Identifying Intercultural Problems between German and Polish Students using the Extended Critical Incident Analysis

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Abstract: Using a survey of students from two national groups as an example, this paper shows how culture-contrastive research can be performed utilizing an extended version of the critical incident analysis (ECIA). Although it is a classic intercultural research instrument, the use of critical incidents can present methodological problems. Based on a study which was aimed at identifying communication barriers between German and Polish students at a cross-border university, an analysis method which combines traditional qualitative methods with critical incident analysis was created. The ECIA was developed as a response to the common criticisms of approaches based on critical incident analysis. By linking problem-centered interviews (WITZEL, 2000), the introduction of indicators, a codification of data, and expert opinions to critical incident analysis, the ECIA presents an application-oriented qualitative method that can be used to identify specific, relevant sources of problems in intercultural encounters.

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1. Introduction

In intercultural contexts, *critical incidents* describe situations in which a misunderstanding, problem or conflict arises due to cultural differences between the interacting people. As interpreting and dealing with cultural differences constitutes a key element of intercultural learning, critical incidents have been used in intercultural communication studies since the 1960s (cf. WIGHT, 1995, pp.128). Advocates of *cross cultural psychology* regard them as "one of the most useful and effective training tools" (cf. WIGHT, 1995, p.127). Due to its clear structure, the analysis of critical incidents has developed into a classic method in intercultural training. Furthermore, critical incidents are also applied as a central analysis unit in intercultural research using qualitative methods (cf. e.g. BROOK-FIELD, 1995; ARTHUR, 2001; OTTEN, 2006). They are especially suitable for questions concerning intercultural differences, since culturally influenced behavior

is typically "an unconscious naturalness"[1] (SCHROLL-MACHL & NOVÝ, 2000,
p.24), and as such becomes obvious only in critical situations. [1]

The evident advantages of critical incidents are authenticity and the fact that they
can easily be operationalized. But the use of critical incidents often also comes
along with methodological problems stemming from the concept of culture; they
are based on the question of to what extent individual critical cases can be
generalized. In this article, a combination of methods is presented, focusing on
the qualitative evaluation of critical incidents. It is called *Extended Critical Incident
Analysis* (ECIA) and has been developed after examining the above criticisms
intensively. A survey that examined communication problems caused by cultural
differences between German and Polish students is used to retrace the
development and application of the ECIA. Thereby the steps and methodological
considerations which have led to a combination of methods that consolidates and
extends the scientific use of critical incidents as it has been pursued so far are
outlined. This will demonstrate how deployment of problem-centered interviews
(PCI) (cf. WITZEL, 2000) ensured the collection of appropriate data, providing a
basis for important follow-up steps in the evaluation of the material. The
identification of relevant critical incidents was accomplished by coding the
material and introducing indicators. Among others, expert opinions were used to
validate the results. Consequently, it is shown that the ECIA was developed as a
method that promises reliable results for application-oriented culture-contrastive
research. [2]

2. Critical Incidents in Intercultural Research

During World War II, critical incidents were used to identify the behavior patterns
of pilots-in-training that were crucial for the success of airborne missions. The
aviation psychologist FLANAGAN then used the obtained findings to develop the
so-called *critical incident technique* that allowed for analysis and diagnosis of
complex systems and processes for problem solution and which also served as a
description of psychological principles (cf. FLANAGAN, 1954). Later, this method
was also applied to the analysis of human interaction, focusing on difficult
situations requiring particularly complex solutions. Today the critical incident
analysis still represents an important tool in "job behavior analysis" (cf. LAYES,
2007; STITT-GOHDES, LAMBRECHT & REDMANN, 2000). [3]

In the early 1960s, TRIANDIS was the first to use critical incidents for intercultural
exercises (WIGHT 1995, p.127). Shortly afterwards, FIEDLER, MITCHELL and
TRIANDIS began applying this method in the field of intercultural interaction
research. In this context the classical definition of critical incidents was
developed, characterizing them as situations of interaction "which the American
finds conflictful, puzzling, or which he is likely to misinterpret; and (…) which can
be interpreted in a fairly unequivocal manner, given sufficient knowledge about
the culture" (FIEDLER, MITCHELL & TRIANDIS, 1971, p.97). FIEDLER et al.

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1   All English translations of direct citations from German texts are made by the author of this
    article.

developed a training method called *culture assimilator*[2] that was based on the analysis of critical incidents. During the following years a large branch of American cross-cultural psychology research was engaged in the analysis of critical incidents, especially regarding their use in training (cf. e.g. BRISLIN, CUSHNER, CHERRIE & YONG, 1986; TRIANDIS, 1995; LANDIS & BHAGAT, 1996, and BHAWUK, 1998). Therefore the concept of the critical incident in intercultural research had been closely linked to the concept of the *culture assimilato*r for many years (cf. LAYES 2007, p.385). [4]

It was THOMAS who brought the critical incident into use in German-speaking intercultural research, localizing the term as "Kritische Interaktionssituationen" in 1993. Like others, he initially used it as a "tool" to create *culture assimilators* (LAYES, 2007, p.385). At the same time he also developed a qualitative method allowing for identification of "cultural standards" (*Kulturstandards*) by using critical incident analysis. Consequently, THOMAS was applying the critical incident analysis as an empirical research method in this instance. The method includes a large number of individuals being interviewed about their experiences with intercultural interactions, e.g. "which different, unexpected, implausible reactions have they often and typically experienced with their foreign partners and how they were reflecting on that unfamiliar and unexpected behavior" (THOMAS, 2005, p.29). The preferably comprehensive data are then used to identify typical interaction situations. Bicultural experts then analyze these situations in order to educe practical and effective *cultural standards* from them. Drawing on the results of other research, the *cultural standards* are defined (THOMAS, 2005, p.29) as

> "orientation guidelines that help in obtaining a knowledge base about the foreign culture's orientation system in order to be able to explain the (…) behavior of the interaction partner and reflect (…) the orientation system inherent to one's own culture" (THOMAS, 2005, p.30). [5]

This method is based upon THOMAS' concept of "culture as an orientation system." His method primarily involves a micro analytic method of data collection that is "however rather geared to macro analytic cognitive interest," which becomes clear in the fact that "conclusions of a corresponding, universal *cultural standard* are drawn from the large number of comparable situations of misunderstanding (…)" (BOLTEN, 2007, p.104).[3] Based on THOMAS' method, a large number of scientifically-founded publications emerged with the purpose of offering training programs for business.[4] Due to this fact, critical incident analysis is also closely associated with culture assimilators in German-speaking regions (cf. LAYES, 2007). [6]

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2   A cultural assimilator is a collection of critical incidents. For every case study several possibilities are offered to interpret the foreign partner's behavior. The learner has to find which of them would be the "culturally adequate alternative of explanation for the behavior of the other person belonging to a different culture on the case study presented" (KINAST, 2005, p.191).

3   For criticism of THOMAS' method see BOLTEN (2007), LAYES (2007).

4   Cf. the series "Beruflich in …" (published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), edited by THOMAS.

In accordance with this, the utilization of critical incidents as a unit of analysis for culture assimilators is widespread. However, critical incidents are also used in research, e.g. for the identification of adaptation strategies (cf. ARTHUR, 2001); to illustrate students' sensitivity in intercultural situations (cf. GÖBEL, HESSE & JUDE, 2003); or to reconstruct the intercultural behavior orientations of universities' employees (cf. OTTEN, 2006). When utilizing critical incidents, the applied methodology varies in each situation, as suggested by FLANAGAN, who makes clear recommendations for the technique, but also advises a flexible procedure:

> "It should be emphasized that the critical incident technique does not consist of a single rigid set of rules governing such data collection. Rather it should be thought of as a flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand" (FLANAGAN, 1954, p.355). [7]

3. The Extended Critical Incident Analysis

In German culture-contrastive research, apart from some exceptions, critical incident analysis is mainly employed for finding cultural standards according to THOMAS' design. All in all, it seems that its potential in finding solutions through problem-analyses concerning specific questions has not been exhausted yet, in terms of FLANAGAN's intention of "collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems" (cf. FLANAGAN, 1954, p.327). This is probably due to the fact that besides THOMAS' methodical design, no other method of critical incident analysis has met the demands of culture-contrastive research. The ECIA, as presented here, is meant to be an extension and an alternative to the existing approaches. Here, critical incidents are not used to find general *cultural standards*, but fields of conflict and irritations within a specific context, and furthermore, to reveal possible strategies for coping with them. While THOMAS' method wants to make visible particular regular phenomena of a (national) culture, the ECIA considers also situational and procedural factors. Thus, the actors are not only treated as people representing a certain culture (or cultural standards), but also as producers of culture in a certain context and at the same time as cultural experts. [8]

The research question that underlay the development of the ECIA arose from a very precise problem: German and Polish students who study at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), which is commonly regarded as a German-Polish university, prefer avoiding contact with each other to searching for contact. As many of the people involved as well as the university's management desired an improvement of the situation, the reasons for the problems should be identified, which should then serve as the basis for strategic considerations about the future advancement of intercultural communication. Thus it was the survey's concern to explore where and when misunderstandings, conflicts or other irritations occurred in everyday communication and whether they could be traced back to cultural imprinting. According to the statement of the problem, i.e. the lack of communication and limited interaction between German and Polish

students, culturally-based problem areas could be discovered that influenced
intercultural communication (for more details, see HILLER, 2007). [9]

**3.1 Essentials: Concept of culture and criteria for the identification of
critical incidents**

3.1.1 Concept of culture

Despite the understandable criticism that has been leveled at the usage of a
nationally-related concept of culture by recent intercultural research[5], a way has
to be found to make cultural imprinting comprehensible in culture-contrastive
research. For this reason, when dealing with the consequences of lacking cultural
knowledge[6], it is suitable to refer to a concept of culture that is based on a
comprehension of culture as an interpretation system which has developed from
a common pool of knowledge (cf. GOODENOUGH, 1964; HABERMAS, 1981;
REHBEIN, 1985; SCHÜTZ & LUCKMANN, 2003).[7] According to this approach,
individuals provide themselves "with interpretations of their surrounding life
environment based on their shared cultural knowledge base" (cf. BOLTEN, 2002,
p.6). For the ECIA, RATHJE's cohesion model (2006) can be operationalized very
well. According to this model, culture is to be understood as knowledge and a
familiarity with phenomena that carries a certain meaning in the collective, even
though its individual members might be of a different opinion. As a consequence,
cohesion within a culture is created through a shared feeling of "normality"; i.e.
the spectrum of difference is also known and is regarded as normality (cf.
RATHJE, 2006, p.12; HANSEN, 2000, p.234). Thus, critical incidents illustrate
intercultural situations "between individuals from different collectives (…), who,
due to the lack of knowledge of the respective spectrums of difference, have the
experience of foreignness" (RATHJE 2006, p.13). Thus this model of culture can
not only be transferred to national cultures but also, in a wider sense, to cultures
of different collectives without leaving out aspects of dynamics and heterogeneity,
or the production of culture and context.[8] [10]

3.1.2 Criteria for the identification of critical incidents

The definition of critical incidents in the ECIA follows a perception of
interculturalism which claims that culture will become relevant as a factor if the
assumptions of normality and *expectations of plausibility* of the interacting
individuals collide on culturally-immanent knowledge of the spectrum of
differences. According to that, these are case studies in which violations of
"assumptions of normality and expectations of plausibility within intra- or

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5 For detailed information see RATHJE (2006) or NOHL (2007, p.399), who points out the danger
   of the "methodological culturalism."

6 Cf. FIEDLER et al. (1971), who assume that the critical incident can be avoided or at least
   understood, given the necessary cultural knowledge provided.

7 For more details see HILLER (2007).

8 In the study, institutional group dynamics and other factors that hinder communication are also
   outlined (cf. HILLER, 2007). As the surveyed groups consisted of students of different
   nationalities in a certain institution, perceived as a German-Polish institution on the German-
   Polish border, this context was in the spotlight of the study.

intercultural actions" are documented (BOLTEN, 2002, p.5). Critical incidents that
can be operationalized are characterized by the following criteria in detail (cf.
FIEDLER et al., 1971; HERINGER, 2004):

- a typical everyday situation in which a representative of culture A starts an
  interaction with a representative of culture B;
- this situation turns out to not be as expected; respectively, conflictful, puzzling
  or ambiguous for at least one of the people involved;
- the behavior of the person representing the other culture can easily be
  misinterpreted, but could be interpreted plausibly on the basis of sufficient
  knowledge about culture B. [11]

The introduction of *indicators* for the identification of critical incidents in the ECIA
is a novelty: Evidence of "conflictful, puzzling or ambiguous" experiences (see
above FIEDLER et al., 1971, p.97) is to be generated by communicative
"indicators." According to LUDWIG-MAYERHOFER (1999), indicators serve to
reveal "latent constructs"; respectively, "dimensions of such a construct that are
not displayed explicitly." This newly-introduced critical incidents-related concept is
a communicative signal hinting at a malfunction or crisis. Such a reaction can
occur on a meta-linguistic level (such as silence, withdrawal, break-up,
embarrassed gestures, stalling when telling something, stuttering, breaks or
laughing etc.) or is expressed by corresponding verbal expressions. In the case
of transcribed critical incidents these reactions can manifest themselves through
expressions that characterize reactions like incomprehension, bewilderment,
irritation, puzzlement, surprise or amazement (e.g. "I felt *very uncomfortable*"). In
the evaluation of the critical incidents the indicators were explicated and
highlighted. [12]

3.2 Generating data

The *critical incident technique* that was developed by FLANAGAN (1954) consists
of collecting data and an evaluation and analysis of the collected data. He
suggests the following procedure: The data can be generated through direct
observation of people's behavior or through questioning (e.g. interviews, group
interviews, questionnaires). Interviews, if carefully conducted, provide, according
to FLANAGAN, a similarly adequate base of data to direct observation. This
provides the "perspective of the middle" which is generally preferred in the field of
intercultural research: according to this approach, reconstructed experiences
allow access to the cultural orientation knowledge of the actors (cf.
SCHONDELMAYER, 2008, p.72). As it is most interesting for the question of the
underlying study as to which of the intercultural contact situations are
experienced as critical by all parties concerned, interviews seemed to be the best
method to collect the critical incidents within the ECIA.[9] [13]

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9 Some researchers advocate an examination of recorded situations of encounter with the help of
   conversation analysis, as they hold the opinion that hereby more objective analyses are
   possible (cf. e.g. with regard to Germans and Poles SCHMITT & STICKEL, 1997). A
   disadvantage, however, is that the actors might not be conscious of their miscommunication. As
   has been pointed out above, cognitive interest depends on the respective posing of a question.

Thus the *problem-centered interview* was chosen as a data base for the ECIA (cf. WITZEL, 1989, 2000).[10] It has several advantages concerning the collection of critical incidents: Firstly, the method's "problem-centered orientation" allows the sharpening of the interview communication on the research question. Secondly, the orientation on the "object orientation" allows combining the method flexibly with other methods. Thirdly, the "process orientation" fosters the interviewee's confidence and self-reflection (cf. WITZEL, 2000).[11] [14]

3.3 Evaluation and analysis of the data: The single steps

3.3.1 Review of the material and marking of relevant text passages

The interviews were conducted and evaluated by one person (the author). First, the audio recordings were listened to carefully. There were two remarkable things which became apparent when dealing with the material. Firstly, it became clear that there were several topics that appeared numerous times. Secondly, there were some striking narration passages that actually did not correspond to the above criteria for critical incidents (cf. Section 3.1.2), but contained obviously relevant insights regarding the answer to the research question. These passages did not contain specific descriptions of problem or conflict situations, but they contained revealing general observations or reflections of the interviewees. This discovery advocated the extension of the utilized data beyond the descriptions of critical incidents. [15]

A coding method had to be developed to incorporate these passages. FLANAGAN already recommended the creation of categories and subcategories for the classical critical incident technique. Through provisional definitions of categories ("tentative categories") subcategories are formed and main categories are consolidated (cf. FLANAGAN, 1954).[12] Using the example of these interviews, "religion" would form a category, whereas "blasphemy" would be a subcategory. Inspired by FLANAGAN and the method of evaluation of problem-centered interviews, a codification raster for the interview was drawn up. Thereby it seemed reasonable to differentiate between two levels: [16]

Using secondary data, the dimension of reality that had been subjectively relevant for the narrating person and lingered in their memory can be analyzed explicitly. For the application-oriented question of the study presented here, the actor's subjective perspective on the problem provided an important basis for the analysis of the situation (cf. WITZEL, 2000).

10 The entire procedure of analysis according to WITZEL consists of a combination of methods: qualitative interview, case analysis, biographical method, group discussion and analysis of content. Their arrangement, emphasis and modification, however, according to WITZEL, depend on the respective object of research (WITZEL, 1989, p.232).

11 This is very important, as in the present case the people involved have to speak on problematic topics and thus reveal a lack of intercultural competence—a competence that is highly appreciated, especially in their surrounding social environment.

12 In FLANAGAN's survey the interpretation and presentation of the results follow subsequently.

3.3.2 Codification of the data

Level 1: At first all text passages regarded as relevant for the research question were marked in the transcripts. Then these relevant text passages were classified according to their type. At the description of problems, conflicts, and misunderstandings, all indicators were underlined and in the next step all critical incidents that met the above criteria (cf. Section 3.1.2) were marked. [17]

Moreover, another type of text became apparent that seemed to contain evidence for the object of research: in some passages of the texts, the interviewees reflected on the problems that were brought up on the meta level and expressed their judgments and interpretation of different topics. An integration of these passages promised additional findings for the research question. The interviewees, here in the role of actors in the field, were asked about their experiences in the field. Some of them jumped from the narrative mode to a meta-level in the course of the interview, from which they assessed, commented on and interpreted the incidents in the field. As they switched perspectives from actors (i.e. acting subjects) to those of observers or commentators in the field in certain parts of the interview, they were regarded as experts in German-Polish communication at the European University Viadrina. In addition to the critical incidents these passages were included in the analyses and classified as *expert opinions* (for explanations see Section 3.3.3). [18]

Level 2: Key words (subcategories or *codes*) were assigned to the significant text passages that characterized the content as related to the topic of the section. This was done following WITZEL's suggestion that "noteworthy thematic observations are assigned to an analytical grid of 'in-vivo-codes' (i.e. everyday colloquialisms)" WITZEL, 2000 [22]).[13] These codes were assigned to superordinate concepts for thematic categories (e.g. "religion," "humor," "hierarchy") wherever it was possible. The superordinate concepts were listed in a table in order to prepare statistics to show in how many episodes they were made the subject of discussion (cf. Tab. 1). In doing so, the overall topics became apparent; i.e. it turned out that there were a number of subject areas that played a major role in the description of conflicts or misunderstandings between the students. From the quantitative distribution of these descriptions in the single categories, conclusions could be drawn about which subject areas in the depictions of the interviewees were especially delicate regarding irritations between German and Polish students.[14] For the content-related analysis, those critical incidents were selected that arose from the most often-mentioned topic areas. Thus the risk of analyzed critical incidents being "individual cases that cannot be generalized" (cf. BOLTEN's criticism 2002, p.5), was minimized. As the topic areas considered were mentioned several times, the conclusion can be

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13 WITZEL refers to the terminological suggestions of the grounded theory methodology here (cf. GLASER & STRAUSS, 1998).

14 The topics dealt with in the analysis prove to be relevant in the perception of the interviewees, as they were mentioned several times. However, with this approach, topics that might also be relevant, but were not mentioned, e.g. due to taboo, could not be considered.

drawn that they reflect supra-individual problem areas which are perceived by many actors in German-Polish encounters. [19]

The following table gives an overview about the categories of the subjects and the quantitative distribution of the critical incidents and expert opinions.[15]

	B	J₁	E	A₁	A₂	A₃	A₄	W	P	AK	J₂	S
"order must exist"						CI			X	CI	X	
"sex tourism"	CI											
disinterest towards Poland	X			X	X		X	X		X		
thievery		CI		CI			X					
style of discussion					X					X	X	
discipline		X										
success-oriented approach											X	X
food	X							X				CI
family	X	X		X	X	X						
finances	X				X		X					
common topics		X					X					
hospitality				CI	X							
formation of groups	X		X		X	X		X	X		X	
hierarchy		X	X	CI	X					X	X	
courtesy/social conventions		X		X	CI			X			X	CI
humor		X	X	X		X		X				CI
communication style		X		X	CI	X						
"kombinowac" (= "getting along" / "street smarts" in difficult situations)				X	X	X						
style of learning		X										
laughing about Polish language/names		CI									CI	
national pride											X	X
networking					CI						X	X
look and style					X		X					
East-West-Germans		X						X				

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15 The names of the interviewees: B: Bernd, J₁: Janina, E: Ewa, A₁: Agata, A₂: Anke; A₃: Aleksandra, A₄: Anette, W: Wojtek, P: Piotr, AK: Ania & Krzysztof, J₂: Jutta, S: Sebastian.

	B	J_1	E	A_1	A_2	A_3	A_4	W	P	AK	J_2	S
traditional festivals	CI	X	X		X	X	X	X				X
religion		CI	X		X			X			CI	CI
perception of gender roles	X				CI						X	CI
shyness											X	
self-confidence			X		X		X					
language barrier	X	X			X	X	X			X		
different educational system	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
appreciation				X				X		X		
living situation	CI							X	X			

Table 1: Distribution of the topics / critical incidents in the interviews[16] [20]

3.3.3 Change of perspectives between opinions of actors and experts

WITZEL advocated the "inclusion of experts' experience" (WITZEL, 1989, p.230). CHELL (1998), too, complemented the classical *critical incident technique* by letting the interviewees put themselves into the position of an expert in order to enable them to specify especially important critical incidents from this perspective. Although the interviewees of this study were not explicitly asked as "experts" as understood in the concept of Expert Interviews (cf. VOGEL, 1995), but rather as "actors," many of them regarded themselves as "experts" in their fields due to their experiences and observations and thus provided explanations for many incidents. Thus, in addition to the critical incidents, the interviews contain numerous secondary products in the form of passages that can be assigned to the category of "expert opinions." According to MEUSER and NAGEL, the following person can be called an expert:

> "'Expert' […] is a status granted with regard to the researcher's respective cognitive interest; people become expert in and through their respondent role. […] A person turns into an expert as we reasonably assume that he or she possesses a certain kind of knowledge which—indeed—not only he or she possesses, but which is not easily accessible for just anybody in the respectively interesting field of activity." (MEUSER & NAGEL, 1997, pp.483-484) [21]

The interviewees take the role of an expert in the moment when they inform the interviewer (outsider) as experts (and thus insiders) about their observations or explain the circumstances with the help of their experiences and knowledge. The

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16 Note Tab. 1: The column on the left shows the topics that were mentioned in the context of communication problems, respectively, as critical incidents, during the interviews. They are marked by an X: The horizontal columns show how often the topic was mentioned whereas the vertical columns assign the topics to the interviewees. The critical incidents which were identified according to the criteria defined in Section 3.1.2 are labeled as "CI" and are presented in the grey boxes.

value of these passages to the cognitive interest of the study became evident only in the process of dealing with the data. This is why the expert opinions have been included into the process of evaluating the ECIA, which can be regarded as a significant extension of the critical incident analysis as it has been pursued so far. From this procedure—briefly depicted—a triangle of interpretation results: On the one hand, the interviewee is an actor in a certain situation (representing situational, everyday behavior) and on the other hand, he is an expert as he describes the incident later, reflecting on observations and experiences and referring to his knowledge about culture and to his expectations of plausibility. This view is contrasted with an external analysis that integrates the conclusions into theories or into further research. This allows an extension of the critical incident analysis to the credit of a wider variety of perspectives. [22]

3.3.4 The content-based analysis of critical incidents

The critical incidents constitute the source material for the next step—the precise depiction and designation of concrete causes of communication problems, conflicts or misunderstandings. This content-based analysis[17] focuses on the question of what causes might have triggered the critical experience and how far these causes in the specific context of interaction could be explained with the cultural background of the people involved.[18] Thereby the conclusion that the discrepancies experienced are not individual cases but are based on cultural imprinting is supported by the fact that the topic areas dealt with did not only occur in individual depictions, but display core themes of critical incidents common among different interviewees. [23]

Thus the ECIA offers a procedure that helps to comprehend single phenomena within their cultural contexts. As a basis for a contextualized comprehension of culture, BOLTEN suggests the following three necessary steps: manifestations that are perceivable (*perceptas*) allow conclusions about the underlying, culturally coined concepts of actions (*conceptas).* They can be comprehended only when "explanations of the Why concerning certain peculiarities and connections of functions of a culture" are given (BOLTEN, 2007, p.96). Critical incidents are especially suitable for making cultural differences apparent. [24]

As the interacting people are not conscious about the supra-individual (i.e. culturally-coined) shared inventory of knowledge most of the time (i.e. native speakers are not conscious of the grammar rules of their language), this

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17 In the style of the qualitative content analysis according to MAYRING (2000), the data was subjected to qualitative steps of analysis ("inductive category development , summary, context-analysis"). In compliance with MAYRING's suggestion, there was made a "connection to quantitative steps of analysis", because it seemed "meaningful for the analyst" (cf. MAYRING, 2000 [20]).

18 Another frequently mentioned point of critique is the fact that Critical Incident-Analyses simplify complex situations and reduce them to cultural aspects (cf. BOLTEN, 2007; LAYES, 2007). In order to analyze a *critical incident* in all its social complexity, a procedure is needed that examines human social action and behavior as an object of research on all its different levels (cf. LAYES, 2007). Yet it does not seem realistic to incorporate all factors that influence a situation of interaction (e.g. patterns of human actions, the function of language and nonverbal communication or institutional frameworks) into an analysis; as a result, it is necessary to concentrate on certain aspects.

inventory only becomes tangible in confrontation with the unexpected, irritating
and unclassifiable. Thus the aim of the critical incidents *Analysis* was to find out
whether the communication problems, conflicts or misunderstandings in their
respective contexts can be traced to the different culturally-determined
expectations of normality of German and Polish students. [25]

In the sense of the above-outlined concept of culture according to RATHJE
(2006) (cf. Section 3.1.1), cultural expectations of normality in their respective
situational context were traced. For the process of analysis, this meant that the
respective expectations of normality and action, rules, conventions, values (in
short: *conceptas*) of the described critical situations were reconstructed from an
inner perspective based on cultural knowledge.[19] Further below, the method is
outlined with an example (cf. Section 3.3.6). [26]

3.3.5 Formulation and validation of the results

The conclusions of the content-based analysis were supported by further
research, specialist literature, and the above expert opinions. In single cases,
reports of other critical incidents taken from the materials on hand have been
consulted.[20] The analysis showed that many critical incidents result from differing
culturally-based expectations that the interacting people are not conscious of.
Frequently, diverse moral concepts and values as well as standards of behavior
could be identified and explained with regard to the respective social, historic and
cultural backgrounds. In many cases, certain subject areas led to critical
situations, misunderstandings or conflicts between German and Polish students
in university life. These findings served as the basis for the formulation of
intercultural fields of conflict between German and Polish students. [27]

3.3.6 Brief outline of the analytical process in ECIA

Hereafter an example is given of what the process of analysis in ECIA might look
like (for more details see HILLER, 2007, pp.236). As six out of twelve
interviewees mentioned the topic "hierarchies between students and teachers"
(cf. Tab. 1), it was classified as a relevant topic for students in the German-Polish
context. In a longer narrative passage, which could be identified as a *critical
incident* due to several indicators (noted below), the young Polish woman Agata
talks about an encounter she had with a professor in Germany when she was a
first-year student. As she reported, he behaved totally differently from what she
had known from her first studies in Poland. The professor had offered her to lend
her some books for her term paper. These books were in his office, which was

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19 Being an everyday border-crosser between Germany and Poland, the author (in her quality as a
   researcher) necessarily contributed her cultural bias to the survey. She saw one possibility to
   account for the classical dilemma of the "superiority" of personal cultural knowledge in
   attributing competence as intercultural experts to the interviewees (cf. MOOSMÜLLER, 1997).
   By equally including their experienced (respectively; subjective) views on problems into the
   "academic (wingback chair) discourse" a threatening perspective of an "almighty knowing
   researcher" (cf. SCHONDELMAYER, 2008, p.103) is counteracted.

20 Apart from the interviews, these are notes from explorative talks and discussions in seminars
   that have been conducted prior to the survey. In a few cases, data taken from students' papers
   has been used as well.

located in another building further away. He invited her to come with him and
Agata did not know how to deal with this situation, as becomes clear in the
following excerpt from her depiction of the critical incident:

> "*For me this was unbelievable* that a professor now goes to the tram stop with me
> and that he gets on the tram together with me. In any case I had taken a seat some
> seats further away and there were probably five people on the whole tram altogether
> (…) and then, he noticed that I was *somehow strange. /laughs/*."[21] [28]

Due to her experiences in Poland, Agata proceeded from the assumption of a
great hierarchic distance between professors and students. In retrospect, she is
able to interpret the situation in just this way:

> "And for me, hmm, I, a Polish girl (…), this meant 'He goes there and I, hmm, follow
> him later'." [29]

Nevertheless she notices relatively quickly that the professor was behaving
differently:

> "But somehow I noticed that he would like to go together with me." [30]

To this she reacted with great astonishment: The words *"for me this was
unbelievable"* are an indicator for Agata's disorientation. As she could not
comprehend the professor's behavior, she acted in accordance with her Polish
upbringing and kept the familiar distance from a professor in the tram, too: "In
any case I had taken a seat some seats further away." At this point she realizes
for the first time that, in the professor's eyes, her behavior might seem strange,
too: "he noticed that I was *somehow strange" /laughs/*. [31]

Although this incident dates back several years, Agata remembers many details.
The situation must have made quite an impression on her. In contact with the
professor she does not only assume a great personal distance, but also a certain
spatial distance. Thus she follows him, sits behind him and wants to wait
downstairs rather than going into the library with him. As the professor constantly
breaks this expected hierarchical distance with his requests or his actions, Agata
feels embarrassed and helpless which explains her repeated laughter as she
retells this incident. [32]

In the course of the analysis, Agata's perspective, respectively, the "expectation
of normality" that her perspective is based upon, is confirmed with results from
other surveys, which show that hierarchy and authority play different roles in the
German and Polish educational system (cf. e.g. MARBURGER & REINHOLD,
1996; RIESNER, 1996). At the same time these phenomena are embedded into
the societal context. Five extensively outlined expert opinions from the interview
data complement the evaluation. For example, the statement of the Polish
student Ewa:

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21 As indicators for this passage being a *critical incident,* the following remarks have been rated:
    "*For me this was unbelievable,*" "*somehow strange,*" "*/laughs/.*"

"(…) well in the seminars Polish students do not speak. That means they speak little. Have you probably heard that already. Well this is because of our school system, in which *[pause]*, yes, well, teachers are to be regarded as God. (…) But what really helped me *[pause]* was a lecturer, who once asked me whether I would like to write a term paper, well he realized that I read all the texts and that I always attend lessons and so on. (…) I was so surprised because I speak bad German and so on and he takes me seriously." [33]

Adding expert opinions allows an extension of the analysis with additional perspectives. Moreover, they contrast with and consolidate the conclusions. As the interviewees present themselves as actors on the one hand, and as experts on the other, their critical experiences are compared with other statements and completed by additional aspects (as in the example of Ewa's statement, with which a comparison of university hierarchies can be made with respect to authority and hierarchy in the Polish school system) throughout the process of evaluation. In this example, the result of the analysis is that the hierarchical orientation in German and Polish universities is experienced differently by the interviewees and can often lead to irritation in or the failure of communication. [34]

4. Conclusion

After having dealt with these problematic aspects, the Extended Critical Incident Analysis was developed as presented here. It is possible to explore human action only if certain aspects are closely examined. Despite the complexity and permanent change of "culture," certain questions can only be answered if classifications and attributions are dared. Research questions need to be able to be operationalized. In this regard the use of an appropriate method is essential: by combining different techniques a method was created that allows a scientifically-substantiated critical incident analysis and, moreover, represents an alternative to the common approaches to analysis as they have been pursued until now. Both aspects are ensured by the variety of the combined methods. [35]

WITZEL's method has proved to be suitable especially for the carrying-out of *interviews* and additionally provided suggestions for evaluating the data. The *codification raster* as well as the introduction of indicators served to detect significant text passages and to identify critical incidents. A quantitative evaluation of the codification led to the *categorization* of the topics according to aspects of relevance. By means of a *content-based analysis,* the contexts of expectations of the interviewees could be reconstructed. The *expert opinions* that were generated from the data allowed the extension of the evaluations with the perspectives and explanations of the actors. [36]

It has been shown that the Extended Critical Incident Analysis presents a practically-oriented and solid qualitative method that can be used to identify concrete, relevant sources of problems for intercultural encounters and allows a fine-tuned customization of the method to the research topic. [37]

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