

# Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



## Module 3

### Activity 1: Definitions of intercultural encounter

## Commentated example

Susana is a youth worker and intercultural trainer. She supports young people in initiating their own projects and activities and also works internationally to assist youth leaders. Below is an example of the way Susana ranked the nine definitions of intercultural encounter. It is interesting to see how her professional field of work influenced her judgment.

At the top of the diamond she placed the first definition, i.e. the one which underpins the AIE. This was because she found it all-encompassing and covering almost all the contexts she works in. Its broader understanding of difference was especially useful for her, including large-scale as well as more personal affiliations, such as family.

On the level immediately below she put definitions 4 and 6. The former resonated with her belief that, even though an individual may regard their own behaviour as the 'right' one, it does not mean this behaviour is universally appropriate. Susana regarded definition 6 as a shorter version of definition 1, which she had already put at the top.

In the broadest part of the diamond, Susana chose definition 2 as a significant step in the direction of a deeper understanding of intercultural encounter and also suggestive of empathy. Definitions 5 and 7 captured Susana's preoccupation with the needs of her participants to become involved in the process of communication across differences, establish commonalities, adapt to new environments, and develop as effective communicators.

On the next level down Susana ranked definitions 8 and 9. She found them less useful because they read more like descriptive examples of behaviour and she could not easily match them to any of her contexts.

And finally, at the bottom of the diamond, Susana put statement 3. She thought it was somewhat hypothetical and a bit wordy, but noted its reference to the risks intercultural encounters may involve.

Go to the next page to see what Susana's diamond ranking looks like.

# Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



An intercultural encounter can be an experience you had with someone from a different country, but it can also be an experience with someone from another cultural background in your country. It might be, for example, someone you met from another region, someone who speaks a different language, someone from a different religion or from a different ethnic group.

The way someone behaves in an intercultural encounter may seem perfectly proper and socially skilled in his or her own culture, but it might seem improper or socially unskilled to someone from another culture. This is why clashes often occur in intercultural encounters even when people began the encounter with a positive attitude.

An intercultural experience takes place when people from different social groups with different cultures (values, beliefs and behaviours) meet. You only become intercultural when you reflect on the experience and when your reflection leads to action.

Encountering someone from another cultural background implies an encounter not only with an individual, but with the hidden assumptions of that person's worldview.

Intercultural encounters usually offer little common ground between the participants at first. Developing understanding does not rely only on the attitudes and skills they already have; rather it is significantly influenced by the communication process and by the context of the encounter.

Intercultural encounter is the experience of dealing with an unfamiliar cultural environment and the process of adapting to its demands. Adapting to these demands, especially when they touch on the deeper side of your own cultural programming, brings about a deep intercultural experience. They involve the hidden elements of cultural difference.

Intercultural encounters are meetings between individuals who are different in important respects and who present one another with the experience of 'otherness'. There are cases where the otherness is obvious, such as in the case of living abroad, and there are cases where otherness is revealed in an encounter that previously was regarded as an encounter with the familiar.

Those engaged in an intercultural encounter are more than passive observers. Intercultural refers to encounters where individuals are immersed, either temporarily or permanently, in cultures other than their own. The immersion may take different forms: it may involve living in a new culture, and it may involve intense exposure to cultural products and materials. The individual is actively engaged with different cultural material and systems, and as a result of the encounter something will have changed for the individuals concerned.

Intercultural encounters don't always go wrong, of course, any more than same-culture encounters always go splendidly, but all other things being equal, they are certainly more likely to end badly. It means that one or more of the people involved is likely to get confused, feel offended, frustrated or otherwise put off by the behaviour of the other person.