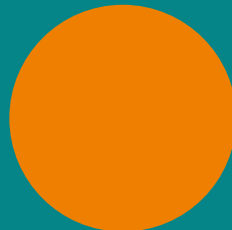
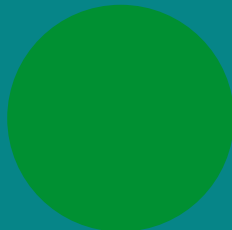


A Matter of Perspective

Critical Incidents from the point of view of
Studentenwerke and higher education institutions

30 case studies from Germany
with 93 intercultural comments
by students and staff



For every-day use
and training



Preface

Why would this student not shake hands? Why does she not show up on time for our appointment? And did she understand me at all? When working with international students, colleagues in the Studentenwerk (student service organization) are confronted with these and similar questions every day.



Currently, more than 320,000 international students from approximately 180 countries study in Germany. In this increasingly international higher education landscape, intercultural competence plays a key role. General information about certain countries of origin is not sufficient when it comes to finding explanations. Intercultural competence means taking on a different perspective, empathizing with other mentalities and questioning one's own way of thinking. Often, there is more than one explanation for certain types of behaviour – and the cultural background might play a decisive role but not inevitably.

In this publication we have compiled a selection of Critical Incidents: intercultural case studies of authentic communication between international students with staff from the Studentenwerk or the administrators of higher education. The majority of these authentic cases relates to the typical topics of the Studentenwerk or the major difficulties experienced by international students, as they were also presented in the Social Survey of Deutsches Studentenwerk (DSW – German National Association for Student Affairs).

The 30 case studies are interpreted by students or staff from the corresponding country of origin. For us, it was especially important that the international students have their say and explain the case study as experts for their culture. We would like to underline that these are personal assessments.

This publication is intended to stimulate reflection and discussion – last but not least through some rather controversial comments. It is intended to demonstrate the variety of perspectives in the intercultural dialogue without any censorship. The introduction “Critical Incidents in an intercultural context” by Dr. Gundula Gwenn Hiller offers the theoretical framework for a classification of the case studies. In the appendix, you will find practical instructions for use in intercultural trainings.

Dr. Hiller has much experience in working with intercultural case studies. She has made her expertise and case studies from her collection available for this publication. We would like to thank her as well as everyone who shared their cases and the numerous commentators.

We hope that this publication enriches and supports you in your intercultural work context.

Achim Meyer auf der Heyde

Secretary General of Deutsches Studentenwerk

Studentenwerke:

The 58 Studentenwerke in Germany fulfil public tasks in the provision of economic, social, health and cultural support to students enrolled at all German higher education institutions. They offer a wide range of services in the areas of university catering, accommodation, the financing of studies, child-care, advisory and counselling services, placement services and culture.

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Critical Incidents in an intercultural context

In the course of internationalisation, every-day life in German higher education has changed significantly. Contributing factors are quantitative developments, such as an increase in international cooperation, growing numbers of mobile students or the introduction of double degrees. On the other hand, these international encounters create new challenges, for example socially and communication-wise. That is why the reasoning has prevailed that this process must also be accompanied on a qualitative plane. Specifically, that means that intercultural qualifications are of tremendous significance for all groups involved at German universities and the Studentenwerk, for students as well as for the instructors and administrative staff.

This publication deals with that specific aspect by introducing and commenting on authentic intercultural case studies (Critical Incidents). The focus will be on communication between international students and staff from the Studentenwerk as well as from the university administration. The case studies invite further reflection on intercultural challenges from various perspectives. The accompanying comments are intended to serve as an impulse for a reflection on approaches of explanation.

Academic foreigners from the 20 most important countries of origin

Country of origin	2014	Country of origin	2013	Country of origin	2004
China	28.381	China	25.564	China	24.095
Russia	11.126	Russia	10.915	Poland	11.588
India	9.372	Austria	8.655	Bulgaria	11.586
Austria	9.305	India	7.255	Russia	8.906
Bulgaria	6.741	Bulgaria	6.764	Marocco	6.791
Turkey	6.701	Turkey	6.666	Turkey	6.474
Ukraine	6.411	Poland	6.575	Ukraine	5.825
France	6.321	Ukraine	6.264	France	5.598
Poland	6.217	France	6.023	Cameroon	5.111
Italy	6.210	Cameroon	5.833	Austria	4.290
Cameroon	6.200	Spain	5.710	Spain	4.179
Spain	5.897	Italy	5.519	Italy	3.867
Iran	5.463	Iran	4.928	South Korea	3.775
South Korea	4.534	Marocco	4.498	India	3.697
Marocco	4.490	South Korea	4.279	Romania	3.491
USA	4.298	USA	4.111	Greece	3.147
Brazil	3.690	Luxemburg	3.196	Georgia	2.902
Luxemburg	3.425	Brazil	3.115	Iran	2.782
Indonesia	3.210	Romania	3.105	USA	2.747
Greece	3.204	Greece	2.892	Hungary	2.575

Figure 2
Source: Wissenschaft weltoffen 2015.

International students in Germany 2002-2014

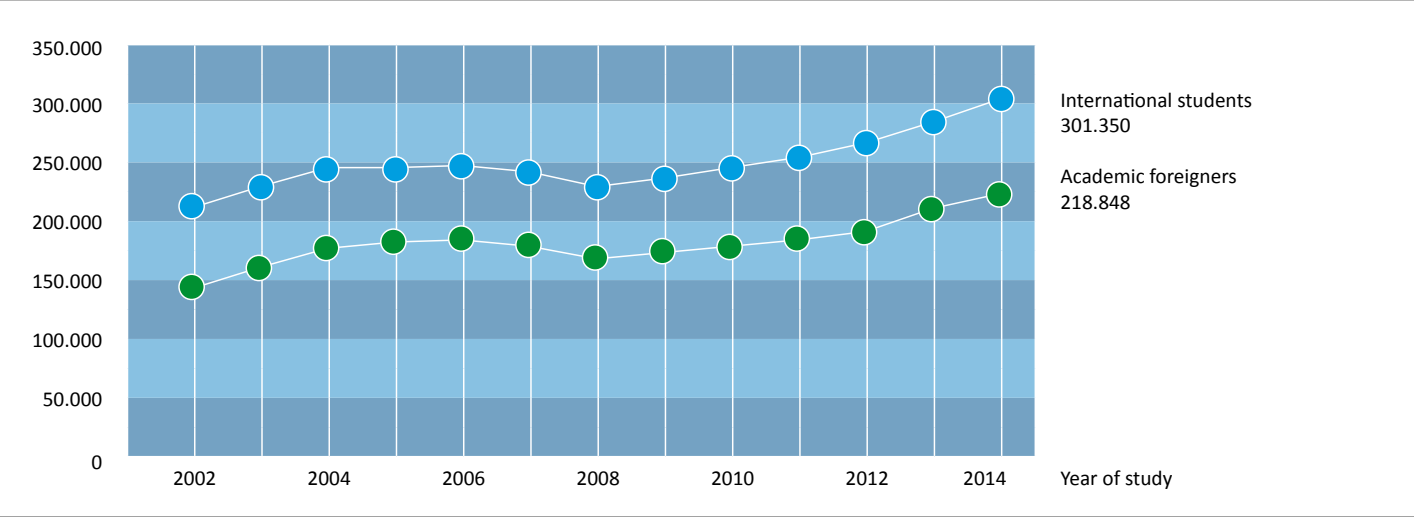


Figure 1
Source: Wissenschaft weltoffen 2015.

Critical Incidents

The specialist term for intercultural case studies is “Critical Incidents”. It is generally a description of a critical situation in which the original intention of communication or action fails. The following are typical features of a Critical Incident:

- an every-day, authentic and plausible encounter between at least two persons of different cultural origins
- the situation is typical for an interaction between persons from these two cultures (Thomas 2003)
- the situation does not progress as expected (negative/positive) and is experienced as surprising, incomprehensible or even conflictual
- at least one of the interaction partners experiences the situation as “conflictual, enigmatic or ambivalent” (Fiedler et al. 1971, P. 97)
- the behaviour of the person from the other culture is easy to misinterpret but could be easily explained with some knowledge of the foreign cultures (Thomas 2003)

According to the understanding presented here, the core of an intercultural Critical Incident is generally formed by cultural misunderstandings or conflicts.

Critical Incidents are frequently used as material in intercultural trainings due to their vividness. The analysis of Critical Incidents is intended to inspire reflection on possible causes and alternative courses of action (see Section “Critical Incidents as training tool”).

International students in German higher education

The continuing internationalisation manifests itself especially in the growing numbers of international students. The most recent report on internationalisation in higher education and research by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) shows that it achieved its highest level in Germany in 2015 (see Figure 1). During that year, approx. 320,000 foreign nationals were enrolled in German universities, representing a total share of 11.9%.

Especially the changes in the countries of origin of students are remarkable. 44% of international students come from Europe but the share of Asian students has been growing steadily and has reached 37%. Among those students, it is primarily Indian nationals whose numbers have increased significantly. Numbering approx. 9,000 students, the Asian sub-continent is the third largest group of international students in Germany today, following China and Russia (Wissenschaft weltoffen 2015). Figure 2 illustrates the developments and shifts regarding countries of origin over the last years.

Difficulties of academic foreigners in Germany
Percentage of international students who experience (major) difficulties

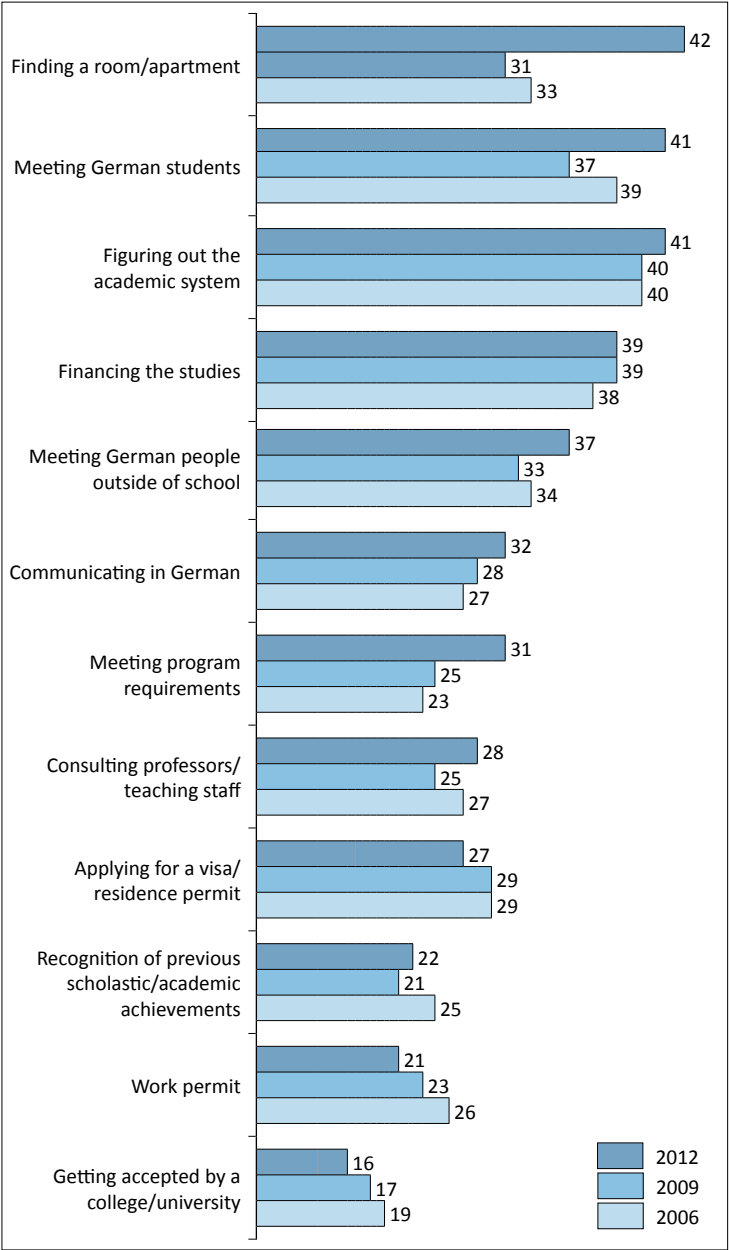


Figure 3
Source: Foreign students in Germany 2012, Results of the 20th Social Survey of the Deutsches Studentenwerk (modified presentation).

Intercultural challenges

The increasing variety of countries of origin of students in higher education results in administration as well as instructors being increasingly confronted with cultural diversity. Current case studies and research suggest that a lot of cultural differences are accompanied by special challenges (for example Otten 2006; Knapp/Schumann 2008; v. Queis 2009; Schumann 2012; Hiller 2014). On the side of the international students, communication and interaction with German university staff is a challenging experience as well.

This is proven by the regular Social Survey commissioned by the Deutsches Studentenwerk which asks international students to list their difficulties and challenges. Figure 3 shows the most recent results.

Several qualitative studies about the challenges for international students from an explicitly intercultural perspective shed a light on problems which supplement those mentioned in the Social Survey (for example Hiller 2014, Schumann 2012).

The most important intercultural problems and areas of irritation and conflict from the perspective of international students in Germany can be summarised as follows:

Areas of irritation and conflict from the perspective of international students in Germany

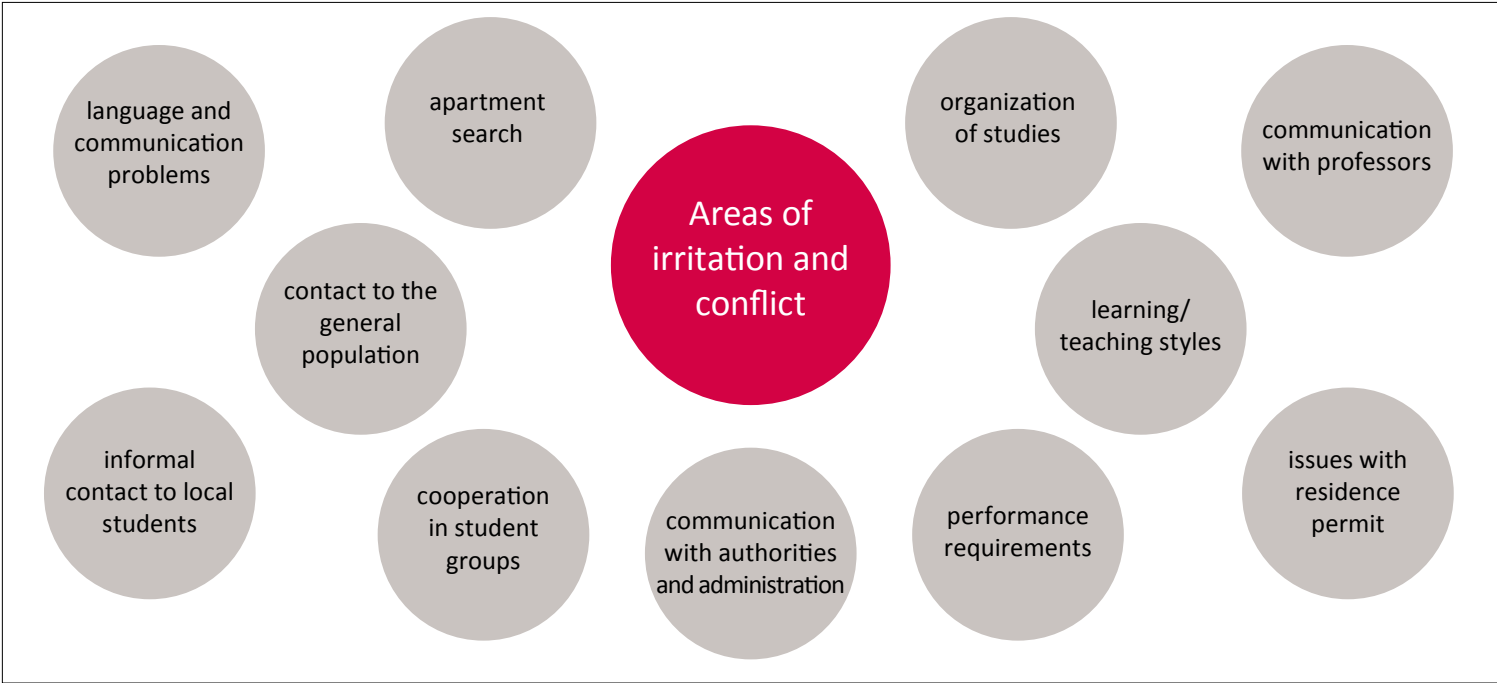


Figure 4
Source: based on the 20th Social Survey by the Deutsches Studentenwerk 2012 as well as Hiller 2014/2015, Schumann 2012; comp. also Leenen/Groß 2007.

Consequently, intercultural qualification programmes for all groups are increasingly being offered by higher education institutions and the Studentenwerk. Especially the development of training programs for administrative staff is on the rise¹.

Intercultural trainings are qualification measures which intend to develop intercultural competences. They intend to sensitise the participants to cultural differences and enable them to handle these differences in their daily work constructively.

Learning spiral “Intercultural competence”

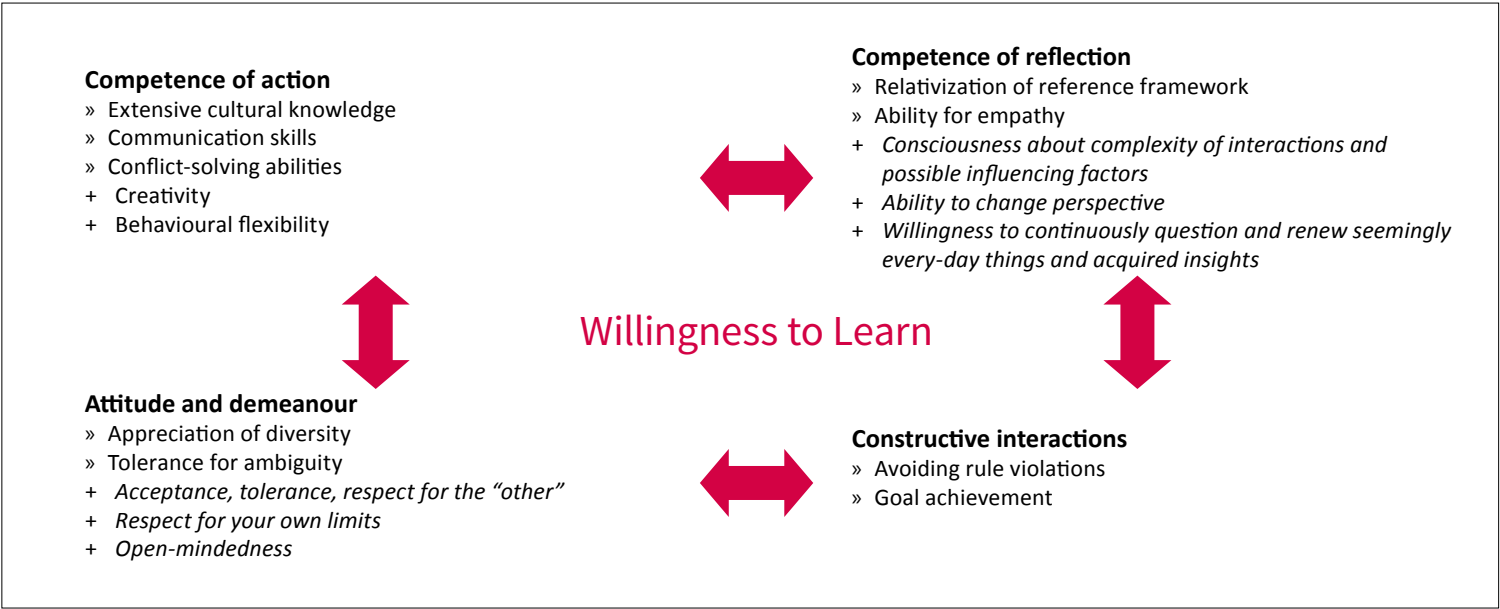


Figure 5
Source: based on the intercultural competency model by Deardorff 2006, supplemented by aspects with a “+”.

Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence comprises a set of abilities to act in a reflective, effective and appropriate manner in intercultural encounters. Generally, it is important to remember that intercultural communication is always based on a negotiation process which can create new communicative patterns and behavioural standards which prove to be suitable in certain situations and can contribute to a successful interaction.

Intercultural learning is a continuous process which aims to expand communication and social competences in new situations as well as to create situations with the counterpart which are adequate, face-saving and effective. The learning spiral visualises this constant learning process and summarises which aspects are included in intercultural competence as it has been defined here (see Figure 5).

The foundation of intercultural learning is the **willingness to learn** in the sense of an expansive motivation for learning (Holzkamp 1995). This may be the case if the learning person has previously recognised a behavioural problem and would now like to learn how to expand his/her own scope of action.

The **attitudes and demeanours** relevant for intercultural competence can be summarised as appreciation of diversity, tolerance for ambiguity (= the ability to handle unclear situations calmly), acceptance, tolerance and respect for cultural differences as well as respect for the own tolerance limits. The important thing is an open approach towards the foreign (open-mindedness).

At the same time, the **ability to reflect** plays a crucial role: empathy and especially the skill of changing perspectives are of central importance for an understanding of critical situations (as the name of this publication suggests). But reflection also includes consciousness for one’s own cultural orientation and its possible impact on the interaction. An expansion of the own reference frame is also of central significance. That includes questioning what is considered as the only “right” or “appropriate” behaviour. Associated with that is also the willingness to question one’s own world view occasionally.

The most important prerequisites for **competence of action** are cultural knowledge, communication skills and conflict solution skills as well as creativity and flexibility. The ability of **constructive interaction** aims to achieve a communicative goal without rule violations (including unspoken, implicit rules and conventions, such as “saving face”, comp. cases “The daring request” or “Emphatic nodding”).

Due to this reason, it is the goal of intercultural trainings in the higher education context to challenge attitudes and expand reflection and action skills for a constructive contribution to intercultural communication situations. That also includes a sensitisation for cultural differences which are to be considered along with situational and structural aspects (see Worksheet 1: Exercise for Critical Incident Analysis, P. 72).

Cultural differences in the context of higher education

As a simplification, the significance of culture in terms of intercultural aspects can be illustrated using the image of an iceberg (see Figure 6).

The iceberg symbolises the fact that our image of another cultures initially only comprises the tip and/or the surface, such as symbols, language, rituals etc. Deeper values, norms, ideals, conventions etc. remain hidden and can generally not be discerned at first glance. In relation to the higher education context, the non-visible part includes educational and academic ideals, understanding of roles of individual players (here: instructors, students, administrative staff) but also legal and economic framework conditions.

Intercultural encounters may result in irritations if the values, role definitions and conventions hidden to outsiders encounter each other, as in a collision of two icebergs. Those are the “critical” moments in the case study presented in this publication. In many cases, cultural differences will be illustrated which can lead to discomfort, misunderstandings or irritation in the interaction.

Iceberg model:
Visible and invisible aspects of culture

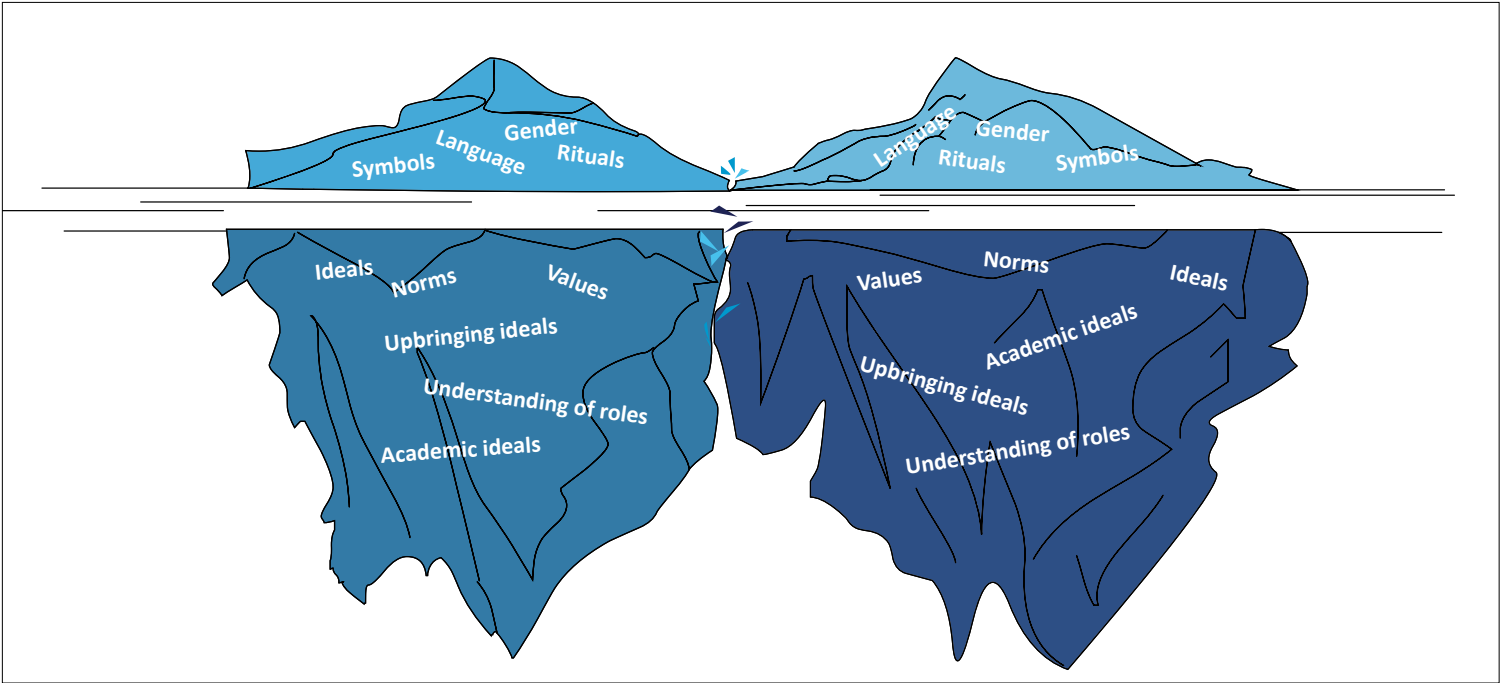


Figure 6
Source: based on AFS Orientation Handbook 1984.

Cultural value orientations

Cultural differences are frequently presented schematically, for example as cultural dimensions or cultural standards. Cultural dimensions and standards designate values and norms, conventions but also ideals which are characteristic for certain cultures. The cultural dimensions (Hofstede 2001) represent a universal grid for arranging existing national cultures. As an alternative, Thomas developed cultural standards (2003) which are characterised as follows:

“Types of perception, thoughts, evaluation and actions viewed as normal, typical and binding by the majority of members of a certain culture for themselves and others. One’s own and foreign behaviour is controlled, regulated and judged by these cultural standards.” (Thomas 2005, P. 25).

The cultural standards are defined from a German perspective and based on analyses of conflict situations which Germans frequently experience in encounters with other cultures. From that emerges the formulation of specific cultural standards which were assigned to German and other national cultures which have been analysed (for German cultural standards, comp. Schroll-Machl 2003)².

Star of Values

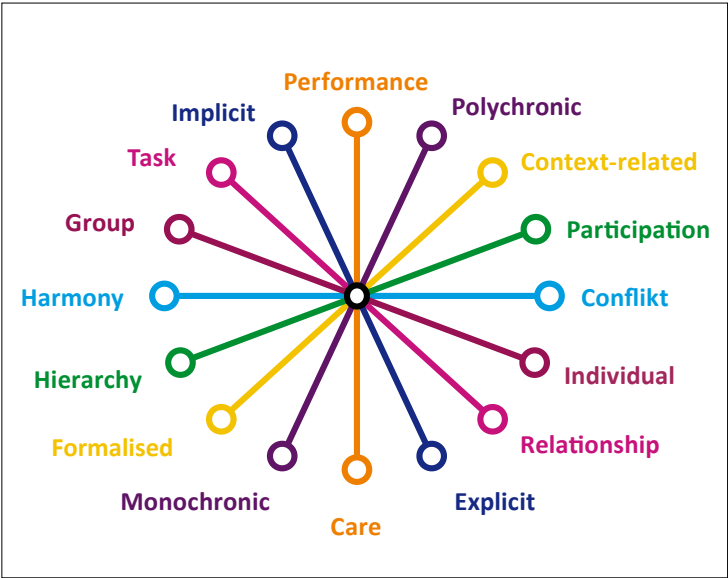


Figure 7
Source: following Bosse 2011.

However, both models bear the risk of making sweeping generalizations about whole national cultures which, in light of globalization and mobility movements, will hardly lead to appropriate assessments. These efforts can only be effective for intercultural learning as orientation aid and/or analysis instrument if not applied template-like to whole national cultures.

For intercultural trainings in a higher education context, an approach makes sense which combines university-relevant dimensions from the existing models and offers them as instrument of interpretation for intercultural communication³.

The model (see Figure 7), also referred to as star of values, provides a number of categories which describe cultural value orientations. The lines are to be taken as dimensions or axes which connect two contrasting and yet supplementary cultural orientations. These lines can help to identify and reflect one’s own value ideas and set them in relation to other cultural value structures.

The following summary will provide a short overview of the most important value orientations contained in the star of values (comp. Scheitza 2002).

These categories can serve as an attempt to explain the case studies presented hereafter. Some commentators use the categories for explanations of the case studies.

Value orientation

- Focus to group belonging – focus on individuality (short form: Group – Individual)
Group: Group loyalty and sound relationships between group members are held in high esteem.
Individual: Individual success, responsibility and uniqueness are held in high esteem.
- Significance of formal rules – significance of context-related/situational strategies (short form: Formalised – Context-related)
Formalised: Roles and tasks are very much formalised and determined by existing regulations.
Context-related: Actions are aligned with situational customs and depend on the personal creativity of the individuals.
- Hierarchy and authority – participation and autonomy (short form: Hierarchy – Participation)
Hierarchy: Disparities are accepted. The structure of responsibilities and obligations is hierarchical.
Participation: Active participation and consensual decision-making are held in high esteem. Status and power symbols are not important.
- Performance and assertiveness – responsibility and care (short form: Performance – Care)
Performance: Competition, material success and performance are held in high esteem.
Care: Care for others, welfare, equal rights and quality of life are held in high esteem.
- Monochronic time orientation – polychronic time orientation (short form: Monochronic – Polychronic)
Monochronic: Structured schedules, punctuality and sequential organization of activities are held in high esteem.
Polychronic: Flexible time structures and synchronous organization of different activities are held in high esteem.
- Implicit communication and high degree of dependence on context – explicit communication and low degree of dependence on context (short form: Implicit – Explicit)
Implicit: Much of the information is communicated without words. Context, partner and topic affect the impact of what is said.
Explicit: Verbal messages are the essential carriers of information. Written, properly formulated text is the ideal and reliable means of communication.
- Conflict orientation – harmony orientation (short form: Conflict – Harmony)
Conflikt: Conflicts should be approached directly and openly. Openness is considered and promoted as honest and efficient behaviour.
Harmony: Harmony and saving face within the group are of the utmost priority. Open criticism and the expression of personal wishes and opinions is considered as tactless and disrespectful.
- Task orientation – relationship orientation (short form: Task – Relationship)
Task: Fulfilling work tasks is a central topic. Work tasks are carried out seriously and with diligence.
Relationship: Good working climate and relationships have priority. Commitment and identification with colleagues are essential.

The case studies in this publication

The cases selected for this publication provide insight into the dynamics of intercultural communication in order to highlight the significance of cultural differences and develop sensitivities for intercultural challenges. All case studies are authentic, meaning they are based on actual experiences in German-speaking higher education contexts. They stem from term papers by participants of the training module “Trainer for intercultural competence at universities” which I have been organizing together with Dr. Elke Bosse and Uta Kirchner at the International DAAD Academy (iDA) in Bonn since 2010⁴. Each participant is assigned the task to collect information about interculturally relevant Critical Incidents in their work context. Over the years, a large collection of stimulating case studies has been compiled, most of which portray interactions between international students and German higher education staff.

The case studies selected for this publication focus on the intercultural communication with the Studentenwerk and university administration and turn their attention to a group of persons which has received little attention in this context to date. The examples are supposed to provide an overview of the intercultural challenges experienced by the staff in the Studentenwerk and higher education administration in their respective work to stimulate reflection of difficult situations and the development of alternative courses of action.

It was not always easy to make a selection for this publication. The following three criteria were used as basis:

1. Each case should be representative for the context of the Studentenwerk and demonstrate potential for gaining intercultural insights.
2. The case studies were supposed to present the main countries of origin of international higher education students in Germany (see above).
3. The case studies were supposed to tackle important problems experienced by international higher education students which were gathered from current research as well as the Social Survey conducted by the Deutsches Studentenwerk (see above).

An assessment of the approx. 400 available case studies allows for the conclusion that intercultural irritations between staff and students affect the following areas:

- Agreements
- Recognizing arrangements
- Work styles
- Bureaucratic understanding
- Standards of politeness
- Communication conventions
- Understanding of roles

- Commitment to rules
- Ideals
- Living habits
- Time concepts and handling deadlines and appointments

However, other topics also make appearances in the case studies, for example food, gender roles or religion. The cases were selected based on relevance and representativeness to provide a platform for students from most countries of origin and consider recurring problem situations. Many of the case studies will treat several of the topics listed above. For purposes of systematisation, we have opted for the following categorisation which follows the task ranges of the Studentenwerk:

- Residence Halls
- Counselling
- Financial Matters
- Culture
- Study organization
- Communication

Despite the existence of some studies and guidebooks on the special intercultural challenges at universities⁵, there are neither research papers nor practical manuals which focus on the role of the staff at the Studentenwerk and the administration. This publication aims to close that gap.

Critical Incidents as a training tool

Critical Incidents are the perfect tool for confronting participants in intercultural trainings with examples of difficult, ambiguous or frustrating situations which they may experience when interacting with representatives of other cultures (comp. Wight 1995). In doing so, participants are supposed to become conscious of their own cultural tendencies and challenge their own interpretations and explanations of the actions of their interaction partners. Hasty ways of interpretation and patterns of perception can therefore be determined, compared and analysed on the basis of Critical Incidents.

Furthermore, Critical Incidents can help to crystallise cultural differences which might be possible causes for the misunderstandings, problems or conflicts. Originally, the traditional didactic objective of working with Critical Incidents was the transfer of knowledge to training participants which might help them to handle similar situations effectively and appropriately. One point of criticism of the Critical Incident method is the fact that explanation attempts frequently come across as one-dimensional. A more recent approach looking to counter the danger of stereotype formation is the sensitization of participants for multiple hypothesis formation⁶.

We will take up this approach in this publication by providing comments on Critical Incidents from several perspectives. Most of the time, students from the same countries as the international players in the Critical Incidents provided comments. For example, it was important that a case depicting an interaction between a German member of staff and a Cameroonian student was commented upon by two or three students from Cameroon who study/studied in Germany themselves. Every once in a while, the number of comments will deviate. It could be that we only found a single bicultural expert or that we received four great comments about the same case. For some cases, we decided to also provide the perspective of the (mostly German) Studentenwerk or university administration staff to give both sides an opportunity to provide their opinion. In some cases, we asked international staff with experience in Germany to comment on specific Critical Incidents. Commentators were asked to analyse the cases based on the following guiding questions:

- How do you assess the situation?
- Are there comprehensible reasons why the person from your country of origin is behaving this way?
- Which aspects of the cultural background might explain the behaviour from your perspective?

Overall, we collected comments for 30 case studies by 93 persons from 23 countries. As expected, many of the explanations differ greatly while others are almost identical. These multiple perspectives on the case studies do not result in clear solutions which might suggest that representatives of certain cultures always act in the same ways. However, we believe that the comments have great explanatory value – especially due to the fact that they suggest a “It could be that ...” instead “The situation is that ...”.

With this publication, we hope to inspire readers to reflect and invite them to think about their own cultural ideals and behavioural patterns. At the same time, we would also like to ask readers to change perspective in interculturally difficult situations and ask themselves what the background to the behaviour of the other person may have been.

End notes

- 1 Examples: The “Fortbildung zum Trainer für interkulturelle Kompetenz an Hochschulen” at the International DAAD Academy (iDA) in Bonn was completed by more than 100 multipliers since 2010, many of whom went on to develop similar programs at their own higher education institutions (www.daad-akademie.de/daad.com/seminare-und-workshops/seminare/de/36937-fortbildung-zumtrainer-fuer-interkulturelle-kompetenz-an-hochschulen-modul-1-kurs). The SPRINT program at the Technical University Dresden (<https://tu-dresden.de/exzellenz/zukunftskonzept/internationalisierung/sprint>) offers a successful intercultural training program for employees of university administration. At other higher education institutions, the development of intercultural training for administrative staff is still under way.
- 2 For individual countries: see the publication series “Beruflich in ...” (Ed.) A. Thomas, Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).
- 3 Comp. Bosse (2011), who adapted the approach by Scheitza (2002).
- 4 The training will most likely be offered for the first time in 2017 at the Center for Continuing Education at the Free University Berlin.
- 5 Manuals and material collections for students: for example Hiller/Vogler-Lipp (2010), MuMis (o.J.) or for teaching staff: v. Queis (2009), Schumann (2012).
- 6 For a multi-perspective exploration of Critical Incidents as applied in the aforementioned iDA training, see Bosse (2011). Comp. also Fetscher (2010).



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studied Romanic languages and German Studies and attained her Ph.D. in Cultural Studies. She is the Director of the Center for Intercultural Learning at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), regularly publishes articles about intercultural competence at universities and provides training for trainers. She is currently working as Editor for the DAAD in Aix-en-Provence/Marseille, France.

Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

Room assignment



THE CASE

Having just arrived from Spain, *Maria** and *Luciana** personally inquire about an accommodation with the Studentenwerk. They had previous e-mail contact with the Studentenwerk but could not agree on a suitable room. They now find out that there are currently no vacant rooms and that they should have accepted the first offer. Now, both girls regret their decision after having found out how difficult it is to find accommodation. By chance, they hear that other students still managed to secure a room with other contact partners in the Studentenwerk. So, they try again, with different administrators, but keep on being told that they should have accepted the first offer. They apologise and really regret. Finally, they manage to secure a room – but they actually need two! Maria and Luciana try again and are lucky – a second room is available but only at a later date. Now the two try to find another room for the intermediate period. An argument ensues as the employee of the Studentenwerk, Frau *Hofer**, finds their behaviour to be ungrateful and inappropriately demanding. She calls Herr *Schulz** from the International Office and asks him to reprimand the students. Herr Schulz sends an e-mail to both students and their faculty advisors. In it, he sternly demands an apology for their impolite behaviour at the Studentenwerk.

The two students formally apologise but do not understand the situation. To them, it is not comprehensible how the assignment of rooms is being managed. They find the system to be random and have the feeling that the applicants are being eyed up and selected. They feel that they have been treated unfairly and wonder what the right behaviour would be to secure suitable student housing in Germany.

* Names amended

Watch this Critical Incident as a short film:
<http://erikmalchow.de/perspective>



PERSPECTIVES

Jorge García Paredes

is a student of Communications Engineering in Madrid and has been an exchange student at the faculty for Information Technology at the University of Mannheim since 2015.

The reaction of the two Spanish students is understandable as they both need a room. After having tried for so long and finally being presented with a solution – even if it is not an ideal one – they should really understand that Frau Hofer and Herr Schulz are only doing their job. They should understand that it is disrespectful if they continue to demand more support which is not part of the staff's scope of work. However, the two should take into consideration that they are dealing with international students. It would be much better to explain to them that they should not present themselves as such and let them know that they might have done wrong.



Román González Santana

is a student of Communications Engineering in Madrid, previously completed a degree in Music and is currently an Erasmus exchange student at the University of Mannheim.

I believe that when rejecting the first residence, the two students thought they would be able to secure another accommodation rather quickly. However, they were not aware of the high demand in a university town. Regardless, in my opinion, they took advantage of people who helped them. If I had been in the same position and had noticed that it was impossible to find decent accommodation at a good price, I would have taken the first room offered to me, without even thinking about it. I would have been very thankful towards the person who helped me. I do not think that this case is about a cultural problem. Instead, it seems to me that the Germans acted too friendly and that people in Spain would have perceived the demands of the students the same way.



Yolanda Mateos Ortega

originally from Madrid but has spent the majority of her life in Germany. She has been active in the areas of languages, mobility, foreign relations and public work at the University of Mannheim for 23 years. She is also an intercultural trainer.

The main difference is the significance attached to the rejection of the original room offer by both sides. For the two Spanish students, it is in the past and therefore irrelevant. They are sorry if this was taken amiss by the Germans but that should not impact the current request in any way. Obviously, there are still rooms available, as others were being helped. The comparison with other students who by now were assigned a room moves more and more to the foreground and supports the impression of injustice. They do not understand the logic behind it and only see capriciousness. This unsettles them insofar that it does not fit with their image of Germany (everything is organised and logical, not regulated by emotions and preferences). Moreover, other German stereotypes (strict, unrelenting) are reinforced. Their attempt to approach different contact points may be partially based on their cultural background (similar to African students, for example) but could also be a result of the perceived capriciousness ("if we find the right, more friendly or clueless contact partner, it might work out"). And they fail to see why they should be content with a 50% solution or a 75% solution later on. They are at the mercy of these people who should support and care for them but are punishing them instead! I am sure I do not need to explain the German perspective.



Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

House rules



THE CASE

Lian* and Yunbo* from China have been living in a shared apartment in a Studentenwerk student residence hall for a few semesters, together with two German students with whom they get along quite well. Both studied in China before and lived in a similar student residence hall. Now, they are having problems with the facility manager, Herr Appelt*. He has written repeated messages, asking them to clear the hallway saying that it is also a regulation included in the house rules which the students must follow. The house rules are posted in the hallway, well visible for all, and must be adhered to at all times. Lian and Yunbo do not understand why the facility manager is getting so upset. After his third reminder, the two become annoyed. After all, they did nothing wrong. As long as their roommates do not object, everything should be okay!

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Fanjie Kong

originally from China, studies Electronic and Information Technology at the University of Hanover from 2009-2014. During that time, he worked as a tutor at Studentenwerk Hanover.

The situation demonstrates the cultural difference between China and Germany. Honestly, I also never understood why we had to keep the hallway clear. Is it so that the apartment remains clean? Or so that we can escape more easily in case of a fire? Regulations are listed in the house rules but a reason is not provided. If I were Lian or Yunbo, I would approach the facility manager and simply ask. On the other hand, I do not understand the two students either. Why should they get upset? As the proverb says: "When in Rome, act like the Romans." Since the two are now in Germany, they should follow the rules and clear the hallway. It is not worth getting upset over.



Zizun Wang

originally from China, worked as a student residence hall tutor at Studentenwerk Halle and Studierendenwerk Thüringen while studying. He successfully completed his Master degree in Miniaturised Biotechnology at the Technical University of Ilmenau and is currently searching for a job.

Let's assume there are many pairs of shoes mixed together in the hallway: In my opinion, the residents should clean up a bit or at least place the shoes in a shelf. However, there seems to be a communication problem between the Chinese students and the facility manager. Many facility managers are nice and open for cultural differences. However, it is not advantageous if a reserved facility manager only writes reminders instead of speaking with the students directly. I can't say much about the cultural factors. Chinese as well as German people do not like receiving reprimands. Although they are violating the house rules, the facility manager should calmly explain to the students what might happen in case of a fire, for example, if they continue to leave the hallway as is. If the facility manager addresses them kindly, most students will be understanding.



Zöhre Aikemu

originally from Urumqi in China, studied Law at the University of Münster and is currently completing her Ph.D. at the University of Siegen. In Münster, she was a student residence hall tutor, focusing especially on supporting international students with child(ren).

In China, there are hardly any residence halls on campus, and no kitchens. Normally, four to six students live in the same room. Men and women live in separate residence halls. In the women's halls, two to three elderly ladies work in different shifts. For the men's halls, it is elderly gentlemen.

We have a great relationship with our old ladies, also with the cleaning ladies. Sometimes, we put trash bags outside our door but then forget to take them. The cleaning ladies then take care of them without complaining. We help them occasionally, because we are thankful. I think that any problem could be solved if the accommodation service were a bit more understanding. Being an international student myself, I can understand both sides quite well. Residents should naturally be familiar with the house rules. But if you go to a foreign country for the first time, you are scared of everything and are quite sensitive. You don't know anyone, are far from your parents, relatives and friends and can feel quite lonely. And because of the foreign language, it is difficult to explain your own standpoint. That is why I would ask the facility manager to show a bit more consideration.



Ingo Sefrin

has been working with students for 28 years and active as facility manager in the Studentenwerk Dresden, division Zittau/Görlitz for ten years.

The most important question is what the house rules state. They certainly do not exist to annoy students but to ensure their safety. Hallways are always the escape routes in case of a fire. It is good that two German roommates appear in the case study as well. They generally also have no understanding of escape and rescue routes. I always tell my students of the horror scenario that the fire alarm is triggered at 2:30 in the morning, the electricity no longer works and they have to make their way outside while half asleep. Objects in the hallways create a danger of falling which can result in a panic. The second aspect is the fact that objects in the hallway also translate into a higher fire load. Our rooms are equipped with fire protection doors but the fire is fed through additional objects in the common areas. In my opinion, the behaviour in the case study is not right. When providing information to students, it is important to always offer personal contact in case of questions. This could be done through office hours, by e-mail or by special appointment. We want our students to move in happy, enjoy living with us and leave with their health intact.



Recommendation by Zöhre Aikemu:

If the students forgot trash bags outside their door, the facility manager should speak with them patiently. As a tutor, I always took the time to explain quiet hours and hallways clearing for fire protection purposes to new residents. It is impossible to completely avoid placing laundry racks in the hallways, especially for students with children as there are no balconies. Because of fire protection and for the cleaning ladies, laundry racks in the hallway are not good. We found a solution at the mother's meeting: Mothers could leave their laundry racks in the hallways in the evenings but had to remove them early in the morning.



Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

Staying overnight with friends



THE CASE

*Anna**, *Kasia** and *Paulina** are Erasmus students from Poland. They live in different residence halls across campus. Most of the residents in those halls are Germans with whom they hardly interact. The three students get together almost every night and frequently stay overnight in each other's rooms. The German facility manager, Herr *Beyer**, responsible for all residence halls on campus, hears of this and is outraged. He does not understand as they all have their own rooms. Herr Beyer informs the Polish students that this is not permitted, also for safety reasons. Shortly after, they receive a written warning from the Studentenwerk. As a reaction, the three students complain to their Erasmus advisor. They do not understand all the agitation as they are not disturbing anyone and nobody has complained. According to them, it is quite normal in Poland to stay overnight with friends. Furthermore, they feel like strangers in their residence halls and are scared at night to return to their own rooms because the campus is very dark. That is why they prefer to stay with their friend.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Karolina Adamowska

originally from Poland, student of Business Informatics in Dresden. Since 2012, she has been working as tutor for international students as well as student representative.

I do not understand the explanation of the Polish students. After all, strict rules are in place in Polish residence halls: at the entrance, there is a reception where residents must leave their key whenever they leave. Every visitor must leave a piece of identification with the reception. This ensures that no outsider spends the night in the student residence hall. Single rooms are rented per day (primarily for distance students). When I went to visit my brother in Warsaw, I was allowed to stay overnight in his room because his roommate was away. However, I did have to pay for the night and he had to consent to holding me responsible in case of damages. That is quite a difference to Germany where nobody checks when you leave or whom you invite. That is why I see the explanation of the three students more as an excuse. But the fact remains: The Polish are a very social people and Polish students



enjoy spending their time with colleagues. These Erasmus students are obviously lacking social contacts. If they had gotten to know people in their residence halls, the situation most likely would not have existed as such.

Emilia Wojtkowska

originally from Poland, studied Social Psychology at the Ruhr University of Bochum and of the Cultures of Eastern and Central Europe and the Humboldt University in Berlin. During her studies, she worked in the Culture Office boSKop in Bochum and in the Deutsches Studentenwerk in Berlin.

I find the behaviour of the three Polish students to be realistic because it is indeed common in Polish residence halls to share a room with other people. Rooms generally house several people, at least two. The perception of privacy in Poland is also different because



people are more used to living in smaller rooms and sharing them with others. In addition, it is not atypical at all (for all cultures and mentalities of the world) to initially feel alone in a foreign country and to look for like-minded people. In contrast, the outrage of the facility manager and the Studentenwerk seems somewhat artificial. I lived in German residence hall for a long time, often received visitors, also at night, and was never issued a warning. I always thought that the regulations are much stricter in Polish residence halls than in German ones. Some still practice gender separation while guests have to pay for their overnight stay in others. But the prohibitions and warnings in German due to "safety reasons" continue to surprise me. If this had been my case, I probably would have complained as well and maybe even left the student residence hall. I see absolutely no reason why people may not visit each

other night if they do not disturb their neighbours (they only slept there and did not have a party?). In a free country such as Germany, this decision should not be taken by third parties.



Marta Matusiak

originally from Lodz in Poland, studied Law and Political Science/Slavic Studies at the University of Greifswald. She worked as student residence hall tutor in the Studierendenwerk Greifswald.

In Polish student halls, there used to be "guards" who sat at the entrance at night to make sure that only the residents would enter. They were usually disliked to such a degree that it became sport for the students to play tricks on them. In theory, only residents are allowed in the halls today as well but breaking this rule is an appealing challenge for students. Judging from my tutor experience, I can also confirm that Polish Erasmus students only stuck to each other. In my opinion, this is a foreseeable system error: You send students of the same university, often from the same degree, together to a foreign country and hope for them to engage in international academic exchange. But frequently, their language skills and scientific interests are not at a sufficient level. It is no secret that the Erasmus program is a party program. Erasmus students often take simplified exams and do not have to study as much as regular students or other scholarship holders. As a result, they have a lot of time to party – and enough money as well.



Recommendation by Marta Matusiak:

The Studentenwerk should use the time of the Erasmus students more effectively. They could be offered sports or volunteering activities to draw them out of their national party teams. In Greifswald, for example, we attempted to place Erasmus students from the same country in different residence halls but the situation ended up as in the case study. It is easier to house everyone from the same country in the same student residence hall and place a tutor there who is proficient in the language. That person can then suggest different activities. If they decide for sports, even event management with the International Office etc., they will get to know other students and will be forced to speak more German. This will also not result in ghettos, as with regular international students, since Erasmus students are generally only in that town for one semester.

Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

Room search



THE CASE

The Russian student *Alexej** arrives in Germany and goes directly from the airport to the university. His first stop is the International Office. Frau *Dietz**, administrator in the International Office, is somewhat irritated because the student came in with his entire luggage. She asks him where he will live. With surprise, he replies that he organised neither an accommodation nor temporary housing, for example in a hotel. He simply assumed that the International Office would provide him with an accommodation and is ready to move in. Frau Dietz is stunned.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Anastasia Hans

originally from Moscow, a student of Business Communications in Berlin who works for a design and branding agency as Junior Consultant.

I find this situation very strange. Honestly, I cannot understand why the Russian student assumed that the International Office would have gotten a residence for him. I can only guess that he is quite young and did not pay much attention. For that reason, he did not understand that there are no rooms to move into right away. However, it could also be that the staff in the International Office did not inform him that he would have to book a hotel room for a few days. Maybe this student is abroad for the first time and is not of such peculiarity.



Ekaterina Maruk

originally from Kaliningrad in Russia, studied Social Work at the Ernst-Abbe University Jena and is now working there as Coordinator in the project “STAY – Study. Work. Living in Thuringia”.

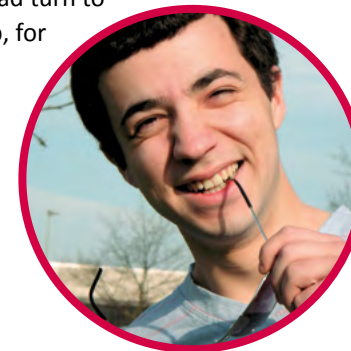
The International Office is frequently confronted with this type of situation because there are many students who have this attitude and act similarly. It has nothing to do with the origin of the international student. There may be a variety of reasons. I can only guess that the student was informed in Russia that the International Office in Germany would take care of all matters for international students – including a room. Students often receive information in their countries of origin which are not aligned with the university in Germany. This ends up leading to misunderstandings. Maybe some of the universities in Germany offer such services but this cannot be assumed for all of them. It could also be that the International Office organises an accommodation for international students at the student's university in the country of origin. He is familiar with that situation and assumes that the same is the case in Germany.



Artur Shageev

originally from Russia, studied Migration and Diversity in Kiel. Since 2015, he has been working for the Family and Welcome Service of the University of Kiel.

I was in a similar situation myself when I came to Kiel and had no room. But I did not expect the International Office to provide me with an accommodation. I was simply looking for some advice as to how and where to find a room. They gave me the contact data of the Studentenwerk Schleswig-Holstein as well as of private residence halls. I spent my first nights at a youth hostel. But I had prepared for such a scenario. I think personal reasons instead of cultural ones are behind Alexej's behavior. If you used to live with your family in which the parents did everything for the children, you might not be prepared for such a situation in a foreign country. But I do think that some people are more independent and self-reliant than others in every country of the world. Theoretically, the following typical Russian characteristics could explain the behaviour of the Russian student: Hospitableness and helpfulness, openness, impartiality, harmlessness. But in reality, I have a hard time imagining such a situation. Many people would instead turn to their compatriots for help, for example Russian student organizations.



Daria Luchnikova

originally from Ulyanovsk in Russia, studied German as a Foreign Language in Leipzig and worked for five years as tutor for international students. As voluntary director, she also manages the project “First Aid for Russian-speaking students” in the German-Russian youth organization IUVENTUS in Leipzig.

We organised a project in which advanced Russian-speaking students took care of the new Russian-speaking students. That is why I am quite familiar with the situation in the case study. I would call it typical for many students from Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan etc.). I experienced something similar with a student from Saint Petersburg. She had also expected that her advisor from the International Students Registry of the University of Leipzig would take care of her. She thought tutors were hired to pick her up from the airport. The explanation is simple: Russian-speaking students expect so much from the International Students Registry because the International Russian Students Registry supports international students very actively. International students are rather rare in Russia and therefore treated like VIPs. Generally, they are actually picked up at the airport and transported to their accommodation. They are automatically eligible for a spot. In some larger cities in Russia, there are even separate student residence halls with more facilities for international students. The support can be so intense that it is almost unpleasant. It is hard for me to say whether this is a result of the mentality of Russian-speaking people or individual cases. I also experienced that Arabic students expect a lot from the International Office in Germany. This behaviour can probably not be fully explained with the cultural background. Many international students in Germany simply expect the same things to be offered as in their home country.



Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

The termination



THE CASE

An agitated landlord of a private room calls the International Office and threatens to evict her Indian tenant, *Rohan**, within days: According to her, he is not clean and never washes his clothes or linen. The entire apartment smells awful, the kitchen looks terrible and the bathroom as well. Recently in the kitchen, she saw water dripping from the cabinets because the student apparently had no clue that the plates need to be dried off before being put into the cabinet. Frau *Meier**, an employee in the International Office, requests a meeting with Rohan and informs him of the call. She explains to him that his lease is about to be terminated due to his lack of cleanliness. A few days later, Rohan actually receives the termination. He is taken by surprise. Back at the International Office he explains to Frau Meier, that he was under the assumption that everything was in order. After all, he paid his rent on time and cannot understand at all why the landlord wants to evict him.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Ramkumar Sukumar

originally from India, has a Master in “Information and Communication Engineering” from the Technical University of Darmstadt. He was ITT tutor for Studierendenwerk Darmstadt and consultant for international students for the student government.

International students in Germany are very far removed from their parents and face a lot of pressure in their studies. In addition, they end up in shared apartments or only have very small rooms because of the scarcity of accommodations. That is a very different lifestyle than in their home country. They often unofficially share a room with other students to save money. As a result, neighbours feel disturbed by noise, parties or cooking. And unfortunately, it is often difficult for foreigners to find an apartment, also because of prejudice. And a lot of rules are stipulated when the rental agreement is signed. Some landlords are very open to other cultures; others are only interested in money. And the lack of language skills often leads to misunderstandings. Yes, there is truth to the fact that some international students (including from India) do not keep their apartment completely clean or achieve European levels. Some will not wash the dishes for days after use, for example during exam periods. They often live



alone which is why washing the dishes is not of the utmost priority. Some apartments are well tended, others are not. Normally, hygienic behaviour is taught at schools in India. But whether individuals follow the recommendations or not is up to the family and circle of friends.

Aman Ullah Khan

originally from India, enrolled in International Production Management at the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg. He worked as a welcome assistant at Studierendenwerk Hamburg.

Everything is available for money in India, someone to clean, cook etc. People don't have to do much to keep their accommodation clean. Everything is taken care of by someone else. We (the students) sometimes come from such families, are quite spoiled and often do not know how certain things are done. The family ensures that we get everything we need so that we are able to manage our studies. That is the top priority. Even if a student lives by him/herself in a rental apartment, cleaning is the last thing on the mind of the landlord. For the landlord, the most important thing is the rent being paid on time. The tenant then “owns” the apartment. The landlord is not interested how the person lives there and whether the plates are placed into the cupboard without drying them. But there are general checks, for example to check whether additional electronic devices are being used in the rooms, on account of the electricity bill. In case of problems, the landlord will threaten the tenant to double the rent if things continue. That is why the student in this case is wondering: He transferred the money, so what is the problem? When students here in Germany clean, they do not want to use cleaning supplies because they cost a lot of money. So, they simply take a wet cloth and wipe almost everything in the kitchen and the toilet is cleaned according to the same principle.



Nandini Sharma

born in Bhopal, India, attained her Master in Pharmaceutical Biotechnology at the University of Halle.

This student did not place great value on diligence in terms of cleaning. Cleanliness plays an important role in our culture as well. The student in this case study was simply ignorant and I don't think his behaviour had anything to do with our culture. Cleanliness always applies and should be practiced actively. Living in clean conditions is good for everyone and the landlord acted correctly by letting the student know what he did wrong. I don't think that this topic should be connected with any type of culture because cleanliness is one of the most basic aspects which is taught in every culture.



Recommendation by Aman Ullah Khan:

It helps to clarify what is being expected of students. What we mean by cleaning here in Germany and why it is important. The kitchens here are not well-suited for cooking Indian food. When Indian students cook with their spices, the entire hallway ends up smelling “strange” but they do not notice. Unless the kitchen is modern enough, has windows and a proper exhaust hood.

Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

The down blanket



THE CASE

*Ben**, a student from the United States, is subletting a fully furnished residence hall room while being enrolled in summer courses. Before leaving, he wants to make sure that he will leave the room as he found it. He cleans, wipes the room floor and washes the bed sheets – including the down blanket. When the German student *Anna**, the actual renter of the room, returns, she notices that her new down blanket has been ruined because it was washed in the washing machine. She is very upset with Ben and would like to have her blanket replaced by him. However, Ben is refusing because he left the room in clean condition and there was no warning that the blanket could not be washed in the machine. A member of the staff of the residence hall administration, who is being included in the dispute, receives the following comment from Ben: “I was under the impression that the room needed to be cleaned before my departure and I assumed that this would include the blanket as well. Unfortunately, there was no warning information that these blankets needed to be treated specially. So, I washed the blanket in the machine, as is customary in the United States.”

* Names amended



PERSPECTIVES

Bethany Guse

originally from Northfield, Minnesota, studied in Konstanz in 2015.

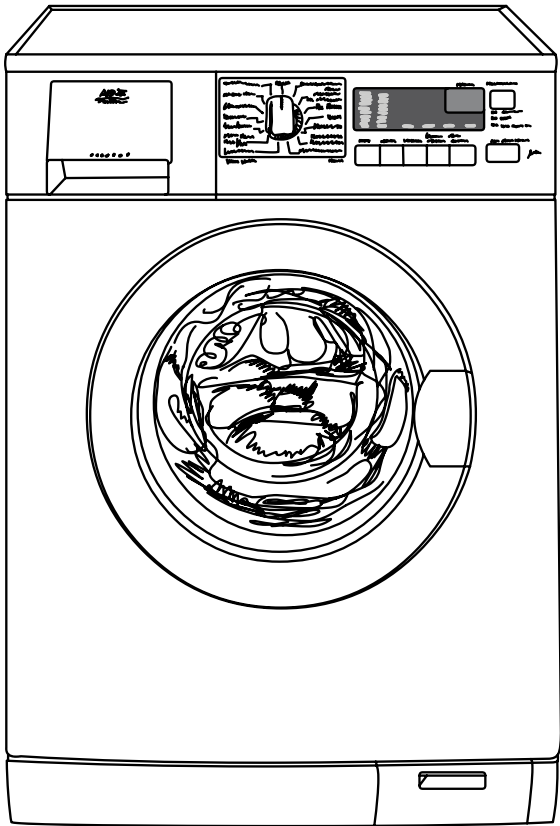
The American student was subletting the apartment and cleaned everything before moving out again, including the down blanket. Naturally, the German student wanted to get a new one when it was ruined. In the United States, it is possible to wash down blanket because they are filled with a different material, not feathers. People usually have washable comforters or quilts. I can understand that he washed the down blanket but not that he is refusing to buy a new one. Perhaps his approach is based on fairness and clear expectations being important aspects of American culture. Nobody told him that he could not wash the down blanket, and now he feels as if he is being treated unfairly because he simply did not know.



Mari Arneson

originally from Northfield, Minnesota, studied in Konstanz in 2013/2014.

My mother always told me that a room always had to look better when I left it after having stayed there. Not as I found it but better. That is why the American student washed the down blanket. This proverb is an important part of our American cultures. I grew up with it. The fact that Ben washed the blanket is normal and respectful in my opinion. Maybe he did not notice that the down blanket was ruined which is why he did not replace it before the German student returned. However, I don't fully understand why he was unwilling to replace it later. He is right when saying that the blanket did not contain any warning information. That is also the reason he didn't know that the blanket should not be washed in the machine. But I do find his refusal to replace the blanket quite impolite.



Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

The broken stove



THE CASE

The facility manager, Herr Müller*, finds a repair slip in his mailbox, submitted by the Chinese student Yan*. It states that the stove in Yan's apartment no longer heats up properly. As a response, the facility manager places a note in his mailbox, with the information that he will be at the apartment at 8 a.m. the next day. Starting at 8 a.m. the next day, Yan waits for the facility manager but goes to his lecture when he has not shown up by 9 a.m. During a break, he discusses the events from the morning with a German colleague. The German student encourages Yan to place another repair slip in the mailbox as the facility manager apparently did not get to the appointment, probably due to other obligations. So, that afternoon, Yan leaves another repair slip in Herr Müller's mailbox, stating that his stove is still broken. On the following day, Herr Müller comes to Yan's apartment at 8 a.m. to repair the stove. Yan does not open the door, even when Herr Müller knocks for the second and third time. Herr Müller assumes that the student has already left the apartment to attend lectures. He opens the door with his master key. Yan is lying in his bed and sleeping. The facility manager addresses the student: "Hey,

you in the bed, get up! I am here to repair your stove. I can't believe that you are lying in bed and sleeping, when you know that I am about to come by." Yan wakes up with a fright, jumps out of bed, throws on some clothes and lets Herr Müller repair his stove. When the facility manager departs again, he leaves behind a distraught Yan.

* Names amended



PERSPECTIVES

Jianxia Zhang

originally from Beijing in China, studied Law at the University of Münster and was active as a tutor in the Studierendenwerk Münster from 2008 to 2011.

The facility manager only knocked three times and did not announce himself as the building manager. In my opinion, the student has the right to not open the door. If I put myself into the position of the student, I would be quite upset because the facility manager did not show up for the first appointment – without any reason or explanation. I would also be quite unhappy because the facility manager did not make a new appointment but simply came to my apartment. This happened without announcement and without consent. Even though the employees of the Studentenwerk are quite trustworthy, I would not want strangers to be in my apartment without my consent. There are several reasons for Yan's behaviour: The stove is very important for Chinese students. Generally, Chinese people eat warm meals three times per day which is why he wants his stove to be repaired as quickly as possible. Maybe he wrote the second note because he did not want to make another appointment with the facility manager. A Chinese proverb says: "Do not take on unnecessary difficulties; it is better to avoid trouble." Chinese students are not very familiar with German regulations, so they do not know that the facility manager can enter the apartment without an appointment. I am sure that language skills also played a role. Yan's German is probably not good enough to hold a discussion or argument with the facility manager. Chinese students especially are scared of discussions – due to the lack of German skills as well as for psychological reasons.



Yunqing Dong

originally from Qingdao in China, since 2012 student of Mechanical Engineering at the Technical University of Munich.

Both players involved made mistakes but the facility manager made the more serious one. After not having shown up on the first day, Yan probably thinks that the facility manager is not the punctual type and that he will most likely come sometime after 9 a.m. That is the reason why he did not get up before 8 a.m. on the second day (although it could also be that he simply overslept). I find the facility manager to be quite impolite. The first day, he does not turn up at all. When he "breaks into" the room on the second day, he is not very polite either. Yan was of course distraught and has no idea how to handle the situation. His German skills are probably not good enough to master such a complicated situation. Things become even more difficult if somebody speaks quickly and has an accent. That is why Yan remains silent and simply lets the facility manager repair his stove. In China, it is not allowed to simply enter a room, not even if you are the facility manager. We do not act spontaneously. We think first and act second. The facility manager is probably done with his repair before Yan has properly woken up. I can only assume that Herr Müller has had plenty of bad experiences with international students, for example that they are usually not punctual. Now he is assuming that Yan is another "typical international student" which automatically activates his memory of bad experiences. From that perspective, it is understandable that he is not polite. It may not sound great but that is the way I assess the situation.



Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

The party apartment



THE CASE

Elisa* from France spends her exchange semester at a German university. The International Office arranges an accommodation for her in a shared apartment. It consists of five rooms, two bathrooms and a common kitchen with seating area. The remaining four rooms are occupied by exchange students as well. Özlem* is from Turkey, Anna* from Finland, Agata* from Poland and Ewa* from Czech Republic. Elisa would like to take as many courses as possible in Germany (more than specified by her home university). In contrast, her roommates are happy to stick with the required 30 ECTS credits. The classes in which Özlem, Anna, Agata and Ewa are enrolled generally take place after 2 p.m. Therefore, the girls from the apartment often invite other exchange students because they usually have small single apartments which make it difficult to meet with more than five people. However, Elisa regularly begins her day with an 8 a.m. lecture due to the higher number of classes. More and more frequently, the remaining occupants of the apartment do not communicate with Elisa when a party will take place in the apartment. In many cases, she does not find out at all. But she accepts these parties for a period of more than 3 months. One Friday night, however, as yet another party is taking place, she loses her cool. She comes out of her room and shouts into the crowd: “Quiet! I have an important appointment at a conference tomorrow morning!” After a 5-minute appearance, she returns to her room and was not seen for the rest of the evening. The remaining students leave the apartment to continue partying in the city. From that day on, the atmosphere in the apartment is tense.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Elise Madelaine

originally from France, has completed a double Master degree in European Studies at the European University Frankfurt (Oder) and in Strasbourg.

The French student Elisa shares an apartment with four other exchange students from various countries. Her roommates frequently invite colleagues but Elisa rarely takes part in the parties because she usually starts her classes early. She selected a higher course load because she wants to achieve more than the required 30 credit points. She needs quiet and concentration as this semester abroad is an important part of her studies. She cannot understand why her roommates and the other students are not sensitive to her situation. Elisa’s behaviour can be explained through the practice of indirect communication in France: Suddenly, she is very angry



and expresses her opinion to the others. She had never previously mentioned the resulting burden placed on her. Instead, she expected her roommates to indirectly recognise her need for peace and quiet through her absence at the parties. Her behaviour is context-related: The outbreak of emotions is the result of three months of passive and tolerant behaviour and “diplomacy”.

Anne-Laure Gestering

originally from France, lives and works in Berlin as an architect. From 2010 to 2014, she worked as Research Assistant at the Technical University of Braunschweig.

I find the described situation to be very realistic and understandable. But this conflict does not seem to have much to do with cultural customs. Instead, this is a difficult situation which may arise whenever people live together. I don’t think that the different countries of origin of the protagonists play a role in this situation. The students did not know each other before living together, were not able to get to know each other independently. They had to learn how to handle this situation from the beginning. Also, the students living in this apartment have different daily routines which is not a good premise. People from the same country would also experience difficulties in such a situation. Naturally, I can understand Elisa’s reaction. She attempts to handle the situation by herself but does not notice the toll it takes on her. As a result, she flips out before being able to discuss the issue with the others. But her behaviour does not have anything to do with her cultural background, in my opinion. A different person from France might have reacted the same way or already shared her concerns the first night.



Lucile Pineau

originally from France, works in the Division of International Affairs at the European University in Frankfurt (Oder).

I can completely understand why Elisa got so upset. For three months, her roommates paid no attention to her pace of life and did not inform her when they invited guests. At the same time, I think that Elisa should have voiced her concerns much earlier, although she probably did not want to bother her roommates. It is understandable that the others want to have parties in the apartment – and they are the majority. But the night in question, Elisa was probably more tired or the others made more noise than usually. French people frequently communicate indirectly: “It is not bad = It is good”. Maybe Elisa had already the following to her roommates: “The parties don’t bother me but they should happen every night = It’s okay sometimes but not regularly”. And the other students understood: “If Elisa has her peace and quiet twice a week, we can party the rest of the time without bothering her”. We French people have a sentence about freedom which we learn at school: “La liberté des uns s’arrête là où commence celle des autres” (The freedom of some ends where the freedom of others begins.) Maybe that is why we expect that others will always respect our freedom and our needs.



Critical Incidents – Residence Halls

The dirty kitchen



THE CASE

*Hassan** from Bangladesh is fortunate as he is assigned a room in a new private student residence hall and finds it an honour to be one of the first residents. As furnished accommodations are scarce, it is quite important not to upset the landlord. That is why all new international students attend a general introduction after their arrival during which they are asked to treat their rooms with care, to clean and air out regularly and to dispose of trash properly. After only six weeks, the employee in the Housing Office of the university receives an indignant e-mail from the landlord – with several photos attached: The brand-new kitchen is quite messy and dirt has burnt into the hotplates of the stove. They cannot be restored through cleaning. The administrator contacts Hassan regarding the issue and presents the photos to him. However, Hassan was not aware of any wrongdoings.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Syeda Samira Sadeque

author, poet and journalist from Dhaka, Bangladesh. In the fall of 2015, she worked for “Democracy Reporting International” in Berlin as a scholarship recipient of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa). She currently works for the “Dhaka Tribune” as a reporter.

The situation will remain problematic as long as Hassan refuses to accept that he did something wrong. If the landlord was outraged and sent photographic evidence to the university, I can only assume that the damage was quite serious. In my opinion, Hassan should get the opportunity to tell his side of the story. I don’t know anything about Hassan’s socio-economic background. But if he comes from a middle-class or lower middle-class family in Bangladesh, it is very likely that he was used to having housekeepers who always cleaned and kept things tidy. It is also possible that he feels under attack because he is intimidated within the context of another culture. It is hard to completely deny the damages to the kitchen as there is photographic evidence. If he is still not aware of any wrongdoings, it might be because he is scared and has decided to take on a defensive stance. He could be afraid of possible sanctions by the authorities – something



which is not unusual in Bangladesh. People can even become physical in such matters. As I mentioned: Those in Bangladesh who enjoy the privilege of education often think that any household chores must be handled by the cleaning lady or a paid housekeeper. I definitely think that this attitude applies to Hassan’s case.

Liton Ruknuzzaman

from Bangladesh, current a student of Business Studies at the University of Applied Sciences Münster. He used to work as a tutor for the Studierendenwerk Münster.

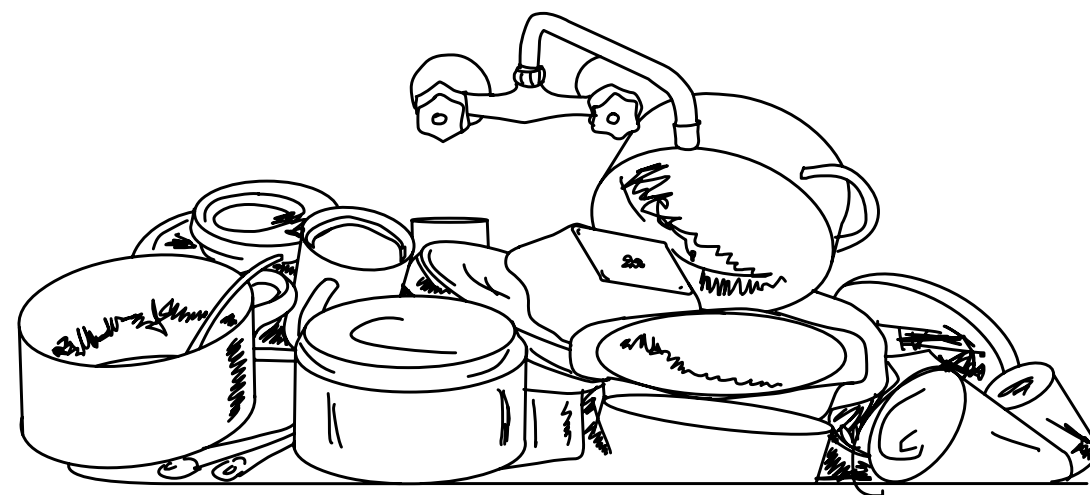
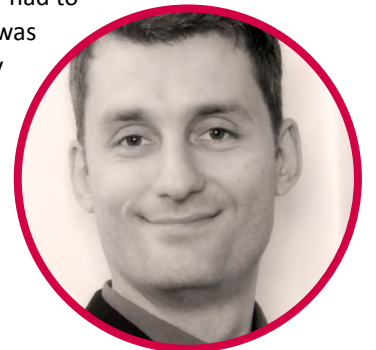
I can fully imagine the situation in the brand-new kitchen. I assume that all residents share the kitchen? Naturally, it is required to leave the kitchen behind in the same condition as it was on arrival. But in this case, nobody can be directly blamed for anything because we don’t know whose fault it was. I think that all residents, including Hassan, should have to pay for the stove. Normally, I can think of no good reason why Hassan specifically was blamed. It could be because people have a misconception about his country (Bangladesh). I would draw a connection to the cultural background because the pollution of the environment and other areas is not culturally conditioned.



Karol Kruk

originally from Poland. He studied History, Political Science and Eastern European Studies in Hamburg and has been working for the Studierendenwerk Hamburg in the division Accommodation.

It is difficult to say whether Hassan is responsible for the condition of the kitchen. I am sure it is being used by several students, so others could be responsible for the damage as well. The landlord can only act this way if he is sure that Hassan is the guilty party. That in turn means that he can either prove Hassan’s involvement or that he assumes that it is Hassan’s fault because all other tenants are out of the question. In Germany, it is often assumed that people of a certain cultural background are not familiar with the German hygienic standards and cleaning principles. In my experience with students from various countries over the last ten years, I found that it is impossible to attribute such problems to a single culture or nationality. In our every-day work life, we frequently have to point out to students that by renting a room, they also consent to doing their part of the cleaning. Some students still don’t do it and keep on bringing up excuses. Others simply assume that a cleaning lady will come. International students often do not know which cleaning supplies are needed because they look different than at home. And many students have never had to clean at home because it was always done by somebody else. But that is certainly not something that can be attributed to a certain culture.



Critical Incidents – Counselling

The counter

Arabic
countries

THE CASE

In Frau Meier's* office in the International Office at a German university, there is a chest-high counter at which she generally advises students. Her desk is located behind this counter where she does her administrative work. One day, an international student knocks on her door. After having asked him in, he enters with a smile and immediately steps up to her desk instead of waiting at the counter. Frau Meier finds this behaviour disrespectful and impolite. She quickly tries to cover the papers on which she was working. Furthermore, she felt uncomfortable and cornered by the proximity and the body language of the student leaning down to her. That is the reason she emphatically demands from the student to take a step back, go to the other side of the counter and wait there for a moment. However, the student is quite irritated, slowly moves back towards the door and leaves the office.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Yassine Tantan

student of German Studies in Rabat, Morocco, he will spend the summer 2016 in Germany through a scholarship of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

I can see how a great misunderstanding between Frau Meier and the student could occur in this situation. Both acted completely normal within their different cultures and experiences. Frau Meier is used to advising students at the counter. For her, the desk is a personal space which nobody may enter. But the student was not aware of that and has had the experience that such an appointment always takes place at a desk. Maybe he thought that the counter had a different purpose: for friends or to have a drink. Frau Meier perceives his behaviour to be impolite because he did not respect her rules. For the student on the other hand, the situation became strange and incomprehensible because Frau Meier hastily hid her papers on her desk and sent him back. These types of situations happen quite often in some cultures. In some houses, for example, it is polite to enter wearing shoes while it is impolite in others. That depends on the culture. That is why you should always ask to avoid creating an uncomfortable situation.



Uta Kirchner

has been working as Overseas Instructor in the International Office of the Technical University of Berlin and as lecturer for Intercultural Communication at higher education institutions.

In my view, this situation is an intersection of several cultural and subjective factors which have also made their way into the German language: First of all, Frau Meier's behaviour can be traced back to a different, culturally specific sensitivity of proximity and distance of two persons. People of many national cultures stand and move closer to one another than we perceive to be comfortable and appropriate for a certain situation in Germany. If someone comes too close to us, we feel uncomfortable and attempt to recreate an in our opinion appropriate distance by retreating. Frau Meier did not have that option in the case study. Her discomfort was probably increased by the fact that she was dealing with a situation in a professional context and with a person of the other gender. It seems to me that in addition to physical closeness, the body posture plays a role. Many Germans attempt to communicate with their counterpart at eye level (literally). We especially like to avoid situations during which we need to look up at our conversation partner. On the other hand, we find it unpleasant when something happens behind our backs. For example, most of us align their desk in such a way that we do not sit with our backs to the door. And last but not least, very strict data protection laws apply in Germany which may have influenced Frau Meier's behaviour. Therefore, I can well understand her (physical) discomfort. But differently from Frau Meier, I would not assess the student's behaviour to have been impolite or disrespectful.



Recommendation by Uta Kirchner:

To prevent such situations, I and many of my colleagues have added a consultation table which stands diagonally to my desk.

Usman Masud

originally from Islamabad, Pakistan, studied Electrical Engineering at the University of Kassel and attained a Ph.D. in Opto-Electronics. During his studies, he worked as a tutor at Studentenwerk Kassel.

This case seems somewhat strange to me but looking at the Germans overall, I can begin to understand the situation: Germans hardly have any experience with the international community. If Frau Meier was originally from South-East Asia, her reaction would have been considered somewhat unfriendly. I assume that the student is acting as is customary in his country of origin. But if his behaviour is also unusual there, he is definitely crossing a line and "guilty". Perhaps he has only had few encounters with Germans. Nonetheless, both parties should tread carefully around one another. What I cannot understand: If Frau Meier works in the International Office, she should know about different cultures. She should have lived in different places and gained a lot of experiences, in my view. On the other hand, the student should know a thing or two about German culture as well but you can't ask too much of him because he has not been in the country for very long.



Watch this Critical Incident as a short film:
<http://erikmalchow.de/perspective>

Critical Incidents – Counselling

The group appointment



THE CASE

One German university is home to many international students. To provide support for student visa extensions and help with possible language barriers, Frau *Schumann**, administrator in the International Office, offers a group appointment together with a clerk from the Immigration Office. The date and time is agreed via an online form. On the day of the appointment, only three of ten registered students show up at the Immigration Office. None of the missing students had cancelled the meeting. The clerk from the Immigration Office is quite upset. Frau Schumann does not understand why the students did not come and is irritated. Later that same day, she writes an e-mail to the students and demands an explanation. She does not receive a reply. A few days later, Frau Schumann meets the Mexican student *Carlos** who was one of the students who did not turn up for the appointment. Visibly upset, she asks him for the reason. Carlos does not understand her irritation and explains that he was busy that day and will go to the Immigration Office himself.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Atenas Rodríguez

originally from Mexico, was a student at the University of Applied Sciences Flensburg and worked as a tutor for international students for three years.

This situation is difficult to evaluate because it is a clash of very contrary characteristics from two very different cultures. In Germany, terms like “time”, “planning” and “appointments” have great value and are associated with respect towards others. For Mexicans, these terms are more relative which is why we handle them more flexibly. We are also not used to making fixed appointments – and especially not used to keeping them. Appointments are not taken too seriously, unless it is something extremely important which might affect the person’s own future. I think that in this specific case, the student cannot understand the employee’s anger because it was “only” an appointment which he could have organised himself at a different time as well. Also, due to the fact that it was a group appointment, he did not feel obligated to cancel. On the other hand, the staff member perceived this behaviour as disrespectful



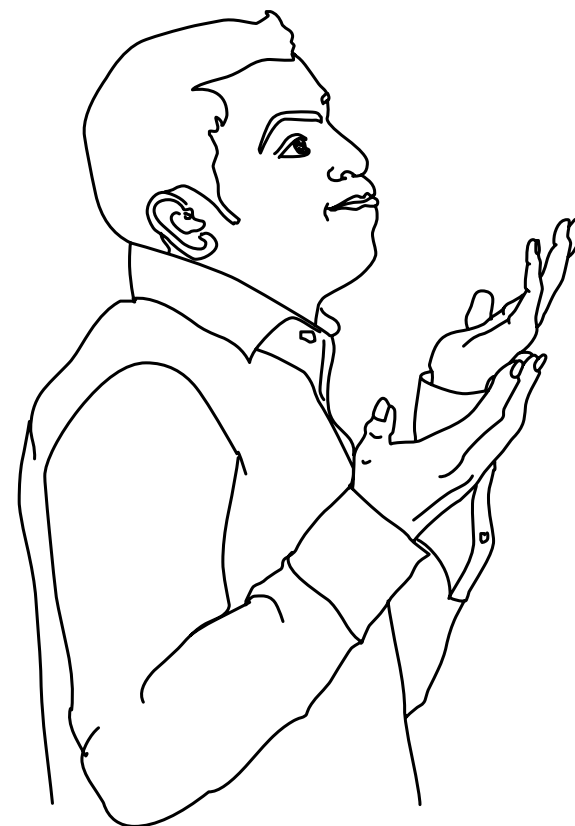
towards herself and the Immigration Office since she took care of the organization and feels like her invested time is not being appreciated.

Sergio Arturo Camacho Perez

originally from Puebla, Mexico, studied Structural Engineering at the Karlsruhe Institute for Technology and was a Student Assistant at Studierendenwerk Karlsruhe.

I would assess the behaviour of the student to be quite negative. First of all, because he does not show up to the meeting and does not cancel in time. Secondly: He does not care that other people are trying to care for his well-being. Culture definitely plays a large role. People have to get used to the German mentality and adapt to it. That is the most difficult thing for us Mexicans. What is right in Mexico might be perceived completely differently here. In Mexico, you don’t have to cancel a doctor’s appointment (most of the time), you simply don’t go. This may be an impudence by the patients but the doctor is at fault as well because s/he accepts such behaviour. Better said: We sometimes act self-centered.

Mexicans have many positive characteristics but also some that are not that great. We like to leave things unfinished or only take care of them once it is too late. Maybe that is why the student cannot understand that the staff member is upset.



Michael Noghero

has been working for the Studentenwerk Augsburg for ten years and is Division Manager for Counselling Services and International Affairs.

The two colleagues would like to offer the student a special service which is associated with organizational efforts on their part. At the same time, a group appointment seems like a good option to process the visa extension efficiently. That is why it is understandable that they are upset when the registered students do not show up. Frau Schumann also has a difficult time explaining this to the Immigration Office and finds herself in an unpleasant situation. That is her state of emotion when she writes the e-mail. And the lack of any response only increases her anger. During the personal conversation with Carlos, her irritation continues to grow as his reason for not attending is rather vague. At no time, did the parties involved attempt to consider cultural differences as the motivation for each person’s behaviour. The first misunderstanding regarding the seemingly fixed appointment is based on a culturally different understanding of time management and commitment. For Germans, attending a confirmed appointment is self-evident and missing it without any excuse is considered to be disrespectful. In many other cultures, appointments are perceived to be more relative, like “approximations”. The online exchange makes it impossible to know whether the positive reply was a serious confirmation or instead a courtesy considered to be appropriate in other cultures. Carlos probably felt that the factual-critical e-mail by Frau Schumann was a personal attack on him. He is used to criticism being brought up much more delicately.



Watch this Critical Incident as a short film:
<http://erikmalchow.de/perspective>

Critical Incidents – Counselling

The silent wife



THE CASE

In the Student Guidance and Counselling Centre of a German university, the administrator in the International Office, Frau Reiser*, has a consultation meeting with an Iranian couple. They have come because the wife has questions about studying at a university. During the conversation, the administrator notices that the husband is carrying on the conversation with her instead of the wife. He replies to the questions she poses to his wife and asks questions in place of his wife. This is very irritating to the administrator and results in her taking a negative stance.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Pouneh Golabian

grew up as a Persian in Gottingen and received a Master in The Economics of South-East Asia at the Ruhr University Bochum.

The situation depicts two different world views: The Iranian couple is used to the man carrying on negotiations as the Iranian laws grant the husband “guidance rights and the basic decision-making authority in all areas of life”. On the other hand, Frau Reiser is irritated by this “paternalism” by the husband. She grew up in a society with a rapid development of emancipation of women after World War II because there were so few men in Germany to “paternalise” women. I can understand that Frau Reiser is perturbed – I did not feel any different during my first meeting with devout Muslims (from Qatar). But after getting to know them better, I realised that it was actually the women who wore the pants in the relationship and that the husband only acted like the patriarch to the outside.



Alireza Sadeghinejad

originally from Iran, studied Structural Engineering at the University Hannover and worked as an assistant at Studentenwerk Hannover to support international students.

I have never encountered a situation like this. As I am not married, I can only voice my opinion. If I were to accompany my wife, mother or sister and all questions related to her, I would simply listen – unless I was asked something or wanted to add something. Language problems or inhibitions may be the reason in the portrayed case. The woman is theoretically in the position to carry out the appointment with the case worker without any support. I can only assume that the husband is present because the woman wanted him to be there. Otherwise she could have come by herself. Perhaps his reaction was important to her. But if the man speaks the entire time, then the presence of the wife is no longer necessary. That would then be the end of the consultation because the wife would no longer have any influence on the conversation.



Gelareh Abooghadaresh

was born and raised in Teheran. After finishing school, she came to Germany and studied Computer Science at the Technical University of Darmstadt. During that time, she worked as a tutor for international students.

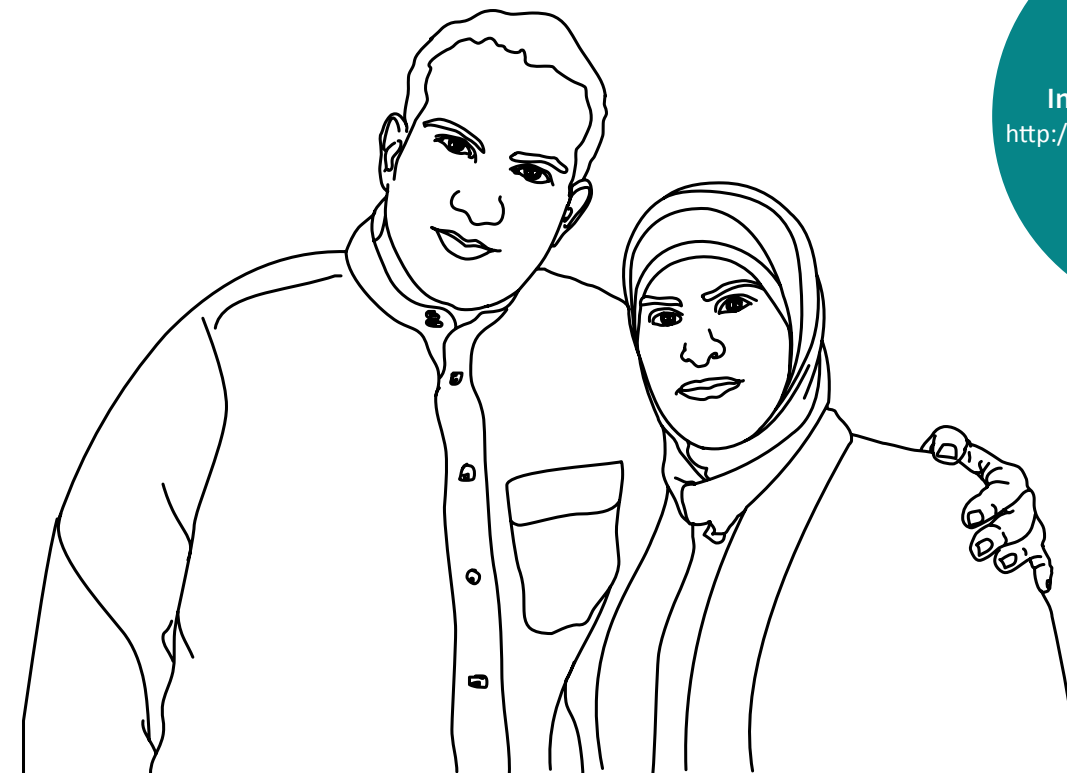
I am not so critical of this situation. I can only assume that the husband means well and the wife does not feel bad. It is quite likely that the two coordinated their questions and topics of conversation at home. I find that his actions can be supportive, for example if he speaks better German than his wife, has been in the country longer or is a student himself. However, that would not be the case if the woman attempts to answer but is frequently interrupted by her husband who does not add to the conversation but controls it instead. I also think that it would be obvious if the woman felt bad. And I will say that he is trying to help her – even if he is not directly involved from the perspective of the administrator. It is customary in my culture to help and give advice without being asked. People like to take the initiative. This behaviour of course also has some bad sides but it is heart-warming.



Masoumeh Khorshidi

originally from Iran, has been studying Energy and Resources at the Technical University of Clausthal. She works as a laboratory assistant at Sympatec Clausthal.

It is not very difficult to imagine such a situation. The husband tries to support his wife in a foreign country – which is the function of a husband. He is looking to collect as much information for her as possible. That is why he allows himself to carry on the conversation instead of her. In Iran, the country has the guidance right while the woman has the duty to obey. In my experience, Iranians who live here in Germany or in other western countries, are very open and try to support democracy and equal rights. There are many self-confident women in my home country who study and work in all kinds of professions, even taxi or bus drivers. They can freely choose their life partner and can even get divorced. By now, Iranian women are better educated than the men but they continue to be oppressed.



Watch this Critical Incident as a short film:
<http://erikmalchow.de/perspective>

Critical Incidents – Counselling

Eye contact



THE CASE

*Serge**, a student from Cameroon, asks the examination office for an extension for submitting his bachelor thesis. He explains that his brother is very sick and he must care for him. As he speaks very softly, the clerk, *Frau Becker**, repeatedly has to ask, “Excuse me?”. She explains the seriousness of the situation to him and looks him intently in the eyes. Serge keeps on evading her eye contact which Frau Becker finds quite irritating. During her lunch break, she meets a colleague and discusses the student’s matter with her. Her comment: “I did not believe a single word he said. He spoke so softly that I could hardly understand him and he could not look me in the eye. When I looked at him, he looked away and I am not even sure whether he listened to me at all.”

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Ncho Louisa

originally from Limbe in Cameroon, completed her degree in Microbiology and now studies Pharmaceutics in Kiel while working as a tutor at Studentenwerk Schleswig-Holstein.

I think the situation is very serious to the student. The misunderstanding between him and the administrator is the result of their types of communication. I can completely understand why Serge acted this way. He has been taught all his life to act this way, always had to. People in Cameroon do not older people or those embodying authority in the eye for reasons of respect. You are also not allowed to raise your voice for the same reason. If you look others in the eye and speak with a loud voice, your behaviour is considered to be impolite. And that means trouble!



Florence Tsagué

lives in Siegen and studied Political Science, Applied Linguistics and English Studies. She works on the Cameroonian diaspora for the online publication www.camer.be.

I find that the student seems unable to cope or under some kind of pressure. That is why he speaks so softly. Lack of experience in Germany may be the reason why he cannot look the administrator in the eye. How familiar is he with German culture? His behaviour could also be explained with respect for authority – those who sit in an office represent authority. In Cameroon, it is sometimes the case that younger people are expected to look older people in the eyes during a conversation or to stare in any way. This would be interpreted as a lack of respect.



Aboubakar Gambo

originally from Cameroon, studied Energy and Process Engineering at the Technical University Berlin. During his studies, he worked as a tutor at Studierendenwerk Berlin and was very active in student self-government.

It is normal in Cameroon to speak softly to older people and to not make eye contact. It is a sign of respect and appreciation. The student is also not in great condition due to his brother’s illness and the Bachelor paper. In addition, Frau Becker constantly repeated “Excuse me?” and looked him deep on the eyes – that threw him off. Serge believed that she thought he was a liar. Naturally he looked away; he probably thinks the administrator is the wife of another man. At that moment, she was also the one making decisions about his further life in Germany. A rejection of the extension would mean that Serge could no longer care for his sick brother. Since family is the most important thing in Cameroon, Serge would lose face within his family. All that occupied his mind more than the actual conversation, so I can imagine that he was actually not listening at all.



Nkolo Oyono Germaine Valerie

is a student of Life Science at the University Hannover and originally from Cameroon. She has been working as a tutor at Studentenwerk Hannover since 2012.

It seems that there is a misunderstanding between the administrator and the Cameroonian student Serge which could end up being Serge’s downfall. He is behaving “normally” towards the administrator – at least according to the behavioural codex in our culture. As a student, he is obligated to show respect for the administrator as she is higher up in the hierarchy. The codex states that one should not look older people or those who are higher in the hierarchy in the eyes during a conversation as it would be a sign of lack of respect. You may also not speak loud. It is also normal for us to place family members above our own interest if need be (for example because of an illness). We handle all those things differently than western countries. And even though people know, they frequently forget as soon as they are in this type of situation. That is because this kind of behaviour has been taught to us from a young age.



Critical Incidents – Counselling

The consultation



THE CASE

*Ahmed**, trained lawyer, about 45 years of age and with Egyptian roots, returns to a German university after spending some time in the United States. He would like to apply for an English-speaking degree, so he goes to see Frau *Hecker** during her office hours. He begins by complaining about how long he had to wait. Frau Hecker apologises and asks for the reason for this consultation. Instead of replying, Ahmed describes his own life situation and family problems and explains that his German wife wants to divorce him. He also pays compliments to Frau Hecker regarding her age and her first name (Rosemarie). He then asks whether he can call her by the short form of her name (Rose). Frau Hecker is taken aback and feels her sense of privacy violated. She does not allow him to call her Rose. Ahmed apologises, explaining that he has been living in the United States for a long time where it is customary to call each other by first name. Frau Hecker terminates the consultation and actively asks Ahmed to leave. Ahmed expresses his thanks and leaves.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Ossama Hegazy

originally from Egypt, completed his Master and Ph.D. 2009 at the University for Technology in Stuttgart and 2014 at the Bauhaus University Weimar. He works as an expert assistant at the employment agency in Weimar.

It is normal in Egyptian culture to begin a conversation with a reference to the personal situation and family problems. But it is not normal to pay compliments to the administrator about her age or name – especially not if this is an encounter between a man and a woman (as opposed to man and man or woman and woman). Asking for permission to use a short form of the first name is always out of the question. Egyptians normally talk about their personal life with an administrator to gain his/her trust and to create a friendly atmosphere for the conversation. The objective is to get the administrator emotionally involved to not only increase the effectiveness of the conversation but also simplify processing the case. The request for using the short form of the name in Ahmed's case could be due to American influence as this question could lead to dangerous misunderstandings or even conflict. I think that he probably wanted to create a more positive atmosphere while also reducing the communication barrier.



Nagi Siam

is a German national of Egyptian descent and works as independent consultant in the education sector in North Africa.



In my opinion, Ahmed is a typical Egyptian. His initial complaint could be seen as an attempt to assess the limits or hierarchies from the very beginning. If Frau Hecker had not apologised, he would have possibly tried to relax the situation with a joke. But since she did apologise, Ahmed can now go far afield and try to create some closeness and understanding. He will typically adorn his explanations with practiced charm since he is dealing with a woman. His behaviour is intuitive while being quite adaptable. Ahmed now probably thinks that he is the master of the situation and could take on the dominating role in the conversation. But his next attempt to personalise the conversation further is rejected. Actively asking Ahmed to leave indicates that Frau Hecker not only feels overwhelmed but also that her sense of personal space and privacy were violated. It is also evident that she is not able to loosen up the situation with some self-confidence and respond to Ahmed without feeling under attack. There is a cultural explanation: Personal contact in Egypt is very important. A personal relationship and the creation of closeness create space for discussion and exchange. This could be superficial (short-term) or with a long-term goal to keep further options open. And even though the case deals only with a consultation, Ahmed probably assumes to be able to gain a supporter (source of information, scholarship etc.). Creating a personal connection (compliments, using the short form of a name etc.) is also a tool to dissolve superficial borders. And it needs to be remembered that the culture of disagreement in Egypt is very different. This cultural background may have contributed to Ahmed not keeping the appropriate distance, without any bad intentions. Ahmed's age and international experience also play a role. And finally, one can of course buy into the prejudice of the Egyptian story-teller. In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that Egyptian culture generally assumes every person to be very autonomous. That means that everyone knows where their own limits lie while granting their counterpart lots of freedom.

Critical Incidents – Financial Matters

A cry for help too late



THE CASE

Nicolás* is from Colombia and a Master student at a German university. He is the father of a one-year old daughter. He only needs one more semester to complete his degree. Nicolas has been working a lot to provide for his family but his performance at university has been suffering as a result. Despite his efforts, there is not enough money, the allowed 90 work days were used up a long time ago and his overdraft at the bank is more than maxed out. He cannot take up any support from the government because he would endanger his residence status. Finally, he decides to write an e-mail to the Studentenwerk to inquire about financial support for students with children. He mentions that he is considering giving up his studies due to the enormous financial difficulties and to return to his home country. The staff at the Studentenwerk was surprised that he did not take advantage earlier of any of the extensive consultation offers for students with children. Now that the situation has progressed so far, there would hardly be any options left to help him.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Cristina Isabel Carbonell Arias

originally from Barranquilla in Colombia, since 2011 a student of Product Design at the Bauhaus University Weimar and working as a tutor in the International Office since 2012.

There are many questions for students when they come to Europe: Will I like it there, where will I live and how will I afford my life there? The first step is to organise every-day life: You look for a job and try to deal with the new surroundings. Europe is unfortunately quite expensive for Colombians and many cannot afford studying there without a job or a scholarship. In Colombia, it is not normal for the Studentenwerk to offer financial support. There is unfortunately lots of poverty in our country and only a few privileged people receive aid from the state or the university. How should Nicolás know that this is actually possible in Germany? There are still many things he does not know. He had to learn to organise things like health insurance, work or bank agreements, visa application, paying taxes etc. over a very short period of time. He



also became a father. In my view, Nicolás tried everything to make enough money. Searching for financial support is difficult for students who have not yet completely mastered the German language. And there is always the fear of having to fly back home.

Recommendation by
Cristina Isabel Carbonell Arias:

Such difficulties could be avoided if the university were to communicate this kind of information to the students immediately, especially to international students. In Colombia, we have a saying “El que no sabe es como el que no ve” (He who knows not is like he who sees not).

Jorge Garzón

originally from Colombia, studied Ethnology and worked as a welcome tutor at Studierendenwerk Hamburg. He currently works in the social sector.

It is noticeable that Nicolás is a committed person who only wants the best for his family and his education. Unfortunately, he seems to have underestimated his situation. He only reacts with a delay because he is in over his head – he probably did not assess the situation correctly and/or ignored it on purpose. Now it has gotten much more complicated to master his problems. Sometimes, the push for independence paired with some arrogance can lead to the “I-will-manage-on-my-own” behaviour. Nicolás would like to keep his worries away from his wife and child, so he takes the entire load onto his shoulders as the family patriarch – until he notices (in the last second or even too late) that there is no way he can handle the situation by himself.



Diana Carrizosa

studied Philosophy in Colombia and Germany. Has been living in Berlin since 2000 and works as notarised translator for the languages German and Spanish.

Nicolás’ situation may be caused by individual as well as cultural factors. Any person may have a tendency towards procrastination, whether life-long or only temporary. However, in this case the irritation on the part of the staff in the Studentenwerk is understandable: How could anyone be so careless in such an existential issue? The complaint is directed towards Nicolás but I would think it to be probable that other Colombians find themselves in the same situation. In Colombia, the sense of time (fixed appointments, deadlines, punctuality etc.) is not nearly as pronounced as in Germany. People will frequently leave things until the last minute. This may be due to a cultural attitude which can be seen positively as optimism, negatively as irrational hope (“somehow things will work out”). And a wide spectrum of consultation services is not as self-evident in Colombia as in Germany. It is more normal to have to manage by yourself – just like Nicolás tried. I would also not expect too much from local consultations in Colombia.



Heidi Hohmann

from the psycho-social information center in the Studentenwerk OstNiedersachsen. She has been consulting students in Clausthal for more than 30 years.

Nicolás is facing pressure from two directions: providing for his family and completing his studies. He is not aware of the new option of not only working 90 but 120 days. Furthermore, these 120 days can be transformed into 240 part-time days to create more time for family and studies. In Clausthal, for example, there is also the option to apply for a degree loan with the Studentenwerk. An application for financial support can be submitted to the International Center twice a year as well. And the student government also provides a fund for emergencies. Contact to a professor for a position as research assistant could be initiated with the help of the information center. There are offers for studying and examination behaviour, motivational crises and procrastination. Regular conversations might make studying easier for Nicolás and return his optimism of finishing his studies. Due to his cultural origin, Nicolás will have a hard time to reveal the problems of his situation: embarrassed to lose face and beg for hand-outs – and those are only some of the concerns. Providing for the family is a responsibility of high status in South-American countries.



Critical Incidents – Financial Matters

Back rent



THE CASE

*Kito**, an exchange student from Kenya, forgets to pay the rent for his apartment in a student residence hall organised by the Housing Office. Frau *Frei**, employee at the Housing Office, sends him a payment request via e-mail but does not receive any reply. After several reminders, the reply does come: “I will come next morning ...”. Since he does not show up the next morning, the correspondence continues for some time. One day, Kito shows up at the Housing Office, whistling happily and not offering an apology. To Frau Frei’s critical question as to why he did not show up on the agreed date, Kito replies that he is there now and does not see a problem. Frau Frei is quite upset. After all, the university has to pay the rent as well.

* Names amended



PERSPECTIVES

Lizbeth Makena Kiruai

originally from Kenya, currently a student of International Development Studies at the University of Marburg. She had worked as a tutor at Kölner Studierendenwerk from 2012-2014.

I see the situation as follows: Maybe the Kenyan student does not take the situation seriously because:

1. He used to be student in Kenya where students do not take the concerns of their landlords seriously. They will pay when they can or are evicted if they do not pay at all – in which case they will stay with friends.
 2. Tenants generally see landlords as annoying. They will try to avoid them if they have no money and only reappear once funds have been replenished – without any sense of guilt.
 3. Maybe he was told that the university will take over the rental payments in case of his inability to pay.
- However, it could just be his personal attitude as well.



Eva Gerold

responsible for Accommodation and International Matters at Studierendenwerk Mainz.

Two different perspectives of the same situation collide in this situation. The Housing Office employee expects adherence to rules and times. The student does have an interest in solving the problem but the actual moment in time does not matter to him. “I am here now, let’s tackle this problem instead of discussing the fact that I was not here earlier.” For both sides, their respective perspective is “completely normal”. Both cannot understand or even imagine that someone else might treat the situation differently. In their world, that is “how it is done”. Neither one notices the fact that both have the same goal – namely solving this problem – because they remain stuck with the definition of “correct” behaviour. Due to cultural and personal differences, the concepts of time and regulations can be quite different. In Germany, there is a focus on adherence to deadlines and regulations while other cultures may focus on the relationship level or objects instead. If we communicate with each other and keep in mind that other people may have a different cultural background, we can get to know their perspective better.



Recommendation by Eva Gerold:

We should explain to international students which issues are important in Germany. Nothing will be achieved through reprimands. My specific suggestions: Both parties could communicate with each other to set a date for “tomorrow, 10:00 a.m. German time”.

Critical Incidents – Financial Matters

Money problems



THE CASE

The Vietnamese student *Nguyen** is the recipient of a university scholarship which takes care of the largest part of his subsistence expenses. The money is transferred to his account in a German bank. The monthly financial support from his family in Vietnam is transferred to the same account. During his fourth semester, the parents stop the payments because they can no longer afford to support him. Nguyen now lives of approx. 250 Euro per month paid by the university scholarship. During that same semester, his half-brother arrives in Germany after Nguyen helped him get a spot at the same university. However, the older half-brother did not qualify for an academic scholarship from the university. Nguyen comes to the International Office and asks for an increase of his scholarship or a job as research assistant. His current funds simply do not suffice. He casually mentions that his half-brother from Vietnam is also in Germany and currently living with him. But he does not explain that he has to support his half-brother, both in terms of academics and finances. The staff at the International Office does not understand how he could have financial difficulties since he receives a relatively generous monthly stipend as well as a basic income from his parents. During a longer conversation, it finally becomes evident that the half-brother has access to his account and spends almost all the money on himself. Nguyen also admits after a number of detailed questions that his parents no longer financially support him.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Si Anh Muhamath Nguyen

originally from Saigon in Vietnam, studied Social Education at the University of Darmstadt. He worked as student assistant and tutor at Studierendenwerk Darmstadt and was also active as supervisor for unaccompanied, underage refugees.

This situation seems very tricky to me. It is about the dishonesty towards the International Office and the injustice between two siblings. In my view, the half-brother seems to be an appendage who cannot manage his life and studies in German independently. He is taking advantage of Nguyen. Nguyen in turn is not honest at the International Office because he considers it his duty to support his half-brother. At the same time, he understands that German norm does not allow for his half-brother to withdraw funds from his account. He is embarrassed because his parents have financial difficulties. He is



also conscious of the fact that the stipend is for him and not his brother. In Vietnam, his helpfulness is understood and normal but not in Germany. Which is why he did not talk about it at first. Common use of a bank account between siblings is quite normal. As the younger brother, he is supposed to respect the older brother which means that he should not ask him on what the money was spent. There is also a tradition of the better ones supporting those who are not quite as adept. Nguyen helped organise the spot at the university which is why he “has to” support him in academic and financial issues. That way, he can present himself as a good son towards his father.

Huy Le

grew up as the child of Vietnamese parents in Hanover and studied Industrial Engineering at the Technical University of Berlin after his training as company scholar with Volkswagen.

I find the behaviour of the Vietnamese people in this example rather strange. If I were to come to Germany on a scholarship and were to face an emergency situation due to unforeseen circumstances, I would clearly communicate this immediately and not only admit to it retrospectively. There is nothing of more significant status in Vietnam than family. That is the only way to explain that Nguyen is afraid to communicate that the increase of his financial support is intended for his half-brother – who isn’t even entitled to it. When it comes to education, Germany has an excellent reputation and life is probably “better there”. Nguyen would like his half-brother to be able to benefit from this situation without having considered the consequences. I know that other Vietnamese people discuss their financial situation with their parents before they come to Germany to study. They generally have a good high school degree, are motivated, resilient and industrious. They frequently take the initiative to look for work in addition to the financial support from their parents or the scholarship to create a comfortable study and living situation or even relieve the parents of their financial obligation.



Thi Bich Tien Nguyen

originally from Dalat in Vietnam, currently a student at the Technical University of Darmstadt and a tutor at Studierendenwerk Darmstadt.

Nguyen went to the International Office because he was in trouble. He is of the opinion that the staff will understand his problems and that he can receive more money. It is a matter of course that he lets his half-brother stay with him. It is customary in Vietnam that every member of the family takes care of the others. Normally, the older brother or sister would care for the younger siblings. We would never demand for the half-brother to move out or not to touch the money. I don’t think that Vietnamese are very direct. They tend to dance around their problems which Germans in turn cannot understand. If you don’t want to directly address your problems, you automatically begin to tell some untruths even though your counterpart will find out the truth after all anyway.



Ly Tran

studied Media Culture at the Bauhaus University Weimar and has supported Studierendenwerk Thüringen since 2013 – originally as International Scout and since April 2014 as Project Assistant for “Studium+M” and “Fremde werden Freunde”.

I discussed this case with my brother who is ten years older. Our reactions were quite different:

Interpretation 1: This is a case of fraud to hustle more money.

Interpretation 2: The scholarship recipient is the clear victim in this situation. It is not unusual for family members to “broker” each other abroad in which case the most reliable person bears the responsibility. Families often hope to be able to “cure” black sheep by keeping them close to “good sheep”. It sounds to me like the half-brother is more of a cousin who has a higher status in the family and therefore the power over Nguyen. That is also the reason he can spend his money.

The cultural reason is this:

- Absolute sense of obligation towards the family.
- Self-evident financial, educational support
- Shame and concealment of family circumstances

Foreigners often think they should not tell the authorities in Germany anything because they might lose their support. Scholarship recipients need to understand that they alone are the subject of the sponsorship and that the half-brother is obligated to finance his own life. But communicating this matter is rather difficult.



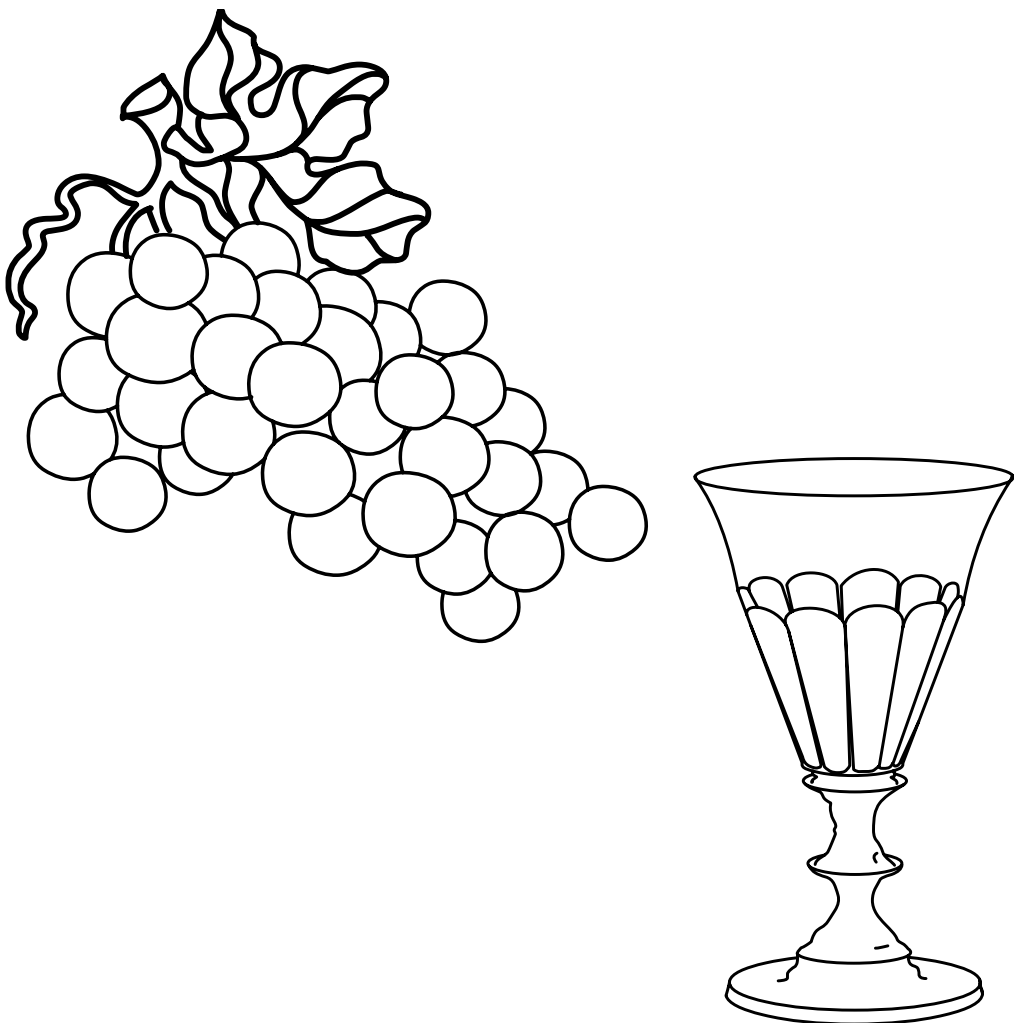
Critical Incidents – Culture

The wine tasting



THE CASE

The staff in the International Office are taking a trip to a lake with some international students. While on a walk in a city famous for its wine afterwards, they spontaneously decide to partake in a wine tasting. Everyone present seems to agree. But during the tasting, a Syrian student distances himself from the group and sits down by himself at a far-away table. Before, he was open and integrated into the group. The Manager of the International Office talks to the student who seems embarrassed of his behaviour. He apologises multiple times and explains his behaviour with the fact that his beliefs would not allow him to be at a table or even in the same room with people consuming alcohol. Several times over, he assures the staff that he is fine with keeping his distance during this part of the trip. He apologises again for creating such a situation for the Director. For the remainder of the time during the tasting, everyone feels uncomfortable with the situation and the sudden exclusion of the previously sociable student.

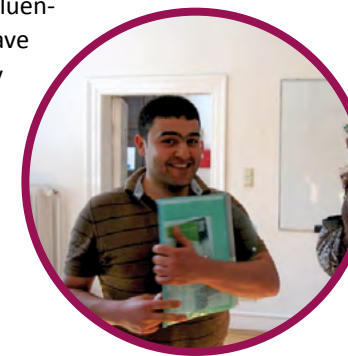


PERSPECTIVES

Adnan Ghanem

originally from Syria, studied Dentistry in Halle and worked as a tutor at Studentenwerk Halle during that time.

There was no way to foresee this situation since the wine tasting was a spontaneous decision. I see the largest share of the “guilt” with the Syrian student because he was unable to solve the situation in a way that was pleasant for everyone. In my opinion, he exaggerated when explaining Syrian etiquette. Adding frequent apologies and displaying a feeling of shame only made the situation more complicated. I follow these rules: I do not have to apologise for my belief. There are no understandable reasons why the student acted the way he did. What I have experienced in my country is that my family – like most families – will not offer guests any alcohol but they would also not be bothered if the host would like to drink alcohol in his house in the presence of the family (as guests). Unfortunately, foreign influences from other nations have spread into Syrian society over the last ten years. They have steered the thinking and actions of the socially weak into a conservative direction.



Hecham Marouf

originally from Syria, has been living in Germany since 2007 and studies Biochemistry at the University of Würzburg.

I think that the reaction of this student was somewhat exaggerated. Some Syrians would stand by him and support his reaction while other Syrians will definitely be against it. Everyone is entitled to their opinion. I am from Syria but am also part of an open minority in which such a reaction is very rare. That is why I cannot imagine acting in a similar way here in Germany. On the other hand, his reaction is understandable: The majority of the Syrian people are Muslim and it is forbidden in Islam to drink or serve alcohol or to be a servant to it. This student probably grew up in a very conservative family and was confronted with such ideas from a young age – for example that drinking alcohol is forbidden because it states in the Quran that it is unhealthy. Or, like in this case, that it is not allowed to sit at the same table as people who drink alcohol. When you come to Germany where this kind of behaviour is normal, the fear of violating religious laws rises. That is why people automatically activate a mechanism of self-protection which results in the student distancing himself in this situation. If you believe something strongly for 20 years, it is quite difficult to change opinion within 20 minutes. But there are also many Syrian Muslims who come from more open backgrounds and do not care whether alcohol is being consumed at the table. They frequently even drink themselves. One example is a school friend of mine who is Muslim but enjoys drinking our national alcoholic drink (anis liqueur). In the end, it is a question of education and this student was probably brought up rather conservatively.



Critical Incidents – Culture

No reply



THE CASE

The administrator in the International Office of a German university, Frau Zanger*, organises intercultural trainings for new Chinese students. To coordinate the dates, she suggests several options via e-mail and asks the students to inform her of their desired dates. Only three students send a reply. After that, she inquires several times via e-mail with the other students. But again, she receives no reply. When Frau Zanger meets some of the Chinese students at an event, she asks why nobody replied to her. The students answer that they already had other events scheduled during the suggested dates and times. No problem but why didn't anybody communicate this to her? The Chinese students reply that none of them wanted to be the reason for her to have to change the date. Frau Zanger shakes her head in disbelief.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Chuan Ding

originally from Qingdao, China. She studies Translation and Interpreting at the University of Mainz in Germersheim. She has been working as a tutor at Studierendenwerk Vorderpfalz since 2015.

In China, people tend to not express themselves as individuals but as a group instead. That is why people tend to not emphasise their own wishes too much as long as nothing bad happens because of it. In Germany, people often vote – person by person. That would not work in China, there are simply too many people. The Chinese are used to remaining in their group and helping each other. Before accepting a deadline, people prefer finding out the opinion of others first. In a difficult situation, as in the case study, people prefer to not make a decision and wait how the others will react instead. As a consequence, nobody reacts to the e-mails sent by Frau Zanger.



Recommendation by Chuan Ding:

The way of communicating with students in China is quite different from Germany. Because there are so many students, information is mostly sent to groups. That means all students who are part of the same course will receive messages from the instructor or department head. It would make sense in Germany to first contact this administrator as well and have him/her forward the e-mails.

Jing Wang

originally from China, currently studies Environmental Engineering at the Technical University of Darmstadt and works as a tutor at Studierendenwerk Darmstadt.

E-mail is not used as much as other means of communication in China. Maybe the students are not used to checking their inbox every day. Besides, it is difficult for beginners to reply in German. These students are new in Germany, they cannot understand their lectures well and are bombarded with German all day long. After that, they are free but tired. They no longer want to hear or speak German. At the beginning, the new students will attend their classes regularly but later on, once they have figured out how everything works, they will no longer go. People don't want to send a direct cancellation and instead simply no longer show up. I have been living in Germany for five years and still have problems to refuse a date or deny something. No student wants the situation to change for everyone due to personal reasons, that's simply embarrassing. I was taught from a very young age that I should always agree with the majority, not separate from the group. Maybe people think: Even if I don't go, many others still will.



Lin Zhang

originally from China, studies in Lübeck and has been working as a tutor at Studentenwerk Schleswig-Holstein since 2013.

In my opinion, the fact that the Chinese students don't react to the e-mail does not necessarily have to do with cultural customs. I can imagine that this is not a mandatory event and they therefore do not feel obligated to reply to the e-mails. Moreover, the training is an event addressed to several people. Therefore, there are no worries that it has to be rescheduled for a single person. It is a similar situation to a lecture from which some students are missing without having cancelled. That does not necessarily have to be Chinese students, Germans too. And of course, the class will not be cancelled because of their absence. That is why their explanation to not want to be the cause of a change of schedule does not qualify as a real reason but is meant polite.



In my home country, it is considered moral to hold your own desires back and show respect. Ignoring or forgetting the e-mails from Frau Zanger is not great behaviour. You need a good excuse which says: I showed consideration, I showed respect. A good way to protect yourself from criticism.

Azadeh Hartmann-Alampour

originally from Iran, intercultural trainer and staff in the International Office at RWTH Aachen.

That was my case. I wanted to find a date for an event for a group of Chinese students. This is how I explain it: Chinese students are group-oriented. A single student does not want to be the reason for rescheduling because the others might still be able to participate even if s/he is not. I assumed that I was on the same hierarchy level as the students. I offer something and if it does not fit, I will be given a "factual" reply. This is not about me personally which is why a cancellation would not offend me. This is simply about an event. But the students see me on a higher hierarchy level as a staff member in the International Office. They cannot tell me directly that the dates I selected don't work for them because a) it would communicate that I am not informed enough about their schedules and as a result offer dates which don't work. A cancellation would b) also communicate that another event is more important than the one I am offering – and that would offend me. With their silence, the students are letting me know indirectly that they cannot participate in my event. Since I am of a higher level in the hierarchy, it is my duty to specify the date. I cannot expect the students to assume this task. I did not behave in accordance with my role.



Watch this Critical Incident as a short film:
<http://erikmalchow.de/perspective>

Critical Incidents – Culture

Shaking hands

Arabic
countries

THE CASE

As part of his work at a German-speaking university, Herr *Bauer** advises international students. He also supervises international student associations. A large student association at his university is the Islamic University Association (IUA) with which he has had little contact so far (and has not looked for it either). He provided support to students from Arab countries in founding a secular Arabic university association – under the condition that this association were to focus on the Arabic world and culture while everything to do with religion would take place in the IUA. *Said**, a Palestinian student he knows well and who is active in the association, recently contacted the IUA. A meeting with five people was scheduled: five persons from IUA and Herr Bauer. The encounter with the IUA unsettled Herr Bauer, he describes it as follows: “The doorbell rings. Two men approach me, greet me with a handshake. Behind them stand two women, smiling at me. I approach them, extend my hand and notice some hesitation. We enter the meeting room of the International Office and have a great and very open conversation. The two women are very active. At the end, I ask them whether they have a problem shaking hands with men. They confirm my suspicion and explain that they do not want to have physical contact with men. They add that I might pose an exception because I am already older and a person of respect. In such a case, it would not be so bad. But they would not want to shake hands with a younger colleague.”

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Khouloud Maknin

originally from Tunisia, has a Master in International Relationships and is lecturer for Communication, Leadership and Citizenship.

In accordance with Islamic culture, women are not allowed to shake hands or engage in any other physical contact with men except for their father, brother, husband or uncle. The prophet Mohamed says that women should only be addressed behind a veil. As a consequence, many religious women avoid contact with men. This behaviour can be found, for example, in Tunisia or other countries of the Middle East but especially in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The men in those countries have very different stand-points but they do not actually tolerate women being active members of society. Some women are very active, quite intelligent and have a lot of ambitions. But they still think that they should avoid

physical contact with men. I would like to emphasise how interconnected religion and culture are. Most Tunisian women, for example, do not have a problem shaking hands but will not hug or kiss. The reason is the women’s movement under the first President of the Tunisian Republic. In Saudi-Arabia, this kind of behaviour is not customary. Women there fight for very basic rights, such as driving or showing painted nails in public.



Yousef Hijazi

originally from Lebanon, has been studying Mechanical Engineering at the University of Hannover since 2013.

I asked the Imam why women may not shake hands with men and this was his reply: “I as a Muslim find it normal that it is forbidden for women to shake hands with strange men. It is also not permitted if the man is old as the texts containing this prohibition are somewhat general. Shaking hands with an older man might lead to the woman having an easier time doing it with other men. Islam has forbidden it because it might lead to temptation or wake desires. If a woman does not shake hands with a man, she has already stopped the first step to fornication and everything associated with it as it might lead to more temptation and wake even more desires. Women are precious in Muslim culture. A short story to illustrate:

An Englishman says to a Muslim: *Why do the Muslims not shake hands with women?*

Muslim: *Do you know Elizabeth II.?*

Englishman: *Yes, that is our queen.*

Muslim: *Have you ever shaken her hand?*

Englishman: *No! Not everyone is allowed to touch her.*

Muslim: *There you go. For us, every woman is like a queen, and not everyone can touch her.”*

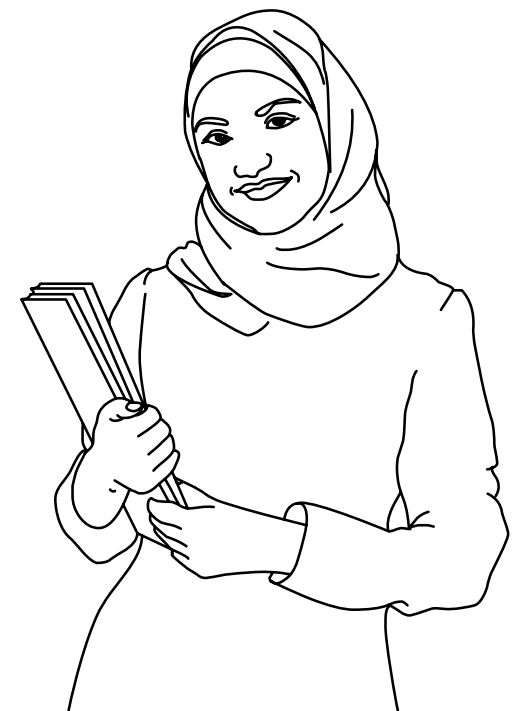
Being a student in Germany who grew up in a Muslim environment, I consider it normal that shaking hands and other forms of physical contact with the other gender are forbidden. Not only for women. This rarely happens with us because everyone knows it is prohibited. But nowadays, everything has changed, even in Lebanon. Some people shake hands with older people because they think it is disrespectful if they do not shake hands. Lebanon is a different case than most Arab countries because it is home not only to Muslims but also Christians and Atheists. Contact with them has made it more normal to shake hands with someone. In Germany, it is no problem for me to shake other people’s hands or to hug them. But I will not do that in Muslim countries. I guess it depends how you live Islam and what your denomination is.



Nikolina Pušić

Psychological Consultant, manages International Affairs at Studierendenwerk Essen-Duisburg.

I experienced a similar situation with a couple from Malaysia which had just arrived in Germany. The man refused to shake my hand when we met but the wife hugged me enthusiastically. This behaviour really surprised me. The tense situation was resolved through common laughter as we accepted our differences and did not address them any further. For the two students, any physical contact with men, especially of a similar age, is the same as exchanging intimacies and could even be interpreted as flirting. To avoid misunderstandings and express their personal integrity, they categorically refuse physical contact with the other gender. The only exceptions are family members and respectable persons. Due to the age and position of the advisor, I would assess their behaviour towards him as appreciative and trusting. A strict physical distance to men can also be an expression of mindfulness for oneself and others, a strong sense of self-value and respect. Any reason why only relates to Islam is not enough for me. I have professional and personal contact to (some religious) Muslims and have never encountered this type of behaviour. In my experience, strict adherence to commandments and prohibitions has more to do with personal attitude and values and less with religion itself.



Critical Incidents – Culture

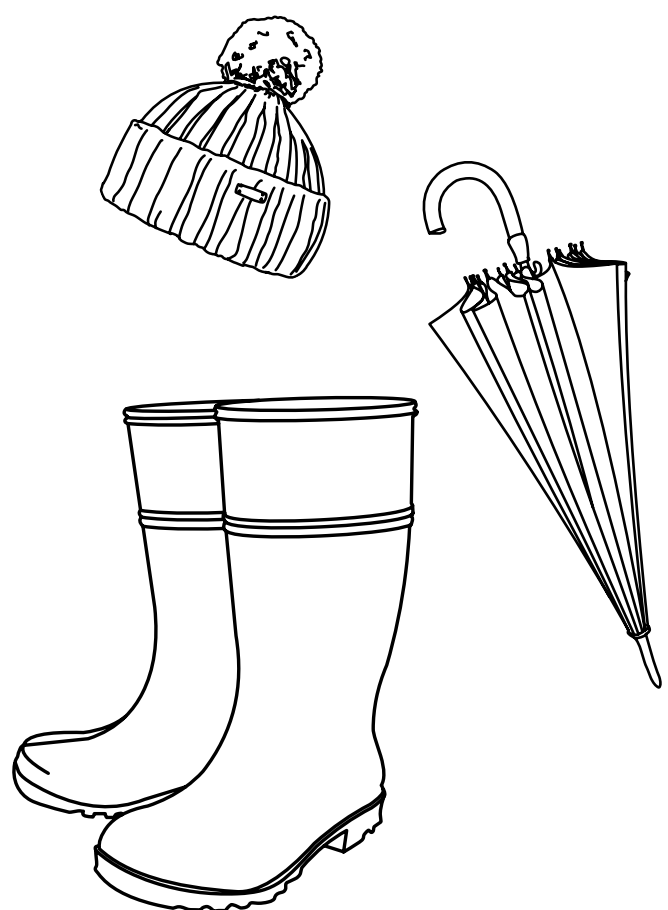
Be brief



THE CASE

A German university employee and two English-speaking colleagues regularly write various texts together. When doing so, irritations regularly flare up. Frau *Heims** tasks include compiling information, for example for the website or as an announcement for students. She then passes on these texts to her colleagues, a British and an American woman, to be translated. Both find that the texts by their German colleague are not informative enough and much too short. The most recent task is the planning of an excursion. Frau Heims is disconcerted when she sees that her colleagues have expanded her announcement. The keyword “Shopping”, for example, includes the following addition: “Plan your meals in advance and buy enough food for the weekend.” They also added the instruction: “Be sure to bring a raincoat in case of bad weather.” Frau Heims believes such details as part of the announcement of an excursion on a webpage are completely excessive and somewhat embarrassing. After all, these are grown-ups studying abroad and not little children who need care.

* Names amended



PERSPECTIVES

Amanda Randall

German professor in Northfield, Minnesota, studied in Frankfurt am Main.

The reaction of the two English-speaking colleagues becomes understandable when taking the structure of the college experience at American universities into consideration. Both recognise that American students are not used to procuring their own food or cooking themselves, for example. They normally live in a residence hall right on campus and eat in the cafeteria. Moreover, it is likely that American students have no idea that German supermarkets have restricted opening hours – compared to the United States where many are open 24 hours a day. It could also be the case that the two colleagues claim that students from abroad require more information because they might feel somewhat lost in the foreign culture. More information translates into a sense of security as well as a “warm message” of care. American students are used to extensive advice and close support from the university or the Studentenwerk (and even from professors!). One reason is the fact that the time at university is considered more as a transition phase from childhood to adulthood and is therefore structured with all kinds of social support. Even though American students qualify as the target group “adults” for the internet page, they tend to be less self-reliant at home due to the structure of university life. Thus, studying abroad is an important step on their way to self-reliance.



Lars Hinrichs

German professor for English Studies at the University of Texas.

In England and in the United States, studying after high school is not considered to be a step towards independence. There is most certainly a great cultural difference to Central Europe. If you ask students in England or in the U.S. where they live, they will most certainly reply with the place of residence of their parents: “I live in California but I study at the University of Texas”. A somewhat more distinguished, albeit docile, hierarchical relationship between students and representatives of the university as institution thus form part of the cultural set of expectations. Specific information about how to protect yourself from rain are something completely normal for students and parents within an anglophone university system. After all, the parents have only temporarily granted the university the supervisory duties of their children. It is not unusual for young people interested in a university to visit the campus with their parents during open house but the majority of questions about the studies during conversations will be asked by the parents and not the future student.



Critical Incidents – Study organization

The daring request



THE CASE

The instructor for German as a foreign language, Herr Müller*, receives an e-mail from Jun*, a South Korean student who has not been to class for quite some time. Jun is requesting a new date for his oral presentation. Herr Müller cannot help but smile when reading the e-mail due of its peculiar style and then decides to speak with Jun personally at the next class (two days later) rather than reply via e-mail. Jun, however, who waited for the instructor’s reply, never shows up again.

* Names amended

Original e-mail:

dear Müller,
apologize I for my absence at literature class.
I hope my reply to not be so late.
At this time, unfortunately, I not only literature class but almost all classes canceled.
That is of course not pride but that could be some reasons.
Sometimes, regularly I was sick and there were personal problems also.
Despite all reasons, is it very impolite for a student not making the presentation without informing the instructor. I was irresponsible. if possible, I daringly ask for the chance to hold the presentation.
Sincerely,
Jun Pak

PERSPECTIVES

Woocheol Sim

originally from South Korea, has been studying Dentistry since 2012 at the University of Regensburg. From 2012 to 2015, he worked as a tutor at Studentenwerk Niederbayern-Oberpfalz. He has been a member of the board of the International Student Network Regensburg (ISNR) since 2014.

Normally, it is mandatory to attend most courses at South Korean universities. Being present impacts the final grade which is why people take part regularly in their lectures. If you miss a lot of class meetings, you will not pass the course. That is why I have a hard time understanding this case. It would be interesting to know how the lecture



took place. The student was probably not able to understand the content due to poor language skills. He could also be introverted and did not volunteer frequently to not have to show his language weakness. He was ashamed. In South Korea, open discussion or interactive participation in a lecture or seminar is not customary. He probably gave up at some point and then decided to not attend lectures at all anymore. And at the end of the semester, he realised the consequences.

Ye Jin

originally from South Korea, studies Intercultural Communication Studies at the European University Frankfurt (Oder). She works with international journalists and artists at various festivals.

Everyone in South Korea tries to leave a good impression with their professor. Students rely on the professors because their letters of reference are extremely important. And since most South Korean universities grade on a curve and only a certain number of students can achieve a grade better than a B, almost all students try to groom their image so that the decision will be made in their favour. This process is closely associated with modesty and some flattery. If a student makes a mistake, s/he should admit to it immediately so as not to appear rude. This is probably universally applicable but it continues to be linked to many other aspects. It is quite like face-saving in China. Because Jun presents himself in a negative light, the professor can display generosity. If he forgives, Jun’s face will be saved as well. Proof are the positive reply and the new chance. I can well imagine that Jun will still write a reply expressing how thankful he is and that he will try harder in the future. In my opinion, that is an unspoken social convention. Therefore, communication consists of more than simply factual information because the aforementioned aspects play an important role for us.



Stefanie Vogler-Lipp

studied Intercultural Communication Studies at the European University Frankfurt (Oder) and has been working there as research assistant at the Center for Intercultural Learning since 2012.

The first thing I notice as an instructor at a German university is the fact that Jun’s e-mail is not grammatically correct. I had to read it twice to understand what he meant. There are too many grammatical and spelling errors. But I do understand that the situation and his behaviour are much more complex. It is evident that Jun and Herr Müller both act from within their cultural socialisation. Jun apparently missed the first date for his presentation and now tries to make up for it. He is aware of his fault and uses very expressive language in his apology: “irresponsible” or “daring”. His behaviour seems to have already been reflected. He might have chosen the written form, an expression for indirect communication, because he shies away from personal contact with his instructor and wants to save face. His absence in the seminar underlines this insecurity. Now he is asking for a second chance. He composes his apology in accordance with his cultural background: very polite and detailed. He lists personal reasons which indicates a high degree of openness and urgency of his situation. Herr Müller on the other hand opts for a personal conversation as a direct means of communication. He thinks it to be more effective and is looking at the problem from a solution perspective. Finally, I would assume that the intended action of the two influences the selection of the type of communication. Herr Müller would like to discuss and solve the problem with Jun. But Jun addresses the problem in writing and waits for the instructor to react. He is supposed to tell him what to do and whether he will be granted a second chance.



Critical Incidents – Study organization

The internship



THE CASE

*Khaled**, a Jordanian exchange student, had applied for a spot for his mandatory internship and has scheduled an interview with the HR department of a company. After the conversation, he asks Frau Schneider*, staff member in the International Office, to call the HR department to try to exert positive influence on his behalf to improve his chances to get the internship. The staff member refuses. In the end, the student does not get the internship. Khaled reacts with disbelief and frustration. He feels like Frau Schneider abandoned him.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Saed Afghani

originally from Jordan, spent an exchange year in Germany and has been working as engineer in automation technology for three years.

I find Khaled's behaviour totally normal. In Jordan, relationships play a significant role when hiring interns. Besides, the demand for internship spots is high and there are not enough opportunities. So, students will do anything possible to get their internship.



Arua Husaini

Jordanian of Palestinian descent who works in the Section Near East, North Africa of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

Khaled seems to blame the rejection on the staff member of the International Office. Maybe he assumed that he would have had better chance if Frau Schneider had called the company and campaigned for him. Since the internship is a mandatory part of his studies, the rejection might make it difficult for him to finish his studies in time. He seems to be under a lot of pressure and was hoping that Frau Schneider would support him. His reaction is still not justifiable since Frau Schneider made clear from the beginning that she would not call the company. He seems to believe the International Office should support him and is responsible for all matters associated with his studies. In Jordan, as almost everywhere in the Arab world, personal contacts, status and origin (family name) play an important role ("Vitamin C") and is customary in all aspects of life. The student apparently does not understand the responsibilities of the International Office. That is why he is upset and disappointed. He takes the fact that the staff member did not campaign for him quite personally.



Aya Alofi

originally from Amman in Jordan, studies Industrial Engineering at the Jordan University for Science and Technology and works as instructor at the German Jordanian University.

The Jordanian student had applied for an internship. After the interview at the company, he asked Frau Schneider from the International Office for help. She was supposed to support him, for example through a letter of reference, as is also customary for the Master. She refused – which is her right. Maybe she thinks that he is not a good fit for the job. In the end, the student did not get the internship. In my view, he did not fulfil the requirements for an internship with the company. He should try harder and look for other people who are willing to recommend him as an intern. I think that his reaction is caused by personal instead of cultural reasons. I know that Jordanians sometimes tend to rely on other people – especially if they know how they will react. Khaled could have been disappointed but that does not give him the right to act shamefully towards the staff member of the International Office. She most likely had good reasons for her refusal.



Critical Incidents – Study organization

The tutor



THE CASE

*Rachid**, computer science student from Morocco, visits the office hours of the International Office. Despite having studied for seven semesters already, he has only managed to collect ten ECTS points. The Immigration Office has summoned him and threatened to expel him since he has not demonstrated any clear willingness to study. Rachid is horrified and afraid to be expelled from Germany. He is very emotional and begins to cry. The staff at the International Office are empathetic. The student speaks very good German. He explains that his personal situation and the suicide of another Moroccan student affected him so much that he was not able to pursue his studies. The director of the International Office who is also computer science professor, knows Rachid. He offers to hire a tutor so that Rachid can improve his performance. The tutor, *Michael**, schedules appointments with Rachid and meets him twice. Michael is surprised how much basic knowledge is missing and finds that Rachid is not showing much initiative. He ends up not showing up for the final exam, despite preparing. After a few weeks, he appears at the International Office and asks for help again. The staff is baffled and do not understand Rachid's behaviour.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Samira Sammer

lives in Berlin, grew up as the daughter of Moroccan parents in the Rhineland. She has a Bachelor in History and Political Studies from the University of Siegen and is the founder of German Study Support.

Many international students feel overwhelmed by the new situation caused by the studying abroad. It is not only the pressure to perform in the studies but also the family's expectations which put quite a bit of pressure on the students. The new cultural environment also represents a

serious adjustment for many. Maybe Rachid realised too late that his degree is not right for him. Now he does not dare to drop out or change majors because he cannot or does not want to have to admit this to his family. In the presence of the tutor, he realises that he will not be able to catch up on what he missed. Or Rachid is still young and



has not yet figure out how to manage his time properly, coordinate university, leisure time and work. He is probably not familiar with that from his home. Students simply have a different rhythm than they do in Germany.



Meryama Qasbi

student of German Studies at the University Mohammed V in Rabat, Morocco.

I think this student has gotten himself into a difficult situation. It is difficult to figure out whether he has financial or private problems. Or perhaps he simply chose the wrong degree? It could also be that he is not really interested in his studies but simply wants to stay in Germany to work and lead a better life. I know this kind of situation from my brother-in-law and many of his friends who did not manage to continue and complete their studies in Germany. In the end, he got married there and now works for a tire company. But I also know a Moroccan who managed a restaurant in Wuppertal and wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the side. It seems that Rachid is simply not motivated. I can only guess that he does not have much discipline. Maybe he is spoiled and never learned to tackle his problems. In my opinion, a lot of cultural aspects are also relevant, such as low performance expectations and a low degree of uncertainty avoidance. Many people in Morocco work and live "polychronic", meaning that "flexible time structure and synchronous organization of different activities" are held in high esteem.



Naima Tahiri

has a Ph.D. in German Studies and has been working as assistant professor in Morocco for five years.

This situation is quite explosive. But the student does not seem to realise as he does not change his behaviour despite the support from the International Office. I assume that he is working and the only reason he does not want to give up his student status is for visa reasons. He would like to live in Germany but may only do so as long as he is enrolled in a university. His explanation towards the professor would then only be an excuse. However, it could also be that psychological reasons (depression) constrain his ability to work and study. A cultural explanation of his behaviour might be the certainty conveyed through his social upbringing that there will always be help in emergency situations. The student currently is in an emergency but does nothing actively try to change it. This fact especially



suggests that his behaviour is not culturally conditioned. If you assume a psychological unstable disposition, it is much easier to understand his behaviour.

Eva-Maria Orgel

has been working as psychological Psychotherapist at Studierendenwerk Berlin since 1993 and offers group therapy and consulting services for students.

The case of Rachid seems to represent a long-term work disorder. Students of German origin tend to avoid confrontation until the last possible moment as well. During our psychological consulting sessions, we try to work out with our clients which steps are needed next to continue. We also attempt to find out which shame topics might hold them back, where their blockades are located and which unconscious resistance there might be. In addition to tutoring support, a psychological consultation would be quite helpful for Rachid. The shame of not being able to handle your studies is only increased by the pressure from the Immigration Office. The fear of a return also paralyses him. Much importance is placed on self-reliant learning at German universities which ends up in many students studying by themselves at libraries. Rachid comes from a culture with relation character; many things take place within a group. Family expectations are also conceivable: Rachid is a great hope who is supposed to study abroad and return with success. He might feel guilty for not being able to meet those expectations. His friend's suicide may have only increased such fears. Listlessness and lack of motivation often present themselves as depressive symptoms. It must be clarified whether Rachid is being held back by his psychological issues or whether the selection of a computer science program was simply not the right choice.



Critical Incidents – Study organization

Complaint with the president



THE CASE

The Romanian exchange student *Dumitru** has been attending a German partner university for a month. Due to the provisions of his student residence hall, he must pay the rent for his room for three months in advance. Even though he was made aware of this regulation in his information package, he does not want to accept this condition. He complains about his coordinator to the president of his university in Romania. The president in turn files a complaint with the president of the German university. The German president asks the Manager of the International Office to explain why students are faced with such financial burden right at the beginning of their stay. A team meeting in the International Office yields the information that the student was informed about the payment mode in advance as well as upon his arrival. It was also explained to him that this is a regulation by the Studentenwerk and that he is obligated to pay this amount from his Erasmus stipend, like all other students. Frau *Fischer**, the responsible advisor in the International Office, is disappointed and angry. In her opinion, Dumitru always goes over her head, does not listen and does not follow the guidelines she must communicate to him.

* Names amended



PERSPECTIVES

Silvia Cojocar

originally from Bucharest, Romania, has been studying Cultural Studies at the European University Frankfurt (Oder) since 2011 and works as student assistant in the Center for key competencies and research-oriented Learning.

Unfortunately, this type of situation happens rather frequently in my opinion. It is a pity that such difficult and unpleasant situations must be clarified in programs such as Erasmus even though the information was communicated beforehand. I am not sure whether there are understandable reasons for the student's behaviour but I do think that his line of thinking is understandable: "It should be stated explicitly, this is a large sum". I am also not sure to what extent the reason behind his actions is cultural. In Romania, there is culture of lack of independence which is only furthered by the universities. Communication remains problematic, especially between universities and students. Romanian authorities let citizens run back and forth or dispatch documents with complex vocabulary which contains no specific information. The feeling is conveyed that it is not necessary to read everything, that the content is mostly useless. But I also think that this case is a question of the individual attitude displayed by Dumitru since the concept of paying three months in advance is quite wide-spread in Romania as well.



Christina Schuster

originally from Romania, has been advising exchange students at the University of Würzburg-Schweinfurt since 1997.

At first glance, one might think that insufficient financial means are the reason for Dumitru violating the specifications of the International Office and Studentenwerk, ignoring the hierarchies of the university and requesting help from the president of his home university. The student most certainly took note of and understood the regulations of the International Office and Studentenwerk. But he probably compared the content of his rental agreement to legal stipulations and discussed it with others. In doing so, he determined that the provisions are unlawful. Consequently, he no longer trusts the two institutions and their representatives. That is why he contacts a higher arbitration body. Most international students have a very positive image of Germany. Romanians see Germany as a constitutional state and idealise it accordingly. After his experience with the International Office and the Studentenwerk, Dumitru has now discovered that the representatives of public German institutions apparently do not comply with legal regulations after all. He feels lied to and abandoned and draws comparisons to the conditions in his home country. The only way to denounce this injustice publicly seems to be a call for help to the president of his home university. The president questions the practices of the International Office and the Studentenwerk. The president of the German university in turn takes the objections seriously and asks the director of the International Office for a meeting. She refers to the provisions of the Studentenwerk.



Critical Incidents – Study organization

The invitation



THE CASE

Frau Berger* works for the International Office at her university and is responsible for student mobility. She organises a university place for Erkan* in Turkey, a student of Turkish origin. Erkan’s plans are somewhat problematic since the faculty initially did not want to admit him to a semester abroad. That is why Frau Berger campaigns for him on multiple occasions and finally obtains the admission. Erkan is delighted when he receives the admission from the partner university. He would like to invite Frau Berger to a meal to thank her. She politely refuses, stating that she only did her job. But Erkan insists.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Baris Ünal

studied Communication Sciences at the Free University Berlin and works as student advisor at the Technical University of Berlin.

This situation has a positive background: bureaucratic hurdles were overcome; the student can go on his exchange and the administrator was able to make an effort on behalf of the student. But the end does seem tricky. Frau Berger advocated for Erkan as part of her job – she may simply consider her own behaviour as normal professional commitment. An invitation to a meal is more of a private affair to her. Moreover, the invitation has the taste of a “remuneration” for something which only exists on a professional level to her. And under no circumstances does she want the invitation to be suggestive of a date. The student is happy and thankful for her special dedication which he perceives as personal. And he wants to thank her in the same way. Taking a meal together or inviting someone to a meal (to your house) is a more customary event in a Turkish environment than in Germany. It does not only have a private or even romantic connotation. Maybe Erkan interpreted the refusal as a phrase of civility. The refusal for politeness reasons and the insistence for the same reasons are part of the (oriental) rituals between guest and host. The student probably did not mean to be vehement when repeating the invitation but the administrator appears to feel under even more pressure now.



Recommendation by Baris Ünal:

She could make an alternative suggestion to still give the student the option to express his gratitude: for example, sending a thank you mail to the employer, sending postcards to the International Office etc.

Pia Ucar

Lawyer and Human Rights Activist from Berlin, has spent time working in Austria, Pakistan and Turkey. Since March of 2016, she has been working for the Peace Brigades International in Kenya.

I can understand the behaviour quite well on both sides in the described situation. I understand the position of the administrator because she feels like she did nothing to justify such an invitation and is also obligated to her employer (and herself) to not accept any gifts. But the desire to want to properly thank her on the part of the student also seems understandable. I have experienced the same type of behaviour in my family. When people are invited to meals, they bring larger gifts than in Germany and any kind of help is appreciated with exuberant gratitude. In my experience in my Turkish family and other Turkish contexts, invitations are initially declined for reasons of politeness (sometimes even several times) to then be accepted after all after repeated invitations. It is kind of a game between refusal and invitation until the invited person finally gives in. That is why I can imagine that the student only saw the refusal by the administrator as a request to repeat the invitation and underline the earnestness.



Faruk Erbay

grew up with Turkish parents in Hannover and studies Industrial Engineering in Clausthal-Zellerfeld.

The student’s behaviour may well be based on the cultural values of his social group. This cultural orientation significantly shapes the behaviour of people and the concept of gratitude and reciprocity is deeply rooted in Turkish culture. I think that is the reason why Erkan insists on his offer. However, what is unconventional in this example is the fact that a man of his cultural background would invite a strange woman to a meal to express his gratitude. It would be more customary to present a small token of appreciation to her, for example chocolate or Turkish delight. The women may feel somewhat pressured by such an invitation. I suspect that his behaviour was influenced by a variety of cultural and social factors.



Critical Incidents – Communication

Emphatic nodding



THE CASE

*Lin**, a Chinese student, comes to the office hours of the Studentenwerk and declares that she would like to change her field of study. The administrator, Frau *Krüger**, knows by her files that this is not a simple process and explains to the student the steps to be taken in a certain order in detail. Lin comments on every sentence with “Yes, yes!” and emphatic nodding. Frau Krüger finds this behavior somewhat strange and occasionally makes sure: “Did you understand that?” Lin’s reply is another enthusiastic “Yes, yes!”. After everything has been explained, Lin leaves the office, thanking the administrator several times. Frau Krüger has the sense that the student did not properly understand what is asked of her.

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Jianning Zhou

from Shanxi, China, has been studying Food Chemistry at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology since 2012.

I think that Lin might have understood the explanation provided by Frau Krüger. International students may not understand every word but should be able to get the general gist, also through intonation and body language. If there was something specific she did not understand, she probably did not have enough time to think or could not reply in German quickly enough as the steps are rather complicated. If she still has any questions, I could see her showing up for office hours again.



Chujian Kong

originally from China, studies Mechanical Engineering at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. He spent 2006/2007 in Germany as an exchange student.

I am 100% sure that Lin did not understand everything. In Chinese culture, people do not directly say “no” because it comes across as impolite. Nobody wants to express their opinion in front of strangers or teachers. Not every Chinese person can handle the German culture because the language is the most important factor and things only become easier very slowly as it is mastered. Many Chinese are withdrawn and shy. They do not have as much independence as most German students. At university, they tend to remain within their group and don’t communicate much with German colleagues. On the other hand, the Germans hardly seem to take an interest in a foreign culture or are even afraid of it. Many Germans would not have a conversation with me unless I initiated it.



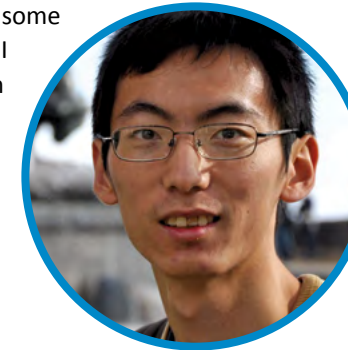
Recommendation by Chujian Kong:

I think it would be important to create a “cultural space of encounter” between Chinese and German people, for example as part of an orientation class with an instructor who is well familiar with the German culture.

Mingyuan Wang

originally from China, studied Computer Sciences in Stuttgart and was active as a tutor on the campus Stuttgart-Vaihingen during that time.

I believe that the student understood the conversation just fine. She certainly did not underestimate the difficulty of changing majors as such an application at a Chinese university is much rarer and almost impossible. Lin’s behaviour is perceived to be unnatural. That could be explained with politeness, meaning that she does not want to disappoint the administrator’s expectations and embarrass her. But maybe she is also insecure due to linguistic challenges. From Lin’s perspective, her lack of language skills could represent discomfort or a disturbance for both conversation partners. Many Chinese attempt to save face during such situations. For example, I would also not always ask during a seminar if I did not understand something. You never know if the question is also interesting to others or was only asked for personal reasons (acoustics, did not pay attention, different cultural background). The latter can be quite embarrassing. If some questions remain for Lin, I think she will get in touch again shortly. Therefore, I would assume that the conversation actually went quite well.



Li Eckart

originally from China, has been studying Economic Mathematics in Freiberg since 2011 and working as tutor at Studentenwerk Freiberg.

I find this situation to be typical. I have experienced something similar when I went to see our professor with a student. During the meeting, he pretended to have understood everything but after we left, he asked me immediately what the professor said. People do not want to cause any trouble to other people because of personal problems. If you keep on asking questions, you waste the time of everyone else. People always strive to be polite. And if you keep asking questions, you insinuate that your counterpart is not doing a great job explaining. And people are afraid to lose face: “It is probably easy but I don’t understand. I cannot show that because the others will think I am stupid.” Or Lin is simply shy. In the Chinese education system, instructors, teachers etc. have an especially respected position. Students are supposed to appear quietly and humbly, behave politely and not cause any problems. This approach also applies to asking questions.



Recommendation by Li Eckart:

The administrator in the Studentenwerk should ask a few simple questions during the conversation, such as “Do you know who your faculty advisor is?”. By the reaction of the student, she should be able to assess how good her German skills are.

Watch this Critical Incident as a short film:
<http://erikmalchow.de/perspective>

Critical Incidents – Communication

Lack of interest



THE CASE

After one month at a German university, Spanish student *Ana** comes to the office hours of her Erasmus coordinator, Frau *Schulz**. Once there, she complains of the lack of interest in her by her German colleagues. She does not understand why other students will not approach her during classes to ask her how she is doing and whether she might need any help. According to her, students in Spain are much more interested and willing to help other colleagues. She can simply not understand the behaviour of the German students and does not feel welcome. Frau Schulz is at a loss for words, she feels sorry for the student.

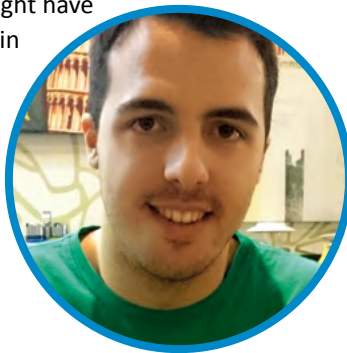
* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Jorge García Paredes

is a student of Communications Engineering in Madrid and has been an exchange student at the faculty for Information Technology at the University of Mannheim since 2015.

It is normal for Ana to feel that way but I believe that she should give her colleagues another chance. She should actively ask for help and not expect others to approach her and offer support, especially because they are not obligated to do so. Somebody might have already offered help in Spain but the German students would most certainly help as well if asked.

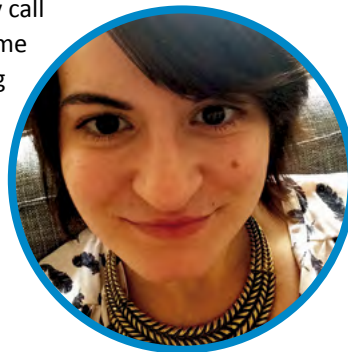


Berta Carrasco Grau

has been living in Germany since 2011 and was tutor for international students at the Translation and Interpreting faculty at the University of Mainz in Gernersheim.

Dear Ana,

university in Germany is, as you have probably noticed, somewhat different than in Spain. In Spain, you are part of a certain class and will share almost all courses with them, more or less like at school. Consequently, friendships are formed rather quickly and people notice if a new student arrives. But my experiences here in Germany have been very different. People here are more independent, everyone can freely pick their courses and the number of participants tends to be higher so that people remain more anonymous. Do not take it personally and do not wait for German colleagues to approach you but go to them instead. Most Germans are more reserved than Spanish people. But if they call you a friend, you can assume that it will be a long-lasting friendship. Do not wait until they welcome you but show them that you are here.



Román González Santana

is a student of Communications Engineering in Madrid, previously completed a degree in Music and is currently Erasmus exchange student at the University of Mannheim.

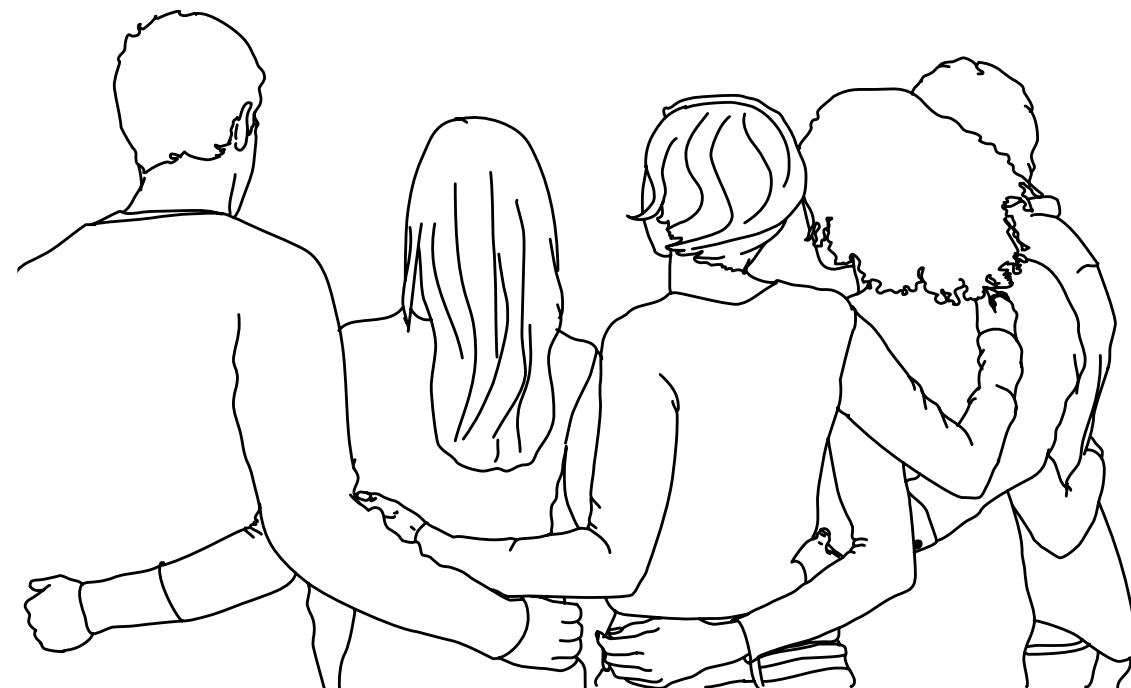
Ana's problem lies in the fact that she imagined her stay in Germany to be easier. But she did not consider that not only language could be a problem but also a new culture in which people might act differently than at home. I think she should definitely ask someone if she is having problems in class, even if her colleagues do not pay attention to her. On the one hand, I understand that she expected everyone to proactively come to her to offer support but I also understand why Germans might expect her to make that step. They are not used to volunteering their help.



Yolanda Mateos Ortega

originally from Madrid but has spent most of her life in Germany. She has been active in the areas of languages, mobility, foreign relations and public work at the University of Mannheim for 23 years. She is also an intercultural trainer.

Frau Schulz could explain the following to Ana: First, she expects interest in her because she is different and secondly, she expects empathy, meaning recognition of her desires. This expectation makes her take a reactive stance instead of a proactive one which may be foreign to her in her familiar environment but steps to the foreground in a new, insecure environment. That means that the other students should approach her. She was probably not active enough herself (to make contacts or possibly ask for help) or her attempts were unsuccessful. The feeling of not belonging takes center stage and makes the whole experience unappealing. She takes the lack of interest personally even though many students were probably treated similarly in such cases. And if she is being treated differently after all, she ignores how many differences there actually are: language, type of communication, unwritten rules etc. Furthermore, she is somewhat wrong in her assessment of her compatriots because Spanish people are quite selective when it comes to their interest in other nationalities. She has an idealised idea of her own group while also drawing on clichés about Germans. As a result, she does not manage to think about her German colleagues unencumbered and look for possible communication strategies.



Critical Incidents – Communication

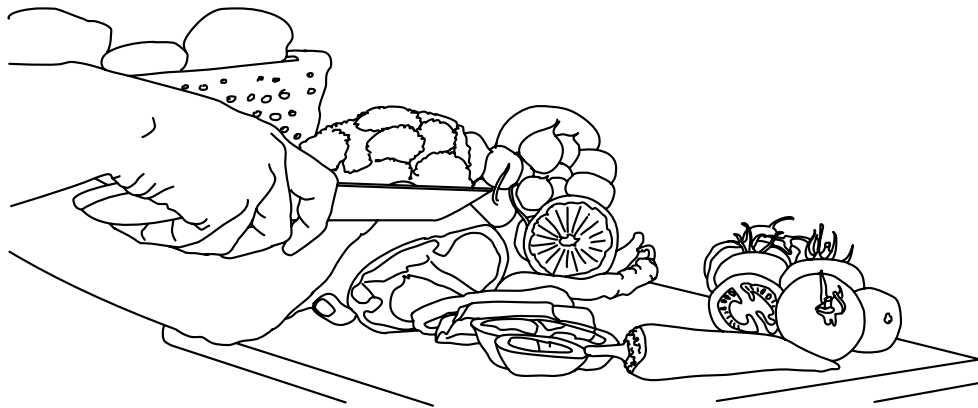
Cooking in the office kitchen



THE CASE

*Layla**, a new colleague of Iranian origin who works full-time, cooks her lunch in the office kitchen every day. She always offers her colleagues to share her food and eat together. After approx. one month, her German colleagues complain about her cooking during a team meeting. According to them, not only the kitchen “stinks” of the food but also the hallway where students move around. It is quite unpleasant in their opinion. The Iranian woman replies that she needs proper, warm food as a full-time employee and she does not like the food from the canteen. Furthermore, the smell does not stink but is a natural phenomenon. And the canteen emits a smell of food as well. Ever since this encounter, Layla feels criticised and discriminated due to her foreign roots. Her German colleagues think that Layla is arrogant and unable to integrate.

* Names amended



PERSPECTIVES

Hossein Abedi

came to Germany from Iran at the age of 13 and worked as a tutor at Studentenwerk Hannover for five years while studying Electrotechnology.

I would like to look at Ana’s behaviour in some more detail and describe why she believes to be the victim of discrimination. There are some basic rules, such as: If I give love, love will be returned to me. Or: If I behave like a normal employee, meaning I don’t offer food, I will be treated normally, just like everyone else. But if I invest more energy in to my social behaviour and offer food, the others will be especially nice to me. That is the first standpoint. The second could be that the Iranians think that they have the “best cuisine in the world”. After 13 years in Germany, I am also convinced of that. Safran, for example, is an ingredient in many Iranian dishes. It is the most expensive ingredient

in the world and it smells delicious. After having heard these two standpoints, every Iranian will be shocked by the behaviour of the colleagues and think that they only complain because Layla is a foreigner. This suspicion is confirmed by the following act: The German colleagues don’t speak to her personally in private but discuss the issue in front of everyone at the team meeting.



Azadeh Hartmann-Alampour

originally from Iran, intercultural trainer who works in the International Office at RWTH Aachen. She coordinates two advisory programs: “BeBuddy” and “Zertifikat-Internationales”.

Layla does not accept the criticism on a factual level but takes it very personally. In her opinion, her colleagues are oblivious to her needs. The group dynamic which she had created through the nice offerings of her food is now destroyed. Her colleagues criticise what she is doing and therefor also her as a person, meaning her “face”. Even though the colleagues explained why they do not like the situation, she cannot distinguish between factual criticism and personal attack. She also finds the criticism to be very direct which hurts her and violates her cultural background. In Iran, nobody would express a complaint that way but always treat other people “with kid gloves”. Layla is hurt, especially because she offered her food to try and establish a relationship with her colleagues. She even perceives it to be as ungrateful because everyone tried her food. She might avoid her colleagues to show that she is hurt – which in turn is perceived as arrogance by the Germans.



Angela Muhl

works as administrator in the residence administration of Studierendenwerk Tübingen-Hohenheim. She coordinates the international tutor program in Hohenheim.

The situation is tricky. Neither party is willing to approach the other party to explain their own standpoint and create understanding. The discussion about the smell of food seems more of a proxy debate to me. Because what is actually bothersome about the situation is the fact that the Iranian woman always offered her food to her colleagues who were obviously not interested in tasting it. If the colleagues had told her that directly, they would have had to provide a reason and would bear the responsibility for the refusal themselves. Instead, the refusal is blamed on an effect, namely the smell. And in doing so, it is communicated as bothersome to third parties, such as the students. The Iranian colleague finds that her efforts are not being appreciated. She even has to defend herself and the smell of her food which she experiences as contempt for her as a person since she identifies with her food. Consequently, she feels rejected as a person. The German colleagues unfortunately did not formulate their expectations clearly and the Iranian colleague misinterprets the refusal. In Persian, the term “Taorof” exists for this type of situation: “Someone offers something. However, the requirement of Iranian politeness demands to never accept an offer the first time as it may be that the counterpart only offered for politeness reasons.” In this case, the Iranian woman believes that her colleagues do not accept her food to remain polite or to lose face. Because anyone who accepts this offer the first time could be considered as greedy or not very proud. That is why she cooks several times. One should also mention that food is very important in Iran. Cooking tends to be associated with a high level of expenditures and is traditionally the responsibility of woman. Regardless of education, women who cannot cook well are of a lower social position.



Critical Incidents – Communication

A No stays a No



THE CASE

Only regular international students can apply for positions as student assistants in the mentoring program of a German university. Frau Gehrke* coordinates the program, accepts the application, hires students and places them in institutes and chairs. She finds out that there is a rumour, apparently especially among Cameroonian students, that it is easy to get a job in the mentoring program. Furthermore, the applications do not correspond to (German) minimum requirements. However, to be able to assess the motivation of a student, all applicants are invited to attend the mentoring meeting. The invitation states that presence is mandatory and serves as foundation for assigning the job. Some Cameroonian applicants come late, do not listen and play on their cell phones. In Frau Gehrke's opinion, they clearly demonstrate that they are not interested. As a consequence, she rejects those students. They in turn send her a complaint via e-mail. Frau Gehrke forwards the mails to the head of division to reply. The students still do not accept the rejection and come to office hours to find out more exact reasons. Frau Gehrke is annoyed. She finds it difficult to list reasons which are clear enough but do not insult the students. The Cameroonian students show up one more time. Frau Gehrke, by now at her wit's end: "I already told you no. A No stays a No."

* Names amended

PERSPECTIVES

Njefi Lionel Nangkam

originally from Cameroon, studies Electrotechnology at the University Kiel and worked as international tutor in the Studentenwerk Schleswig-Holstein from 2013 to 2014.

Money plays a significant role for international students in Germany. Therefore, everything which has to do with this aspect is of extreme importance. And that is exactly where the problems begin because the only motivation for the jobs in the mentoring program is money. The fact that some students show up late is a cultural problem. We only begin to pay attention to time once in Germany and are often not young enough to create a routine for it. The lack of interest could be due to the person or place of residence. We Cameroonians tend to stick together. For this reason, information tends to spread fast and new arrivals are immediately integrated into the group. The new arrival will then tend to copy the habits of the other

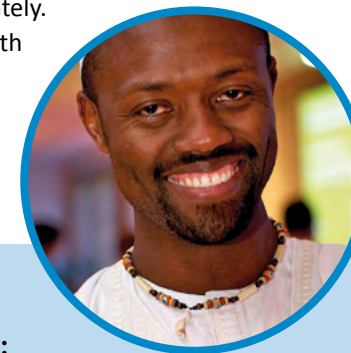


people, such as industriousness, recklessness or a commitment to sports. That is why it might be that the behaviour of these students was caused by the Cameroonians in that specific city – or they simply behave poorly.

Narcisse Njoya Ngatat

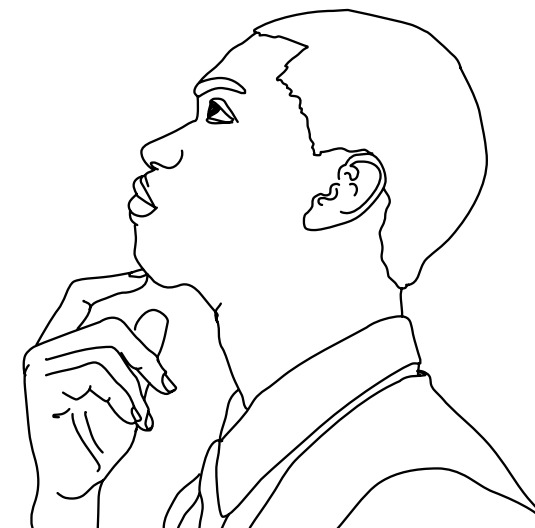
from Cameroon, studies Mechanical Engineering at the University Siegen and was a long-term member of the International Committee of Deutsches Studentenwerk.

A No is a definitive No if there is a logical reason which is convincing and understandable to the applicant. If this person is not convinced and assumed subjective reasons to have played a role, a repeated question for the reasons of rejection is quite normal. In this case, the applicants practically saw the job as theirs already and acted correspondingly casually. Their behaviour during the mentoring meeting (lack of punctuality, playing the phone and lack of interest) must be evaluated separately. That has nothing to do with culture as respect of the hierarchy in Cameroon is extremely important.



Recommendation by Narcisse Njoya Ngatat:

The students should be told clearly that they did not meet the minimum requirements of the application. And if possible, these requirements should be stated clearly as well. I think it would be a good contribution to integration if they were told what was wrong with their behaviour. They should be informed how it is here, maybe they are not aware.



Ouethy Nana Nguessi

studied Electrotechnology in Darmstadt and worked as tutor in the International Office of the University Darmstadt, for Studierendenwerk Darmstadt as well as for Deutsches Studentenwerk.

The behaviour of the students would actually not be acceptable in our culture. People can of course not be late for important appointments! And if an older person is addressing you, you definitely don't play with your cell phone. That is a type of "No respect" which is severely punished in our culture. I am quite surprised that the students acted this way. Maybe they already had the information Frau Gehrke was trying to convey. Or maybe she addressed the students without respect. In that case, they would have wanted to show her that they were hurt? Regarding the subsequent reaction on the part of the students? For a Cameroonian, a simple "No" will never be enough. We have a saying: "Impossible is Not Cameroonian!" to make clear that indeed everything is possible. You must always try everything, there is certainly a way. After having been rejected, the students continue to contact Frau Gehrke because they really want the job and do not understand the situation. We also know that everything is mostly transparent in Germany. If students think they had a claim on that job, they of course would like to know why they were rejected.



Recommendation by Ouethy Nana Nguessi:

The administrator should really take the time to explain to the students what they did wrong and that they did not get the job because of that. In doing so, she should be friendly and honest without hurting the students. If you would like a job, you must behave correctly. Otherwise, negative consequences will follow. The administrator will not recommend students who behave inappropriately.

Critical Incidents (CI) in intercultural training

Worksheet 1: Exercise for Critical Incident Analysis

The Critical Incidents (case studies) from this publication can be used the following way in intercultural training:

Goal of the exercise:

During a CI-analysis, participants should switch perspectives and try out their ability for empathy. They should explore different interpretation perspectives which frequently remain overlooked in the explanation process of the own experiences. It is important to recognise situational, cultural and personal factors of influence on intercultural interactions. Finally, alternative courses of action can be reflected.

Requirements:

Timeframe: approx. 45-90 minutes, depending on the variant

Number of participants: approx. 8-20 persons

Social form: small groups with approx. 4-5 persons

Room preparations: depending on the number of participants

Preparation:

- Explanation of the term Critical Incident (see P. 5)
- Select one or several case studies – initially without perspectives – and create a handout for the participants. Please make sure that the case studies are relevant for all participants and follow their specific every-day experiences.
- Worksheet 2: Copy “C-P-S-I Model with guiding questions for Critical Incident Analysis” (P. 74)
- Have perspectives for the case study ready as additional explanation option

Description of the exercise:

Part 1:

The trainer introduces the term Critical Incident.

The participants receive a handout with the selected case study (CI) and have approx. 5 minutes time to read it. Afterwards, they should provide short and spontaneous answers to the following four questions:

1. Is this an intercultural CI? Why or why not?
2. What were the protagonists trying to achieve A, B, (C), (D) ...?
3. In your opinion, are there cultural behaviours involved or something which you would say to be “typically” German or typical for culture X?
4. Which other factors may have impacted the situation?

After this short reflection, the trainer asks the group for their general assessment: “Who is of the opinion that this is an intercultural CI?”. The trainer may ask participants to stand in three different locations in the room, representing “I agree”, “I am undecided” and “I disagree”. Participants with different replies can be asked for a short explanation of their decision. The trainer then asks the participants to return to their seats so as not to pre-empt the analysis in the second part of the exercise.

Part 2:

The trainer introduces the C-P-S-I model (worksheet 2). The worksheet is then distributed. In small groups, participants should now use the guiding questions to analyse the situational, cultural and personal factors of influence which may have impacted the situation. After discussing the results, further interpretation perspectives can be developed as a group. Depending on the selected case study, the trainer may ask further questions:

- Which institutional aspects may have impacted the situation?
- What role might language (or lack thereof) might have played?
- How important might the factor “power” have been?

The trainer can point out that a multitude of perspectives generally remains unconsidered when interpreting our own experiences. The own (mis)behaviour is frequently justified with situational factors (“I am having a bad day today” while the behaviour of the counterpart is generally explained using personal factors (“He has a bad character”).

Afterwards, the trainer hands out the corresponding perspectives from this publication. The participants now have time to compare and discuss them.

Further variants:

Variant 1:

The trainer asks the participants to put themselves into the shoes of those involved in the situation to demonstrate different perspectives. Have everyone tell the story from the perspective of an involved party.

Variant 2:

After the CI-analysis, alternative actions can be discussed, for example: how could the protagonists have behaved at what point so as to avoid irritations? The trainer could ask the group to re-enact the situation – with the requirement of employing new communication strategies.

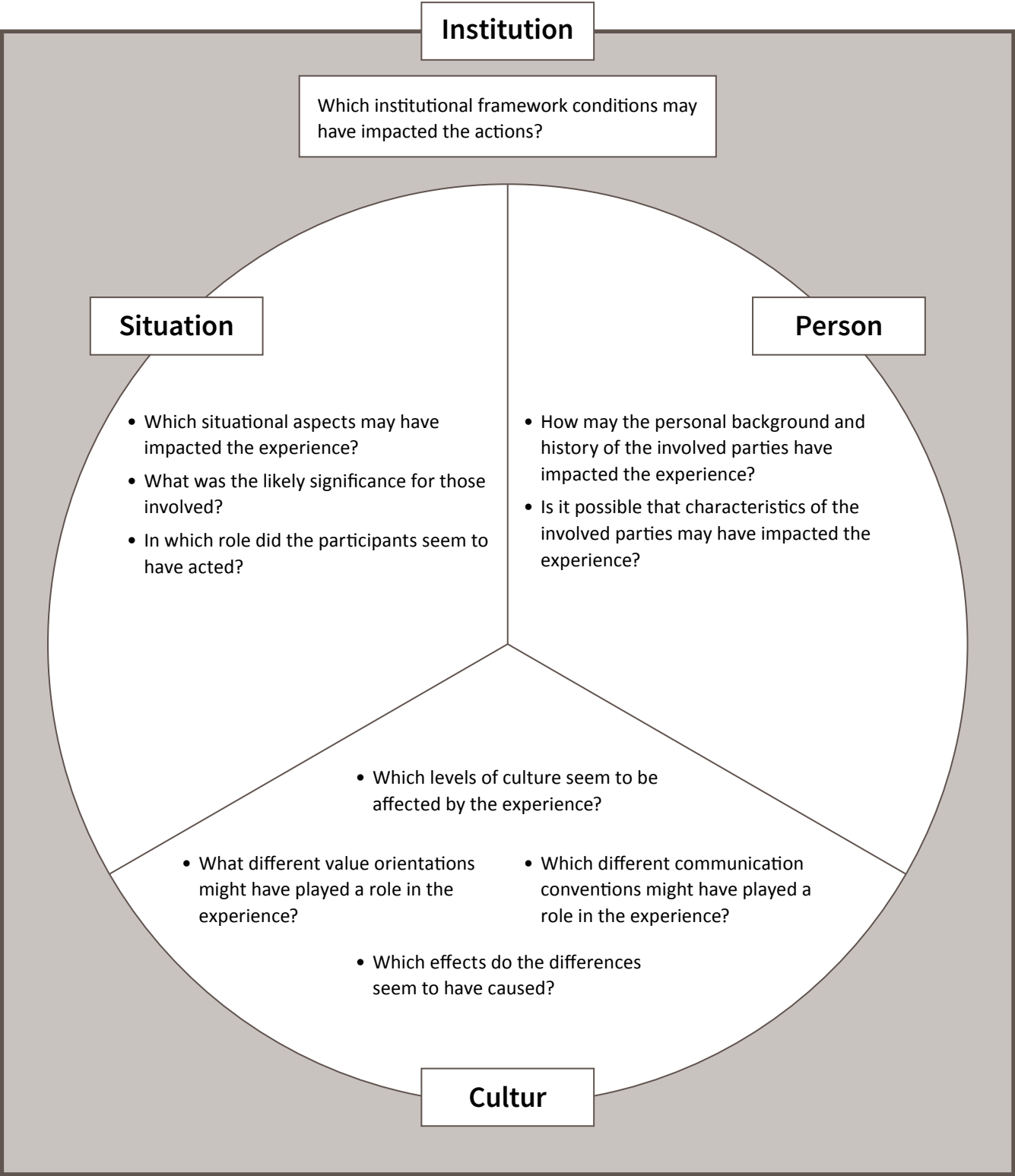
Variant 3:

A CI-analysis may also base on case studies provided by the participants. For that, the trainer asks the group to write down a CI they experienced themselves and to analyse it using the C-P-S-I model.

Critical Incidents (CI) in intercultural training

Worksheet 2: C-P-S-I Model with guiding questions for Critical Incident Analysis

(C-P-S-I = Culture-Person-Situation-Institution)



Following Bosse 2011, created on the basis of the C-P-S model for reflection of one's own intercultural experiences (Bosse/HOPIKOS 2008).

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Web links for intercultural learning

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30 case studies from Germany with 93 intercultural comments by students and staff
For every-day use and training

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All names mentioned in case studies in this publication have been changed. Any references to real institutions and situations were omitted to guard the anonymity of the case presenter and the involved persons. Any possible similarities to actual names are unintentional.

For better legibility, we abstained from using the male and female form in this publication. In those cases, both genders are naturally included.

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