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EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL INSIGHTS THROUGH THE CRITICAL INCIDENT RESEARCH METHOD

Abstract

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) has become a renowned approach in qualitative research, offering a systematic framework for exploring interactions, revealing human perception and conduct in different scenarios. The technique analyses significant incidents that emerge from either observations or narrations within specific contexts and helps to scrutinise thoughts, emotions, attitudes or actions. CIT uncovers cultural discrepancies within intercultural communication and has been implemented in various disciplines. Originating from aviation research, CIT has proved to be adaptable to other areas and has thus been successfully integrated into intercultural training and research. Regardless of its utility and popularity, some critics suggest it can oversimplify complexity. Nevertheless, recent publications have demonstrated the ongoing significance of CIT. These publications use linguistic approaches that broaden its horizons, encompassing narrative methodologies and multi-perspective analyses. While CIT provides significant insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations in terms of subjectivity and generalisability. In conclusion, CIT continues to be a valuable qualitative research approach that enhances our understanding of human behaviour and experiences through the systematic analysis of key events.

Keywords: Critical Incident Technique (CIT), qualitative research, human behaviour

INTRODUCTION

In the field of social sciences and qualitative research, various methodologies are utilised to study significant aspects of human experiences, behaviours,

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and interactions. One method that has become prominent in recent decades is the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). It was defined by Flanagan, the founder of the method as 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).

This approach to research provides a structured framework for analysing particular occurrences, referred to as “critical incidents”, in order to understand individual perceptions, behaviours and reactions in different contexts. According to Flanagan, critical incidents can be described as following:

By an incident is meant any specifiable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical the incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects. (1954, 327)

Based on this understanding, CIT involves examining individual experiences in a given context, with a focus on events that have had a significant impact on an individual’s thoughts, emotions, or actions (Chell 2004).

In the field of intercultural communication, critical incidents are situations that arise due to cultural differences between individuals and result in misunderstandings, issues or conflicts. Based on this understanding, Fiedler, Mitchell & Triandis developed a definition of critical incidents by characterizing them as situations of interaction which one of the parties “finds conflictful, puzzling, or which he is likely to misinterpret; and (...) which can be interpreted in a fairly unequivocal manner, given sufficient knowledge about the culture” (1971, 97). According to them, Critical Incidents can be investigated by asking people to depict some specific intercultural incidents that “made a major difference in their attitudes or behaviour toward the members of the other culture” highlighting that these could be “pleasant, unpleasant, or simply non-understandable occurrences” (Fiedler, Mitchell & Triandis 1971, 5). Thus, critical incidents are especially effective for investigations related to intercultural differences, as culturally influenced behaviour and actions are usually “unreflected self-evident” (Schroll-Machl & Nový 2000, 24) and reveal themselves as such in critical situations.

Moreover, critical incidents are not simply mere routine occurrences; they are instances that are memorable and frequently lead to a change in one's cultural perspective (Fetscher 2022). Therefore, researchers aim to identify patterns, insights, and underlying factors influencing human behaviour and decision-making by analysing these specific incidents.

Over the last decades, critical incidents were systematically implemented in qualitative social research and applied as a key analytical device for intercultural research using qualitative methods (cf. e.g. Brookfield 1995; Arthur 2001; Otten 2006).

Despite criticism of a static understanding of culture that could also question the concept of critical incidents as disruptions arising from 'culture,' its standing has not diminished. Recent publications demonstrate that authors have been taking these criticisms into account and further advancing the methodology (Fetscher & Groß 2022; Hiller 2016; Hiller & Zillmer-Tantan 2021; Bosse 2018). This article examines the complexities of the Critical Incident research method, traces interdisciplinary applications and highlights its advantages, further applications and potential limitations.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CIT

Initially, critical incidents found their application in aviation research and pilot training. Flanagan developed the critical incident technique in 1954 in order to facilitate the scrutiny of complex systems and processes for addressing problems and the clarification of psychological concepts. Later, this approach was broadened to include the evaluation of human interactions, especially in critical situations requiring elucidation and resolution. Currently, the examination of critical incidents remains a crucial technique for assessing employment patterns (Layes 2007; Stitt-Gohdes, Lambrecht & Redmann 2000).

Since the beginnings, CIT has since been widely adopted in intercultural research as a practical method for both research and training (Wright 1995). Thus, a practical implication of the method was at the forefront from the very beginning. Triandis pioneered the use of critical incidents in intercultural training during the early 1960s (Wright 1995, 127). Shortly thereafter, Fiedler, Mitchell, and Triandis (1971) adapted this approach for research on intercultural interaction. From there, critical incident analysis was extensively explored in American cross-cultural psychology, particularly in training contexts (Cushner & Brislin 1986; Triandis 1995; Landis

& Bhagat 1996; Bhawuk 1998). Fiedler et al. developed a training method based on the analysis of critical incidents, the culture assimilator, that was used to impart missing cultural knowledge.

Under the influence of Alexander Thomas (1996), the CIT has also gained a great deal of traction in the German-speaking world, evolving and being refined on an interdisciplinary basis.² Thomas developed a qualitative methodology for determining “Kulturstandards” (cultural standards) via CIT. A “cultural standard” as defined by Thomas (2005) refers to a set of shared norms, values, behaviours, and expectations that are characteristic of a particular culture or group. These standards are supposed to serve as a framework for understanding and interacting with members of a given culture. Based on Thomas’ idea of “culture as a system of orientation” (2005), the aim of this approach was to identify repeated unusual responses and unfamiliar behaviours that were later analysed by cross-cultural specialists in order to develop cultural standards intended to serve as orientation. Thus, Thomas used critical incidents as an empirical research tool by interviewing various individuals about their experiences in intercultural interactions. Numerous reliable publications have been produced based on this framework, all with the objective of promoting better understanding regarding cultural differences in various settings.

ESTABLISHMENT AND ONGOING ADVANCEMENTS

Consequently, critical incident analysis has established itself firmly within qualitative social research and has been used across a range of fields, including psychology, education, healthcare, organisational studies and more. It serves as a useful tool for investigating complex interaction phenomena that may not be sufficiently captured through traditional quantitative methods. Notable applications outside the field of intercultural research include:

- *Human resources*: Within organisations, CIT is used to identify key factors that contribute to employee satisfaction, motivation and performance. These insights provide direction for improving human resource policies and practices, resulting in a more positive work environment, as demonstrated by Niedermeier, Schaper & Bender (2018).

² These are mainly the publications from the series *Beruflich in...*, published by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

- *Healthcare*: The method can assist healthcare providers in improving communication, patient safety and overall care quality by helping to understand critical incidents in patient care (Saito et al. 2015).
- *Consumer behaviour*: Researchers use CIT to examine critical incidents shaping consumer decision-making, shedding light on factors that influence purchase choices and brand loyalty, such as those explored by Jones in 1999.
- *Teacher training*: In the field of educational research, CIT reveals critical experiences that shape students' learning experiences. This enables educators to adjust pedagogical approaches and curricula, ultimately enhancing learning outcomes (e.g. Göbel, Hesse & Jude 2003).
- *Higher education research*: (cf. Bosse 2018): Of specific note is also the exploration of higher education research, an area that often intersects with intercultural research within the German-speaking research community (Otten 2006; Hiller 2007; Hiller 2009; Hiller 2016; da Silva 2010; Schumann 2012).
- *Counselling psychology research*: In 1986, Woolsey showed CIT's aptitude to benefit counselling psychology research. Butterfield & Borgen (2005) detail the position of CIT in qualitative research tradition and its evolution within counselling psychology. They also provide suggestions for standardising the use of the method.

In summary, the Critical Incident Technique is firmly established within the landscape of qualitative research, providing a flexible and insightful tool for understanding complex human experiences across various fields.

METHODOLOGY

The Critical Incident Technique involves collecting and then analysing data. Flanagan (1954) outlines a process whereby data can be obtained by observing individuals directly or through various forms of inquiry, such as interviews, group interviews and questionnaires. In his view, careful interviews can produce data that is comparable to observations obtained by direct means. By reconstructing personal experiences, it becomes possible to access the cultural knowledge and perspectives held by the parties involved. CIT is meanwhile recognised as an exploratory interview method with the aim of gaining “an understanding of the incident from

the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective and behavioral elements” (Chell 2004, 48). It is part of the range of episodic and narrative interview methodologies (Flick 2000). The technique enables examination of personal experiences situated within real-life scenarios that the interviewee deems “critical.” In the realm of research on intercultural communication, CIT is significant by identifying challenges intrinsic to human interaction within international contexts. Thus, it identifies important concerns within international domains of practice through critical incidents, dissecting them as manifestations of various behavioural and orientational patterns. Instead of interviews, some scholars prefer using recordings of human activity such as transcriptions or video material. They argue that analysing recorded organic interactions enhances “the contextual perception of communicative action” (von Helmolt 2022, 77).

As a basic principle in qualitative research, the approach must align with the research question (Flick 2000). Flanagan recommends specific technique instructions while also advocating for some adaptability in the method:

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 (1954, 355).

The method has been continuously developed and adapted to the individual research goals of the various disciplines. In order to make the work with the CIT comprehensible, approaches from German-language intercultural higher education research will be presented below as examples.

EXAMPLES OF APPLICATION

EXTENDED CRITICAL INCIDENT ANALYSIS (HILLER 2009)

Extended Critical Incident Analysis (ECIA) is presented as an approach aimed at addressing communication issues between German and Polish students at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) (Hiller 2009). The problem identified was the avoidance of contact between these two groups, which prompted the need to uncover the underlying reasons in order to facilitate improved intercultural communication.

The ECIA defines critical incidents as situations in which the expectations and assumptions of individuals from different cultures collide, resulting in conflict, misunderstanding or confusion. They are characterised by everyday scenarios in which representatives of culture A interact with culture B and the situation doesn't unfold as expected, leading to misinterpretation or emotional reactions.

Data for the ECIA was collected through problem-centred interviews (Witzel 2000) to determine which intercultural situations are perceived as critical. The content analysis of the data (Mayring 2000) examines the specific causes of communication problems and assesses their relationship to cultural differences. The interviews are analysed using a coding method to categorise and sub-categorise incidents and to identify overarching themes that contribute to conflict or misunderstanding. To identify critical incidents, the ECIA introduces indicators, which are communicative signals that indicate a dysfunction or crisis. These signals may take the form of non-verbal cues or verbal expressions such as incomprehension or confusion. In addition, certain passages revealed interviewees' reflections on issues at a meta-level, providing insights into their judgements and interpretations of various issues. These were labelled as "expert opinions" (Meuser & Nagel 1997). The inclusion of expert opinions aligns with the concept of experts in research, defined as individuals with specialized knowledge not readily accessible to everyone in the field of interest (Meuser & Nagel 1997).

This approach extends traditional CIT by creating an interpretive triangle that combines the role of the interviewee as an actor in a situation, an expert reflecting on observations and experiences, and an external analysis that integrates conclusions into theories or further research. Hence, the conclusions drawn from the analysis are supported by research, literature, and expert opinion. This multidimensional perspective enhances the understanding of communication problems and their cultural underpinnings.

STUDIES USING CRITICAL INCIDENTS AS A RESEARCH AND AS A TRAINING TOOL

Critical incidents research is always application-oriented, and the data collected represent not only material to be analysed but also illustrative case studies at the same time. This fact that critical incidents can serve as both a research tool and a training tool has been used by a number of researchers in studies that aimed to produce didactic materials or training units as a result. Schumann (2012), Hiller (2016; 2018) and Hiller & Zillmer-Tantan (2021) had similar approaches basing on this polyvalent property:

MULTILINGUALISM AND MULTICULTURALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In a project that explored challenges and coping strategies related to multilingualism and multiculturalism in higher education, Schumann (2012) and her colleagues first used critical incidents to record experiences of difference among international students in Germany. The goal was to create a database of critical incidents that could be used for training purposes.

Therefore, the researchers collected critical incidents for two years through interviews with German and international students and teachers. The interviewees were asked standardised questions tailored to the different target groups. In addition, students in seminars on intercultural communication were asked to report on their own experiences and then to reflect on them. For this purpose, they were given worksheets with the following tasks:

- 1) Information on the communication situation (interaction partner/nationality/subject of study); place (course/meeting/leisure time), time (semester).
- 2) Hypotheses on possible causes of the misunderstanding.

A total of 524 critical incidents were collected. The critical incidents contained in the data were identified by coding, categorised and processed in a multi-stage evaluation procedure. First, they were edited according to certain criteria (Hennig 2012). If necessary, the texts were shortened and paraphrased in order to focus on the cultural core of the misunderstanding.

For each intercultural misunderstanding, two questions are developed which invite the participants to look at the misunderstanding from two different perspectives and in this way to change perspectives. Then, they were presented to persons who came from the same 'academic discourse community' (Hennig 2012, 91). They also reviewed the interpretive perspectives expressed by the interviewed persons. This procedure served to compile a sample of critical incidents according to the criterion of exemplariness, which could be representative of university communication situations. With this, the data set was reduced to 164 critical incidents. They were then assigned to 4 communicative domains, and these were again differentiated into subcategories. These incidents were made available with the comments from two perspectives (usually by an international person and by a person socialised in Germany) in a database.³ The authors

³ See: <https://www.uni-kassel.de/mumis/www.mumis-projekt.de/mumis/index.php/critical-incidents.html>.

then developed various didactic materials and worksheets. A part of the database was also translated into English.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Hiller (2016; 2018) took a similar approach. For their publication with critical incidents from university administration and international students, the authors developed the following procedure: The cases selected are based on term papers written by students and participants of a train the trainer programme. Each participant is given the task of collecting data based on interviews on interculturally relevant critical incidents in his or her work context. The material is intended to provide an overview of the intercultural challenges that staff in student services and university administration face in their work and to stimulate reflection. Similar to Schumann, approximately 400 critical incidents obtained from the interviews were linguistically revised, discussed and evaluated according to a certain catalogue of criteria. Each case should be representative of the university administration context and show potential for gaining intercultural insights; the case studies should represent the main countries of origin of international students in Germany and they should deal with important problems of international students. Various fields of irritation were identified (such as work styles, bureaucratic understanding, or standards of politeness).

In contrast to Schumann's approach, the critical incidents were not published with two comments each to explain the cultural background. As generating and discussing multiple perspectives was the didactic goal of this training manual, multiple perspectives on the cases were to be collected. Thus, in a second survey procedure, female respondents from all over the world were given the cases and asked for their interpretation. In most cases, students from the same countries as the international actors in the critical incidents. For example, it was important that a case involving an interaction between a German staff member and a Cameroonian student was commented on by two or three students from Cameroon who themselves study or have studied in Germany. For some cases, the perspective of the staff was included to give both sides the opportunity to express their opinion. The commentators were asked to analyse the cases on the basis of the following guiding questions

- What is your assessment of the situation?
- Are there any understandable reasons why the person from is behaving in this way?

- What aspects of the cultural background might explain the behaviour from your point of view?

In total, for the first volume, the authors collected comments on 30 case studies from 93 people in 23 countries. As expected, many of the explanations are very different, while others are almost identical. These multiple perspectives on the case studies do not lead to clear-cut solutions, which might suggest that representatives of certain cultures always behave in the same way.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CIT

For the purpose of orientation, the basic principles of CIT can be summarised as a series of key stages:

1. Data compilation: In the case of interviews or other narrative procedures, researchers gather in-depth descriptions of the selected incidents from the participants. These descriptions aim to capture the event, actions and reactions of the participants, as well as the context and the outcomes. In the case of observations or recordings, the observers describe what they see.
2. Incident selection: Researchers identify specific incidents that are relevant to the research question. These incidents are collected through interviews, surveys, observation or other methods of data collection.
3. Categorisation and analysis: The collected incidents are then scrutinised to identify prevalent themes, common patterns and factors influencing the outcomes. Researchers may classify incidents on the basis of attributes such as affirmative/negative outcomes, efficacy of responses, or emotive resonance.
4. Interpretation: Through thorough analysis, researchers interpret the underlying meanings and implications of the incidents. This stage involves drawing connections between incidents, identifying trends and deriving insights that contribute to a wider understanding of human behaviour. Some researchers include expert opinion in the interpretation process, as suggested by Thomas 2005; Butterfield & Borgen 2005; Hiller 2009.

As with all research methodologies, the validity of the findings depends on the rigour of the approach taken. The careful selection of incidents and

the systematic analysis of data all enhance the reliability of CIT as a research method.

CRITIQUE AND RESPONSES

Substantial criticism of the critical incident method is prevalent within the research landscape on intercultural communication, and the various limitations and concerns associated with this approach are outlined by scholars. One of the main criticisms revolves around the idea of culture, which is in most cases nation-centred (Layes 2007; Mecheril et al. 2010; Bolten 2020). Linked to this is the argument that the critical incident method may not fully capture the dynamic and evolving nature of cultures, as cultures are constantly changing over time (cf. Holliday 2010; Bradley 2015).

Another important criticism relates to the subjective interpretation of critical incidents, leading to potential disparities in interpretations and making the method susceptible to bias (González-Moro 2006). Furthermore, there is a possibility of selective bias in the choice of incidents, which may skew the overall representation of the cultural experience (Boyes 1991; Cushner 1987).

Another criticism centres around the danger of oversimplification of intricate intercultural interactions by isolating specific incidents, potentially disregarding the broader contextual factors that influence these interactions (Woodward 2015). Furthermore, a focus on negative or difficult incidents may lead to the biased perception of a culture by overlooking positive experiences and interactions (Garg & Rastogi 2019). The method's dependence on retrospectively recounted incidents could also introduce recall bias and memory distortion (cf. Cushner & Kadesch 2003; Triandis 1978). While the critical incident method provides useful insights into intercultural interactions, its utility is accompanied by limitations and criticisms that warrant consideration when employing this approach for intercultural research.

Given these considerations, the challenge in intercultural studies rests upon establishing a framework conducive to understanding cultural influences. Therefore, when assessing the impacts of inadequate cultural awareness, it is appropriate to embrace the cultural viewpoint as an interpretive system emanating from a shared repository of knowledge (cf. Goodenough 1964; Schütz & Luckmann 2003). To achieve this, it is crucial

to recognise that various factors play a role in intercultural interactions. One way to address this is to utilise a model that emphasises the multifaceted nature of such interactions. For example, the C-P-S-I model (Bosse 2010) elaborates on this by exploring four dimensions – culture, person, situation, and institution – that contribute to shaping an interaction context. Alternatively, a multi-perspective approach such as that demonstrated in Hiller (2009) and Hiller and Zillmer-Tantan's works (2021) could be used.

A recent German-language publication, "Critical Incidents neu gedacht" ("Critical Incidents Rethought"), by Fetscher and Groß (2022) introduces innovative strategies to tackle critical incidents, presenting fresh outlooks on research methodologies. This work contributes significant new ideas from the field of linguistics, some of which will be expounded on in this section. Fetscher (2022) advocates a narrative approach that unveils facets of identity construction and the negotiation of culture through corpus analysis; she proposes a dual-level observational perspective analysis (first order: material analysis; second order: analysis of the conversation about the materials). Klein presents research on student dialogues concerning critical incidents, highlighting the pedagogical insights inherent in her approach (Klein 2022). Kreß (2022) directs her analysis towards how cultural distinctions are marked in linguistic processing, using student YouTube experience reports as an illustrative example. Nazarkiewicz's culturally reflexive approach strives to generate diverse perspectives, emphasizing that the perception of the critical aspect of critical incidents can vary, and that disruptions in expectations, non-understanding and visible asymmetries classified as 'critical' possess substantial learning potential transcending a constraining notion of culture. Finally, Ranjabar (2022) presents a method using critical incidents to reconstruct how international students cope with bureaucratic challenges in Germany.

BENEFITS AND APTITUDE

CIT is a reliable and validated qualitative research method that offers valuable insights into various phenomena. When used appropriately and in accordance with research objectives, it provides detailed and nuanced understanding of human behaviour, experiences, thoughts and reactions in particular contextual settings.

The appropriateness of utilizing CIT in a given research project should be considered in light of the following factors:

- Research question: Does the research inquiry involve understanding particular behaviours, ways of thinking or experiences that might have a significant impact on human interaction?
- Qualitative approach: If the research question centres on qualitative exploration rather than on quantitative measurement, CIT can offer an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and viewpoints.
- Contextual insight: CIT proves especially efficacious in probing the intricacies and rationale behind behaviours and reactions within real-life scenarios. Should the research aim be to transcend superficial explications and explore the fundamental factors that influence behaviour, choosing CIT would be appropriate.
- Research design: CIT allows for a suitable strategy for selecting incidents, gathering data, analysing narratives and formulating conclusions. An adeptly devised CIT study will safeguard the integrity of the findings.
- Rich Descriptions: CIT requires participants to provide complete descriptions of incidents, allowing for the possibility of comprehensive and detailed data. CIT enables data narratives that capture the complexity of experiences.
- Practical application: Insights derived from CIT investigations can directly inform practical strategies and interventions in various domains.
- Flexibility: The technique can be adapted to fit divergent research settings and questions.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the aforementioned criticism of the CIT format, there are, as in all qualitative research approaches, certain limitations that need acknowledging. Firstly, the researchers' preconceptions may sway the subjectivity inherent to the interpretation of incident descriptions, potentially affecting the veracity of findings. Secondly, it is important to consider the limited generalisability of the approach; the subjective nature of the method may impede easy extrapolation of conclusions to wider populations.

To conclude, the Critical Incident Technique offers a valuable lens through which researchers can investigate the complex aspects of human behaviour and lived experiences. As with any research methodology, it is essential to carefully consider the strengths and weaknesses of CIT and its alignment with the research question. Through its systematic approach, CIT continues to be at the forefront of advancing qualitative research and enhancing our understanding of human behaviour.

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