IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION. STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT PROCESS TO EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Erasmus students' adjustment process to foreign cultural settings in relation to the identity changes that are triggered by the new contexts and experiences abroad. In this regard, the core of the paper is to understand the main adaptive challenges generated by students' educational transition, and to identify the factors and strategies they employ to overcome them.Facilitating a more positive adjustment and educational experience for the international students remains a growing interest and concern in higher education (Shigaki, Smith, 1997; Olivas, Li, 2006; Wenhua, Zhe, 2013). However, most of the studies that investigate educational transitions focus on the attitudes and adjustment problems of foreign students in the United States (Zimmermann, 1995; de Araujo, 2011). In this context, we find it important and pertinent to examine the adjustment experiences that European students undergo in Europe, in order to learn more about the stages and forms of intercultural adaptation as it occurs in their specific case, and about how to ease their confrontation with different cultures and people in a variety of ways.To achieve its objectives, our study reviews several theoretical notions and models – such as "identity negotiation" (Ting-Toomey, 1999) and "cultural contracts theory" (Jackson, 2002; Hecht, Jackson, Ribeau, 2003; Onwumechili et al., 2003), that help understanding Erasmus students' identity shifting and adjustment process abroad. To the same end, a qualitative research based on semistructured interviews was conducted among Romanian and Dutch students who have recently performed academic exchange in a European country.

Keywords: cross-cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, cultural contracts theory, Erasmus students

1. INTRODUCTION

The literature on foreign students is varied, but it is also concentrated in several fairly narrow areas. Much research has been carried out on such topics as the attitudes and adjustment problems of foreign students in the United States (Boyer, Sedlacek, 1988; Barnes, 1991; Zimmermann, 1995; Araujo, 2011) and on the problems of the non-return of the foreign students (the "brain drain"). Many other important issues, such as the process of identity negotiation experienced by international students have received scant attention from scholars and analysts. Yet, it is highly known and well documented that when individuals move from one culture to another (even for short amounts of time), many aspects of their identity are modified "to accommodate information about and experiences within the new culture" (Ryder *et al.*, 2000:49). This happens due to the continuous and direct contact between individuals of different cultural origins and backgrounds, which causes changes in attitudes, behaviours, values, and, at a fundamental level, alterations in the individual's sense of self. Thus, this work reflects students' identity negotiation experiences while abroad, in an attempt to identify coping strategies that may facilitate their cultural adjustment during the temporary relocation. Consequently, in what follows, we will introduce the main concepts and models in light of which processes of identity negotiation and cultural adaptation are understood and discussed; we will present the most common theoretical perspectives that were developed to understand the way sojourners, in general, and international students, in particular, deal with the challenges imposed by being abroad; we will expose the main factors that influence students' adaptive process as revealed by the extant literature on the topic; and, finally we will present the empirical findings resulted from a qualitative research based on indepth interviewing.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Identity negotiation in intercultural settings. In order to explore students' identity shifting and identity negotiation in relation to their

adjustment abroad we rely on *Cultural Contracts Theory* (Jackson, 2002; Hecht, Jackson, Ribeau, 2003; Onwumechili *et al*., 2003). Created in 2001, this theoretical paradigm "allows us to examine how identities take shape and are retained on a daily basis" (Jackson, 2002:366). Cultural contracts are defined by Jackson as "manifested products of identity negotiation during communication with others" (2002:362). But why do people need to negotiate or manage their identities, and, moreover, what is identity negotiation?

It is undeniable that nowadays people hold multiple, dynamic identities (Smith, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 2005) which may be 'activated' in terms of context or situation. At the same time, the changing and evolving identities which people carry with them into every cultural and conversational encounter reflect difference and, very often, with this difference conflict may come easily. Therefore, *identity negotiation* emerged as one useful strategy for reducing conflict (Jackson, 2002), and one of the preconditions for successful intercultural communication (Ting-Toomey, 1993). Within the sociological literature, the idea that identities are negotiated originated in the work of Goffman (1959), who introduced the notion of *working consensus* or agreement regarding the roles each person will assume in a given situation. In different words, through identity negotiation processes people reach agreements about who is who in their relationships and about what they can expect from one another during their further interactions. However, the terminology as it appears today in the field of intercultural communication emerged only recently through the work of Stella Ting-Toomey, who defines communication as "the identity-negotiation process between the self and relevant others" (1986:123). This identity negotiation paradigm refers, as Ting-Toomey puts it, to the selection of one among the multiple role identities individuals display to engage within a particular communication context. In short, identity negotiation "is about coordinating one's identity to match, compliment or simply not resist the presence of other cultural identities" (Jackson, 2002: 362).

As previously explained, identity negotiation is about alterations in people's worldview. A shift in any one or any part of one of the cultural aspects of students' cultural identities, for instance, represents the *signing* of a cultural contract. Hence, in line with Jackson (2002) and Onwumechili *et al.* (2003), we may state that everyone has "signed" at least one cultural contract in his/ her life, since cultural contracts "are necessary for the sake of preserving, protecting, and defining the self" (Jackson, 2002:363). And with every significant encounter, one or more of those cultural contracts is negotiated. In different terms, everyone has identified or aligned himself/ herself with others throughout his/ her life. And this happens because our identities are acquired and developed through interactions with significant others (Ting-Toomey, 2005) who will always play an important part in how we define ourselves and why we define ourselves as we do.

2.2. Theories of cross-cultural adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation – a concept that is used to represent various other terms such as assimilation, acculturation, integration, and adjustment has been defined as "a complex, multi-staged process of cultural encounters" (Sussman, 2002:391-392). As Adler notes, it is a "depth experience" that "begins with the encounter of another culture and evolves into the encounter with the self" (1975:18). In the literature, there appear to be at least four theories or models of cross-cultural adaptation that inform us of the various psychosocial stages that accompany this complex process. The first model, *The U-Curve Model*, was developed by Oberg in the '60s and explains the emotional curve that many sojourners experience upon entering into a new culture. Oberg (1960:178) distinguishes 3 to 5 stages of emotional adaptation: *honeymoon stage* (characterized by feelings of initial euphoria, excitement, fascination and optimism), *culture shock* (characterized by feelings of disorientation and the loss of many familiar cues), *hostility towards the host culture* (leading to feelings of resentment), *initial adaptation* (described by a sense of autonomy within the host culture), and *assimilation into the host culture* (when adjustment is about as complete as possible, anxiety is gone, and new customs are accepted and enjoyed). As some scholars show, the model "cannot be regarded as a comprehensive explanation of intercultural adaptation" (Hottola, 2004:450) since it does not allow for the uniqueness of individual experience (Adler, 1975).

The second model, *The Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management* was introduced by Gudykunst (1998, 2005) and was developed from Berger & Calebrese's (1975) *Uncertainty Reduction Theory*. Simply put, this model states that when entering in a new culture, sojourners experience anxiety as they feel too little ability to predict or explain the behaviour of the host nationals. In order to reduce uncertainty, manage anxiety, and adapt effectively,

a sojourner must have a solid sense of self-awareness, good communicative tools to gather information and navigate the adjustment process, adaptable attitudes and behaviour, and a high tolerance for ambiguity (Gudykunst, 2005:424). A strength of this model is its suggestion that a certain amount of uncertainty and anxiety are actually necessary for positive acculturation. In this context, culture shock is no longer conceptualized as a problem to be cured, but as a necessary step towards a successful transition experience.

The third model, *The Transition Model* was introduced by Bennett (1998), who views cultural adaptation as a natural process that exists within the human experience, its difficulty or ease depending on various factors such as the psychological personality traits of the individual, his/ her preparedness to change, the goals, aspirations and expectations correlated with the transition stage. Hence, sojourners' experiences and reactions to the new settings and people are rather unique to each individual than phases that are generally valid or predictable. A strength of the model is the conceptualization of culture shock as a natural psychological phenomenon, as a normal stage in people's cultural adjustment abroad, suggesting that sojourners are not alone in their experiences.

Finally, the model we build our analysis on, *The Communication Systems Model*, was introduced by Kim, who argues that adaptation actually occurs through communication and the building of social networks (2005:342-343). This is actually the first model of cross-cultural adaptation to specifically take communication into account in its application. According to Kim, cultural adaptation can be viewed as "a combination of communication adaptability and interaction involvement" (Chen, 1992:34). This model maintains that adaptability means

> the individual's capacity to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways, to learn and accommodate some of the new cultural ways, and to creatively find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural difference/ unfamiliarity, intergroup posture and the accompanying stress (Kim, 1991:268).

In short, through acculturation, sojourners acquire host-cultural practices; simultaneously, deculturation, or the "unlearning of some of the old cultural elements" occurs (Kim, 2005:340). Through both of these processes, Kim suggests, cultural adaptation takes place. More importantly though, the process of adapting to a new culture is grounded in communicative activities, including speaking, listening, interpreting, and understanding verbal and nonverbal messages (Kim, 2005). Consequently, cultural immersion is positively related with fluency in the language of the host culture. So, to facilitate adaptation, sojourners

> need to develop their ability to communicate effectively and efficiently according to the systems of language, non-verbal behaviour, and communication rules prevalent in the new society (Kim, 1988:166).

Also, along with developing host communication competence, they have to try to maximize their social participation by developing interpersonal relationships with the host nationals.

2.3. The predictors of cross-cultural adaptation. Countless studies have explored the predictors of cultural adjustment or adaptation. Based on a variety of literature sources, Sussman (2002:292) makes an inventory of those variables found to influence adjustment to a host environment and includes, among the most significant ones: individual differences in personality, the nature of the sojourn (purpose, length of stay), familial and social networks, interactions with home and host nationals, and cultural factors (e.g. cultural distance between home and host countries). Besides these variables, other authors (Pawanteh, 2000: 51) stress the importance of interpersonal relationships with the local community for the creation of positive attitudes towards the host country. Nevertheless,

> the local community's efforts at intercultural contact have a significant effect too on whether or not the sojourner has a meaningful, uneventful or unsuccessful intercultural experience (Pawanteh, 2001:141).

At the same time, the preconceived notions of the destination (the stereotypes and prejudices that the sojourner holds) may influence to a certain extent his/ her (initial) life in another environment. On the other hand, the opposite phenomenon of sojourners being stereotyped by the host country's nationals or by other foreign people may lead to an unsuccessful sojourn. As Imahori and Cupach (2005:199) put it, "people may experience face threatening acts when their cultural identities are constrained because of being stereotyped" or being perceived only as members of their respective cultures, while the other aspects of their identities are ignored or left in shadow. Also, the sojourner's motives prior to his/ her arrival in the foreign country as well as the previous cross-cultural

experience can result in a meaningful intercultural experience. In addition, the actual conditions to which the individual is exposed in the new culture would seem to be of paramount importance for emotional well-being, satisfaction and successful adjustment (Church, 1982:549).

At the same time, it has been commonly assumed that having a high level of communication competence with people of another culture will result in more familiarity with the other's culture and lead to a favorable sojourn (Pawanteh, 2000:49). In this sense, there is substantial support in the literature for a positive relationship between language proficiency and the amount of social interaction with host nationals (Gullahorn, Gullahorn, 1966; Deutsch, 1970, Kim, 1988, 2001 etc.), which ultimately may lead to an easier adjustment (Kim, 2005). Also, the similarities in the cultural framework between the host culture and that of the sojourners are assumed to allow for an easier and more natural adaptation process (Chen *et al.*, 2008). In the same line, most of the researchers assume that "the cultural distance" will influence negatively the adaptation for the sojourners belonging to cultures that are very different from the host destinations (Bochner, 2003). And the empirical studies have generally supported this notion (Chen *et al.*, 2008). In brief, very often, external differences such as climate, geography, economic resources and cultural patterns can give rise to a set of individual adjustment problems. For example, a student who comes from a country with a tropical climate will have trouble adjusting to a country in northern Europe, where the average temperatures do not exceed 10 degrees Celsius (Bochner, 2003).

Cultural adaptation is a continuum, a process that cannot be analyzed from a global perspective, as it depends on a number of variables whose combination provides an infinite number of possible outcomes (Bochner, 2003). In this sense, sojourners exhibit a broad range of degrees, modes, and levels of adaptation (Anderson, 1994:293). It is therefore pertinent to examine the daily experiences of different categories of sojourners while in the host country as a means to further understand the nature of their intercultural adaptation (Pawanteh, 2000:48).

3. QUESTIONS AND INSTRUMENTS OF THE RESEARCH

Our empirical research focused on Erasmus students from Romania and the Netherlands and aimed to explore their adjustment process to foreign cultural settings in relation to the identity changes that were triggered by their temporary intercultural transitions. 59 young people accepted to participate in this study between 2011 and 2012. By using indepth retrospective interviews, we were interested to find out how European students negotiate their identities abroad, and which are the main transformations that the relocating experience brings to their identity feelings.

Two research questions have guided our endeavour: *How do students negotiate their (cultural) identities abroad and what are the main identitary changes that the intercultural experience may cause? What are the most common challenges that students face in the foreign environment and how they manage to deal with them?*

In line with the theoretical model that provided the analytical framework for our approach, we argue that communication and social networking are central to the process of intercultural adaptation. Moreover, we assume that the success of students' academic sojourn both academically and personally depends to a large extent on their communication skills and on their abilities to interact with locals and other internationals as well.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical section of this paper centers on Romanian and Dutch Erasmus students' adjustment process to foreign European environments (i.e. on the main difficulties imposed by the foreign contexts as well as on the main adaptive factors that helped students cope with the new situations) in conection to the identity transformations involved by their efforts to adapt to the host destinations.

In relation to the first research question, regarding the identitary alterations caused by students' intercultural experience, our findings showed that all the surveyed students changed themselves in the process of adaptation to the new educational and socio-cultural settings. Although respondents have tried to maintain their own cultural identity during the academic mobility, most of them have also assumed other layers of identification in order to be mindful, respectful, competent communicators when traversing cultural boundaries. Put differently, while abroad, students' cultural identity started to change slowly, as to incorporate new information into old patterns and to become less stranger and more fit to the host environment. Thus, we may say that most of the

respondents have developed (at least for the time of their sojourn in the foreign country) what Kim (2007) calls an *intercultural identity* – a broader, more universal identity, combining and assimilating elements of the multiple cultures they got into contact with. According to the interviewees, this new, expanded identity has developed out of the many challenging experiences of self reorganization and redefinition under the demands of the new environments:

> Erasmus enriches your experience, it helps you learn to deal with extreme situations, such as getting in a country where you don't speak the language. Through Erasmus you get in contact with other cultures, with a different world, and this makes you often test your limits and become more open; you begin to see things differently, you begin to see particularities and not to generalize that much (Livia, Italy);

> Erasmus was very interesting, it helped me becoming more independent, more confident as well... and it kind of like... gave me like a broader perspective on things, because you get in touch with other cultures, with other people's views on things, and you kind of loose that narrow mind you had before... (Doenja, UK).

As for the second research question, the present data show that among the main challenges of the host cultural and educational environment, most of the respondents have rated "the language barrier" in the leading position, followed by "making friends with host nationals". Language was the most important drawback during students' adaptive period; sometimes they perceived the different national languages as obstacles, while English, lingua franca for most of them, was very rarely felt as disadvantage. The host country's language as a barrier was mentioned by all the 8 Romanian Erasmus located in Germany or Holland (as opposed to the rare mentions of the same problem for other countries such as Italy, Spain or France):

> Some of the Germans just refused to speak English, even if they knew the language; some of them did it on purpose and we reacted by speaking only English, even if we could have used German instead (Mihaela, Germany).

Symmetrically, most of the Dutch students performing their Erasmus in Italy, Romania, Spain or France emphasized the host country's language as an important barrier in their adaptation process, while their fellows who studied in Germany, Norway, Sweden or Austria have experienced fewer problems with the foreign language.

Regarding the second main challenge which, as deriving from the interviews, was "creating bonds with local students and people", most of the respondents argued that despite their repeted attempts and efforts to build relationships with the host country's nationals, they ended up by only getting closer to the other international students:

> One of my goals was to make friends with a lot of British people, and that didn't really worked out, I failed... because you kind of tend to move towards the international students, because they're alone and they're looking for friends, and you're alone and you're looking for friends, and that kind of creates like a bond. So it's easier to talk to each other and to do things with each other (Doenja, UK).

Furthermore, many Erasmus students rated "bureaucracy" as another difficult part of their life abroad, with 5 Dutch and 3 Romanians emphasizing it as the most challenging aspect of their sojourning experience:

> At the beginning the most challenging was to get through with all the administrative staff. It was really chaotic… (Bibi, Poland).

Other challenges that the Erasmus students faced and learnt to deal with were "the weather" (the cold climate was mentioned by all the Dutch students who performed their mobility stage in Norway, Austria or Poland while the hot weather was usually unbearable for most of the Dutch who studied in Italy, Spain or Romania), "living abroad for the very first time", "living on campus", "missing family and friends" etc. Also, "finding the right courses", "finding a place to stay", "not knowing anyone" or "living in a big city" were considered less challenging than, for instance, the "high prices" – which 4 students from the Netherlands and more than half of the Romanian interviewees emphasized several times:

> Probably the biggest challenge was how to cover all my expenses, because Ireland is a very expensive country and I think it was a struggle not to spend too much (Laura, Ireland).

Despite all the obstacles and difficult moments that influenced students' initial life abroad, the adaptation to the foreign millieu was easy for most of the interviewees. 48 out of the total number of the surveyed students revealed that adjusting to the new context was softer than initially expected, and most of them got to feel like home there in the end.

The main factors that helped students cope more easily with both the academic and the socio-cultural challenges were multiple and various; still, speaking English or the host country's language, their status of Erasmus students and the intercultural contacts were rated among the top three elements that facilitated respondents' adjustment process to the unfamiliar cultural settings, followed by their friendships with co-nationals or the previous experience of travelling and living abroad.

However, it is necessary to make some distinctions between Romanian and Dutch students' views and perspectives because, although the challenges they confronted in the host society were similar, the ways they chose to overcome them were rather different. In this regard, findings showed that in Romanian students' case, almost half of the respondents highlighted the friendship with other Romanians (with whom they started the "Erasmus adventure" or whom they met abroad) as the most powerful means of adaptation:

> To my adaptation has greatly contributed the fact that I left my country with two other Romanians whom I already knew, and I also made friends with a co-national I met there. Without them I wouldn't have felt the same, definitely! (Raluca, Netherlands).

In line with other studies in the current literature dedicated to sojourners' adjustment (Church, 1982 etc.), our research emphasizes that, because of the anxieties associated with immersing themselves in the host culture, many Romanians tended to form "enclaves" of fellow nationals. On the one hand, establishing these primary-group relations allowed them to maintain familiar, traditional values and belief systems; on the other hand, these enclaves served as "reference groups" with whom the new environment could be interpreted, discussed, compared and often criticized. However, despite the benefits their increased interaction with co-nationals has brought along, most of the Romanian respondents addmitted that their contact with the local or the international students and people was restricted in this way.

Furthermore, the Erasmus group identity, the communication and friendships with other exchange students, a good English (or/ and a good knowledge of the host language), the constant support they received from tutors and professors, the intercultural parties, and the fact that some of them have travelled or even lived abroad before the Erasmus experience were also emphasized as very important factors that reduced Romanian interviewees' anxiety and facilitated their temporary integration in the foreign environment. At the same time, the similarities between their host and home cultures were often considered to be cardinal aspects in the Romanian respondents' adaptation process, though they were less stressed than the previously exposed factors.

As far as the Dutch interviewees are concerned, the main factors helping them to surpass both the academic and the socio-cultural obstacles were their proficiency in English, the intercultural contacts and the new international friends (which most of them mentioned among the top three adaptive elements); these were followed by the previous experience of working and/ or living abroad, the cultural similarities between their home and host destinations and the Erasmus family. Other means of adjustment comprised in the Dutch students' answers were the activities arranged by the host universities (such as the welcoming parties, the intercultural dinners and many other informal meetings), the common concerns and preoccupations that students manifested for experiencing new things, for itinerating, and for making new friends and, finally, their interest and eagerness to make contact with different people from various cultures. An important distinction between the Dutch respondents and their Romanian colleagues was that the former students did not accentuate the support of and friendship with fellow nationals as essential in facilitating their cultural transition:

> [...] my goal was not to hang out with Dutch people, because I know a lot of Dutch people and I like them, but not when I'm abroad, I want to meet other people (Doreth, Norway).

At the same time, as largely explained before, this was the main adaptive pattern in the Romanian students' case.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Students (particularly Erasmus students) are enrolling in European universities in increasing numbers, yet previous research seldom focuses on their adaptive challenges abroad in relation to the identity shifts that the intercultural experiences may trigger. In this context, the empirical section of this article was meant to address such issues and to contribute to the extant literature on the subject by revealing the main inconveniences that Erasmus

students face nowadays while trying to temporary adapt to the host European cultures, together with the factors that help them diminish their adaptive efforts and integrate abroad. To this end, our research addressed to young Romanian and Dutch people who have spent an Erasmus stage of several months in a European country at their choice. Among the most common theories that explain the complex phenomenon of cross-cultural adaptation we have built the analysis on Kim's *Communication Systems Model* (2001, 2005), which highlights that adaptation actually occurs through communication and the building of social networks.

Being transplanted into a new culture inevitably necessitates adjustment. The most obvious type of adjustment international students have to deal with is academic, as studying in a different country often involves a different education style and new kinds of demands and expectations. Still, academic adjustment is only one aspect of the whole process of adaptation international students deal with. Like other sojourners, these students have to adapt "outside of the classroom" as well. And our empirical study has rather focused on Romanian and Dutch students' adaptation (mainly) outside the academic context, although the academic and the non-academic aspects of students' experiences are often inextricably linked.

From the adaptive perspective, the main conclusion of this article is in line with other studies in the field revealing that the problems reported by the foreign students during their cultural transitions have remained essentially the same over the past years. Among them, the language barrier and the friendships with the host nationals were emphasized as the greatest challenges by our respondents. Nevertheless, if the language-related problems diminished considerably after the first sojourning weeks, the interaction with the host country's students and locals remained difficult throughout the whole exchange period and, most of the times, it did not exceed the academic environment. However, despite the initial language and accomodation-related difficulties associated with their foreign study, the great majority of the interviewed students have experienced a rather "soft" transition to the new cultural environments. Also, most of them confessed they grew attached to their host cultures and got to feel like home by the end of their stay, a fact demonstrating that students' overall level of adjustment to the new environments was high. Among the various means of dealing with the challenges raised by the experience of being a foreign student, the fluency in English or the mastery of the host country's language (after the initial weeks abroad), the Erasmus identity and the interaction with other internationals were mentioned the most frequently. The theoretical assumption that intercultural adaptation actually occurs through increased communication and the building of social networks was highly confirmed by both the Romanian and the Dutch interviewees' experiences and perspectives. Having good communicative tools to gather information and navigate the adjustment process) as well as being fluent in English or in the host country's language were positively correlated with a successful cross-cultural adaptation by almost all the students. In short, drawing on the theoretical model that guided the current discussion concerning Erasmus students' cultural adaptation during their academic sojourn (*The Communication Systems Model*), we may conclude that students' communication adaptability together with their increased interaction (and, moreover, the combination of the two) can be viewed as the definition of cultural adjustment for the respondents involved in this study

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