



ZELDA project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.
Grant agreement no. 2019-1-IT02-KA2014-063370.

Sensitive zones - little stones that can block a road, and on how to work with them

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Why is it so hard to understand somebody who is not your clone? In fact, it is not. We, human beings are highly communicative creatures and in ordinary circumstances we are quite comfortable with the idea that communication is about exchanging ideas and opinions. The fact that I like Cherry Coke and you like Fanta does not necessarily lead to inextricable animosity between us. In ordinary circumstances. Unless Cherry Coke or Fanta, for some mysterious reasons, become markers of our identity. That is the point. Intercultural communication is easy, as long as differences in looking at the world and at each other are not experienced as identity threats.

It is worth stopping here for a moment. Before we continue, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by intercultural and in what sense we use the concept of identity. If culture is that frame of interpretation that gives sense to our experiences and actions (a definition that is close to Geertz¹ symbolic conception of culture) then we drift into an intercultural situation - no matter if we are conscious about it or not - each time that we find ourselves in an interaction where the frames of interpretation (“reference frames” in Cohen-Emerique’s vocabulary) do not overlap precisely. It is foreseeable that such a perfect correspondence does not happen very often. That is why it is possible to argue that most interactions are at least potentially intercultural.

Now let’s turn towards identity. In the present epoch where identity becomes one of the major stakes of intergroup conflicts, the temptation is great that we use the word with a big I, in the same way that for many years, decades and centuries “culture” was pronounced with a big C. Culture with a capital letter looks like a box, or rather as a stone block, unchangeable, noble, unified. It looks as a container of valuable traditions, or, as a precious gem, passed on from generation to generation, indivisibly and equally shared within a group of people who develop a sense of

¹ Geertz, C. (2001). *Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture*.



belonging by the very fact of recognizing in each other the bearers of tradition, the custodians of an atemporal essence. Or so they claim. Speaking about themselves. Culture with a capital letter can also be seen as a vessel of those abject morals, customs and habits that differentiate the barbarians from the civilized. Or so they claim. Speaking about the culture of others.

In contrast, culture with a small c is volatile, barely visible, hiding in everyday gestures, in the way people smile at each other or quarrel with each other, cook or wash, care for their children and go about their daily business. Culture in lowercase is not noble, but ordinary, it is changeable and changing, it is borrowed, passed on, discovered and rediscovered, transformed and stretched. It cannot be the ownership of any group, of any quarter, it is not imprisoned, it is not carved in stone, it is free and unpredictable. In this book we are defending the idea of culture with a little c.

Identity also exists in two different forms. Identity with a capital letter inspires pride, awe or contempt, or all at the same time. It is big, it is indivisible and visible, it is attached to the color of the skin, to nationality, religion or something so obvious that makes easy to differentiate people who at the end of the day do not differ from each other that much. This is essentialized identity. It is not the kind of identity that we are speaking about in this book.

Lowercase identity is as ordinary as its twin: culture with a small c. And it is as elusive. It is this unnamable force in ourselves that makes us feel at home in the world. It produces an impression of continuity and self-sameness amid undeniable change. It creates a sense of uniqueness at the same time as the certitude of belonging. It provides security and it procures self-esteem. It is “morally infested”², which means that it provides a moral basis to the self-definition of the person. It is the very depth of the self, the self-contained hidden lake of the soul, except that its surface is entirely made of the reflections of the outside world populated by a vast number of others, who sometimes confirm, sometimes challenge our understanding of what is normal, good, just and rational. This is precisely the reason why communication is a perilous journey. A bad refraction, and our security, our self-confidence is lost.

² Bamberg, Michael (2010) Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity. *Theory & Psychology*



Because identity is built in such a sublime and secretive way, out of fractions and refractions of the surrounding environment, without our knowledge or agreement, in principle any difference that we discover, anything that sticks out of what we know as normal, any suspicion of attack against our values and self-esteem (even if unfounded) can become a threat against our identity. Even the color of a shoestring may be experienced as a provocation³.

Because - despite its intimacy - identity is not a private matter, it is being constructed publicly, in the collective space of society, its structure is not random. Within a group it shows common patterns. There are some things that tend to get us more nervous than others, and these things are quite similar across cultures: those aspects of social life that constitute a basic compass for living in society for humans. The distinction between what is edible and not, what is a man or a woman, what is the difference between a child and an adult, between good and bad, just and unjust are essential universal questions, with countless particular answers that social groups have developed. Difference matters, precisely because we are not that different after all: we attribute importance to very much the same kind of questions. In the language of Cohen-Emerique we call those areas that deal with such questions “sensitive zones”. Sensitive zones are sensitive because they correspond to dimensions of social life in which deviance from a perceived norm triggers intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings with the greatest probability.

Why are sensitive zones so important for intercultural education? Because they function as invisible steppingstones on which it is easy to stumble. The strong emotional reaction they provoke when challenged lessens the chances of mutual satisfaction in the interaction, precludes reciprocal understanding, disturbs the working of empathy and renders impossible win-win solutions in conflicts. In Cohen-Emerique’s pedagogical framework intercultural communication can be improved by increased awareness and sustained practice. Understanding that the source of our anger, disgust, frustration, panic, or humiliation is not the other person, but rather the ill-fitting

³ Lace code as part of skinhead subculture began in the 1970s London. See: <https://insidefullerton.fullcoll.edu/2020/11/lace-code-was-once-an-informal-way-to-express-yourself-in-the-punk-scene-but-is-it-still-used-today/>



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between two frames of reference may help us overcome the first impulse to choose between fight or flight in a stressful situation of communication. If communication is maintained, anything is possible, if it is blocked by violence or retreat, a positive outcome is highly improbable. What is more, once the negative emotions triggered by the unusual or unknown are dissipated, learning about the variability of human modes of inhabiting the world may become a source of playful joy, sparked by the pleasure of discovery. To arrive to this stage where diversity turns to be inspiring from being threatening is one of the goals of intercultural learning. This is a process in which the illusion which pushes humans to take their own world for the World is being unveiled. Experiencing this sort of disillusionment might be confusing. On the other hand, it boosts self-awareness and trains for flexibility, it enhances the capacity of coping with the unexpected, and not secondarily, it frees the mind for finding solutions to real problems and puzzles instead of losing energy in fighting imagined enemies. The task of an intercultural trainer is to provoke, maintain and feed this process.

As much as sensitive zones can constitute real obstacles in intercultural communication, they can also become the fuel of intercultural learning. While we are investigating a sensitive zone and its surprising variations, we learn about ourselves, as much as about possible other worlds. Therefore, it is helpful if the trainer has vast knowledge of different cultural patterns to illustrate cultural diversity. However, no trainer can be expected to be a specialist of all cultural groups, let these be ethnic, professional, age and gender related, or otherwise constituted. In the same manner, it is impossible to be knowledgeable in all possible dimensions of cultural differences. Luckily, in sensitive zones cultural differences get thickened and amplified. This fact makes it possible to organize a great number of idiosyncratic cases of intercultural conflicts in clusters. Sensitive zones are countless, but they are much less numerous than individual stories of encounters. Consequently, it is possible for the trainer to get prepared: knowing the context of his or her intervention, he or she can be prepared to find certain kinds of sensitive zones rather than others in the core of narratives of training participants.

Well-chosen examples of cultural patterns can be a powerful means to shed light on the context-dependency of cultural meaning. However, there is an obvious danger of essentialization inherent



in examples. The type of sentences “the Nuer love their cows”, or “the Roma are good musicians” do not do justice to the richness of cultural variations, instead, they create the impression of a mosaic world in which cultures would behave like boxes containing people and to each box would belong some kind of oddity. In this way, we get dangerously close to Culture with a big C, which leads surreptitiously to Identity with a big I. Capital letter in these words create an imaginary world where all persons from Sub-Saharan Africa become an affectionate cow breeder knowing little about higher civilization and no Roma person is supposed to make a meaningful professional career except in the musical field. There is a thin dividing line between stereotypes and the acknowledgement of the possibility that “I would do things differently if I was another person”. Needless to say that our intercultural trainings aim at taking distance from the first path to approach the second.

To achieve this goal, it might be important to explain that in certain circumstances humans have experimented with transforming husbandry into a way of life, using every single part of their cattle to increase their chances to survive. In this case the emphasis is not on the Identity of the Nuer but on the conditions in which it makes perfect sense for example to use cow urine for washing one’s face. Participants of intercultural trainings in Europe might have little chance to wake up one morning in a Nuer village to witness such a scene but this example may help them realize that their concept of cleanliness can be relativized, and at any case should be contextualized. This learning functions as a protective shield against indignation and confusion in real life situations where the sensitive zone of cleanliness and purity becomes under attack by much more trivial challenges to the accepted normality.

Trainers with an anthropologist background have an obvious advantage here, as anthropologists count as experts in cultural variations and they are likely to have come across with a great number of ethnographic examples during their studies. Acknowledging that not all trainers are ethnographers and even the latter cannot be universal experts, this book intends to offer some help for the trainer in preparing him or her for group discussions around specific sensitive zones. Each chapter invites the reader to an excursion around a cultural universal which is translated into dramatically different forms in different cultures. These texts however should not be read as a



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collection of exotic examples to be memorized and cited at the appropriate moment, rather as a methodological guide training for the method of cross-cultural comparison. Such practice helps to discover meaning in diametrically opposite views and behaviors and facilitates taking distance from entrenched visions of normality.

The sensitive zones discussed here have been chosen by matching different criteria. They are arguably interesting cultural dimensions which are often to be found in the center of intercultural collisions. However, at first instance they were not selected because of their universal importance, but because they popped up in narrated cases that the authors have recently come across, typically during intercultural trainings. The articles demonstrate how ethnographic examples found elsewhere in the world and theory applied to this the empirical material shed light and make intelligible the participants' own experiences. Inversely, the texts also offer some clues for how to identify and treat sensitive zones in narrated culture shocks.

Cohen-Emerique herself analyzed some sensitive zones in her book⁴. The texts here aim to complement her work and, in some points, enter in dialogue with it. Although most sensitive zones are as old as the human condition, their manifestations are time- and space bound. This selection therefore can be considered as reflections of the most pressing cultural preoccupations of our times. These preoccupations are ultimately linked to the question of what kind of world we live in and what kind of world we are tending towards. This is the hidden politics behind cultural analysis. Finally, beyond their pedagogical and political import, the chapters might be read on their own right, as interesting texts which speak about cultural diversity in a light and lively manner.

The chapter *Relationship between the individual and pets* reminds us to the complicated relationship humans have maintained since the dawn of time with other living creatures. From this text we learn that many small scale indigenous society turn towards domestic and even wild animals with special care. The chapter also talks about the ambiguous relationship of Islam with

⁴ Cohen-Emerique, M., & Rothberg, A. (2015). *La méthode des chocs culturels: Manuel de formation en travail social et humanitaire*. Rennes (Ille-et-Vilaine: Presses de l'EHESP.



pets. The chapter *Hygiene* reveals the symbolic interconnectedness between conceptions of physical cleanliness and moral purity. That is why uncleanness is not only disgusting but also revolting everywhere, the only problem in this unison being that people disagree on standards of cleanliness. The most extraordinary examples of odd hygienic conceptions to the Western modern eye come not from remote corners of the world but from the West's own not that remote history. The text on *Religion* also opens a reflection on history, with a special attention turned towards the present. Although religion has always been a cause of heated disputes between humans, it has been suggested that in modernity it has lost its ground. In stark contrast to this opinion, we observe the multiplication of religious references in all aspects of our life. Multiculturalism in the Western world is more and more identified with an uneasy coexistence between Christianity and Islam, with heightened sensibilities on both sides, complicating the lives of well-intentioned social workers committed both to religious tolerance and to the social and political acquisitions of Western modernity.

The case of *Status and Hierarchy* is another example of a universal concern coming to the fore of contemporary debates. The ongoing introspection of Western civilization unearths vast layers of historical injustices and oppression. The expanding movement rejecting such heritage comes to question the very foundation of oppression: hierarchy. Growing suspicion towards all manifestation of authority affects even the relationship

Between trainees and trainers. As opposed to religion, and hierarchy, the concern with *Face*, understood in the Goffmanian sense, is a less visible and obvious stake in intercultural communication, although it is omnipresent. Goffman defines face as a combination of self-esteem, projected self-image, and perceived social appropriateness of a person. While Goffman created a powerful theory of the Face which applies universally, he paid less attention to intercultural variations. This is the unexplored territory where the article leads the reader, illustrating with a broad range of examples contemporary manifestations of cross-cultural face-dilemmas in communication.

Disagreements about *Gender* is another evergreen of intercultural studies. Beyond its universal significance, the topic have gained prominence in current political and social discourses. We have left behind the times when progress seemed irreversible, and the emancipation of women was considered as an ongoing process following a global agenda. Flash backs are happening not only



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in countries under Sharia but also in the very core of Western modernity. What is more, gender debates have become more complicated with the ongoing mainstreaming of various forms of queer theory, questioning the very foundations of the binary on which earlier struggles focalized.

Rationality and *Justice* belong also to the very center of Western political thought and of the self-image of the West. The trick of Western modernity has been to universalize the particular and in its name conquer, oppress, and claim the right to manage the rest of the world. The present looming global ecologic, economic, social and political crisis opens up avenues to legitimately question the well-foundedness of this unilateral right-claiming. The two corresponding chapters refer to anthropological work and reflections in political philosophy to enter this debate. They examine a corpus turned toward non-Western examples and mind-experiments which rehabilitate non-instrumental rationality and concepts of justice which do not content with pretended formal equality in a world of deep inequalities. One possible gain in building bridges between contemporary social movements and non-Western epistemological traditions is the possibility of conceiving justice extended to the non-human living world of which humans are just but one single constituency.