

Expatriate Power – a counteractive factor of intercultural Learning?

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Abstract

Due to the advancement of globalization, overseas assignments are becoming increasingly necessary for the coordination of international subsidiaries or to guarantee the transfer of knowledge, among other things. However many of these assignments are unsuccessful in that either the business expatriates return earlier as planned or they do not perform as well as expected. Multiple reasons for the failure of such assignments have been identified, most of which are related to the ability of an individual to adapt to the host culture and culture learning. In this article it will be argued that power may affect the quality and nature of an expatriate's culture learning and thus may undermine the chance to adapt adequately. The article presents first results of a case study regarding German expatriates of five organizations in Mexico. The data displays evidence that power may restrict sanctions of host country nationals (HCNs) of an expatriate's culturally inappropriate behaviour. This tendency appears to be reinforced by the high value placed on power distance and an emphasis on hierarchical structures within an organization.

Keywords: overseas assignment, cultural learning, power

0. Introduction

Since global competition has been on the increase, understanding and managing the effective adjustment of expatriates to a foreign culture has become increasingly necessary (Black&Gregersen, 1991)(1). Many sojourns are unsuccessful(2). Reasons for the low rate of success are mainly attributed to problems in adapting to the host culture associated with personality, self-monitoring, and self efficacy (Caligiuri 2000, Hechanova et al. 2003, Ones&Viswesvaran 1999, Parker&McEvoy, 1993) as well as the motivation of cultural intelligence (Templer et al. 2006, Early&Ang 2003), the inadequate selection of personnel (Tung 1982, Gertsen 1990; Bolten 2002) and a lack of intercultural preparation for the sojourn (Brüch 2001, Jammal 2003). For successful adaptation culture learning is an important precondition. Culture learning is a social process and depends on the quality of interaction with HCNs.

However, "Adaptation as an overall process has defied prediction. (...) The field is riddled with attempts to get the complex and dynamic nature of cross-cultural adaptation under control." (Haslberger 2005, 162). Most studies regarding the adjustment and performance of expatriates don't meet the complex nature of the phenomenon, since they focus on the individual level and are based on quantitative research. Many methods measuring adjustment are based on the self-assessment of the probands(3), which may be biased by their own perceptions. Even if they feel well adjusted, HCNs may evaluate that differently(4). Thus they are limited when it comes to measuring sociocultural adjustment; a lack of mirror-inverted designs comprising HCNs and expatriates can be stated.

Perhaps because of this individually-centered research tradition, power is an often neglected issue in studies of intercultural communication (Isolatus 2006, Jensen 2006, Landis&Wasilewski 1999. Even if related disciplines as e.g. cultural studies in general (see e.g. Grossberg, 1999) are aware of its influence, " hierarchy and power are still sometimes classified even as to be outside of the scope of intercultural communication. " (Isolatus 2006, 231). Power is generally described more explicitly by the dimension of power distance as used by Hofstede (1991), which is, according to Jensen (2006), merely a descriptive approach, dealing with the question of how a society emphasizes the differences between a citizens's power. There are not many research results that explain what kind of practical implications this approach may have (Isolatus, 2006). These conclusions are also valid regarding research on overseas assignments and adjustment. That is surprising, since according to Crozier&Friedberg (1979, 14) each structure of collective action is a system of power. They conclude that every serious analysis of collective action should focus on power as a main point of advisement (see Crozier&Friedberg 1979, 14). Since foreign assignments mainly take place in organizations which are structures of collective action, power should be an important research issue as well. We may suppose that it shapes the interaction between expatriates and HCNs.

This article attempts to explore the possible relation between power and the culture learning. The interaction between HCNs and Expatriates in Mexico will be described. Contrary to most studies with a psychological research tradition, this article is focused on a collective level and thus based on a sociological theory. It mainly presents first results of a case study. Section one of this article highlights that which occurs when a person travels overseas and joins a foreign culture. In this context key concepts will be addressed: The sociological theory of structuration

(Giddens 1984) will be combined with concepts of culture learning and adjustment. The second section explains the methodological approach, and section three presents the results. In this regard, the possible influence of power on the interaction process of German expatriates with HCNs will be explored. In section four concluding remarks will be made and limitations and the need for further research will be pointed out.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Mechanisms of Social Systems

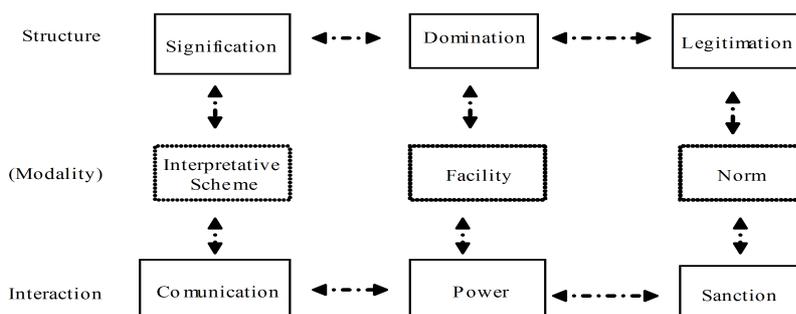
Before describing the process of culture learning, I would firstly like to explain principles of social systems by referring to the theory of structuration as described by Giddens (1984). Social systems build the framework in which international assignments take place, since the expatriate leaves one particular social system in order to enter a new one.

I have chosen the theory of structuration because it entails the concept of the duality of structures. This means it is not only the social structures which form the most important phenomenon of social systems but also the agents and their interaction with each other. These agents are knowledgeable individuals who have the ability to reflect their agency and reproduce or transform the social structures. Thus social structures do not determine interaction, rather they enable action and restrict it at the same time. Giddens also recognizes that social systems are not homogeneous, for they differ inside, an idea which he illustrates through his concept of regionalization (1984, 376). Consequently he promotes a dynamic concept of society that seems to be suitable to analyse intercultural encounters. Giddens' ideas therefore differ from the classical essentialist approach; he tries to combine two theoretical traditions which for a long time have been seen as incompatible: the macro- and microsociological approach. After a brief overview of his theory, I will apply it to the intercultural context in order to illustrate what happens during an overseas assignment.

According to Giddens, social systems are "reproduced relations between actors and collectivities, organized as regular social practices" (1984, p.25) and based on 'agents' and structures, which are strongly interrelated. The 'agents' of each society revert to particular resources and rules, that are mainly anchored in the practical consciousness of agents. The practical consciousness means tacit knowledge about how to behave in certain situations and contexts and is linked to particular social systems. Rules are generalised behavioural patterns which portray a sense of action within a social system. They have a regulating function, linking human interactions to social norms. Rules are reproduced in three dimensions of structure: signification, domination and legitimation (see figure 1) which - due to the duality of structure(5) – are exercised in interaction through communication, power and sanction.

These three dimensions have to be understood together. Signification gives sense to the rules and resources and is transmitted in the interaction through communication, which reverts to interpretative schemes. Legitimation is expressed through sanction, which is geared to social norms. Power is exercised through the facility of mobilizing resources and is a "routine element of the instantiation of conduct in social reproduction." (Giddens, 1984, p.16) Power is generated in and by the structures of domination.

Figure 1: *The structuring principles of societies (Giddens 1984, 29)*



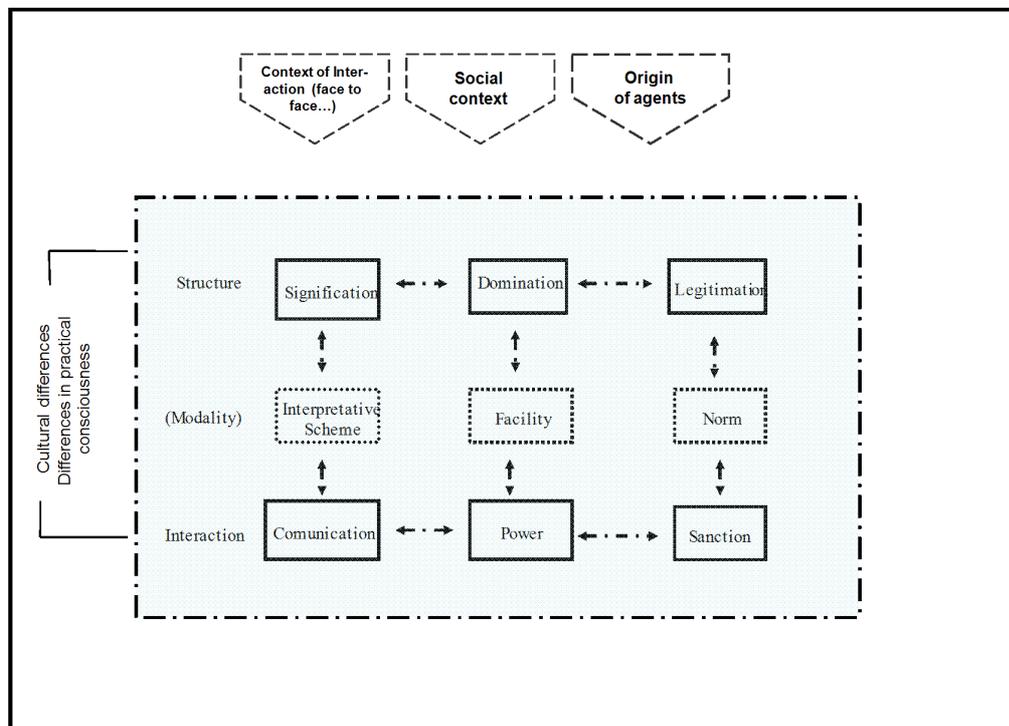
Since practices are reproduced across time and space, they are unique for each society. Thus expatriates are accustomed to certain social structures different from those of the host culture. The signification of the structures differs from one social system to another as well as the ways of interaction. Culture is seen here as social practice (Hörning, 1999; Weisinger & Salipante, 2000) that relies on the stucturation modalities explained above.

1.1.1. Application to the intercultural context

Living in a foreign culture, the expatriates are confronted with differences in the social practices of the home and host society and thus his usual habits may give rise to reactions or consequences different to what he would expect at home. At least at the beginning of their sojourn expatriates do not possess the resources for adequate interaction abroad and their methods of interpreting the society and the "other" are influenced by individual experiences in their home culture and therefore possibly unsuitable. The interpretative schemes do not work in the same way as those of HCNs. Collective meanings may differ, as well as communication modes(6). Domination depends on the mobilisation of resources; the methods of mobilization as well as the tolerance of how much power may be wielded in which context may differ between societies. The legitimation of particular behaviour may differ from the home context, since different norms are established. Suitable behaviour may be learned in the process of acculturation. Taking into account what Giddens states about the legitimizing dimension of a social structure, the expatriates' behaviour patterns which are inappropriate in the foreign culture would be sanctioned by the co-present members of the foreign social system, according to the social position of the agent in the social system what means the possibility to wield power. This may lead to culture shock (Oberg, 1960). The culture shock is normally caused because agents become aware of incompatible interaction routines. Prediction of the others' behaviour fails to a certain degree and may cause acculturative stress. Culture learning takes part resulting in a modification of the habitual practices(7). Culture learning refers here to a process of learning that enables one to interact successfully and autonomously in the host culture or with persons of another culture and is essential for intercultural competency (Furnham & Bochner, 1982). However the reverse may also be the case if agents reproduce familiar practices which manifest themselves in the maintenance of familiar routines.

Transferring Giddens' model of the constitution of society as a framework of analysis to the intercultural context, this seems to be limited by not taking into account the fact that persons from different cultural backgrounds interact. As I have explained above, the expatriate is confronted with foreign rules and modes of interaction. But in my opinion that is not sufficient for an analysis of a situation of cultural overlap..

Figure 2: Structuration within an intercultural context



I believe that the model of Giddens should be extended by at least three more dimensions which constitute a suitable framework for the analysis of the cultural overlap and thus intercultural interaction (see figure 2) the origin of the

interacting agents, 2) the social context in which the interaction takes place (Hörning, 1999) and 3) the interaction mode.

1) Origin is seen here as a multidimensional construction. This may be on the one hand the national or regional origin, but also sociocultural affiliations in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1987) as well as organization origin (e.g. coming from the parent organization etc.). The specific constellation of the agents' origins may influence the situation of cultural overlap in determining factors such as cultural distance(8) and thus influencing all dimensions of Giddens' model. Regarding signification, the value that is ascribed to the origin of the agents may influence the modes of interaction and depends also on the political constellations of the countries of origin. For example, a North American agent might be treated different than a German one, since the political relationships are perceived as less positive between Mexico and United States than between Germany and Mexico. The status of a Guatemalan will be different to that of a German who is supposed to be member of a rich industrial nation, while many Guatemalans come to Mexico because of financial benefits. Domination, or the facility to wield power, also depends to a certain extend on the origin of the persons and thus legitimation and sanction will also be influenced due to the interrelation of all dimensions. On the level of interaction these conditions will be reflected, too.

2) All of these conditions depend on another dimension: the social context where the interaction takes place. In the working context other rules are more important than outside work. Thus the signification of the agent's origin may be biased by the position the person fills etc. According to that the chance to wield power and legitimation are also influenced.

3) As a third dimension, the way contact between agents takes place is of importance. Since virtual assignments are increasing, we have to take into account if the contact takes place face to face or is virtual. Virtual intercultural collaboration follows other conditions and brings different challenges in comparison with face to face contact (see Maletzky, 2007, Holtbrügge 2007, Martins et.al. 2004).

In sum, the intercultural contact takes place inside social systems and a process of intercultural structuration starts. It's course depends on the possibility to mobilise resources and dominate. Linked to that, certain behaviour is legitimated or sanctioned. The signification of certain behaviour influences in how far it is sanctioned or tolerated.

1.2. Adjustment and Culture Learning

The term adjustment is often used interchangeably with the term adaptation. Research "often refers to models that describe adjustment in terms of three components: 'factors', 'mechanisms', and 'outcomes'. Factors are determinants of adjustment, such as individual and organisational characteristics, mechanisms and generally defined as the means by which particular adjustment outcomes are achieved; and adjustment mechanisms have been conceptualized in terms of learning and coping strategies and on a more general level, by adjustment 'modes'. 'Outcomes' of adjustment refer to the state of being adjusted" (Zimmermann, Holman & Sparrow 2003, 46). This study tries to explore power as a possible factor of cultural learning and adjustment.

Literature distinguishes between psychological and sociocultural adjustment. The former is usually defined as the achievement of psychological comfort while interacting with HCNs and foreign living conditions (Black et al. 1991). Sociocultural adjustment relates to the ability to fit into the host culture. It is based on the cultural learning theory and is related to social behaviour and practical social skills (Klingeberg 1982; Furnham 1993; Black & Mendenhall 1991) Adjustment is defined here with the words of Giddens as the process of restructuring of a foreigner's interaction routines according to those routines of collective interaction which are predominant in the host culture. It is considered to be the process of getting acculturated to the host country, implying that sojourners experience psychological comfort with various aspects of their new setting, thus allowing them to form appropriate routines of interaction with others and decreasing their chances of getting into a conflict situation because of intercultural misunderstandings. Selmer, according to Furnham and Bochner (2001, 9), mentions (1986) that the "expatriate does not necessarily have to undergo a basic shift in deeply held values to conform to a new set of cultural norms abroad. It is sufficient to merely learn new social and cultural skills, in the same way as one learns a foreign language." Culture learning is often based on the social learning theory (Bandura, 1971 see Furnham & Bochner, 1982, 1986). Contact to and interaction with locals thus are important sources, since adequate behavior might be observed and tried. The importance of interaction with host country nationals is supported by the contact theory (Hanvey 1979) that postulates that interpersonal contacts result in understanding and adjustment. "Interacting with host country nationals in a social setting is one of the ways the expatriate newcomers become aware of appropriate behaviour in the host country, as local people may act as sources of information and help to understand (Black & Gregerson 1991; Bochner 1981, Gertsen 1990)." (Selmer 2001) In this way overseas effectiveness may be reached. Overseas effectiveness consists of three areas: Professional expertise, interaction and adaptation (Salo-Lee 2006)

According to Giddens' assumptions regarding the constitution of society, adjustment has to be interpreted as embedded in the host cultural context and thus should be framed by the structures of signification, legitimation and domination, as well as communication, sanction and power on the interactional level. According to Parker&McEvoy (1993), adjustment encourages the success of the overseas assignment and thus is important to achieve. The degree of adaptation which is required varies depending on the host culture (Berry 1998, 297).

1.3. The concept of power

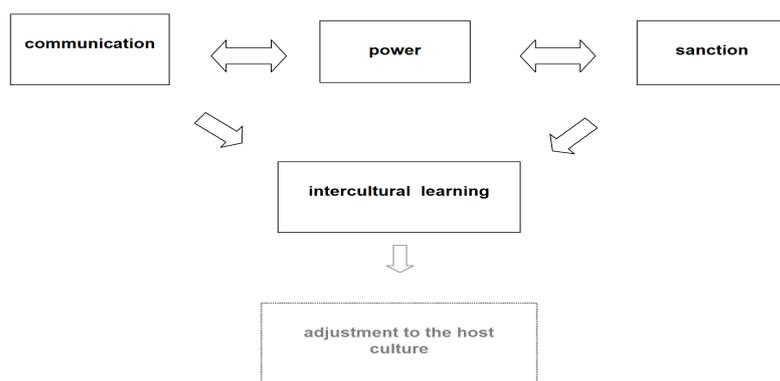
Since *power* has a "pervasive influence in social life" (Giddens 1984, p.31), the same may be assumed in the context of intercultural communication and interaction between expatriates and HCNs. The definition of power can be likened to a lake of imperceptible depth in that it is difficult to define, and many works have been dedicated to this issue (see Witte 2001, Nájera Nuñez 2003). Power could be viewed as a form of influence (Russel 1973, Krüger 1980, March 1955), as the achievement of goals (Mann 1991), as a capacity (Trias 1993, Holm 1969) and as an end in itself (Moore 1958). My approach is based on the concept of power as understood by Giddens (1984)(9). Power reflects the structure of domination, but takes place on the interactional level. It is generated in and through structures of domination. The concept of domination relies upon the mobilization of allocative and authoritative resources. Allocative resources refer to the transformative capacity one has to regulate or control objects, goods, or material phenomena, whereas authoritative resources refer to the capacity one has to command other people.

Power, according to Giddens, enables one "to 'act otherwise', [which] means to be able to intervene in the world" (Giddens 1984, p. 14), that means it is a kind of influence. One important aspect of his definition is the expression "to be able to intervene the world", what shows that power is not only manifested by wielding it. Giddens' understanding differs here from that of Elias Canetti (1981), who believes that power only exists in the moment of its manifestation. Contrary to this, Giddens agrees with other theoreticians (e.g. Weber 1947, Krüger 1980) that power enables the possibility of doing or achieving something. This is very important in the context of overseas assignments. The expatriates inherit a formal or legitimizing power (French & Raven 1959), not only in the sense that they can wield power, but their ability to mobilise resources may encourage a certain respect and behaviour from subordinates as an unintended consequence. This is, among others, the idea of Ortmann, Windeler, Becker & Schulz (1990, 16), who, in reference to an organizational context, state that power functions through an inherent logic of a potential threat. It includes an implicit or explicit threat expressed by certain symbols. The meaning of symbols depends mainly on the interpretation of their recipients (Blumer 1986). Since the structure of signification differs between the host and home society of the expatriate, the possibility that the HCNs have different interpretation patterns of particular symbols, in this case of power symbols, is high and may lead to misunderstandings.

1.4. Power and Culture Learning in the Process of Interaction between Expatriates and HCNs

According to Giddens, the dimensions of structure and interaction are interrelated. Due to this interrelation (see figure 1), power affects on the one hand communication and on the other hand sanction or level of tolerance on the interactional level, and on the structural level domination is interrelated with signification and legitimation. Therefore I draw the conclusion that, by relating Giddens' ideas to the intercultural context, power affects the quality of communication between expatriates and HCNs as well as the degree of toleration by HCNs in the case of aberrant behaviour by the foreigner.

Figure 2: *Power and culture learning*



Since cultural learning takes place through interaction, this occurs according to Giddens through communication, power and sanction(10). Thus cultural learning may be influenced by the expatriates' power, which is connected to the hierarchical position they fill in a organization and thus by the potential threat they possess. The extent to which the dimensions affect each other depends – as I suppose – on the meaning of power in the particular context.

According to the above, the following research questions have emerged:

- How does the expatriate's power bias the communication between the host country nationals and expatriates?
- How does the expatriate's power affect the way inadequate behaviour is sanctioned?
- What implications may this bias have for culture learning?

2. Methodology

This article is part of a larger study, where a triangulation (Flick 2004) of quantitative and qualitative data has been applied. It is based mainly on a case study, as the openness of the method allows a form of data collection which is not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis and thus permits a level of depth and detail that quantitative strategies alone can not provide (Lamnek 2005, Mayring 2002). The qualitative and quantitative methods are combined to amplify the results of each other rather than to deepen the investigation. In the quantitative part, 1430 questionnaires have been sent to Mexicans working in national and international organizations, 810 have been statistically evaluated(11).

In the context of the case study, 22 German expatriates were questioned in semi-structured interviews (Meuser & Nagel (2003) about their sojourn. Additionally, four interviews with Mexican employees have been conducted in order to contrast them with the Germans' statements and to detect culturally influenced perceptions as well as to highlight the Mexican cultural background. The goal of the study was to gain insights of the situation of German expatriates in Mexico and their challenges, as well as to extract tendencies of usual working styles in Mexico, in order to give a scientific basis for intercultural trainings and future expatriates.

The interviews took place in 3 German organizations of the pharmaceutical sector and one Mexican automotive component supplier as well as one educational organisation in Mexico City, Chihuahua and Toluca. The data was collected between 29.12.2005 and 26.03.2006 during the foreign assignment of the German expatriates on their workplace. Most of the interviewees were between 25 and 34 years old. 16 interviewees were male, 10 were female. The percentage of female expatriates is comparatively high; most women came from the educational or the pharmaceutical organizations and were relatively young. During the 1990s the quota of female expatriates in German organizations was about 10% (Stahl, Miller & Tung 2002), in European organizations the average is about 9% (Price Waterhouse Coopers 2001). The time the interviewees had spent in Mexico until the date of data collection was between 5 weeks and 11 years. Nobody has participated in intercultural training before and only a few people knew Spanish at the beginning of their sojourn. This is consistent with other studies which attest to only few preparation activities by organizations (see Mayrhofer, Kühlmann & Stahl 2005). Language training is

especially neglected by international business firms (Selmer 2001 citing Aryee 1997, Black & Mendenhall 1990, Brewster 1995).

The interview atmosphere was open and positive. The interviews were transcribed. The process of analysis followed the grounded theory approach. The material was read step by step using the open coding technique of Strauss and Corbin (1996). Relevant passages of text were identified and subsequently, in the axial coding phase, categories were refined and interrelated. In a following step the results were compared and an explanation was sought for the results. For this purpose and after the process of open and axial coding, the theory of structuration was integrated into the process of interpretation. The choice of theory was made largely because the data showed some evidence of the predominance of power asymmetries. This seemed to influence the legitimation of certain behaviour.

Following those steps it was concluded that power may be a hidden, influential dimension in the process of culture learning.

The process of interpretation of the interviews followed the paradigms of quality criteria of qualitative research (Mayring 2002): It was rules driven; the operation was documented and a consensus was produced including a validation consensus with Mexican co-interpreters as well as Germans. An argumentative validation was conducted during which the results were presented in different scientific settings including colloquiums and conferences.

3. Results(12)

As I have explained in part 1.2 of this article, an expatriate is confronted with a social system which has different characteristics of social structures and interaction modes than the social system of the home country. In becoming aware of these differences culture shock may occur and, in the best case, culture learning should take place, but on the other hand resistance and separation also is possible. In order to interact effectively, culture learning and adjustment is necessary (Palthe 2004). Business expatriates spend most of their time overseas in the work context. One German interviewee explained:

Especially if you come here as an expat, then you normally have a leading position and then you have eight-hour-days, @from eight to eight@. (bc1)

Therefore, for many expatriates the working context is the main place of interaction with HCNs and thus the main opportunity for acculturation and culture learning. For this reason the main focus in the following will be on the working context. The work context follows the special rules of a particular organization culture and the background of the individuals working together, which are nevertheless related to the culture(s) of the organization location.

In this case study, main points of intercultural friction may be influenced by the following factors: different interaction and communication modes, different working conditions and assumptions, including different interpretations of hierarchy. Additionally, an underestimation of cultural differences can be observed in many German interviewees who indicate a lack of knowledge of the host culture which seems to result in an underestimation of the need to adapt. This is an indication that those persons did not undergo effective culture learning.

3.1 Power appears to shape the host national-expatriate - interaction

Nearly all expatriates described a harmonic working atmosphere, especially regarding the relations with their subordinates(13). At the same time some people claimed to have had problems with Mexican managers. One German interviewee from the automotive supplier organization expressed:

On the bottom level, everything is accepted very well, most of the recommendations, hints etc., but on the "level above" with the Mexicans, the management level directly, there they don't listen to you very well. (...) Well, a typical Mexican says "yes" to his chief. A German sometimes has his own ideas and some don't like it if you discuss these ideas with them.(bc5)

Problems with superiors are expressed mainly by persons who show ethnocentric attitudes and tend to maintain interaction routines (Giddens) which are more typical for the home culture than for the host culture, which is mainly the case in the automotive supplier organization. Such problems seem to have their origins in different understandings of hierarchy and may be ascribed to a power struggle. The German expatriates seem to be used to more equal hierarchical structures than their Mexican colleagues. This seems to provoke their superiors. They have not been used to be criticised by subordinates. The perceived harmonic working atmosphere regarding the Mexican subordinates may be a result of the higher tendency to subordinate, which means that the contradiction and criticism of superiors is avoided or achieved indirectly through communication and interaction. These results have been also confirmed by the quantitative data(14) (see table 1), as well as by the qualitative data. 35,2% of Mexican respondents are afraid to advance their view and only 6,8% don't worry about the hierarchical position of the

interlocutor when expressing their opinion openly. A distance between the superior and his subordinates seems to be viewed as normal (42,8%). Nearly half of the respondents experienced tension when doing their job.

Table 1: *attitudes towards authorities*

leadership	I (fully) agree %
The boss should maintain a distance to his/her subordinates.	42,8
I am afraid to express my opinion to my boss.	35,2
I often feel tension and am nervous when doing my job.	44,7
If I know that I am right I advance a view independently of the hierarchical position of the interlocutor.	6,8

Certifying Hofstede's (1980) findings with IBM workers years ago, a Mexican interviewee tells about her fellow countrymen in what may be interpreted as an indication of a high degree of power distance(15) and also underlines the above mentioned:

She has to respect the hierarchy. She has to show that she respects him [the chief]. Why should she show this? In order to avoid disputes with the chief. (C11)

Thus, according to this interviewee, usually only people filling a higher hierarchical position are allowed to criticise inadequate behaviour. Another Mexican explains regarding Mexican supervisors:

he is someone who is, in a certain way, not equal to us. (...) He is, I feel (...) they think that this person is almost a god. (C12)

Criticism is allowed only between equals.

If you speak about that [criticism] with a co-worker it's ok, but if you tell it to your chief he feels that you are criticising him personally. (C11)

Since the work context seems to be the main place of interaction with HCNs it is also an important source for culture learning. Because of the fact that most of the expatriates fill key positions, one source of culture learning is biased: contact with an important group of host country nationals, who are in general important for demonstrating appropriate behaviour (Black & Gregerson 1991; Bochner 1981, Gertsen 1990): the subordinates. Filling a high position in the organization means having a higher chance of mobilizing authoritative but also allocative resources and thus of wielding power. A certain potential for threat is linked to the position and thus seems to influence communication and sanction. Communication and interaction seems therefore to be even less direct than usual. One German expatriate – filling a high position - states the following about two Mexican secretaries working together with him:

Here in the building sit two people who are doing everything in their power to make me lose my job, however every time I see them on the floor they nearly hug me. (cl6)

The subordinates do not like the expatriate, but they try to hide their dislike. Inappropriate behaviour seems to be tolerated by those who have a position lower than that of the German. Dislike is not expressed openly; the expatriate only knows that he is disliked through other informants or through subliminal behaviour, which is for the expatriate normally not so easy to distinguish(16). Subordinates are also described as tolerant in situations where expatriates revert to the cultural interaction routines of their homeland. An expatriate member of the executive board of an automotive supplier organization stated:

In my experience they [the subordinates] also know where we come from. It is much easier for us here than for a foreigner in Germany. (bc2)

In the following discourse the interviewee explained what is meant by that: Even if you reproduce interaction routines that are usual in the home cultural context, but interpreted as deviant behaviour in the host cultural context, this is apparently tolerated by the subordinates. In the opinion of the expatriate, Germans show less tolerance to foreigners and try to teach them to be more like Germans. Germans seem to enforce more assimilation than the Mexican subordinates. This tolerance seems to be linked to the hierarchical position of the interviewee. Interestingly a student apprentice - filling a lower status position- expressed exactly the opposite while working in the same organization:

I had the impression – and that's my opinion - that they [the Mexicans] aren't very tolerant if you are different to them. (bc3)

Similar examples have also been given by interviewees of other organizations.

This way of subordination was described by some interviewees as "Janus-faced". This was especially asserted regarding contact with subordinates who were regarded as deceitful. Nearly all interviewees stated this phenomenon. Superiors were perceived to be more honest, but at the same time less friendly because they seem to sanction unusual behavior.

In summary, power linked to the hierarchical position of expatriates seems to shape the interaction between the German expatriates and the Mexican subordinates. Since the contradiction and criticism of superiors appear to be less usual in the Mexican work context, a tolerance of inappropriate behaviour has been described by many German interviewees in higher positions. Following the idea of the social learning theory that depends on the feedback of peers, this may have the consequence that culture learning and thus adjustment are more difficult to realise.

3.2 Intensifying factors

How far power may influence the interaction between the expatriate and host national seems to depend on the context (see Figure 3). The social system (green) in general, as well as the work context (violet) seem to shape the situation in this case.

An underlying condition seems to be the origin of the interacting agents. The German expatriates, being part of the parent organization, displayed a special status: Firstly they were German, which means for many Mexican colleagues that they come from a "more developed" country. Secondly most Germans came from the parent company or a privileged subsidiary (as it is the case of the automotive company where the R&D department is located in Germany). The positions filled by the expatriates were key positions, embodying a certain threat potential for the colleagues and subordinates and influencing the structure of signification.. Coming from a more developed country may be connected with stereotypes such as: "Surely they know everything better" but also may generate feelings of being competent. On the other hand a certain degree of mistrust was observable. Proactive behaviour may be biased, which is an important source of innovation. One Mexican interviewee states the following which demonstrates an oscillation between admiration and dislike:

On one hand you admire it, when you work together with Germans: the orderliness, the discipline; they are very oriented to "Leistung" (performance), aren't they? (...) They have very well designed working guides, don't they? But on the other hand you dislike it, they exaggerate the most insignificant details. (cl1)

The structures of meaning which are linked to the origins of the actors seem to influence the interaction and the conditions of interaction (structure). Since the dimensions of social systems, according to Giddens (1984), are interrelated, the conditions for domination are linked to signification. Being a German and part of the parent organization, a certain position in the organization is ascribed and the facility to mobilize allocative and authoritative resources is determined in a certain way. How much domination may take place or how much power may be wielded seems to depend on the one hand on how the society handles authority and how strictly hierarchical differences are tolerated, which could mean how the power distance index of Hofstede (1991) is developed, but also on the personal will of the expatriate to wield power, which is related to his personality on the one hand but also to the specific norms in his culture on the other. One expatriate points out:

I think that in Mexico people tend to obey the boss more, but in Germany they work more freely and independently. (bb2)

Thus German expatriates who in this case study were normally used to a more egalitarian treatment in the work context (lower PDI) often did not even want to mark the differences between hierarchies and tried to implement a participative leadership style. According to their statements, many problems occurred which were often classified through stereotypes such as "the Mexicans are not reliable", "Mexicans cannot work independently" etc. but were in the end a reflection of the inappropriate leadership style. With an adequate change management, the unusual leadership style could finally be introduced successfully in one organization.

In addition, to wield power also means to know how to mobilize resources in the foreign culture and to apply them in the right way. Many German interviewees commented about the importance of status symbols and the right clothing in Mexico, as well as about the special rules that are linked to corruption etc.

There is a lot of corruption. Corruption is in a certain way – how should I express it? - a way of living together, something that stabilizes the social life to some extent, it makes life predictable. We [the Germans] are not very good at that because we never learnt how to negotiate in situations of corruption. If you speak here with people who

study law – I have 3 or 4 students who study law, they told me that they learn in the 7th or 8th semester of their studies, among other things, how to bribe. (C1 7)

This knowledge is only achieved if cultural learning has taken place successfully. If the agents are not aware of the right usage of resources, unintended consequences of interaction (Giddens) may be the result. Without being aware e.g. hierarchies are highlighted, because a direct communication style or wearing certain cloths display superiority for the host country nationals, even if the agent perhaps don't want to express status differences.

Signification and Domination are also interrelated with Legitimation. Related to the special position of German expatriates, aberration is more or less tolerated by the colleagues and subordinates. This seems on one hand to be connected with the general norms in a society regarding how much a foreigner is expected to assimilate (Berry 1997, 297; see also citation of bc2 above), but as we have seen in the examples above it also seems to vary in the working context depending on the expatriate's power or the hierarchical position he fills. This is also linked to the strategy of internalization in the parent organization. According to Perlmutter (1969), we can differentiate between four strategies of internationalisation: the ethnocentric, polycentric, regiocentric and geocentric strategies(17). An ethnocentric strategy, where all high positions in the foreign location are filled by persons from the mother organization and the foreign organization has to follow the guidelines of the parent organization, dictates that expatriates will have a different status to those in a organization with a polycentric strategy of internationalization, where the foreign locations act nearly autonomously(18), implementing their own management structures(19). Following the geocentric strategy, the filling of key positions occurs independently of the aspirant's nationality and synergies are aspired to. The regiocentric conception attempts to adapt the management structures and personell decisions to regional costumes and necessities. In the first case the potential for threat may be much higher because the expatriates probably have more power and control. However, also differences in the expatriates role may enforce the power they display.

On the societal level the potential for threat is linked to the working laws, for example. Living in a "hire-and-fire society", a boss has more threat potential than in a society where the labour protection laws are very strict. Since in Mexico the dismissal laws are very lax, the threat potential of a superior is much higher than in Germany, and thus it is understandable that an inharmonic relationship is avoided by the subordinates. They depend more on the arbitrariness of the chief. A Mexican interviewee states how stability in the workplace is normally established:

It's also largely what we call in Mexico the "healthy game". That means: "I don't get involved with you, I don't evaluate you, I don't attack you – something like that- and you won't do that to me. In this way I maintain my security and you maintain yours. (C12)

On the level of interaction between the expatriates and the Mexicans three dimensions seem to be interrelated: communication, power and sanction. In the work context, power seems to have an essential influence. Being in a powerful position and therefore having the potential for threat is linked to the social structure of a society and the hierarchical constitution of the organization culture and therefore the interaction to subordinates appears to be biased. The bigger the threat potential the less open the communication and sanctions. If criticism takes place, it is normally very indirect. In many cases the expatriates didn't even realise they were being sanctioned. This is due to the form of communication used in the workplace between those of different status, which seems to be another intensifying variable of culture learning.

Figure 3: *Influencing factors on the specific situation of intercultural collaboration and learning*

they appear not to dare to contradict and criticise their superiors, communication is less direct and the sanction of inappropriate behaviour seems to be reduced. This means the limitation of an important source of culture learning. Inadequate behaviour patterns might be reproduced by the expatriates and lead to problems. The working context for many expatriates seems to be the main place of interaction with HCNs. Consequently, adaptation might be biased by power. This is consistent with the findings of Isolatus (2004; 2002) in the case of Finnish expatriates in Mexico who also confirms a relationship between power and adjustment.

The effect of power seems to be intensified by the organization culture and the societal context. On one hand a strict marcation of hierarchies appears to be usual in the Mexican society. This is linked to lax laws of dismissal protection which intensify the superiors' threat potential. Additionally, the organization culture seems to be important: where a more egalitarian understanding of leadership was established, interviewees seemed to be less ethnocentric and described an open communication atmosphere which seemed to favour culture learning.

Communication styles vary between the Germans and the Mexicans. While the Mexicans tend towards a high context communication, the Germans tend towards a low context communication which often seems to be a source of conflict and misunderstanding. Since it is difficult for those who are used to low context communication to decipher the messages of a high context of communication, the communication style seems to intensify a lack of culture learning. Hierarchical differences seem to favour indirect critical expressions and behaviours. Additionally, it seemed that often it wasn't deciphered by the Germans, when inappropriate behaviour was sanctioned.

These results were gained through semi-structured interviews. The advantages of this approach include the possibility of clarifying the expatriate's perceptions of the overseas assignment in depth and also the possibility of contextualizing them. Also, host country nationals have been included into the sample, which was useful in that their perceptions could be contrasted with those of the German expatriates, which differed widely. The extended framework of analysis of Giddens has been very useful for analysing this context since it takes into account the perception and significative schemes of the probands which are often neglected. The interrelation between the dimensions have been especially important. This model unifies dimensions which are normally neglected or only investigated separately.

At the same time there are some limitations. The small sample of interviewees and the individual approach does not allow for a generalisation of results; additionally, this study is limited to Mexico. Only a few HCNs could be convinced to participate in the study as interviewees. It is also not possible to make some stimulus-response conclusions. It is worth noting that the expatriates who worked in a more egalitarian organization culture seemed to display a higher overseas effectiveness than those working in organizations with a strict marcation of hierarchical differences, but positive proof is still lacking and could be the content of further investigations. Additionally, the study focuses only on one point of time. Differences between those who stayed longer in Mexico to those who were new could not be observed. Nevertheless, a long term study should be applied in order to measure the relationship between power and culture learning over time. Here the context variables should be selected carefully: different organization cultures, levels of intercultural competence and hierarchical positions as well as organizations' strategies of internationalization should be considered.

The practical implications of this study are as follows: there was some data evidence which suggested that the negative effect of power on the possibilities of culture learning seemed to be counteracted by an adequate organization policy with an open trust-building atmosphere. In this study most of the interviewees had a more egalitarian understanding of a superior-subordinate relationship than is usual in Mexico. It was observable that the expatriates underestimated the power they had and displayed, which had unintended consequences. Only by establishing new organization norms could a trustful and egalitarian organization culture be created. Thus the study supports the proposal of Thomas & Stumpf (2003), Bolten (2002b) and Barmeyer (2000) that a synergy of elements of both cultural backgrounds is necessary. This has the implication that during intercultural trainings future expatriates should be sensibilized to the possible potential for threat that they may display. This is especially the case if the understanding of hierarchical implications differs between the home and host culture. Additionally, these different understandings of hierarchy and possible consequences, such as the taboo of criticising a superior, should be addressed in trainings. Innovation may be hindered if the subordinates do not express their ideas or criticise the false suppositions of the superiors. Another implication is that it is difficult to install a participative leadership style from one day to another because of the above mentioned customs.

This study supports the contact theory (Hanvey 1979) and also points out the importance of interaction with host country nationals. It supports the idea that interaction outside of the work place seems to be especially important (Selmer 2001) because the distribution of power is different. A trustful relationship with locals may serve as a source of information. Furthermore, the open criticism of inadequate behaviour seems to be necessary. This also supports newer concepts of international personnel development which suggest that a local coach would be of high importance (Mendenhall & Stahl 2000; Bochner 1981) because the "natural" atmosphere of cultural learning seems to be biased by power.

Explanation of signs

@.@ = laughing

(cl 2) = abbreviation of the organization and interviewee number in this organization

bold = accentuation

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Notes

1 The number of foreign assignments continues to grow (Price Waterhouse Coopers 2001).

2 Failure of foreign assignments are mostly measured by early returns. The quotes vary largely. While Brewster (1988) states a averaged quote of 5% early returns in British, German, French, Swedish and Dutch firms, Horsch (1995) states a quote of 13% for German multinational companies (see Lindner 1999). According to Black and Gregerson (1991) the rates for U.S. firms are between 16% - 40 %.

3 as for example the usage of the scale, developed by Black (1988)

4 Human interaction is, according to Blumer (1986), based on subjective meanings, which exist within and are the result of social interaction. HCNs may revert to their own perceptions which are based on different

experiences and norms of a specific cultural context. This could result in the fact that even if the expatriate's action has a particular intention, this intention may be misinterpreted because of particular structures of meaning which may be based on certain stereotypical views of the expatriate (see Maletzky 2006).

5 The duality of structure means according to Giddens that structures only exist in the moment of interaction. Structure and agency cannot be grasped separated of each other.

6 According to Edward Hall (1990), high and low context cultures exist. High context cultures tend to give indirect information which is only understandable if the context is known, while low context cultures express all the necessary information in the verbal message.

7 Most approaches about expatriate adjustment often refer to adjustment as a unidirectional process of changes in expatriates' behaviour patterns according to the rules of the foreign environment (Zimmermann & Sparrow 2007). According to newer approaches it may be understood as a process of mutual adjustment (Zimmermann & Sparrow 2007). The course of adjustment thus may vary.

8 Cultural distance is seen here as the perception of cultural differences. Different to the construct of Kogut and Sing (1988) or Evans and Mavondo (2002), who developed a single index based on the dimensions of Hofstede, this data demonstrates that cultural distance was perceived differently by host country nationals and German expatriates. Host country nationals perceived big cultural differences, while the Germans perceived the Mexican culture as very similar to the German one (see Maletzky 2006). That shows that a single index, such as that mentioned above, is not sufficiently convincing.

9 Giddens' concept of power has the advantage of combining both the structural and interactional levels and isn't seen as an isolated phenomenon, but is interrelated with other dimensions of social structures. Furthermore, it is more complex than other concepts which mainly focus on the interactional level or only take into account the structural level, as for example in the work of Luhmann (1984).

10 Nevertheless, these three dimensions have to be understood as strongly interrelated with the structural level of societies. Figure 2 does not display these dimensions for reasons of clarity.

11 The high rate of return may be explained by the fact that I have distributed and collected a big number of questionnaires personally.

12 Abridgements of the interviews have been translated by me personally.

13 Also Gangotena (1994) and Marín&Marín (1991) certify the high importance of a harmonic atmosphere between mexicans.

14 It has to be mentioned that the quantitative data displays tendencies of work attitudes in Mexico in general, it was not collected in the same organizations where the interviews were conducted. The management of those organizations denied the participation.

15 The power distance index of the Mexican sample of Hofstedes investigation (1980), that was applicated by IBM workers has been 81 of 100. Since the results are already old and there are some limitations because of the sample group and operationalisation of the variables, the index should not be overestimated but is suitable to give a first orientation.

16 Here can be observed what Giddens calls the dialectic of control: The subordinating persons are never powerless, they always have a latitude

17 For a detailed explanation see also Weber&Festing 1999, for a brief overview see: Festing & Dowling 2005

18 See Kinast / Schroll- Machl (2002)

19 However, also the opposite might be the case: local employees might be demotivated because higher positions are filled by persons of the country of the companies' headquarter (Dowling et al., 2008) and power struggle or high degree of fluctuation might be the result.

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