

# Global **PAD** Core Concepts

---

## Critical Incidents

### A Compilation of Quotations for the Intercultural Field

Compiled by

Helen Spencer-Oatey

**Reference for this compilation**

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2013) Critical incidents. A compilation of quotations for the intercultural field.  
*GlobalPAD Core Concepts*. Available at GlobalPAD Open House

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/globalpadintercultural>

Please acknowledge original sources if citing quotations within this document.

## 1. Introduction

Critical incidents are used in many disciplines, including the intercultural field.

It has now been 50 years since Flanagan (1954) wrote his classic article on the critical incident technique (CIT). During the intervening years, the CIT has become a widely used qualitative research method and today is recognized as an effective exploratory and investigative tool [...]. Evidence of its ubiquitous presence lies in the fact it has been more frequently cited by industrial and organizational psychologists than any other article over the past 40 years [...]. However, its influence ranges far beyond its industrial and organizational psychology roots. It has been utilized across a diverse number of disciplines, including communications [...], nursing [...], job analysis [...], medicine [...], marketing [...], organizational learning [...], performance appraisal [...], psychology [...], and social work [...], to name but some of the fields in which it has been applied.

Butterfield et al. 2005: 475

However, the concept of 'critical incident' is interpreted differently by different practitioners and researchers and so this compilation of quotations illustrates many of the varying perspectives and approaches.

## 2. Flanagan's Original Conception of Critical Incidents

Flanagan (1954) developed the critical incident technique for job analysis purposes, with the aim of identifying the critical requirements for job success.

The critical incident technique consists of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles.

Flanagan 1954: 327

The principal objective of job analysis procedures should be the determination of critical requirements. These requirements include those which have been demonstrated to have made the difference between success and failure in carrying out an important part of the job assigned in a significant number of instances. [...] Essentially, the procedure was to obtain first-hand reports, or reports from objective records, of satisfactory and unsatisfactory execution of the task assigned. The cooperating individual described a situation in which success or failure was determined by specific reported causes.

Flanagan 1954: 329

[Critical] incidents are defined as extreme behavior, either outstandingly effective or ineffective with respect to attaining the general aims of the activity. The procedure has considerable efficiency because of the use of only the extremes of behavior. It is well known that extreme

incidents can be more accurately identified than behavior which is more nearly average in character.

Flanagan 1954: 338

### 3. Critical Incidents and different Paradigmatic Perspectives

As Chell (1998) pointed out, the CIT [critical incident technique] was developed during a period when the positivist approach to scientific investigation was the dominant paradigm in the social sciences, indeed, in all the sciences. Although it is a qualitative research method, the CIT was initially posed as a scientific tool to help uncover existing realities or truths so they could be measured, predicted, and ultimately controlled within the realm of job and task analysis – ideas that are rooted in the predominant quantitative research tradition of the day. To gain acceptance, early researchers utilizing the CIT often used quantitative language and in some cases used quantitative validity and reliability checks [...]. However, we currently find ourselves in a post-modern [...], some would say post-structural [...] research paradigm where qualitative methods are now commonly in use and accepted [...].

Butterfield et al. 2005: 482

If we were to add the CIT to Creswell's (1998) list of qualitative traditions, we would describe its distinctive features as the following: (a) Focus is on critical events, incidents, or factors that help promote or detract from the effective performance of some activity or the experience of a specific situation or event; (b) Discipline origin is from industrial and organizational psychology; (c) Data collection is primarily through interviews, either in person (individually or in groups) or via telephone; (d) Data analysis is conducted by determining the frame of reference, forming categories that emerge from the data, and determining the specificity or generality of the categories; and (e) Narrative form is that of categories with operational definitions and self-descriptive titles. These features are what distinguish the CIT from other qualitative methods and are, we argue, necessary in order to be true to the method.

Butterfield et al. 2005: 483

### 4. What is 'Critical' in Critical Incidents? Varying Perspectives

#### Use of the term 'critical'

Concerned about the emphasis on the word 'critical' in this technique, Norman et al. (1992) suggest 'revelatory', and others suggest 'significant' (New South Wales Nurses Registration Board, 1992) as alternatives that better describe the more everyday incidents that may be the focus of nursing research. It appears from this discussion that, with a change of name from 'critical' to one such as 'revelatory' or 'significant', this method may be considered even more universally useful.

Keatinge 2002: 34

### The association of 'critical' with extreme behaviour

[Critical] incidents are defined as extreme behavior, either outstandingly effective or ineffective with respect to attaining the general aims of the activity. The procedure has considerable efficiency because of the use of only the extremes of behavior. It is well known that extreme incidents can be more accurately identified than behavior which is more nearly average in character.

Flanagan 1954: 338

### The association of 'critical' with emotions/evaluations

There was much evidence in the interviews of a high emotional content to the events described. Respondents reported feeling "angry", "confused", or "hassled" and metaphors such as "trial" and "hell" were used. [...] it is reasonable to argue that the perceived "critical incident" is essentially an emotional event, in that it represents a period of intense feelings, both at the time and during its subsequent reflective interpretation.

Cope and Watts 2000: 114

For an incident to be defined as critical, the requirement is that it can be described in detail and that it deviates significantly, either positively or negatively, from what is normal or expected.

Edvardsson 1992: 17

### 'Critical' as self-defined/interpreted/created

The focus of this research was self-defined criticality, in that it was the entrepreneur's personal representation of salient moments which was of prime importance. By taking a more phenomenological approach to studying critical incidents [...], terminology such as "How did that happen? ... how did you feel ... why ... and then?" [...] was used to explore each incident.

Cope and Watts 2000: 112

The "critical incident" is a complex phenomenon that does not occur independently of the entrepreneur but in many cases is a change in perception and awareness that stimulates the entrepreneur into action.

Cope and Watts 2000: 113

Critical incidents are not 'things' which exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis of that judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident.

Tripp 1993: 8

The vast majority of critical incidents [...] are not at all dramatic or obvious: they are mostly straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis. [...] To be critical, it had to be shown to have a more general meaning and to indicate something else of importance in a wider context. Thus one can see that critical incidents are not simply observed, they are literally created.

Tripp 1993: 24-5, 27

We have already looked at an incident which was critical in the sense that when it was analysed and worked through, it became invested with new meaning which was transformative of understanding and practice. But none of them have been critical in the sense of their being turning-points in a person's life, which is the way in which most biographers use the term.

Tripp 1993: 105

## 5. Use of the term 'Incident' in Critical Incidents

By an incident is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act.

Flanagan 1954: 327

... the six case interviews not only yielded an array of complex and dramatic critical moments, but also indicated that the term "incident" often tends to trivialise the diversity of critical experiences faced by entrepreneurs, who often endure prolonged, difficult and highly emotional critical *periods* or *episodes*.

Cope and Watts 2000: 112

It is also apparent from this research that critical incidents are not discrete, isolated events as the term may suggest and it therefore often proves very difficult to define the chronological and perceptual boundaries of these events. [...] In metaphorical terms, certain types of critical incident could be viewed as "eruptions" within these critical episodes, representing the culmination of fundamental, unresolved issues. [...] it could be argued that the term "crisis" might relate to prolonged critical episodes, but that certain influential, more clearly-defined critical "incidents" occur within these transitional periods.

Cope and Watts 2000: 113

## 6. The Value of Critical Incidents

### Personal learning and growth

... the critical incidents described here accelerated this process of learning and growing self-awareness, and therefore often proved to be seminal moments within this process of change.

Cope and Watts 2000: 113

... much of the learning undergone during such a period may be tacit and, as a result, hard to formalise and communicate [...]. Thus, each entrepreneur may well have learned more than they could possibly relate [...].

Cope and Watts 2000: 116

Critical incidents can be very important [...] because they provide a means of enabling teachers to be more aware of the nature of their professional values and associated problematics, to question their own practice, and to concretise their generally abstract notions of values such as social justice.

Tripp 1993: 17

[Critical incidents] are an excellent way to develop an increasing understanding of and control over professional judgement, and thereby over practice.

Tripp 1993: 24

Critical incidents should question the way things normally operate.

Tripp 1993: 28

The analysis of critical incidents is not a once-off and final affair, then, but an on-going one in which new links can constantly be made, not only to current practice, but to how we see ourselves in relation to current and past selves and practices.

Tripp 1993: 109

... professional practice is always and necessarily a matter of working on the values in the practice, rather than working on the practice itself.

Tripp 1993: 111

### Recording critical incidents for personal reflection: use of journals or portfolios

... a critical incident file should be written with at least three audiences in mind: primarily the writer him- or herself; second a critical friend such as a close colleague, facilitator or collaborating researchers; and third an interested (though not necessarily informed) public or other, individually unknown colleagues and researchers.

Tripp 1993: 72

Very few critical incidents will be 'fair copy' or 'final draft'; as in journals, the main characteristic of critical incident writing is lack of closure and continual revision. In fact, many of the entries will be actual events rather than critical incidents, simply because critique is a much slower and harder process than description of an event.

Tripp 1993: 32

In view of the necessity for continually adding to items, reviewing, linking and revising them, it goes without saying that any critical incident file is best kept on a word processor [...]. For this reason I do not favour strict chronological organisation of a critical incident file so that it looks like a journal, but find it much more appropriate to categorise items, keeping them in different files according to theme. [...] It is important to organise a critical incident file in such a way that it relates very directly to professional practice in order to facilitate ongoing theoretical thinking about it.

Tripp 1993: 74

The *Autobiography [of Intercultural Encounters]* has been developed to promote intercultural dialogue. It is a personal document which encourages users to think about and learn from the intercultural encounters that have made a strong impression or had a long-lasting effect on them. [...] It invites users to reflect critically upon their own memorable intercultural experiences, and helps them to analyse them in retrospect and in the light of the most defining aspects of each encounter. An intercultural encounter can be an experience between people from different countries, but it can also be an experience with individuals from other cultural backgrounds in the same country - for example, from other regional, linguistic, ethnic, or religious backgrounds. Therefore, the *Autobiography* aims to promote respect for diversity both nationally and across borders. Users of the *Autobiography* develop understanding and competences for the future by reflecting critically on the experience. They select and describe specific intercultural encounters in which they have taken part, analyse their experience individually and identify different aspects of their current intercultural competence by referring to:

- Attitudes: the user's attitudes and feelings towards the whole experience, reflecting to what degree attitudes such as respect for diversity have been developed;
- Behaviour: the interpretation of another's behaviour as well as the behavioural patterns followed by the learner in a particular intercultural experience;
- Knowledge and skills: the user's knowledge about otherness and how people act in intercultural contact situations; the skills applied during and after the event;
- Action: the action taken by the user as a result of analysing the intercultural encounter.

This retrospective view of the intercultural encounter favours a critical analysis of the way the user acted at the time, how he or she sees the encounter now and how he or she might respond in the future. The *Autobiography* therefore has the potential to promote change.

[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/autobiogrweb\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/autobiogrweb_EN.asp)

An example of an intercultural development tool:

To help you maximise your intercultural learning during your experiences in a culturally unfamiliar environment, we recommend you to do the following:

- ✓ Keep a record each week of an experience that *surprised* you or that you found *unusual, puzzling, irritating, upsetting, very pleasing or significant* in some way;
- ✓ Explain as best you can *why* you felt as you did;
- ✓ *Discuss your experience* with a 'Culture Learning Colleague' (a chosen partner who is, if possible, from a different cultural background to you);
- ✓ *Act on your insights.*

Your portfolio is confidential to you and your 'Culture Learning Colleague', but we will ask you to select entries to submit for assessment. When writing your journal, you will be engaging with a development tool (the 3RA tool) which prompts you to *Report, Reflect* and *Re-evaluate* your experiences, and then *Act* on your insights. This 4-step tool should help structure your thinking on your experience(s) and help you deepen your intercultural awareness and competence. On the following pages, you will find a template which you can use when writing your ILJ.

Spencer-Oatey and Davidson 2013: 1

An example from a specific study in the field of nursing:

The implementation of the CIT comprised a request to the nurses attending the focus group to document:

- an occasion on which he or she had a positive experience of managing bowel care for the palliative care patient; and
- an occasion on which he or she had a negative experience of managing bowel care for the palliative care patient.

Participants were asked to document their responses on a Critical Incident Form (one each for positive and negative incidents) provided to each nurse. The form comprised first a series of questions designed to identify participants' demographic details. Second, participants were asked to reflect on and document, in respect to the incident they selected, the situation, the action (he or she took as the nurse managing the situation), the reasoning behind the action, and its outcome.

Keatinge 2002: 36

## 7. Using 'Critical Incidents' in Intercultural Training

Critical incidents used in cross-cultural training are brief descriptions of situations in which there is a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arising from cultural differences between interacting parties or where there is a problem of cross-cultural adaptation. Each incident gives

only enough information to set the stage, describe what happened, and possibly provide the feelings and reactions of the parties involved. It does not explain the cultural differences that the parties bring to the situation. These are discovered or revealed as part of the exercise.

Wight 1995: 128

Example of a critical incident used for intercultural training purposes:

*Critical interaction situation 'computer training'*

Due to my working focus on the computer sector, I also hold computer training courses in China. I always ask the participants repeatedly during the courses whether they have understood everything, so that I can carry on with the material. They all answer 'yes'. However, when I then ask a specific question, no one can answer it. I now assume that many participants have not understood the material, although they nod in reply to my question as to whether they have understood. This behaviour on the part of the Chinese always surprises me. Why don't the Chinese students admit that they haven't understood something?

Thomas 1996, translated and cited by Rost-Roth 2007: 497

The purpose of the CIE [Critical Incidents Exercise] is to confront participants with examples of the kinds of difficult, confusing, frustrating problems or conflict situations they can expect to encounter in interacting with persons from another culture or adjusting to a new culture.

Objectives of the exercise are to:

- Increase participants' awareness of their own typical, idiosyncratic, or culturally determined interpretations and explanations of others' behaviour and their own attitudes and responses in situations such as the ones described.
- Draw out, compare, and analyze the various interpretations and perceptions of participants, resource persons, and staff.
- Clarify the cultural differences in the incidents that might have contributed to the misunderstandings, problems, and conflicts or influence the various interpretations and explanations of the participants and resource people.
- Assist participants in understanding the diversity among members of each culture as well as normative differences between the cultures.
- Help participants achieve the understanding necessary to behave more appropriately and effectively in similar situations.
- Enlarge participants' awareness of the kinds of things they need to learn and motivate them to continue learning.
- Provide the basis for engaging in role plays that will build skill in handling problematic cross-cultural situations.

Wight 1995: 128–129

The basic assumption behind the development of a generally applicable set of training materials is that there are extensive commonalities in the experiences of people who interact with culturally different others. These commonalities occur despite differences in the exact jobs people have, or despite differences in the exact place where the extensive intercultural

interaction takes place. [...] To explore these commonalities [...] 18 themes were identified which are central to understanding people's cross-cultural interactions. [...] These 18 themes provide a framework for the analysis of specific experiences people have during their cross-cultural interaction. The 18 themes themselves are grouped according to three broader categories: emotional experiences, knowledge areas, and the bases of cultural differences.

| <b>A. People's emotional experiences brought about by encounters with cultural differences</b>                                    |   |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>Anxiety.</i>  | Since people will encounter many unfamiliar demands, they will be anxious about whether or not their behavior is appropriate.   |
| 2. <i>Disconfirmed expectancies.</i>  | People may become upset not because of the exact set of situations they encounter in the host culture, but because those situations differ from those which they expected.  |
| 3. <i>Belonging.</i>  | People want to feel accepted by others and want to feel "at home," but they often cannot since they have the status of outsiders.   |
| 4. <i>Ambiguity.</i>  | The messages people receive in other cultures are often unclear.  |
| 5. <i>Confrontation with one's prejudices.</i>  | People discover that previous attitudes which they learned during their socialization in their own countries simply are not useful when interacting in another culture.   |
| <b>B. Knowledge areas which incorporate many specific cross-cultural differences and which sojourners find hard to understand</b> |   |
| 6. <i>Work.</i>   | Many cultural differences are encountered in the work place, such as attitudes toward creative effort and the proper relationship between on-task time and social interaction.  |
| 7. <i>Time and space.</i>   | Varying attitudes exist regarding the importance of being "on time" to meetings, as well as the proper spatial orientation people adopt when interacting with each other.   |
| 8. <i>Language.</i>   | Perhaps the most obvious problem to overcome in crossing cultural boundaries is that of language differences. Attitudes toward language use, and the difficulties of learning language as it is actually spoken rather than "read from a book," are part of (his knowledge area.  |
| 9. <i>Roles.</i>  | Sojourners are accustomed to a set of generalizations regarding who plays what roles, or performs various sets of related behaviors, because of long experience in their own culture. Examples of roles are the family provider, the boss, the volunteer, the leader, and so forth. Large differences exist with respect to the occupants of these roles, and how the roles are enacted, in other cultures. |
| 10. <i>Importance of the group and the importance of the individual.</i>  | All people act at times because of their individual interests, and other times because of their membership in groups. The relative emphasis on individual and group allegiances varies from culture to culture.   |
| 11. <i>Rituals and superstitions.</i>   | All cultures have rituals to meet the needs of people as they cope with life's everyday demands, and people in all cultures engage in behaviors that outsiders can easily call "superstitions."   |
| 12. <i>Hierarchies: class and status.</i>   | The relative importance placed on class distinctions, and the markers of high versus low status, differ from culture to culture.  |
| 13. <i>Values.</i>  | People's experiences with broad areas such as religion, economics, politics, aesthetics, and interpersonal relationships become internalized.   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | Understanding these internalized views, called values, is critical in cross-cultural adjustment.   |
| <b><i>C. The bases of cultural difference, especially concerning how people in different cultures think about and evaluate information</i></b> |  |
| <b><i>14. Categorization.</i></b>  | Since not all pieces of information can be attended to, people group bits of information into categories for more efficient organization. People in different cultures place the same individual elements into different categories (e.g., who is a friend, what a good worker does), causing confusion for people accustomed to any one given set of categories.  |
| <b><i>15. Differentiation.</i></b>   | One result of increased interest in, or importance of, a certain knowledge area is that more and more information is <i>differentiated</i> within that area such that new categories are formed. Examples are the types of obligations which accompany various types of interpersonal relationships, and the various ways to overcome red tape. If outsiders do not differentiate information in the same manner as hosts, they may be treated as naive or ignorant. |
| <b><i>16. Ingroup–outgroup distinction.</i></b>  | Ingroups refer to people with whom interaction is sought. Outgroup members are held at a distance and are often the targets of rejection. People entering another culture have to be sensitive to the fact that they will often be outgroup members, and that there are some behaviors associated with ingroup membership in which they will never participate.  |
| <b><i>17. Change and growth, self-improvement</i></b>  | Even though people desire change and improvement, the style in which they best learn new information differs from culture to culture.  |
| <b><i>18. Attribution.</i></b>   | People observe the behavior of others, and they also reflect upon their own behavior. Judgments about the <i>causes</i> of behavior are called attributions. The same behavior, such as a suggestion for how a proposal can be improved, may be judged as helpful in one culture but insulting in another.   |

Brislin 1986: 216, 224–6

The CIE [Critical Incidents Exercise] is similar to the culture assimilator in that both are based on critical incidents and present a variety of situations representing a wide range of significant differences between two cultures. It is the way in which the exercises are developed and used that is different, but it is a critical difference. The culture assimilator follows the design and assumptions of programmed-learning methodology, the CIE those of experiential-learning methodology. It is important to understand the difference.

In the culture assimilator, each incident is followed by three, four, or five interpretations. The trainee chooses one of the interpretations, then checks to see whether it is the preferred interpretation. If not, additional choices are made until the most preferred interpretation is found, accompanied by an explanation for why this particular response is best. The preferred interpretation has been selected by the experts designing the assimilator, based on research they have conducted. The other interpretations might seem plausible to someone unfamiliar with the culture but not someone who is familiar with it.

In the CIE, participants are not given interpretations from which to choose but are required to come up with their own. This forces them to give more thought to the situation and requires them to identify their own personal interpretation and what they would be likely to do if they were in that situation. They have to decide what they feel would be appropriate

or effective behaviour, and they have to make a personal commitment by explaining and defending the interpretation and solution they propose. In the culture assimilator, the participant has to choose the correct response. Thus the culture assimilator is like a multiple choice test, whereas the CIE is more like an essay examination.

With the culture assimilator, an individual is often (but not always) working through the exercise along with no opportunity for discussion. With the CIE, participants discuss and compare their responses with those of the other participants and resource persons. Discussion is an essential part of the exercise, is more involving than working alone, allows participants to develop cross-cultural problem-solving skills, and leads to deeper understanding of the unknown culture. There is no limit to the number of interpretations that can be examined in the CIE discussion, and participants have the opportunity to question, disagree, clarify, and elaborate, whereas with the culture assimilator they often do not. In the CIE, the interpretations are those of real persons from both cultures taking part in the discussions, not hypothetical persons or experts who are not available to the trainees.

Wight 1995: 135–136

#### Strengths and weaknesses of the critical incidents method for intercultural training

| <i>Strengths</i>  | <i>Weaknesses</i>   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage participants at a personal level in examining attitudes and behaviour that will be critical to their effectiveness;</li> <li>• Can be written for a variety of situations;</li> <li>• Require analysis and reflection, decision-making; reduce idea of answers being available from an 'expert';</li> <li>• Short reading time; move quickly into reflection;</li> <li>• Can be used singly or grouped to illustrate concepts or processes;</li> <li>• Can lead to role playing and situational exercises to provide practice;</li> <li>• Appeals to concrete experience and reflective observation learning styles.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants may complain they receive too little information;</li> <li>• Incidents need to be carefully written, revised, or selected to make desired point;</li> <li>• If aimed at culture-specific learning, need host-country resource people;</li> <li>• Most effective if individual reflection is discussed in small groups of fewer than eight;</li> <li>• Frustrating technique for abstract conceptualization learners.</li> </ul> |

Fowler and Blohm 2004: 59

## 8. Collecting and Researching 'Critical Incident' data

[...] the critical incident technique [CIT] is essentially a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behavior in defined situations. It should be emphasized that the critical incident technique does not consist of a single rigid set of rules governing such data collection. Rather it should be thought of as a flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand.

Flanagan 1954: 335

### Collecting 'critical incident' data through observation

The critical incident technique consists of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles.

Flanagan 1954: 327

An example from a specific study in the field of nursing:

A researcher (who was also a pediatric nurse) spent time observing the new neonatal nurse clinician [NNC] at work, and used the CIT to capture her observations. She documented critical incidents (or significant incidents as they were called in this study) that occurred during her observation of each of the NNC undertaking clinical practise. In this study, the observer recorded the entire major care scenarios or interactions in which the NNC participated during the observation period. While this might have emphasized what was ordinary and typical of the role, in this instance what was ordinary and typical in the new role was unknown to the researcher (or the NICU [Neonatal Intensive Care Unit] staff as a whole). Therefore, the observation process provided a means of identifying what was significant in the role. The sheet on which the researcher recorded the significant incidents which she observed prompted her to describe:

- the situation, a brief description of the scenario that is concise and sufficiently descriptive for subsequent analysis;
- the action, a description of the action/s in context identifying the significance of the event, describing the issues or concerns involved; and
- the outcome of the action, a review of the actual or potential outcome of the incident.

The observer clarified any issue, if she was unsure what it meant, with the NNC subsequent to the observation period by asking specific questions based on the work of Benner (1984) and Gonczi et al. (1990). Each of two NNCs were observed for a total of four hours, with the observation period being spaced over each of the morning, afternoon and night duty shifts.

Keatinge 2002: 34–35

### Collecting 'critical incident' data through participant record keeping

An example from a specific study in the field of pragmatics:

A number of Chinese students (mostly recent arrivals in Britain) were asked to keep a record of 'rapport sensitive' incidents, viz. incidents involving social interactions that they found to be particularly noticeable in some way, in terms of their relationship with the other person(s). This 'noticeable impact' could be either positive or negative (cf. Goffman's (1963: 7) concept of 'negatively eventful' and 'positively eventful' behaviour). So students were asked to record two types of incidents: those that had some kind of particularly negative effect (i.e. interactions that made them feel particularly annoyed, insulted, embarrassed, humiliated, and so on), and those that had some kind of particularly positive effect (i.e. interactions with other people that made them feel particularly happy, proud, self-satisfied, and so on). The respondents recorded each incident on a record sheet, completing it in either Chinese or English, whichever they preferred. The record sheet was as follows:

| Name:                     |   | Sex: M / F |         |         | Week No:    |         |       |         |                           |
|---------------------------|---|------------|---------|---------|-------------|---------|-------|---------|---------------------------|
| 1) The setting:           |   |            |         |         |             |         |       |         |                           |
|                           |   |            |         |         |             |         |       |         |                           |
| 2) Other people involved: |   |            |         |         |             |         |       |         |                           |
| Gender                    |   | Age        |         |         | Nationality |         |       |         | Relationship<br>with you* |
| M                         | F | Older      | Similar | Younger | Chinese     | English | Greek | Unknown |                           |
|                           |   |            |         |         |             |         |       |         |                           |
|                           |   |            |         |         |             |         |       |         |                           |
|                           |   |            |         |         |             |         |       |         |                           |

\* Note: You can fill in this column with "friend", "classmate", "teacher" etc. accordingly

| 3) The event and 4) Your reactions: | | | | | | | | | |
|  | | | | | | | | | |
| 5) The reason for your reactions: | | | | | | | | | |
|  | | | | | | | | | |

An example from a specific study in the intercultural field:

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the perceived stressors and coping strategies of Canadian post-secondary students during a 7-week cross-cultural Seminar program in Vietnam. [...] The prompts for the critical incidents were posed in the form of open-ended questions as follows:

1. What experience this week did you find to be stressful?
2. How did you deal with the situation that you found to be stressful this week?
3. What action did anyone take this week that you found to be affirming or helpful?
4. How do you view yourself this week in relation to international development issues?
5. What are the most important insights that you realized about yourself this week?

The first prompt queried an outstanding stressful event in the experience of participants, and the second prompt was focused on coping efforts used to manage the stressors related to the event. Rather than attempting to account for all stressors in the experience of students, an attempt was made to understand in greater depth one meaningful event per week and students' related coping efforts. The third prompt was designed to uncover perceptions about meaningful social support in a cross-cultural context. Therefore, students generated both the events and the coping strategies that were meaningful for them. The last two prompts were more general in nature, in an effort to track the process in which students' potentially altered their worldview regarding self and their understanding of international development.

Questionnaire packages with the critical incident questions were distributed to students for completion at six different times during the Seminar. Thus, participants could reflect upon their critical experiences as they emerged during the cross-cultural encounter, offering the advantage of a more discrete measure of shifting demands and related coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Arthur 2001: 41, 44–45

### Collecting 'critical incident' data through interviewing

The critical interview technique is a qualitative interview procedure, which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, process or issues), identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects. The objective is to gain an understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective and behavioural elements.

Chell 2004: 48

An example from a specific study in the field of business:

The interviews were relatively unstructured, and respondents were merely informed at the beginning of the interview that the focus of the research was on their personal recollections of what it felt like to open a business. The wish to explore critical incidents was phrased in more familiar terms, describing these as the best times and the worst times that they had experienced,

and in particular what they feel they now do differently as a result of these memorable events. It must be stressed here that the interviewer was careful to separate the concept of criticality from the more popular notion of “crisis”, which is typically perceived in negative terms. Events that were perceived as positive, exciting and extremely beneficial in terms of outcomes were deemed just as important as those that proved problematic.

Thus, the focus of this research was self-defined criticality, in that it was the entrepreneur’s personal representation of salient moments which was of prime importance. ... In keeping with the notion of the “phenomenological interview” [...], questions flowed from the conversation itself instead of the interview turning into a mere question-and-answer session.

Cope and Watts 2000: 112.

There is evidence that researchers using the CIT are now asking participants to reflect upon and write down the meaning of critical incidents, not just discuss them in a research interview (Francis, 1995). This corresponds with the move towards exploring incidents of personal importance and the significance of factors related to critical incidents [...]. There is also evidence the CIT is starting to focus on eliciting the beliefs, opinions and suggestions that formed part of the critical incident rather than concentrating solely on a description of the incident itself [...]. This is consistent with another trend in the CIT literature, namely that of adapting the method to focus more on thoughts, feelings, and why participants behaved as they did [...]. This builds on the practice of focusing on what a person did, why he/she did it, the outcome, and the most satisfying aspect, which appears to be well established and reflects the work currently being done at UBC and elsewhere [...]. Keatinge’s (2002) suggestion that the term ‘critical incident’ be replaced with ‘revelatory incident’ as a way of inducing a wider array of examples and experiences from participants may be a reflection of these new directions for and uses of the CIT.

Butterfield et al. 2005: 489–490

Alexander Thomas has conducted many studies which have aimed to identify group-specific culture standards<sup>1</sup> by using critical incidents. Franklin describes Thomas’ 1996 study as follows:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted both with members of the culture under investigation and with members of other cultures about their experiences of interaction with the other culture. In the research reported on here (Thomas 1996: 118–122), which concerned German–Chinese interaction, the interviews were conducted after a three- to four-month period of residence in the host-culture under investigation, after the honeymoon period and at a time when adjustment to and integration in the new culture are required. Thomas assumes that in such a period the number of critical incidents is likely to increase because individual explanations, stereotypes, and special patterns for understanding behaviour of members of the other culture have not yet been formed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas defines culture standards as “ways of perceiving, thinking, evaluating and acting that are regarded by the majority of the members of a culture as normal, typical and binding for themselves and others”. Franklin (2007: 274), quoting Thomas 1988: 153, in translation.

The interviews were conducted only with those with a high degree of interaction with the host culture, such as managers and teachers, took place in the first language of the interviewee and were recorded, transcribed and analyzed.

The interviewees were asked to describe frequently occurring, task-related encounters in which their interaction partner reacted in a way they had not expected. The interviewee should have experienced the situation as conflict-bound or confusing or he/she should have misinterpreted the situation. The situation should be unambiguously interpretable for somebody with sufficient knowledge of the cultures involved. For each critical incident described they were also asked to indicate why their interaction partner had behaved so unexpectedly and to give their own explanation for the critical points in the incident they described.

The interviewees were also asked to describe encounters in which to their surprise they were able to interact without problems and without conflict and which took place smoothly and harmoniously.

The critical and harmonious incidents and the explanations given were translated into Chinese or German. The descriptions made by the Germans/Chinese were given to Germans/Chinese who had lived for a long time in China/Germany and were experts on the country to assess and explain the critical incident. The descriptions made by the Germans were also given to Chinese experts to assess and explain and likewise those made by the Chinese to German experts.

With the help of these assessments and explanations, the descriptions of the interactions were analyzed to identify the culture standards which determined the interaction process in the phase in which it was experienced as critical. The assumption was that the incidents were experienced as critical because behaviour was contrary to expectation. The member of one culture adheres to his/her own culture standards and thus shapes and interprets the interaction situation in a way unfamiliar to the other culture. A comparison of the assessments and explanations by the two sets of experts led to the determining of the culture standards significant for the critical incidents being investigated.

In a final step, the culture standards which emerged from this analysis were compared with knowledge and insights derived from research in the areas of cultural history and philosophy. Experts were asked to associate the culture standards established in the analysis with events and sources in the history of the culture concerned.

Franklin 2007: 274–275

### **Analysing 'critical incident' data**

To be able to analyse the criticality from the individual customer's perspective, we argue that one must understand the significance of critical incidents in the light of human memory mechanisms and judgement processes.

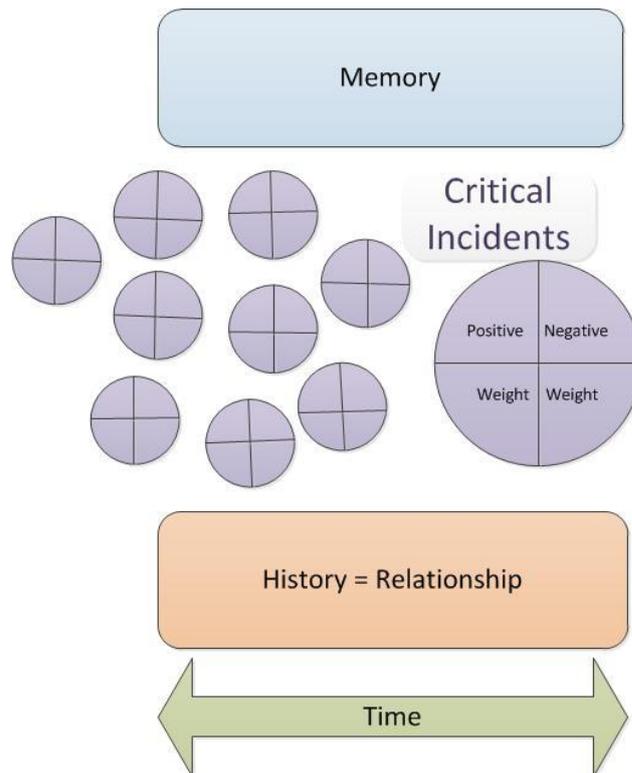


Fig.1: Critical Incidents in Context: History, Time and Memory

Edvardsson & Roos 2001: 251, 255

## Research process and reporting

### *Checklist for Critical Incident Technique (CIT) Content Analysis Studies*

#### Phase 1: Problem definition

- Determine what the research question is
- Determine if CIT is an appropriate method for understanding this phenomenon

#### Phase 2: Study design

- Determine what a critical incident will be defined as
- Determine the criteria for determining what is not a critical incident
- Determine the unit of analysis
- Develop data collection instrument (clear instructions, appropriate story-triggering questions)
- Determine appropriate sample (appropriate context(s), appropriate respondents)

#### Phase 3: Data collection

- Train data collectors (if applicable)
- Data collectors collect data
- Identify usable critical incidents
- Identify/develop criteria for incident inclusion (or exclusion)

#### Phase 4: Data analysis and interpretation

- Content analysis of critical incidents
- Read, reread incidents

Identify recurring themes  
Develop classification scheme  
Create descriptions of categories (incidents, behaviors, or other units of analysis)  
Sort incidents using classification scheme  
Assess intracoder reliability  
Have additional judges/coders sort incidents  
Assess intercoder reliability  
Test classification scheme on a holdout (validation) sample

#### Phase 5: Results report

- (1) Study focus/research question
  - Explicit identification of focus of study
  - Description of the research question
  - Precise definition of what a critical incident is in the given context
  - Discussion of why CIT is an appropriate method for understanding this phenomenon
- (2) Data collection procedures
  - Data collection method
  - Description of data collectors (training, background, number of collectors)
  - Data instrument (instrument instructions, interview questions)
- (3) Respondent (sample) characteristics
  - Description of sample characteristics
  - Sample size (number of respondents)
  - Response rate
  - Compelling rationale for the selection of respondents
  - Respondent characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, education, income, other relevant information)
  - Description of multiple samples (if applicable)
  - Discussion of number of incidents requested from each respondent
- (4) Data characteristics
  - Type of incidents requested from respondents
  - Incident valence
  - Description of context(s) and/or number of contexts
  - Number of incidents collected
- (5) Data quality
  - Report on number of (usable) incidents
  - Discuss criteria for incident inclusion (or exclusion)
- (6) Data analysis procedures/classification of incidents
  - Operational definitions of coding
  - Identification of the unit of analysis
  - Category development discussion
  - Classification scheme description (major categories, subcategories)
  - Discussion of judges/coders (training, independence, number of judges used)
  - Reliability (intrajudge reliability statistics, interjudge reliability statistics)
  - Content validity of classification system
  - Discussion of results of applying classification system to holdout (confirmation) sample
- (7) Results

Classification scheme—description and discussion of major categories  
Classification scheme—description and discussion of subcategories (if applicable)  
Connection to existing literature/theory  
Suggestions for future research

Gremler 2004: 81–2

## References

- Arthur, N. (2001). Using critical incidents to investigate cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 25: 41–53.
- Brislin, R. (1986). A culture general assimilator: Preparation for various types of sojourn. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10: 215–234.
- Butterfield, L. D., Borgen, W. A., Amundson, N. E., & Malio, A.-S. T. (2005). Fifty years of the critical incident technique: 1954-2004 and beyond. *Qualitative Research*, 5(4): 475–497.
- Chell, E. (2004). Critical incident technique. In: C. Cassell and G. Symon (Eds.) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research* (pp.45–60). London: Sage
- Cope, J. & Watts, G. (2000). Learning by doing. An exploration of experience, critical incidents and reflection in entrepreneurial learning. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 6(3), 104–124.
- Council of Europe, Language Policy Division (2009). *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*. Available at [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default\\_EN.asp?](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default_EN.asp?) and [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/autobiogrweb\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/autobiogrweb_EN.asp) [Accessed 30 May 2013]
- Edvardsson, B. (1992). Service breakdowns: A study of critical incidents in an airline. *International Journal of Service Industry Management* 3(4): 17–29.
- Edvardsson, B. and Roos, I. (2001). Critical incident techniques. Towards a framework for analysing the criticality of critical incidents. *International Journal of Service Industry Management* 12(3): 251–268.
- Flanagan, J.C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51(4): 327–358.
- Fowler, S. M. and Blohm, J. M. (2004). An analysis of methods for intercultural training. In: D. Landis, J.M. Bennett, & M.J. Bennett (Eds.) *Handbook of Intercultural Training. Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp.37–84.

- Franklin, P. (2007). Differences and difficulties in intercultural management interaction. In: H. Kotthoff and H. Spencer-Oatey (Eds.) *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp.263–284.
- Gremler, D. D. (2004). The critical incident technique in service research. *Journal of Service Research* 7(1)L 65–89.
- Keatinge, D. (2002). Versatility and flexibility: Attributes of the Critical Incident Technique in nursing research. *Nursing and Health Sciences*, 4: 33–39.
- Rost-Roth, M. (2007). Intercultural training. In: H. Kotthoff and H. Spencer-Oatey (Eds.) *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp.491–517.
- Spencer-Oatey, H. (2002). Managing rapport in talk: using rapport sensitive incidents to explore the motivational concerns underlying politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34: 529–545.
- Spencer-Oatey, H. and Davidson, A. (2013). 3RA Intercultural Learning Journal Template. A tool to help record and reflect on intercultural encounters. Available at:  
<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/interculturalskills/>
- Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical Incidents in Teaching. Developing Professional Judgement*. London: Routledge.
- Webster, L. & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method. An Introduction to using Critical Event Narrative Analysis in Research on Learning and Teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Wight, A. R. (1995). The critical incident as a training tool. In: S.M. Fowler (Ed.). *Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods. Vol.1* Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, pp. 127–140.