



## Addressing power relations in MCE trainings

### *Why deal with status differences and when?*

The subject of power relations did not suddenly make its appearance in the training room or in culture shock experiences: it has always been there, influencing the way people thought about and reacted to each other. But it only recently became such a high priority subject-matter that we had to review our way of using Margalit Cohen-Emerique's (MCE) method to see how we could give it more visibility – in the training room as well as in the analysis of incidents.

In her own practice, Margalit Cohen-Emerique had addressed issues of hierarchy as a dimension of cultural differences that influences the way people in different cultures relate to the idea of power differences. For instance, she identified the preference for horizontality in the professional culture of social workers as a value that often played out in their critical incidents. Also, in the first questions of her analysis grid she asked to identify the relationship between different social groups of the protagonists in a situation, exploring whether there are any historical antecedents creating an asymmetrical power relation, such as belonging to a former colony / colonizer country, or to a cultural minority in terms of religion, ethnicity etc. Finally, the activity she created to train participants for the third step of her method (negotiation) entitled “Minoria, Majoria”, had a not much hidden reference to power relations. However, she did not make the reflection on status differences a systematic, separate step in the analysis grid nor in the teaching of her approach, which we now feel is necessary, for three main reasons.

a) **Persistence of power and status differences connected to different social identities.** Cultural diversity does not only imply a multiplicity of identities and practices, today in most of our societies it also implies inequalities, because the different groups we belong to come with different advantages and disadvantages and with a specific social rank. The concrete implication for each individual is quite complex, as each of us belongs to a multiplicity of groups. To what extent our group memberships make our lives easier or more difficult will depend on the interplay of several social identities (a phenomenon covered by the concept of “intersectionality”). In any case, a critical approach to interculturality should make visible the power asymmetries hidden underneath cultural diversity, otherwise we run the risk of “culturalising” phenomena which have to do more with power dynamics than cultural diversity per se.

b) **Expectation to address power differences in trainings** Power relations (or the discourse on power relations) may influence the dynamics of the training process, occasionally creating tensions amongst participants or between facilitators and participants. The legitimacy of the facilitator may be questioned, she / he can be perceived neglecting a proper address of power position, hence contributing to the oppression of already discriminated groups. To avoid such risks, it is useful for the facilitator to get acquainted with contemporary expectations on how to handle power relations in the classroom so s/he can develop her own strategies.

c) **Sensitivities and ambiguities in the discourse and approach to fight inequalities** If the term “woke became the word of our era”<sup>1</sup> it did not do so peacefully and without

---

### 1

Kenya Hunt, 2020 “How 'woke' became the word of our era » <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/21/how-woke-became-the-word-of-our-era> In its original linguistic context of African-American Vernacular English “woke” as in “stay woke” denotes an alertness to racial prejudice and discrimination (Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke>) From its first recorded appearance in the 1930s, the concept underwent substantial transformation. Today it is used by people of different colour and social identities, as a cover word for



ambiguities. To the contrary, it appears as a highly divisive term, either provoking firm agreement or loud resistance mixed with disbelief and confusion. An ambiguity that may not characterise only the concept of “woke” but in general the “social justice movement” that in their search of remedies for past and present inequalities produced a set of recommendations, and a whole new language that remains inaccessible for many people. All this implies that our desire to address inequalities within a diversity training does not fall on virgin territory, but one already marked by debates and sensitivities, which often create tensions in the training sessions. Below some examples of such tensions:

- Intercultural trainings can be criticised for breaching expectations towards a **safe space**, because of their fundamental belief that intercultural communication, dialogue across different cultural, “racial” class etc. frontiers is possible. They tend to have a preference for mixed groups motivated by the belief that we can come to understand each other despite our differences, and that our differences may make learning more interesting.
- Interculturalists emphasise the exploration of norms, values, representations, even prejudice underlying specific situations. In such an exploration members of discriminated groups may be reminded of the oppressions they experience. Accordingly, intercultural approaches don’t respect the principle of **avoiding all discomfort** that participants may experience (requiring ‘trigger warnings’<sup>2</sup>), rather they can be confrontative.
- Intercultural trainers may encourage participants to “**dare to make mistakes**” instead of adopting a **politically correct self-censoring** so that they have access to the real questions and representations that participants may have, occasionally also expressing stereotypes, prejudice with a view of deconstructing them together
- Intercultural approaches usually don’t use the dichotomy of **oppressed / oppressor** but focus on culture shock experiences which have two sides. They tend to be interested in both sides, not just the side that could be identified as “oppressed”. Interculturalists tend to recommend negotiation to find a solution to a problem which respects the best possible way the identities of both parties. This of course does not make sense if our frame consists always in identifying oppressed and oppressor.

The question is whether these contradictions above reflect really accurate and representative features of the processes that activities of Social Justice would like to promote. It may well be that the identity of Woke or Social Justice Activist is as much subject to the dynamics of reification as any other identity, and the examples above are telling of a such reified interpretations of Social Justice more than its main flow. To clear possible confusion, we may need to be explicit on which aspect we converge and diverge from other approaches, in particular from currents of the “Social Justice Movement”.

In the following we’ll start by exploring how we can develop participants’ sensitivity to status differences in our trainings. We’ll then look at how a reflection on status differences can be integrated in MCE’s analysis grid of critical incidents. Finally, we’ll discuss ways to integrate the reflection on power differences in the intercultural training *process*.

---

different strategies of speaking about and acting up against different types of oppressions. The word has its emic and etic versions, depending on whether the people using it identify with some form of the “Social Justice Movement” or see “wokeism” as a potential threat to freedom of speech or even open social dialogue.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the role and impact of “trigger warnings” see <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>



### *Developing participants' sensitivity to giving importance to status differences*

Members of the majority society may be easily enveloped in an illusion of cultural neutrality (i.e., that cultural differences do not matter) and an illusion of equality (that we all have the same chances, access, status). They may easily have these illusions if they had never experienced the evidence to the contrary: they did not have to hesitate whether they can hold hands with their loved one in public, that they would stick out in a speed dating session by their appearance, that they would be reduced to their religion, country of origin, handicap etc. For some of us, it is very easy to imagine that in any social event, others will consider us primarily as individuals, as the unique persons we feel ourselves to be “deep inside”. But is such a colour-blind / culture-blind / class-blind position realistic Today? Think of this: have you been present in a group where you were the only representative of your gender / country / religion / physical ability? Did you feel that this feature had no influence at all on your behaviour and the behaviour of the others? It may well be that such an illusion of individuality and neutrality is the “privilege” of whoever appears to be in majority.

The more we belong to a minority, the more we will feel that we'll be considered through the social categories that separate us from the majority: as a woman, as a disabled person, as a person of colour, as the Muslim etc. And these labels will come with their own “rank-tag”: an expectation of relative social status connected to the social identity in question, allocating social groups in the group-based hierarchisations prevailing in each society. Status or rank differences are not mere abstractions, but have direct impact on people's lives: their salaries, their chances of being taken for a job or easiness for accessing services etc.

Advantage and disadvantage are always the two sides of a coin of inequality: whenever we see a case of negative discrimination, whether it is direct or indirect (e.g., access to a right is limited for members of some groups), per definition another group benefits from it. For instance, if legal marriage is not available for gay couples, only to heterosexual couples, this implies that heterosexual couples benefit from advantages with respect to gay couples. If black men are not accepted in a club, it means that white men have an advantage. What is negative discrimination for a minority group, is positive discrimination for members of the majority. Most of these unfair distinctions have their own labels: the first example was one of institutional homophobia and the second an example of racism. Both are examples of direct discrimination, that is where there is an explicit rule which favours one group over the other. Indirect discrimination occurs when there is seemingly one rule for everyone, but that one rule affects different people differently (e.g., one entrance with stairs to a building tends to discriminate disabled people).

Questions of discrimination, prejudice and categorisation are usually dealt with in the first modules of MCE trainings dedicated to the exploration of different biases and obstacles to the recognition of others. Usually, a next module deals with the exploration of identities. We recommend completing these modules with an activity that shows how different identities are connected to different statuses and how these status differences affect our lives. For examples of concrete activities, see the activity sheet “Status thermometer”.

### *Addressing status differences in the analysis of culture shock experiences*

The first question of MCE's grid for analysing critical incidents invites participants to take note of all the different identities of the protagonist (narrator) and the person / people triggering the culture shock experience. This exploration serves to make an as precise inventory as possible of all the identities which can be relevant for identifying values, norms and representations that may have played out in the incident, on the side of the narrator or the other person. Originally,

MCE asked also to identify what are elements of identities that bring people closer and that separate them. It is in this phase that we created a sort of “plug-in” helping us to put more emphasis on status differences. The idea came up in our project IRIS – relationships, intimacy, interculturality in youth work. Instead of merely inviting participants to offer us a list of identity elements, we offered them a table that was partially pre-filled with identity elements that we expected could be relevant in that specific project (we were collecting critical incidents related to relationships, intimacy, sexuality). Besides offering a list of social identity categories (for both narrator and the “other person”), we inserted two columns, for both of them, inquiring about the social status connected to the specific identity, first of all as seen in the general social context (e.g.: “Paris”) and then as seen in the context of the specific situation (e.g.: an art mediation workshop in a youth centre). We asked participants to fill this table to the best of their knowledge. For some identities it may be quite easy to perceive the connected social status, it may even have some relatively objective indicator (e.g.: average revenue for the social group in question), while for others, participants may be more uncertain. The aim of the exercise is to be able to identify to what extent there may be status differences between narrator and the other person and how this may influence the situation. In some critical incidents, like the example below, it may even appear that the root of the incident is in status differences rather than differences of cultural values.

*Example of incident: “Hand on thighs”*

*“I offer drawing workshops on Saturdays in the leisure center, a living space for people living in emergency accommodation centers. I am with a group of young Senegalese men who have known me for two years and some of whom have become close friends. A young French man I know by sight, comes to the leisure center. He's never been to the workshop before, and I guess he comes here for the coffee. I'm sitting at a table. He sits next to me, and puts his hand on my thigh, under the table, so that no one can see him. That day, I have short shorts with thin tights. I'm stunned and I don't dare say anything. This lasts a few seconds. I finally get up to end the scene and pretend that nothing happened.” (Paris, 2018)*

Identities	NARRATOR “CAMILLE”			Other person “Jean Christophe”			What brings us closer	What separates us
	identities	Value in soc	Value in context	identities	Value in soc	Value in context		
Nationality	French	+	neutral	French	+	+	x	
Native language	French	+	+	French	+	+	x	
Minority	No	+	+	No	+	+	x	
Years in France							x	
Legal status	Legal	+	neutral	Legal	+	neutral	x	
Age	30	+	+	23	-	-		x
Gender	F	-	-	M	+	+		x
Sexual orientation	hetero	+	neutral	hetero	+	neutral	X	
Education	university	+	+	Secondary school	-	-		X
Social class	middle	+	+	low	-	-		X
Religion / worldview								
Profession	trainer	+	+	unknown				x
Job status (full time / part time)	Employed, full time	+	+	unemployed	-	-		x
Position in organisation	Trainer\Facilitator	-	neutral	None	-	+		x
Role in the situation	Trainer \ Facilitator	+	neutral	Potential participant?	-	+		x

*Table to explore identities and status differences connected to the incident “Hand on thighs”*



### *Integrating reflection on status differences in the intercultural training process*

Formal equality, that is treating everyone the same way may actually perpetrate inequalities in a heterogeneous group. Think of the examples:

- inviting everyone to have lunch together in the month of Ramadan would exclude Muslim participants
- written handouts would exclude blind participants or participants who can't read the local language
- speaking fast in the local language would exclude participants who don't speak the local language fluently

The above examples show that not only we must strive towards equal treatment, but we also should reflect on possible indirect discriminations that our processes may imply without our intention. To do this, it may be worth to start by considering what kinds of diversities we should consider in the context of an intercultural workshop. Soon enough we'll realise that we face a diversity of diversities:

- visible / nonvisible diversity : we have been somewhat trained in thinking that what counts as diversity is instantly visible. And indeed, skin colour, ethnicity, age and usually gender can typically be perceived immediately. But many aspects of diversity remain hidden to eyes and ears at first, such as nationality, religion, region, social class etc.
- diversity of identities vs. deep diversity: if skin colour is salient, i.e. people of different skin colours are together, skin colour may serve as the basis categorisation into different groups (often reduced to the binary of white and people of colour). But such a categorisation does not necessarily imply anything for the diversity of values, norms, behaviours. Our "black" and "white" participants may have the same values and preferences. We talk of deep diversity whenever there are differences on the level of values, norms and behaviours, and this diversity may not necessarily be traceable along visible categories.

All of these diversities may have an impact on our workshop, but of course in different ways. In the following sections we'll offer some ideas on how to address the diversity of identities and deep diversity.

#### *Welcoming diversity: a first gesture of recognition*

Visible or not, a first gesture we propose is to welcome the diversity in the training room. Welcoming at first may seem like a superficial formality. However, most rituals, even the simple greetings serve a deeper purpose: conveying respect to the other, confirming their recognition of worthy partners for interaction. As a basis, all human beings desire recognition: acceptance is a standard expectation that we bring into each interaction. This recognition does not only refer to our personal identities, but also to our multiple cultural identities. Even more so if we're in a context where that identity is salient or is represented by a minority of participants, and where we expect that we count on the importance of these identities. If the facilitators' team consists of members of the majority society (let's say white heterosexual women) the recognition of the diversity that others bring into the process is a must. For a concrete way to do this, see the activity sheet "**Circle of identities - welcoming diversity**".

#### *Acknowledging the positions we speak from: positionality and decentering*

Speaking from a neutral position is not really possible: we are all formatted by our different cultural identities, which shape our values and representations and our perceptions and reactions to others. The very first step in MCE's approach – decentering – precisely invites us



to become aware of these cultural positions. The concept of positionality proposed by the social justice movement bring attention to the fact that different cultural identities also give us advantages and disadvantages in different contexts. Naming our identities as facilitators at the beginning of a training is a way to make our identity positions explicit. Some may perceive this as a futile gesture of stating the obvious. At the same time, it is also an acknowledgement of the identities – or experience – that we do not have. And this is much less obvious. Without such an acknowledgment some participants may believe that we assume speaking from a neutral position. In the worst-case participants may assume that the identities we do not represent we consider unimportant. Participants who may represent groups which have been silenced or discriminated in the name of neutrality would be reassured by this gesture which offers space and importance to these identities. This formality could be particularly relevant in training settings where the diversity of the team of facilitators in not representative of the diversity in the room or in the given social context.

*Establishing rules of cooperation*

Constructing a charter of good collaboration is a customary step in trainings based on non-formal pedagogy. While some perceive the establishment of guidelines as actually an obstacle: “guidelines point to a fundamental misunderstanding about imposing conditions on dialogue that lead to pretense rather than to genuine learning”<sup>3</sup> the aim is actually the contrary, to encourage active participation and lift its obstacles (fear of being judged, saying something that then will become subject to rumours in the workplace etc.). This same charter could also establish special precautions that need to be taken for the proper protection of members of discriminated groups. While endorsing the necessity of some agreed framework for collaboration, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014)<sup>4</sup> warn us about how some ‘classical’ style of setting guidelines can backfire and lead to more inequality. Taking their recommendations as good illustrations of the Social Justice Movement, we propose to go through them and explore to what extent they are compatible with intercultural approaches. (For a concrete activity on how to construct guidelines interactively, see the activity sheet “**Creating a brave and welcoming learning space**”.)

<b>Social Justice guidelines (as proposed by Sensoy and DiAngelo)</b>	<b>Our intercultural approach</b>
« Strive for intellectual humility. Be willing to grapple with challenging ideas »	Lose the illusion of the objectivity of your perception (accept that your perception is the consequence of different biases (categorisation, stereotypes) lose the illusion of your cultural neutrality (become aware that you have cultural identities which offer you a specific cultural window on the world and on other cultures).
« Differentiate between opinion—which everyone has—and informed knowledge, which comes from sustained experience,	Differentiate between objective descriptions, interpretations and evaluations: what is it that we ‘know’ about

<sup>3</sup> Gordon (2007) cited by Applebaum (2014) last accessed on 9/12/2021 at <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1150&context=home>

<sup>4</sup> <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1138&context=home>



study, and practice. Hold your opinions lightly and with humility ».	the other as opposed to thinking and interpreting.
« Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader group-level patterns. »	Use subjective situations (culture shock experiences) as an entry point for analysis to uncover the deeper values, norms representations. In no case a culture shock experience should be used to justify a generalising claim concerning a social group.
« Notice your own defensive reactions and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge, rather than as a rationale for closing off. »	Use all emotional reaction as indicator that something important was touched or questioned. Use the emotional reaction to guide your exploration of the underlying factors.
« Recognize how your own social positionality (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) informs your perspectives and reactions to your instructor and those whose work you study in the course. »	Decentre! Explore how your perception of and reaction to others depends on your own values, norms, representations.
« Differentiate between safety and comfort. Accept discomfort as necessary for social justice growth. »	Cultural difference tends to be a challenge for our minds and hearts, potentially triggering negative emotional reactions, but it is worth it to make our world bigger.
« Identify where your learning edge is and push it. For example, whenever you think, <i>I already know this</i> , ask yourself, <i>How can I take this deeper?</i> Or, <i>How am I applying in practice what I already know?</i> »	Intercultural learning never ‘finished’ we can always gain more awareness of our own values, explore further rationalities different from ours and practice negotiation.

The exploration above seems to indicate that on the level of guidelines the two approaches may be easier to reconcile than we would have imagined. But again, the social justice movement has different currents that may come up with different recommendations. To explore possible tensions and clashes our recommendation remains the same as with any other identity position and critical incident: explore the specific positions, dive underneath to explore the underlying values and norms and see if you can find common grounds and recognise each other’s position to negotiate.



ZELDA project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

Grant agreement no. 2019-1-IT02-KA2014-063370.

## *References*

Barbara Applebaum (2014) Hold That Thought In Democracy and Education vol22/iss2/1 last accessed on 9/12/2021 at

<https://democracyeducationjournal.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1150&context=home>

Kenya Hunt, 21/11/2020 "How 'woke' became the word of our era » Last accessed on 9/12/2021 at

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/21/how-woke-became-the-word-of-our-era>

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt 9/2015 THE CODDLING OF THE AMERICAN MIND Last accessed on 9/12/2021 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo (2014.) Respect Differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education In Democracy and Education vol22/iss2/1 last accessed on 9/12/2021 at <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1138&context=home>