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## ***Critical Incidents Revisited: A cross-cultural analysis across Europe***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This contribution seeks to shed light on potential answers and solutions for selected critical incidents (CI). For these purposes, two well-defined CIs were chosen that allow for a wide range of possible interpretations across cultures. Against the background of the international Erasmus+ project entitled 'Critical Incidents in Intercultural Communication and Promoting Diversity' all five project partner countries, namely the Czech Republic, Germany, Finland, Austria and Italy have participated in this exploratory study to identify how the respective societal sample may interpret the critical incidents at hand. At each partner institution, a purposive sample consisting of six selected experts was conducted to elaborate on the CIs and provide possible answers and further introspection of their train of thought.

In a second step, a thematic analysis was conducted to allow for the extraction of subthemes and the creation of a thematic map. The findings were then sketched in line with specific cultural theories to verify if prevalent and hard-wired assumptions are still valid. This is all the more relevant in view of the dynamic VUCA world where volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations dominate our digitalized and globalized knowledge society.

To account for these complexities, it was sought to not only look at societal cultures as a source of possible interpretations. In addition, it was attempted to also take account of demographic, cognitive, disciplinary and functional diversity. Despite the different perspectives adopted by the informants, it was still possible to find common societal ground within their interpretations. As such, a number of culture-specific attributes in terms of communicative styles and orientations to oneself, time and hierarchy were able to associate with the respective geographical regions.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

As borders of travel and trade gradually shift and expand, there is heightened interest in the experiences and interactive misunderstandings of persons that study and work across nations (Goodman, 1994; Arthur, 2001). To investigate the adjustment process in reaction to cultural immersion, a number of models have been developed, from culture shock (Oberg, 1960) to adjustment strain (Crano & Crano, 1993) to acculturative stress (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). Critical incidents (CIs) were found to be useful in describing complex encounters in cross-border settings. Such brief descriptions of vivid events were identified as meaningful in the experiences of the narrators. Therefore, this paper seeks to identify specific responses and reactions to work-related incidents while at the same time trying to gain some kind of societal meta-picture of cultural patterns that tend to be prevalent within a specific

geographical group. Arguably, specific group behaviour could be clustered in terms of territorial boundaries, societal coding, demographic traits, cognitive socializations or even disciplinary belongings (Gaisch et al, 2019). As such, it is possible to obtain a more profound and differentiated picture of potential societal answers that incorporate a broad potpourri of possible explanations of how to approach specific CIs.

## **2 SETTING THE SCENE**

This contribution was conceived by members of the Erasmus + project entitled 'Critical Incidents in Intercultural Communication and Promoting Diversity' (CIICPD). For one, it was sought to elaborate on CIs and shed light on how the different societal stakeholders would react to the settings at hand. For these purposes, two well-chosen CIs were presented to 30 intercultural experts working at the involved institutions of higher learning, namely, Skoda Auto University/Czech Republic, FH Zwickau/Germany, FH Upper Austria/Austria, University of Siena/Italy, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences/Finland. In addition, it was regarded as helpful within this team constellation to also cooperate at a research level that allows for a range of further critical incidents to occur. Given that the aim of the CIICPD project is to elaborate on, further develop and additionally identify CIs of all kinds, it was considered to be a fruitful experience to see how CIs unfold among this cross-border project team that draws on a wide variety of disciplinary and demographic backgrounds.

In other words, this paper aims to address the issue of how 30 intercultural experts from five European countries develop informal strategies and interpretations of how to deal with conflicts, challenges and ambiguous situations that emerge in a highly multicultural context. After the presentation of the CIs, the informants were asked to respond to a set of focused prompts designed to uncover implicit and explicit biases and to unfold deeply ingrained societal beliefs. It was found that different ways of living and thinking generate different informal responses - sometimes ones of refusal, detachment and incomprehension as well as ones of integration and diversity acceptance.

## **3 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Applied in a variety of settings since its conception in 1954, the CI technique was found to be useful as a research methodology in a wide range of academic disciplines. As Flanagan (1954, p. 327) put it, CI is "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act".

Cultural critical incidents (CCI) - as a further field - define any events that involve ethnically heterogeneous groups. CCIs are used to identify contributors to disparities in hazard exposures (Smith-Jackson et al.; 2005). In general, CCIs characterize the nature of cultural misunderstandings, assumptions, stereotypes, or other barriers that occur between persons at cross-border encounters. Within cross-cultural critical incidents literature, cultural differences are predominantly regarded in line with implicit cultural standards, expectations and dimensions (Tarchi & Surian, 2016). Hence, participants are encouraged to identify and reflect

about such incidents while at the same time generate potential operational scenarios in response to the intercultural encounters at hand (Wight, 1995). Frequently, it involves some kind of relational misunderstandings that go beyond linguistic barriers (Surian & Damini, 2014), which further reinforces the importance of reflective practice. It therefore seems understandable that reflection on CCIs was found to be a vital step towards cultural competence (Odawara, 2005).

For years, intercultural research on its own has had a bias toward quantitative and comparative studies that tended to examine differences on a macro societal level (Pyle, 2014). This is one of the reasons why both the studies and findings identified by e.g. Hofstede (1984), Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (2008), Hall (1988) and Lewis (2010) were taken up by intercultural educators across the globe and cultural dimensions were elaborated that tended to describe macro-level behaviour of specific nations and their citizens. Some of these dimensions fall into the categories described by Hofstede (1984), e.g. uncertainty avoidance, power distance, or orientation to self (individualism versus collectivism), while others refer to Hall's orientation to time (1976) (monochronic versus polychronic) or communication patterns (direct versus indirect). In addition, specific value sets that tended to be prevalent within certain cultures were examined and discussed by a number of cultural researchers. Such cultural dimensions range from the separation of life spheres, the display of emotions, task versus people-orientation to questions of hierarchy, ambiguity and work ethics. Over the years, numerous models were developed that embraced different factors of social and societal aspects (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997; Schwartz and Sagiv, 1995; Hofstede et al., 1990; Hofstede, 1984; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2008, Hall, 1976).

More recently, these macro approaches have been increasingly criticized, pointing out that they lack a more differentiated lens. Such a broader diversity perspective needs to take account of a variety of aspects that go beyond the societal context. It also embraces demographic, cognitive, disciplinary, functional and institutional diversity factors (Gaisch et al, 2019) while at the same time looking at the geographical embeddedness of the persons involved.

One approach that tends to also take personal narratives into account and thus draws on micro level experiences is the one identified by Thomas (2010). What he calls cultural standards are forms of perception, thought patterns, judgment and interaction that are shared by the vast majority of citizens of a specific culture. The information received from specific critical interactions lends itself to cross-country comparisons and can be assessed in line with cause and effect issues in ambiguous intercultural settings.

Another stance that has been increasingly discussed is one that goes beyond a restricted intercultural lens. It takes the concept of the HEAD (Higher Education Awareness for Diversity) Wheel (Gaisch et al, 2019) as a frame of reference and seeks to build a bridge between diversity management and intercultural competence as a key transversal skill. It is argued that heightened awareness of the interplay of a variety of diversity aspects allows for more informed decisions based on personality traits, demographic factors as well as functional, disciplinary and cognitive socializations (Gaisch, 2019). In addition, it seems that a broader look at cross-border encounters has the potential to transcend current narrative frameworks of diversity management and intercultural competence. In doing so, it may enrich each other in innovative ways and generate more profound and differentiated answers to critical incidents based on a number of aspects that go beyond territorial boundaries .

## 4 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This research was designed as an investigation based on two CIs that were commonly selected by the project team with the aim to collect impressions and representations of a well-chosen sample of experts.

To identify possible reactions to the two selected CIs, a qualitative research design was chosen embracing 30 experts from the participating HE institutions (Czech Republic, Germany, Finland, Austria and Italy). The sample consists of 11 female and 19 male persons within an age range from 20 upwards, with most of the respondents falling into the 50+ category. The different disciplines and professional backgrounds of the participants are in the following categories: economics and business, engineering and ICT, foreign language teaching, humanities as well as intercultural project management. Table 1 provides an overview of the interview data.

The subject selection was done via purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008, p.415), meaning that participants were deliberately chosen in view of their international expertise. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used as an analytical instrument to search for patterns in the data. This method was structured as a data analysis method around the 1970s, at the same time that qualitative methodology was beginning to be widely used. Given that it is a relatively flexible method of qualitative research, independent of theory and epistemology, it can be “applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p 6). This type of analysis arguably does not provide a comprehensive description of the data. Rather, it attempts to provide a more detailed analysis of certain aspects of the data set.

In view of the constructivist approach, this qualitative method does not require the same level of detail in the transcript as discourse or narrative analysis. After generating initial codes, the data were organised into comprehensive and meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005).

**Table 1:** Overview of the interview data

<b>Gender</b>	Male	11
	Female	19
<b>Age</b>	20-30	2
	30-40	8
	40-50	9
	50 +	11
<b>Countries</b>	Austria	6

	Czech Republic	6
	Finland	6
	Germany	6
	Italy	6
<b>Disciplines</b>	Economics and business	13
	Engineering and ICT	6
	Foreign language teaching	3
	Humanities	5
	Intercultural project management	3
<b>Total participants</b>		30

## 5 RESULTS FROM THE EXPERT INTERVIEWS

In the following, the findings of each institution are presented individually and discussed in line with the societal setting at hand. For the sake of clarity, the two CIs are given below. In sum, it can be said that in view of their expert status, all interviewees understood the issue at hand well and interpreted the findings by drawing on their ability to change perspectives. Due to the required brevity, a particular focus is placed on their perception of how their respective citizens would have interpreted the setting.

### 5.1 Critical Incident 1

#### **Mr Hassan does not come to work**

Mr Frank is an engineer and is responsible for a large construction project in Jordan. Mr Hassan, Jordanian, is his most important employee. One morning Mr Hassan asked Mr Frank for an urgent meeting. He explains that he has to take the next day off because his wife has to see a doctor. Mr Frank replied that it would be very inconvenient the next day and that he urgently needed him. He asks Mr Hassan for understanding and asks what is wrong with his wife. Mr Hassan does not answer. Mr Frank emphasizes once again how important the work the next day is and that Mr Hassan's wife can certainly go to the doctor on her own. Mr Hassan remains silent and does not come to work the next day. Mr. Frank is disappointed because he trusted Mr. Hassan.

### *Austria*

Despite the contextual relativity it was commonly agreed that Austrians would have searched for a compromise in this cultural dilemma. It came to the fore that Austrian citizens tended to react more in line with Mr. Frank and also have a similar set of expectations regarding work ethics. Given that task-orientation and work-related priorities are dominant in this societal region, it became obvious that deadlines and tight schedules are considered an urgent work life reality. This is why there was a greater understanding of the burning issues voiced by Mr. Frank. At the same time, it was made clear that if Mr. Hassan had communicated his concern more clearly and made his point more explicit, Austrians would have most likely gone for a compromise, whatever the nature. Interestingly, the separation of life spheres identified for the Germanic culture (Schroll-Machl, 2016) was confirmed in this context since it was generally considered unprofessional to discuss private matters at work. In this regard, it was found to be preferable to reinforce the relevance and urgency of the required time off. Under no circumstances would it be permissible to simply not show up at the workplace.

### *Czech Republic*

Two ways to interpret the misunderstanding between Mr. Frank and Mr. Hassan dominated the Czech data. First were the varied cultural aspects mentioned by all of the respondents who pointed out conflicting perceptions of status, power or hierarchy (power distance), religious values or prioritization of family vs work (high vs low-context). The respondents also repeatedly brought in obviously disparate communication styles, particularly in how the actors exploited politeness strategies to express a varied degree of directness or in how they approached negotiation with respect to facts vs feelings, (task vs people orientation). Czech respondents tended to see the communication breakdown between the two men mainly Mr. Frank's fault, though, indicating that respect to private matters and deeper complexity of relationships are more important over work (people orientation). They objected that Mr. Frank should have employed more empathy or tact, better understand the local culture's behavioral norms to which he obviously was a foreigner, or, considering Mr. Hassan his most important employee, he should have been more concerned about his needs. In line with that, as for a presumable approach of Czechs, the respondents agreed that more discussion to find a compromise would be possible in their country, including talking about and respecting their employee private needs, especially with female bosses. A Czech ability of improvisation to seek all-embracing or off-record solutions to comply with the authorities in power is worth mentioning, too, as Czechs tend to see themselves very flexible especially in creatively organizing their private matters.

### *Finland*

Similarity was found in the Western work ethic between Mr. Frank and Finns when it comes to work time. There is common understanding within the Finnish culture that work comes first. As a result, the doctor's appointment should have been postponed, even more so as the urgency of the work matter was clearly outlined. On the other hand, if Mr. Hassan had been more open about his situation, a Finnish superior would have been more understanding and flexible. The lack of information from Mr. Hassan also raised a question of the worker's hon-

esty about the reason for absence. There was also discussion about the role of the private life and family, and the role of women, in different cultures, which are important factors to note when working in an intercultural setting.

### *Italy*

The Italian participants outlined issues regarding communication (high and low context), organizational matters (power distance) and different perceptions concerning the professional and personal spheres (task and people orientation). It was argued that Italian work culture has a wide economic basis composed of small artisanal realities, small and medium enterprises. This implies that organizational cultures are frequently organized in “familiar” cultures, in which learning and innovation practices regarding multicultural management have been implemented over recent years. Hence, communication and a focus on listening to the other person is key in an Italian work-related setting. Further, it came to the fore that the Italian culture tends to be more people oriented. It was outlined that generally people come first and great efforts is made to foster inclusive practice to achieve better results at work. While the Italian informants classify themselves as people who prefer direct communication and tend to ask personal questions, even in professional spheres, they still pointed to the multicultural nature of Italy. Here, it was made clear that care needs to be taken to cater to the different needs of a variety of cultural backgrounds.

### *Germany*

A pronounced focus was placed on the Jordan setting and the role of women in certain geographical areas. It was outlined that family beats work in this context based on a number of reasons that there is a lack of understanding between the two persons regarding these different approaches. At the same time, it was made clear that due to societal expectations in a German work context, Mr. Hassan’s behaviour would most probably be related to impoliteness, unreliability and untrustworthiness. In this context, a follow-up discussion would be sought in some cases to clarify the situation. Different sets of expectations and discursive repertoires led to a breach of trust on both sides. It was also stated that more differentiated reactions are likely to occur based on specific educational backgrounds, internalised communicative patterns and perceived levels of hierarchy.

In the following, the second CI is provided. Here again, the incident takes place in a work-related intercultural setting with different discursive and cultural norms and expectations.

## 5.2 Critical Incident 2

### The delivery date

*Mr. Carpenter:* I would like to come back to the question of the delivery date again. We seem to have skipped over that.

*Mr. Sato:* Yes, this issue is slightly complicated. It will take some thought.

*Mr. Carpenter:* Not really. It is just a matter of choosing a date that all of us here can agree on.

*Mr. Sato:* Yes, choosing a date.

*Mr. Carpenter:* I think three months after the start of production is reasonable. What do you think?

*Mr. Sato:* Yes, three months. Very reasonable. Perhaps we can take a break now.

*Mr. Carpenter:* A break? Right now? We only have this one item left on the agenda and then we will be finished. If we could just decide.

*Mr. Sato:* Yes, we need to decide. If we could just have a break.

*Mr. Carpenter:* Ok, but let us make it quick.

### *Austria*

Even among the experts, there was little understanding of why the agenda could not have finished effectively and in time. Mr Carpenter's approach seemed more transparent and comprehensible for the Austrian respondents. It came to the fore that efficiency tends to beat diplomacy and that time aspects play a crucial role in project-related work settings. The underlying issue was found hard to discern and not wasting time, getting to the point explicitly and voice issues directly were seen as key aspects of the Western (Austrian culture). In addition, the perception was that of a rather low frustration and ambiguity tolerance on the part of Mr Carpenter together with the expectation of a high degree of autonomy. This freedom and power to decide on your own is considered a crucial trait of individualism and agency, which is perceived as vital and desirable within the Austrian society, even more so within a profes-

sional environment. Hence, Mr Sato's reaction was poorly understood and partly interpreted as poor decision-making, a sign of weakness and overload. While some respondents sensed the need for collective decision-making and hierarchical issues with regard to Mr Sato's desire for a break, others had more personal reasons on the radar such as his wish to go to the bathroom.

### *Czech Republic*

Unlike the first critical incident, which yielded relative similarity in interpretations, the respondents seemed to hit dead-end multidimensional views in the second case. While not allowing for synthesizing individual reflections, however, the data indicate a relative agreement of how the incident might be approached in the country, in particular, more direct communication and more open negotiation, as well as possibility to comply with the request for a break would be allowed. Looser deadlines, greater flexibility, and last-minute improvisation (orientation to time) were the local behavioral patterns pointed out through the data content. Nonetheless, despite experts in cultural theories or managing diversity were chosen for this study, there seems to be an obvious lack of awareness of more profound cultures-specific particulars among the respondents needed to grasp this case. Indeed, only one of the participants might have unraveled the case with a suggestion of a grounded, knowledge-based, simple interpretation of Mr. Sato's behavior: "I think Mr Sato is Asian and it is part of their decision-making routine, before making a decision or before an agreement they need a ten min break to go through some private things, have a cup of coffee and then they can confirm something or agree on something" (high-context, people orientation). With its suggestive simplicity, this revelation brings up the complexity of intercultural contact which might be amiss when their agents get stuck in their own boundaries, miss a particular piece of intercultural knowledge or lack on-site experience.

### *Finland*

The case showed the importance of being familiar with the culture of the business partner. If one does not recognize cultural differences and is not aware of their influence on behaviour, these kinds of situations appeared to raise interpretations of misunderstanding and irritation. Decision making was seen to be more effective in Finland and hence rather in line with Mr. Carpenter. It came to the fore that also Finnish work culture would expect more task-oriented patterns and a more pronounced focus on time and efficiency. On the other hand, it was considered that, if given the reason, there would be more flexibility, as in this case for a break. What needed to be agreed upon, however, was a more explicit communication structure. Hence, it would have been preferable to discuss possible breaks and procedures and how to continue from here, and not to leave the issue unfinished.

### *Italy*

According to the Italian participants, the lack of cultural experience and competences led to various problems and challenges between the business partners at hand. Bringing in possible decisions that have already been made in the background indicates for them an imbalance of the power (high/low power distance). In addition, the missing communication and intercultural

misunderstanding in terms of trust and appreciation led to a stalemate in this particular CI. In this case, it was argued that Italians would try to reduce the pressure on the other person and take a step back. In a people-centred culture where interviewees see themselves, it is essential to focus on listening and trying to understand the other person's point of view, but it is also important for Italians to clarify the situation and communicate accordingly. Taking a break while being stuck in a situation as presented in the CI at hand was perceived as positive by the Italian informants. It was argued that this may be helpful to solve problems, exchange information and clarify open points. Hence, this interruption may have the potential to reduce pressure and provide a suitable timeslot for the persons involved to find customized solutions for specific needs.

### *Germany*

Like Mr Carpenter, Germans were said to be most likely surprised about the required break and sudden interruption. Time is money and quick and self-reliant decision-taking may be seen as a sign of agency and power. The lack of clarification was regarded as frustrating due to the perceived need for uncertainty reduction. While a certain fear of disappointment and loss of face was detected on the Asian side, it also came to the fore that professional autonomy was regarded as a tacit rule of appropriateness within the German context. A lack of understanding of the situation and problems with communication (low and high context), politeness and decision-making (power distance) were highlighted.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

The aim of this contribution was twofold. For one, it was sought to engage in a cross-cultural joint research endeavour within the framework of the international Erasmus+ project entitled 'Critical Incidents in Intercultural Communication and Promoting Diversity'. All project countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Finland, Austria and Italy) were asked to participate in this intercultural publication on CIs which was considered as a dissemination activity for the international project. The second purpose was to shed light on potential answers and solutions for the two selected critical incidents at hand and to show the huge variety of explanatory insights that different citizens may bring forward. It came to the fore that despite some similarities in terms of the respective societal sample, most answers could be traced back to further aspects (such as cognitive knowledge structures, disciplinary background, functional diversity or personal attributes). It therefore shows that the meta-level analysis of cultural dimensions as discussed in the literature review may only serve as a first indication and may not be taken for granted. It also showed that the most crucial ingredients for 'finding the right answer' was the level of critical reflection and the situative embeddedness that each respondent was capable of drawing upon.

## **7 DISCUSSION**

Results showed that respondents were generally well aware of cultural differences and conflicting codes of signification. Further, they were cognizant of culture-specific attitudes, norms and behaviours and had a strong desire to respect local values and rules of appropriateness. At the same time, it was found that with reference to specific angles, participants seemed relatively unaware of their own ethnocentric lens and biases. Interestingly, while they were enthusiastic about the importance of contextual relativity, in some areas their own culture-specific perspectives came clearly to the fore and were expressed with relative ease for the totality of their societal background. What was also striking was that although all 30 interviewed persons were identified and deliberately chosen as cultural experts, there was a substantial variety in their responses and reactions. Some tended to be well grounded in cultural theory while others made clear that they were drawing from their international experience as practitioners in the intercultural field.

Despite the different disciplines and perspectives adopted by the participants, it was still possible to find common societal ground within their answers. As such, a number of culture-specific attributes in terms of communicative styles and orientations to oneself, time and hierarchy could be reiterated.

In sum, it became clear that despite their partial representativeness, the CIs pointed to a heightened awareness of the informants with regard to cultural diversity in working contexts. Attention was paid to the management of interpersonal relationships and different ways of thinking, acting and communicating. The capacity to re-evaluate daily working routines and to assess specific sets of expectations was deemed crucial to find ad hoc solutions for specific needs.

## **8 LIMITATIONS**

In view of the nature of qualitative research, certain inconsistencies in terms of follow up prompts and translation issues may have occurred. While thematic analysis was found to be a helpful tool given its flexibility, it may also have some disadvantages as it does not provide a clear-cut frame of how and what to code. Hence, a vast variety of codes came to the fore which were not addressed in its entire complexity. This was mainly due to the requirements of this contribution in terms of both length and focus. It is for these purposes, that only certain parts of the questions were sketched in more detail while others were largely sidelined.

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