

CULTURAL STANDARDS, INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP ABILITIES AS SEEN BY EXECUTIVES OF A MULTINATIONAL COMPANY

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Abstract:

This article describes the research approach of a research project at Volkswagen Slovakia which deals with cultural standards, intercultural communication and leadership abilities as seen by executives of the company group. The main access to this topic is over personal, guide lined expert interviews, which are interpreted by means of qualitative content analysis. The main goal of this project is the valuation of the objects by perspective of the own executives, which guarantees the identification of valid perspectives especially for the automotive industry. Based on the special interest of Volkswagen Slovakia the cultures of Germany and Slovakia are chosen as reference cultures while China, Russia, India, Great Britain, USA and Portugal are defined as compared cultures.

1. INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL STANDARDS, INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND LEADERSHIP ABILITIES AS OBJECTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The globalization of the world is present everywhere in these days; companies steadily increase their focus on strategies of internationalization. Because of this they are often faced with very different cultural contexts. This leads to special challenges to all the employees which are involved in this processes, but particularly to the members of the management. In the phase of establishing business abroad usually the managers from the home companies are sent to new producing sites. Here they are confronted with foreign cultural situations and it is sometimes not easy for them to work successfully in this new environment. The employees in the foreign companies face managers, which are culturally influenced in a very different way. Misunderstandings and frustrating experiences on both sides, which avoid effective work on shared aims, seem to be inevitable.

This is when intercultural training can be helpful. The main objective of a comprehensive program of intercultural training should therefore focus on continuous improvement of intercultural communication of all employees and the implementation of an open corporate culture for intercultural learning and mutual understanding.

The intercultural management research can elevate useful information for the development of such programs and activities. The most important thing than is, that the collected information is transformed into activities which lead to an improvement of the employees skills to deal with culturally overlapping situations in general (Holzmüller 1997, p.58).

The presented research project fulfils this aim: Grounded on the concrete appraisal of already collected cultural standards by executives who are experienced in working abroad and also on a collection of differently culturally influenced leadership-styles and values, a program for intercultural (management) training will be developed.

The intercultural management research in general is a research field that is integrated in many different disciplines. In the context of our research in particular the study by THOMAS (using the method of collecting cultural standards) is important. But the interpretation will also be influenced by the studies of HOFSTEDE (1980 and 2006), GLOBE (2004 and 2008) and HALL (1969 and 1990).

In the following sections we are going to present the relevant definitions of culture, a description of relevant cultural standards and the state of the art of research on them, furthermore intercultural education and the chosen abilities of executives as our objects of research.

1.1 Culture

Lots of authors have already tried to define the concept of culture or identify dimensions or categories which help to difference (national) cultures or to find some commons.

One early example is the attempt to find an indisputable definition by KROEBER and KLUCKHOHN (Apfelthaler 1999, p. 29). They tried to compress one definition out of 170 collected definitions, which was not very successful:

„Culture is build from explicit and implicit behaviour patterns, which are acquired and imparted by symbols and are the reason for the specific performance of a human group, including the incorporation in cultural products. The entity of culture is build of (historical) passed on ideas and connected values. Cultural systems can on one hand be seen as results of actions and on the other hand as reasons of actions.“ (Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952, p. 181)

Until today an uniform definition of the term „culture“ can't be found in literature. In its historical meaning the term can be traced back to greek language where it means "cultivation" in the agricultural sense. (Berger, 1995, p.14ff). Broadly speaking the word is descended of the roman "colere", which means "to tend to sth.". Attended behavior therefore determines a specific culture. (Jansche 1995, S. 102) In our research project mainly the cultural standards after THOMAS (2003), the cultural dimensions after HOFSTEDE (2006) but also the theories of the GLOBE-Project (2004) and HALL (1977) are an important background.

THOMAS describes Culture as an "universal but for a community, organization or group very typical system of orientation. It determines the perception, thinking, values and acting of all its members and creates by this the conditions for the development of self contained styles of coping with its environment (Thomas, 2003).

Concerning to the Dutch culture-psychologist Gert HOFSTEDE culture is the "collective programming of awareness, which marks the difference between the members of one group or category of human beings from those of other groups or categories." (Hofstede, 2006)

The authors of the GLOBE-study say, that culture is build of: „...shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretation or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations.“ (Globe, 2004)

HALL defines culture as "a system for production, transmission, saving and converting of information." (Hall, 1977).

1.2 Cultural standards

In the end of the 80's and beginning of the 90's of the last century THOMAS developed, as an answer to the immediately beginning critics on the work of HOFSTEDE, a more open concept of "cultural standards". This concept should avoid pre-defined cultural dimensions, which are also an expression of the researchers own cultural background.

The "cultural standards method" is a qualitative research method for the collection of cultural differences. It is based on the assumption that every culture has its own cultural standards, which determine the perceptions and behaviour of its members. These cultural standards determine the whole perception, thinking, values and acting of at least most of its members. They see this behaviour etc. as normal, binding and usual. In encountering situations with members of other cultures they are judging their own, but also the behaviour of the others on this "benchmark". (Stemplinger, Haase, Thomas 2005, p. 12)

The central cultural standards are characteristic for the behaviour of people of a certain culture in certain situations. The same standards might not even exist in another culture or just be less important. But different cultures can also show similar cultural standards (Thomas 2003a, p. 438).

To collect the cultural standards as many people as possible, who have experiences in different intercultural encountering situations, are interviewed. The main interest of these interviews is the perception about the specifics in dealing with the partners from another culture. Especially so called "critical incidents" are collected (the "critical incident technique" was invented by J.C. Flanagan, 1954). These are situations which are seen as very negative, when something was disturbing the communication, or, on the other hand very positive experiences. The cultural standards are derived from the results of the interviews. These cultural standards are dependent on specific fields of action, for example management, language education, youth-groups (Thomas, Kammhuber, Schroll-Machl 2007, p. 25).

The concept of cultural standards, of course, is also discussed controversial. The collection of data by interviews can just provide a "snap-shot" of a certain culture, which might be a problem because "culture" itself must be defined as dynamically. The defined standards can strongly differ from each other concerning to the research-method and – period. The way of interviewing itself is influenced by the researchers own culture. Furthermore the results of qualitative research usually are a reduction of reality. And often there is said nothing about hierarchisation of the single cultural standards. (Lecture Prof. Dr. Sievert, summer term 2006, 2. Mai 2006) But this is also admitted by the advocates of this method (Thomas, Kammhuber, Schroll-Machl 2007, p. 20).

HOLZMÜLLER points that the method is very appropriate to be transferred into praxis by the means of intercultural management, because it has a middle-levelled complexity and positivistic and interpretative elements are used. (Holzmüller 1997, p. 58 ff).

1.3 Cultural standards research: State of the art

The following cultures have been identified as relevant for our research-project: Germany and Slovakia as the reference cultures, but also Britain, Portugal, USA, India, China and Russia. The selection criteria are provided in Section 3 below.

Until now there do not exist verified, actual data of cultural standards and cultural dimensions (Hofstede) in the special comparison between the two reference cultures (Germany, Slovakia) and the other cultures.


HOFSTEDE's research contains statements (point-values for cultural dimensions) to all relevant cultures – here a comparison is possible. But the values for Germany, Great Britain, India, Portugal and the USA are taken from the first, very big IBM-research project while the

values for Slovakia, Russia and China are either taken from later and smaller studies or are estimated. The possibility to compare the data might be called into question because of this, but also because of the age of the study (1980). Furthermore in the later studies different questionnaires have been used, the sample was another and also the target-group. The questionnaire of the later research has been answered by students. (Kutschker, Schmid 2005, p. 719)

THOMAS et al. collected data for the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Eastern Europe in general by using the cultural standard method (Schroll-Machl, Nový 2003; Schroll-Machl 2004; Stemplinger, Haase, Thomas, 2005). It might be suggested that the Czech and eastern European standards are quite similar to the Slovakian but possible differences should be figured out. Furthermore some data exists for the German (Schroll-Machl 2007) and English (Schmid 2007) culture. There does not exist any result for the Portuguese culture (which was affirmed by Prof. Dr. Thomas by mail on 17.09.2008). There have been collected some data for the Indian culture (Schroll-Machl, Steinbach 2005), also for the Russian (Lyskow-Strewe, Schroll-Machl 2007), American (Slate, Schroll-Machl 2007) and Chinese culture (Liang, Kammhuber 2007).

As an example for cultural standards we created a contrastive comparison of the Slovakian (after Stemplinger, Haase, Thomas, 2005) and German cultural standards (Schroll-Machl, 2007).

Comparison of German and Slovakian Cultural Standards	
GERMAN	SLOVAKIAN
Task-Orientation	Avoidance of conflicts Orientation on social responsibilities Collective orientation
Value of structures and rules	Pragmatism Flexible handling of time
Internal control (rule-orientation)	Pragmatism
Separation of personality- and living-spheres	Diffusion of working life and private life
Time-planning	Flexible handling of time Pragmatism
Direct communication	Avoidance of conflicts Unsteady self assurance
Individualism	Collective orientation Orientation on hierarchies Orientation on social responsibility






 Seite 23 18.11.2008 Dipl.Soz.Päd Rebecca Lippén, MA VOLKSWAGEN SLOVAKIA, a. s. 

Fig. 1 Comparison of German and Slovakian cultural standards

The central challenge of our research project is the direct valuation and appraisal of the existing standards and the connection with special, individually experienced situational variables by the point of view of the executives. Another goal is the special comparison between the two main cultures “Germany” and “Slovakia”. The project wants to analyze the already existing concepts for describing and comparing the chosen cultures and face the concepts with the special valuation and experiences of executives from Volkswagen. This guarantees that the results will be adaptable for praxis-concepts of intercultural education within the Volkswagen Company.

1.4 Intercultural education

In the understanding of our research project intercultural education integrates the parts intercultural learning, intercultural training as an approach to intercultural learning and intercultural competence as the central goal of intercultural education.

Intercultural learning:

„Learning“ generally can be understood as a process through what organisms change their behaviour because of certain experiences. Intercultural learning took place when a person tries to deal with people from other cultures by understanding their special orientation system of perceptions, values and acting, to reflect it concerning to the own culture and to transfer it to the own acting in the foreign culture (Thomas 2003, p.438).

Intercultural learning usually happens in the following four steps:

Table 1 Steps of intercultural learning (After: Kamhuber 2000)

Step of learning	Content
1. Step	Occupancy of knowledge of orientation of the foreign culture (culture and country)
2. Step	Understanding the foreign cultural orientation system
3. Step	Ability to coordinate cultural divergent ways of acting (act successfully in divergent situations)
4. Step	General ability of cultural learning and understanding

Concerning to THOMAS intercultural learning has the aim to develop criteria of behaviour and abilities like acceptance and valuing cultural specifics, tolerance, mutual understanding, solidarity, sensibility for shared values, norms and similarities, discovery of possibilities of mutual supplementation and enrichment and the construction of intercultural experience- and acting-knowledge. (Thomas 2003a, p. 434) It helps to provide some information about each other and can avoid dominant demands or fear of being dictated by the other side. Intercultural learning can avoid preconceptions and destructive cultural stereotyping which means, that it also avoids hostility towards foreigners and the fear from foreign cultures.

Intercultural learning can take place in planned, organised intercultural encountering situations, like for example in students- or expert-exchanges. On the other hand it can also happen in the spontaneous intercultural exchange of single persons who meet incidentally (ibid.).

Intercultural training:

There are lots of different kinds of intercultural training. Bolten types intercultural training concerning to two criteria:

- Informatory versus interaction oriented
- Culture-overlapping versus culture-specific

These have different goals and are interesting for different target groups. Therefore there are four different types:

- culture-overlapping informatory
- culture-overlapping interaction oriented
- culture-specific informatory
- culture-specific interaction oriented

They have different advantages and disadvantages and can be found in praxis in different styles. (Bolten, 2007a)

The experiences of the executives with intercultural education and the appraisal of the relevance of intercultural education, intercultural learning and intercultural training is another main point of the research project.

Intercultural competence:

THOMAS understands intercultural competence as the ability to configure the intercultural interacting process in a way that misunderstandings are avoided and new solutions are created, which are accepted by all involved persons and can be used in a productive way (Thomas 2003b, p.141).

MÜLLER and GELBRICH describe intercultural competence as the ability to deal effective and adequately with members of other cultures (Müller, Gelbrich 2004, p. 793).

The description of intercultural competence is put into list-, structure- and process-models by BOLTEN. List models are additive descriptions of wanted personal attributes which guarantee successful action in intercultural contexts (Bolten, 2007b). Here usually are found some descriptions of competences like “language skills”, “open mindedness”, “flexibility”, “empathy”, “optimism”, “tolerance for ambiguities”, “sociableness” or “role-distance” (Bolten 2006).

The critics on the limiting character of this listing models lead to the development of structure-models. This idea was suggested by GERTSEN. The models describe intercultural competence like a system of affective, cognitive and konative (connected with the behaviour) parts.

Process models go one step further by describing intercultural competence as a successful holistic interaction of individual, social, professional and strategic acting in intercultural contexts (Bolten 2007b). This means that professional as well as social and personal competences are integrated. The hard as well as the soft topics of human resources development are included.

The valuation of the importance of intercultural competence for the business-success of a company is another important aspect in the research project.

1.5 Leadership abilities

Wanted abilities of executives, which are used for the selection of personnel at Volkswagen Slovakia, are another important basis in our research project. They are going to be validated by the executives which are interviewed.

The following table shows this individual choosing:

Table 2 Abilities of executives

Criteria	Consequences
Initiative	Ability and willingness to act autonomous, in ideal case without external incentives
Creativity	Ability to search for spare rooms steadily and to fulfil them purposeful
Performance orientation	Very high level of performance, high prioritization of working-life
Willingness to solve problems	Braveness to take risks and personal responsibility
Capacity	Ability to deal with stresses and strains and to keep self control; maybe even searching of stresses and strains as a source of increasing self-perfection

Social sensibility	Ability to deal with other people in a objective and emotional way; strong understanding for other people
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2. VOLKSWAGEN AS A MULTINATIONAL COMPANY

Global assignments are an important part of the international human resource policy in multinational companies, nowadays they are „daily business“ and the importance has been raising sustainable during the last years. This can be ascribed to the increasing phenomena of globalisation. New markets are opening and companies establish branches in these regions or attractive production areas are found abroad – so that productions are transferred or extended abroad.

There is nothing else at Volkswagen: Approximate 330.000 employees from 18 countries (12 European and 6 other countries) are working together in 48 production sites and are producing 25.400 vehicles every day.

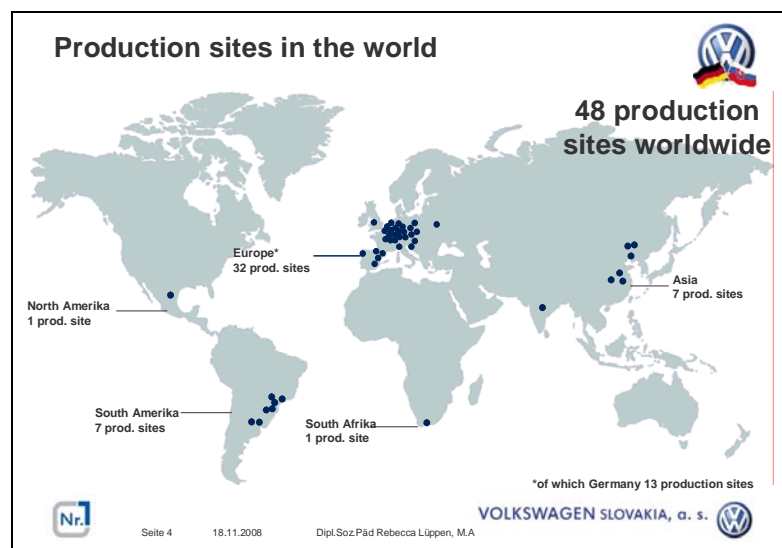


Fig. 2 Production sites in the world

In the whole company-group there are more than 2100 executives and managers as „global employees“ working abroad. This means that they are sent from Germany to another country, as representatives of a foreign production site in Germany or are exchanged between the foreign production sites. At October 2008 there have been 823 Global Employees from Germany working abroad, 25 employees from Slovakia have been sent abroad, the most of them to Germany. There have been working more than 60 German Global Employees in Volkswagen SK (internal statistic).

The global employees of Volkswagen are supported, accompanied and prepared (professional and organisationally) by the “Global Assignments” department. This also defines the standards which are valid for all the assignments within the company-group. This includes a reasonable compensation of the individual mobility as well as the definition of standards for living, the support of settling to abroad and the support for accompanying partners and children. The preparation and providing of intercultural seminars, safety trainings and language courses is included too (Groupnews Oktober 2008, p. 54).

3. JOINT RESEARCH PROJECT AT VOLKSWAGEN SLOVAKIA

After describing the theoretical background we are going to describe the main targets and methodology of our research project at Volkswagen Slovakia and try to figure out, why the chosen methods are suitable to fulfil the targets.

3.1. Central questions and aims of research

The central questions of our research project are divided into five fields of interest:

Field 1: Valuation of existing cultural standards for various countries

- 1.1 How value and assess (international) executives from Volkswagen Group the cultural standards of Thomas et al according to their relevance?
- 1.2 What kind of hierachisation is suggested by them?
- 1.2 Where are in their opinion special areas of conflict?
- 1.3 Is the knowledge about these standards seen as helpful for successful professional acting?

Field 2: Appendence to situative variables

- 2.1 Which situations have been experienced by the executives in which cultural differences played a central role?
- 2.2 How could the cultural standards be extended by these experiences?
- 2.3 Which situation should be contained by the point of view of the executives so that successful acting abroad can happen?

Field 3: Investigation of practices and ideals of intercultural education in the company

- 3.1 Which practices of intercultural education have been experienced by the executives and are seen as suitable?
- 3.2 Which ideals of content, arrangement of and access to intercultural education have the executives?

Field 4: Valuation of the relevance of intercultural competence for economical success of the multinational company

- 4.1 How high is the relevance for the economical success valued?
- 4.2 Which concrete situations can prove this?

Field 5: Valuation of the abilities of executives which are defined for the personnel selection of executives at Volkswagen Slovakia

- 5.1 Do the abilities exist in the own culture of the executives and how are they rated by them?
- 5.2 Do they exist in the guest culture and how are they rated by the executives?
- 5.3 How do the executives value the influence of the main abilities of their own culture on their guest culture and how are they influenced by the abilities of their foreign colleagues on the other side?

The main focus of the research project lies on situations (or situative variables) in negative and positive direction. This focus implicates and ensures the practical relevance of the results because these situations can be directly integrated into the conception and documents of intercultural trainings at Volkswagen SK as well as further professionalisation of such trainings.

The main objectives of the research project are an assessment, evaluation and ranking of existing cultural standards and the selection criteria for executives as used by Volkswagen Slovakia by the interviewed executives of a multinational company. Furthermore, the references to specific, individual experienced situative variables for further classification and

complementation of the cultural standards. And also the description of the relations between the target cultures Germany and Slovakia and the other investigated cultures.

Already realised comparative cultural studies will be assessed critically and be valued by executives of a multinational operating company.

Finally the collected data should be integrated into a concept of intercultural training.

3.2. Methods of collecting data

The key research methods are qualitative collected and evaluated expert interviews with executives of the Volkswagen Group.

To figure out the relevant cultures which should be compared to the reference cultures Germany (headquarter) and Slovakia (local production site) the sales figures of the last three years (August 2008) have been paid attention to as well as the “exchange of experiences” within Volkswagen Slovakia.

This ensures that the collected data provides a practical benefit for the human resources development within the company.

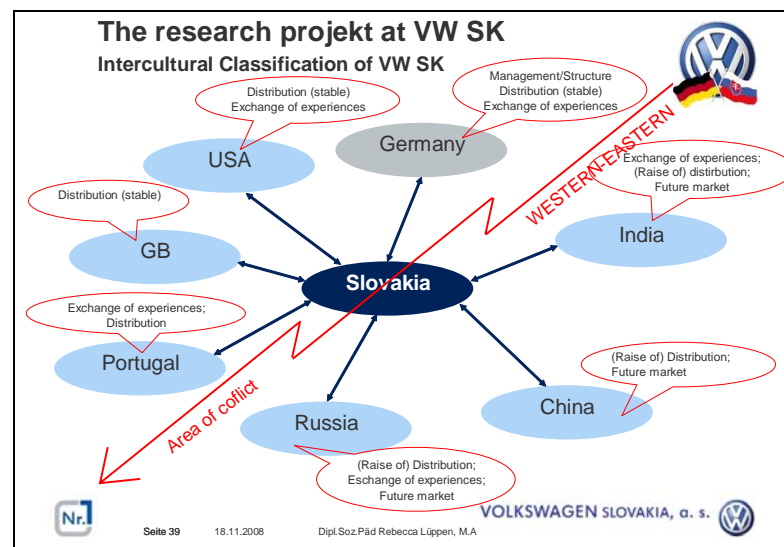


Fig. 3 Intercultural classification of VW SK

It becomes obvious that Volkswagen Slovakia in particular cooperates with cultures in two clusters, namely with the (far) east culture circle in specification with the Russian, Indian and Chinese culture and the western culture circle in the form of German, American, English and Portuguese culture.

The research project also wants to explore to what extent these pre-clustering is true and which position Slovakia occupies in a presumed cultural East-West tension from the perspective of the interviewed executives.

The German and Slovak culture are defined and used as reference cultures in this project, because the German culture is the cultural background of the headquarters and the Slovak culture is the primary physical and cultural space, which take influence to the interests and the general corporate culture of Volkswagen Slovakia. This is the reason for choosing German and Slovak executives as target group for the interviews.

We are going to realise personal guideline experts' interviews with executives from the Volkswagen Group. It is therefore a qualitative research approach.

Expert interviews are suitable, when exclusive insights into structural relationships and transformation processes of action systems are to be collected. The research relates to the

assessment of the relevance and applicability of the cultural standards in the Volkswagen Group and practices and ideals of intercultural education in the company. Thus the method is suitable to answer the guiding research questions (see Chapter 3).

The survey is based on an interview guide, but the necessary space on the precise question wording, demand strategies and possibly also the exact sequence of questions is given. The interviews will be recorded as audio files and will be transcribed recording to a standardized transcription system.

Interviewed are executives from the reference cultures Germany and Slovakia, who have experiences in everyday work with one of the other cultures. Thus, a sample of 48 interviews with experts after the following grid is the result.

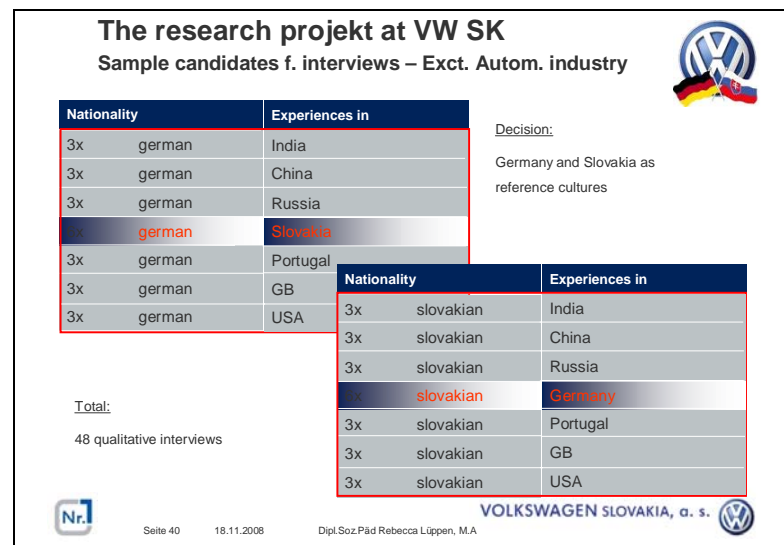


Fig. 4 Sample candidates for interviews

The interview guides are oriented on the cultural standards after THOMAS (deductive categories). In particular situations are focused, in which they could have acted more professional with a better or more extensive intercultural training or knowledge of the cultural standards. Therefore it is a survey using the so called critical incident technique (CIT), which goes back to FLANAGAN (1954). The method was originally developed as an observation method, but by meaning of economic research or other research-related reasons there are often also used interviews.

The choice of this approach for the research project is due to the possibility of collecting different views on desired or required skills, or on a different culture in a very behaviouristic way. Constructs like "cultural standard" or "intercultural competence" can afterwards be related to specific situations and become capable and more concrete- and can be taught more easily later on.

Already in 1954 FLANAGAN cites the measurement of attitudes and personality characteristics (e.g. intercultural competence) and the determination of training requirements in addition to personnel selection and assessment, job analysis and design, counselling and psychology as possible fields of action for his method. In respect this method seems to be suitable to answer the central questions of this research. (Flanagan 1954, p. 346)

For economic reasons we will use telephone or video interviews, sometimes also via SKYPE. The interviews will be digitally recorded and evaluated qualitative by using the computer program MaxQDA. Methodologically we refer to the method of qualitative content analysis after MAYRING (Mayring, 2000).

By interviewing people from different cultural backgrounds it is a so-called comparative approach, which should uncover the similarities and differences between (in this case multiple) different but equal cultures.

The research results are finally put into a concept or a recommendation for intercultural management training within Volkswagen Slovakia. If it will be possible the benefits of the developed management training should be evaluated.

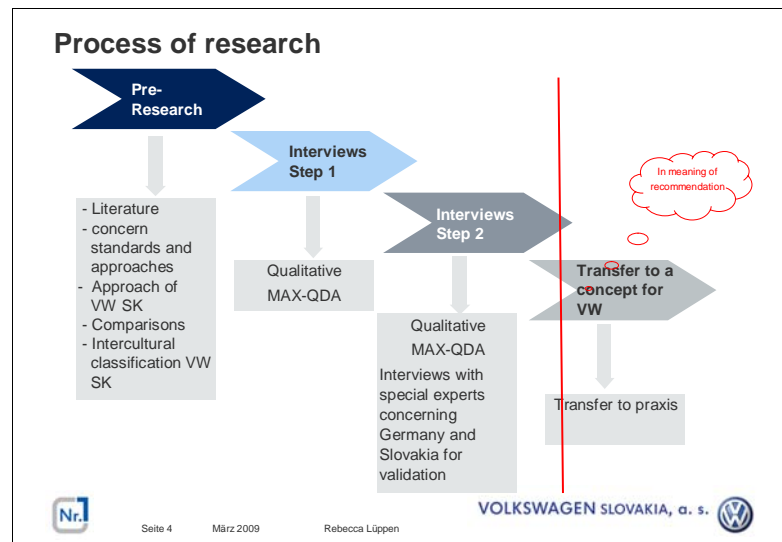


Fig. 5 Process of research

The methodology of the interview analysis refers in general to the “typological analysis” after KUCKARTZ (Kuckartz 2007), whose analysis program MaxQDA is used. He refers to the term of the “feature space” and the “methodology of Weber”. These approaches have been related with the development of the software, as the author figures out. The typological analysis has therefore, in contrast to other approaches like the “grounded theory” or the first understanding of the “qualitative content analysis”, been developed as a computer aided approach from the beginning.

4. OUTLOOK ON RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH FOR THE INCREASING OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The first interviews already confirm the general scepticalness of standardized cultural concepts. On the other hand it becomes clear that the views of Germans and Slovaks on different other cultures are quite different.

Today we are in the phase of taking all the interviews. We also began to transcribe them and make first steps in analyse them. Valid further statements are expected to be available from autumn 2010.

The research project has the aim to provide valuable insights into the practical relevance of the cultural standards and a categorization of the abilities of executives. These results can be used for intercultural leadership development within the Volkswagen Group and will provide concepts and programs for intercultural training. This claim seems to be available through the research approach at the moment.

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