

**Diversity competence**

Cultures don't meet, people do

**Extra case discussions:  
applications of the TOPOI model**

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These [extra case discussions](#) pertain to *Diversity competence* by Edwin Hoffman and Arjan Verdooren.

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First read the Introduction to Chapter 11 of the book.

Cases where no source is mentioned concern case situations that were presented to us by participants of workshops and training programs. We would like to express our profound gratitude for their contributions. The original descriptions have been maintained as much as possible, except for having been anonymised (with one exception) and possible clues for identification having been removed.

## 1 ‘Good morning, Fritz’ or ‘Good morning, Herr Ranschburg’?

‘I meet my Austrian client for the sixth time in as many months. He greets me as Herr Smith. Categorizing him as a businessman, I interpret his very formal behaviour to mean that he does not like me or is uninterested in developing a closer relationship. (North American attribution: people who maintain formal behaviour after the first few meetings do so because they dislike or distrust their associates.) In fact, I have misinterpreted his behaviour. I have used the norms for American business behaviour, which are more informal and demonstrative (I would say “Good morning, Fritz”, not “Good morning, Herr Ranschburg”), to interpret the Austrian’s more formal behaviour (“Good morning, Herr Smith”)’ (Adler & Gundersen, 2008, p. 79).

### *Reflection and analysis*

As such, it is very understandable and helpful that the person in question, Mr Smith, uses the concept of ‘national culture’ to become aware of his own interpretation and judgment of the communication of his Austrian counterpart, Mr Ranschburg. Where it becomes problematic is if this leads to a kind of over-analysis and enlargement of one national cultural feature. The stereotypical difference in greeting between Americans and Austrians is then suddenly the only measure to establish with certainty the amount of trust between the individuals and the nature of their relationship. In the culturalistic approach, this often counts as a way of proving one’s expertise in order to validate the relevance of models around national cultures.

Generally, it can be stated that Americans have a more informal approach to doing business whereas Austrians are more formal. Austrians – like some other groups – know the ritual where the other is formally offered the use of the informal ‘*du*’. Specific rules are maintained as to who offers this ‘*du*’ to whom (older people towards younger, seniors towards juniors, women towards men). This difference in national background is just one possible explanation for Mr Ranschburg’s behaviour; it is not the only way or criterion to establish his perception of Mr Smith.

Where does a system-theoretical approach using TOPOI lead to? First of all, concerning the Tongue area, there is a difference in how two people – and not two nationalities – address one another. Mr Ranschburg (from now on: R.) addresses Mr Smith (from now on: S.) formally as Herr Smith. For S. this has a negative effect on the Persons area (identity and relationship): he doubts whether R. likes him and wants to develop the

business relationship with him. In this example, the explanation of the cultural difference satisfies S. He does not ask himself if there are other things at play. For example, whether the common senses of the mutual images of ‘Austrians’ and ‘Americans’ play a role. Additionally, what makes S. think that R. does not want to continue cooperating and does not like him? Has S. observed additional non-verbal signals or statements from R. that point to this?

### *Possible interventions*

S. could be prepared for, and open to, differences in how people address each other and how they interact. The important point is not to directly judge these differences negatively (‘hypothesis of the best’). He can reflect how the dominant images of Austrians concerning Americans (and vice versa) might influence his perception of R.

Concerning S.’ question of how R. sees him and the mutual relationship, S. can recall how his contact with R. developed in the past six months. S. must have received sufficient other signals besides form of address to assess how R. perceives their relationship. Even just R.’s non-verbal language and his way of greeting (warm, happily, cool, distant) could give S. clues as to how R. experiences the relationship. Also, S. could think back how R. during their encounters responded content-wise to business matters and, in case of recurring doubt, ask R. explicitly about his interest in pursuing business together. Finally, at the right moment S. could ask R. – if this still matters to him – if he would agree to approach each other on a first-name basis. S.’ positive intention here is decisive. And, if necessary, S. could ask R. how he experiences their cooperation.

## 2 Speaking another language

Lei and Yuan Yuan work at an international research organization in the Netherlands. They are both Chinese, and both speak fluent English. One day they are standing together by the water cooler, chatting in Cantonese about a new restaurant in the neighbourhood. Their Dutch colleague Sebastiaan walks past along the corridor, and says ‘Ching chong chang ching chong chang chong’. Lei and Yuan Yuan stop talking and look at Sebastiaan in astonishment.

‘You sound so funny speaking like that’, says Sebastiaan with a smile.

‘Uh ... Well, to me you sound funny speaking Dutch’, says Yuan Yuan.

‘Yes, but this *is* the Netherlands, you know’, Sebastiaan replies. ‘And anyway, you should be speaking English here’, he says, smiling and wagging a finger.

Lei mentions this to his manager Jan-Willem, and says that he feels this is a form of discrimination. Jan-Willem says: ‘Hang on a minute, I agree that it was a really bad joke but I wouldn’t call it discrimination. I know Sebastiaan and he is certainly no racist.’

### *Reflection and analysis*

Obviously, the Tongue (language) area is relevant here in several ways. First of all, the use of a different language than the (apparently) agreed common language, English, plays a role. Sebastiaan comments on this by ridiculing the way that Lei and Yuan Yuan’s

Cantonese sounds to him. Perhaps a common sense in Dutch society influences Sebastiaan at that point, where Chinese is often represented as the ultimate example of foreignness and incomprehensibility (for example: by asking ‘Was I speaking Chinese?’ when someone seems not to have understood anything you said). From this common sense, derogatory comments about Chinese language are considered ‘just jokes’. On the Persons level, the historical relations between Europe and China/Asia, where Europeans have long felt (and behaved) superior, play a role and might give Sebastiaan’s comment a different connotation than a joke about, say, the French or Swedish. Additionally, with the comment ‘This *is* the Netherlands, you know’, Sebastiaan positions himself as part of the majority, whose language is ‘normal’ and not equally ‘funny’ to outsiders as Chinese supposedly is.

On the Organization level, one could wonder what the exact rules are – if any – about language; even if English is the decided common language, does this mean that other languages cannot be used during informal moments? On the Order level, Lei and Jan-Willem have different perspectives on discrimination. Jan-Willem seems to think that in order to speak of discrimination, the ‘perpetrator’ needs to be ‘a racist’ – someone who consciously adheres to racist beliefs. However, as discussed in section 3.1.7, *Exclusion and unconscious bias* in the book, exclusion and discrimination often take place unconsciously, and people often inadvertently approach others on the basis of stereotypes and prejudices. The discussion is then not whether someone *is* a racist but if someone *acts* in a discriminatory or excluding way.

On the Intentions level, Jan-Willem does not give recognition to Lei and Yuan Yuan’s feelings by directly establishing that Sebastiaan’s comment is a ‘bad joke’ and downplays it by saying it is not discrimination and Sebastiaan is not a racist. In this way, Jan-Willem basically takes side with Sebastiaan and defends him by saying ‘that is not how he is’. Additionally, in the Intentions area one could wonder about Sebastiaan’s motives. Perhaps he did not want to offend his colleagues or make them feel excluded, but – from the common sense about Chinese as ‘extremely foreign’ – did not realize how offensive his joke was to others (distinction between intentions and effects). Or perhaps he had felt excluded in other instances when Lei and Yuan Yuan or others spoke a language he did not understand, and he acted out his irritation in this way.

### **Possible interventions**

First of all, Jan Willem could recognize Lei and Yuan Yuan’s feelings by reflecting on their experience and showing understanding without immediately starting to discuss whether or not this counts as discrimination.

From an organizational point of view, it would be wise to review the rules about language use in the organization and communicate these clearly (again) to all employees. If there are no rules, it could be agreed, for example, that people speak English in formal situations such as meetings, but are allowed to speak any other language (including Dutch) at informal moments. In addition to these rules, it could be considered common courtesy to check if others do not feel excluded (see section 10.5, *Language positions and speaking one’s own language* in the book). Lei and Yuan Yuan could make sure by

not continuing to speak Cantonese, for example, when others are trying to join them during a coffee break – without claiming that they are responsible for Sebastiaan’s response in this case.

Jan-Willem could address the incident to Sebastiaan, or encourage Yuan Yuan and Lei to do so – possibly while serving as an intermediate. To this end, they do not have to accuse Sebastiaan of being ‘a racist’. They could start by asking him for the reasons for his response, and calmly explain that his behaviour was offensive and hurtful to his colleagues and why. Jan-Willem could emphasize the importance of an inclusive working environment, and that anyone who feels excluded should mention this to others – this also goes for Sebastiaan in case he feels excluded in situations where he does not understand another language.

### 3 Typically German?

‘During a lunch appointment with my (originally German) colleague, we discuss our education and internship programme (of PhD students). The programme is not running very well when it comes to the candidates. My colleague has the feeling that they show too little commitment for the internship and spend too much time on other tasks. Moreover, their attitude often disturbs him. For example, according to him, they often interrupt during conversations or meetings and try to push their own agendas. They redirect tasks to the supervisor and take too little responsibility in this respect. I have the impression that cultural differences have a strong influence on the way my colleague perceives the candidates’ role. I have tried to address this explicitly. I indicated that I hear him and understand what he’s saying. And that I wonder whether perhaps the fact that he was raised with another perspective could play a role. In response, my colleague immediately gets defensive and says that this has absolutely nothing to do with that: he received his education in the Netherlands and has worked here for more than nine years. So this argument does not apply. Verbally as well as non-verbally, he indicates that this means “end of story”. It’s a shame, I don’t know how to avoid ending up in a “yes-no” situation. I cannot manage to give him feedback in a way that he will recognize or want to recognize. Other people in my surroundings categorize his behaviour as “typically German”. His cooperation with other professionals is sometimes very complicated, due to the way he positions himself.’

#### *Reflection and analysis*

In the Order area there are differing views concerning several aspects of the work and supervision of the candidates. At the same time, the person in question and the colleague – in the Intentions area – have the same positive motivation to make sure that interns do well and internships are a success. In the Tongue area it is possibly unclear what is meant by ‘commitment’, ‘interrupt during conversations’ and ‘pushing their own agendas’.

In the Organization area the question is what the exact criteria are for the interns, what standards they need to uphold. In any case, there seems to be no consensus as to the expectations towards the interns. The main problem that the person in question addresses probably lies in the Persons area: the relationship between her or himself and the colleague is problematic. The person in question suggests that this also goes for other co-workers and that many perceive the colleague's behaviour as 'typically German'. It often happens, as it does here, that when people believe they recognize a (supposed) group trait, they subsequently use this to explain everything and at the same time assume that the (supposed) 'cultural' traits are off-limits for discussion. As discussed in Chapter 1 of the book, however, no one is merely a 'product' of a culture, but also a 'producer'. People take elements from all their collectives into their repertoires, and the outcome of this process is different for every individual. It is thus understandable that colleagues believe they recognize things that are 'typically German', but at the same time this is insufficient or even counterproductive to address the problem.

Probably because the colleague feels addressed in terms of his 'otherness' as a German, he responds defensively and sweeps the topic of the intern supervision off the table. It is unclear what the person in question exactly said, but as it is discussed in the case, it is remarkable that the colleague feels addressed regarding his German background even though the person in question 'merely' asked if the fact that he was raised with another perspective could play a role. This other perspective could be anything and need not concern his German-ness (even though the person in question probably did refer to this). Apparently, this is somehow a sensitive topic and possibly, in his reaction as well as in his interaction with others in the programme, a common sense, with a negative image of Germans that still exists among some groups in the Netherlands, may play a role.

### *Possible interventions*

In this case as well, deculturalizing is key as it concerns individuals with their own personalities and views. The differences in views concerning the interns should not be attributed exclusively to national backgrounds. It would be good to see and recognize each other's mutual positive intentions. The colleague is – in his own way – very involved with the interns and their internship. Concerning the supervision of interns, it is important that the programme manager and the supervisors determine together what the internship criteria are and how each of the supervisors deals with them. In the discussion of the criteria, general concepts like 'commitment', 'interrupting conversations' and 'pushing one's own agenda' need to be made explicit: what does this refer to, what is the behaviour that can be witnessed, what exactly makes this behaviour disturbing or insufficient? In this regard, it would be helpful, while assuming positive intentions in the other, to explore on a deeper level what for the supervisor (including the colleague) is valuable from the perspective of the internship: what is valuable and relevant to you that makes you experience certain behaviours as disturbing or insufficient? Such an exploration can lead to commonalities (points of departure, values, professional criteria) and create space to look at the interns' behaviour differently, or to adjust the internship criteria.



It is important that such a discussion takes place from a mutually felt dedication to a successful internship and that each participant assumes and recognizes this dedication in the other (i.e. not a competitive atmosphere).

As to the colleague's interaction with others, a conversation with metacommunication and precise feedback could be helpful. Possibly under the supervision of a manager, employees who experience the interaction with the colleague as unpleasant could, using the feedback rules (perceived behaviour, experienced effect and desired adjustment), indicate what they find difficult and discuss how the mutual interaction could be improved.

This also gives the colleague the space to share his experiences and to clarify the backgrounds of his behaviour. What is important is that this discussion does not take place in an atmosphere of accusations but one of assumed positive intentions of each person where possible (good) intentions and effects may not correspond with one another. In other words: the point of departure is the hypothesis of the best: the other does not have bad intentions but his or her behaviour could have an undesired and negative effect on the other.

#### 4 Achieved or ascribed status?

'As a 24-year-old, I was the project coordinator of an international education programme in which we cooperated closely with the universities of Bergen (Norway), Lisbon (Portugal) and Palermo (Italy). When visiting the partner university in Palermo, we discussed the status of the project with one of the local coordinators. There are three of us. My 45-year-old colleague and I are sitting at the desk opposite from the associate professor from Palermo. The topics of discussion are related to my expertise. I am talking and answering the questions. However, the associate professor from Palermo ignores me while he speaks and directs his questions to my older colleague who is sitting next to me. She then looks at me, after which I answer the question. During the conversation, the man realized that in fact he had to deal with me, but it took him a lot of effort to direct his questions to me. Also in our email correspondence (in the following months) this person would as a rule cc (carbon copy) my superiors as well as other people from foreign partners when emailing me, even about the simplest and most harmless questions or remarks. It seemed as if I was not accepted in my role and as if I was seen as incapable.'

#### *Reflection and analysis*

This case was discussed previously in section 7.3.4, *Hierarchical and sensitive to status vs. egalitarian and informal* in the book (on the TOPOI area Persons), where we indicated that there is probably a difference in appreciation of achieved status (in this case education, position and performance) versus ascribed status (age). To the professor from Palermo, the higher age (ascribed status) of the project coordinator's colleague seems important. The project coordinator values the achieved status of position and expertise. Possibly, for the professor the young appearance of the project coordinator may

also play a role, making it hard to believe that she or he already has such an important position. Additionally, in the Persons area, the person in question feels she or he is not being taken seriously and is treated as incompetent since, after the conversation, the professor's emails are not only sent to him but also cc'd to others.

### *Possible interventions*

During the conversation, the person in question could become aware that the professor is probably led by a difference in appreciation for status in his consistent addresses to his older colleague, so it is nothing personal. It can also help him to realize that such a difference in appreciation of status by the professor cannot be changed instantly, and therefore it is hard for him to address the person in question directly as project coordinator. This awareness can help the person in question to allow the difference in the appreciation of status and to continue the conversation without negative feelings towards the professor. After all, the professor eventually realizes that he has to deal with the person in question in the role as project coordinator.

As regards the email correspondence, the person in question could, from the hypothesis of the best, realize that the professor possibly thinks in different hierarchical lines and that this is why others are cc'd. This is then not necessarily related to the question whether or not he takes the person in question seriously or sees him as competent. If the 'cc's' disturb the person in question, she or he could tell the professor in a calm and friendly matter that it is sufficient to address emails only to him or her and that others need not be cc'd. If necessary, the person in question's manager could additionally inform the professor.

## 5 'Hi, could you help me?'

'My situation has to do with the perception of what is friendly and polite in a work environment from the perspective of different cultures, and how to find out whether you're doing the right thing when people don't give you any (negative) feedback directly. I had several interactions with two Belgian colleagues, which involved me coming to them in order to ask them to do something for me in the laboratory. For example, I would approach them while they were working and ask, "Hi, could you help me find a protocol for this kind of experiment?" or "Hi, could you help me today with a particular part of my experiment?" My colleagues usually reacted fine, although sometimes with a bit of reluctance, and agreed to help; but later I found out that they perceived my questions as too direct. To them I came off as unfriendly or even mean, and they would have preferred it if I had asked them first how they were doing and did a bit of small talk. However, where I come from, people might think that you don't really care about them if you only ask them how they are doing so as to move on to a work-related question, which comes off as "fake niceness" and is frowned upon. I was wondering whether this is something culture-specific or more person-specific, and how to find the balance between being direct and friendly when working in an environment with a mix of people from different cultures. In addition, I would like to find out if there are ways to understand you might be doing something wrong without people openly expressing it. This might be especially difficult

to do in cultural environments such as the Belgian one, where people are generally not quick to express personal dissatisfaction with your actions to your face.’

### *Reflection and analysis*

The person in question has experienced that her or his direct way of asking colleagues for help – without introductory small talk or showing interest in the other person – has a negative effect. This leads to several questions:

- What is friendly and polite in a work environment from the perspective of different cultures?
- How to find out whether you’re doing the right thing when people don’t directly give you any negative feedback? Or how can you find out if there are ways to understand you might be doing something wrong without people openly expressing so?
- Is small talk ‘fake niceness’?
- Is this something culture-specific or more person-specific?
- How to find the balance between being direct and being friendly when working in an environment with people from different cultures?

Here, one notices how the person in question refers to (national) cultures and not individual people, even though we would immediately add that we are not denying that people’s behaviour and responses can be partly influenced by (national) cultures. But that is only one possible explanation for someone’s behaviour, and from a system-theoretical approach, not the starting point of reflection or advice. Furthermore, the person in question seems to expect a list of rules and do’s and don’ts regarding the different cultures in his or her work environment.

Following the TOPOI model, this person experiences in the Tongue area that her or his direct communication style has a negative effect on the Persons area – the relationship with another person. Additionally, in the Persons area, the question is which position this person has regarding her/his colleague (consider Leary’s Rose in section 7.6, *Symmetrical or complementary relationship?* in the book). Is this a situation with a hierarchically higher position (vertical, above–below) or with an egalitarian co-worker relationship (horizontal, cooperative)?

In the Intentions area, intentions and effects do not match: this person has inadvertently offended others. Additionally, this person finds it insincere to ask colleagues how they are, because where he or she is from, such small talk is seen as merely pretended friendliness. The question now is how he or she could – without pretended friendliness – request help, especially when it is difficult to hear from the other how this request has come across?

### *Possible interventions*

First of all, encounters always take place with other people, and all behaviour is tied to individuals, not just to cultures. Other circumstances (personality, a moment of stress, interpersonal factors) are just as likely to make people respond the way they do. Therefore, we cannot predict beforehand how a request for help will come across to an

individual or a group of people. Consequently, rules in terms of ‘do’s and don’ts’ for different cultures in the workplace cannot be given.

This person could remain spontaneous and act from an attitude of involvement and attention, asking for help in the way that he or she is used to. This person could then remain alert towards the other’s response, especially to non-verbal signals, since, as he or she stated, not everyone expresses their dissatisfaction explicitly. If someone responds verbally or non-verbally in a different way than expected, this could be taken as a starting point for the following response, for example by saying: ‘Sorry, I believe that I am asking you a bit of out the blue’, ‘Sorry, is this a bad time?’ or ‘Sorry, is this a good time to ask for your help?’

For some colleagues, this person could learn, based on previous experiences, whether they appreciate being asked sincerely how they are doing or whether this is a good moment to ask for their help. In such cases, this is not pretended friendliness but a sincere question, because this person would like to see his request for help fulfilled, but also feels involvement and care for his colleagues (considering the case description where he feels concerned about their reactions). By the way, an introduction with ‘Hi, how are you?’, ‘Hi, are you busy today?’ does not have to be pretended friendliness. The person in question could – in the context and the moment that this introduction is expressed – consider it as ritual questions; the addressed person knows these questions are not meant to be answered extensively (unless of course there is something urgent that needs to be mentioned). The true interest in his or her colleagues could be expressed at other moments when he or she really invites them to tell him or her how things are going and what they are working on.

## 6 ‘You must repair my laptop ...’

‘As team leader responsible for the PC lab I am often confronted with foreign students requesting IT support. This can range from problems with the central IT infrastructure (e.g. email not working) to problems with their own personal laptop/smartphone (e.g. PC crashed, no Eduroam connection). Although most of these communications are one-time meetings and don’t take much time, sometimes they do not go smoothly. I am aware that some factors have little to do with intercultural aspects of the communication (e.g. the student cannot explain what his IT needs are, or English is a second language for the student and for my staff), but I hope that some of the problems can be explained by a different cultural background. To give a practical example: In the past year, on several occasions, students (mostly “Indian-looking”) have told us that “we *must* repair their laptop or configure their smartphone ...”, which is not really appreciated by my staff. The “must” component is not well received, considering we offer a free, best-effort service. African- and Chinese-looking students seem to do this a lot less.’

### Reflection and analysis

Very understandably, the team leader and his employees feel offended in the Tongue area by the way in which mainly 'Indian-looking' students address him with 'must'. In Persons they feel treated like subordinates who have to carry out orders. The team leader hopes to find out that the misunderstandings result from differences in cultural background. The question is why the team leader hopes this; what would the confirmation solve for him: less irritation and an improved relationship with the students?

The reason why the 'Indian-looking' students talk in this way to the employees could certainly be related to their cultural backgrounds, but in a broader sense and not only related to their national culture. They could, for instance, come from a higher caste, from particular families or regions where it is normal to address service providers in such a direct way (Persons area: the relationship to others). Another reason can lie in Tongue, where a lack of command of polite phrases in English ('Could/would you please ...', 'Would you be so kind as to ...') lead to using 'must' or 'have to'. Alternatively, since English is an official language in India, instead of a lack of language command, it could also be the command of a different *kind* of English – one spoken among particular groups in India – where a request with 'must' is not necessarily considered rude or unfriendly.

### Possible interventions

The underlying question from the team leader is probably, How to deal with such expressions by students? Often service providers, upon hearing the word 'must', respond with 'I am not your servant' or 'You don't have to order me around' or let students wait longer before helping them. This kind of intervention is understandable because people don't feel treated respectfully and hence feel directly offended. However, the students probably do not understand why the employees respond this way: they do not realize the effect of their communication and therefore feel no need to improve it.

Adequate feedback could be a good intervention here. When addressed with 'must', the employees could tell the students that they feel treated like a servant or feel they're being bossed around. They could then ask whether the students understand this and say that they would appreciate it if the students introduce a request with: 'Could/would you please ...' or 'Would you be so kind as to ...'

It could also help to explain that those expressions sound friendlier. The team leader and the employees could correct the students immediately and – from an attitude of the hypothesis of the best – say, with a friendly and inviting facial expression, 'You mean, *could/would you please* repair my laptop?' or 'You mean, *would you be so kind* as to repair my laptop?' Consequently, they could wait a moment until the students rephrase their request and, when necessary, i.e. if the students either verbally or non-verbally express they do not understand the employees' response, provide feedback as mentioned before.

## 7 International Youth Exchange

‘The German-French-Romanian preparation group of the exchange programme comes together in a city in France. The Romanian supervisor explains in fluent French that it is impossible for the Romanian youngsters to pay their own contributions for the exchange. The French supervisors, being aware of the difference in living standards between the three countries, accept this without further discussion. During the first encounter, the supervisors ask the French and German participants to take the differences in living standard into account and, for example, not suggest having drinks together too often, since this could embarrass the Romanian youngsters. During the exchange programme, the Romanian youngsters are often found spending every free minute in shops, coming out with giant plastic bags full of merchandise. Without the Romanian supervisors or youngsters noticing, the Germans and French discuss the incongruity between what the Romanian supervisors said about the Romanian youngsters’ financial situation and their current consumption behaviour’ (own translation of Carpentier et al., 2014, pp. 158 ff.).

### *Reflection and analysis*

First of all, one can see in Organization that the discussion about finances and the contribution of the youngsters – which is an important organizational issue in the context of an international exchange – is quickly closed and not considered an issue for further consideration. In Order the views and logics of the Romanian representative concerning the Romanian youngsters’ contribution is accepted without further discussion. Perhaps the views and logics of the Romanian supervisor are accepted as self-evidently true and justified because of the common sense, i.e. the dominant generalizing image of Romania as a ‘poor country’.

It is not discussed whether some Romanian youngsters are capable of paying a contribution and whether perhaps some French and German youngsters might also have relatively small funds. A dominant taboo (= common sense) to discuss money might also play a role in preventing further discussion. In Tongue the notion that the Romanian representative spoke ‘perfect French’ perhaps contributed to her statement about the finances being accepted without discussion. In the description it is not mentioned how the German representative responded: how is her or his command of French?

Additionally, concerning the Order area, the French and German supervisors give a particular interpretation of the Romanian youngsters’ consumption behaviour; probably something along the lines of ‘So in fact they do have money and use it to buy all kinds of things for themselves’. The French and German see this consumption behaviour as contrary to the Romanian supervisor’s statement. In Persons the mutual relationship between the supervisors does not seem to be one of openness and mutual trust. After all, the French and German supervisors discuss the financial issue without involving the Romanians. In Intentions the positive intention of the French and German seems to be not making the Romanian supervisor and youngsters feel uncomfortable about the money issue. The effect, however, is that it leads to a secretive taboo atmosphere in which assumptions are not tested and questions not asked.

### Possible interventions

In Organization the issue of finances could be explicitly addressed. As mentioned, finances are an important organizational aspect. Especially in the context of organizational issues – and in spite of potential taboos and preconceptions – it could be good to discuss this. Even though the Romanian supervisor claims that it is impossible to expect the Romanian youngsters to make a contribution, the supervisors could still openly and without suspicion discuss the reasons for this. What is the financial situation of the German and French youngsters, what can be done for the financially less fortunate youngsters, and how will the financial issues be managed? In Order the French and German supervisors could, from the hypothesis of the best, try to give other interpretations to the (Romanian) youngsters' consumption behaviour: perhaps they received money from their families to buy items; perhaps they are buying things to sell back home to make some extra money; or indeed, some (Romanian) youngsters may be financially more fortunate and, just like some of the other (French and German) youngsters, may be able to afford to buy themselves things.

In Persons the supervisors should in the first place approach the youngsters as 'youngsters', and let go of national divisions. Regarding the finances, the issue concerns *youngsters* with different financial positions, and the question of how to deal with that, instead of thinking in terms of *Romanians* (who are by definition financially weak) and *German* or *French* youngsters (who are by definition in a good financial position). Additionally, in Persons, the supervisors could also make an effort to truly engage with one another – this is after all an international exchange project. In this way, a mutual relationship of trust could be created where the supervisors openly and non-judgmentally exchange experiences relating to the youngsters. Such an exchange fits well within the framework and goals of an international youth exchange. The supervisors could then also discuss their observations of the consumption behaviour of some youngsters – and the backgrounds thereof.

## 8 'Yes, I understand ...'

'A Chinese trainee works in a lab in the controlled zone (i.e. where radioactive activity is present and there is a danger of contamination). The trainee is assisted by such different people as technical staff, scientific employees etc. Due to difficulties in communication, many things have gone wrong. In my opinion, the trainee did not completely understand what we told him, but was afraid to ask for additional information or an explanation. We asked him several times whether he understood our explanations and guidelines and he always said "yes", e.g. when we told him not to throw liquid waste with heavy metals in the sink, but to wait until we had found a suitable reservoir. Yet when we came back with the reservoir all the liquid had disappeared in the sink. We also told him not to use glove boxes without our guidance. But one day, one of the pumps was broken and the cause turned out to be that the trainee had poured a full beaker of water in the cabinet and later turned on the vacuum pump. So the pump sucked up all the water and was broken. He was also not allowed to work in the radioactive labs after 5 p.m. (for security reasons). A few days later, we got complaints from the security department that they spotted a student after 5 p.m. in a non-radioactive zone, still wearing clothes from the radioactive zone.'

How to make sure that future trainees do understand our explanations and follow the rules – given their poor knowledge of English?

### *Reflection and analysis*

The problems in the communication seem to take place mainly in the Tongue, Persons and Organization areas. Concerning Tongue, the trainee's answer 'yes' apparently does not mean yes in terms of 'Yes I understood', 'Yes I will do it' or 'Yes, I will uphold the rules'. In section 5.3.12, *Meanings of 'yes' and 'no'* in the book (on the TOPOI area Tongue) and in section 10.4.1, *Making explicit and checking*, we have indicated that 'yes' as an answer can mean many things and that closed questions such as 'Do you understand?' and 'Will you do it?' are ineffective for someone who does not understand the language sufficiently and/or does not dare to ask for additional information. The trainee's 'yes' is hence rather a socially desirable 'yes', partly because in the Persons area apparently the relationship between the trainee and the people that assist him – technical staff, scientific employees – is not safe and familiar enough to give honest answers. The trainee thus says 'yes' because, for example, he is afraid to admit he has not understood or does not want to disappoint the person who tried to explain. In the Organization area, the question is – considering the trainee's insufficient command of English – how adequate admission standards for trainees are, as well as the way they are tested.

### *Possible interventions*

First of all, it is important to establish standards for admission concerning the command of English necessary for the research work at hand, and how this should be tested. After the trainee is hired, an introductory meeting could serve as a means to express mutual expectations and to clarify what the learning process entails; the trainee is expected to have an open, learning attitude: asking questions, not having to know everything, being allowed to make mistakes, etc. In such a conversation, building relationship and trust can begin, which is indispensable in order to create a safe and familiar work atmosphere so that the trainee will dare to take up a learning and inquisitive attitude.

As to the communication, when explaining or testing whether something is understood and will be done, it is imperative to ask open questions. For example, 'Can you summarize what I've told you?' or 'Could you demonstrate what I just explained?' From the non-verbal language – facial expressions – it can often be read whether the trainee has understood something. Furthermore, mentoring sessions can be used to discuss the trainee's behaviour in an appreciative and supportive way. Metacommunication and adequate feedback can be helpful in this regard.



## 9 The Three Gorges Dam

We will present two case descriptions of (most probably) the same educational situation. The first description was brought forward by a teacher at a college in the Netherlands where International Communication students spend one semester at a partner university abroad (in this case the Chinese University of Hong Kong). The second description was found online, and came from two Chinese students from this university who presented the same case during an Intercultural Communication course. The interesting point is thus that the same situation is described from two perspectives: that of a Dutch teacher and that of two local Chinese students in Hong Kong.

### The description by the Dutch teacher

‘Several Dutch students are taking the minor “Ecological environment of China” at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. One day, Professor Lo is teaching about the impact of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze river. He begins his lecture with a monotonous list of statistics and technical properties of the dam, and all students listen silently. After half an hour, Nathalie, a Dutch student, raises her hand. The professor does not respond at first, but Nathalie keeps her hand in the air, and when he looks her way she asks, “Where is the Dam exactly?” Professor Lo smiles and nods and answers the question. Then, he resumes his lecture, but soon other exchange students raise their hands. The local students look at each other and move around uncomfortably in their seats. Tim asks how big the ecological damage exactly is. Professor Lo gives an extensive, but vague answer. Immediately after, Esther asks how many families were disadvantaged by the construction of the dam. A number of Chinese students begin to laugh, others hold their hands before their mouths. Professor Lo also responds a bit uncomfortably, but he answers every question. Then, he says that he needs to get on with the lecture. He goes on to present several pros and cons of the dam, and ends with the conclusion that the pros outweigh the cons. Immediately, about five exchange students put their hands in the air. They all start talking at the same time, making it clear that they do not automatically agree with Lo’s statements. This leads to a spontaneous debate. The Chinese students also start participating. The chatter gets louder and louder and many look startled.’

### The description by the two students from Hong Kong

All names have been anonymized; the student authors also preferred to remain anonymous.

‘Last year, I took a course “Ecological environment of China” at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I expected that all my classmates would be local students. After I entered the lecture theatre, I saw a few exchange students chatting with each other in the first rows of the seats until Professor Lo began to talk.

I remember the topic of the lecture was “the impact of the Three Gorges Dam”. I really felt that the topic was boring because it was rather factual and theoretical to me. The impact of the project was obvious and not difficult to understand. Thus, I thought I would fall asleep throughout the lessons. However, my expectation seemed to be wrong due to the exchange students.

The lesson started smoothly and all students were silent. No one made a sound at the moment. After Professor Ho lectured for half an hour, an exchange student called Natalie suddenly raised her hand. As Professor Lo was concentrating on his lesson, he was not aware of her, or maybe he did not expect any questions from students. However, local students sitting behind those exchange students saw her clearly. Their first reaction was to open their eyes widely. We felt a bit surprised because there were rarely any students asking questions during lessons. After a while, Professor Lo saw Natalie and she spoke. She said, "I'd like to ask where the exact place of the Three Gorges Dam is? And how serious does it affect the soil?" Professor Lo smiled and nodded his head, and then he answered Natalie's queries. After she got her answers, she continued her attention on Professor Lo's lesson.

We, local students, thought that the remaining one and a half hours would be passed in silence. We tried to pay attention to professor's lecture. However, as his tone is too flat it seemed to be a lullaby to us; our eyelids began to fall. At this moment, not only Natalie, but also other exchange students took turns to raise their hands and ask questions. I looked at my classmate who sat beside me, and saw her looking at me, too. Other local students also looked and smiled at each other, feeling half surprised and half doubtful. The exchange students were so eager to ask that, along with the students, Professor Lo also showed his uneasiness. He rarely encountered so many questions in a lesson as today and he was certainly worried that he could not finish his syllabus.

Following the question and answer session, the exchange students amazed us again as they pushed the lessons to the climax when they could not agree with Professor Lo's point of view. Near the end of the lesson, he mentioned the impact of the project, that pros exceeded cons due to the future economic development of China. There was nothing wrong with his standpoint. Of course, we know that it was hard to say which factors surpassed another, but Professor Lo's view reflected his own idea and one of the facts only.

Therefore, we got his view and tried to think of our own perspectives. I thought to myself that I could not totally agree with Professor Lo. It was because I regarded the impact of the Three Gorges Dam on environment irreversible. However, I had no intention to speak my point out, as it was unnecessary and also embarrassing to talk in front of the whole class.

Yet, an exchange student called Alison held the same view as me. She did not know anyone in the class, including other exchange students. However, she started to "debate" with Professor Lo. I felt the atmosphere [was] strange and intense, which I had not encountered before. Other local students were also startled by Alison's behavior and they murmured with each other. Local students soon filled the classroom with so much voice. Some of them even tightened their eyebrows and showed an embarrassed expression. A thought came to their mind: "How come a student challenges a professor and doesn't give him face?"

Luckily, time was up and the lesson ended. The exchange students may have needed to hurry for the next lessons so they left on time. At that moment, Professor Lo sighed and felt relieved just like the local students' (Jackson, 2003).

### *Reflection and analysis*

The problematic part of this case, which can mainly be found in the second description, is the negative interpretation that both the students and the professor could give to each other's behaviour. A frequent and quick, culturalistic explanation could be that this is an example of a confrontation between two educational cultures: the 'Chinese' and 'Western'. On the collective or metalevel, it can certainly be established that national-cultural differences play a role – in this example, differences between a generally 'Western' and a generally 'Chinese' culture of education. The 'Western' students generally position themselves in a participative, active and critical way. The Chinese students, socialized in a Chinese educational culture, mainly take a passive, listening position. They have little interaction with the professor who is hierarchically situated on a pedestal as an all-knowing person not to be contradicted.

The risk of such a culturalistic view is the activation of prejudices and stereotypes and mutual negative attributions. The experience of strangeness with each other's behaviour can then easily lead to an 'allergic reaction' (see section 2.2.4, '*Allergic reactions*' in the book). This could make the Chinese students – in the eyes of the exchange students – passive, without opinions, afraid to speak out and submissive to the teacher. The 'Western' students are – in the eyes of the Chinese students and teacher – rude, provocative, arrogant and disrespectful towards the teacher. The latter is expressed somewhat in the second description through the reflection of the local Chinese students: 'How come a student challenges a professor and doesn't give him face?'

In addition, such a culturalistic view and accompanying allergic reaction makes any commonalities hard to identify. For example, the Chinese students could actually be passive because they are a bit bored with the lecture (something that most probably also happens to the Western students sometimes); or they may have critical ideas of their own about the professor's conclusions but find it unnecessary to express this (showing that 'Chinese' education can also stimulate critical thinking, but in a more implicit way). At the same time, Western students could probably also imagine situations where they would feel uncomfortable and awkward if someone would challenge a lecturer in an inappropriate way (so the difference is what counts as appropriate and inappropriate). The culturalistic analysis then tends to paint a black-and-white, either-or picture that lacks many nuances and possibilities for connection and empathy.

However, if one looks at the concrete situation on a micro level to see what is going on, it is helpful not to speak of an interaction between two collectives or two cultures, but rather of an interpersonal communicative encounter between unique individuals in an educational context. The added value of the TOPOI model is then that it helps to point out more precisely in what areas the differences lie and what the possibilities are to bridge these differences.

In Tongue, one could identify differences in communication styles. Several students are direct, explicit and critical in their communication: they ask questions and engage in discussion with the lecturer and each other. Their communication style is informal as well. The communication style of others is mainly reserved, listening and receptive,

as well as more formal and implicit (consider the described non-verbal language). In Order the students and the teacher apparently have different views of 'good education'. For several students, 'good education' implies critical thinking, active participation and forming one's own opinions. For other students and possibly also the teacher, 'good education' implies listening carefully to what the teacher says and taking in what he says as well as possible in order to be able to reproduce what was taught.

In Persons some students interact with the teacher informally and on an equal basis, which is polite and respectful in its own way. They are probably used to a student-teacher relationship based on equality. Other students are more hierarchically oriented and see the teacher as a higher placed person who knows about things and who you are not supposed to contradict. In Organization the professor seems to apply a form of lecturing where the goal is knowledge transfer without discussion or clarifying questions. A majority of the students is familiar with this kind of lecturing. A minority, however, is used to a style of lecturing where it is self-evident and even expected to actively participate, ask questions and engage in discussion with each other and the teacher to form an opinion. Additionally in Organization, the professor and students involved (both international and local) seem unprepared for the different views and expectations concerning the education/course.

The most important area to reflect upon is Intentions. Here lies the basis for bridging the differences because of the commonality that the students all share and that unites them: their motivation for the course and their respect for the teacher. All students are motivated and respectful. However, the way in which they show their motivation and respect is different, as mentioned above in the Tongue and Persons areas.

### *Possible interventions*

Aside from the mentioned risk of a negative interpretation of the behaviour of others, the described situation does not need to be problematic. In fact, it can be a great intercultural learning experience in which both teacher and students experience strangeness and can subsequently become familiar with the differences that occur between the students concerning their communication styles, perspectives on education, the student-teacher relationship, the familiar types of lecture, and the expression of their motivation. A precondition to learn from this experience of strangeness and not to get stuck in negative judgments and mutual images, is the point of departure of the hypothesis of the best: the belief and trust that every student and teacher themselves have good reasons for behaving in the way they do. A second precondition to learn is that the students (and teacher) take this opportunity to discuss what each of them perceives as 'good education', how they perceive the teacher-student relationship, and what didactical forms (including lectures) they are used to and prefer.

As to Professor Lo, he could have interrupted his lecture to discuss what happened in the class (metacommunication). He could have explained his approach to the students and his expectations from them. Though it is not his field or his responsibility, if he wanted to, Professor Lo could have asked the students about their expectations and ideas concerning the lecture. In that case, the professor and the students could engage in the inter-

cultural learning experience together. It would be best if – in the context of international education – the involved students and teachers at the university would be prepared in advance for differences in educational socialization and how they may or wish to deal with this in the lectures. In the event that questions, discussion and critical reflection are part of the course, it would be advisable to choose forms and make rules this enable all students – especially those that are not used to active participation – to participate.

## 10 ‘I have obeyed all your orders’

An Australian university teacher gives feedback by email on an Indonesian student’s paper. To his surprise, the student responds to his comments within a day, which makes the teacher wonder if the student has thought through the comments and even if he didn’t have any other plans for that day. His surprise is further enhanced by the student’s response: ‘Thank you for your feedback. I have obeyed all your orders. Please find the corrected paper enclosed.’ The teacher does not identify with formal and hierarchical interpersonal relations, and the student’s response makes him feel awkward. He is unsure how to understand the situation, leave alone how to respond to it.

### *Reflection and analysis*

In Persons the student’s phrasing ‘I have obeyed all your orders’ makes the teacher uncomfortable because he feels approached from a hierarchical position that feels unfamiliar and unpleasant to him. The teacher probably prefers a more informal, equal interaction with students and is unsure about the student’s words: should he take them seriously, or are they intended jokingly or even mockingly? In Tongue the question is how the teacher had phrased his feedback; perhaps his choice of words gave reason for the response? Additionally, perhaps the choice of words is merely a matter of language – an unfortunate literal translation from the student’s mother tongue (language transfer), or insufficient English language skills. In Intentions the teacher is surprised by the student’s effort to respond within a day (‘did he not have other plans for that day?’) and he is unsure whether the student has thought his comments through. The teacher is unsure how to respond.

### *Possible interventions*

This case is an example of how an experience of strangeness as such can make people feel unsure and incompetent, whereas one could wonder if any additional intervention is actually necessary. After deculturalization and normalization of the situation, one could argue that it is ‘merely’ a case of a student who has corrected his paper very quickly and accompanies this with a (for the teacher) uncommon phrasing. Would he have responded differently to a (native) Australian student? In terms of possible interventions, it would be good to distinguish between two issues: the content level concerning the student’s paper (is it acceptable or not) and the relationship side. How does the student perceive the professor: as a hierarchically superior whose comments are orders to be followed? Or is the student joking by addressing the teacher in this way – perhaps even mocking him?

As to the content of the paper, the teacher could first of all – assuming the hypothesis of the best – appreciate the student’s quick response and recognize his efforts. In any case, the teacher need not doubt the quality of the response to the feedback as such because of its early arrival. If the student’s response is adequate, the teacher could compliment him on this; if not, he could give additional feedback.

Concerning the relational side of the situation, it is unclear whether the teacher knows the student. If this is the case, then the teacher could estimate whether this is a common response from the student, who is perhaps socialized in an educational environment with a more hierarchical, formal interaction with teachers. In that case, he could simply let the student’s words be. If the teacher would suspect that the student’s words are intended jokingly or mockingly, he could also let it be, or – since he seems to prefer a more informal and equal interaction – respond in a similar fashion with ‘thanks for obeying so quickly’ or ‘happy to see you followed my orders’, possibly adding an emotion or smiley ;-).

The teacher could also revisit his earlier feedback to judge whether he has given cause for the student’s reaction. If he remains uncertain about the student’s words or if they disturb him, the teacher could have a conversation with him face to face instead of by email, with all its communicative limitations. In the personal conversation, the teacher could address both issues (content and relationship) separately. On the relationship level, he could address how the student’s words came across to him and ask him how they were intended – using the general feedback rules.

## 11 ‘What do you think you white people can say about the (ancient) customs of us Africans?’

‘As a professional astrophysicist I am very interested in cultural astronomy and science education. To that end, I did a project in West Africa (“Galileo in Senegal”) in which I travelled to remote parts of northern Senegal with a journalist friend, 50 small telescopes, a notebook and a camera. The goal was to learn the local people’s ideas and stories about the night sky. Approaching villagers of all ages as a white woman (with a telescope, in a very religious Islamic part of the country) could only be done with a lot of respect. My feeling was that it was a good experience and pleasant/fruitful exchange for all involved. A while after this experience, I presented some of our findings to an educated public at a cultural centre in Dakar, the capital. In general, the reactions were very positive and both inspired and inspiring. But one person in the audience stood up and said: “What do you think you white people can say about the (ancient) customs of us Africans? What puts you in a position to make claims about these things?” Note that I was not intending to make any claims, but speaking to the audience about science and culture, and bringing the two together, somehow touched a nerve with this person. I think that I could understand where his reaction came from, and I tried to respond as gracefully and respectfully as possible, but this confrontation made me feel a bit trapped in a minefield of potential misunderstandings. (...) The fact that I did not fit the “local role model” of women may have exacerbated the situation.’

### Reflection and analysis

The astrophysicist is confronted with an accusation: who does she think she is as a white person telling people something about the ancient customs of Africans? This incident in Dakar is most likely influenced by the common sense of the white colonial history and the current Western involvement in Africa. What is striking in the Tongue area is that the man speaks in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, of ‘you white people’ and ‘us Africans’. In his words, the collectively experienced pain and anger seem to echo experiences of ‘white superiority’ towards Africans. Possibly, these common senses hinder him from being open and listening to the astrophysicist’s story. As a result, he cannot – in Persons – see her as an astrophysicist who is trying to share carefully and respectfully, without a sense of superiority or arrogance, her experiences in northern Senegalese villages with regard to her knowledge of the stars (consider the example of *astrophysicist* Katrien Kolenberg in section 10.3.1, *Take a detour* in the book). It seems as if he can only see her as the next ‘superior’ white person who thinks she can explain African habits better than Africans themselves can. Fortunately, the astrophysicist seems to understand the background of the man’s words and she answers him empathetically and respectfully. However, she feels ‘a bit trapped in a minefield of potential misunderstandings’ and believes that (in Persons) because with her performance she does not fit the ‘local role model’ of women, she ‘may have exacerbated the situation’. It seems as if the astrophysicist’s words are influenced by a dominant common sense that includes a particular image about ‘role models’ for Senegalese women.

### Possible interventions

It could help the astrophysicist to trust her positive intention of involvement, respect and carefulness. She knows that she is acting with integrity, judging from the positive confirmation of the Senegalese villagers with whom she has spoken and worked. This self-awareness could help her stay in balance. Furthermore, she seems to realize that the history of ‘whites’ in Africa can influence how people perceive and approach her. So it is nothing personal against her, but rather a collective pain that she as a ‘white’ person should not take personally and to which she should respond as calmly as she did. Additionally, she should not doubt herself because her behaviour as a woman supposedly did not fit the image of the local women in Senegal. Here, it seems that she is hindered by a particular stereotype, and it would be good to reflect on this and let it go.

In addition to the historical context she could look at the current context in Senegal, which could give her a broader view and a different perspective. For example, in 2012 the percentage of women in parliament increased from 22 to 45 percent. This was aided by a new law that obliged political parties to place as many women as men on their ballots, so that women were equally represented. Such information could help her to put the situation in a different context and thus see her role differently. In this way, the astrophysicist could herself be a role model for Senegalese girls, women *and* men. Why shouldn’t many of them recognize themselves in her and want to follow her example? Finally, the astrophysicist could approach the man in question after the lecture, with an open attitude, to continue the conversation and ask him what in her lecture made him so angry. He might then tell her what for her – no matter how open she is – could still be blind spots in situations like this.

## 12 ‘... the Jews made Israel a better place’

‘Some months ago, I had a very interesting talk with an Erasmus student from Israel about the political situation in his country. He argued that the Jews had made Israel a better place (better farming, no more malaria, etc.). Afterwards he asked me about my opinion on the topic. Until then I had believed the Israelis were the “bad guys” in the whole story because, among other things, they were claiming the land from the Palestinians. But after hearing his story, I realized that it is very difficult to have an opinion about the situation without actually living there. So I replied that it’s not up to me to have an opinion because I don’t live there; I cannot assess the situation accurately. He found my answer astounding, since people often would tell him their opinion right away. He found it very interesting that I neither approved nor disapproved Israeli politics, but could not give him an answer right now, not having been there myself. Nor did he pressure me to choose his side, but respected my answer. It’s not that I said this to avoid possibly offending him by telling him my initial opinion. I said it because I realized it is very difficult to have a sound opinion about a situation of which you actually know so little. After all, your opinion is mainly based on information from the media, which can be, and often is, biased.

I did have some questions after this exchange of views:

- How can you form an opinion about issues or situations in faraway countries/regions (without being biased by information from the media)?
- Is not having an opinion about certain things a good thing, for example to avoid prejudice?
- How would the situation have evolved if a Palestinian were also in the room at the time?’

### *Reflection and analysis*

In Order the person in question has a particular view or opinion about Israel that he or she does not express in order to prevent hurting the other person (Persons). The topic is sensitive, partly because of a relevant common sense that Israeli’s are ‘the bad guys in the whole story’. The person in question realizes that as an outsider, your opinions are primarily based on the media, which are often ‘biased’ (incidentally, the opinions of those directly involved are also often largely based on the media). So this person has questions on how to form an opinion without being biased, whether it is good to not have an opinion about certain issues in order to avoid prejudice, and how a conversation about a controversial topic – in this case the Israeli-Palestinian issue – would develop if both parties were present.

### *Possible interventions*

The case description mainly plays out in the Order and Persons areas: it is about differences in views in a conversation that can have a negative effect on the relationship between the participants. They could feel offended and hurt. As to the questions formulated above, it is almost impossible not to have a prejudiced opinion because every piece of information is as such a selection and interpretation of reality. As mentioned



in section 6.2, *Subjective views* in the book (on the TOPOI area Order), there is no single truth; every view or opinion is a possibility, not the truth. For a positive exchange of views – a good conversation – the point is not so much whether participants have different opinions – which is only interesting and fruitful – but the way in which conversation partners put forward their opinions. If they firmly present their opinion as ‘the truth’ (‘this is simply how it is’), force their opinions on others, are neither open nor give space or attention to different opinions, or judge negatively what is important to the other, this will be detrimental to the mutual relationship – especially when it concerns sensitive topics. In other words, what is important in such a conversation around different, sensitive points of view is a *dialogical* approach. A dialogical exchange is characterized by openness, curiosity about the other’s views, a learning attitude, suspending one’s judgment, presenting one’s view as a possibility and, finally, the intention and willingness to explore the issue together and to come to new insights and knowledge.

When applied to the case in hand, the person in question could recognize the Israeli student’s perspective (which is not necessarily the same as agreeing). One can give recognition by attentive listening, enquiring further and responding with agreement or appreciation to points that one could agree with; for example, ‘better farming, no more malaria’. Additionally, the person in question could, without judgment and from an open learning attitude, ask how the student sees the position of the Palestinians, the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, etc. The person in question could also present her or his opinion and knowledge, not by presenting this as fact but enquiring, testing as in: ‘I don’t know if it’s true but I read/heard/saw that ...’ or ‘I don’t know how you feel, but I think ... What do you think about this?’

When it concerns an opinion or value, e.g. the right of a people to their own state, the person in question could first ask how the student sees this, and subsequently add his or her own view. When, at a deeper level of values and emotions (Intentions), follow-up questions are asked about certain issues, this may lead to a connection. Questions may include: ‘What to you is the main issue, value or significance in this issue?’ ‘What makes you respond to this issue so strongly?’ or ‘What are you afraid of?’ When it comes to the deeper level of values and emotions, there is often a lot of recognition and commonality between conversation partners who differ in their opinions. This commonality can be the basis of a mutual understanding and the starting point for more knowledge and insight, and hence for changes in points of view and perspectives.

The question of how the conversation would develop if a Palestinian were present is difficult to answer. First of all, it cannot be predicted how this Palestinian would respond. Palestinians do not have default responses but are unique individuals who all respond in different ways. As regards the position of the person in question, this is also difficult to predict. Possibly the Israeli student and the Palestinian would start talking about the political situation in Israel and the Palestine territories, and the person in question would only be present and listen. Or the person in question could be asked to give her or his opinion, perhaps hoping that she or he will choose a side. In such a case, it may be wise to begin by saying that as an outsider it is difficult to have an opinion about the situation. The person in question could present his or her own opinions as mentioned:

enquiring, testing. Another possibility is to take up a mediating role as a neutral, third party in the conversation. For example, when the discussion tends to turn into a conflict, to try and calm things down a bit and continue in a dialogical fashion.

## 13 Conflicting values

The following four cases are discussed simultaneously, because comparable issues are at play, all dealing with a conflict of values. The people in question have come forward with the cases, curious as to how they could have approached the conversation differently, or how to approach a conversation with others when there are conflicting values involved.

### 13.1 ‘Human rights are no problem in Russia!’

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Present:              | A and B, senior researchers at an institute in Moscow.  |
| Setting:              | I interviewed them at their university.   |
| Relevant information: | I was informed that this institute does not work independently, but is very pro-Kremlin oriented (i.e. they echo the Kremlin policy). I did an interview and we spoke about human rights, especially gay rights. The Russian Orthodox Church is very important in Russia and gay relationships are strongly condemned.  |
| Me:                   | How is the situation in Russia for bisexual people?   |
| A & B:                | There is no problem for them. In Soviet times they were prosecuted, but now they’re no longer prosecuted. In the West there is a lot of criticism concerning human rights and gay rights in Russia, but this criticism is imported from abroad. Human rights are no problem in Russia!<br><br><i>I knew that human rights are not always respected in Russia, but I was afraid to oppose their statement.</i>   |
| Me:                   | But before the Olympic Games there was a lot of criticism of the position of gays in Russia.  |
| A & B:                | Yes, but again, this is imported from abroad. The Orthodox Church protects Russians from these gay people and they really appreciate it. This is really important (...). Would you like to see two men in a wedding dress, kissing each other on the street? Would you like that?<br><br><i>I couldn’t really react because I understood that traditional values (embodied by the Orthodox Church) play an important role in Russia and I didn’t want to offend them.</i> |

A & B: There is no problem for gay people in Russia. Orthodox Church is imported from abroad. Also mass media are very free in Russia, even freer than in Europe.

*I just nodded and didn't react, but this is clearly not true. I was dissatisfied because this was a very one-sided perception, but I thought it would be useless to argue with them. We will have to cooperate with them and they would be hosting my colleague. I didn't want to cause troubles, but I felt bad about letting them say these homophobic things.*

### 13.2 'Free access for women in Iranian stadiums?'

'We – a Belgian and some foreign (Ethiopian/Iranian) colleagues – were talking and chit-chatting during lunch time about non-work related topics such as hobbies, houses, dogs and cats, and also about such world events as the elections in the United States, strikes, terrorist attacks, the refugee situation, etc. We usually have a conversation in which all opinions can be discussed, as everyone talks respectfully with one another. So there's no issue about which people are too radical or not open-minded.

At some point I think we were talking about Iranian culture, and asking our Iranian colleague questions. At some point I mentioned that one of my Facebook friends is an Iranian lady (Darya Safai) living in Belgium who is striving for free access for women in Iranian stadiums, as Iranian women are not allowed at (male) sports games like football or volleyball. I said that I didn't understand this. Our Iranian colleague gave the explanation that "the Iranian policy has this rule/law because sports games are really dangerous due to hooliganism", and in this way "women are protected". I had the feeling it became a little quiet around the table, so I decided not to pursue the topic. I just said "Ah, I see", and smiled that I understood her answer. But actually I didn't.

I did not pursue the topic since I didn't think I could come to an open conversation because of the – in my opinion – lame explanation given. Plus I didn't want my colleague to feel offended or maybe even "attacked" because I had a different opinion on the real issue at hand (as I see it): equality for men and women. If I had continued the conversation I would have asked her whether she really believed that all sports games are dangerous, even volleyball and beach ball. These sports don't tend to have a "hooliganism" history, or do they? On top of that, boys are still allowed to go, why not protect them too?

Nevertheless, as I said, I didn't continue this topic so as to "keep the peace" around the table, even though I wanted to have a deeper conversation about it. I didn't know how to handle this awkward situation. But I'm still left dissatisfied with how the conversation ended (in fact, in my opinion, it didn't). We now appear to keep the conversations on the level of "safe topics":

### 13.3 ‘Women should have freedom and be treated well, but the man has to be the boss’

‘Two (also female) colleagues, who recently joined us, and myself were at a workshop where we spent two days at a chateau for a module called “Making cultural diversity work”.

On the second morning, I and my two classmates were a little bit late for breakfast, so when we went into the dining room where our friends were already sitting at a table, I helped myself to a croissant, some jam and a glass of milk. Then I went to sit at the table where the others were talking and having breakfast. As I was eating my croissant I heard John saying, “It’s OK, it’s OK, but the man should be the boss.” I looked at him and joined the conversation. They were talking about relationships between women and men. Two African classmates advocated the view that women should have freedom and be treated well, but the man had to be the boss. Then I and the other two persons from Europe put forward several counter-examples and hypothetical stories to illustrate our point.

Every time something like this happens, it awakes my inner soft anger. Last summer, when I was travelling with people from different countries, I had a conversation in a bar with a Russian guy and I got very angry. He defended the view that women have to be protected and given presents whenever you go out with them, and at the same time said he would never do the dishes. I said I didn’t need anyone to take care of me. This was really a strong intercultural encounter. When I left the bar I was really mad. A friend from Spain who was also present at the conversation (though he supported neither view) came to talk to me. He tried to calm me down and make me understand that in Russia they have a different way of thinking about some aspects, and that I should respect that.

After that experience I could manage this one much better, even though in such topics I still find it hard to say, “OK, we have different opinions, that’s all.”’

### 13.4 As an atheist, is it difficult to talk with a deeply religious person from Cameroon?

‘One of my colleagues at (...) is a deeply religious person from Cameroon. As an atheist, it is difficult to talk to him about religious topics without offending him.’

#### *Reflection and analysis*

In all four cases there are different views in Order concerning values (Intentions), e.g. equal treatment of women and gay people, and the value of religion. In three cases (gay rights, women in sports venues, and religion) the people in question find it difficult to come forward with their opinions, as they’re afraid of offending the other person (Persons). In Persons, too, in all four cases the discussions are culturalized: they approach the issue as an intercultural situation in which national cultural differences complicate the communication.

However, this kind of discussion – about the same issues – could just as easily take place within one’s own group or country. Take, for example, case 13.4 (*As an atheist, is it difficult to talk with a deeply religious person from Cameroon?*). The fact that this deeply religious person is from Cameroon seems to make it especially difficult to engage in a conversation with him or her.

In case 13.1 (*‘Human rights are no problem in Russia!’*) an ‘us versus them’ conflict seems to arise. Perhaps the person in question has begun the interview somewhat prejudiced because of the previously mentioned information that ‘they echo the Kremlin policy’. This prejudice could echo in her general question ‘How is the situation in Russia for bisexual people?’ and may have caused the interviewees to feel urged to defend Russia against ‘the West’ – as Russians confronted by a ‘Western’ interviewer. This ‘us versus them’ dynamic could be activated by a common sense that ‘the West’ believes that human rights are not safeguarded in Russia. This common sense – apart from whether or not it is justified – then forms the backdrop to which the conversation partners determine their positions, where they do not perceive one another as individuals but as representatives of either Russia or ‘the West’.

Culturalization activates common senses of prejudice in Persons as well, which could negatively influence interpersonal conversations. This is mainly noticeable in case 13.3 (*‘Women should have freedom ...’*) in which the person in question receives the cultural relativistic advice not to worry about it and just accept that some people have a different opinion, because ‘in Russia they have a different way of thinking about some aspects, and I should respect that’; as if the opinions of one Russian person are somehow representative of all Russians. And as if only passive tolerance and respect should be shown towards these opinions, whereas critical interaction with Russians is inappropriate and useless. Furthermore, in this case, in Persons, it is very understandable that the person in question feels personally affected as a woman and offended by the man’s comments in the bar about women, and that she is angry about it.

In Intentions, it is not completely clear what the people in question want to achieve with their conversations. Are they curious about the others’ opinions, do they want to change their minds or convince them they are wrong? In case 13.1 (*‘Human rights are no problem in Russia!’*), in Organization, it is also unclear in what context and with what goal the interview takes place. Is the interview for example intended to test, on the basis of specific criteria (equality of people irrespective of sexual preference), whether the person in question’s organization could in fact cooperate with the institute in Moscow?

### **Possible interventions**

To begin with, a deculturalization of these cases would be fruitful, as it would allow us to see the discussions as ‘normal’ conversations between people with different views – discussions you could have with anyone, from anywhere. Deculturalization also helps to avoid culturalistic prejudices, bias and generalizations (e.g. ‘The Russians are like this’). Conversations that involve opposing values are not easy and can affect people personally. People can respond emotionally when an issue relates to them personally – as a

woman, a gay person, a ‘white’ person or a ‘black’ person ..., e.g. in case 13.3 (*‘Women should have freedom ...’*).

The question is firstly what people want to achieve in these encounters: do they want to convince the other of their point of view, do they want to stimulate the other to change his or her mind or are they sincerely interested in the other person and his or her views and can they suspend their own for the time being? In the first case – wanting to convince the other – the conversation could easily lead to a truth battle of one truth against the other. Such a discussion, or rather argument, can be exciting and interesting but also polarizing, offensive and fruitless as both parties hold on to their positions, and may even feel more strengthened in them.

In the previous four cases, the people in question seem to have the intention to be interested in the opinions of the other and also – in the cases of the access to sport venues and men-women relationships – to stimulate the other to change their opinion.

First of all, it is obviously good and important to enter into conversation with people with different opinions. You should not reason in a culturalistic and relativistic way: ‘It’s a different culture, so I should accept it and only show a passive kind of respect.’ Neither should you avoid the conversation out of fear of offending the other in advance. Respect implies a sincere, active interest in the other’s views; with this intention in mind, you should not be afraid to offend the other and you can certainly present your own opinion, especially when asked for it. In case 13.1 (*‘Human rights are no problem in Russia!’*) the person in question can safely give an answer to the question posed by the two researchers: ‘Would you like to see two men in wedding dress, kissing each other on the street?’ and ask whether they, in turn, would have problems with this and, if so, why.

The most important guideline in a conversation about values is again a dialogical approach, as can be revisited in the exploration of case 12 (*‘... the Jews made Israel a better place’*). Dialogical responses by the people involved to the respective statements could include:

Case 13.1 (*‘Human rights are no problem in Russia!’*): Could you clarify this? What do you mean by human rights? To whom do these rights apply? Do they apply to gay people as well? *‘There is no problem for gay people in Russia’*: Could you explain what you mean by this? What does this mean with reference to your earlier remark that the Orthodox Church protects the Russians against these gay people?

Case 13.2: *‘Our Iranian colleague gave the explanation that “the Iranian policy has this rule/law because sports games are really dangerous due to hooliganism”, and in this way “women are protected”*’: Are women then admitted to go to sports games without hooligans, e.g. beach volleyball?

Case 13.3 (*‘Women should have freedom and be treated well, but the man has to be the boss’*): Can you clarify this? Could you give some examples? Isn’t it a contradiction to say ‘women should have freedom, but the man has to be the boss’? Could you explain?

Case 13.4: *‘One of my colleagues at (...) is a deeply religious person from Cameroon. As an atheist, it is difficult to talk to him about religious topics without offending him’*: If the person involved is really interested in what religion means to the other person, she or he can safely have a dialogical conversation and ask about the meaning of different religious issues for the person from Cameroon. Sincere interest and involvement make the other feel recognized and motivate her or him to talk. And if appropriate, the person involved can mention her or his views and opinions on the matter as well, without presenting them as better or loftier.

Especially regarding case 13.2 (*‘Free access for women in Iranian stadiums?’*), we would like to add that it is important to avoid sarcasm and cynicism, and hence not to think, let alone say, ‘what a lame explanation’, or mockingly ask *‘whether she really believed that all sports games are dangerous, even volleyball and beach ball. (...) On top of that, boys are still allowed to go, why not protect them too?’* The other person would probably close off or get defensive.

Another possible intervention could be metacommunication: talking about or addressing the communication between yourself and the other. In case 13.2, if there is a good, trustful relationship, the person involved can communicate on a metalevel with the colleague, for instance by saying, ‘We always talk respectfully and openly about anything and everything. But now I have the feeling that what you give as an explanation is not the real reason why women are not allowed to visit sports venues.’ In this case it is also very important to understand the colleague’s answer as a possible signal that she doesn’t want to talk about the topic. Perhaps the issue of women’s rights is (still) too sensitive, too vulnerable for her – possibly partly due to the dominant images and opinions in the West (common senses) about women’s rights in Iran. From that perspective, one could also choose to let the topic rest and not condemn or judge her views at this point. When the relationship is more established and ‘safer’, the colleague may speak more openly and ‘honestly’ about how she feels about the subject.

In a situation where the other person only pushes her or his opinion and does not listen or respond to what you have to say, this could also be addressed with metacommunication. You could ask if the other only wants to state their opinion or truly wants to have a conversation and wants to listen to your views. Additionally, it can help to mention your emotions and tell the other, for example, that her or his opinions about women affect you personally as a woman (‘You are also talking about me then!’). This makes the conversation more personal, which could contribute to more awareness of the other as to what his or her opinions imply and what the consequences could be for someone else.

If the interview in case 13.1 (*‘Human rights are no problem in Russia!’*) is intended to investigate the possibilities for cooperation, partly based on such mutual values as equal treatment of homosexuals, the person in question could (should) bring this forward explicitly. He or she could mention, for example, that for his or her organization, an endorsement of the value of gay rights is an important criterion for cooperation and ask how the potential partner sees this. If necessary, what this value implies in practice could be further explicated.

Especially with regard to cases 13.1 (*'Human rights are no problem in Russia!'*) and 13.3 (*'Women should have freedom ...'*), we would like to give an example of how in a conversation you can try to understand someone with opinions that completely contradict values that are important to you. This concerns the episode *'Beschermengelen van de kerk in Rusland'* (*'Guardian angels of the church in Russia'*), part of the TV series *De Westerlingen* (*The Westerners*) by Dutch broadcasting agency VPRO (the discussions are in English, comments in Dutch). The series revolves around the question 'Can you understand people with a totally different morality from yours?' With this intention, Maral Noshad Sharifi (who is Iranian-Dutch) talks to 23-year-old Russian Igor Ilyin in Moscow. Igor is a history student and a member of Sorok Sorokov. Sorok Sorokov was founded after the performance of the punk band Pussy Riot in 2012 in a Moscow cathedral. The group sees itself as a defence group of the Russian Orthodox Church. The supporters of the orthodox-Christian defence group have conservative ideas about gender roles, sexuality and reproduction.

Below are some excerpts from a report that Noshad Sharifi wrote about her experiences:

'For a few weeks now I've been curious about Igor. During my first morning in Moscow, I will meet him. Recently, he confessed to the VPRO editors that he didn't trust us. He thought we were spies from the West who wanted to keep an eye on the Russian Orthodox Church. I thought it was a fantastic idea of his. I mean: spies? Really? When would I ever come into contact with someone like that again?

I had said before that I wanted to know nothing about him so that our first encounter on camera would really be the first time we'd meet. In the end, the mental distance was even bigger than I had been able to imagine.

Just before departure, Daria, our Russian fixer, walked into the hotel room with the following message: "Igor wants to call it all off, he thought Maral was a guy. He doesn't want to talk to a woman about serious topics." Hang on a minute. He doesn't want to talk to me ... BECAUSE I'M A WOMAN. "Where the fuck did I end up", I thought.

(...)

A voice in my head said: "This is exactly why you're here, try for a moment to be open to people with different opinions."

My conscience said: "This is going too far. Why would you go around with some dumb sexist? As if you could teach someone like that anything."

Voice: "Get out of your bubble, woman, you are not better than anyone else!"

(...)

Sometimes I really want to slap Igor, when he says he'd rather not have women smoke and drink. When he says that gays are a danger to society, because they cannot make kids. But he is especially obsessed with transgenders. He keeps coming back to it: "You Westerners just change gender every day and everything should be possible", he claims.

(...)

This guy who can study for free because he's so smart truly believes that when gays can be themselves, they will make others gay as well. I try to tell him that throughout history the group of LGBTs [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender] has probably been more or less the same size and that nowadays fortunately it's easier for people to show it.

(...)



I often let Igor talk. I was there to get to know him, not to prove I was right. It wasn't easy. Sometimes I really didn't want to see him for an hour, but then the anger would slowly go away. In the end I loved Igor, I found it terrible to say goodbye. We knew that we didn't really understand each other after that one week, but we became friends and are still in touch. I hope he will visit me soon in Amsterdam and meet all my friends, including gay and transgender people. Maybe, after a while, he would change his image of other people' (own translation of *De Westerlingen*, episode 2, VPRO, 2017).

Finally, we would like to emphasize that opinions that contradict universal ethics (see Chapter 3 of the book) can clearly be rejected and condemned. Especially in situations where there is no space or possibility for a conversation or dialogue, statements that offend human dignity should be halted; not from a sense of (moral) superiority but based on the dignity of every human being, for instance as described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

#### 14 **'This is Africa, deal with it'** (Thanks to Lieke den Dekker)

'On 7 December 2008, during my studies at the academy for visual arts, quite young and fairly naive, I went to Berending, Gambia to do a four-month internship at the local primary school, together with a fellow student. I did not realize beforehand that it would be a stormy experience with many remarkable moments, but definitely also many difficult moments. The culture is so different, and that makes you realize how deeply your own culture is internalized. I experienced many things that opposed my own culture and my own sense of right and wrong.

One of these things was the way children were punished at school. As such, I inadvertently witnessed the school vice-principal punish a girl who was late. As a rule girls, in addition to going to school, also take up several household tasks. For younger girls, for instance, it is quite normal to help their mothers get water before going to school. The girls have to get up very early for this and it is a hard job. On that day, there was a long queue at the water pump, which caused this girl to be late for school. In the schoolyard, in front of the other pupils, she was beaten with a bamboo stick on her back and buttocks for this. The sounds of the swishing stick were heart-breaking. At least, it broke my heart. The pain made the girl unable to stand on her legs, and she sunk to her knees. Only then did I notice an equally miserable child lying in the sand a few metres away.

Together with my fellow intern, we went forward with our experiences. We explained that corporal punishment is forbidden in the Netherlands, and that it was against our principles. Even though they said they understood us and agreed, neither of us felt that they were really listening. It even turned out there was a law against corporal punishment, but this was not enforced at all. The conversation ended with the comment "This is Africa, deal with it." And even though the idealist in me had decided to change the situation after the first confrontation, this conversation sucked all the courage out of me. I thought,

“They don’t want it to change. Their conviction about the efficacy of their method is just as big as our conviction that these punishments are useless.”

What I found difficult about my position concerning corporal punishment was the personal bond I had developed with the “bad guy” who often beat the children. He was my neighbour for four months, and every morning for four months he made sure that I got up with a smile. Waving at my window, often singing. The same man who would wear a wool hat at temperatures below 25 degrees, and would still shiver from the cold. Who thought the computer was full of magic, and would not leave it for hours on end. He touched me. He was a man whose heart was in the right place, yet who had learned in the course of his life that corporal punishment was effective. It was difficult to balance my senses, telling me that corporal punishments should not be tolerated under any circumstances, and my ratio, telling me he didn’t know any better because it was part of his culture. I managed to accept the idea that it was impossible to expect him to abandon it altogether, but that hearing my opinion would at least make him think about it more before acting. In any case, the vice-principal never beat the children again while we were around. Moreover, I hoped to have shown the pupils that things could be different, and that this could inspire them in the future.’

### **Reflection and analysis**

In Intentions, it is first of all very brave and admirable that Lieke and her fellow intern take action against the beating of children. They could also have ignored it from a cultural and morally relativistic point of view (see sections 3.2.1, *Universalism, relativism and pluralism* and 3.2.3, *Relativism* in the book), assuming that corporal punishments happen to be part of Gambian culture and that they are not supposed or allowed to judge this from their Dutch cultural background. The vice-principal takes up such a relativistic point of view with his comment ‘This is Africa, deal with it’. Perhaps his statement is a response to Lieke’s argument that corporal punishment is forbidden in the Netherlands (Order).

In Organization, Lieke and her fellow student take the initiative to talk to the vice-principal without fearing their hierarchically subordinate position as interns. Fortunately, in Persons, Lieke has a good relationship with him. In Intentions, it is important to realize that as such the vice-principal has a positive intention with meting out corporal punishment (maintaining order, teaching pupils to come on time), but the expression of his intentions, his behaviour, is detrimental to the girls (distinction between intentions and effects).

### **Possible interventions**

Above all: the way the students approached the issue was very appropriate and effective.

The children are no longer beaten in their presence and, most probably, this has made the vice-principal think. Alternatively, what can be done and what can be helpful in the event a personal relationship has not (yet) been established? It is wise to start the conversation with a non-judgmental attitude and refrain from arguments like ‘This is

the 21st century, you cannot beat children anymore', or 'In the Netherlands, corporal punishments are forbidden'. This can inadvertently come across as superior and ethnocentric. From the hypothesis of the best, you can assume that the vice-principal himself believes he has good reasons for beating the children and that he shares a mutual basic humanity. This open, positive attitude could be the basis of a conversation with the vice-principal. Perhaps you could say that you find it difficult to address this, but that seeing the girls who came late being beaten affected you deeply. You could ask the vice-principal why he beats the children in this way and what he is trying to achieve. Depending on his answer, you could in a dialogical way enquire if he knows why the girls come in late; what they could do in order to come on time; whether he has seen that some girls are in a lot of pain and sometimes cannot even stand up and walk after a beating; if this is truly something he wants (this could possibly make him aware of the difference between the intentions and effects of behaviour) and whether there may be other ways to ensure that the children come on time. It is important not to expect the vice-principal to immediately in the conversation admit that he was wrong or to promise to change his behaviour. This takes time: it is often difficult for people to admit straightaway and explicitly that they are wrong and to promise to better themselves.

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