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# Sprechen sie...What? Anxiety/Uncertainty Management in a German American School

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Running head: SPRECHEN SIE...WHAT? ANXIETY/UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT IN A  
GERMAN AMERICAN SCHOOL

Sprechen sie...What?

Anxiety/Uncertainty Management a German American School

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CST 431

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### **Abstract**

This case study explored causes and means of managing anxiety and uncertainty by analyzing one student's service learning experience at a German American school in a city in the Pacific Northwest through the lens of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM). This case study explains the theory and applies it to this student's experiences and observations in this new (to her) cultural setting. AUM is a theory that is meant to be used for explanatory purposes but also serves the purpose of actual application to situations in order to increase effective communication and cultural adaptation. Ultimately, the reader will gain knowledge of the theory, its applicable uses, and how a sojourner into the culture of a German American school used its knowledge to gain more insight from that experience.

## **Sprechen sie...What?**

### **Anxiety/Uncertainty Management in a German American School**

Everyone has experienced that feeling before; the feeling at the top of a rollercoaster when one's car slowly chugs up the steep incline of what is surely the hugest drop of one's life. What had been excitement and joy a second ago transforms into panic and fear. Adrenaline, which had been pumping in a positive way, now is quickening pulses and making hearts pound like sledge hammers even as people at some level know that they are safe. After all, the operator secured and checked fastenings and crowds of people have gotten-safely off the ride with smiles on their windblown faces. Nevertheless, at that moment, at the brink of the giant drop, it is impossible to banish from the mind that one did, in fact, voluntarily participate in one's own demise; bodies are panicking and assuring their brains that one indeed is on the precipice of death.

This feeling of utter, illogical panic in the face of the unknown is something almost every human being has experienced at some point or another. That idea of the unknown or strangers frightens most in the extreme in many situations, especially when faced with an unfamiliar culture or intercultural interaction. When entering a new culture or interacting with someone from a different culture, typically, before the interaction takes place one is fairly excited about this new opportunity. However, upon realizing that one has no idea what is actually going to happen, those dreaded feelings of apprehension and uncertainty start to grow overwhelming. But the question is...why? What are the causes of these feelings that can grab a hold suddenly, rendering one practically useless? Through a case

study of my experience at the German American School of Portland, it will soon become apparent how and why these overwhelming feelings of anxiety and uncertainty strike.

## **Background**

These feelings of uncertainty and or anxiety are common when facing unfamiliar situations. I experienced first-hand this semester what it is like to jump into a completely foreign cultural environment and attempt to fit in when I began working as an intern at the German American School in a city in the Pacific Northwest. The school is a German language immersion school for children in pre-school through fifth grade. The students are immersed in the language from the beginning of their time at the school, typically pre-school or kindergarten, and encouraged to speak almost completely in German when their skill level allows. A few programs are taught in English, but for the most part the students both learn and are taught in German in order to further their speaking and comprehension skills of the language.

As part of my two credit internship, I agreed to volunteer at the German American School for about three hours once a week in a classroom starting the last week in September. I had no idea before I began this internship the challenge I would be presented with as a new intern at the school. I experienced greater amounts of uncertainty and anxiety in this new culture than I had initially expected when I entered the fourth grade classroom on the first day. As I anxiously waded my way through my first day in the fourth grade classroom my German skills seemed to be worsening by the second as I became more and more nervous. I had been looking forward to my time volunteering at the German American School all summer and, then, on my first day all I could think about was getting in

my car and going home. I had hoped to be gaining German and teaching skills from my experience at the German American School but, initially, all I could feel was panic.

Throughout my semester long internship at a German American school I was faced with the task of figuring out how to manage my feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. This paper uses Gudykunst's (2005) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory to analyze the cultural adjustment process I went through while attempting to adapt and effectively communicate at a German American school these past few months. This paper offers insights concerning the causes of and means to manage anxiety and uncertainty experienced through my case study at a German American school. This analysis of my case study concludes by providing guidance for future sojourners into this particular culture, or similar ones.

## **Frame**

Before describing a sojourner experience, its analytic frame must first be explained. Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) (Gudykunst, 2005) revolves around those key concepts: uncertainty and anxiety. Marris (1996) claims that **uncertainty**, "is created by our own preconceptions...because events only appear uncertain in some context of purposes, and expectations of orderliness". Marris continues on to explain that what defines uncertainty is affected by, "what we want to be able to predict, what we can predict, and what we might be able to do about it" (1996). Uncertainty is far more likely when one is communicating with members of outgroups (strangers) than when communicating with members of ingroups (Gudykunst, 2005a). One has both minimum and maximum

thresholds for how much uncertainty one can handle, which differs depending on culture and the individual (Gudykunst, 1991).

Our maximum thresholds are the highest amount of uncertainty we can have and still think we can predict host nations' behavior sufficiently to feel comfortable interacting with them. Our minimum thresholds are the lowest amount of uncertainty we can have and not feel bored or overconfident about our predictions of the host nations' behavior (Gudykunst, 2005b).

It becomes increasingly difficult to communicate effectively with host nationals (strangers from the unfamiliar culture one is facing) when one's uncertainty is not between one's minimum and maximum thresholds. In the case that one's uncertainty exceeds one's maximum threshold, host nationals' behavior becomes harder to predict and the confidence to predict or explain their behavior is lost by the sojourner. If uncertainty falls below one's minimum thresholds, this can almost be worse, because one is overly confident in one's abilities to predict the behavior of host nationals' and it is easy to begin interpreting behaviors and actions incorrectly (Gudykunst, 2005b). Basically, when it comes to one's uncertainty, it is all about the ability to predict what other people are going to do. One feels safer and more confident when thinking one understands the situation and people one interacts with to the extent that one feels able to predict what those people will do before they do it.

On the other hand, **anxiety** is, "the affective (emotional) equivalent of uncertainty" (Gudykunst, 2005b). According to Stephan & Stephan "like other types of anxiety, intergroup anxiety stems from the anticipation of negative consequences" (1985). These

negative consequences are things one imagines happening when feeling uneasy about interacting with host nationals (Gudykunst, 2005b). One's anxiety can also be measured using the same thresholds as one's uncertainty, the goal being to have an anxiety level between one's minimum and maximum thresholds (Gudykunst, 1991). When the maximum anxiety thresholds are exceeded this can leave one with so much anxiety that it is difficult to communicate comfortably with host nationals, making it very difficult to adjust to the host culture. However, if one's anxiety is below one's minimum thresholds then one has reached the point where one no longer cares about effective interactions with the host nationals, which could be just as damaging to effective communication and effective communication as being too anxious to communicate (Gudykunst, 2005b).

AUM theory also addresses the idea of the **sojourner** or the **stranger**. Gudykunst uses the idea of communicating with someone one doesn't know in an unfamiliar environment as communication with strangers. He bases this idea of strangers off of Simmel's notion of strangers. "The stranger will thus not be considered here in the usual sense of the term, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow- the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going" (Simmel, 1908 reprinted in Levine, 1971). Thus this concept of the "stranger" implies that the stranger is both near and far at the same time. The stranger creates something of a paradox in that they are physically close when one encounters them but they are far in reference to the fact that one does not know their values or behaviors.

In order to manage one's uncertainty and or anxiety and reach a level between one's maximum and minimum thresholds Gudykunst (2005b) stipulates that one must manage



uncertainty and anxiety through **mindfulness**. This concept of mindfulness which Gudykunst uses as a moderating process in his AUM theory explains that one often communicates mindlessly or without thinking (Langer, 1997). Now this is not to suggest that everyone naturally communicates like an idiot- no, mindlessness in this situation simply indicates that one is not necessarily consciously aware of the consequences or means by which one is communicating.

Mindfulness is a state of conscious awareness in which the individual is implicitly aware of the context and content of information. It is a state of openness to novelty in which the individual actively constructs categories and distinctions. In contrast, mindlessness is a state of mind characterized by an over reliance on categories and distinctions drawn in the past and in which the individual is context-dependent and, as such, is oblivious to novel (or simply alternative) aspects of the situation (Langer, 1992).

In other words, when one uses generalities and large categories one is being mindless. Being mindful means when something, like a host culture, is unfamiliar it is dealt with by creating more categories with which to better understand the new or unfamiliar.

Gudykunst's (2005a) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) with communication effectiveness as the outcome variable assumes that, "...managing anxiety and uncertainty are 'basic causes' influencing effective communication". The other variables affecting effective communication are referred to in this theory as "superficial causes". These superficial causes are organized into categories of: self concepts, motivation, reactions to strangers, social categorization, situational processes, connections with

strangers, and ethical interactions. Thus, these superficial causes indirectly affect effective communication by having a direct effect on the “basic causes” (anxiety and uncertainty) which, in turn, directly affect effective communication (Gudykunst, 2005a). The beauty of this theory is that it “... is designed to be applied by individuals to improve the quality of their communication, not just explain effective communication,” (Gudykunst, 2005a).

Gudykunst also discusses intercultural adaptation as an outcome variable of AUM theory. It is appropriate that Gudykunst discusses AUM theory with intercultural adaptation as an outcome later in his book because he also views effective communication, discussed earlier, as a facet of adapting to a new culture. “I view intercultural adjustment as a process involving feeling comfortable in the host culture, as well as communicating effectively and engaging in socially appropriate behavior with host nationals” (Gudykunst, 2005b). However, Gudykunst goes on to explain that in order to achieve these things “we must consciously (i.e. ‘mindfully’) manage our uncertainty and anxiety” (Gudykunst, 2005b).

In the following section, the concepts of AUM theory explained above will be utilized in order to identify uncertainty and anxiety within my internship at the German American School of Portland, discussing how it was both created and managed.

## **Application**

When I began my time at the German American School of Portland I went in with confidence and the idea that, because I was familiar with working with children who were

elementary school aged I would have no difficulty helping in the classroom I was assigned. I was a sojourner or stranger in a new culture but little did I know that I was far from prepared for the culture into which I was entering.

I went into my first day at the German American School with something of a “mindless” attitude. I sought to take my knowledge of elementary schools, nine-year-olds in general, and the German language and apply it to this new, unfamiliar culture I was entering into. However, as I entered the school I was not only immediately met with a different language, but I was also met with a very different type of elementary school when compared to the public elementary school I attended a child and saw as “typical” for what an elementary school should look and feel like. These aspects alone already gave me a somewhat “mindless” perspective. This caused me to start making generalizations about things I found different or strange, instead of looking at what was different about them and creating new categories when I encountered something or someone unfamiliar.

Another key aspect of uncertainty/anxiety management is the conditions in one’s host culture (Gudykunst, 2005b). When I arrived at the German American School on my first day I was greeted by the front desk worker who was busy taking care of other students and their parents arriving for the school day. She quickly handed me a visitor badge and explained to me where the fourth grade classroom was I would be volunteering in. Upon my arrival in the classroom, which I already had nervously entered, I had to hunt down the teacher while she was in the middle of frantically writing down the day’s agenda on the board before school started a few minutes later. It was fairly obvious immediately that the fourth grade teacher had not really thought of a plan for my time at the German American

School volunteering that day. I introduced myself and she nodded asking me to grab a chair and sit in the back of the room for the time being. At this point, I did not feel very welcomed by my host culture and so far my relationship with strangers was not a very positive one. So, even as I sat down in the back of the classroom my anxiety and uncertainty started to rise upward toward my maximum threshold. The fourth grade teacher began class and introduced me to the students in the classroom; but I sat in the back feeling out of place, like I had no clear purpose being there. Later, once the students had been given a task to work on, my teacher informed me I could walk around and help the students if necessary. However, this instruction felt like a side thought to me. I was frustrated and very nervous simply walking around the classroom full of nine-year-olds, with no particular purpose or title. I even felt like my German skills were worse than they are in reality during this time where I was awkwardly loitering around the classroom with no real felt purpose.

Gudykunst stipulates that the more comfortable strangers feel in the host culture, the less anxiety they will experience when interacting with those within the host culture (2005b). The opposite is, then, also true: when the host culture does little to make the stranger comfortable in the host culture, the stranger experiences greater anxiety. In this situation I would be the “stranger” entering into a new host culture: the German American School. And as is shown in earlier research above, the greater anxiety one feels the less effective of a communicator it allows one to be.

My anxiety that day was affected by several superficial causes Gudykunst (2005b) mentions. My self-concept was dropping along with my collective self-esteem and social identity when I felt like my teacher didn’t want me in the classroom and I had no real

purpose or role. Because of this lack of purpose I also did not feel motivated to interact in my new environment- another superficial cause that led to my basic causes of uncertainty and anxiety increasing further toward my maximum threshold. My self-esteem also took a severe hit when one of the students, whom I had asked to concentrate on his work instead of talking to his friends, responded by saying “you can’t tell me what to do, I’m better at German than you are!” While I was fully aware that this student was saying that because he was angry I’d caught him not doing his work, the second half of his statement wasn’t any less true. I’d heard him speaking with the teacher earlier and he was, indeed, probably better at German than I was.

It was no wonder that I felt like, on that day in particular, my German skills were impaired because the fact of the matter is they probably were. The negative feelings I felt I was receiving from my host culture, along with my damaged self-concept, self-esteem, and social identity increased my anxiety and uncertainty levels immensely. I’d gone into this internship with the goals of improving my teaching and German skills at the same time. However, my maximum thresholds for anxiety and uncertainty were quickly exceeded that day in fourth grade. Therefore, I was too overwhelmed to be a very effective communicator or adapting to this new culture which prevented me from even beginning to achieve the goals I’d set for my experience at the school.

After my anxiety thresholds were exceeded the previous week in the German American School’s fourth grade classroom, I had a discussion with the intern director and she agreed that I might benefit more from an environment where I did not feel so anxious and uncertain. The following week I was moved to the pre-school class with three and four-

year-olds. Although, my anxiety and uncertainty thresholds started leaning toward their maximums that morning when there was a debacle with which classroom I would be put in, they slowly started to simmer back to a more comfortable place between my minimum and maximum thresholds when my new teacher, Frau Schmidt, greeted me enthusiastically to her classroom and the pre-schoolers were overjoyed to have a new German speaking playmate.

In this new environment the superficial causes of uncertainty/anxiety management were affecting me on a positive level this time. I think, particularly the superficial cause of situational processes, which concern the host nationals' (the people in my new culture) power, helped me manage my anxiety/uncertainty. Half of the pre-schoolers in my new class could barely speak, let alone in German. There were a few students who clearly came from native speaking homes but seeing as they were three and four-years-old it was clear to me that they were neither experts concerning grammar nor did they care. When the host nationals' power compared to mine seemed to even out more when I realized they were not superior to me in language skills this started to help me manage my anxiety/uncertainty. Also, the fact that the students in this class were happy to see me and asked me to play with them immediately after entering the classroom, boosted my self-esteem and increased my self-concept. I at least knew how to play with three year olds, thus my self-concept was more solidified, and my self-esteem got a boost from being wanted by my students in this classroom, instead of judged. Thus I became a much more effective communicator with the students in this class already on the first day due to the fact my anxiety and uncertainty were more comfortably between my minimum and maximum thresholds.

As my weeks in the pre-school progressed I was able to manage my anxiety and uncertainty thresholds, keeping them between my minimum and maximum levels. This started to occur during small, but significant instances. For instance, three weeks into volunteering Frau Schmidt, my pre-school teacher, asked me to lead a craft with the class. This was a simple request on her part, but I felt needed which increased my self-esteem and I had a specific job that helped me define my self-concept in the classroom. I also became familiar with the routine of the classroom and knew to get out the cups and paper towels at snack time. Frau Schmidt also designated me “juice pourer” at snack time, so I had another specific job that defined my role in the classroom and thus increasing my self-concept once again and motivation to interact with my students.

As a result of these superficial causes being met, I was able to balance my anxiety and uncertainty progressively better between my minimum and maximum levels. Because of my anxiety and uncertainty levels being balanced between my minimum and maximum thresholds fairly well, my basic needs were being met. Thus, I was able to start thinking more mindfully when I went to volunteer in the pre-school classroom once a week. I began my time in the pre-school classroom looking at the group of children there as simply my students. Then as I became more familiar with my environment I began making distinctions. I started with simply learning all of my new students’ names. Then I learned the difference between the native and non-native German speaking students in my class and soon after I began to distinguish between the different personalities and needs of each my students.

An excellent example of my final stage of distinction between my students was one of my most recent visits to the school. My class usually participates in a program called “Second Step” on Thursdays, but that week the Second Step teacher had been sick, so my class was scheduled to go to Second Step on Friday, the day I volunteer, instead. Second-Step is a weekly program at the school where the students discuss and learn about feelings and or how to deal with problems. Second-Step was scheduled for the time my teacher usually takes a break so she asked me if I would lead the students next door where the program is held. As we lined up outside, I asked one of my students, Randy, if he would help me lead the line. I did this because I knew that Randy often has an attention problem and forgets to listen to the instructions that are given to him, so I was not going to risk having him wander off on my first journey with the class I had been trusted with by Frau Schmidt.

When we arrived in the Second Step classroom we sat in a circle with the pre-kindergarten class. After a few minutes of the lesson Randy decided to start making his newly discovered favorite dinosaur noise quietly on the other side of the circle. While I actually did find this quite amusing I could see the Second-Step teacher did not. So I had to move Randy next to me and explain that dinosaurs were allowed in our classroom, but not this one. Apparently, this was a valid enough argument for Randy because he then refrained from making the noise anymore. I also noticed during our lesson, that my most outgoing student, Casey, was not interacting with the teacher at all and wouldn’t answer any of his questions. I was confused at first and then suddenly realized that this program was one of the few that the German American School teachers entirely in English. Casey comes from a home full of native German speakers and spent all her time at an immersion school. I quickly realized that Casey might not actually understand the lesson that was



occurring. So I had Casey come sit in my lap and when the Second-Step teacher would ask her a question I would whisper it to her in German and then she would reply more enthusiastically than she had been previously.

After Second-Step I led my class safely back to our room and we resumed our usual routine with Frau Schmidt. This was a particularly encouraging day for me because I had not only managed to be in charge of my students alone for a period of time without any incidents, but I had also been able to access their individual needs and personalities to deal with certain situations concerning individual students. And most importantly, they were willing to listen. This is where mindfulness comes into play. I would not have been able to identify early on that Randy would, no doubt, decide to be rambunctious in the hall or that Casey needed some translation help, if I hadn't distinguished smaller defining categories for each of my students from when I started volunteering and had simply looked at them all as one group. This is what allowed me to figure out that Randy needed valid, or at least creative, reasons to be given before he could be convinced that the rambunctious or destructive activity he was participating in was not a good choice. This mindfulness also helped me see the difference between my German student's (Casey's) attitude in our German speaking environment and the slightly, for her, more foreign English speaking environment. I knew if I wanted her to participate and gain back some of the sassy personality she had I would have to help her balance between these two environments and give her some German she could understand in order to contribute.

### **Insight for Future Sojourners**

If anyone else had been looking in on this small incident on one of my last days at the German American School, they would, no doubt, have been unimpressed. However, for me this day was a true accomplishment. I had gone from my first day at the German American School in fourth grade, being a completely ineffective communicator because I was handicapped by my anxiety and uncertainty, to confidently handling the entire pre-school class, having managed my anxiety and uncertainty. Thus I was able to be mindful and felt I fulfilled the ultimate goals of AUM in that I could effectively communicate with the students with confidence and I had begun the journey of adapting into the culture of the German American School. These things could not have been accomplished if I certain superficial causes had not been in place for me to then manage my anxiety and uncertainty.

Although Gudykunst does seem to be particularly attached to all of his superficial causes in AUM, I felt that once my self-concept and motivation to interact were solidified that the others came along as well. In this case, however, ethical interactions did not seem to be a very big factor in my management of my anxiety and uncertainty. But without the two superficial causes of self-concept and motivation to interact being present in the situation I don't think I could have managed to move through the process of anxiety and uncertainty management.

When I first began working at the German American School, I wanted to improve both my teaching and German skills while I was there. When I was assigned the fourth grade I saw it as a challenge that would help me learn faster in both these fields. When I was incredibly overwhelmed that first day of fourth grade and asked to be moved down in

language levels, I felt like a failure at first; a quitter. And that is a title I have very rarely in my life accepted.

However, as I began analyzing my time at the German American School with the AUM theory, I started to realize that choosing to stay in the fourth grade, where my anxiety and uncertainty maximum thresholds were exceeded, would have severely affected my effectiveness when communicating, as well as my ability to adjust to my new host culture.

By choosing to move to the pre-school classroom, which some might have seen as a “cop out”, I was actually giving myself an advantage. I acquired more quickly the confidence to communicate effectively with my students and predict their behavior because my uncertainty and anxiety levels were managed. I would recommend to future sojourners to the German American School that the “sink or swim” mentality when it comes to volunteering in this immersion school setting is not, in fact, the most beneficial for the overall learning experience. I now see that it is wise to start out at a level where one does not have to cope with too many superficial causes of anxiety and uncertainty in a negative way. If one desired to eventually move up to volunteering in the more advanced levels I would recommend spending a semester in a level in which one felt comfortable so one might gain the skills needed to volunteer at the German Skills gradually. Their familiarity of the host environment would also make the superficial causes of reactions to strangers and connections with strangers much easier to accomplish. Thus, the process of anxiety and uncertainty management would, most likely, be a quicker and smoother process, allowing the volunteer to use their attained mindfulness to more effectively communicate and adapt to the culture of that more advanced level.

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