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Hospitality in Culture: A Study of Differences and Influences of the Hospitality Industry in the U.S. and Western Europe

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Hospitality in Culture: A Study of Differences and Influences of the Hospitality Industry
in the U. S. and Western Europe

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The College of Business Administration

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Catherine Finney

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This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee,
has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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Abstract

Hospitality is a global practice that takes different forms from culture to culture. At first glance, it may seem that these differences are not of importance or do not reflect the cultures they are a part of, but this is a limited view of the scope of hospitality influence. This thesis gives a brief overview of the concept of hospitality. It then discusses the importance of proper use of hospitality practices and the positives and negatives of the use of hospitality in a cross-cultural context. Next, this work reflects on interviews held on the topic of hospitality with American individuals who have resided in the nations of Germany, France, and England. These interviews helped to frame an image of how hospitality differs from the United States in these western European nations and cultures. It then challenges the standard of hospitality the United States has cultivated and offers suggestions for bettering the current practices. This work concludes by asserting the need for anyone entering a hospitality encounter different from their own to be educated and open minded about the practices and customs that may differ from what they are accustomed to.

Does hospitality differ from country to country? The answer to this question has important implications for business leaders, those who intend to study or travel abroad, and for those interested in how national perceptions are shaped. In recent years, the frequency of cross-cultural interactions, specifically related to international travel experiences, has increased exponentially. According to a recent study by Boston Consulting Group, in the millennial generation, interest in traveling abroad has increased by 23 percent in comparison to prior U.S. generations (Machado). As people travel abroad more often, the hospitality experiences in these different international contexts become even more important since they shape the first impressions that people form of a country's overall culture. Every culture has differing practices for hospitality and how one enters those cultures with preconceived notions, experiences, and a willingness to adapt accordingly will contribute to how they perceive that culture. This thesis offers an exploration on cross-cultural hospitality that is intended to analyze why this is an important conversation in our current time.

To start this discussion, we will explore different definitions and ideas of hospitality. Building on these ideas, we will analyze the personal experiences of Americans living abroad in the three nations of focus (France, Germany, and England), specifically as it relates to hospitality practices. This will lead into a brief overview of information on hospitality and how this concept may form a portrayal of national image. Finally, we will move to a discussion of how other nations' hospitality practices could be of benefit to the United States and its current processes. Through my own travel experiences in Germany, France, and England, I have witnessed how imperative it is to

consider one's preconceived notions, experiences, and ability to adapt in every cultural hospitality encounter. While it is crucial to be knowledgeable about the cultural differences, one must be able to apply such knowledge.

Hospitality is a universal practice that takes form in distinct ways. Some scholars assert that "traditional hospitality" is reserved for the private "home" sphere and therefore does not include a form of payment for that service (Blue and Harun 73). According to *In Search of Hospitality*, hospitality from the corporate perspective reveals that when a host, in the commercial sector, is aware and honestly concerned for the well-being and happiness of their guest, without attempting to extort that guest, their act can be considered hospitable (Lashley and Morrison 45). These two sources would suggest that hospitality goes beyond simply serving a meal or preparing a room. Rather, hospitality is a mindset that allows the host to provide service to someone in a generous way. *In Search of Hospitality* also comments that "an appropriate motive" must govern every hospitality encounter for a person to be considered hospitable (Lashley and Morrison 11). In an article on tourism practices, David Hummon states that "... tourism involves a 'structured break from ordinary reality,' a movement away from the world of home, work, and compulsory activity, to an 'extraordinary world' away from home where leisure and voluntary activity are the stuff of experience" (181). When considering this quote in the context of hospitality if one replaces the word "tourism" with "hospitality," a new perspective on this concept is revealed. This change of vocabulary asserts that hospitality is something that allows for an escape from the real world for the guest.

Based on these aforementioned sources along with my own experiences abroad, the working definition of hospitality can be presumed to be a concept that does not have a concrete way to be defined. It is evident that hospitality is the process of creating an environment that is welcoming and provides service for someone that goes beyond that which is expected and meets their basic needs. Through these gathered materials, the discussion can be framed to emphasize cultural norms of hospitality in Germany, France, England, and the United States.

According to Avril Bell's study on immigration, she explains that when considering different cultures and their practices in hospitality, it is evident that every culture presents different forms of hospitality and therefore different laws that enforce those practices. This concept determines a layered and complex foundation from which every interaction between people and place is governed (Bell 239). Moreover, Mohsin points out that "if we consider culture as a set of norms, rules and customs, as a result people from different cultures have differences in their norms and customs" (4). When considering those from different backgrounds and cultural elements, it is evident that cultural norms influence how one interprets the notion of hospitality. If a situation is interpreted incorrectly, it is likely to result in a negative connotation of that culture. However, if one is able to properly receive the encounter, an opportunity to reap the positive benefits of fully experiencing that culture's idea of hospitality is established.

To analyze how hospitality encounters might differ across cultures, I interviewed three different Americans who were living in the different host countries. The first of these interviews was with Lindsey Snyder, an American who has resided in Leipzig,

Germany for three and a half years. Regarding German hospitality, Ms. Snyder revealed that Germans tend to be more reserved and tend to prefer privacy. Germans show respect for one another and expect others to do the same in a way that some could interpret as “stiff.”

She expanded on the idea by explaining how customer service differs in Germany from the United States. She elaborated that Germany's idea of customer service is not nearly as valued as it is for those in the U.S. Snyder said, “Employees at shops, restaurants, hotels, etc. will not always treat their customers with the respect or honor that people from the U.S. are accustomed to. If they don’t want to serve you, they often have no problem telling you that either blatantly or through their actions.” Germans in the hospitality industry continue to be less motivated to please customers as they are not living off of the tips they receive from happy customers (Snyder). From this example, it becomes evident that someone from another culture could easily take offense if they did not understand that their waiter has no need to go “above and beyond” to please them.

This interview clarifies that German hospitality differs from the U.S. in that Americans in general seem to show more openness to people by coming into their homes and sharing meals. The expectation to meet any and every need the guest might have is not a universal practice, and instead, Germans seem less concerned with offending guests over a matter of service quality.

According to an interview with Angela Wray, an American who spent three years in France with her family, the French treat one another politely; however, they are not “overtly welcoming.” She disclosed that French culture dictates savoring the experiences

of hospitality. She recalled speaking with her French friends about the practice of Americans eating lunches while sitting at their desks to save time. Her friends were taken aback by the idea of rushing through a meal and not taking the time to enjoy the company. She continued by revealing “a proper way to greet at a store when you enter: address the people ‘bonjour madame/monsieur.’ In offices, you must say hello to everyone before you go about your day” (Wray). Cultural customs such as these are perfect examples that hospitality norms can greatly impact a person’s perception of a situation. Clearly, the French value the hospitality experience over the speed at which one can finish a meal or social encounter. They are more formal with how they go about basic everyday encounters and this, it would seem, bleeds into other aspects of their lives.

A London-based couple since 2014, Peter and Maggie Barker, had a different perspective on the idea of cultural norms of hospitality specific to England. The Barkers explained that service quality in England has improved drastically over the years. There are far greater opportunities for hospitality and tourism offerings. Mr. Barker shared, “You used to just get a paycheck and not worry about tips. Now, with how regularly international travel is happening, we experience this to be changing.” While something like tipping might seem a minor factor to service quality, the Barkers related this back to service roles in the U.S. where waiters and waitresses are highly reliant on receiving tips to supplement their incomes (Barker). From the Barker’s perspective, and my own experience, it would seem that when tipping is a factor in the hospitality encounter, the host is more likely to put forth an effort to meet the needs and expectations of the guest.

This observation would explain the long held stereotype that Americans are friendlier to encounter than the British.

In the discussion, Peter and Maggie Barker explained that many people will come to England and other European nations and relate their native experiences back to their experiences in the United States. It seems that many based a standard of excellence for their hospitality with the bar set by the United States. While this may be true in some instances, America is not the world leader in hospitality. It is likely, instead, that this phenomenon is largely driven by the economic power status held by the United States. Therefore, many cultures have modified certain hospitality practices in an attempt to mimic the United States' profitability in this area. Mr. Barker outlined that many English businesses involved in hospitality have slowly changed their practices over the years to accommodate this standard that many hold in relation to the United States (Barker).

While this concept may seem to be good, there are several negative effects. The most noteworthy of these is an idea formulated from America's value for individuality. In response to this mindset, Americans have been raised to have the expectation of always having what they want when they want it. Mrs. Wray had a comment on this notion. She explained that in France, you must order directly from the menu, you do not make changes to what the chef has prepared, so what you see is what you get. She recalled encounters where her Americanized views were challenged when she would ask for variations from a menu. Wray said, "It was humbling to know that the customer was not always right and the best might not be exactly what you initially wanted" (Wray).

Mohsin adds an interesting note on this topic when he posits that “business success in the 21st century will be dependent on how individuals and organizations acquire and practice cross-cultural sensitivity and skills in dealing with customers from diverse backgrounds” (7). As individuals enter cultures with little education or understanding of the practices and customs of those cultures, the possibility of a negative encounter being the outcome of an interaction seems to increase immensely. This concept can be applied beyond hospitality and gives a basis from which many cultural encounters take place.

In every aspect of life, how one interprets a situation plays a vital role in the outcome of that situation. The same is true in the realm of cultural hospitality practices. It is truly fascinating to witness an encounter between people of different cultures and watch them struggle through rituals of one particular culture or another. It is common for individuals to enter such a situation without the understanding that they need to prepare for cultural abnormalities that differ from their own. When properly prepared for and/or handled, a cultural hospitality encounter can be used to the benefit of both parties. According to Simon Anholt, “... effective public diplomacy is mainly about ‘engaging people with one’s country ... strengthening ties... such schemes plant a seed of understanding, affection, and gratitude that may remain within people for the rest of their life.” He goes on to say that these same people develop a loyalty for the countries where they experience positive encounters and will strive to pass that desire along to others (Anholt). It would seem that effective forms of hospitality allow for the guest to walk away with a first impression that will frame future encounters.

Other research suggests that when activities in hospitality are used in a proper manner, an opportunity to strengthen social bonds and assist in bringing satisfaction is developed (Lashley and Morrison 9). It is evident that cultural encounters in hospitality should not be taken lightly. In fact, Anholt's entire article discusses the way the world views the United States and delves into the idea that the U.S. hospitality practices play a vital role in how this image is fostered. He ultimately proposes that the perceptions that people have of a nation may have consequences that go as far as national security (Anholt).

This new discovery leads into what could be considered the most interesting of concepts from the results of this research. The United States has developed a culture and hospitality style that differs from any other in the world. Along with this, American culture is one that values individuality above all others as can be seen in Hofstede's study on cultural comparisons (Cultural Comparisons). These two factors have overlap to create a unique perspective of the U.S. from the viewpoint of the rest of the world.

Anholt takes a different approach to this concept. He suggests that Americans rate hospitality in a different manner than the rest of the world, and therefore, the rest of the world does not know what to think of them. While many would assert that "America does it best," statistics show otherwise. Anholt's research reveals that "Americans are ranked fifth in the world for 'hireability,' but 13th for hospitality... it is the world's #3 destination. This means that the majority of people who visit the United States are not actually going to their first country of choice" (Anholt). While American hospitality has

seemed to many as something to strive for, these findings from Anholt would suggest that many people would disagree with this assumption.

Despite Anholt's findings, the United States has continued to be the standard that other nations have aspired toward in the realm of hospitality. As previously discussed, the influence of U.S. hospitality is likely driven more from an economic standpoint rather than a preference standpoint. This is interesting because there are instances where cultures have not only shifted their practices to satisfy Americanized standards, but have also altered cultural hospitality practices to please the masses (as could be interpreted from the conversation with Peter and Maggie Barker).

I would challenge how the United States approaches hospitality encounters might not be "the best." What if we changed the idea that the customer does not always know best and should not always be given exactly what they desire, and instead, took a page from the French and learned to appreciate cultural hospitality as it is. In continuation of this, I believe hospitality satisfaction would increase if the following two practices were encouraged in American hospitality: 1) being grateful for the cultural experiences in every hospitality encounter and 2) enjoying a slower pace to savor these encounters.

Our foundational definition of hospitality stated that hospitality is the process of creating an environment that is welcoming and provides service for someone that meets their basic needs and goes beyond that which is expected. After this review, it should be realized that how one interprets this definition will determine if they feel they have truly received a positive hospitality encounter. While someone from Germany may feel that the service they receive has met their needs, someone from England who has received

equivalent service might interpret their encounter to have fallen short. It is in realizing that every culture has different hospitality practices, that are not necessarily worse or better than our home cultures, that we can truly enjoy the hospitality we receive in every environment.

Mohsin sums up this entire concept in one phrase: “If we aim to develop a society of knowledge-based skills, which values learning and looks forward to be a service to others, we need to be aware of cultural sensitivities and avoid embarrassing situations which can cause both commercial and social harm” (3). This research matters because it allows for a basic understanding of how to properly face cultural differences in hospitality. As a young person who has traveled extensively, I have been naturally drawn to this topic. By pursuing a masters in hospitality from a university in England, I will expand my knowledge and understanding on this subject further. For now, I have discovered that when coming to the table, with an educated and open mind, laying down one’s cultural expectations, one can truly experience the beauty and individuality of each cultures’ hospitality practices.

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