When East Meets West: An Investigation into Intercultural Conflicts between University Exchange Students from High and Low Context Cultures

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Abstract

The increasing importance of globalisation and international experience has resulted in a growing number of university students taking part in exchange programmes. The experience of living in another country can, however bring about issues concerning cultural differences in intercultural interactions. This research aims to understand whether conflicts arise for university students taking part in intercultural interactions and if so, the role of high and low context cultures (Hall, 1969) in these intercultural conflicts. In order to meet the research questions and objectives of the study, two empirical stages are used. This research develops a visual diagram of Hall’s high and low context cultures and their characteristic behaviours.

Stage 1 involves university students taking part in a cultural simulation to gain insight into the potential for conflict occurring in intercultural interactions. After taking part in the simulation, participants answered questionnaires about their reactions, thoughts and feelings towards the cultural simulation. The findings in stage 1 suggest a high likelihood of conflict occurring and lead the way to a more in depth analysis in stage 2.

Stage 2 involves interviews with exchange students who have spent their exchange programmes in either high or low context cultures. The aim of which was to identify characteristic behaviours causing conflicts and descriptions through the critical incident technique. The main contribution to knowledge from stage 2 is a model showing the characteristic behaviours that cause most conflict for both high and low context individuals, as well as the level of severity of the conflicts as described by participants. The model represents the key findings of this research; that conflict was experienced by both high and low context individuals, however low context individuals recalled a greater number of conflicts when interacting with high context individuals, than did high context individuals. This study identifies six characteristics of Hall’s high and low context theory that can cause conflicts. The characteristic high context behaviour of *implicit communication* was found to cause the greatest number of conflicts and the perceived severity of which was also high. *Explicit communication, task orientation, relationship orientation* and *collectivist behaviours* are identified as causing conflict for exchange students, but such conflicts were perceived as having a lower level of severity. Contrastingly, *verbal communication* and *individualist behaviours* are identified as causing conflict for neither high nor low context participants. Finally, the model shows that all conflicts described take place either within the university or in the local community.
The developed model shows that the severity level of the conflicts varies depending on the culture of the participants; low context individuals generally describe conflicts with a higher level of perceived severity than high context individuals. This research also includes indications for future research and practical recommendations in the area of academic educational institutions
Declaration of Originality:

This dissertation is my own original work and has not been submitted for any assessment or award at University of Manchester or any other university.

Signed:...........................................

Kathryn Willcox
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Research Problem:

‘Between users of low context communication and high context communication, misunderstanding is hard to avoid’ (Guirdham, 1999 p. 171), this gives an impression as to the importance of this research and the likelihood of misunderstandings taking place. High and low context cultures have distinctive behaviours, as defined by Hall (1969), whose theory classifies’ countries on a continuum of high and low context. This theory is applicable to the experiences of exchange students, through their exposure to, and interaction with these high and low context cultures. Their experiences permit an investigation into the way Hall’s theory supports the understanding of conflict experienced by students. Acknowledging this, the following research questions are proposed.

1.2 Research Questions:

1.a Considering exchange students from low context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from high context cultures?

1.b Considering exchange students from high context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from low context cultures?

2. If so, what characteristic behaviours cause these conflicts and what is the level of impact?

1.3 General Aim:

In line with the above research questions, the aim of this research is to understand whether conflicts arise for university students taking part in intercultural interactions and if so, the role of Hall’s high and low context cultures in these intercultural conflicts. The aim is to develop a model that presents these conflicts in order to understand the perceived level of impact they have, through the development of a severity scale. The focus of this research is on the experiences of university exchange students.
1.4 Objectives:

To meet this aim, the following objectives are proposed:

1. To discuss key cultural theories and critically examine Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures.

2. To define and discuss the issue of conflict and the presence of conflicts in intercultural situations.

3. To explain the role that conflict plays in high and low context cultures.

4. To identify characteristic behaviours associated with high and low context cultures to be shown in the development of a visual diagram.

5. To use a cultural simulation as preliminary research to investigate the potential of conflict occurring when individuals from high and low context cultures interact.

6. To conduct interviews with exchange students who have spent six months or more in a high or low context culture, in order to identify specific details of any intercultural conflicts and the impacts they had on individuals.

7. To use the visual diagram of characteristic behaviours developed in objective 4 to critically analyse the behaviour that caused any conflicts between both high and low context cultures and the impact on the exchange students.

8. To use the data gathered through objectives 1-7 to produce a model showing characteristic behaviours that may cause conflict in intercultural interactions and a perceived severity scale showing the level of impact.

1.5 Relevance

In the 2013 East Asia Pacific Economic Update, figures show that the developing economies of East Asia and the Pacific are projected to grow at 7.1 percent in 2014 (Worldbank.org, 2014). A Boston Consulting Group Report (2004) further confirms that China, with ‘a population exceeding one billion and an immense supply of low-wage workers’ is becoming a huge global player. This particular report emphasises the growing importance of the East, particularly China, in the global economy. ‘What we are witnessing at the moment is a fundamental world historical shift, a rebalancing, a return to some kind of equilibrium
between West and East’ (Day, 2010, p.6). The growing global market place, the growth of international tourism and the movements of international students (Cushner & Brislin, 1996) have been some of the reasons in the past for this shift and for the increasing relevance of the study of global intercultural interactions. Chen & Miller (2010, p.4) identify the need to ‘embrace emerging markets’ and call for an approach that ‘reaches out further temporally, geographically, and ideologically;’ further evidence that attention has begun to shift towards the East.

‘It is inevitable that employees and customers from dissimilar cultures will be in constant contact with one another’ (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Intercultural communication skills are therefore becoming vitally important for one to succeed in the global work place and ‘the global economy and shifting political tides make the need for intercultural understanding and education obvious’ (Earley, 2004, p.100). International activities allow students to upgrade their international perspectives and skills, enhance foreign language programs, and most importantly, increase cross-cultural understanding (Altbach & Knight, 2007); an international education is therefore, more important than ever. ‘More than ever, we need business professionals and executives who can make sense of today’s complexity and multiplicity by thinking in broad and integrative ways’ (Chen & Miller, 2004, p.6). The inception and education of such internationalised professionals can begin on a small scale with students in business colleges and universities. With the emergence of the knowledge society, international activities of universities have dramatically expanded in volume, scope, and complexity during the past two decades (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Curriculum in industrialised nations has also undergone a noteworthy shift towards internationalisation; ‘providing effective cross-cultural educational preparation to accompany the physical movement of student, programs, providers, and academic staff across borders’ (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p.27).

International exchange programs provide business students with opportunities to experience a culture different to their own and with that, learn valuable lessons, transferable to the growing globalised market place. During these international experiences, interactions take place amongst people from different cultural backgrounds and a number of researchers have noted this can result in interpersonal conflict (Shupe, 2007; Guirdham, 1999; Ting Toomey, 1994). Triandis (2000) also acknowledges cultural differences have profound implications on the probability of conflicts taking place.
There exists extensive evidence of conflict occurring between cultures during negotiation situations or within organisational settings (Tinsley, 2001; Brett, 1998). Trompenaars (1996) suggests in order to minimise this conflict, you must first analyse and measure the differences between the cultures. It therefore seems important to research cultural differences and the potential for conflicts to take place during international exchange programs. Focus is therefore at an individual level within a university setting as opposed to an organisational level. This research conceptualises such cultural differences in terms of Hall’s high and low context cultural dimensions.

On a personal level, experience of an exchange year in the German part of Switzerland, a typically low context country, provided a strong motivation to explore this topic further.

1.6 Structure

The structure of this research begins with a comprehensive review of relevant literature in the areas of culture, intercultural interactions and conflict; with particular focus on Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures. The literature review aims to meet objectives 1 through to 4 and aids the development of the characteristic behaviours. Following this, the methodology provides an overview of stages 1 and 2 of the empirical data collection that aim to meet objectives 5 and 6. The research philosophy and methods used are critically discussed alongside data collection techniques and limitations. An analysis of the empirical data collected is then given in order to meet objectives 7 and 8. Conclusions can then be derived from the data analysis to develop a model that will present the main implications and contribution to knowledge. Indications for future research are then given as well as practical recommendations.
2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The objective of this section is to present a review of the relevant literature that will provide a platform for the later empirical stages of data collection and analysis. This literature review therefore, aims to provide an overview of key concepts and highlight key definitions and variables to improve the clarity of the research questions and objectives. It aims to meet objectives 1 through to 4 (see page 10).

The structure of this literature review begins with discussing the very broad notions concerning culture and key cultural theories. It then focuses on a more detailed analysis of Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures. The literature identifies characteristics associated with Hall’s contextual theory, which aim to provide the basis for this research. The second section concerns the idea of conflict and draws on relevant literature that connects the topics of culture and conflict in intercultural situations. Particular focus is given to how conflict is viewed within Hall’s high and low context cultures.

It must be acknowledged this literature review does not aim to provide an extensive review of culture.

2.2 Culture Definition

Culture has been defined in a number of ways in the literature. Orkvist and Shaw (2008, p.183) define culture as a set of traditional beliefs and values that are transmitted and shared in a given society. They identify culture as a facilitator of communication whereby culture ‘imposes common habits of thought and feelings among people…’ Hofstede (1989, p.391) defines culture as ‘the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another’. Alternatively, Trompenaar’s ‘Riding the waves of culture’ (1998) describes culture as the way in which groups of people solve problems and reconcile dilemmas. Quite realistically, Smircich and Calas (1987) suggest culture is generally conceptualised differently, depending on the researcher’s goal of investigation. Intercultural interactions, and therefore communication acts as a focal point of this research and considering the central focus on high and low context cultures, it seems appropriate to acknowledge Edward T. Hall’s classification of culture. ‘Any culture is primarily a system for creating, sending, storing and processing information. Communication underlies everything’ (Hall & Hall, 1985 p.3). Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures encompasses many
communicative characteristics; this is therefore the most appropriate definition of culture for this research.

Hofstede (2011) identifies a distinction between organisational and national level culture. National culture first became a management concern for US companies involved in movement abroad during the 50s and 60s (Hofstede, 1989). In Hofstede’s ‘Organizing for Cultural Diversity’ (1989, p.391) it is stated ‘national cultures are programmed into us first, that is, right from the day we are born’ and therefore ‘form the most profound level of our mental programs, which is our values’. Hofstede classifies organisational or corporate cultures as being acquired last, after an individual has joined an employer. This distinction is important given that the focus of this study will be on national cultural differences.

2.3 Acknowledgement of Other Cultural Theories and Dimensions

The GLOBE cultural study (2004) involved an investigation into the relationship and interplay between culture and leadership in organisations throughout 61 different countries. The focus on "Global Leadership and Organisational Behavior Effectiveness" classifies 9 cultural dimensions of which there exists considerable overlap with other cultural theories. However, this study considers cultural dimensions on an organisational level as opposed to a national level.

There is extensive literature and theories on the ways in which national cultures differ. Trompenaars (1996) identifies seven dimensions by which national cultures can be identified; universalism versus particularism; collectivism versus individualism; affective versus neutral relationships; specificity versus diffuseness; achievement versus ascription; orientation towards time; and internal versus eternal control. Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (1997) focus on these cultural differences and how they affect the process of doing business and managing. They place these cultural differences into 3 categories; those that relate to our environment, those that come from the passage of time and those that arise from our relationships with other people. It is the latter of these that correspond most closely to the notion of intercultural interactions and is therefore most relevant to this research.

Similar, but not identical to Trompenaars (1996) dimensions are the six cultural dimensions of Geert Hofstede (1989). His research involved comparative studies to classify national cultures according to power distance; masculinity vs. femininity; uncertainty avoidance; long-term vs. short-term orientation; indulgence vs. restraint and individualism vs. collectivism.
From these six dimensions the theory of individualism vs. collectivism can be closely compared to Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures. Individualism is ‘the degree to which people in a country learn to act as individuals rather than as members of cohesive groups: from collectivist to individualist (Hofstede, 1989, p.392). Members of individualistic cultures are governed by the moral codes of an internalised, ‘free-wheeling’ self, and members of collectivistic cultures are influenced by the implicit moral standards of a connected ‘public’ self (Ting-Toomey et al. 1991). Countries such as China that score low (20) on Hofstede’s individualism scale are considered by Hall to be high context whereas low context cultures such as the UK score high (89) (Hofstede, 2001). These close links help to support Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures and will be discussed in more detail later.

2.4 Hall’s High and Low Context theory

The use of a culture based theoretical framework such as Hall’s as a starting point helps to create an explanatory system for the differences and similarities in communication within two different cultural communities (Ting-Toomey, 2010). Hall has been cited over 3,300 times for his three major works: 1,552 times for The Hidden Dimension (1966), 1,124 times for Silent Language (1959), and 659 times for Beyond Culture (1976) (Cardon, 2008); highlighting the importance of his work. Hall (1976) presents five categories of events that govern the rules of what ‘one perceives and is blind to in the course of living’, these are: the subject or activity, the situation, ones status in a social system, past experience and culture (Hall, 1976, p.76). The premise of much of Hall’s work is based on the concepts of time, space and context as key cultural factors; this research will primarily focus on context. According to Hall (1976, p.200), context is the ‘information that surrounds an event and is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event.’ Hall’s theory of context encompasses two dimensions; high and low context cultures, which describe the rules around information exchange and communication within a culture (Kakabadse, 2001, p.6).

2.4.1 Hall’s Contextual Continuum

Hall’s high and low context theory can be viewed as a continuum (figure 1) with countries placed along a scale to represent the extent to which contexting occurs within the national culture (Kim et al. 1998. p.3). Figure 1 shows where Hall places some countries along the contextual continuum. Hall (1976) acknowledges no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale, however some cultures are considered to be high and some low. Swiss-Germans
and Germans are positioned as being the lowest context cultures and the Japanese as representing the highest context culture.

In Hall’s 1976, ‘Beyond Culture’ he discusses context in the area of law in different cultures, focusing on Japan and USA as examples of high and low context systems respectively. In Hall’s subsequent research in 1985 and 1990 he adds Chinese culture, close to Japan, as another high context culture on the continuum. A 2004 report by Boston Consultant Group (BCG) details that despite widespread trends of globalisation and significant blurring of boundaries, ‘China still has norms, culture and capabilities all based on the domestic market’. Countries such as Korea (Kim et al. 1998), India and Singapore (Hooker, 2003) can also be identified as high context cultures, given the more collectivist characteristic behaviour. These classifications provide support for the country selection in the forthcoming empirical research.

**Figure 1- Hall’s Contextual Continuum of Countries**

![Hall's Contextual Continuum of Countries](image)

*Source: Hall (1976) adapted Usunier (1993)*
2.4.2 Characteristics of Hall’s High and Low Context Cultures

In considering the above discussion of Hall’s high and low context cultural theory, four characteristics can be identified to differentiate high and low context communications; explicit vs. implicit information, non-verbal communication, task vs. relationship orientation and individualist vs. collectivist

1. Explicit vs. Implicit Information

‘The effect of implicit communication should not be underestimated’ (Hoogervorst et al. 2004, p.288). In high-context communication, ‘most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message’ (Hall, 1985, p.79). High context communication therefore involves talking around the point and members of this culture often expect others to pick up on how they are feeling (Korac-Kakabadse, 2001). Hall (1976) states that, when talking about something they have on their minds, individuals from high context cultures expect others to know what is bothered them, without having to be too specific. This very indirect form of communication varies drastically to that common in low context cultures.

In comparison, information exchange in a low-context culture is ‘vested in the explicit code’ (Hall 1976 p.79) and therefore tends to be unambiguous and to the point. People of a low context feel the need to be ‘contexted’ any time they are asked to do something or to make a decision (Hall 1985, p. 9), this results in communication often being based on direct messages (Cardon, 2008). As a result of this, low context communication assumes individuals know very little and must be told practically everything.

2. Individualist vs. Collectivist

Individualist and collectivist characteristics appear less throughout the literature on contexting and are components of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. However, these characteristics deserve considerable attention for this study. Much cultural literature considers low context communication patterns to be typically found in individualistic cultures and high context patterns, typically in collectivist cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1994). Japan, Korea, and China can be considered less individualistic and more collectivistic (Park et. 2011), mirroring the country classifications of Hall’s contextual continuum. Korac-Kakabadse (2001) also acknowledges this dimension as complementary to the context continuum. Hofstede’s (1980) study further confirms cultures characterised as low context are predominantly individualistic
and cultures characterised as high context are predominantly collectivist. In Levine’s (1985) ‘The Flight from Ambiguity’ a relationship is made between attributes of directness and individualistic cultures and indirectness and ambiguity within collectivist cultures. Gudykunst, (1994) also describes high and low context cultures as disclosing person-based vs. group-based information, to which a close link to Hofstede’s (1980) description of individualist vs. collectivist can be made. Individualism is defined by Hofstede (1984, p.419) as a ‘situation where individuals are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only’ in contrast, collectivism is a ‘situation where people belong to in-groups or collectivities that are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty’. Alternatively, the concept of individualism and collectivism is the extent to which individuals place dependence on the ‘group’ (Hofstede, 1984). Hall (1976) distinguishes that members of high context cultures make greater distinctions between insiders and outsiders than low context cultures.

3. Non-Verbal and Verbal Communication

‘Interaction is a complex process which involves verbal and non-verbal elements; both are inextricably bound up with culture’ (Kirch, 1979, p.416). Matsumoto et al. (2005, p.16) suggest conflict is ‘inevitable because of the differences in the meaning of verbal and non-verbal behaviors across cultures, and the associated emotions and values inherent in the cultural system’. This characteristic is therefore an interesting phenomenon to explore in relation to cultural differences.

In low context cultures less importance is placed on non-verbal communication with many external, surrounding factors being screened out. Gestures are also considered important within high context communication with non-verbal communications used frequently during information exchanges. In reference to collectivist and individualist cultures, which we have seen to be closely linked to high and low context cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1994), Triandis (2010, p.149) noted that collectivists sample the context of communications more than individualists. This results in them ‘paying more attention to gestures, eye contact, level of voice, the direction of the two bodies, touching and the distance between the bodies’. Such paralinguistic cues can open the opportunity for misinterpretation and error (Triandis, 2010).

Non-verbal communication is discussed thoroughly in Hall’s 1959 book ‘The Silent Language’ where he presents it as one of the ‘great paradoxes of culture’. Stating that European culture is a ‘word world’ and that these words can mean one thing on one level but in reality something quite different can be being communicated on another level. Similarly,
Kirch (1979) highlights numerous differences between cultures and non-verbal communications; actions such as laughter, applauding, smiling and hand gestures all appear to have different meanings for different cultures.

4. Task vs. Relationship Orientation

The final characteristic behaviours identified are task and relationship orientated communication. In low context cultures, communication is primarily task oriented. Hall (1985) identifies Germans and Swiss national cultures as low context, he describes the scenario of an executive office in Germany; information communicated in such an office is only shared with a select few. In contrast, Hall compares this to a high context Japanese executive, whose offices are shared, and organisations are centered on the gathering, processing and sharing of information. High context cultures therefore have a strong relationship orientation. In Hall’s Hidden Dimensions (1985, p.8) he states Japanese, Arab and Mediterranean people have ‘extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues and clients’. They are involved in close personal relationships and therefore do not require or expect as much in depth background information. Kim et al. (1998) used a 16-item survey comparing USA, Chinese and Korean cultures, finding that in a high-context culture (such as China and Korea), people appear to be more socially orientated; further supporting the relationship orientation characteristic.

2.4.3 High and Low Context Cultures in Intercultural Situations

Intercultural communication deals with the interaction between people of different cultures, the analysis is therefore on the cultural differences in play that allow for micro level investigation into these interactions (Levine et al. 2007, p. 5).

As mentioned previously, Kim et al. (1998) carried out a cross-cultural study of Korean, Chinese and American subjects that attempts to show whether Hall’s description of the characteristics of high and low context cultures can be empirically confirmed. This study begins to critically assess the accuracy of Hall’s theory and his definitions of high and low context cultures. This study identifies five theoretical categories of contexting: social orientation, responsibility, confrontation, communication, and dealing with new situations. Using a 16-item survey instrument on graduate students from Korea, USA and China the five dimensions were tested. The results showed that in a high context culture (China and Korea) people appeared to be more ‘socially orientated, less confrontational and more complacent
with existing ways of living’ than in low context cultures. They also found that in high context cultures, ‘authorities assume more responsibility than people from a low context culture (such as America)’ (Kim et al., 1998, p.520). This study is supporting of Hall’s high and low context cultures and contributes to the validity of the characteristics identified.

2.4.4 Critique of Hall

Analysis of key literatures by Cardon (2008) present challenges to Hall’s theory of high and low contexts. One critique presented is the role of modernisation and globalisation leading to a convergence towards characteristics of low context cultures. Cardon (2008) suggests members of high context cultures are shifting to more direct, precise communication styles, characteristics of low context cultures. This effectively weakens the classification of Hall’s contextual theory.

Similarly, Cardon (2008) highlights the impact of technology on culture; he claims it is reducing the reliance on contextual cues, which may undermine some features of high context cultures, suggesting a further shift towards low context cultures. In light of this, the modern day relevance of the theory is challenged. A final critique by Cardon (2008) of Hall’s (1976) ‘Beyond Culture’ suggests Hall is very critical towards low context cultures. Cardon (2008) implies Hall’s literature favors high context cultures and criticises many American (low context) tendencies. According to Cardon (2008, p.402), Hall suggests [American culture] engages ‘only in linear thinking, looking at ideas not events and not taking the time to get to know people’. Hall’s suggested preference towards high context cultures, amongst other criticisms, leads Cardon (2008) to recommend that ‘researchers who cite contexting or interpret intercultural communication in terms of contexting should do so cautiously.’ A final recommendation from Cardon (2008) is that researchers, who do describe contexting, should also present the limitations to the model.

Rozin (2003) highlights further limitations to Hall’s contextual theory by identifying alternative principles for understanding cultural differences. One principle suggests much of the effect of culture results from physical and social artifacts; meaning cultural differences stem from differences in the physical environment rather than individuals’ mental differences (Rozin, 2003).

A second principle presented by Rozin (2003) is that differences between individuals in different cultures are generally ‘larger in behaviour than in thoughts or feelings.’ This principle suggests the environment plays a role in shaping our cultural behaviour. Rozin states
that thoughts and feelings can change, but unlike behaviour, these cannot be observed, so this occurs indirectly. Culture can therefore shape behaviour and the environment but act only indirectly on mental events, suggesting cultural differences will appear much greater in an individual’s behaviour than in the reality of his/her thoughts and feelings.

A further suggestion presented is the impact age has on cultural differences. Rozin (2003) suggests that, ‘in the contemporary world, differences between individuals will be larger in older generations.’ Globalisation, as also highlighted by Cardon (2008), has meant perceived differences between cultures are not as large amongst young people. This may suggest differences between the behavioural characteristics associated with Hall’s high and low context cultures could be weakened amongst the younger generation (Cardon, 2008).

The final principle for understanding cultural differences is the concept of a ‘default response’ to situations. The default response leads to cultures inducing ‘preferences for thinking, feeling or acting in particular ways’ (Rozin, 2003) suggesting that, over time, behaviours can be easily understood by members of other cultures. This process has been coined enculturation and due to a process of assimilation, decreases the perceived cultural differences between individuals (Sam & Berry, 2010).

2.4.5 Assumptions

Levine et al. (2007, p.211) states that ‘if a theory presupposes cultural groups (as opposed to individuals) as entities for a certain construct or characterises members of a cultural group as similarly possessing a certain attribute, the theory should convincingly argue that unity exists among group members’. Hall’s high and low context theory assumes national culture can predict individual culture. It presupposes that members of high and low context countries possess the identified characteristics of high and low context cultures, it must therefore argue that a sense of unity exists amongst these group members.

Levine (2007, p.209) also highlights the importance of not automatically treating all intercultural interactions as intercultural communication. One example given is the following; ‘when Jane from USA and John from Germany interact with one another, not all aspects of their interactions reflect intercultural/international communication. Only when their communication patterns reflect their corresponding cultural characteristics and assumptions can we treat their interaction as intercultural communication’. Therefore there exists ‘no guarantee that cross-cultural communication differences will be fully exhibited in intercultural
communication’. This is an important factor to take into account when researching intercultural interactions.

2.5 Conflict

The Oxford English Dictionary defines conflict as ‘to be incompatible or at variance with’ (OED online, 2014). Alternatively, Hocker and Wilmot (1991, p.12) offer a more detailed definition of conflict as ‘an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals’. Ting Toomey (1991) directly relates conflict to taking place in intercultural situations and defines it as ‘the perceived and/or actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes or outcomes between two or more parties from different cultures over substantive and/or relational issues.’ Ting-Toomey (1982) also views conflict as part of a communication process, this allows a connection to be made between conflict, culture and Hall’s context theory. Ting Toomey (1994) suggests high and low context communication processes may influence the presence or absence of conflicts. Similarly, Hall (1976) recognises that failure to take contexting differences into account can cause problems in intercultural situations.

2.5.1 Cultural Distance and Conflict

Triandis, (2010) identifies that conflict is greater when two cultures are very different than when they are similar; this difference is called ‘cultural distance’. He found cultural distance increases the chance of miscommunication and that this distance influences the perceived similarity or dissimilarity of individuals involved in intercultural interactions. A perceived dissimilarity between cultures may therefore increase the likelihood of conflict. The theory of cultural distance impacts the likelihood of miscommunication and therefore could influence the potential for conflicts to arise. Suggesting, the larger the distance between countries on Hall’s contextual continuum (figure 1), could influence the potential of intercultural conflict.

2.5.2 Intercultural Conflict

Berns and Atran (2012, p.633) present cultural conflict as a biological phenomenon, occurring from deep within our biological make up. Stating that challenges ‘elicit brain processes involved in cognitive decision-making, emotional activation and physiological arousal associated with the outbreak, conduct and resolution of conflict’. Berns and Atran (2012) also suggest conflict can arise from knowledge, traditions and artifacts; suggesting cultural
dimensions such as Hall’s high and low contexts may play a role too. Ting Toomey (1994) proposes intercultural conflict typically starts off with miscommunication, leading to misinterpretations and pseudo conflicts. He then suggests that if this miscommunication goes unmanaged then actual interpersonal conflict can occur. Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) offer four practical reasons for studying intercultural conflicts; interpersonal relationship satisfaction; creative problem solving; the growth of the global work force and domestic workplace diversity.

‘Between users of low context communication and high context communication, misunderstanding is hard to avoid’ (Guirdham, 1999, p.171). Cushner and Brislin (1996) identify five ‘problem emotions’ that are common in intercultural encounters and may help to understand the ‘misunderstanding’ discussed by Guirdham (1999). Firstly, disconfirmed expectations involve being upset because a situation is not what was expected. Ting-Toomey (1994, p.363) acknowledges ‘violations of expectations’ can lead to conflicts. The second identified problem emotion is a feeling of not belonging, whereby one feels like an outsider and not part of the ‘in-group’, a characteristic closely linked to high context, collectivist cultures (Hall 1986; Hofstede, 1989). This could be an emotion experienced by a low context individual when interacting with high context individuals. A third problem emotion is a sense of ambiguity, associated with not knowing what is ‘going on’ or how to interpret events in intercultural encounters. This problem can be related to Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) who suggest uncertainty contributes to conflict. The study found that people can ‘become impatient with or intolerant of the ambiguity’, leading to feelings of anger, frustration, or resentment.

The fourth emotion identified by Cushner and Brislin (1996, p.274) is a confrontation with ones own prejudices. It proposes that individuals are confronted with the associations they make of people ‘like me’ and ‘unlike me’. This problem emotion can lead to individuals feeling unpleasantly surprised about their own prejudices when interacting in another culture if people are termed ‘unlike me’. Finally, the fifth problem emotion proposed by Cushner and Brislin (1996) is a feeling of anxiety because of unfamiliarity concerning an event. All five of these problem emotions originate from an initial misunderstanding within an intercultural interaction and therefore may increase the potential for conflict. The above problems identified allow a consideration into the possibility of intercultural conflicts between members of high and low context cultures.
2.5.3 Conflict in High and Low Context Cultures

There is widespread literature that acknowledges culture can influence the preference of conflict style adopted, as well as influencing the different views towards conflict and conflict management (Croucher et al. 2012; Triandis, 2000; Ting-Toomey, 1991). Ting-Toomey (1994) outlines different cultural value assumptions concerning low context and high context communicators’ basic attitudes to conflict. These assumptions take into account the core value characteristics associated with both high and low context cultures, providing a basis for analysing conflicts within these two different cultures.

According to Ting Toomey (1994, p.364), the underlying assumption for low context communicators is that conflict typically follows a ‘problem solving’ model. For this reason, conflict in a low context culture can be viewed as being functional and dysfunctional; dysfunctional, when repressed and not directly confronted and functional when it can provide problem-solving opportunities. Conflict can also bring about positive changes in relationships (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Similarly, Ting-Toomey (1994, p.364) suggests that in a low context culture conflict should be dealt with openly and directly, and when conflict is effectively managed it may be viewed as a ‘win-win problem solving game.’ This falls in line with a study by Croucher et al. (2012) that found low context cultures such as Ireland and the USA adopt more dominating roles towards conflict.

In contrast with this, Ting-Toomey (1994) presents seven assumptions of high context communicators, suggesting they follow a ‘face maintenance’ model of conflict. Conflict in high context cultures is viewed as damaging to social face and relational harmony, and therefore should be avoided. This is supported by Croucher et al. (2012) who found that high context nations, in this case India and Thailand, prefer avoiding and obliging conflict styles more than low context nations. Ting-Toomey (1994, p.364) adds that in high context cultures conflict should be dealt with discreetly and subtly with ‘conflict signaling a lack of self-discipline and self-censorship’. The effective management of conflict in high context cultures is viewed as a ‘win-win face negotiation game.’ Conflict within high context cultures can therefore be viewed as primarily dysfunctional. In addition to this, studies have shown that individuals from high context cultures are more prone to avoid or to oblige in conflicts (Ting-Toomey, 1991; Chau & Gudykunst, 1987). This strategy of conflict avoidance, associated with high context cultures, suggests yet further differences between high and low context cultures and their attitudes towards conflict.
Having considered this relevant literature, it could suggest that if conflict occurs during intercultural interactions the reactions of individuals from high and low context cultures may be different.

2.5.4 Impact of Conflict on Individuals

Hall (1985, p.11) states the following; ‘high context people are apt to become impatient and irritated when low context people insist on giving them information they do not need. Conversely, ‘low context people are at a loss when high context people do not provide enough information’. Impatience and irritation can be classed as negative terms to describe the impact that characteristic low context behaviours can have on high context individuals. Such negative emotions, as highlighted by Cushner and Brislin (1996) suggest a potential for conflict to occur between these cultures.

Shupe (2007) studied intercultural conflicts experienced by international students, using the collectivism and individualism cultural dimensions to conceptualise cultural distance. This study states that cultural distance predicts the incidence of intercultural conflict, and exposes the impact intercultural conflicts have on international students’ job satisfaction, psychological well-being, health conditions and socio-cultural distress. The study develops a model that views intercultural conflict as a stressor and found international students’ conflicts are directly related to decreased work satisfaction, increased stress and decreased psychological wellbeing. Similarly, Babiker et al. (1980) theorised that cultural differences were the main cause of stress experienced by sojourners. This is further suggested in Shupe’s (2007) study that states the more different people are in terms of cultural background, the more likely their interactions will result in damaging misunderstandings. The results of these studies theorise that cultural differences generally have a negative impact on individuals, suggesting potential for conflict.

2.6 Contribution to the Body of Research

A study by Adler and Graham (1989) questions whether intra-cultural behavior accurately predicts cross-cultural behavior by conducting a negotiation simulation involving a sample of 462 Japanese, American and Canadian business people. The study found negotiators actually adapt their behaviors in cultural interactions. This provides useful insights into whether identifiable conflicts may exist between high and low context cultures, given the evidence of adaptability amongst individuals. Adler and Graham (1989, p.516) criticise research projects
by suggesting ‘while the field of international management has included cross-national interaction studies, they tended to emphasize macro-level organizational, structural and financial issues’. There seems to be a significant gap with regards to intercultural interactions that take place at the micro level, with few researches focusing purely on the interactions between individuals of different cultures, external to organisational situations. Additionally, Hofstede (1991) recognises the challenges presented by intercultural differences in multinational organisations. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on micro level interactions and conflicts that take place between exchange students in intercultural interactions. There also appears to be limited literature that focuses on specific behavioural characteristics of cultures and the impact of such behaviours on intercultural conflicts. Literature tends to concentrate on conflict resolution styles (Croucher et al., 2012; Trompenaars, 1996; Aruch & Black, 1991) and conflict management (Ting-Toomey, 1994) rather than the causes of conflicts between cultures. This study aims to develop a model to create an understanding of specific cultural behaviours that may cause intercultural conflicts.

This study is relevant since the small-scale, exploratory investigation of university exchange student experiences presents an opportunity to understand the potential for conflicts to occur at an individual level, and the specific cultural characteristic behaviours that may cause these conflicts.

2.7 Visual Diagram

The visual diagram aims to show, more clearly, the identified cultural characteristics of Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures. From the literature review and for the clarity of this study, eight characteristic behaviours associated with Hall’s high and low context cultural dimension have been extracted. These characteristics help to conceptualise the cultural differences that will aid the answering of the research questions and development of the proposed model. The types of behaviour are illustrated in figure 2.
Figure 2: A visual diagram to illustrate the characteristic high and low context cultural behaviours associated with Hall’s (1976) theory.
3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction:

This section will provide an explanation of the chosen research philosophy and research design along with details about the primary, empirical data collected in stages 1 and 2.

Research Questions:

1. Considering exchange students from low context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from high context cultures?

2. Considering exchange students from high context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from low context cultures?

2. If so, what characteristic behaviours cause these conflicts and what is the level of impact?

Objectives 5 and 6 of this study were the following:

5. To use a cultural simulation as preliminary research to investigate the potential of conflict occurring when individuals from high and low context cultures interact.

6. To conduct interviews with exchange students who have spent 6 months or more in a high or low context culture, in order to identify specific details of any intercultural conflicts and the impacts they had on individuals

3.1.1 Research Philosophy

The ontology of this research can be classed as constructionist, with the perspective that there is a socially constructed reality. The research design of this study is based on an interpretivism epistemology; often associated with constructivism, it is concerned with understanding the way we as humans make sense of the world and the differences between humans as social actors (Saunders et al. 2007). The interpretivism paradigm views knowledge as being contextually and often temporally constrained, with the researcher considered part of the social world. In contrast to this is a positivist epistemological approach that suggests facts are derived only from science and the researcher is considered an external factor. Phenomenology is a research philosophy that refers to the way in which we as humans make sense of the world around us (Saunders et al. 2007). According to Finlay (2009) research is
phenomenological when it involves rich description of the life world or lived experience. A phenomenological approach is appropriate when considering the research methods to be used in stage 2 of this study. Lester (1999, p.1) relates the phenomenological approach with ‘gathering deep information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews’. The intended, critical incident method involves obtaining ‘a record of specific behaviors from those in the best position to make the necessary observations and evaluations’ (Flanagan, 1954, p.30). In addition to this, the phenomenological approach is most commonly associated with qualitative methods of data collection; a phenomenological philosophy will therefore be taken throughout the main methodology in stage 2 (Saunders et al. 2007).

3.1.2 Research Progress

Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers involving the use of two or more data collection methods within one study. This mixed method research allows the validity of the data collected to be checked, for example, quantitative data can be triangulated by collecting qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al. 2007). As part of this triangulation method of research, this study will comprise of two methodological stages. A simulation technique in stage 1 will be an explanatory, quantitative method and will involve the collection of data through questionnaires. Stage 1 aims to meet objective 5, this preliminary stage acts as a foundation for developing in depth research in the form of exploratory, semi structured interviews in stage 2. Both stages will be treated independently yet the findings from stage 1 are intended to act as a lead into stage 2.
3.2 Stage 1: Simulation Technique

3.2.1 Introduction:

Fowler and Pusch, (2010, p.94) defined intercultural simulation games as ‘instructional activities that engage and challenge participants with certain experiences integral to encounters between people of more than one cultural group’. In cultural simulation games such as the Bafa Bafa game (Shirts, 1995) the aim is for participants to develop skills and prepare for future experiences of interacting with different cultures.

Traditionally, the process (as in Bafa Bafa) involves participants imitating the behaviour of pre-constructed cultures with rules; reward and punishment systems; styles of interacting in social or work situations and sometimes even a language (Fowler & Pusch, 2010). Participants may then be given a task to complete or questions to ask, to encourage interactions between the different constructed cultures. Often, the two cultures resemble either distinctly individualistic or collective characteristics (Fowler & Pusch, 2010). This is to allow an ‘exploration of how these two fundamental cultural orientations play out in a group and cause difficulty when people move into the “other” cultural setting’ (Fowler & Pusch, 2010, p.96). Woods (1990, p.116) states the purpose of simulation games (in particular, Bafa Bafa) is to ‘introduce students to the values, expectations, and customs of a foreign culture’. He suggests cultural simulations can illustrate how one may feel when encountering another culture, whilst also showing just how difficult it can be to enter new environments. Having considered the purpose of simulation techniques, a cultural simulation, similar to Bafa Bafa, will be used as part of the triangulation method. This stage 1 of the methodology aims to meet objective 5 and aid the answering of research questions 1.a and 1.b.

3.2.2 Research Methodology: Stage 1

Business Students at the University of Manchester will take part in ‘cultural simulations’ that involve imitating 2 cultural groups; the ‘tribe’ culture follow specific cultural rules that are designed to mirror and exhibit characteristics of a high context culture (Hall 1976). The predefined rules of the tribe culture were as followed:

1. Speakers stand shoulder to shoulder, facing opposite directions, when conversing, not face to face.
2. It is considered rude to converse too fast, there must be at least a five-second pause between questions and answers
3. Women hold their hands in front of them, men hold theirs behind them

These rules may be seen as representing those within a high context culture. Since Hall’s classification that non-verbal communication often plays a key role in high context cultures as well as the characteristic of implicit communication, where much information is internalised in a high context culture (Hall, 1976). Similarly, one feature of the simulation is that only members of the tribe culture are aware of the rules. This creates a somewhat collectivistic behaviour amongst the tribe; further supporting Hall’s classification of high context cultures and the behaviours identified in the visual diagram.

Individuals of the second culture, named the ‘anthropologists’ were briefed of their roles as professional anthropologists, visiting a new country for the first time. Unaware of the tribe’s rules, their task was to learn more about the tribe culture by talking to the inhabitants. The anthropologists, on entering the room, were told to ask certain, predefined questions in order to learn about and interact with the tribe culture (See Appendix B).

3.2.3 Data Collection: Questionnaire Design

As a quantitative research method, questionnaires offer a structured, standardised format for collecting information from a large number of participants. One critique of questionnaires as a research method is that the response rate can be particularly low. However, a study by Edwards et al. (2007) found there are a number of ways to increase questionnaire response rates. These include, monetary incentives, varying the length of questionnaire, follow up contact with non-respondents and highlighting the benefits to the sponsor or society if participants return questionnaires. Monetary incentives would be unrealistic for an undergraduate study; however, distributing and collecting the questionnaires directly after the respondents have completed the simulation would be effective. Witnessing the distribution of the questionnaires, as apposed to using an alternative, delayed method such as email, eliminates issues surrounding memory or delayed responses and may ensure a higher response rate from participants (Sanders et al. 2007, p.393).

Another important factor to acknowledge with the use of questionnaires is the structure and format. The question length, order and type must be appropriate, as well as the use of response scales and overall grammar (Lietz 2010). The questionnaires in this study were developed from an initial template and involved the use of preliminary demographic questions followed by a number of likert-style questions. The use of these rating questions
can be useful when collecting opinion data (Sanders et al. 2007, p. 372) therefore making it an appropriate technique to use in this study. A likert-style rating scale is most frequently used with rating questions and can be defined as ‘a scale that allows the respondent to indicate how strongly she or he agrees or disagrees with a statement’ (Sanders et al. 2007, p. 601). Examples of this technique from the designed questionnaire are as followed:

(Anthropologist) Q1. How comfortable did you feel interacting with the tribe culture? (Circle as appropriate)

Response options include; ‘extremely uncomfortable’; ‘slightly uncomfortable’; ‘neither’; ‘slightly comfortable’; ‘extremely comfortable’.

(Tribe) Q1. How easy did you find adapting to the rules of your culture? (Circle as appropriate)

Extremely difficult; slightly difficult; neither; slightly easy; extremely easy

The final question in the questionnaire allowed for a more open response; ‘Any other comments on your experience with the tribe/anthropologist culture?’ This question falls closely in line with the exploratory nature of this research and allows respondents to respond in their own way. This technique is particularly useful to find out what is ‘uppermost in the respondents mind’ (Saunders et al. 2007, p. 369). It is appropriate to include an open style question to obtain the true feelings and opinions of participants towards the opposite cultures and their intercultural interactions in the simulation.

The tribe and anthropologists answered slightly different questionnaires (Appendix A). The aim of this section is to gain an insight into, firstly the anthropologist’s reactions to the high context tribe, the impact of the rules governing the tribe culture and the corresponding level of comfort felt when the anthropologists interact with the high context, tribe culture. Secondly, in order to meet objective 5 the questionnaires aim to gain an insight into how the tribe react to adopting the rules of their own culture and the corresponding level of comfort felt whilst interacting within their culture and with the anthropologists.

The ultimate aim of the simulation is to gather feedback via questionnaires of the experiences of the participants with a view of confirming or disconfirming the presence of conflict between the simulated high context tribe culture and the anthropologists. Ultimately, the stage
1 methodology aims to answer research questions 1.a and 1.b and promote a lead into further exploration in stage 2.

3.3 Stage 2: Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

3.3.1 Introduction

It is generally accepted that, for inductive and exploratory research, qualitative methods are most useful (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010, p.106). Furthermore, Van Maanen (1979) acknowledges that the CIT is an inductive method whereby researchers can develop patterns, concepts and theories.

Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010, p.117) discuss the use of communication as a common primary data collection method, referring to the collection of data through ‘asking those who have experienced a particular phenomenon to explain it to the researcher’. Stage 2 will therefore involve the use of the qualitative, CIT; involving a series of interviews with students who have, in the last 12 months, spent a minimum of six months living and studying in a country with either a high or low context culture, as classified by Hall (1976).

3.3.2 Research Methodology: Stage 2

The CIT can be defined as ‘a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behavior in defined situations’. The CIT allows observations and accounts of human behavior to be collected in defined situations. This method helps to facilitate solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles (Flanagan, 1954). The exploratory nature of this research means this method is appropriate for achieving objective 6. Flanagan (1954, p.30) also states the CIT, rather than just collecting opinions, hunches, and estimates, obtains records of specific behaviors from ‘those in the best position to make the necessary observations and evaluations.’ An incident can be classified as ‘any specifiable human activity that can be used to permit inferences and predictions about the person performing the act’ (Flanagan 1954, p.1). Cushner and Brislin (1996, p.13) use critical incidents to develop a cross-cultural training program to ‘assist people when they must adjust to life in countries other than their own’. In their study, critical incidents are designed to introduce readers to the range of experiences they may have as they interact with cultures; the study aims to develop a more ‘comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in cross-cultural interaction’ (Cushner & Brislin, 1996, p.14).
The CIT has been compared to participant observation as a similar qualitative method since both techniques are used to get closer to the subject (Bryman, 1989). However, participant observation focuses on the here and now (Cassell, 2004); as a research technique it entails listening and watching other peoples behaviour in order to collect first hand information in a natural setting (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). The use of participant observation in the case of this research could provide first hand data of intercultural conflicts as and when they took place. However, such a technique also brings many disadvantages, for example, the effect of the observer’s presence, and the reliability of the observations made (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). In addition, the delayed time frame and geographical distance of both the incidents and the participant’s means this method of data collection is impractical and of little value to this research.

The CIT technique has also been compared to the use of semi and unstructured interviews as qualitative research methods (Bryman, 1989). Unstructured interviews tend to have no pre-determined list of questions and interviewees are given the opportunity to talk freely about events, behaviour and beliefs in relation to the topic area. This technique can be closely linked to the CIT with a view of gaining in depth observations and accounts of human behaviour. The idea is to probe answers and allow interviewees to explain, or build on their responses whilst maintaining a certain degree of flexibility (Saunders et al. p.315). Semi-structured interviews involve researchers planning a list of themes to be covered in the interview, this allows the interview to be guided in a practical way, to stay focused and achieve the main aims. Participants in this research will be provided with an interview guide prior to the interview in order to equip them with the desired outcomes and aims. The use of semi-structured interviews may also be used to explore and explain themes that have emerged from the use of a questionnaire, (Wass and Wells, 1994) creating a useful connection between stages 1 and 2 of this research. To elaborate further, the CIT allows the interviews to have a clearer focus than semi-structured interviews, enabling the researcher to probe more appropriately ‘As is the case for participant observation, CIT is context rich, however, unlike participant observation the context is developed entirely from the subjects perspective’ (Cassell, 2004, p.47).

### 3.3.3 Adaptation

For the purpose of this study, the CIT will be adjusted to incorporate ‘micro’ incidents. The main ‘critical incident’ can be viewed as the exchange period abroad; in which numerous
micro incidents take place. The reason for this is it gives participants the opportunity to
describe not only one but, if applicable, numerous critical incidents where they may have
experienced conflict. This means interviewees are not constrained in their discussion,
contributing to increased support to the incidents described. This also falls closely in line with
the flexible, open nature of semi-structured interviews in that it gives participants more
freedom in their recounts.

3.3.4 Interview Design

Face to face interviews are essential to the flexible, informal nature of the CIT and therefore,
where possible, this is the preferred interview technique. However, given the international,
intercultural focus of the study, in some cases online interviews will be carried out via Skype.
Criticisms have proposed that this technique lacks interpersonal contact, and may prevent
the creation of a comfortable atmosphere for sharing experiences and incidents, due to the
asynchronous communication of place (Opdenakker, 2006). One advantage of this online
technique, however, is the ability to take notes without seeming impolite (Daniels and
Cannice, 2004). It is the next best alternative to gathering data internationally, given the
presence of time and monetary restraints. With the permission of the participants, the
interviews were recorded so as to increase efficiency and accuracy and to enable a more
detailed analysis of the qualitative data. In order to maintain anonymity, participant names are
changed.

Flanagan (1954) proposes five main steps to the CIT. First, general aims and objectives of
the activity must be established in order to create a ‘uniform idea to participants’. The
development of which should result in a brief, usable statement so observers are made fully
aware of the purposes of the observations and evaluations. Secondly, both plans and
specifications should be developed; highlighting the situations observed (the place, the
persons, the conditions, and the activities), the relevance to the general aim, the effect on the
general aim and finally how the participant observers are selected. The next step, Flanagan
highlights involves the data collection technique, behaviours or results observed should be
‘evaluated, classified, and recorded while the facts are still fresh in the mind of the observer.’
He emphasises the importance of this in collecting reliable, useable data and therefore the
time frame between the defined situation and recorded observation matters. The fourth step
involves analysing the data retrieved. ‘The purpose of the data analysis stage is to summarise
and describe the data in an efficient manner so it can be effectively used for many practical
purposes’ (Flanagan 1954 p.19). The final stage in the use of the CIT is that of **interpreting and reporting** the data in relation to the initial aims, objectives, plans and specifications. In particular, Flanagan highlights the importance of recognising limitations to avoid faulty generalisations.

Sanders *et al.* (2007) highlight the importance of providing participants with knowledge of the themes before semi-structured interviews take place. This promotes validity and reliability, enabling the interviewee to consider the aims and goals of the interview. Similarly, it must be taken into account that the memory of participants is improved if it is known that a particular behaviour is to be observed (Flanagan, 1954). Participants will therefore be contacted between 1-3 days prior to the scheduled date and informed of the general objectives through the interview guide (Appendix C). Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010) note the importance of participants having the same understanding of theoretical concepts used in the study; clear definitions of high and low context cultures are therefore communicated to participants, as well as a broad definition of conflict. Caution is taken with the level of information supplied to the participants, so as not to influence their responses and ensure their experiences and stories were legitimate and reliable.

**3.3.5 Data Collection**

Participants are chosen based on their student status, nationality and their country of exchange. Appendix E shows participants’ nationality, home university, main cultural influence and exchange university. Students from low context cultures, according to Hall’s theory, were from the UK, Finland and Switzerland and spent their exchange in high context cultures, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, and Japan. Responses from these participants will assist with answering research question 1a.

1.a Considering exchange students from low context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from high context cultures?

Conversely, interviews will take place with students from high context cultures; Singapore, HK and China who spent time on exchange in low context cultures; the UK and Switzerland. It is acknowledged that some of these participants are still on exchange when interviewed, a fact that will be taken into account within the limitations (see page 54). These participants will assist with answering research question 1b.
1.b Considering exchange students from high context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from low context cultures?

The interview length varied from 10-45 minutes and the sample selection method involves a variety of techniques. Since it is important for interviewees to feel relaxed and open to discussion of the conflicts they experienced, the selection process was relatively informal. Societies such as the Manchester Business School International Society, as well as friendship circles in Manchester are primary sources of suitable respondents. Contacts were also made through personal experiences of the researcher during an exchange year abroad. In these cases, the use of social networks proved fundamental in gaining access to appropriate samples. In addition to this, a snowballing sampling technique is used, in which initial participants recommend subsequent students. This technique can be particularly useful when there are difficulties in identifying participants (Saunders, 2007, p.232). Marshall (1996) acknowledges that overlaps between sampling methods can often take place. Given the limited time and resources of this undergraduate study, a convenience sampling technique is chosen due to the accessibility to university students. However, a more intellectual strategy is that of judgment sampling. This involves the researcher actively selecting the most productive sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996). This technique was particularly useful for this research given that exchange students have direct experience of intercultural interactions and potential conflicts; making them the most productive and appropriate to answer the research questions.

3.3.6 Limitations

Brislin and Cushner (1996) highlight the potential danger in the total reliance on stories or critical incidents as a data collection method. They highlight that critical incidents are limited to the experiences of one or a few people, and that conclusions drawn, and therefore recommendations made, should be taken with caution. Flanagan (1954, p.29) also emphasises that ‘critical incidents represent only raw data, and do not automatically provide solutions to problems’. This technique should therefore not be used to make generalisations to the wider population. With generalisations there exists a danger of ‘cultural lumping’, which involves making questionable generalities about individuals within a culture (Scullon et al., 2012). Park et al. (2012) highlight that within the same culture, there exists substantial individual variations and this can prove problematic when studying and making sweeping statements about cultural differences and conflicts that occur. Sanders et al. (2007) also express concerns
about the generalisability of findings from qualitative research; an important consideration in this study, given the necessarily small number of participants in both stages 1 and 2. However, there exists an argument that relates the significance of qualitative research to theoretical propositions (Bryman, 1992). This suggests that where there exists a relationship between research and relevant, existing theories, as is the case in this study, there is a broader theoretical significance to form a basis (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Marshall and Rossman (1999) highlight the importance of recognising cultural difference as an uncontrollable bias, particularly in relation to interviews. Such cultural differences are particularly relevant given the nature of this study, which increases the likelihood of misinterpretation between the interviewer and interviewee. It is important to be aware of the potential influence of the researchers personal, low context culture on the interview process, as well as during the analysis and interpretation of the results. In order to combat this, care will be taken to use unbiased questions and remain neutral during the interviews.

Finally, for ethical reasons participants were asked permission to be recorded during the interview process. This may potentially, but unavoidably, influence the level of comfort and therefore openness created throughout the interview, which in turn may impact the reliability of the critical incidents recalled.
4.0 Analysis

4.1 Stage 1: Analysis of the Cultural Simulation

4.1.1 Introduction

The cultural simulation took place within the Manchester Business School undergraduate ‘International Marketing’ course seminars. The method therefore involved participants being selected randomly, given the time of their scheduled seminar. All participants were students aged between 20 and 24 participating in an undergraduate business degree programme at the University of Manchester. Four separate simulations took place on different occasions with a maximum of 12 and a minimum of 7 students participating in each simulation. Of the two different questionnaires intended for both ‘cultures’, 19 responses were collected from the tribe culture (those adopting the ‘rules’) and 17 responses were collected from the anthropologists. A total of 36 completed questionnaires were received following the completed simulations. As discussed previously, the data collected in this stage will act as preliminary research to prompt further investigation in stage 2.

Objective

5. To use a cultural simulation as preliminary research to investigate the potential of conflict occurring when individuals from high and low context cultures interact.

4.1.2 Data Manipulation

The quantitative data collected during stage 1 through questionnaires was managed and analysed through the IBM statistical analysis program, SPSS. Cross-tabulation permits two or more variables to be analysed simultaneously and allows possible relationships between these variables to be observed (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010, p.160). A chi square test ‘calculates the probability that the data in the cross-tabulation could occur by chance alone’ (Saunders et al. 2007, p.443). Chi square tests were then used to determine whether a statistical significance exists between the variables presented in the cross-tabulations. The exploratory nature of this research means that a result of $p \leq 0.15$ will be considered significant.

Initial analysis of the data through chi square tests indicated low levels of significance so, given the small number of data sets, the data was manipulated in order to encourage significance in subsequent tests. The questionnaires revealed 15 different nationalities amongst participants, which were coded and classified into high and low context cultures.
based on Hall’s contextual continuum. Similarly, the 5 point likert scale was reduced to a 3 point scale that represented ‘positive’, ‘negative’ and ‘neither’ responses. The responses for ‘extremely uncomfortable’ and ‘slightly uncomfortable’ were combined to improve the significance, given the small data set. The culture of the participants was distinguished by ‘high context’ or ‘low context’ based on the initial demographic style questions in section 1; ‘What is your main cultural influence (the country or culture which you most identify with)?

4.1.3 Results and Discussion (Stage 1)

The following relationships were found to be significantly different at a significance level of $p \leq 0.15$.

**Question 2. (Tribe questionnaire) ‘To what extent did you feel comfortable interacting within your culture?’**

A level of significance of .048 was found between the tribe participants’ culture and the responses to question 2. Suggesting participants whose main influence was a high context culture felt more comfortable interacting within the tribe culture than participants whose main cultural influence was a low context culture. This statistical observation may suggest an individual’s cultural background could influence how comfortable one feels in intercultural situations. This may have occurred because the high context individuals were more accustomed to, or felt more comfortable adopting the tribe cultures rules, since they resembled characteristically high context behaviours. This level of comfort could be linked to Cushner and Brislin’s (1996) problem emotions of ‘a feeling of not belonging’ and ‘anxiety’. This is an important observation that may be useful in stage 2, given that the varying degree of comfort observed may influence the potential for misunderstandings and hence, intercultural conflict.

A significant relationship was also found between the impact of tribe culture rules 2 and 3 on the anthropologists, and corresponds with question 3 of the anthropologist questionnaire (Appendix A). At a significance level of .061, participants who were negatively impacted by the slowed speech (rule 2) were neither negatively nor positively impacted by the hand positions (rule 3). This may have been because their attention was focused on the slowed verbal communication (rule 2), resulting in rule 3 (hand positions) being unobserved. Non-verbal gestures can often go unnoticed by members of low context cultures and in this case,
the anthropologists, who often screen out external-surrounding factors (Ting-Toomey, 1994). This could suggest cultural characteristics associated with verbal communication may have a greater impact on individuals than non-verbal communication.

The final question on both questionnaires was “**Do you have any other comments on your experience interacting with the tribe/anthropologist culture?**” The open nature of this question presented qualitative, in depth responses, since participants could describe their feelings towards the culture and their intercultural experience. This question prompted responses from 8 participants, which can be seen in figure 3.
Figure 3: Table of responses to question 4: “Do you have any other comments on your experience interacting with the tribe/anthropologist culture?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Simulation Culture</th>
<th>Main Cultural Influence (High/Low Context)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tribe</td>
<td>Low Context</td>
<td>‘Felt like you were being rude/difficult to act like the tribe culture because I wasn’t used to it’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tribe</td>
<td>Low Context</td>
<td>‘Awkward and Unusual’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tribe</td>
<td>High Context</td>
<td>“Feeling mean face to face- Kind of rejecting everyone’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tribe</td>
<td>High Context</td>
<td>‘Easy to find-difficult to learn’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Anthropologist</td>
<td>Low Context</td>
<td>‘They seemed quite shy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Anthropologist</td>
<td>Low Context</td>
<td>‘Awkward-difficult’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Anthropologist</td>
<td>Low Context</td>
<td>(the ‘stance’ rule) ‘made the conversation extremely awkward’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Anthropologist</td>
<td>Low Context</td>
<td>‘The person with their back turned was off putting and did not allow a friendly/smooth flowing conversation’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This question received a relatively low response rate, which is often the case for open questions, given the time needed to answer (Sanders et al. 2007). However, all 8 comments
indicate a largely negative response to the cultural simulation, which can be seen through the lexis used; ‘awkward’; ‘difficult’; ‘mean’; ‘off-putting’ and ‘rejecting’. Although the simulation represented hypothetical intercultural interactions, it may present a key observation to suggest the potential for conflict between exchange students in true intercultural interactions. Furthermore, this analysis allows us to consider the way in which individuals describe their feelings towards intercultural interactions and the relative perceived severity of the descriptions made. This therefore presents a credible basis for a detailed investigation in stage 2.

The findings collected from these questionnaires suggest intercultural situations could bring about a potential for conflict, providing a grounding for a detailed exploration into the experiences of exchange students in high and low context cultures.

4.1.4 Limitations

One limitation of the stage 1 data collection was the low number of participants; this may have been due to the prescheduled nature of the simulation sessions. Participants were randomly chosen based on their scheduled seminar times as opposed to being sampled on the basis of culture or nationality. This could lead to unrepresentative results and produce data which is not in line with the aims of the study. A limited time scale between the research proposal and the scheduled seminars meant that preparation time was condensed, resulting in a smaller number of accessible respondents.

Although a greater number of simulations could have increased the reliability of the stage 1 data, this was not possible given the limited time frame. Similarly, the nature of the simulation means the cultural interactions were not between two genuinely different cultures. The pre-defined rules and allocated roles of the simulation mean it can only provide suggestions regarding the true impact of intercultural interactions and potential for conflict.

Finally, the use of the likert scale has also been criticised by Busch (1993, p.734), who suggests that vague quantifiers such as ‘occasionally’ and ‘sometimes’ can create problems, due to the arbitrary nature of these category labels and imprecise distance between each response choice. This is a consideration to be taken into account in the analysis of the questionnaire responses.
4.2 Stage 2: Analysis of the Critical Incidents

4.2.1 Introduction

This section will first highlight the analysis process, and discuss how the data in stage 2 was manipulated and analysed with the use of coding. Excerpts from the transcripts will then be systematically presented based on the characteristic behaviours identified in objective 4 and figure 2 (page 27). A discussion then presents key findings and implications in order to meet objectives 7 and 8 and the research questions.

1.a Considering exchange students from low context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from high context cultures?

1.b Considering exchange students from high context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from low context cultures?

2. If so, what characteristic behaviours cause these conflicts and what is the level of impact?

Objectives

7. To use the visual diagram of characteristic behaviours developed in objective 4 to critically analyse the behaviour that caused any conflicts between both high and low context cultures and the impact on the exchange students

8. To use the data gathered through objectives 1-7 to produce a model showing characteristic behaviours that may cause conflict in intercultural interactions and a perceived severity scale showing the level of impact.

4.2.2 Data Manipulation

After the initial interviews were conducted and recorded, transcripts were typed for each interview (see example in Appendix D). Basic demographic information was collected from each participant, which has been categorised and tabulated in Appendix E.

As a technique used in qualitative data analysis, coding allows the development of categories derived from key themes (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). A code can be defined as an ‘abbreviation or symbol applied to a segment of words, most often a sentence or paragraph of transcribed field notes, in order to classify the words’ (Miles and Huberman, 1986, p. 56).
This process of coding was used throughout the analysis to cluster the characteristic behaviours identified in the interviews, and help to identify patterns within the data. Finally, ‘the use of direct quotes can impart some flavour of the original text’ (Adams et al. 2010, p. 330), and will therefore be used as a method of maintaining the authenticity of the critical micro incidents described.

4.2.3 Results and Discussion (Stage 2): Conflicts Encountered

A total of 12 university students were interviewed; seven students were from low context cultures and spent an exchange in a high context culture and five were from high context cultures and spent an exchange in a low context culture. 11 of the interviewees were able to identify conflicts that took place during their first two months on exchange, with one participant stating that no conflict had taken place. Participants from low context cultures described a total of 12 critical micro incidents where conflict occurred. Participants from high context cultures identified 4 incidents where conflict occurred. A total of 16 critical micro incidents were identified by university exchange students, these initial findings suggest the answers to research questions 1.a and 1.b are positive. Analysis can now proceed to answering research question 2.

2) ‘What characteristic behaviours of high and low context cultures caused these conflicts and what is their level of impact?’

The conflicts that occurred were identified as being caused by six of Hall’s characteristic behaviours; implicit communication; explicit communication; non-verbal communication; relationship orientation; task orientation; and collectivist behaviour. Other conflict generating behaviours are also identified that do not fall within the above categories.

Implicit Communication vs. Explicit Communication

These behaviours were identified as causing the greatest number of conflicts for students on exchange; both individuals from high and low context cultures reported conflicts that occurred as a result of either implicit or explicit communication styles.

4.2.3.1 Implicit Communication

One participant, Lauren from the UK, described an incident during university group work in Hong Kong. She emphasised the implicit nature of the communication that took place.
“If I thought we should do something one way, I would say I think we should do this, but for me it was obvious that they didn’t think that, but they would never say it, they would sort of be like so what about this, we used to just go round in circles.”

The conflict that occurred here concerned the difference between the indirect communication style of the local, high context students and the more explicit communication style that Lauren, was accustomed to. She makes a direct comparison to the explicit communication style she would likely adopt in that situation. Park et al. (2011) recognise that clearly asserting one’s own views can be seen as an important communication skill in low context cultures such as the UK.

Lily, a Finnish student who participated in an exchange to Singapore, recalled a similar experience that took place whilst interacting with Singaporean students in university group work.

“If you have group work here [UK], you meet up maybe 3 times and then it’s done. We met up at least three times a week for multiple weeks, so it was very frustrating for me being like guys lets just do this”.

The interviewee identified the behaviour that caused this conflict as implicit communication; she went on to compare the situation to her experience in the UK, ‘Here someone throws an idea and people say no or yes but there [Singapore] they only discuss things over again.’ Lily describes the impact of this conflict as ‘frustrating’. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) associate frustration with uncertainty in intercultural situations that can lead to conflict. One may also make a connection with Hall’s characteristic behaviour of task orientation, with this participant emphasising the need to “just do this”, perhaps reflecting the low context, explicit communication style she may have experienced in Finland and the UK.

The same interviewee also recalled an incident that took place in the local community; she received a noise complaint from Singaporean neighbours.

“They didn’t come to us and be like sorry can you please be quiet, no they sent an official complaint on paper and we just thought it was so weird”. She then went on to describe her reaction to receiving this complaint. “We were kind of like what are they doing, it was funny at first but then we thought we should go and say something but then we decided if they weren’t comfortable coming to us then I don’t think they would be comfortable us going to them”.

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This provides another example whereby implicit information from a high context culture caused conflict for the exchange student. The use of indirect communication through a formal letter as opposed to a direct confrontation could be classified as implicit, high context behaviour. A sense of ambiguity can also be identified in this incident, with the individual not knowing how to interpret or react to the course of events. Cushner and Brislin (1996) recognise ambiguity as one of the five ‘problem’ emotions that are common in intercultural encounters.

Additionally, Swiss student Chris who spent his exchange in Japan described another conflict that was caused by Chris’ lack of familiarity with implicit communication. This incident concerned the university structure and administration process; he explained that in Switzerland he was used to receiving direct feedback from lecturers on his progress. This contrasted with his experience with the Japanese system.

“I feel like people should get obvious feedback for example there was never your presentation sucked, the professor would never say that. He would say yeh I really liked this element. And I just asked him why aren’t you honest, he is a really good professor but he was just not allowed to give feedback and he just said that’s Japanese culture and that’s probably the worst thing I heard in my 5 months”.

Such an experience falls close in line with Hall’s (1976, p.98) statement that ‘It is very seldom in Japan that someone will correct you or explain things to you. You are supposed to know, and they get quite upset when you don’t.’

Finally, Swiss student Chris described a similar incident that involved his experience of asking directions in the local community in Japan.

“I wanted to find a museum and we got lost so I had to ask this Japanese guy where is this museum and he was just pointing in this direction and said its there, however we found out it was in the totally opposite direction and after two or three times trying, we found out they would never say no they don’t know, they would rather send you somewhere that was completely out of nowhere”.

Chris described this incident as “rude”, claiming that from a Swiss perspective it was rude because the Japanese local had sent them completely the wrong way, rather than admitting he did not know the directions. This conflict had a significant impact on the individual given the
strong emotive language used to describe his feelings, suggesting a higher degree of severity than the previous description of “frustrating” by Lily.

Having categorised these conflicts as caused by the high context behaviour of implicit communication it can be suggested this behaviour has the potential to cause conflicts for low context individuals in intercultural situations between high and low context cultures.

### 4.2.3.2 Explicit Communication

Conversely, individuals from high context cultures interacting in a low context culture experienced challenges with the use of explicit communication in a number of incidents. For instance, Victoria, from China spent an exchange year in Switzerland and describes her experience of interacting with a Swiss official at the University of St. Gallen.

“I had just arrived in Switzerland for about a week and I wanted to travel outside of Switzerland but I realised that my passport would not allow me to do that and I still had not received my residents permit. When I talked to somebody in the exchange office about this she said oh you know, in the border there is nobody who is going to check your passport you can just cross the border. I actually did the next day. That was quite interesting because I didn’t expect her, as an official in the university to just tell me that there is nobody going to watch you in the border. And I said but oh that’s the rule and we shouldn’t do that but that was my first impression that oh people here are really direct”.

Victoria does not identify this situation as either positive or negative, and does not specifically mention that a conflict took place as a result of the explicit communication. However, since Ting-Toomey (1991) defines conflict as ‘the perceived and/or actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes or outcomes’ it may be argued this situation involved an incompatibility of expectations from Victoria and it could therefore be classified as an intercultural conflict.

Finally, Ben, a student from Hong Kong described another incident that took place in the local community whilst on exchange in the UK. The cause of this conflict could be identified as explicit, direct communication. However, similar to the case above, the student did not specifically identify the incident as a conflict, and he made this clear in the interview.

“There was one time I went to a club and I forgot to hold the door for the person behind me and the person said to me oh that is so rude. Now I don’t regard that as a conflict because it
was my bad but I just kind of forgot that I was supposed to hold it. But yeah they just told me I was doing it wrong straight away”.

The above descriptions of conflicts and challenges caused by explicit behaviours appears to have had a less severe impact on the individuals in comparison with the descriptions of conflicts caused by implicit communication, where individuals used particularly emotive descriptions; “rude” “weird”, “frustrating” and “the worst thing”.

4.2.3.3 Non-Verbal Communication

Swiss student Chris described a critical micro incident that took place in the local community during his exchange in Japan. This conflict was caused by non-verbal communication and more importantly the use of gestures in the high context Japanese culture.

“If you get lost somewhere and you ask someone in English where am I they will usually just do an x with their arms which means no or go away basically... this is common. At the beginning you are thinking that they are doing some rap thing but no it means no or go away, I don’t know, I can’t help you. This is super rude because instead of giving you an answer they are just doing the x or shaking their head or showing you with their hands, please go away.”

The exchange student perceived this characteristically high context behaviour as particularly rude, suggesting this conflict had a distinctively severe impact on the individual. Interestingly, this was the only critical micro incident from all interviewees that acknowledged non-verbal communication as a cause of conflict. Kirch, (1979) suggests the use of gestures in many cultures is being replaced by verbal descriptions to express the same thought as the gesture itself. One example of this is the English term ‘fingers crossed’ that is frequently replaced by the hand gesture.

When asked if she had experienced any conflict caused by non-verbal communication, British student Lauren, who spent her exchange in Singapore stated “I wouldn’t say I really noticed anything but then I wasn’t looking for that, so that’s not to say they didn’t take place, I was just unaware, maybe the fact that they didn’t say stuff is communication to others, but I wouldn’t from an outsider perspective understand what they were trying to say”. Non-verbal gestures can often go unnoticed by members of low context cultures who often screen out external-surrounding factors (Ting-Toomey, 1994). This could suggest low context
individuals tend not to notice non-verbal communication and hence there may exist less potential for this behaviour to cause conflict.

4.2.3.4 Relationship Orientation

Swiss student, Chris, described an incident where the high context characteristic of a relationship orientation was the cause of conflict within group work whilst on exchange in Japan.

“We had papers there and professors refuse to fail anyone in graduate studies, they try to talk to everyone who didn’t write a good essay and just talk to them forever instead of doing something more interesting like teaching you or providing you with something that could be interesting”.

In this description it appears professors in Japan placed a great degree of importance on building relationships with students. This seemed to create a certain degree of conflict for the Swiss exchange student, which could be due to his experience within a task orientated culture that may place more focus on teaching. Another Swiss exchange student, Liam, who spent time in Singapore, described a similar experience during group work, whereby a strong relationship orientation created conflict between his own task orientated, low context culture.

“I was in a team with only Singaporean students, in this group I had some conflict. The first time was the first meeting and for me it is obvious that you prepare before and you read some articles and I often summarise my thoughts, that’s how I organise my work. I kind of expect that other people do more or less the same that at least they have an idea of more or less what we are supposed to do and this was not the case. The first half hour we were not able to talk anything about the topic because it was so important for them first to get to know, we just talked about what are you doing? Why Singapore? Where have you been? I think that is very important for them. In Switzerland we have this thing at the beginning but for 5 minutes at most, in Singapore we had like half an hour or forty minutes talking about this”.

In this intercultural encounter, Cushner and Brislin’s (1996) disconfirmed expectations plays a role in helping us understand the conflict that occurred. The Swiss student was familiar with preparation prior to group meetings, a characteristic that could be closely connected to a task orientated behaviour. The student had expected others to do the same. However, this did not occur and hence the situation led to a certain level of conflict taking place. During this interview, when asked how this conflict made him feel, the student stated:
“I was really annoyed and cursing because I decided to work with Singaporeans to find out how it is but then I cursed my decision in that moment because I could have done it with exchange students”.

The emotive language used to describe this conflict suggests it had a significant impact on the individual and a high degree of severity. This falls in line with Ting-Toomey’s (1994) ‘violations of expectations’ as a factor that can lead to conflicts in intercultural situations.

4.2.3.5 Task Orientation

Chinese student Victoria spent her exchange in St. Gallen, Switzerland. It should be noted that China and the German part of Switzerland register particularly far apart on Hall’s contextual continuum. Victoria describes an incident involving task-orientated behaviour, associated with low context cultures.

“I joined the tandem language exchange program and I first heard about it in China when a Swiss exchange student told me that every university has that and I thought it sounded very strange that you have a whole program like that. Although my home university has different languages and people do want to learn, we never have such a program. So I joined this tandem and interestingly I met with this Swiss guy for the first time and we were talking about languages straight away and didn’t really invest much time into getting to know each other. It was a bit awkward at first because we started a task without really knowing each other. In China we build relationships first but in Switzerland it seemed people were definitely more about the task.

Victoria described this incident as making her feel “awkward” and “strange”. It may suggest a certain degree of ambiguity (Cushner & Brislin, 1996) was present in this intercultural interaction that led to the misunderstanding and conflict between Victoria and her Swiss tandem exchange partner. Her description of the incident as “awkward”, in comparison to harsher emotions that other participants described incidents (“rude” and “annoying”) suggests the impact of this conflict on the high context exchange student could be of a low severity.

4.2.3.6 Collectivist

One conflict experienced by UK student Jack, whilst on exchange in Singapore was that during university group work he felt there was a significant lack of trust from the Singaporean
students towards him as an exchange student. This conflict could be identified as being caused by the high context collective behaviour.

“They [Singaporeans] were very committed to trying to keep their grades up, so they didn’t really trust me to do the work. At one of the group meetings I asked one of the girls why I was given such a minor role to play and I told them I wanted to have more say in what was going on. There was four Singaporean girls and me so it was a bit weird, but they wouldn’t explicitly say why until I suggested that this might be the reason, so I had to almost coax it out of them”.

The lack of initial trust suggests there could have been an ‘in group’ ‘out group’ situation arising. As identified by Hall (1985) and supported by Hofstede (1980) such a characteristic is linked to high context cultures and could be a cause of intercultural conflict. The reaction towards this conflict as described by Jack was initially very strong “It made me feel angry to begin with and like I almost didn’t belong but then I sort of saw their point of view because they pay very high tuition fees and GPA [Grade Point Average] is very important to them”.

Also identified by Cushner and Brislin (1996), this ‘feeling of not belonging’ can be a common problem emotion related to intercultural encounters. Similarly, the feeling of ‘anger’ may distinguish this conflict as having a relatively severe level of impact on the individual. On a more general level, Jack briefly describes his experience whilst on exchange in Singapore; “In the first few months it was very difficult and I’d actually say maybe at one point, maybe about two or three months into the exchange, I felt very very low and I actually just wanted to go home for maybe a week just to get out of Singapore for a while”. This rather emotive recount further highlights Cushner and Brislin’s (1996) ‘problem emotions’ and confirms the severe impact that negative intercultural experiences can have on exchange students.

A similar conflict, concerning collectivism and trust within high context cultures was highlighted by Lauren whilst on exchange in Hong Kong.

“We had shared bathrooms, and we’d be in the bathroom and I’d be chatting away and they wouldn’t say anything you’d try to make conversation and you would get nothing, it was like talking to a brick wall, it was really quite rude but I feel like over the year, I wouldn’t say that we got like good friends with the locals but they would definitely speak to you more and it was
probably a bit of trust on there part like they didn’t know you, they were sceptical to get to know you but when they saw me they would start saying hello”.

The initial conflict that took place is suggested as being caused by a lack of trust or notion of an in-group and out-group, however this conflict became less severe over time since a degree of trust was built up between the UK exchange student and local Hong Kong students.

4.2.3.7 Verbal Communication

This characteristic behaviour of a low context culture was not described as causing particular conflict for the university exchange students interviewed, the similarity in the understanding of verbal communication and explicit communication could have led participants to combine these two potentially overlapping behaviours that caused conflict.

4.2.3.8 Individualistic

Similarly, from the micro critical incidents described no participants recalled conflicts that took place as a result of the low context individualistic behaviour. Individualistic behaviour means individuals are oriented around ‘the self’ and members are often ‘highly individualised, somewhat alienated, and fragmented, and there is relatively little involvement with others’ (Hall, 1976, p.39). One possible explanation for this could be that high context individuals were not given the opportunity to engage in such intercultural interactions, therefore suggesting conflict may unlikely occur.

4.2.3.9 Other Conflicts Experienced

A number of conflicts occurred as a result of another cultural dimension that is not part of the main identified cultural characteristics of this study. Hall (1983) classifies the notion of ‘polychronic-time’ and ‘monochronic-time’ in accordance with the individualism vs. collectivism dimension. He states members of individualistic, low context cultures place great emphasis on time schedules and appointments (m-time). In contrast, p-time cultures such as Latin America, China and Japan view time schedules as more fluid with appointments not taken so seriously. Two critical incidents described identified this time dimension as the cause of intercultural conflict for the exchange students. In particular, p-time caused conflict for individuals from low context cultures, interacting whilst on exchange in high context cultures.

Harriet, a student from the UK who spent her exchange in Singapore described the adverse impact that p-time orientation had during group work, which led to conflict.
“The local students were always late to the meetings, I thought it would be the opposite, but it was really common that they were late to a lot of our meetings which again dragged the whole process. It delayed the whole thing and sometimes it ruined the whole routine because we had an allocated specified time. It was just a very different viewpoint, they just kind of took a lot more time to do things than we did”.

A similar conflict took place for Swiss student, Liam whilst on exchange in Singapore. He describes the issue of the p-time dimension in relation to interactions with his Singaporean landlady.

“She was terribly unreliable we had visited the apartment and we had to sign the contract so we said let’s meet and sign a contract. She said she would pick us up Tuesday afternoon 4pm we waited at 4pm and she wasn’t there so we waited till 5. Then at 6 she called and said I’m sorry I didn’t make it at 4pm can we meet tomorrow at 9am and we said ok no problem, then she wasn’t there again and the same thing at 11, sorry can we meet at 12 today, and we said are you sure you are going to make it because we are sick of waiting and then at 12 she didn’t show up again and then of course after 5 minutes we were doing something else and then she called again at 2, yeh I’m sorry I didn’t make it for 12 I will pick you up at 4. It was this kind of problem every time, and then when I left in December I remember she offered to bring me to the airport and I said no I don’t need a ride because I knew I would never make it the airport. It made me actually really angry”.

Both these conflicts could be caused as a result of the difference between the p-time vs. m-time orientation. These examples suggest that numerous cultural differences, on top of those identified in the literature review and shown in the visual diagram, could cause conflicts in intercultural interactions, which may provide a basis for possible future research.

4.2.4 Limitations

Flanagan (1954) states that the researcher is responsible for pointing out not only the limitations but also the degree of credibility and the value of the final results obtained. Stage 2 of this study has certain limitations relating to the collection of empirical data. Firstly, only 12 university students were interviewed from 6 different countries, in a larger study with more time/resources, participants from many different cultures could be used. From these participants, a total of 14 critical incidents were recorded, creating a limited scope for investigation.
Shupe (2007) recognises the danger of attempting to make broad generalisations about national or cultural groups based on individual level data, which can lead to misguided or faulty conclusions. For this reason, caution has been taken to use the empirical data in an exploratory way and the discussion provides statements of likelihood or potential, rather than certainty. The proposed model is therefore based on university exchange students and the findings do not attempt to make generalisations about the entire population. The model may not apply to intercultural conflicts that take place outside of the context of university exchange programmes.

Globalisation means cultural differences are not as large amongst young people than amongst older generations (Rozin, 2003). The participant sample focuses on the experiences of students aged between 20 and 25. This factor should be taken into account, given that participants may be especially ‘au fait’ with different cultures and have a certain degree of prior cultural awareness. This may influence the conflicts recalled, as well as the perceived severity of these intercultural conflicts.

Another limitation that must also be considered is the time passed since the critical micro incidents took place. The events are retrospective (Cassell, 2004), and this may jeopardise the validity of the accounts recalled. ‘When criticality is connected to actual behavior, the consequence is clear, but memory connected to the behavior needs to be taken into consideration to enhance reliability’ (Roos, 2002, p.194). This is particularly relevant for participants who were interviewed six months after returning from their exchange program (Lauren, Lily, Helen Jack and Victoria) and must be considered a limitation to the methodology. ‘Vague reports suggest the incident is not well remembered and some of the data may be incorrect’ (Flanagan, 1954, p.14). Conversely, four of the participants were still on exchange in the UK when interviewed. This may initially increase the reliability and validity of the micro incidents recalled. However, it could also present a potential reluctance to discuss conflict, given their current status of residence in the country and relative closeness to the experiences.
4.3 Figure 4: Model of Behaviours that caused Conflicts and Impact Severity Scale
4.3.1 Summary of Main Implications from this Model

As presented in figure 4, the empirical data showed that in this study the behaviour characteristics of high context cultures; *implicit information, non-verbal communication, relationship orientation* and *collectivist* all caused conflicts for individuals from low context cultures. Conversely only explicit information and task orientation were acknowledged as causing conflicts for individuals from high context cultures interacting with low context individuals. The low context behavioural characteristics of *individualism* and *verbal communication* were found to cause no conflicts for individuals from either high or low context cultures.

The relative severity of the conflicts experienced was higher for members of low context cultures than for high context individuals. Which is supported by the difference in views towards conflict between high and low context cultures (Croucher *et al.* 2012; Triandis, 2000; Ting-Toomey, 1991).
5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This study aims to answer the research questions;

1.a Considering exchange students from low context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from high context cultures?

1.b Considering exchange students from high context cultures, do students experience conflicts when interacting with individuals from low context cultures?

2. If so, what characteristic behaviours caused these conflicts and what is their level of impact?

The empirical research allows an exploration into intercultural conflicts to aid the development of a model of behaviours that cause conflicts and an impact severity scale. This model is reproduced below for the sake of convenience of the reader.
The main implications of this model, as the data collected in stage 1 suggests, is that university exchange students experience conflict when interacting with members of different high or low context cultures. Stage 2 confirms the presence of conflict when low context exchange students interact in a high context culture. As is shown in the above model, the most common behaviour to cause conflict for low context individuals was \textit{implicit communication}. The most common behaviour that caused conflict for high context individuals was \textit{explicit communication}. However through the descriptions given by participants, the impact of the conflicts was less severe for high context individuals than for low context individuals. This can be seen through the scales positioned on either side of the model, the behaviours are positioned in order of severity. In line with this observation, two of the five high context participants actively stated they did not classify their incident as a conflict. As is shown in the model, the level of impact the characteristic behaviours had on participants varied. Descriptions include ‘rude’, ‘frustrating’ and ‘weird’ used by members of low context cultures to describe \textit{implicit communication} and \textit{non-verbal communication} whilst interacting with high context individuals. Contrastingly, high context interviewees in this study were reserved in showing how they felt towards the incidents described, with more neutral emotions used; ‘interesting’, ‘awkward’ and ‘strange’. The contrast between these uses of language suggest conflicts that took place for members of low context cultures interacting in a high context culture had a greater impact and greater level of severity. Similarly, individuals from high context cultures described far fewer conflicts, which can be seen in the developed model.

Further implications of the developed model are that conflicts can be grouped into taking place either within university or in the local community. Within university, the empirical data showed 10 out of the 16 incidents described involved conflicts taking place within university group work. Shupe (2007) suggests diverse groups often experience ‘lower levels of cohesion, more attitudinal and perceptual problems and more conflict.’ The remaining conflicts that took place within university were mainly due to structural or procedural differences in administration. In contrast with this, 6 incidents described involved interactions taking place within the local community, where a greater degree of cultural difference could have existed, given the increasing internationalisation of university activities (Altbach & Knight, 2007).
5.2 Recommendations

5.2.1 For Academic Institutions

This study could also provide valuable recommendations to academic institutions such as universities. The increasing importance of international experience creates a need for more awareness of the challenges students may face when taking part in international exchange. The model developed in this study could aid the design of such student exchange programs taking into account the impact that intercultural conflicts can have on students. The model suggests that conflict takes place during intercultural interactions and academic institutions could benefit from this awareness by developing pre-departure cultural classes to inform students of cultural differences and potential conflicts that may occur.

5.2.2 For Practitioners

This study could also provide recommendations for managers when they engage in intercultural interactions within an organisational context. A greater understanding of the potential for intercultural conflicts and behaviours that cause such conflicts could encourage more successful future intercultural interactions. Similarly, understanding the impact that intercultural conflicts may have on exchange students could prove useful to understanding the potential impact on employees within an international organisation.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The main limitations of this study, surmised from items 3.3.6, 4.1.4 and 4.4.1, are the following:

The model produced is the model of university exchange students from high and low context cultures; this focus on Hall’s cultural dimensions represents only a small dimension of cultural differences. The model may not apply where other cultural differences such as Hofstede’s dimensions may cause conflict.

Regarding the empirical data collection, the limited time and resources of the researcher resulted in a small sample size of only 36 participants in stage one. Additionally, the simulated nature of the cultural exercise did not represent the true nature of cultural differences. Therefore, the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the students taking part may not transfer to real life experiences of intercultural interactions.
Similarly, only 12 interviews were conducted in stage two, resulting in a small sample size. Furthermore participants were from the UK, Switzerland, Hong Kong, China and Singapore creating a limited variety of countries and cultures when considering Hall’s cultural continuum. Therefore, these interviews have not provided enough data to claim that the produced model of university exchange students from high and low context cultures experiencing conflict and the perceived severity can be applied to all university students from high and low context cultures.

Hall’s theory of high and low context cultures encompasses only a limited section of cultural dimensions that have the potential to cause conflict in intercultural interactions. Further research could investigate other cultural dimensions such as Hofestede’s (1989) power distance; masculinity vs. femininity; uncertainty avoidance and long-term vs. short-term orientation and the impact they have in intercultural interactions.

Similarly, this research only investigates a limited number of countries that are represented on Hall’s contextual continuum. Further research could investigate exchange students experiences in a wider number of countries and highlight potential differences depending on where the country lies on the continuum. This should likely increase the reliability of results.

This research indicates that conflicts take place either within the university setting or within the local community, further research into the differences between these intercultural interactions and conflicts could provide an interesting intercultural investigation. Similarly, demographic differences in exchange students such as age and sex could prove to influence the conflicts experienced and level of impact severity. A more in depth analysis could also take place into the psychological impact these conflicts have on aspects such as work and productivity for students whilst on exchange.
List of References


Edwards, P. Roberts, I., Diguiseppi, C., Pratap, S., Wentz, R., Kwan, I., Cooper, R. (2007). *Methods to increase response rates to postal questionnaires*, Iss. 3, Available through: Wiley Online Library


Guirdham, M. (1999). *Communicating across cultures- (Sub)cultural communication at work*, Chapter 4, pp. 107-171


Appendix A: Example Questionnaire (Tribe)

Tribe Culture

Section 1 - Personal Details

Gender: (Circle as appropriate)

Male    Female

Age:

Ethnicity:

Nationality:

Main Cultural Influence (the country or culture which you most identify with):

Section 2 - Cross Cultural Activity

1. How easy did you find adapting to the rules of your culture? (Circle as appropriate)

2. To what extent did you feel comfortable interacting within your culture? (Circle as appropriate)
3. To what extent did you feel comfortable interacting with the anthropologists? *(Circle as appropriate)*

4. Any other comments on your experience with the ‘tribe’ culture?
Appendix A: Example Questionnaire (Anthropologists)

Anthropologists

Section 1 – Personal Details

Gender: *(Circle as appropriate)*

Male  Female

Age:

Ethnicity:

Nationality:

Main Cultural Influence *(the country or culture which you most identify with)*:

Section 2 – Cross Cultural Activity

1. How comfortable did you feel interacting with the ‘tribe’ culture? *(Circle as appropriate)*

2. How easy would you find it to establish a business relationship with the ‘tribe’ culture? *(Circle as appropriate)*

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3. How would you rate the impact associated to each one of the tribe’s behaviors?

Position of Stance

Negative  
Slightly Negative  
Neither  
Slightly Positive  
Positive

Slowed Speech

Negative  
Slightly Negative  
Neither  
Slightly Positive  
Positive

Hand Positions

Negative  
Slightly Negative  
Neither  
Slightly Positive  
Positive

4. Any other comments on your experience with the ‘tribe’ culture?
Appendix B: Anthropologist Questions

You are on an information-gathering mission to a foreign culture. You will ask as many individuals as possible the yes/no questions listed below; tabulate your responses and present the conclusions to members of the society. After asking the questions on the interview guide, you may continue by generating at least five additional specific yes/no questions on the problem and/or solution. Be sure to interview at least two people for each question. You will have ten minutes to complete the collection of data.

1. Are all of you from the same culture?
2. Do you all speak the same language?
3. Are you friendly to outsiders?
4. Do you practice the same religion?
5. Is the same food prepared by all culture members?
6. Do you live in extended families?
7. Are children educated in public schools?
8. Are most people in cities?

Questions for anthropologist:

1. To what extent is the group friendly and co-operative?
2. To what extent is the group reasonable and consistent in their thinking?
Appendix C: Interview Guide

The general aim of my study is to develop an appreciation of the problems that can occur when individuals from high and low context cultures interact.

A conflict can be defined as an ‘incompatibility or variance’ of values, expectations, processes or outcomes between two or more individuals.

During the first 2 months of your exchange, have you experienced any intercultural conflicts?

1) Characteristic Behaviours of high and low context cultures can be seen in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Context</th>
<th>Low Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Implicit/Indirect communication</td>
<td>1. Explicit/Direct communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Non-verbal communication</td>
<td>2. Verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relationship orientation</td>
<td>3. Task orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Collectivistic</td>
<td>4. Individualistic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Can you identify any conflicts that were caused by these behaviours?

The critical incident technique can be described as a ‘procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behaviour in defined situations’

3) Please feel free to talk about any specific details of any conflicts you experienced.

4) Please provide as much detail as possible, What? How? When? Did the conflict take place?

5) How did the conflict make you feel?
Appendix D: Transcript Example- Swiss Student on exchange in Japan

Date: 18th February 2014

Location: Online Skype Interview

RESEARCHER: During the first 2 months of your exchange, did you experience any intercultural conflicts?

C: Actually the people there are not that different they have like a similar mindset when it comes to politeness so for example swiss people are also always trying to please others so even if you have some criticisms you are trying to put it in a very very nice and polite way.. so this is very similar so you have this politeness that is kind of connected….

…But of course you have many culture clashes. For example I have one really nice example… I wanted to find a museum and we got lost so I had to ask this Japanese guy where is this museum and he was just pointing in this direction and said its there, however we found out it was in the totally opposite direction and after two or three times trying, we found out they would never say no they don’t know, they would rather send you somewhere that was completely out of nowhere

RESEARCHER: How did that make you feel?

C: Actually its kind of rude… from a Swiss perspective it is really rude because this guy has sent you somewhere that is completely wrong and you really don’t want to go there and he still sends you there…

C: The other thing is that although they all have three or four years of English at school they would never talk to you in English because the thing is… it’s the same concept they don’t want to show any weakness if they feel that they don’t master a language to an extent that is really more or less native speaker they will never use it. if you get lost somewhere and you ask someone in English where am I they will usually just do an x with their arms which means no or go away basically… this is common. At the beginning you are thinking that they are doing some rap thing but no it means no or go away, I don’t know, I can’t help you. This is super rude because instead of giving you an answer they are just doing the x or shaking their head or showing you please go away.

….And the thing is they are not really saying anything.. that is the worst part because if you say I really don’t know or I don’t speak English im really sorry then that’s fine. Some older people do that but they would never do that they would just send you away.

RESEARCHER: And how did you feel about these conflicts when they took place?

It’s a feeling that you are really really far from home because the cultural differences its like a manifestation of geographical distance somehow because I mean Ive been to Singapore and I have relatives in Thailand and ive been to most Asian countries but I have never been to Japan before.

RESEARCHER: Did you notice any differences between Japan and Singapore?

C: Yeh a huge difference, whereas in Singapore everyone is really friendly and trying… for example if you are in a bar or a night club people start talking to you in Singapore and also in south east Asian countries and the same thing happened to me when I went to Taiwan a
couple months ago… they start talking to you because it is the same in Europe you are interested in, if someone is from another country you are interested in where he is from, what he is doing here but in Japan it’s the opposite. As soon as they realise that you are not Japanese which is kind of obvious that you are a westerner then they are trying to avoid any contact in general… of course there are bars where it is different but its even the case I have met some Japanese that have grown up in England and Sweden etc. You kind of notice that you are not a native Japanese speaker although they have spoken Japanese at home all the time it’s the same effect they feel not part of the group they are kind of the outsider although they are Japanese it’s the same so as a western you kind of have the same sensation but in a different way.

RESEARCHER: Which university did you study at?

C: I studied at Sophia university and they have… well I have my masters now so I had to go onto a graduate programme and basically, Japanese are not doing any graduate studies there is only like 3 programmes for the whole country in Business its different if you want to have an academic career in some different field but in theory that’s it so there you have most international students and the Japanese you have in the studies programme they didn’t really grow up in Japan mostly many have for example a European mother so you have some really Japanese but western too so you don’t really get to know them that much… because also the thing is the education system in Japan is one of the worst in the world… its one of the things that I was also told before going there… they have like you can go to citations etc they are really really really bad and the reason for this is there is no failing at university. They have an entrance exam before you go to university and if you pass that its more or less you automatically graduate… there is not even a grade for failing in undergraduate studies c is the worst grade you can get at undergraduate and you get a c if you are basically not.

Singapore is the total opposite... in Singapore I mean the Chinese you feel like people are striving to achieve something some goal in the future... in Japan the goal is just graduating… the thing is it doesn’t really make a difference if you are good or bad in Japan the companies go to universities and hire people from universities they don’t really care about the grades its just which university are you from and then you enter a company there is this concept of life time employment so as soon as you enter the company they don’t care where you studied… and as soon as they are in there they are never going to leave a the country and b the company so for me as a student coming back to my experience this is very strange because even if you talk to one of the students just knowing that they don’t have any aspirations I mean they have aspirations for example they want to do good in sports and clubs but just intellectually they are not interested and when its comes to graduate studies it totally changes because everyone in the graduate programme..

RESEARCHER: Did you experience any conflicts because of this?

C: We had papers there and professors refuse to fail anyone in graduate studies, they try to talk to everyone who didn’t write a good essay and just talk to them forever instead of doing something more interesting like teaching you or providing you with something that could be interesting

C: You also have individual feedback session for everything you do and then he was like he told me he is American but has lived in Japan for a very long time he noticed that I had some problems with their style… I feel like people should get obvious feedback for example there was never your presentation sucked, a professor would never say that. He would say yeh I really liked this element. And I just asked him why aren’t you honest, he is a really good
professor but he was just not allowed to give feedback and he just said that’s Japanese culture and that’s probably the worst thing I heard in my 5 months

RESEARCHER: And how did that make you feel?

C: I just felt like okay screw it… if that is the thing then I am going to relax a little more do what I have to do I know if I try a little bit or do like 20% of a 10% paper I am going to get an a. You can’t get depressed whilst studying but what we did, we travelled… its just sad if you consider the possibilities for the professors to get their idea into others student’s heads.

The thing is it always felt like they don’t care anymore as if they had given up but besides that the people are super nice and they make you feel welcome like for example if you speak some Japanese at the end we were able to order water and say like thank you so the basics. If you enter a restaurant even if they don’t speak any English and if you start off with your couple of Japanese sentences they always treat you super friendly and they totally include you and they start talking to you in English a little bit.

C: You feel included if you try but you feel excluded if you expect them to just be nice which is just not going to happen because its just not their culture, with their history basically they are not that friendly towards anybody who is not Japanese which they have proven to do in the 2nd world war …

RESEARCHER: Do you have anything more you would like to add?

C: No that’s all the conflicts I experienced that are relevant for you I think
### Appendix E: Table of Participants (Low context)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>National culture according to Hall (High/Low)</th>
<th>Home University</th>
<th>Exchange Country</th>
<th>Exchange University</th>
<th>Characteristic behaviour that caused the conflict</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Low context</td>
<td>University of Manchester</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
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<td>Collectivism</td>
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<td>Implicit communication, Collectivist, Relationship orientation</td>
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### Appendix E: Table of Participants (High context)

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<th>Home University</th>
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<th>Characteristic behaviour that caused the conflict</th>
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<td>Manchester</td>
<td>- Explicit communication</td>
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<tr>
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<td>High context</td>
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<td>UK</td>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>- Explicit communication</td>
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<tr>
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<td>National University of Singapore</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>- No conflict</td>
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<td>UK</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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