**Can cross-cultural sensitivity be learned?**

*More and more often these days, we meet, even in our own neighborhoods, people from foreign cultures with other cultural and religious viewpoints regarding both work and non-work situations. In order to improve our mutual interactions, it makes good sense to become aware of other peoples' cultures — whether you're abroad on a vacation or on a business trip — or if you meet people from other countries in your own home town. Culturally-sensitive behavior means simply being sensitive to other cultural norms in all your relationships with other human beings.*

**Interview with a specialist**

We were able to interview Dr. Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi on this subject. She is the founder and managing director of the "interkultur" Institute in Bremen and has been active for more than thirty-five years as a coach and trainer on the subject of methods of improving intercultural relations. Her work has taken her around the world, and she now feels at home in the Arab/Islamic world as well as in India, Vietnam, Australia, and the United States. In addition she has published books and papers on issues such as diversity management, intercultural competence, and country-&-culture-specific business know-how.

Learn more at [www.interkultur.info](http://www.interkultur.info).

**Can cross-cultural sensitivity be learned?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: Good manners can be learned, but not by the mere rote memorization of lists of *dos and don'ts*. We have to learn to respond emotionally both to our own cultural conditioning and also to that of other people. Such a learning experience must be *felt*. If we wish to be sensitive to other cultures, we will be able to learn about them — and in the process we would do well to remember Goethe's statement that “Our wishes are the precursors of the skills that are within us.”

**We Germans often say that "in other countries there are other   
customs." In your view is this just a harmless proverb or is there perhaps something potentially harmful about it?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: It can be both. From one point of view it's harmless — and from another it's dangerous. Cultural responses in other countries are not necessarily different in any given situation from the responses here in Germany. And even here in Germany aren't there enormous differences in the values and the resulting cultural attitudes between the East and the West and Protestant and Roman Catholic regions?

I have heard that in Bavaria and Hesse there is an enormous variety of types of sausages. The Bavarians like bread baked with caraway seeds — something little known in the north of Germany. In the Rhineland, where Polish workers have lived with their families for several generations, there are actually Rhineland dishes with Polish influences. The Huguenot settlers in Germany brought with them their own French recipes. And everywhere on the borders of Germany the recipes from this place and that place are used and blended together in creative ways.

What I would like to emphasize is that for centuries we have had here in Germany such a range of cultural diversity that we are so accustomed to that most of us aren't even aware of it. We have a number of different regions with their own unique landscapes — and groups of ethnic peoples with their unique languages, holidays, foods, and rituals. We Germans are actually a diverse group of people.

We should certainly have learned by this time to deal with cultural diversity. So why has this so often been a problem here with us? As a result of the two world wars we have had to deal with long-lasting and traumatic situations that have resulted in a variety of problematic consequences — consequences which have left their mark on us. The following is a good example: As a member of the European Union we are the nation that has the most laws and regulations — as well as the greatest number of insurance policies. This says something about our great need for security. And whenever we meet our business associates in the other European counties, it is usually we Germans who prepare and structure the meetings in such a way that there is no chance that any detail of interest to us will be out of our hands. That is a characteristic cultural behavior.

Culturally influenced behavior is evident not only in terms of the nationality and ethnic group to which one belongs, but also with reference to the fact that one is either a woman or a man, old or young, a member of one generation or one social class or another. Also relevant are one's profession, one's social status, and so on. Now that I am well over sixty years old and think about the decades I may have yet to live, I see the world very differently from the way I saw it as a twenty year-old when I traveled to work in Vietnam — or from the way I saw it when as a forty year-old I pursued my profession with an almost insane enthusiasm. That is all different at this time in my life.

We Germans often say, as noted above, that "in other countries there are other customs" — and we infer when we say this that German culture is a unity. But one could also say that each ethnic group, such as those in Swabia, Bavaria, Hesse, et cetera, has other customs — or that each of the sexes has its own customs — or each generation or religious group has its own customs — and so on. And behind every expression of "otherness" there can be potential dangers. .

I often think that Goethe was correct when he wrote that "those who are alike get along with one another . . ." When I am in India, for example, I can communicate easily with women of my own age in spite of our different nationalities and ethnicities. And I'm often able to communicate with Muslim men more easily than with German men. Perhaps the second half of Goethe's statement is relevant in these instances — "that opposites attract."

In any event we should always realize that even in Germany not all persons are culturally identical. We are all unique individuals and only in many different characteristics resemble our own German neighbors.

**We live in the middle of Europe and at first glance the other   
European countries don't seem very different from the German-speaking areas. Is this a false impression? Even though there   
are certain cultural similarities, which differences are worth a   
closer examination?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: The answer to that depends on a lot of things — even if we consider the great diversity of languages which are always associated with individual cultures. There are more than two hundred languages spoken in Europe — languages which stem from very different language families. In the European Union alone are there twenty-three official languages and more than one hundred minority group languages. Yet in the course of product exchange we see the same products and English expressions appearing everywhere in Europe. On closer inspection, however, it's a mistake to conclude that there are few differences. Why for instance do German and French Airbus employees have so many problems working together? Or why was the Daimler/Chrysler association so beset with problems? That isn't just a problem regarding their different abilities to communicate in English; it's a problem regarding the overall cultural conditioning that the various individuals and organizations bring with them to the workplace. They simply have different ideas regarding the operational sequences, the chain of command, or the leadership. Or perhaps different ideas regarding meetings and discussions about the work to be done.

When Germany alone offers so many different cultures, we can see that Europe as a whole is so big that it presents a very large and multicolored puzzle in which there are many very different shapes and colors. Consider for a moment the following question which I often ask European college students: "What is considered polite behavior in your country?" This question elicits radically different responses. While the middle class in eastern European countries consider it invariably appropriate for men to open doors for women and to assist them in taking off or putting on their coats, this behavior in western Europe has become a thing of the past. At least that's the observation of eastern European college students who consider our behavior as impolite. On the other hand northern European students consider these behaviors among men and women to be out of date. In the last three decades the Scandinavians have strived for equality so that all men and women have equal rights. The cultural result of this idea is that every man and woman can and should be gainfully employed. While in diverse regions of south Europe one may still see that at least the majority of young people will offer their seats on busses and streetcars to older people or pregnant women, this behavior has become very infrequent here in Germany.

Many eastern European students (and also people from Asia, from Arabic countries, Africa, and Latin America) consider German behavior between men and women or between older and younger people as impolite. A young Polish woman asked me if that sort of behavior is supposed to be modern. The majority of people in the world don't wish to learn this sort of behavior from us**.**

**More and more frequently we hear that the world is becoming   
a "global village." Yet in spite of the alleged successes in   
globalization there are always mistakes with significant   
consequences that lead both to misunderstandings and failures. For which mistakes might we be held responsible and how can   
they be avoided? And when, to refer to a German proverb, can the problem be best solved "after the child has fallen into the well"?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: First of all I often try to think about the world "from outside" and to examine things in light of the professional assessments of experts, both men and women, on comparative cultures. In this way it's apparent that one can recognize European cultural attitudes almost everywhere.

Consider the many European colonial powers which took over areas on every continent. The Spanish, the Portuguese, the British, the French, and the Germans always tried to impose their own cultures, their own norms and values, the ones important to them, upon their new territories and the peoples living there. In many regions this resulted in great suffering and destroyed the traditional cultures. Yet the evidences of colonization present even to this day are often the very features which attract us to various countries. One may experience the charm of French architecture in Hanoi or in Puducherry, in Southern India. Or we may experience magnificent British buildings or monuments everywhere in India and think of them as Indian. Or consider what the Spanish left in Latin America — their language and the fortifications which demonstrated their dominance. In Windhoek, Namibia one may still buy German baked goods and sausages. And African converts to Christianity attend the churches.

Next I would like to talk about the so-called "global village." Again and again I hear from the young employees of both sexes in German firms that the cultures in all countries will eventually be the same. Recently an engineer on his way to Arabia said that "Everywhere in the world people know what proper behavior is." Of course he was referring to his own understanding of "proper behavior" and thought that if he behaved "properly,” he would be certain to do the right thing. But things are not that simple, because "proper behavior" can mean different things in different places. This type of Europeanization, which reaches everywhere in the world, is promoted by those who give little thought about other cultures and living conditions — by those who consider that our way is the right way. I often hear people saying this. Long dominant and widespread is Americanization — American culture with conspicuous European roots. And now comes in its wake the aggressive influence of the Chinese. This appears at this time to be truly alien. It begins to envelop the global village and to us it appears to be ruthless for its own interests. But others have done this before.

This type of "one-size-fits-all" thinking is characteristic of a certain type of ethical system in which certain individuals give little thought to what is actually quite different in other cultural contexts. Many persons are not only culturally ignorant but also insensitive. We can see this, for instance, whenever the American military begins a war based on a questionable motivation. We can see it too when businesses put "the Chinese" on their risk list because they're afraid that technical know-how will be pirated. Or whenever "Arabs" from any country whatsoever are mistrusted as if they were the blood brothers of Osama bin Laden. Our ignorance leads to anxieties, and these are often the bases for our overall assessments and prejudices.

What I describe as the superficial assessments of other cultures have become general. People now fly quickly from A to B, spend two nights in a hotel belonging to some European or American hotel chain, and then feel justified in saying "I know India!" And another person says he knows Arabia, and so on. It's interesting how much we all know about the world! Naturally there are those who really know a lot, but this does not include all the tourists who have visited any given city or country.

I know a lot of business people who take a taxi from the airport to their hotel, are picked up there by a business partner, return to their hotel for a meal, and then return to the airport. That's all they know. Many are even shy or uncertain about walking back and forth on the street in front of the hotel — let alone about taking in the most important sights in the community. Who can be surprised then when no culturally-sensitive observations are made in conversations regarding Abu Dhabi, Bengaluru, Tokyo, or Shanghai? How can an individual be a suitable business partner in one of these cities when he or she knows so very little about it?

For this reason intercultural seminars and coaching sessions are so important — classes in which the participants not only make a preparatory trip to a particular cultural area — but also in which they can review and analyze the experiences they have had on their trip. Executives and other employees often remark that they have difficult experiences while abroad. Sometimes they have experienced what they believe to be serious social blunders on the part of the foreigners they have dealt with. Someone recently asked me why the Vietnamese don't respond to brief and clearly phrased questions when asked both in conversation and in writing what we expect of them. My reply was that it was perhaps the very brevity and clarity of the message — that the expectations were too clearly expressed.

When one acknowledges, for instance, that the communication has been stalled and inhibited, it makes sense to confer face-to-face and in a trusting manner. One might begin, for instance, by stating "I have come to you because I would like to know how, when working together, we might approach the work we have to accomplish and the means by which we will undertake to achieve it. How can we do these things?" This would be a good way to begin. Such an approach might entail an extra trip, but is more likely to result in a successful outcome. Often the end result might be a statement such as "He's my German friend!"

**You've traveled in many countries and have experienced many   
very different cultures. What are your recurring impressions regarding the similarities and differences between those cultures   
and our own?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minhawi: Regarding the similarities, one finds everywhere in the world the need to meet certain basic needs. These include adequate nutrition, water, and shelter — as well as education, training, and good jobs. Whether one has the freedom to practice one's own religion, the freedom to express one's views, or to be treated as the equal of other citizens — all these things differ from culture to culture. Many minorities in other countries, the Christians in Turkey for example, complain that they aren't able to practice their religions. Other persons, such as those who in China criticize the government, are imprisoned for expressing their views. And as far as treating all persons as equals, it's still the case almost everywhere that most household and professional work of women is neither adequately appreciated nor equally remunerated. This is also a feature of cultural behavior. In many otherwise democratic nations professional women receive lower salaries than their male counterparts. In the United Arab Emirates one does receive equal pay for equal work — but here in Germany that is not the case in spite of the law which is supposed to guarantee it.

Furthermore it occurs to me that there's a certain "international behavior" that one sees in middle and upper classes. This is especially evident in business people who have the money and the opportunity to travel abroad. In doing so they have the chance to experience something other than their own home culture — the chance to rise above provincial limitations to a more enlightened point of view. Yet while underway they use the "miles" earned on previous flights, dress in similar clothing, amuse themselves on laptops, turn on cell phones when they land, pay with credit cards, stay in European-style hotels, eat only European-type foods, and so on.

I sometimes do that too because it's so easy to travel that way. Yet when I choose to see beyond this and to experience the country I'm actually visiting, I'm immediately aware of many differences — in language, communication styles, buildings, vegetation, climate, even fragrances. Then I observe that in Asiatic and Muslim nations the natives often act very differently than we do. When Asians part, they're more likely than we are to cry — and when they meet they're more likely than we are to show joy. Sometimes if I'm on my second or third professional visit to a Muslim country, I'll be embraced by some of the women, but of course not by any of the men.

It's clear to me that there's a great deal of mutual respect between the men and women I meet there, because both men and women there are more deeply inculcated than is the case with us in the different behaviors expected of the different sexes. And as a result they are more certain regarding the means of achieving their goals.

In doing business with persons in different cultures, it makes good sense to take more time in composing our emails than we might take if we were writing a brief note to someone in northern Europe or North America. This is especially true when one is writing to Asians, Muslims, and Africans. One has to discuss not only the particular matter about which one is concerned, but first of all to ask how things are with the other person — or to ask about some particular matter of concern to that person. And at the end of each email it's necessary to express one's good wishes. In most countries business meetings are not thought of as merely a way to kill time. People meet in order to get to know one another — in order to meet as true partners and colleagues. In order to accomplish this, one needs to take time — to give time to our partners and colleagues. The time given for such meetings at the start will pay off later in more effective communication.

Business cards should be printed in German on one side and English on the other — or Arabic and English, or Chinese and English, and so on. Whoever is able to speak the native language of the business partner shows in so doing an interest in the other's culture. Note also that the business card shouldn't just state that one is a "Manager" as this term is virtually meaningless and says little about one's actual position and functions. Most Asian, Arabic, and African cultures are organized as strict hierarchies, so it's important when meeting with these persons to give a clear description of one's business functions — both stated face-to-face and as it appears printed on one's business card.

**You have often said that you actually feel different in Australia than you do while traveling in India or the Islamic world. What accounts for that? Do you use other types of manners in other places?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: Yes, I often think that, for instance when I give a two-day seminar on India and follow that with one on the Islamic world. That almost leads to culture shock, because I need time to sort out my deep feelings about India from my feelings about the other culture. My work is about human feelings and is enriched in each case with data about both a given country and a deep sense of its culture.

**When traveling in Asia what special things should one observe   
regarding local customs?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: Table manners are instances of local customs. In many Asian nations such as China it's considered good manners to smack one's lips when a dish tastes good. One traveler recently remarked that "They simply put all their chicken bones down on the table."

What impresses me most in Asia is the strong work ethic. When I lived in Vietnam during the sixties, I was impressed by the work ethic of the women. Everything appeared to go smoothly and in no time at all they had rebuilt all the bombed-out huts. In India many young software engineers have an unbelievable daily work load. Ten hours a day are not unusual. Many of these employees even sleep in their offices next to devices on stand-by mode so that early in the morning they'll be able to serve European offices in the middle of their day.

Another cultural characteristic is that most Asians are very devout and belong to one or another of the very different religious and spiritual traditions. In many countries there's also the belief in the power of one's ancestors — that is to say that the dead will be remembered every day and prayed to fervently in order to achieve special wishes — such as choosing the right partner, having children, or knowing what day to hold a big festivity, or what day to conclude a business deal.

**What should European women bear in mind when visiting the   
Islamic world — especially when conducting business there?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: We shouldn't be surprised to learn that many women are professionally active in the Islamic world. This is considered quite normal, and in terms of percentages, with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia, there are more professionally active women in leadership positions in most Islamic countries than in Germany.

Many Germans hold a mental image of the patronized and enslaved Islamic woman. There is such a thing, but not more frequently than here in Germany.

Many German travelers are uncomfortable with the differences in gender roles in Islam. At this time there are certainly young urban Arabic and Asian women entering and succeeding in the traditionally male-dominated professions such as politics, science, and business. Engineering, for example, is not a male-dominated profession in these countries. The fact that there are an ever greater number of Arabic and Asian business women opens new opportunities for European business women.

Although German women often don't appear to conform to the traditional Arabic/Muslim image of a woman, they are regarded as professional equals and competent negotiators. That said, it's essential that they dress conservatively.

Young German business women will achieve their goals more readily with a gentle and cautious communication style than with a pushy, know-it-all attitude.

When German women travel in Saudi Arabia they should always have a headscarf and a long, dark, and roomy overcoat. Many Saudi business associates actually provide such overcoats for visiting German business women. Some German women, particularly older ones, may be able to remove their headscarves in many offices.

Those women who travel in rural regions of the Islamic world should always have a headscarf with them. You never know where you'll end up! — besides, it provides good protection from the sun.

And, if couples travel in Muslim areas, they should avoid physical contact in public.

**The choice of appropriate clothing is always an interesting topic. What clothes would you recommend when traveling abroad —   
both for sightseeing as well as for business meetings?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: What can be considered appropriate clothing? It's certainly something entirely different in South America than it is in the Islamic world. While traveling as a tourist in South America I could wear a blouse if I want to, but in Asiatic countries, and certainly in Muslim areas, this would not be acceptable. In these areas women visitors should always be fully covered, though women don't have to wear headscarves in Muslim countries unless they're in Saudi Arabia. And men in short pants and women in hot pants are never appropriately dressed unless they're at the seashore.

It's really strange that there's any question about this. If we're preparing to visit another country and wish to express our respect and sensitivity for the culture, there are many sources from which we might learn before we leave about the clothing appropriate for both men and women. When we're in foreign countries we're guests of the people and we have to conform to their local customs.

**In your opinion are there common values that are held by people everywhere in the world?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: I have serious reservations about the commonly expressed idea that there's such a thing as cultural values that are the same everywhere in the world. Let's consider again what are thought to be good manners and modesty. What is considered modest or polite behavior can be different in different places."

I prefer to think that a common cultural value would be a genuine interest about the customs of other people and a curiosity regarding the cultures of the other countries — or equitable and ethical treatment of one another so that everywhere in the world we strive for the survival of many cultures and for our one shared world environment.

**If you were to develop a failure-proof strategy for foreign travel   
and for conducting business between countries, what would be   
the essential features of such a strategy?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: Do you know the story of the three wise monkeys? I would advise people while traveling to keep their eyes and ears open and to keep their mouths closed for the time being. We should make an effort to observe very carefully and to listen very intently in order to discover what other people are discussing. And we should ask more questions in order to present ourselves as willing to learn from the knowledge of other people in the other country.

**How should one prepare oneself personally for any journey — whether for pleasure or for business? What are your recommen-  
dations?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: It's always interesting to know how we appear to other people. When we go out into the wider world, especially when making business trips abroad, it's important to be able to consider what other people may think about us. For this reason we have to think about how we might appear to other persons — and how we would like to appear to them. That's one way to cross to the other side of the "intercultural bridge." Having crossed to that place, then, it's important for us to understand the background of the other people — to know about their personal histories and about their political, social, ecological, and economic circumstances. That is their culture, and we have to learn to understand it.

**What advice would you give readers regarding appropriate   
behavior while traveling abroad?**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi: 1. Develop your own traveling style — your own personal synthesis of interests and activities. 2. Travel is a challenge, and it can be an art. Take the advice given in the chapter „Das ABC des Reisens“ in the book ***Weltweit arbeiten. Gut vorbereitet für Job und Karriere im Ausland***. ["The ABC of Travel" in the book ***Working Abroad: How to Prepare for a Job and Career Abroad*** \*\*]

In conclusion, it's instructive to consider Goethe's observation that "It isn't sufficient merely to know something, one must apply one's knowledge; and it isn't sufficient to merely to wish for something, one must act upon one's wishes."

I hope that all readers of this interview will have many exciting experiences during their travels, because these experiences can enrich our everyday lives.

**Many thanks for the interesting interview!**

Interviewer: Christine Huber / This interview appears in Barbara Kleber's book   
***Knigge für jeden Tag. Richtiges Benehmen. Zeitgemäße Umgangsformen***, 2011. **[*Everyday Etiquette. Appropriate Behavior & Modern Manners***, 2011.] ***\*\****

\*\* Note that while these titles may be translated, no translations of these books have been published.

English translation of interview: Ralph Wilcoxen

**Literature**

Béatrice Hecht-El Minshawi, 2008: **Weltweit arbeiten. Gut vorbereitet für Job und Karriere im Ausland**. [**Working Abroad: How to Prepare for a Job and Career Abroad**]

Barbara Kleber, 2011: ***Knigge für jeden Tag. Richtiges Benehmen. Zeitgemäße Umgangsformen*** **[*Everyday Etiquette. Appropriate Behavior & Modern Manners***]