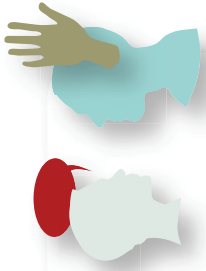


An illustration at the top of the page features several colorful silhouettes of people's heads and hands. On the left, a dark blue silhouette of a woman's head is shown in profile, with a pink hand reaching out towards it. Next to it is a red silhouette of a man's head. In the center, there is a gold silhouette of a woman's head and a pink silhouette of a man's head. On the right, a white silhouette of a woman's head is shown in profile, with a purple hand reaching out towards it. Below the main title, there is another white silhouette of a woman's head with a red hand reaching out towards it, and a light blue silhouette of a man's head with a gold hand reaching out towards it. The background is a light teal color with faint white grid lines.

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



Language Policy Division



The **Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters** is a concrete response to the recommendations of the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living together as equals in dignity" (<http://www.coe.int/dialogue>), Section 5.3 "Learning and teaching intercultural competences", paragraph 152:

"Complementary tools should be developed to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures."

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For further acknowledgements, please see the *Introduction*.

The views expressed in the *Autobiography* and supporting documents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Council of Europe.

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Autobiography
of Intercultural
Encounters
Autobiographie
de Rencontres
Interculturelles

www.coe.int/lang



What is the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters?

This Autobiography has been designed to help you analyse a specific intercultural encounter which you have experienced. You do this by answering a sequence of questions about various aspects of that encounter.

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.

This focus is on **ONE** event or experience which you have had with someone different from yourself. For example, avoid talking in general terms about a holiday which you have had, and instead choose just one specific encounter or meeting which you have had with a particular person from another country or culture. It may be somebody you already know and have known for some time.

The event could be a visit to that person's house. It could be a meeting with someone from a foreign country or another region of your own country. It could be something that happened whilst on a trip abroad, and so on.

...



...

Here are some examples from other people:

- An English teenager met a foreigner for the first time in Turkey. She and her mother talked to him because they got lost in the town.
- A ten-year old girl went for a holiday to Egypt. There she got acquainted with a local girl of 11. They met on the beach and first communicated with the help of gestures. She learned that her parents worked at the hotel where her family was staying.
- A German boy went to stay at his friend's house. His parents came to this country from Japan but he was born here.
- A young Bulgarian woman got to know a Hungarian and a Turkish guy at an international airport in the US. She was intrigued by the different ways they responded to critically delayed flights.
- A university student arriving in France, frightened and tired, and being amazed at how friendly and caring the bus driver could be.
- A Bulgarian boy congratulating his Armenian friend on Christmas day and realising and feeling embarrassed that Armenian Christmas was on a different day.

Notice that the encounters can be in your own country, in your own neighbourhood, in your own home, in a foreign country or on a journey – in other words anywhere you happen to be.

Choose an experience which was important for you - it made you think, it surprised you, you enjoyed it, you found it difficult, etc., and **give the experience a name or title**, e.g. "My Turkish experience", "My first conversation in a foreign language", "Staying with a Japanese friend", "Delays at the airport", "Arrival in France", "The wrong day for Christmas"...

This Autobiography helps you to think about the experience by asking you questions about it. Try to answer the questions as honestly as possible. It does not matter if the experience is positive or negative.

All experiences are important.

Name
Today's date
Encounter title and/or number



Who I am (Optional)

How would you define yourself?

Think about things that are especially important to you in how you think about yourself and how you like others to see you.*

I am first and foremost a human being. My name is Imad. I am 22 years old and I was born . . . and currently live with my mother in a small country in the Middle East. I am the youngest brother to two loving guys and currently a student of Public Health and Development Sciences. I hope to achieve a lot during the course of my life by making a difference, starting with myself and then reaching to others in various communities around the world.

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*Here are some elements you may wish to include if you find them to be an important part of your identity: your name, age, gender, nationality, ethnic group, country, region or community where you live or come from, religion, languages, etc. Or you could include being a son/daughter, brother/sister, school student, member of a sports team, member of any other type of club, etc.

Name

Encounter title and/or number



The encounter

Title

Give the encounter a name which says something about it...

When help does not help

Description

What happened when you met this person / these people?

We were in an outdoor museum. I was accompanying some folks in wheelchairs. . . . Because of the wooded terrain, they had difficulties keeping track of the tour. Two of the participants, one from Korea and the other one from Argentina, decided to . . . head back to the main square and I could see they were facing some difficulties in doing so. On an impulse, I went closer and gave them a push. They objected. . . .

Time

When did it happen?

It was in September,

Location

Where did it happen? What were you doing there?

It happened during a visit to a museum in a small town. I was a volunteer with the . . . UN which was hosting an international convention. There were people from all over the world.

Was it... (please tick one or more)

- study –
- leisure –
- on holiday –
- at work –
- at school –
- other –

Volunteering

The encounter

1

Importance

Why have you chosen this experience?

This experience made me think a lot about my viewpoints concerning people with disabilities and about the way I [used to] behave in their presence, as if they depended on me and were in constant need of help. So I would unconsciously ignore their personal +

Was it because... (please tick one or more)

- It made me think about something I had not thought about before
- It was the first time I had had this kind of experience....
- It was the most recent experience of that kind

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- It surprised me
- It disappointed me
- It pleased me
- It angered me
- It changed me

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.....

Add any other reactions in your own words and say what you think caused your reaction...

I was so shocked at their reaction. One wouldn't suspect that helping someone might be met with a rather violent objection. It was only after I had processed the situation many times in my head that I figured out why.

What else?

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Today's date

Name

Encounter title and/or number

Name

Encounter title and/or number



The other person or people

Who else was involved?

There were hundreds of other participants who were doing that tour. I only knew ... few of them.

Give the name of the person or people if you know...

I also knew the names of the volunteers who I worked with, but none of them were there when the incident happened.

Write something about them...

What was the first thing you noticed about them? What did they look like? What clothes were they wearing?

Most people were wearing normal everyday clothes such as jeans, pants, and ... T-shirts. There were a few African participants who were wearing traditional African tribal clothes.

Were they were male/female, or older/younger than you, or did they belong to a different nationality or religion or region, or any other thing you think is important about them?

All the participants were older than me, all representing their countries in an official convention held by the UN. They were thus all coming from different backgrounds, mentalities, regions, religions, cultures, etc.

What else?

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Name

Encounter title and/or number



Your feelings

Describe how you felt at the time by completing these sentences?

My feelings or emotions at the time were...

sadness and confusion.
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My thoughts at the time were...

Why did they violently object? I was only trying to help, what harm could I have caused by my actions?
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What I did at the time was...

(for example did you pretend you had not noticed something that was strange? Did you change the subject of the conversation which had become embarrassing? Did you ask questions about what you found strange?)...

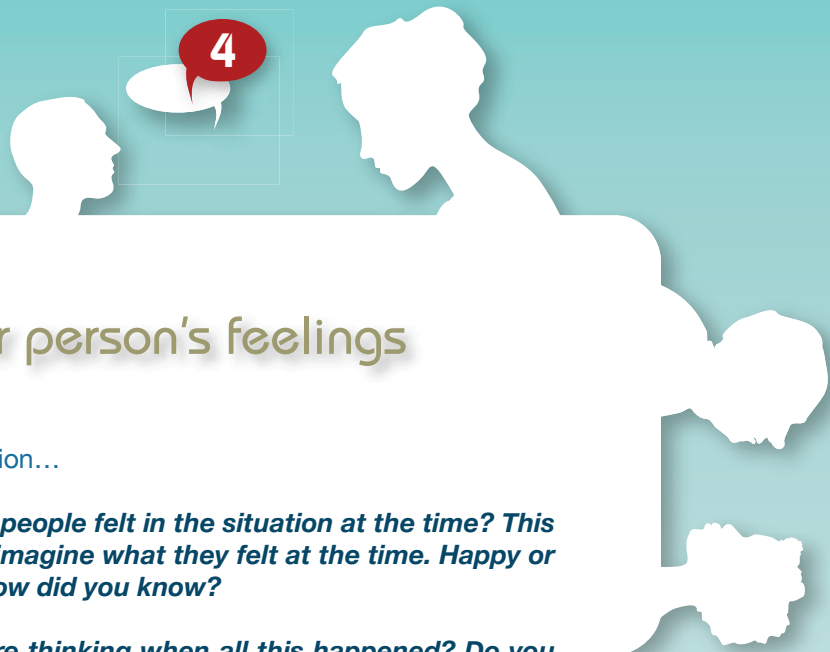
I stepped back and watched them as they eventually succeeded in reaching the main square by themselves. For the rest of the day, I continued next to them, talking about various subjects but not mentioning the earlier incident.
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What else?

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Name

Encounter title and/or number



The other person's feelings

Imagine yourself in their position...

How do you think the other people felt in the situation at the time? This can be difficult but try and imagine what they felt at the time. Happy or upset/stressed, or what? How did you know?

What do you think they were thinking when all this happened? Do you think they found it strange, or interesting, or what?

Choose one or more of these or add your own and say why you have chosen it.

For them it was an everyday experience/an unusual experience/a surprising experience/a shocking experience/because...

I suppose it was a typical experience for them because the same thing happened... when other people tried to 'help'. I am sure their angry response was provoked by the repeated nature of the experience whereby they felt they were pitied by others... Their chairs have become part of their identity and when people touched them it meant trespassing their personal space. This explains why they were enraged, ... stating that they could take care of themselves.

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Choose one or more of the options below and complete the sentence or add your own ideas.

The other people involved in the experience appeared to have the following feelings - surprise/shock/delight/no special feelings/...

Some of the other people involved were as shocked as I was. Others did not show anything, they seemed to know the reasons for their rage.

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The other person's feelings

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I noticed this because of what they did/said and/or how they looked, for example they... (say what you noticed)

I noticed this because some people were really surprised and looked at me wondering why this reaction was provoked. As for the others, some didn't pay attention. One of the onlookers approached me and said that I shouldn't have done what I did, for "it really upsets them."

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I am not sure because they seemed to hide their feelings...

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What else?

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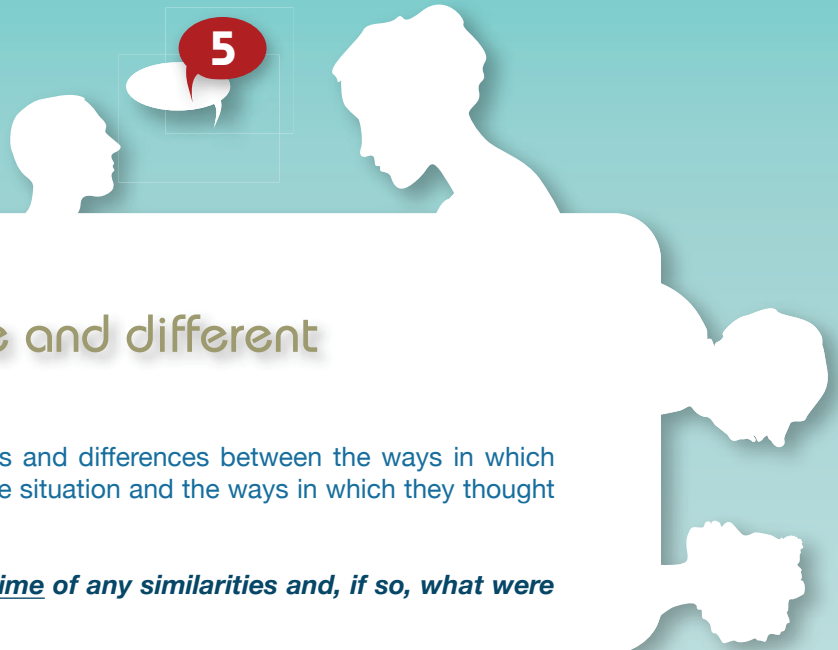
Name

Encounter title and/or number

Today's date

Name

Encounter title and/or number



Same and different

Thinking about the similarities and differences between the ways in which you thought and felt about the situation and the ways in which they thought and felt about it...

were you aware at the time of any similarities and, if so, what were they?

I there were no similarities whatsoever between what we thought and felt at the time.

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were you aware at the time of any differences and, if so, what were they?

I was only aware at the time of the differences in emotions, for they were upset and angry and I was shocked and surprised. But I had no idea what they were thinking and why so. I only sensed that we were thinking differently.

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Looking back at the situation...

are you aware now of any other similarities, and if so what are they?

I suppose there were really no similarities between what we felt and thought at the time.

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are you aware now of any other differences, and if so what are they?

Yes, I am currently aware of the differences in thoughts, for it might be that they were
focused on how to overcome the obstacles of the terrain, whereas I thought that they were
in need of external help.....

How do you see your own thoughts, feelings and actions now?

First thoughts

I acted out of prejudice - I thought that since they had a disability, they were constantly in ...
need of help. I should have known better - any human being would feel upset if their
independence was denied them.....

Choose one or more of the following and complete the sentence
OR invent your own.

- The way I acted in the experience was appropriate because what I did was...
- I think I could have acted differently by doing the following...
- I think the best reaction from me would have been...
- My reaction was good because...
- I hid my emotions by...

I think I could have acted differently - stay close, watch them and wait for them to ask for ...
help if they possibly wanted that.

What else?

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Today's date.....

Name

Encounter title and/or number.....

Name
Encounter title and/or number

Today's date



Talking to each other

When you think about how you spoke to or communicated with the other people, do you remember that you made adjustments in how you talked or wrote to them?

First thoughts

I remember the first thing I did was that I expressed my shock and surprise in Arabic, my native language. I then noticed that nobody around me understood so I adjusted my speech to English, the common language to all.

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Further ideas – for example:

I was talking to them in my own language and I noticed I needed to make adjustments to help them understand me, for example...

I was not speaking in my own language and I had to make adjustments to make myself understood - to simplify/to explain using gestures, by explaining a word, by...

I noticed things about how they spoke – that they simplified, that they used gestures, that they spoke more slowly...

I was talking to them in my own language and I noticed I needed to make adjustments to help them understand me, for example I said in Arabic: what happened? what's wrong? Then I immediately notice that I was using the wrong language so I translated what I had said into English.

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Did you already have any knowledge or previous experience which helped you to communicate better?

First thoughts

Yes, I do have some knowledge and experience in expressing myself in English. That's why the issue in this situation wasn't about not knowing how or what to communicate or whether I got lost in words, but rather in being able to understand why my action provoked this unexpected reaction.

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Further ideas – for example:

I already knew things about how people communicate and behave in other groups which helped me to understand the experience and communicate better – I knew for example that...

I knew that other people involved in the experience thought and acted differently because of what they had learnt as children, for example...

I knew that other people involved in the experience thought and acted differently because of what they had learnt as children, for example, as I mentioned before, some people acted normal, as if they had anticipated the response that followed. This can only be explained by the fact that these people have been taught in their home countries how to treat people with disabilities and how to act in their presence, or else any of them would have rushed to "help" the way I did.

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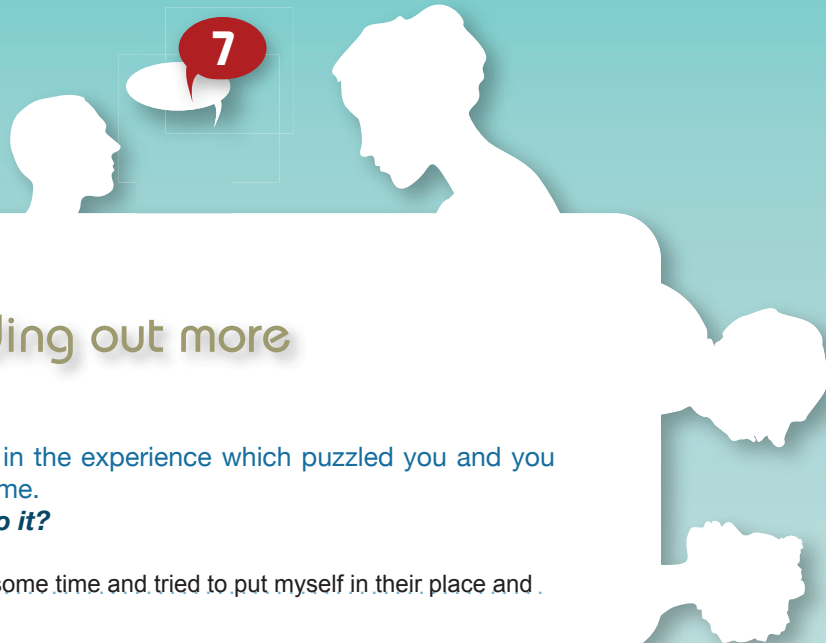
What else?

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Name
Encounter title and/or number
Today's date

Name

Encounter title and/or number



Finding out more

There may have been things in the experience which puzzled you and you tried to find out more at the time.

If you did so, how did you do it?

I thought about the situation for some time and tried to put myself in their place and see what it feels like.

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If you have found out an answer since, how did you do it?

For example:

There were things I did not understand, so I tried to find out by asking questions at the time/reading about it/looking on the internet/asking questions...

I used the following sources for information...

When finding new information I noticed the following similarities and differences with things I know from my own society...

I also found some answers in my sociology class at university. We had a lecture on health and disability where I could ask some questions and the answers helped me draw a couple of conclusions.....

The following things still puzzle me...

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What else?

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Name

Today's date

Encounter title and/or number



Using comparisons to understand

People often compare things in other groups or cultures with similar things in their own.

Did you do this? Did it help you to understand what was happening?

For example:

The experience involved some things which were similar to what I know in my own group and these are the things I noticed...

There were some things which were different from my own group...

The reaction of the two men was the same, and yet, they came from two different continents and two different countries. They only shared the misfortune of having both legs amputated. What I compare here is my reaction, being the first time I work with people with a disability, and that of others, who acted 'normally'. For, in my cultural context, minimal attention is given to people with physical and mental challenges, by both institutions and individuals. This makes it difficult to know how to act when we face such situations. In other places, people are more sensitive and respect human dignity.

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What else?

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Name

Encounter title and/or number

Today's date



Thinking back and looking forward

If, when you look back, you draw conclusions about the experience, what are they?

Complete as many of these as you can...

I liked the experience for the following reasons...

I liked the experience because it sheds some light on a side of me that I did not know existed. It was surely a negative side but this experience helped me think a lot about how I can change to make a better person of myself, for "It's when you step out from your comfort zone that you grow up the most", and I truly feel that I've grown up.

I disliked the experience for the following reasons...

Surely, the only thing I disliked (at the time) about the experience, was the feeling of awkwardness and confusion following the reaction provoked by the two men. I suppose that's the only thing that made me feel sad. I then worked out the meaning of what had happened.

There were some things which **I approve** of and these are my reasons...

The experience helped me a lot in changing my views, thoughts and judgements concerning people who face disability, for they are human beings just like me, who can manage on their own and perform activities as well as I can and even better, and are only in need of help when they ask for it. Sadly, as much as I would have loved to do something such as volunteering in an NGO that worked with and for the disabled, I haven't had the time or resources to do so. But sincerely hope to do so later in my life.

There were some things which **I disapprove** of and these are my reasons...

Thinking back
and looking forward

9

Try to imagine that you are telling someone you know well about all this. It could be your brother or sister for example.

Do you think they would have the same opinions as you? Would they approve and disapprove of the same things for the same reasons?

Try to think about why people you know well and who belong to the same group(s) as you (same family, same religion, same country, same region etc) might have the same reactions and write your explanation here:

I suppose that, if I were to tell this story to my brothers they would disapprove of my behaviour then. The reason is that they all live abroad, have been in contact with many different people, and they know better how to approach people who are not the same as us. But if I were to tell some of my friends about this experience, they would agree with the way I have acted. Living and working with people with disabilities in our community is not very

Did the experience change you? How?

As I mentioned earlier, the experience helped me a lot in changing my views, thoughts and judgements concerning people who face disability for they are human beings just like me who can manage on their own and can perform activities as well as I can and even better, ... and are only in need of help when they ask for it.

**Did you decide to do something as a result of this experience?
What did you do?**

Sadly, as much as I would have loved to do something, such as volunteering in an NGO that works with and for the disabled, I haven't had the time or resources to do so. But I sincerely hope to do so later in my life.

**Will you decide to do something as a result of doing this Autobiography?
If so what?**

I suppose that I will simply send it to the facilitators that asked me to do so, and wait for the intercultural seminar to take place in order to see how writing this Autobiography can help me later on.

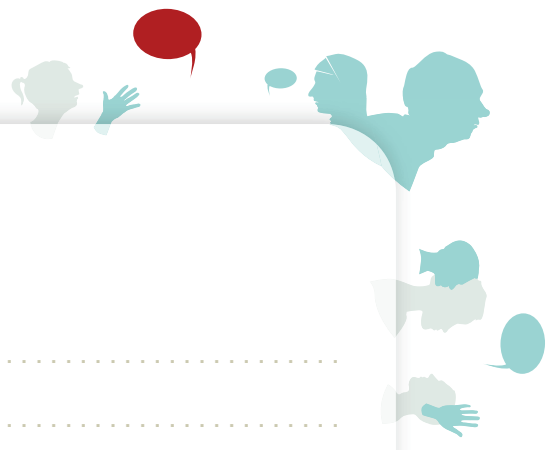
What else?

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Today's date

Name

Encounter title and/or number



What else? (your notes)

A large rectangular area with rounded corners, containing 25 horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.