, generally accepted by, typical of and binding on a certain culture. The cultural standards also serve as benchmarks for the assessment of one’s own behaviour, the behaviour of others and for behavioural adjustment (Müller & Thomas, 1991; Thomas, 1996). Major importance is attached to those cultural standards which apply to a large number of situations and cover a wide

range of behavioural aspects. Standards that meet these requirements are, for example, those which are relevant to human interactions, as they determine perception, assessment and activities.

Cultural standards display themselves at different levels of abstraction. On the highest aggregate level, cultural standards are expressed as general norms and values. On a more specific level, they appear as behavioural guidelines. If deviations beyond certain limits of tolerance occur, disapproval will be generated and sanctions will follow. The range of validity of different cultural standards varies cross-culturally: while some standards show an equivalent meaning in two or more cultures, others change their meaning in part or entirely or are not observed at all in another cultural environment. Cultural standards can also change their significance or their limits of tolerance across cultures (Thomas & Hagemann, 1996; Thomas, 1991b). Within a cultural framework, standards are not explicitly perceived by society members. It is only through contact with foreign cultures that their existence and their effects become manifest.

### *6.3. Determination of cultural standards*

Cultural standards are empirically derived by researching culturally overlapping situations in two cultures of interest. Interacting partners with different cultural backgrounds automatically generate “critical” incidents due to their own cultural orientation systems. Incidents of this kind are perceived as unpleasant, annoying and depressing to the persons involved. They are difficult to cope with and can preoccupy the persons involved for a long period of time. To empirically capture these situations, interviews are used to investigate cross-cultural incidents which the interviewees experienced (Critical Incident Analysis; Flanagan, 1954).

After consolidating the individual results, the differences triggering critical incidents between cultural orientation systems are elaborated. For that purpose, research groups for both cultures involved are installed to identify specific behavioural patterns and provide explanations for these patterns. Each judge is familiar with his/her home country's cultural orientation system and its cultural standards and holds assumptions about their effectiveness in the host culture. For example, to explain behaviour in a Chinese–German culturally overlapping situation, Chinese judges would use Chinese culture standards, whereas Germans would use assumptions of what they perceive to be a Chinese cultural standard. These judgements are contrasted in pairs and synthesised in a way that cultural standards emerge. Supported by findings from other disciplines such as philosophy, religious sciences and linguistics, core cultural standards are consolidated and their vertical and horizontal interrelations are elucidated (Thomas, 1991a,b).

Looking at the typology of culture concepts (see Fig. 2), Thomas's concept of cultural standards holds a position in the matrix's centre combining interpretative and positivistic methodological approaches. On the one hand, the concept relies on an interpretative approach by using qualitative interviews. On the other hand, it also draws on positivistic methods, as the data are consolidated by means of quantitative analysis. For validation purposes, the consolidated data are, in turn, subjected to

interpretative analysis. As to the number of cultural variables included, Thomas's concept also holds a middle position.

#### 6.4. Examples of cultural standards

In the past few years, intensive research was done at the Department of Psychology, University of Regensburg, to identify similarities and differences between German and US, Chinese and South Korean cultural standards. One set of cultural standards in the US and Germany is particularly well documented, namely that of "interpersonal distance regulation", as it is very likely to produce considerable misunderstandings in culturally overlapping situations (Markowski & Thomas, 1995; Müller & Thomas, 1991). It is reported that Germans assess US-Americans as friendly, open and amenable, but superficial and unreliable. In contrast, US-Americans who had contact with Germans describe them as reserved, shy and stubborn (Thomas, 1991b). These examples point out that culturally overlapping situations bear a high potential for misunderstandings, insult and emotional stress, which might, for example, put the success of business relations at risk.

Contrary cultural standards on how to overcome psychological personal distance to other people may serve to explain these deviating attributions. American cultural standards demand minimising this distance. Consequently, it is considered an obligation to react and to establish contact with every person in the field of vision. In general, openness in peripheral personal matters (e.g. general personal information, helpfulness and hospitality) is extensive, whereas central personal affairs (e.g. personal problems, emotions and attitudes) are dealt with far less frankly. From a German perspective, peripheral personal matters are hardly enlarged on during first social contacts (typical norm: "do not be obtrusive!"). The distance appears only after a prolonged period of getting acquainted and results in a comparatively high sincerity with regard to central personal affairs (Markowski & Thomas, 1995; Müller & Thomas, 1991). In the following (see Table 2), central cultural standards in the US and Germany are outlined, which were empirically derived.

Table 2  
Central cultural standards in the US and Germany

In the US	In Germany
Individualism	Formalism
Egalitarian orientation	Power orientation
Action orientation	Performance of one's duty
Achievement/competition orientation	Family orientation
Interpersonal distance regulation	Interpersonal distance regulation
Social acceptance	Physical distance regulation
Calmness/"easy-going"	Frankness/outspokenness
Patriotism	Personal property
Relation between sexes	Traditional role expectations
Future orientation	

Source: Markowski & Thomas (1995) and Müller & Thomas (1991).

An analysis of central cultural standards in China and South Korea served to confirm a well-known norm in interpersonal relations—i.e. face-saving, the importance and explanatory power of which were elucidated for everyday situations. From a European perspective, this cultural standard is difficult to understand in its variety and consequences. It is a typically Chinese culture-specific phenomenon that also exists in Germany, but plays only an inferior and less differentiated role. Its main focus is put on saving a person's status in interpersonal relations. If this status is damaged or ill-respected through personal or other people's misbehaviour, this will imply shame and disgrace (Brück & Thomas, 1995).

Typical behavioural patterns that comply with this cultural standard include avoiding or retreating quickly from potentially "dangerous" social situations, ending the interaction and keeping self-control, avoiding public criticism and confrontation as well as striving for harmony (Thomas, 1989). This has led Thomas (1996) to propound the following findings for German–Chinese interactions: while in the Germans' view their task-orientation prepares the ground for interpersonal relations, the Chinese take the exact opposite approach: only after establishing a positive personal relationship will business contacts promise success.

These examples of cultural standards indicate that knowledge of one's own and the target country's cultural orientation system makes the emotional handling of cross-cultural differences significantly smoother. It also allows managers engaged in culturally overlapping situations to adapt better to the specific demands of these situations. As a result, training material for cultural orientation trainings has been developed which is based on the concept of cultural standards.

### *6.5. Application of the concept of cultural standards in education and training programmes*

The data which are collected during the interviews contain a large number of exemplary situational descriptions (i.e. of critical incidents). Therefore, they can be drawn on as a starting point for the development of relevant training programmes. The so-called cultural assimilator programmes are based on the idea that interaction partners understand and react more efficiently in interactive processes if these processes make sense to them. The acting individuals show better understanding when they discover why interaction partners pursue certain goals and why certain incidents and behavioural patterns occur in a certain cultural environment the way they do (Thomas & Hagemann, 1996; Triandis et al., 1972). Assimilators can either be culture-specific ones, which are designed and used to prepare individuals from one cultural group for interaction with another cultural group, or culture-general ones, which prepare individuals for experiences regardless of particular cultural backgrounds (Cushner & Landis, 1996).

In the German-speaking area, some assimilator programmes that are based on the concept of cultural standards are already available. Thomas (1989) reports on the development of a programme for interacting with Chinese people in a business context. Similar programmes are available for German trainees in the US (Müller & Thomas, 1991). Furthermore, culture assimilator programmes for US expatriates in

Germany (Markowski & Thomas, 1995) as well as in China and South Korea (Brück & Thomas, 1995) are at hand. These training programmes are based on the descriptions of intercultural, interactive situations which can only be solved “culturally correctly” by applying the underlying cultural standards. After each description of an exemplary situation, the programme offers various possible solutions of which only one corresponds to the actual target culture’s orientation system. Each alternative proposed is accompanied by explanatory comments of why the solution chosen is right or wrong. By means of representative and illustrative examples and built-in learning loops, the trainees get an opportunity to acquire knowledge of cultural standards and their implications for everyday life in culturally overlapping situations.

In line with the holistic view of cultural competence, the training materials allow for not only a cognitive but also an emotional analysis of a target culture. During the process of establishing cultural standards, it encompasses the conative (skills) dimension by drawing on particular skills which worked well or failed in a critical incident. Knowledge (cognitive dimension) is created as the training draws on interactive situations (such as negotiations, marketing activities, everyday situations, etc.) which are rehearsable and familiar to the individuals being trained. In this way they may learn about cultural universalities and specifics between the home and the target culture. Finally and foremost, the concept of cultural standards places a strong emphasis on the affective dimension. As the differences between “culturally competent” and “incompetent” reactions to training situations are too subtle to be solved through knowledge alone, the right reaction requires a high degree of cultural sensitivity. This may eventually even lead to positive attitudes towards foreign culture, increased acceptance of local norms and a reduction in emotional barriers (Lange, 1994).

## **7. Limitations and outlook for future research**

These remarks are by no means supposed to give the impression that the concept of cultural standards is the only approach that can be applied in the development of culture-sensitive marketing. Thomas’s concept of cultural standards is but one approach and constitutes a comparatively new form of dealing with cultural problems in international marketing management. As it has not yet been subject to extensive research, weaknesses in the concept have to be put into perspective.

Despite its inherent practicability and its imminent applicability to international marketing training, this concept has weaknesses. Due to its degree of novelty it is not strongly rooted in culture-theoretic basic research (Demorgon & Molz, 1996; Krewer, 1996). Although it was developed out of practical experiences in intercultural communications research, it may not be considered atheoretic due to its scientific background in social psychology and communication sciences. However, from an anthropological and culture-sociological perspective, the highly extensive concept of culture falls short of theoretical foundation. Moreover, it should be noted that the concept takes on a more traditionalistic notion of culture, which reflects only a few constructivist and systemic aspects (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984).

Cultural standards are candid shots and therefore meet the dynamic character of culture to a limited extent only. Besides, it still remains unclear what kinds of inter-relationships between cultural standards exist and how they are weighted and hierarchically structured. This implies that, at present, no definitive findings as to the singular importance, the extent of overlapping and the central significance of single cultural standards have been established. However, the concept's basic outline suggests that future research efforts will result in considerable improvements in its dynamic as well as its relational aspects.

Another issue which requires further consideration are the variances within a culture which may have an impact on the stability of cultural standards. Variables such as age or gender may interfere with uniform cultural standards within a national context. Some countries are also culturally more heterogeneous (e.g. the US) than others (e.g. Japan). The influence of these variations has not yet been investigated and is thus not reflected in the training material.

In a business context, limits regarding the concept of cultural standards also come to the fore due to its bicultural focus. As national cultural standards can only be determined by comparing one's home culture to a target culture, generalisation is limited and results in the development of country- and culture-related material. As data are only gathered in a specific context, such as in a business environment, an additional limitation to their application prevails. So far there has been no evidence of whether cultural standards identified in a specific context are applicable across different social environments. In other words, it still remains unclear whether findings obtained in a student exchange programme, among managers or development aid workers are equally relevant or valid.

The time dimension and its potential influence on the concept of cultural standards is another aspect which has not been dealt with so far. The concept of cultural standards lends itself well to examining initial interactions between individuals. However, to what extent individual perspectives change, as interactions take place over time and relationships develop, still remains to be clarified.

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the research avenues which are provided are likely to overcome the deficits due to the inherent potential of this concept. Based on our own experiences with the training material and the reactions of trainees who have worked with it, we believe that the concept of cultural standards is superior to other theoretical concepts and especially suitable for the development of culture-sensitive marketing.

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