



# CULTURE SHOCKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A reader for international students and faculty:  
how to turn critical incidents into a learning  
opportunity



Erasmus+

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## 1. WELCOME TO OUR READER!

### Who is the reader for?

This reader is for you if you are a University student planning to embark in international mobility, if you are already studying abroad or even if you'd like to make sense ex post of the experience you've had. We also welcome you if you are University faculty or staff who is involved in some way in the reception, accompaniment, teaching or preparation of international students. The reader has an easy access language so that it can be accessible regardless of your disciplinary background and academic level.

### What is the reader for?

The reader wishes to contribute to the success of international mobility, to make sure it really becomes what it is meant to be: one of the most interesting and inspiring forms of learning, both academically and personally. To do this we'd like to put the method of critical incidents developed by French social psychologist Margalit Cohen-Emerique to the service of international study experiences. This method has the objective of helping people work through cultural differences or "culture shock" experiences. We know that "cultural differences" are not the only challenge during international mobility. But we also know that they tend to infuse and interfere with many domains and aspects of life where people don't expect culture to have an impact, what's more people often deny the impact of culture even when it is the primary explanation for some behaviour that at first seems "odd".

### How is the reader structured?

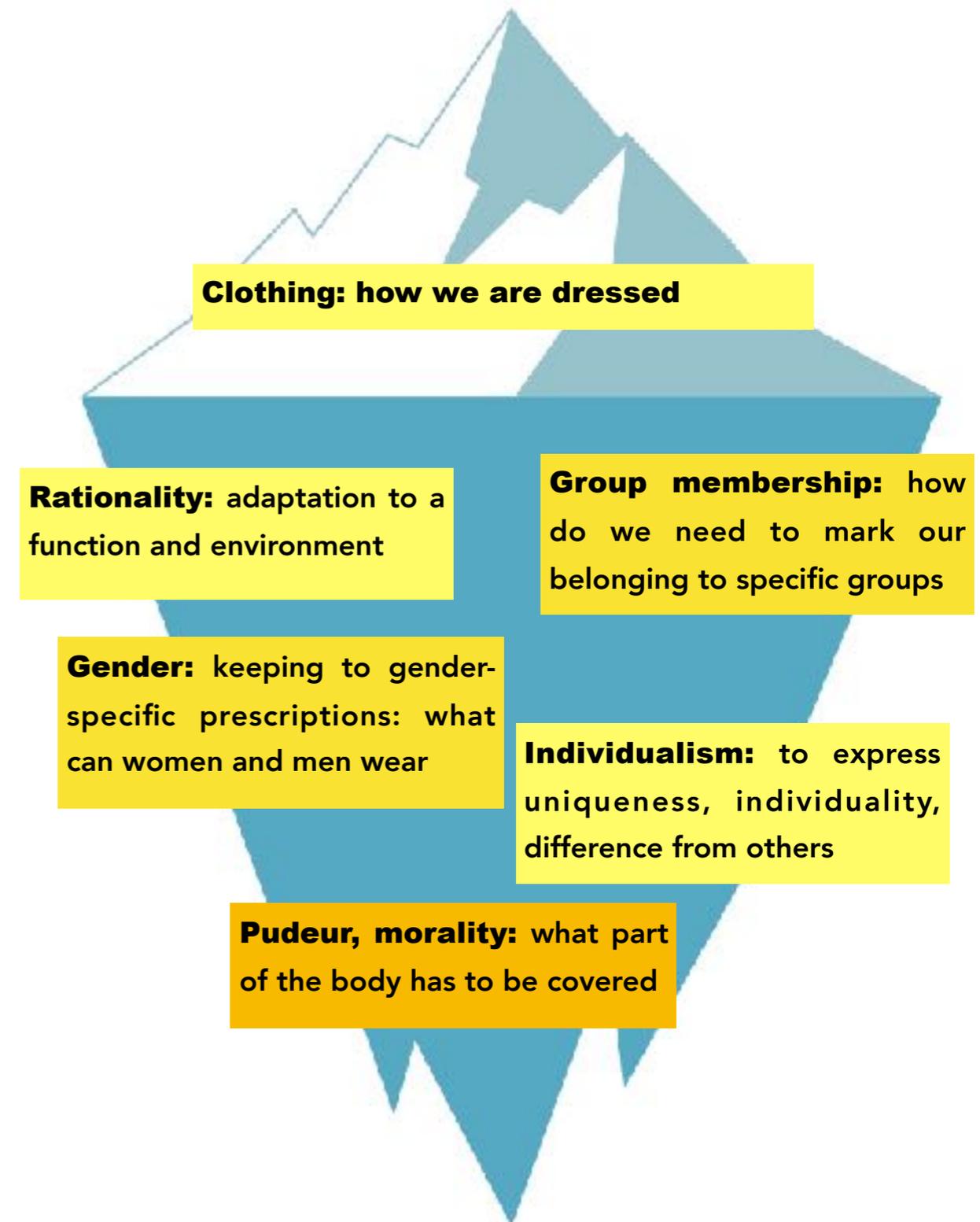
We start by a short theoretical introduction that explains the concept of "culture shock" or "critical incident". We then present a practical guide that will help you identify and understand your own culture shock experiences. Finally we present our own collection of critical incidents, resulting from an applied research carried out with international students. With the description of sensitive zones we tackle recurrent challenges and obstacles in the adaptation process, presenting some background literature for a deeper understanding of these domains.

## 2. NAVIGATING BETWEEN THE ICEBERGS OF CULTURES

Icebergs are probably the favourite metaphor of intercultural trainers, and for a good reason: they capture a fundamental truth about the “nature of culture”. Consider this: wherever you are, you are surrounded by signs of culture. Look around just now; you are probably facing a computer, sitting on a chair, within a built environment, a room, you are probably dressed in a particular way. You may hear the noises of other humans interacting, Around you there may be decorations, books maybe even plants. All these items are perceptible, visible: they are the visible part of the iceberg above the water level. But in order to understand them fully, we have to tap on a larger baggage of values, norms and representations that give the real meaning to these cultural manifestations. These, like the hidden part of the iceberg are usually invisible to us.

Take clothing for instance. To have a precise understanding of why a person is wearing that particular outfit we may need to understand several elements of his or her identity and his or her cultural position on a wide set of values. What gender she or he identifies with? Does she / he follow cultural prescriptions that expect marking the gender differences or rather diminish them? What are her / his beliefs concerning the parts of the body that are considered public or private? What does she / he need to cover in order to feel “decent”? Does she / he feel the need to express group memberships? Is she / he wearing a uniform? Or the non-formal but still expected markers reflecting a belonging to a musical subculture, a political position, a sexual orientation?

What is true for clothing is true for every single cultural tool, behaviour, manifestation and space. We could deconstruct each of these in the same fashion as we did with clothing, and slowly we could undress the illusion of our cultural neutrality. Like the protagonist Neo in the blockbuster movie “The Matrix” perceives the informatics coding of each element of the matrix, so we could perceive the cultural codes that underpin every cultural manifestation. There is one fundamental difference though between Neo’s digital coding and our cultural codings. In contrast to the single binary code of the Matrix, we have a virtually infinite number of such codes.





Each culture can be thought of as having its own iceberg. What's more, each individual, being enculturated into several cultural groups will have a somewhat unique constellation of cultural values, norms and representations that he or she will mobilise when interpreting a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, even those of us who have always lived in the same country (and so did their parents and grandparents) carry a plurality of cultural baggages, referring to their region, religion, political standpoints, social class, sexual orientation, gender identity etc.

Going back to clothes: "mini-skirts" for some icebergs will mean a vulgar strategy to attract attention. While others will see the same mini-skirt a statement about women's freedom to take full possession of their body. Yet to others it is merely a comfortable piece of clothing. Similarly complex is the hijab, a form of veil used by Muslim women. The same garment has been accused of being a form of oppression of women and a means for young Muslim women to invent an identity strategy to be modern, feminist and Muslim at the same time.

The problem is that even if there is a great diversity of icebergs, we tend to read manifestations, behaviours, objects of other cultures through our own icebergs. And this, most of the time will result in errors. First of all in errors of meaning, and

then in errors of judging intentions. The young woman who associates freedom to being able to show as much of her body as she wants will consider the veiled young woman as oppressed or conservative. And vice versa: the young woman associating decency with covering more parts of the body will interpret the exposed legs as internalised oppression and exposure to the male gaze. And so with every other example: the hierarchical frontal arrangement in a classroom will imply for some the assurance of serious education, while for others the lack of critical thinking and old-fashioned, outdated pedagogical style. Arriving 20 minutes late to a meeting for some will mean disrespect, while for others just the right time to arrive.

The key message here is that we do connect different meanings, norms and values to the same behaviour. And whenever different icebergs collide, it is quite probable that people will interpret each-other's behaviour assigning internal characteristics, predispositions and intentions. Often these collisions are accompanied by more or less intense emotions. When this happens, what emerges from the collision of our cultural icebergs are the so-called "culture shocks".

# 2.

## WHY DEAL WITH “CULTURE SHOCKS”?

- Get acquainted with our definition of “culture shock” or “critical incident”
- Understand where culture shocks come from and what they imply
- Understand how culture shock experiences can be a powerful means of training - preparing for international mobility or the reception of international students

## WHY DEAL WITH “CULTURE SHOCKS”?

A first tradition of intercultural trainings focused on the transfer of information on specific cultures: how to understand Japanese use of space, Hungarian sense of humour, French eloquence, Belgian identity etc. At the beginning of her career, Margalit Cohen-Emerique also delivered trainings for French social workers to be able to cater for the needs of their clients newly settling in France as part of the Jewish diaspora. However, she observed that her trainings based on history, cultural anthropology, identity psychology did not have a sufficient impact on the practice of the social workers she trained: in some situations they did not apply the newly acquired knowledge on the specificity of this cultural group while in others they tried to stick to elements of the transferred information even when it did not seem to fit the context of the concrete client.

Cohen-Emerique’s observations are in line with general critiques towards what is called a “culture-specific” approach:

- In one hand it is impossible to give valid and permanent information on cultural norms, values, behaviours that are generalisable across whole cultural groups and their members because of the dynamic nature and perpetual changes characterising each culture, and also the diversity of individual experiences of their members.
- In the other hand it seems tremendously difficult to apply well this type of information into concrete situations: somehow the anthropological knowledge is difficult to transpose into the everyday embodied interactions.

To respond to the challenges she identified, Cohen-Emerique constructed an approach and a methodology that for the last thirty years has become widely used all over France in the training and supervision of professionals of the social and health sectors working with people from “other cultures”. Cohen-Emerique’s intercultural approach is based on three steps, each based on different training methods and tools and requiring the development of different competences.

# Steps of the method of critical incidents

1. Decentering
2. Discovery of the cultural frame of references of the other(s)
3. Negotiation

## a) Decentering

The first step - decentering - is based on the recognition that if there is a conflict it is not the mere consequence of the culturally different other, but rather the interaction between two different cultural reference frames. Decentering thus invites to the exploration of the involvement of one's own cultural models, practices, norms and how they enter in interaction with the values / norms / expectations of the other.

The recognition that decentering is necessarily the first step stems from the observation that our cultural frames of reference act as filters - think of the metaphor of glasses as a representation of culture - biasing how we see the outside world. Decentering makes it possible for us to lift these cultural glasses just enough to be able to see their colour, their shape, i.e. to better understand how we filter our reading of the other person. Moreover, it is much easier to systematise and give meaning to our knowledge on other cultures once we have acquired some perspective of our own. For instance it is easier to understand (which does not mean to accept) cultural taboos concerning meals - what is edible and what is not - once we have discovered that our own culture also draws such a line: maybe for us it is oysters and snails that are usually not categorised as food, maybe it is pork, maybe all beings that have eyes but there is usually such a line, and the question is merely where the line is. Finally it is our nature that we tend to consider ourselves - our own culture - in

more complexity while easily accepting simplifications on others. Gaining more awareness of our own culture first may help us become aware of this bias and maintain less simplistic assumptions on others. This first phase implies the acquisition of tools helping self-awareness, self perception, awareness and identification of emotions.

### **Key skills in this phase are:**

A core skill is the capacity to take a step back from a potentially delicate situation and try to resist the need of immediately looking for the answer and judgement in the other ("how can they oppress the women by forcing them to hide their face and body curves?") and instead turn the attention to ourselves ("why is it so important for me to choose the way I want to dress? Why is it important for me to show my face or body curves?").

## b) Discovery of the frames of cultural references frame of the other

Once we have gained awareness of our own cultural norms, values, representations, we are ready to have a clearer view of the other. The objectives of this phase are:

- Gaining a more elaborate idea on the cultural values, norms, patterns of people from other cultures,
- Overcoming simplistic assumptions and stereotypes,
- Becoming aware of the multitude of factors that may influence the cultural reference frame of the other.

In this phase we acquire tools from cultural anthropologists to observe, interview, analyse cultural patterns, and create “grids” that facilitate the taking into account of contextual elements (e.g. for professionals working with immigrants a useful “grid” would help to determine to what extent the client is “integrated” or “acculturated” in the new society, so as to avoid pinning on her/him cultural values and patterns of her culture of origin which she does not follow anymore).

### **Key skills in this phase are:**

- Daring to be curious: Cohen-Emerique observed that when we become in contact with members of cultures unknown for us, we get too often stuck with our preconceptions, simply because we don't dare to be curious and investigative by the fear of invading the other's privacy and their right to be 'invisible' as a cultural entity different from mainstream. It is because of this fear of intrusion that we do not dare to ask what is the meaning of a behaviour / norm that is strange for us, even when we would have had a chance to actually understand that behaviour or norm.
- Observation (e.g. being able to notice in Japan the low frequency of handshakes as a typical greeting ritual).
- Connecting the observations in a systemic way to our set of knowledge and practices (e.g. widening our representations of what a greeting ritual can be by slowly learning the delicate nuances of the bow).

## c) Negotiation

The third step, negotiation implies finding a solution to a concrete problem in a way that respects as much as possible the identities of both parties. In this phase we are invited to develop communication skills and attitudes favouring negotiation.

### **Key skills in this phase are:**

- Acknowledging the validity and importance of the cultural values and norms of the other (if we consider the other's norms as inferior or unworthy, we're unlikely to negotiate).
- Active listening, non violent communication: listening to the other, not just focusing on what we want to achieve and where our own reservation line is.
- Resistance to the need for closure: avoiding our genuine wish to close communication and end the relation in emotionally challenging, threatening situations.
- Awareness of the cultural diversity of verbal, para-verbal and non verbal communication, capacity to adjust to the communication repertoire of the other.



# 3.

## A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO LEARN FROM YOUR CULTURE SHOCKS

- Learn an easy access method to work through your own culture shock experiences
- How to identify if you are having a "culture shock"?
- How to analyse a culture shock?

## IDENTIFYING CULTURE SHOCKS

The first step of Cohen-Emerique's approach consists in becoming aware of our own frame of cultural references. But how to achieve this when cultural norms and values are notoriously hidden from us? Like the fish surrounded by water, we are surrounded by culture, we are ourselves results of culture, so much so that we rarely have the privileged perspective of reflecting on it. In fact, the best occasions where we gain some perspective on our cultural baggage is during encounters with other cultures, where the alterity of the other culture helps us to make visible what is usually invisible. Amongst these encounters those that provide the most visibility are the "culture shocks".

### What is a culture shock?

The concept of "culture shock" has been used in a variety of definitions and perspectives, so let's start clearing up how we understand it.

*Culture shock is an interaction with a person or object from a different culture, set in a specific space and time, which provokes negative or positive cognitive and affective reactions, a sensation of loss of reference points, a negative representation of oneself and feeling of lack of approval that can give rise to uneasiness and anger.*

(Cohen-Emerique 2015:65)

### Let's pick up some key elements of this definition:

♣ *Culture shock is about people's real experiences, not fantasies, not theories about what could be a source of clash or tension, but situations that have actually happened where we suspect that cultural differences may have played a role.*

♣ *Cultural difference can occur on many different levels. We use the concept of "culture" in the widest sense to include a variety of interpretations: nationality, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, class, professional culture etc..*

♣ Our definition of culture shock pins it down limited in time and space: it has a beginning, and end and is set in a very concrete place.

♣ *Emotions point to culture shock*: emotions (positive or negative) act as indicators, pointing to the direction where something important has happened, maybe because it threatens a value or norm we hold dear, or maybe because it is against our expectations. In any case some emotion accompanies each experience of culture shock, this is how we can detect that we have just experienced it. Sometimes it is a diffuse sense of being lost, but it can be a very powerful anger, disgust, or fascination...

♣ *Culture shock can be positive or negative*: not all culture shock experiences are negative, some people experience positive culture shock, for instance when city-dwellers encounter the Yanomami living in the rainforest, perceiving them as living in 'total harmony with nature'. Positive or negative, the experience tends to motivate us to create a simplistic image of the other instead of trying to perceive them in all their complexity.

♣ *Culture shock can inspire judgments*: In some culture shock situations we witness a behaviour that breaks with a cherished norm (e.g.: someone ending a meal with a loud burp) the interpretation is almost automatic: how rude, how impolite. In other situations we commit cultural mistakes, breaking norms and we are reminded of our mistakes, depending on our character and the severity of the situation, we may feel ashamed and guilty ("I should have known"). Either way it is very easy to close a situation by a negative judgment on the other or

ourselves. One of the reasons is that because these situations tend to be unpleasant we try to close them as soon as possible. Judgment is a good way to do so: we don't need to investigate, try to understand the other, if we are convinced that they are fundamentally rude, sexist, authoritarian etc. Judgment can easily give a false sense of meaning and satisfies our need for explanation.

## A CHECK-LIST FOR CULTURE SHOCKS

Based on the previous discussion of key elements, here is a check-list that should help you identify if what you've experienced can qualify as a "culture shock"..

- You have experienced this incident yourself, in a concrete context, a specific time and space.
- You've experienced an emotional reaction: the situation made you feel in a particular way.
- The incident was triggered by a person / group or object from a different sociocultural background than yours.
- The cause of the incident is probably some form of cultural difference: you have made an effort to consider situational factors, and they did not suffice to explain the situation. (Cultural, situational and internal personal factors influence our behaviour simultaneously, and disentangling them is one of the objectives of this method.)

## An example

Here is an example of a culture shock, to show you what it could look like:

*"During a Phd seminar in a Parisian university I notice the professor addresses students with the informal "tu" while the students address her with the formal "vous". At first I couldn't even believe my ears. This made them look so archaic and retrograde..."*

Told by an international student, Paris 2018.

In the following we will offer you instruments of analysing your experiences, to learn about them, to change your perspective (and come back to the three steps (decentering / exploring the reference frame of the other / negotiating). We will guide you through the most important questions to answer and help you to understand better what happened (and how to avoid in the best case in the future).



# ANALYSING YOUR CULTURE SHOCKS

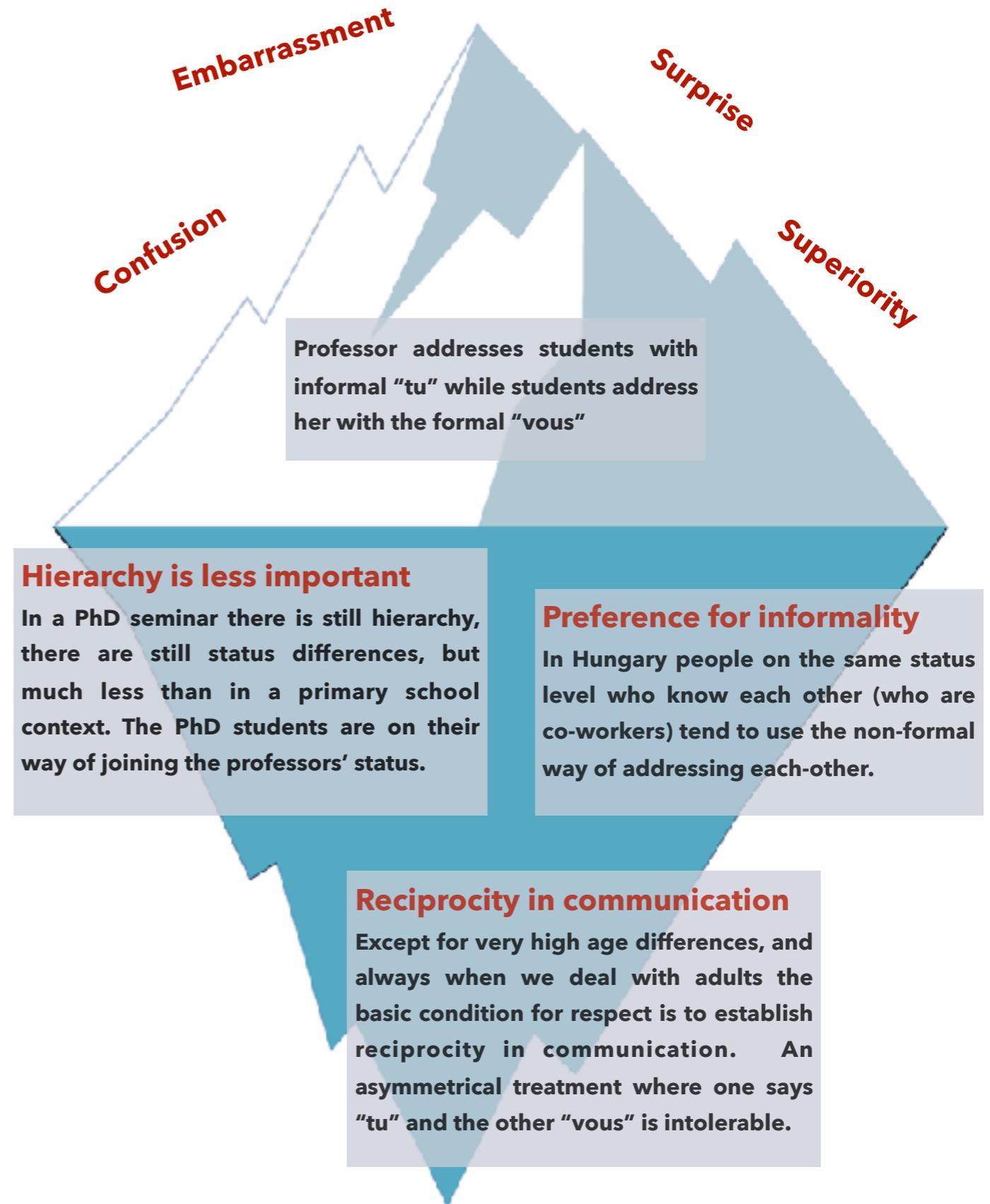
First of all, **do not blame yourself**. Guilt is a common feature of experiences of critical incidents. As if most of us had this particular expectation towards ourselves that nothing surprises us, nothing brings us out of balance. Well, it is very much OK to be out of balance, it is OK to be shocked.

1. **Write down the experience!** The best is if you write down the experience as soon as you lived it. Without interpretations, just trying to stick to what happened, and how it made you feel. Take note of who were the protagonists and elements of the context, which would be more difficult to remember later on.

2. **Give importance to the feelings** you have. Become aware of the emotions, try to identify them, without magnifying them and without acting upon them. Remember: feelings are not an unnecessary burden we must get rid of, but indicators bearing important information. Write down the emotions around the top of your iceberg.

3. Once you wrote down the whole incident try to **phrase in one sentence the objective / visible element at the source of it**. "Objective" and "visible" means that an external person would see the same thing. That you do not yet include your interpretations. For the previous incident this sentence would be "Professor addresses students with informal "tu" while students address her with the formal "vous"". Write this sentence on top of your iceberg.

4. **Explore your representations, values, norms, ideas, prejudice i.e. your "frame of cultural references"**. We're trying to uncover here elements of your belief system that could have had an impact in the situation. Some of these elements you are probably always aware of, while others can be completely non-conscious. Be careful, the mere fact that you are not aware of a value does not necessarily mean you are not abiding by it. Please write these elements in the underwater part of your iceberg. For each value that you think of (e.g. "individualism") please try to formulate a sentence that makes it clear how that value is relevant in the situation.



## QUESTIONS 2-4: "ICEBERG" OF THE NARRATOR

# UNDERSTANDING “THE OTHER SIDE”

**5. Explore the representations, values, norms, prejudice i.e. frame of references of the other person(s)** at the origin of the shock. Be aware of the fact that the other person is not here with you, to agree or argue with your ideas, so you can only emit hypothesis. However, try to make the most elaborate hypothesis you can. Please write these elements to the iceberg dedicated to the other person(s). For each main title (e.g. “individualism”) please include some explanation on how that value is relevant in the situation.

**6. Identify learning points:** does the situation highlight any problem concerning the professional practice, or in general about the challenges of international student mobility or how diversity is handled in the university?



## Hierarchy is important

The superior status must be valorised and its respect expressed. Confirming the recognition of hierarchy is more important than welcoming horizontality with the PhD students.

## Preference for formality

There is a tendency for formalism, attributing importance to how messages are expressed. Formalism is also a means to keep professional and personal identities separate. Even people who work together may treat each other the formal way.

## The need for reciprocity can be suspended

To give more space to the expression of values considered as more important, such as hierarchy.

## QUESTION 5: “ICEBERG” OF THE OTHER PERSON

# 5.

## INTRODUCTION TO OUR COLLECTION OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS

- What is our inventory of incidents?
- Where do the incidents come from? - The process of collecting and analysing
- Presentation of the “sensitive zones”
- How to use the inventory of incidents

## WHAT IS OUR INVENTORY OF INCIDENTS?

Between January and May 2019 the partner organisations involved in the SOLVINC project collected and analysed 35 different culture shock experiences. Most of them were told by international students while some of them by local students and faculty and staff members. Our desire to include culture shocks experienced by local students and faculty is not intended to show how international students “provoke” and bring about difficulties. To the contrary, we wanted to show that experiencing cultural differences can be challenging whether one is abroad or in her/his usual cultural environment.

### **Where do the incidents come from?**

The incidents were collected from students and faculty in the following Universities: Universidade do Porto, Spoleczna Akademia Nauk, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Universität Wien and finally several French Universities whose students or faculty have collaborated with élan interculturel.

### **How were the incidents collected and analysed?**

Part of the incidents were collected through workshops and part of them through bilateral interviews. All incidents have been analysed bilaterally; with the participation of the narrators. In the analysis we adapted the grid proposed by Margalit Cohen-Emerique, following the steps presented in the previous section (“Practical Guide to Culture Shocks”).

# PRESENTATION OF THE “SENSITIVE ZONES”

- Communication
- Gender
- Identity
- Diversity
- Hierarchy
- Colonialism
- Time perception

## What are sensitive zones and why are they so “sensitive”?

“Sensitive zones” are the domains most susceptible to trigger misunderstandings, tensions and conflict in intercultural encounter. It is important to clarify that the “sensitive” feature is not inherent to the domain in question - i.e. there is nothing inherently sensitive in the domain of gender or sexuality.

## Sensitive zones identified in the SOLVINC research

The 35 incidents analysed in the SOLVINC project revolve around seven main sensitive zones. These zones don't create completely disjunct sets of incidents, in fact most critical incidents touch upon several themes listed below. However, they also exemplify one or another sensitive zone more explicitly, and that's what we considered for the primary classification. For instance, you may say that there is no incident that does not involve “communication” - and you would be right. But some of the incidents are particularly helpful to point to the main cultural differences that characterise how we communicate.

### COMMUNICATION

There is no culture shock without some form of communication, most critical incidents emerge in interactions. However, some of these incidents actually occur because of different approaches to communication. Indeed, differences abound on all

forms of communication: verbal, para-verbal, non-verbal or contextual. There are also transversal differences, that can appear on any of these levels. The incidents classified here give a first overview of the range of cultural diversity we can expect concerning communication practices.

### GENDER

Do we expect men and women to dress, speak, work in similar ways? Or do we wish to make some distinction between their appearance, their roles, their status or their communication style? What's more: do we imagine gender as a binary variable or as a continuity with different positioning possible? Can we imagine more genders than two? To what extent do we expect gender to interfere with University life? This section offers a window on incidents where different conceptions and ritualisations of gender lead to misunderstandings and tensions.

### IDENTITY

One of the most noted dimensions of cultural differences concerns the individualist - collectivist dimension: the tendency to think of oneself mostly as a unique individual defined by his/her life experiences, personality and achievements or as member of different social relations and groups. Beyond this distinction we also consider a different perspective: how does intergroup situation or the experience of international mobility influence our identity structure? What implications does minority / majority status have on our identity? How do people deal with the dynamics and expectations of acculturation?

## HIERARCHY

How to determine who has more status? How do we have to relate to people of higher status? Do we have to mark or hide status differences? These questions don't have universal answers. In some cultural contexts marking status differences is more important, while in others more horizontal treatment of each other is favoured even when there are differences in status. This section offers illustrations of different approaches and manifestations of hierarchy and power distance.

## DIVERSITY

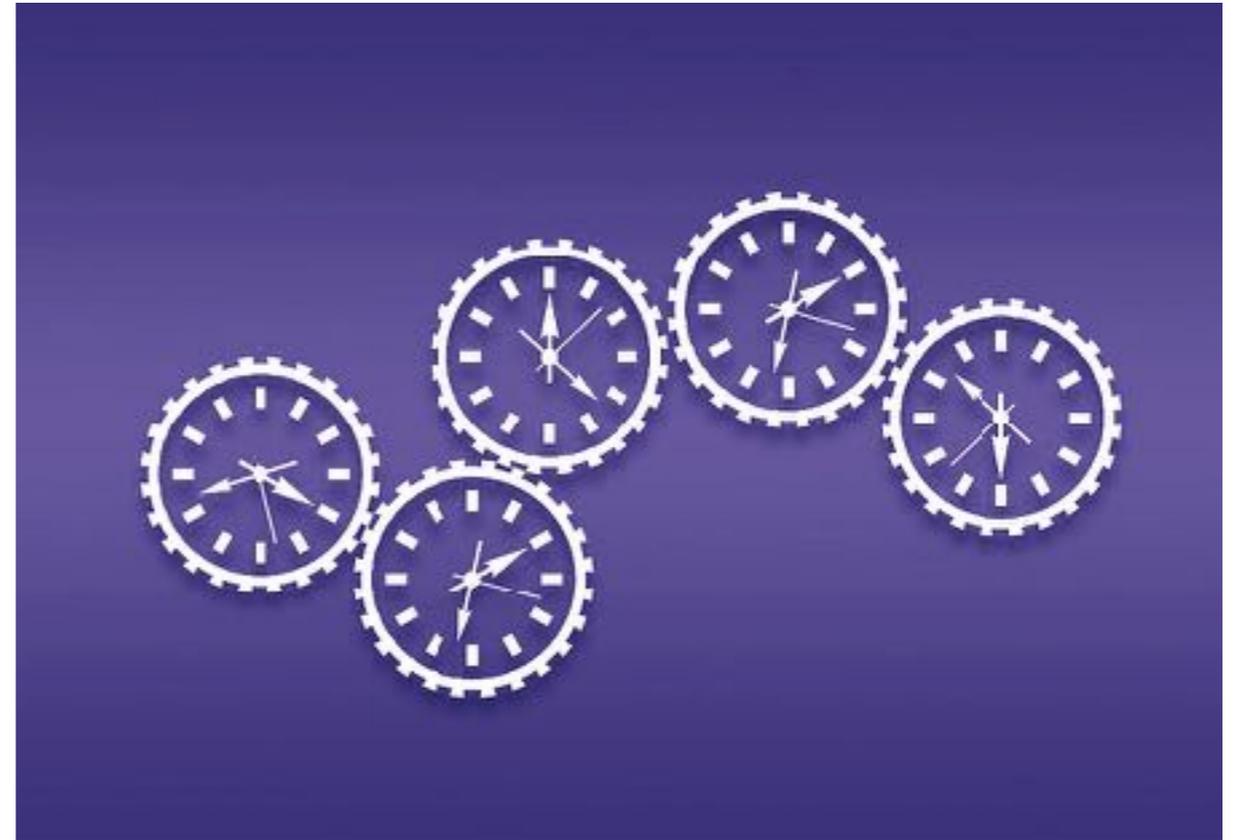
All culture shocks are result of cultural diversity, but some are actually triggered by people's reactions to cultural difference or focus more specifically on how diversity is managed. Some incidents in this section illustrate the use of stereotypes and the dynamics of prejudice and discrimination. Others deal with the tension between a universalist and a particularist approach to diversity and show how political correctness plays out in this debate. Finally, some incidents point to the difficulty of acknowledging a different hierarchisation of needs.

## COLONIALISM

The European Colonial Period may have officially come to an end with the decolonisation taking place in the aftermath of the Second World War, but the colonial past continues to have an influence in some form. For instance, it may have an impact on the interpersonal or intergroup dynamics of people belonging to former colonised or colonizer countries, or on how knowledge production or transmission are represented and institutionalised in former colonised countries.

## TIME PERCEPTION

What does punctuality mean? When does a class really start when it is scheduled for 10 a.m.? Can we schedule a class at 8 a.m.? If 15 minutes after a class was supposed to start there is no one in the room can we deduce the class is cancelled? This section explores cultural differences in imagining, approaching, dealing with time. More precisely it looks into the main dimension of differences: polychronic vs monochronic time orientation.



# HOW TO USE OUR INVENTORY?

In this final section we would like to present some recommendations for the use of our inventory of critical incidents.

## A short "users' guide to our inventory"

On the welcome page, each image is a window on a specific "sensitive zone". By entering such a door, you can read the analysed culture shock experiences that were collected from students and from University staff members illustrating that sensitive zone. If you wish, you can also search our database using the search boxes on the top right corner. For instance, you can choose the incidents where protagonists of specific nationalities are involved, or incidents that happen in a specific situation (for instance: plenary class session, cafeteria etc.).

To make the reading easier and more practical our incidents are presented online separately. Once you enter the database either through a "sensitive zone" or through a "national culture" or "situation" you can click on and download individual critical incidents.

## ONLINE TOOL TO LEARN FROM CRITICAL INCIDENTS

SOLVING PROJECT WEBSITE

READER OF CULTURE SHOCKS

SEARCH: SENSITIVE ZONES

NATIONALITIES

SITUATION



## Precautions about the inventory

**Confidentiality** to respect the privacy of our narrators, we have changed all names in the incidents. Please don't try to investigate who they were.

**Validity - mindful generalisations** you may have already understood that our method is quite subjective and contextual. The incidents you will read were told by real life individuals who represent very specific individual constellations of cultural identities and life experiences. Some incidents point more to general cultural features than others, some are more generalisable than others. For this reason, don't automatically apply what you read here to explain the behaviour of other people of the same nationality or cultural background. Be mindful of the diversity of cultural identities each of us have and the tremendous importance of contextual and personal factors.

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