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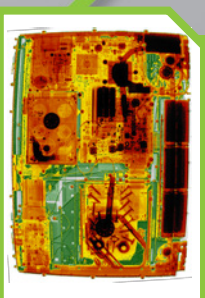

Mandatory Baggage Handling Questions: cultural sensitivities

Mandatory baggage handling questions have been used as part of the aviation security measures to guarantee safety of the aircraft and its passengers. The unambiguous questions are used as part of an evaluation of the threat posed by the traveller. While the responses to the questions taken alone are of limited utility, they can prove useful when evaluated in conjunction with the non-verbal behaviour of the subject. Airport security has however, as **Daniel Odido** explains, hitherto not paid adequate attention to the cultural peculiarities of travellers, leading to accusations of unfair profiling.

It is a typical scene at any international airport. The queue epitomises the diversity of international air travel. A grey-haired man reads a newspaper as he awaits his turn. A teenager with earphones chews gum. A sari-clad lady whiles her time in the queue. A man in a skull cap stands with an air of fortitude. A lady in smart trousers is busy on a tablet. Children are chasing each other and playing. Several races are represented. All are waiting for their turn at airport security. Aviation provides the fastest and most convenient form of travel. Modern security threats have, however, chipped away at many of its conveniences. A two-hour international journey now takes twice as long due to the extra time for security checks.

The security officer is busy processing the passengers: "Have you packed your luggage yourself? Has anyone asked you to carry anything on board for them? Have you left your bags unattended at any time?" There are only three questions. Questions which are simple enough and unambiguous, with the only possible responses being 'yes' or 'no'.

Whilst the questions are the same, the people are different. The man nods as he answers the first question in the affirmative. This is only partially true. He had thrown in a few things into the bag that had been packed by the housekeeper. People are less cautious when dealing with family and trusted employees. The lady answers the question in the affirmative, but shakes her head as she does so. The screener curtly indicates to her that she needs to undergo further screening.

Screeners are required to process passengers fast and reliably. The yes/no responses in the mandatory baggage handling questions saves time and enables the screener to process the passengers in a standard way. The screeners also look out for body language and flag suspicious people for extra security screening. 'How' you behave, rather than 'what' you answer is important in identifying people with malicious intent. But this approach often equally catches the ignorant and the naïve!

Mandatory baggage handling questions certainly serve a purpose. However, issues may be raised if the questions and screening are perceived to be insensitive to the cultural diversity of the travellers. The questions require the screener to not only read the cultural context of the traveller, but also their 'non-verbal communication'.

The first challenge in responding to the questions is language. Not all travellers are familiar with what is being asked, or why. This causes them to be hesitant and to fumble when answering the questions. This raises an antenna in the mind of the screener. Unsynchronised verbal and body responses raise suspicions.

Actions speak louder than words; 93% of communication is non-verbal, with 55% attributed to body language and 38% to the tone of the voice. Non-verbal communication is, however, not an international language! It can lead to miscommunication. Non-verbal differences account for much of the typical difficulties in communicating. Communication style depends on a society and its culture, and some aspects of body language are culture-specific.

Other aspects of non-verbal communication are similar across cultures. This is especially true of facial expressions. Deep down, all humans are basically the same. This can however lead to a fallacy of uniformity across cultures. There are six universal human emotions: happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, anger and surprise. These emotions are also expressed in a similar manner across cultures. What does widely differ is the extent and intensity with which people express these feelings. Some societies frown upon highly animated expressions. Some put a premium on smiling, while others view too much smiling as an indication of shallowness. Women generally smile more than men across cultures. Too much smiling at the security screening may raise suspicions of trying to hide nervousness.

It is important to accurately read the non-verbal prompts in the high security environment of the airport. Some elements of body language can be confusing. Gestures are often used to complement the verbal message, for example, a nod often reinforces an affirmative answer in Western cultures. This is in contrast with some cultures in the Middle East that consider shaking the head to indicate 'yes'. Having direct eye contact is encouraged in Western cultures such as United States, and is considered to express honesty, attentiveness, confidence and openness, while it is considered impertinent, or even rude and offensive in many Asian, Middle Eastern and African cultures.

> "…non-verbal communication is however not an international language…"

Ironically, the emotions that are easiest to communicate are the ones most likely to be absent during the tense security checks before travel. The expression of happiness is universally uniform, and it is also the easiest emotion to communicate. However, many people do not feel particularly happy whilst awaiting security checks. Even first-time travellers, though excited, are most likely feeling some trepidation.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) uses behavioural indicators to profile passengers at US airports as they look for indications of malintent, but the programme has been criticised for focusing excessively on Arabic, Muslim and Hispanic passengers. The agency's 'behaviour detection officers' do, in fact, scrutinise all travellers for behaviours that it associates with stress, fear or deception.

It is risky to judge cultural practices in the context of another culture, especially in establishing profiles. Patterns of behaviour that are considered anomalous in one culture may be normal in others.

Intercultural communication can be problematic and is best understood through the concept of 'cultural dimensions'. One of these dimensions is the concept of 'power distance', which suggests that lower-ranking individuals expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. This plays out at the screening point when a traveller is confronted by a uniformed official. Some cultures treat uniformed officers with extraordinary deference to authority. People from such cultures may exhibit the emotion of fear at the security checkpoint.

Another cultural dimension is concerned with individualism as opposed to collectivism. At one end, traditionally individualistic societies value 'I', whereas the more traditional societies emphasise 'we'. One is expected to assist fellow people. These societies emphasise loyalty and support for each other. If you're travelling on the same aeroplane then you are 'sojourners', and it is perfectly normal to assist with small favours like carrying a piece of luggage for a newly-made acquaintance.

In many non-individualistic cultures, it is normal for a member of the extended family or a household to help pack a suitcase for a travelling relative. People from traditional and highly religious societies are culturally geared towards fulfilling the expectations of family and community. It is natural for a person from a collectivist culture to agree to carry presents for people who would meet them at the destination. Similarly, it is not a big deal for such a person to leave a bag unattended; indeed, it is natural to task a fellow traveller, who is otherwise a stranger, with looking after the bag.

The profile-fitting at the security checkpoint is subject to cultural innuendoes. Patterns of behaviour that are considered normal in one culture may be flagged as anomalous in others when taken out of their cultural contexts. Operational profiling compares passenger demographics and other background data to historic or recent intelligence-derived 'threat profiles', and also takes into account the officer's psychological assessment of the traveller based on the responses to a few binary questions.

It is challenging, let alone impractical, to take account of all the cultural nuances in airport security. We need, for the future, to develop more intelligent ways of processing passengers and use the information we already know about them. Big data now enables us to handle large data sets and analyse inputs from various sources, whilst artificial intelligence (AI) provides us with the capability of simulating intelligent human behaviour. AI also provides machines with the capability to 'think' and learn and it has already been successfully used in the design of accurate search algorithms, as well as for face recognition and other complex tasks. Its use is increasingly extending to solve cognitive tasks.

Airport security should therefore use big data in conjunction with AI to crunch through the copious amounts of information about passengers and generate accurate information about the cross-cultural nuances of travellers. This will remove human subjectivism and provide for a better passenger experience insofar as it will likely remove the perception of racial and other forms of cultural profiling.

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