

All relationships are based on a delicate reciprocity of claiming recognition for oneself and offering it to the other. As this process grows deeper, we create a space of intimacy, which sometimes engenders a romantic relationship. Cultural differences abound in the rules of how these interactions should happen, so misunderstandings and conflicts are not rare. The incidents we collected illustrate the intercultural challenges of these processes. We also explore how conflict and violence are used in the attempt of changing relationships.

Reciprocity, respect and their breaches

A key concept to understand how relationships work, and even simple interactions as a matter of fact, is reciprocity. This concept covers a practice and social norm which implies that for every positive action a similar proportional action is due in response. To a smile we respond with a smile (not with a huge hug), to an invitation to a coffee with an invitation to a similar drink. This rule of reciprocity is validating mutual recognition in each interaction - I respect you and you respect me- and as such it is the foundation of all interaction. Breaking the rule of reciprocity is interpreted as an offence: you wave at the neighbour walking on the other side of the street and she just looks through you. You will feel ignored, disrespected. This general rule of reciprocity exists in all human societies, albeit tainted with different expectations to take into account the rules of social organisation such as status, hierarchy and gender. In any case we can count on reciprocity being a known rule in any human society. So what could potentially go wrong?

Greeting rituals



Truth is, even people with good intentions, ready to assure the other of their full respect can inadvertently cause ruptures in reciprocity and thus embarrassment, tension, offense. The incident Kissing offer such an example: a Senegalese young man is approached by a French classmate who wants to kiss him on the cheek. At that point he's not familiar with the practice, he does not know how to react and breaks the usual choreography. Indeed, if greeting rituals are designed as a reliable choreography to ensure reciprocity, because they can differ radically from culture to culture, in intercultural setting

they fail to do so. There is a great diversity in the codes of polite communication, that we can observe for instance in the use of space, touch, gestures, postures, use of eye contact, the preference of exteriorisation of emotions, the level of formality etc. All these differences can give the impression to the interlocutors that we are not respecting them. They are not worthy of reciprocity.

Recognition of roles and identities

A different problem of respect occurs in the situation Madame or Mademoiselle? Here a Senegalese merchant inquires whether he should address the young European woman as Ms or Mrs. At first glance this looks like a polite question, still, our protagonist does not feel respected. One of the mistakes he inadvertently committed is that he put forth the marital status of the young lady, as for him, how to address the lady in question is tightly connected to her marital status. But in Europe, people tend to be much more individualistic, and they prefer to be treated according to their unique individuality as opposed to their role and status, especially if it is a marital status: "no women would want to be treated according to her marital status" she says. His other mistake was to point directly to her gender identity with his question. Indeed, in

that particular situation, walking alone in the market in Dakar, of the many identities our protagonist possesses, gender identity was probably not the one she wanted to put forward.

So, not only we want to be respected, but we want to be respected in the role or identity that we are displaying in a specific situation. The concept of “face” helps to be more concrete: I honour your “face” implies I endorse the positive social value of the role or identity that you are putting on scene. Here is another illustration to this phenomenon: after finishing a training, the facilitator and the participants go to have a drink together in a friendly reception offered in the place where the training was held. One of the participants approaches her with a question – which she expects to be about prejudice or discrimination – the subject of her training. Instead she is asked “Madame, can you find me a wife?” - a question that somewhat makes her lose her face as trainer to become a matchmaker.

Loss of face is a frequent companion of intercultural encounters, as quite often the other party does not get clearly one’s intentions, practices, let alone politeness rules. In the situation “Should not have paid” the group of young international women pays in the pastry shop instead of their Turkish host, which makes him fail his responsibilities as host, he also loses face.

Money, gifts and reciprocity



The exchange of money and gifts are par excellence good occasions to observe problems of reciprocity. In the situation “Babysitter” a young Eritrean woman offers to babysit the children of the youth worker who’s been supporting her, but when the youth worker wants to pay her for her services, she declines. Of course, the youth worker is distressed: she does not want to abuse a young woman in a difficult situation, to the contrary she wanted to help her financially. Her insistence to pay her denies the young woman to exercise her right (and duty) of reciprocity by making what is called a

counter-gift, a way to thank her for all the help she had previously offered her. Indeed, Marcel Mauss, French anthropologist points to dynamics of the circulation of gifts: after receiving a gift, I am in debt, and I can only restore equilibrium when I make a counter-gift. This continuous process of giving and receiving, for Mauss constitutes the very fabric of societies. When we refuse someone the possibility to make a gift, we assign her outside of the circle of people eligible to participate in the circles of reciprocity.

When it is too much

So, giving too little (gift, attention, respect...) or being denied the right to give are problematic. But so is giving too much. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face threats can occur in these two directions. A positive face concern happens when one’s need of being valued and accepted is threatened when one does not receive enough attention. A negative face concern happens when one’s need for autonomy and freedom from imposition is threatened when one receives way more attention than what corresponds to the specific relationship. Imagine receiving a way too precious birthday gift from an acquaintance. Or consider the situation “Declaration of love”, where a young participant declares his affectionate intentions to a youth worker, putting a tremendous burden on her shoulders and a similarly heavy “negative face threat”. In the situation, the young man tried to change unilaterally the parameters of the relationship, and ended up losing his face. To avoid such negative face threats, in the modern west such out of the blue declarations of love have all but been eliminated. Instead, people learnt to engage in subtle courting process, which allows to make small steps and continuously check whether these are reciprocated in the transformation of the relationship.

Lack of consent and harassment: a violent rupture of reciprocity

In some cases, we witness the imposition of more intimacy in the relationships with others, leading to different degrees of violence. "Forcing intimacy" on someone means not respecting their consent. In the situation "Handyman" for instance the Syrian man calls the youth worker to ask her whether she's alone at home and whether he could visit her, which was clearly not part of their relationship so far. When the incidents involve physical contact as in "Hand on thighs" (a participant puts his hand on the thighs of the facilitator under the table) or a relationship to sexuality as in "The earwhisperer" (a participant whispers sexual comments to the ear of the facilitator) shock situations become assaults (sexual harassment, sexual assault...). From the "perpetrator's" side these acts can have several meanings and motivations. They can correspond to what the person has decoded as appropriate response (the handyman) or they can constitute



intents of gaining status with respect to the facilitator or the witnesses. From the narrator's point of view however, they are perceived as aggressions due to lack of consent.

In fact, we are talking about a "culture of consent", so it is something that can be learned and that varies. The author Valérie Rey-Robert published on 23 February 2019 a book entitled "a French rape culture" in which she specifies that each country has its own rape culture and that the specificities change according to the cultures. In this book, she focuses on the culture of rape in France, which allows us to step

back from our Western frame of reference and understand that consent is also a variable notion. This does not mean that we must accept that people exceed our consent on the pretext that their culture is different. It is just a tool to analyze and understand certain cultural shocks.

When reciprocity lead to deepening the relationship: intimacy and romantic engagement



As Dora Djamila Mester explains in the Body Project, sexuality is often seen as something natural and universal. But when you look at it more closely, you realize how much all aspects of our sexuality depend on our culture. If our sexuality depends on our culture, it necessarily varies according to these cultures. And meeting a different sexuality than yours can create a culture shock. The same goes for our relationship to intimacy and our conception of romanticism.

According to Hsu (1953, 1985) and Doi (1963, 1973), passionate love is a Western invention, linked to a dominant individualistic model, incompatible with more Asian collectivist values. (Cited in Hatfield 2007: 764) Nevertheless more recent comparative research has found less diversity in the meaning that different cultures attribute to it: people of different cultures could all distinguish friendly love from passionate love. Associations may vary, however: Italians and North

Americans associate love with happiness, while in China the dominant associations were: infatuation, unrequited love, nostalgia, sadness (Shaver, Wu and Schwartz 1991 cited by Hatfield 2007: 765)

For example, in the critical incident "Madame, find me a woman" and "Declaration of Love", what partly shocks the narrators is that the young men from Mali seemed to have such a different conception of intimate relationships and the process of getting there, than their own. In some cultures, it is well accepted that marriage is only a legal arrangement that is entered into out of interest (personal, professional...). In other cultures, marriage is the ultimate proof of love and it is a step that only happens after a certain time in a relationship. This diversity is well explored in Vincent Citot's "Origin, structure and horizon of love", as well as in "What meaning should we give to the notions of couple and marriage?" written by Françoise Héritier. For the social construction of marriage, see "The conception of marriage and family" written by the association Raconte-nous ton histoire which studies the cultural variations of marriage and the couple in the heart of the Belleville quarter in Paris. The article "Confronting the intimate and the culture of the other" written by Elian Djaoui explores the different relationships to intimacy in an intercultural perspective, with a focus on people in migration situations in France.

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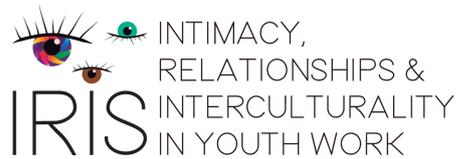
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Incidents

Title	Country
Madame, find me a woman	FR
Madame or Mademoiselle?	FR
The ear-whisperer	ES
He's a girl	NL
The boyfriend	NL
Losers	ES
The babysitter	NL
The kiss	FR
Declaration of love	FR
Should not have paid	HU
Naked	FR
The mob and the whore	ES
Hand on thighs	FR
Friends and family	ES

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RELATIONSHIP TO EACH OTHER*

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