

Critical incident – Experience report : On Being Algerian in a French University

The text was written by a master's student of Pr. Samuel Ludwig of the Université de Haute-Alsace.

“I am from Algeria, more precisely from Kabylie. I have been brought up and raised in a family which respects Islam as a religion and also obeys the social rules or norms, tradition, conventions, customs and, in one word, our culture as a whole. Since my childhood, my parents have always encouraged me to study because they regard knowledge as a key for success in life. As a result, now I am a student in France and carrying on my studies at a French university. Before coming to France, I had a very restricted view of the French culture and of other cultures as well. Hence, once arrived in France I started to face some cultural shocks; I immediately noticed that there were some differences between my home and the host culture. As a matter of fact, these differences are at the level of religion, language, traditions, behaviour, and the way of life in general. It is worth mentioning some of the intercultural encounters and cultural shocks that I faced at the French university. A first example is when I spoke to my teacher who is French: while speaking to him, I was speaking with hand gestures. Then, few seconds later 2 moments, except me. They all wondered why I did not feel like drinking wine, in fact, they were all curious to know the reason for my refusal to drink alcohol. To avoid any kind of offense, especially with my mate, I explained to them that being a Muslim I can't drink alcohol because it is not allowed in Islam. This is an example of a cultural misunderstanding essentially due to their ignorance of my home culture and their limited knowledge of Islam. Finally, I was also invited by a Chinese mate, who prepared dinner in her room. After having had dinner, I praised my Chinese mate by saying “that's really a delicious meal.” A few seconds later, I realized that something was wrong since she neither replied nor gave any sign in response to my praise of the meal. Afterwards, she explained to me that in China, when someone is invited to a dinner, he or she should not say anything about whether the meal is delicious or not, because this raises a kind of doubt that the meal was not delicious at all. In Algeria it is a common thing that we so often say as a praise and thanks for the meal and the invitation. Being at the French university, I met foreign students nearly from all nationalities, coming from countries all over the world, knowing that everyone of these students is coming with his own knowledge, background, ideas, beliefs. In such a mixture, it is natural that the intercultural encounter and cultural misunderstandings or miscommunication should occur. To avoid the occurrence of intercultural misunderstandings tends to be impossible since it's natural that a sojourner should face them. However, to reduce the amount of cultural misunderstandings, social scientists suggest some tactics and strategies that may help one understand both home and host cultures and

to seek some parallels between them when an intercultural conflict occurs. In fact, in an intercultural exchange the amount of the shock is reduced and this also enables one to get a better understanding of the host culture. Moreover, the intercultural competence, this ability of successful communication with people of other cultures, helps and enables one to adjust to the host culture. Indeed, a person who is interculturally competent captures and understands, in interaction with people from foreign cultures, their specific concepts in perception, thinking, feeling and acting.(...).”