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## Systemic Stance in Cultural Awareness Workshops for China: A Qualitative Reflection on Constructivist Approaches to Cultural Learning

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### Abstract

This paper explores how systemic stance manifests in cultural awareness workshops designed to prepare German professionals for assignments in China. Drawing on qualitative research based on interviews with expatriate employees, the study reflects on the role of constructivist and systemic approaches in shaping meaningful cultural learning processes. The research builds on systemic theory, second-order cybernetics, and intercultural management literature, focusing on how facilitators embody systemic stance through empathy, curiosity, and reflective dialogue. Findings show that while most cultural awareness workshops remain focused on knowledge transfer and cultural comparison, elements of systemic stance appear where facilitators encourage self-reflection, perspective-taking, and contextual awareness. The discussion highlights constructivist learning as a key to developing intercultural competence and argues that integrating systemic stance can strengthen sustainability, adaptability, and well-being during international assignments. The paper concludes by outlining recommendations for facilitators, organisations, and researchers seeking to bridge systemic coaching principles with intercultural learning practices.

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### 1. Introduction

Globalisation and increasing international cooperation have made intercultural competence a crucial skill for organisations and their employees. As China remains one of Germany's most important trading partners, cross-cultural encounters between German and Chinese professionals are frequent. Companies invest in cultural awareness workshops to prepare employees for assignments abroad, yet the effectiveness of such programs varies. Many workshops emphasise factual knowledge about culture and behavioural rules, often neglecting the personal and relational dimensions of learning.

This paper argues that a systemic stance—an approach rooted in systemic theory and constructivist thinking—offers a meaningful lens for reimagining cultural awareness work. The systemic stance focuses on interconnectedness, reflexivity, and the co-construction of meaning. Instead of transmitting predefined cultural knowledge, facilitators adopting this stance facilitate reflection on individual perception, relationship, and context.

The aim of this study is to examine how systemic stance is perceived and experienced in cultural awareness workshops for China, and how this perspective contributes to deeper cultural understanding and learning sustainability.

### 2. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in systemic theory, constructivism, and intercultural communication research. A systemic stance is grounded in the assumption that individuals are part of interconnected systems that shape perception and action (von Foerster, 1993)<sup>[18]</sup>. Systemic thinking replaces linear causality with circular understanding, where each observation is influenced by the observer's position.

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In coaching and workshop contexts, this means recognising that every participant constructs their own version of reality and behaves accordingly.

Constructivism, as proposed by Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995)<sup>[19]</sup>, emphasises that knowledge is actively constructed rather than transmitted. This insight shifts the facilitator's role from expert to guide, enabling learners to create their own meanings through experience. In intercultural contexts, such facilitation supports awareness of personal assumptions and cultural biases.

The communication theory of Paul Watzlawick (1967) underlines that every behaviour conveys meaning and that misunderstanding is inherent to communication. This reinforces the need for reflective dialogue in intercultural encounters.

Intercultural education research distinguishes between culture-specific and culture-general programs. While the former focus on particular national contexts, the latter emphasise overarching principles such as perception, empathy, and adaptation (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983)<sup>[4]</sup>. Integrating a systemic stance allows both levels to be addressed by fostering reflection on personal experience within cultural frameworks.

### 3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore how participants experienced systemic stance during cultural awareness workshops for China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from the automotive industry who had completed company-organised workshops before their assignments abroad. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling, ensuring relevance and depth of experience.

The interviews were guided by the EDAMA reflection model (Aeppli & Lötscher, 2016)<sup>[1]</sup>, which differentiates phases of reflection from describing to analysing and planning actions. Questions encouraged participants to recall their workshop experiences, describe facilitator behaviour, and assess whether they perceived systemic principles such as an appreciative attitude, non-judgment, and reflexivity.

Data analysis followed Mayring's (2015)<sup>[7]</sup> qualitative content analysis, identifying recurring themes and categories across interviews. The categories 'constructivism', 'systemic stance', 'systemic methods', and 'systemic coaching' were derived both deductively and inductively.

### 4. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed four overarching categories: Constructivism, Systemic Stance, Systemic Methods, and Systemic Coaching.

- **Constructivism:** Participants reported that most cultural awareness workshops were informative and structured but rarely interactive with a constructivist's stance. However, they valued exercises that allowed self-reflection and perspective-taking, suggesting that constructivist principles enhance engagement.
- **Systemic Stance:** Most participants perceived the facilitator's stance as only marginally systemic, in being more focused on knowledge transmission through lectures than on responding to participants' needs. However, elements of systemic stance appeared when facilitators encouraged dialogue, asked open or circular questions, and acknowledged uncertainty. Participants described these moments as 'eye-opening' because they

invited awareness of personal perceptions and cultural assumptions. Facilitators who modelled curiosity and empathy created psychological safety and trust.

- **Systemic Methods:** Techniques such as reframing, scaling, and perspective exercises were seldom explicitly used but recognised by participants as valuable. Reframing helped them interpret misunderstandings as learning opportunities rather than failures.
- **Systemic Coaching:** Participants associated systemic coaching with personalised guidance, respect, and non-directive questioning. They saw potential for integrating systemic coaching elements into cultural awareness workshops to deepen learning and self-awareness.

### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study demonstrates that while cultural awareness workshops are not yet sharing a constructionist and systemic stance, systemic elements are intuitively recognised and appreciated by participants when offered. A systemic stance shifts the focus from teaching cultural facts to fostering self-reflection, relational understanding, and adaptive communication.

- To enhance future cultural awareness workshops, the following recommendations are proposed:
- Support facilitators in their practicing and reflecting of systemic coaching principles such as curiosity, non-judgment, and empathy.
- Integrate systemic reflection methods (e.g., circular questioning, reframing) into workshop design.
- Encourage ongoing reflection before, during, and after international assignments for everybody involved.
- Conduct longitudinal qualitative studies to explore the reciprocities of a systemic stance and perceived well-being abroad.

By bridging systemic and intercultural perspectives, facilitators and organisations can cultivate a more reflective and relational approach to global collaboration, supporting sustainable intercultural competence.

### 6. Thank-You Note

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