

# 1. GSiK-Tag

6. Mai 2011



Open Space Discussion:

## Perspective Taking

How egocentric is the West?

Teilprojektbeteiligter:

**Zentrum für Lehrerbildung und Bildungsforschung (ZfL)**

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Open Space Topic of Discussion:

## How egocentric is the West?

The open space discussion was based on the research paper 'The Effect of Culture on Perspective Taking' by Shali Wu and Boaz Keysar.<sup>1</sup> Their study, conducted at University of Chicago, suggests that collectivistic cultures are better at perspective-taking and at using this universal ability to interpret and predict other people's actions than Western individualistic cultures.

The study was briefly presented to the participants followed by a short introduction on basic aspects of perspective-taking:

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<p data-bbox="443 943 687 1003"><b>3. Perspective Taking</b></p> <ul data-bbox="405 1061 727 1211" style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Evaluate other individuals' mental states</li><li>• Consider their perspective</li><li>• Interpret, understand, predict their actions</li></ul>	<p data-bbox="847 920 1209 981"><b>4. Perspective Taking &amp; Culture</b></p> <ul data-bbox="868 1010 1214 1223" style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Individualistic cultures (e.g. Western) ⇒ independent selves ⇒ focus attention on self</li><li>• Collectivistic cultures (e.g. China) ⇒ interdependent selves ⇒ focus on the other ⇒ more tuned into the other's perspective</li></ul>

Before starting the discussion students took part in two perspective-taking exercises based on pictures that show optical illusions<sup>2</sup>.

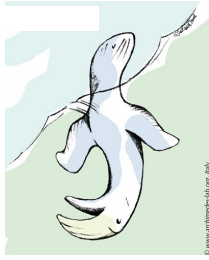
### Exercise 1:

Two students were sitting opposite each other with an empty chair in the centre between them. The trainer then placed a picture on the empty chair that showed different things depending on the point of view the students were looking at it. Both students had to describe what the other student saw.

<sup>1</sup> Wu, Shali and Boaz Keysar (2007). The Effect of Culture on Perspective Taking. In: *Psychological Science*, Vol. 18, No. 7, pp. 600 – 606.

<sup>2</sup> For both pictures see *Archimedes' Laboratory. New Optical Illusions Gallery*. [http://www.archimedes-lab.org/Gallery/new\\_optical\\_illusions/pages/10-Magic\\_tray.html](http://www.archimedes-lab.org/Gallery/new_optical_illusions/pages/10-Magic_tray.html)

Student A's perspective:



Student B's perspective:



*With the first picture both students were instantly able to take the other student's perspective and describe correctly what she saw.*

*Student A described correctly that Student B saw a bird with a long beak sitting on a branch flapping its wings and about to rise. Student B described correctly that student A saw a seal in the water moving its fins with its head above water level.*

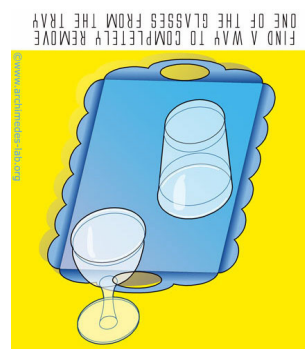
Exercise 2:

The next optical illusion was more challenging. It shows two glasses on a blue tray. The trainer brought a blue tray and two similar glasses. Again a pair of students sat opposite each other with the picture placed on the chair in the centre. The tray and the two glasses were placed on the floor. Student A had to arrange the glasses on the tray as student B would see the arrangement from his perspective and vice versa.

Student A's perspective:



Student B's perspective:



*Outcome:*

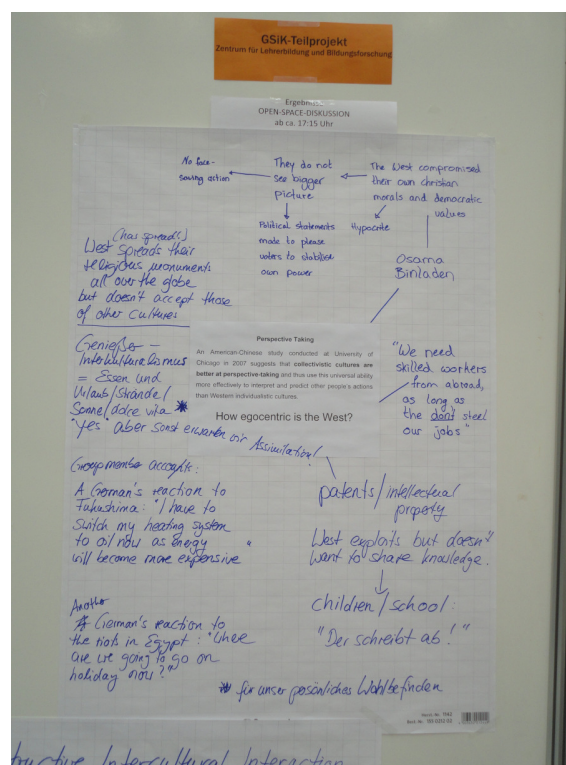
*Student A first placed the wine glass correctly in front of the tray and the right way round. She placed the second glass on the tray but first failed to see that from student B's perspective the glass was standing on the tray but upside down. After other students had hinted on an error without saying what it was, she realised herself and turned the glass round.*

For student B it was then obvious that he had to place the juice glass on the tray and the right way round. The position of the wine glass, however, posed a bigger challenge to all students. First student B placed it upside down on the tray. After student A hinted on the error he placed it the right way round in front of the tray. Then the whole group started discussing. Some claimed that from their position standing at the side of the tray seeing it standing upside down on the tray would be possible, others disagreed. Even student A got confused about the position of the wine glass, which is actually not standing at all but lying with the bowl on the tray the rim facing the onlooker and the stem and base outside the tray. As a wine glass lying half on and half off the tray doesn't occur very often in real life even student A's perception got startled.

**Especially the outcome of the second exercise made students aware how we perceive things differently from different perspectives and sometimes even fail altogether to take the perspective of another person.**

In an open discussion the participants then discussed the question **'How egocentric is the West?'**

The following examples and arguments were put forward:



- *Political statements (e. g. like on the killing of Osama Bin Laden) are made to please voters but fail to see the bigger picture and its implications.*
- *With some statements the West compromised their own Christian morals and democratic values.*
- *The West failed to put across a face-saving message to the Muslim world after the death of Bin Laden. Their statements are very likely to cause more defensiveness and resentment.*
- *The West has spread their religious monuments all over the globe but have great difficulty accepting those of other cultures in their own country.*
- *Patent laws and regulations regarding intellectual property shows Western egocentrism. The West has exploited and still is exploiting developing countries but doesn't want to share their knowledge and technology.*
- *This is also reflected on German schools where pupils are reluctant to work in teams and often show a 'Der schreibt ab!' mentality.*
- *Egocentrism can also be observed in the debate about immigration of highly skilled workers from abroad. The economy needs more highly skilled and qualified workers but Germans at the same time resent having more immigrants come into the country.*
- *Multiculturalism is often just a 'Genießer Interkulturalismus'. We enjoy exotic food, holidays and beaches, everything that adds to our own well-being but other than that we expect foreign cultures to assimilate.*
- *Egocentrism is also reflected in statements participants had heard after Fukushima: "We have to change our heating system to oil now as energy will become more expensive", or after the riots in Egypt "Where are we going on holiday now?"*

With an ethnographic look on their own Western culture the mainly German participants led a very self-reflective and self-critical discussion. Self-reflection and self-critical thinking are both important requirements for perspective-taking and intercultural competence. So the question then is

**“How egocentric is this?!”**