Abstract

It is often claimed that the international academic sojourn has the capacity to bring about personal and cultural change in the sojourner, but such claims are not often supported by empirical evidence. Using an autoethnographic approach, this paper offers a first-person account of the changes wrought in an international student by their time spent studying abroad. The study notes a growth in cultural knowledge, an increased tolerance of cultural differences and an improved ability to communicate across cultures.

Key words

International education   personal development cultural learning autoethnography

Introduction

Mobility has become a significant and increasing phenomenon in the twenty-first century (Urry and Grieco 2011). Urry (2002 p. 256) emphasises that "being on the move" has become a "way of life" for many, and the right to mobility is fundamental to western citizenship and is expressed in governmental and legal documents (Cress 2010). Indeed, both the UN and the EU enshrine the right to movement in their constitution (Urry and Grieco 2011). However, it must be noted that many people have mobility thrust upon them, as reflected in the rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees in the early twenty-first century (Urry and Grieco 2011). In 2014, more than 1.6 million individual applications for asylum or refugee statues were submitted to governments in 157 countries, the highest level ever recorded (UNHCR 2014). For this reason, some authors argue that it is important to distinguish between voluntary and enforced mobility (Hannam 2006; Buscher and Urry 2009).

Urry and Grieco (2011) identified key social practises in the contemporary world which involves the international movement of people;

- Asylum, refugee and homeless travel and migration
- Business and professional travel and migration
- Social travel and migration, i.e. joining families and friends in foreign countries
- International education travel
- Post-employment travels and the forming of transnational lifestyles within retirement
- Holiday and leisure travel to visit places in relationship to different senses, especially through the 'tourist gaze'.

As well as enforced mobility, voluntary mobility has also seen a significant increase in recent years. In the tourism sector, the number of international tourists reached over 1.138 million in 2014, an increase of 51 million over 2013 and close to 526 million compared to 1995 (UNWTO 2015). Moreover, the number of international students has also seen a vast increase, reflecting growing university enrolments around the world. In 2012, 4.5 million students went abroad for the purpose of study, an increase from 2 million in 2000 ((Project Atlas 2015). The United States is the world's leading destination with almost 975 000 international students in 2014 and holds 22 % of the total number of mobile students worldwide. This is followed by the United Kingdom with approximately 495 000 international students (11 %) and China with 378 000 students (8%) (Project Atlas 2015). Furthermore, Asia is the leading source of international students: 53 % of all students studying outside their home environment originate from Asian countries. One out of six internationally mobile students

is from China, and together with India and South Korea, these countries account for more than a quarter of all students studying abroad (ICEF Monitor 2014).

In the United Kingdom, international enrolment in higher education has seen a growth of +2.6 % between 2013 and 2014 (ICEF Monitor 2014): 18 % of the total number of students are international (UKCISA 2015). The most popular subject area of international students studying in the United Kingdom is business and administrative studies (38.7 %), followed by engineering and technology (32.7 %) and law (25 %) (UKCISA 2015). The economic impact of increasing student mobility is significant as it leads to enhancement of the local economy and increased job opportunities (UNWTO 2015; Universities UK 2014). Studying abroad also has an impact on the students themselves at an individual level. Indeed, personal and cultural change is the focus of this paper whose aim is to chart the journey of an international student through their life abroad and to consider the change wrought by the international sojourn. This paper presents data from an autoethnographic study of the first author's own experiences of being an international student.

The international student sojourn

Alongside the rise in the recruitment of international students worldwide, there has been an increase in research on the international sojourn. Transition to a new culture marks a significant life event (Kim 2001), calling for a process of adjustment to new cultural norms (Gudykunst 1998; Busher et al. 2016; Tarry 2011). Brown and Holloway (2008a) state that adjustment describes the process and outcome of change experienced during the international stay. In this process, the student often faces challenges related to academic life, social interaction and emotions (Gebhard 2012; Gao 2017; Mesidor and Sly 2016; Alsahafi and Chin 2017). Often, students have initial unrealistic expectations of their new surroundings, which lead to feelings of distress when their expectations of the unfamiliar are not met (Ward et. al 2001; Newsome and Cooper 2016). However, studies indicate that this process helps students to acquire functional skills, and to develop insight into their own identity, which allow them to better handle future socio-cultural challenges (Newsome and Cooper 2016; Zhen Li et al. 2017). According to Kim (2001), the best outcome for a globalised and multicultural society is the development of intercultural competence, which carries positive implications for world peace and understanding.

The international sojourn therefore has transformative potential. It has the power to increase cross-cultural understanding and tolerance of cultural diversity (Ward et al 2001; Cushner and Karim 2004;

Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). It can force a change in the domestic and professional role, which has carries implications for how sojourners will behave following the return home (Brown 2009). As Guiness (2003) argues, distance from home can test and stretch resourcefulness and force a revision in self-understanding. Indeed, the return home can be a worrying time, as sojourners may face difficulty in adjustment (Steyn and Grant 2006). It is also argued that it can produce change in those left behind in the origin culture (Brown 2009).

The degree of change wrought in the sojourner is a function of the purpose and duration of the trip undertaken: a shift in personal and cultural outlook is more likely in the international student whose stay is usually for a year or more (Brown and Holloway 2008b). Adjustment in the case of international students is often as an initially painful and testing process, whose outcome is usually positive, often a life-enhancing challenge to old ways of thinking and behaving (ibid; Newsome and Cooper 2016).

The aim of this paper is to offer support for the above-stated outcomes of the international sojourn by offering a first person account of an international student's journey through life abroad as well as to dwell on the outcome of this journey.

Methodology

This paper is based on data collected using an autoethnographic approach. This is described as a "lyric inquiry" (Neilsen, 2008, p. 94) in which the aesthetic underpins the phenomenological. This allows an emotional approach to knowledge that attempts to use personal experiences to reflect the universal (Quinney, 1998). Autoethnography is defined by Ellis et al. (2011) as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and analyse personal experience in order to illuminate elements of the wider culture. The researcher uses aspects of autobiography and ethnography to do and write an autoethnography (ibid). According to Sparkes (2000, p.21), autoethnographies 'are highly personalised accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding'. Closer to literature than to science, the products of autoethnographic research should be accessible, evocative and grounded in empirical experience, so that the reader can empathise with the experience they read about (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Autoethnographic writing includes the researcher's vulnerable self, and produces evocative stories that create effect of reality and seeks fusion between social science and literature (Reed-Danahay 1997). In autoethnography, people write about epiphanies in their lives and in doing so, they open themselves up for criticism about how they have lived (Ellis 2004). Moreover, autoethnography encourages people to

better understand and learn from each other, as it invites the reader into the lived experiences of a presumed "Other" (Boylorn and Orbe 2014).

Ellis et al. (2011) observe that people don't generally deliberately undergo an experience in order to be able to write an autoethnography about it; rather they selectively write about past experiences that are assembled using hindsight. The first author of this paper used personal diaries to create an autoethnography of the journey of her life as an international student. Thus, the findings presented in this paper reflect the first author's own experiences. The data sets on which this study is based are as follows: firstly when she was a Swedish exchange student in Salem, Oregon (August to December 2013); she then continued her studies in Graz, Austria (January to August 2014); finally, she completed an MSc in Bournemouth, England (January 2015 to April 2016). Like most qualitative research, the approach was inductive and idiographic in that data were collected with undue influence from pre-existing theories, and the study starts from the personal, from the self (Holloway and Brown 2012).

Writing skills are important in all qualitative research (Caulley 2006): tension and interest in outcomes are essential traits for qualitative inquiry (Holloway 2011). This is particularly important when producing autoethnography, which must be aesthetic, emotionally rich and engaging, and must feature character, scene and plot development (Ellis and Bochner 2000). As Noy (2007, p. 143) states, 'autoethnography is unique in that its power lies within its discursive, written mode. Bearing in mind the importance of a readable narrative, many hours were spent rereading and refining the story, making sure that it was authentic and honest and that it might resonate with the reader. The first person was used because it facilitates engagement with the reader and allows for a more resonant account.

Many autoethnographers opt to produce an account that is without academic underpinning, aiming instead to be evocative and to allow readers to enter into their world (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Some academics manage to get such narratives published, though this is challenging. As Ellis et al. (2011) state, autoethnographers are often required by social science publishing conventions to analyse their experience, which also serves the purpose of illuminating facets of cultural experience that are not included in the personal account. Indeed, autoethnography in general is underrepresented in the academic literature, and is often criticised for being narcissistic and self-absorbed, for being neither art nor science (Sparkes 2000; Holloway and Brown 2012). Ellis et al. (2011) claim however that autoethnography aims to challenge the view that art and science are at odds with each other: it offers a bridge between the two worlds (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

Considering the argument within the methods literature regarding treatment of autoethnographic data, we opted to analyse the first author's story, using a varied literature to interpret and to explain her experience. Perhaps, as Ellis acknowledges, we are too socialised in the norms of the academic community, which expects dialogue with literature and theory (Ellis and Bochner 2000)? Perhaps, as Sparkes (2000) confesses, we felt that integrating theory in the account would ward off charges of self-indulgence? Nevertheless, we made the commitment to avoid or minimise the lack of feeling and distanced theorising that often characterise analytic autoethnography: we aimed to 'protect the integrity of the story' (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 440), to write an account that managed a 'blend of evocative and analytic prose' (ibid, p. 443). This meant moving backwards and forwards from the emic to the etic, in order to take a more analytic view of the data (Holloway and Brown 2012).

Autoethnography as an academic type of writing has been widely criticised. It has been dismissed for social scientific standards as being not enough theoretical and analytical and for being too aesthetic and emotional (Ellis 2009). Furthermore, autoethnographers have been criticised for doing too little fieldwork (Delamont 2009), and for using biased data (Anderson 2006). According to Ellis et al. (2011), the criteria for judging autoethnography are different from those usually applied to qualitative research. As Sparkes (2000) states, new criteria are demanded by the emergence of a new method. Ellis et al. (2011) claim that reliability is established in autoethnography if the reader believes that the narrator could have had the experience they describe, that memory recall has not distorted the experience or that the narrator has not taken artistic licence too far. Validity is similarly achieved if the reader believes that the account is lifelike, coherent and engaging. Indeed, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), if an account is not evocative and does not stimulate an empathetic response, it cannot call itself autoethnography.

Findings

The findings presented in this paper are built upon the first author's own experiences of being an international student in various countries. Firstly, an analysis of the author's experience of culture shock and cultural adjustment when first entering an unfamiliar country is outlined using Adler's (1975) transitional experience model. Secondly, the importance of personal space is discussed as the author reflects upon the differences between cultures in negotiating this issue. Thirdly, the challenges encountered when working in multi-cultural groups are identified, followed by a discussion of the author's struggles to overcome prejudice towards

other cultures. Lastly, differences in social interaction and communication between cultures are emphasised along with an account of how the author managed to develop an intercultural identity.

Experiencing culture shock

My journey of self-change started about 2 years ago, more precisely in late August 2013. I had just finished my undergraduate studies in the small country of Sweden and was heading off to the vast country of the United States to continue my studies. I had travelled before, and in fact I had always seen myself as an experienced traveller with great cultural knowledge, but this was the first time I was actually going to live in another country, something which I would later see was very different from any other travel experience I had had before. This supports the argument that cultural change and the achievement of cultural awareness are processes that take time (Hofstede 2001). The longer the exposure to a culture, the more likely the development of cultural change.

I ended up in a small town called Salem in the state of Oregon. At first, the cultural transition did not seem very difficult. I found myself in a state of excitement and euphoria; I met friendly people from many different cultures, and we all got along very well. I was especially touched by the Americans themselves, who seemed to be very sociable, helpful and welcoming. I especially recall an encounter with an American student during the first week of term. We barely knew each other, yet within the first conversation, she invited me to come and visit her family without knowing anything about me. At first, I was a bit shocked, but at the same time I felt very flattered. This friendly gesture was later repeated by many other Americans, and I got invited to all sorts of events such as Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations, which made me feel special and well-liked. However, a few weeks later I came across the same girl and asked her when I could visit her. She did not seem to know what I was talking about, which made me feel disappointed. This happened with the other Americans that I met: they suddenly seemed to change their mind about their invitations.

I would say that it was then that I reached the stage of 'culture shock'. I was trying to figure out what I could possibly have done to make these people dislike me, which made me feel very anxious and uncertain about myself and my social competence. I was also angry that people were being dishonest, since we always keep our promises in Sweden. However, as time passed, I came to realise that this behaviour had nothing to do with me. As I started to learn more about American culture, I learned that inviting people to one's home is seen as an act of friendliness, though the invitee is not expected to understand this as an actual invitation. As soon I learned this, I started to feel better.

Pedersen (1995 p. 1) defines culture shock as "the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment". It is a sudden immersion into a nonspecific state of uncertainty where individuals are unsure what is expected from them or what they are supposed to expect from people in their surroundings (ibid). Furthermore, Ward et al. (2001) state that culture contact is inherently stressful and involves an experience of loss of status in the new culture, where language, customs and procedures are strange and unfamiliar.

There are many different theories which attempt to chart the process of cultural adjustment. In my case, the process of euphoria, cultural shock and adaption that I went through can best be explained by using *the model of transitional experience* proposed by Adler (1975). The transitional experience is characterised as a movement from a state of low self- and cultural awareness to a state of high self- and cultural awareness involving five distinct stages. The first 'contact' stage occurs after arriving in a new country when the newcomer experiences euphoria and excitement about the new experience, but where their basic identity is fully integrated in his or her own culture. In relation to my journey, this stage of the process was particularly visible, as my feelings of excitement and joy about being in a new culture dominated any other emotion. Adler (1975) states that the individual is more alert to similarities than differences in this stage as psychological mechanisms for coping with radically new stimuli are absent. This can be seen as an explanation for why I perceived everyone I met as friendly and helpful: I was not able to see the differences between my culture and the host culture.

The second stage is marked by a period of confusion and disorientation. Differences are increasingly noticeable as different values and behaviours interfere with the values of the individual. The individual usually experiences self-blame for any difficulties encountered. The difference in values was obvious in relation to my travel experience since I perceived Americans to be dishonest in contrast with honest Swedes. I felt different from others, and castigated myself. Being unable to interpret others' behaviour when entering a foreign country is not only applicable to my situation; it has been widely recognised in the literature (see Ward et. al 2001; Kim 2001). For example, Brown and Holloway (2008) conducted a study of international postgraduate students in England and found that most students felt uncertain and anxious about how to behave in everyday situations, including how to engage in small talk and how to read emotions: they were afraid of misunderstandings that could occur due to not knowing what is culturally acceptable in England. Similarly, Gebhard's (2012) research on adjustment issues among 85 international students studying at an American university indicated that students expressed social and emotional difficulties which often led to social constraint and withdrawal from their surroundings.

The next stage is characterised by an integration of new cues and an increased ability to function in the new culture alongside resentment of the new culture. I did not fully experience this stage, as I did not

resent the American culture or show my anger. I kept the negative feelings I had to myself, which did not last very long as I tried to deal with my problems immediately by talking to the people I met, and trying to find the underlying reasons for their behaviour. Despite feeling betrayed by my new friends' behaviour toward me, I decided to stay close to them in order to observe their actions and thus to evaluate whether or not their behaviour was aimed personally at me.

The autonomy stage is marked by an increased sensitivity and understanding of the host culture. I found myself at this stage after a time of observing and taking part in the American culture. I developed an increased sensitivity to American social norms, which helped me to accept that differences between cultures exist.

The final stage of independence is marked by the individual being able to fully accept cultural differences and feeling comfortable with both the home and the new culture. This increased sensibility and acceptance among sojourners has been researched by other authors such as Sussman (2000) who states that cultural contact leads to changes in one's values, attitudes and cultural identity. Moreover, Noy (2004)'s study of Israeli backpackers showed that long-term sojourning contributes to changes in the perception of oneself. I would argue that I did not fully reach this stage during my experience in the United States since I still valued the Swedish culture more, and I did not manage to feel fully comfortable with the American way of behaving. Adler (1975) states that this stage usually occurs after spending years in the same culture whereas my sojourn lasted only six months. However, Adler (1975 p. 18) also argues that individuals in this stage are capable of "undergoing further transitions in life along new dimensions and of finding ways to explore the diversity of human being". Hence, this travel experience most probably helped me to better adapt to and understand other cultures that I encountered later in my travel history.

Managing personal space

After my six months in the United States, I travelled to Austria for a further six months in January 2014. I now faced a new culture, with new cultural traditions and behaviours that I would have to adapt to. Although I did not experience the same 'culture shock' as when I moved to America, I still encountered differences which in the beginning were hard to get used to.

One thing I learned from my time in Austria is the importance of personal space in the context of Swedish culture, and how intimidating it can be if someone invades this space. To give an example, the Austrian culture has the tradition of 'cheek kissing'. This phenomenon was completely new to me when I first arrived. On my second night, I was invited to a house party where I did not know anyone.

As soon I as arrived, people came to greet me by giving me a kiss on each cheek. This was a highly disturbing and uncomfortable experience. I wondered how someone I did not know would dare to come that close to me without my permission! As time went by, I became more comfortable with this kind of greeting behaviour, and to people being physically close to me. This adjustment helped me when in January 2015 I moved to England for my postgraduate studies.

The programme that I followed in the UK consists of people from numerous different nationalities and I have had the opportunity to get to know many different cultures. After arrival, I started to engage with people from Latin American countries, particularly Venezuela. I came to learn that Venezuelans prefer to stand close to and touch people when communicating. This is very different from Swedish culture as we try to keep our distance from people at all times in order to avoid making people feel uncomfortable. However, even though I felt slightly unsettled during these encounters, especially if a male friend approached me (being too close is often perceived as a sexual invite), I did not feel as intimidated or uncomfortable as I would have a few years ago. As my personal space had already been invaded many times in Austria, one could assume that my tolerance had increased, which allowed me to bear people being close to me.

My experience is explained by theories of cultural differences in social interaction. Cultural norms involve behaviours that members of a certain culture have defined as most suitable in any given setting. (Ward et.al 2001). Furthermore, norms do not only confirm socially appropriate behaviour, they also define what is seen as inappropriate (Gudykunst 1998). What is considered 'normal' behaviour is further connected to social rituals in cultures. Rituals can be described as any kind of established routine or procedure, including greetings. Rituals are important since they strengthen cultural meaning systems (Matsumoto and Hwang 2015). In the context of Swedish culture, 'normal' behaviour is related to greeting each other with a hand shake (Lundmark 2009). Since this norm is deep-rooted in my personality, the behaviours I encountered in Austria felt like a violation.

Moreover, Hall (1990) discussed the concept of spatial experience and the distances maintained in encounters with others. He defined four categories of relationships (intimate, personal, social and public), which require different amounts of personal space that vary cross-culturally. What is perceived as an intimate distance in one culture might be perceived as personal or even public in another. For example, the personal distance used for casual conversations with friends is within one and a half to two feet according to American and Northern European standards (Hall 1990). This is violated by my Venezuelan friends, who usually stand closer than this when communicating, as dictated by their own cultural norms for communication.

Furthermore, cultures can be classified into "high-contact" and "low-contact" cultures (Gudykunst 1998). Venezuelans come from a high-contact culture which means they prefer greater sensory contact with the person they are communicating with. Sweden is, on the other hand, a low-contact culture

which means we are not used to touching, or being touched by others while communicating. Touching is only allowed within families or in very close relationships. As Hall (1990 p. 11) states, "even the brushing of the overcoat sleeve elicits an apology". When a person from a high contact culture meets someone from a low contact culture, the latter is seen as cold and unfriendly, while the former might be seen as sexually predatory (Ward et. al 2001).

Working in multi-cultural groups

Working in mixed-nationality groups was a challenging experience. I have experienced difficulties working in groups before but these are amplified in multinational groups. One such group included Southern European, Asian and Arabic students. I encountered difficulty in communication with a student from an Arab background who always said what was on her mind without thought for peoples' feelings. After reading my work, she commented that it was useless and poorly written. Her words were very hurtful and I took them personally. In my culture, this way of expressing oneself is considered very rude: we try to express our disapproval in a more polite manner, in order to avoid unnecessary conflict. Another cross-cultural difference I encountered related to different preferences in terms of the organisation of tasks between the Swedish and the Italian culture. I would describe myself as a very structured and organised person who likes to do one thing at a time, working on one topic and finishing that before moving on to the next. This was not the case with my Italian friend who preferred to work on every topic at the same time without any clear structure or time frame. This created tension and frustration and it took longer to complete the work as there was a constant debate about how things should be done.

Popov et al. (2012) argue that although collaborative partners with different cultural backgrounds can capitalise on differences in experience, knowledge and abilities, not everyone can benefit from culturally divergent knowledge because of not sharing the same rules and norms and for underestimating the role of clarity. Gudykunst (1998) states that communication is only effective when the individual interpreting the message assigns a meaning similar to what was intended by the individual transmitting it. Most of the time we interpret messages using our own frame of reference, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. This is often because communication rules differ across cultures, which in turn has an influence on how messages are interpreted. Matsumoto and Hwang (2015) discuss the concept of politeness or etiquette which describes expectations for social behaviour in relation to cultural norms. Often cultures differ in what is considered polite and appropriate and vary to the extent to which people are 'direct' or 'indirect'. In some cultures, it is perceived rude not to express one's opinion explicitly, while in others, it is considered impolite to act

in a direct manner (Ward et. al 2001). In relation to my experience, I perceived the Arabic student as being rude towards me as she openly expressed her disapproval of my work, while she most probably thought it would have been rude not to be direct with me.

In relation to my experience of working with Italians, Lewis (2006) discusses the concept of linear-active and multi-active cultures. He states that people from a linear-active culture prefer to do one thing at a time, to concentrate hard on that particular task, and to complete it within a beforehand set time frame. On the other hand, people with a background in a multi-active culture are more flexible when completing work tasks; they prefer to do many things at the same time and are not very interested in schedule and punctuality. Lewis (2007) further states that when people from a linear-active culture work with people from a multi-active culture, irritation and tension result on both sides. Unless one person adapts to the cultural traits of the other, a crisis will erupt as they will not be able to understand each other's actions. In accordance with this view, Hall (1990) refers to the same cross-cultural differences in terms of the monochronic and polychronic use of time. I come from a linear-active, monochronic culture whereas my Italian friend originates from a multi-active, polychronic culture, which can work as an explanation for the difficulties we encountered in managing our group. Behfar et al. (2006) however emphasise that students working in multicultural groups have to handle challenges that are common for both monocultural and multicultural groups. I found upon reading the study by Karahanna et al. (2006) that the challenges I faced cannot solely be attributed to cultural differences. Personal characteristics and opinions, as well as gender and age may all play a part in people's work behaviour. However, I have experience of working in both monocultural and multicultural groups, which makes me aware that there are indeed differences in cultures. I have slowly been able to distinguish between individual and cultural differences.

Battling cultural stereotypes and prejudice

The next chapter of my journey is dedicated to stereotypes and prejudice which is a widely recognised topic in literature on international student adjustment (see Newsome and Cooper 2016; Charles-Toussaint and Crowson 2010). However, many of the existing studies focus on prejudice of the local population towards the international student, which was not the case for me. I have not been exposed to much prejudice towards me or the Swedish culture, but my journey has made me aware of the stereotypes I have held of other cultures. Before my trip to England, I must admit I had some prejudice towards Asians, probably because of a lack of exposure to Asian cultures. As Klopf (1995) states, stereotypes and prejudice often derive from the 'unknown', and are based on inconclusive or hasty examination of facts.

Firstly, I believed that the Chinese represent all Asians in terms of cultural traits and behaviour. Furthermore, I believed that Asians tend to stick with people from their own culture. However, during my first few weeks in England, a student from Thailand approached me, and invited me to a party with her friends from different parts of Asia. I must say I had some doubts about going as I was not sure if they would be willing to communicate with me, or if we would have anything in common. These assumptions would be shown to be erroneous. At the party, people were genuinely interested in me and my culture. They were very friendly and asked me a lot of questions. I was surprised to realise how 'European' they behaved and that we shared the same worldview in many respects. Ten months later, two of my best friends are from Thailand and South Korea, and they have confounded my misperceptions. I have learned about the differences in Asian cultures and I also learned that people are offended if it is assumed that they share the same culture and traditions as the Chinese. They do not want to be overshadowed by the Chinese and they want people to know that they have their own character and traditions. Gudykunst (1998) states that stereotypes create expectations of and predictions about how people will behave, which are often challenged by intercultural contact.

The social experience

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of my academic sojourn is related to social interaction and communication. Gudykunst (1998) states that communication style is unique to each culture and that communication patterns are highly influenced by cultural identity, which is defined as a psychological connection between a person and a cultural group (Gudykunst and Kim 2003). As a Swede, I was raised to be reserved, timid and passive, especially in encounters with strangers. Sweden is an individualistic country characterised by high self-reliance and avoidance of long-term relationships with people outside the family network. Swedes usually prefer tight, small social networks where trust is key (Gannon and Pillai 2010).

Because of my cultural background, I have struggled to socialise and open up to new people. While in Sweden, I never really reflected upon this cultural characteristic and I did not know how it would hinder my ability to function abroad. This became noticeable when I moved to the United States. As Gudykunst (1998, p. 65) states, "we become aware of the influence of our cultural identities on our communication when we find ourselves in another culture or in a situation in our cultures where we are interacting with members of other cultures". The American culture is individualistic as is the Swedish culture (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). However, Americans are also risk-takers and outgoing (Hofstede 2016). I remember feeling foolish that I did not share the ability to talk freely, to initiate conversations. One of my Americans friends always used to tell me that I had to 'loosen up', and to not be so 'uptight'. Many studies of international student adjustment highlight cultural difference and its effect upon social relationships. Newsome and Cooper's (2016) study of international students and

their cultural and social experiences in a British University revealed that international students often struggled to establish relationships with British people. The British people were commonly portrayed as distant, unfriendly, rude and reserved.

Being in a different cultural environment has helped me to improve my social skills. In each new country, I have acquired new, unique social skills. I am no longer afraid of talking to people I do not know, and I more easily to let people in. Hence, my social network has grown and includes people from all over the world. Nowadays when I meet people from different cultures, they often tell me how 'non-Swedish' I am. There are comments like: "I thought Swedes were cold and unfriendly, but you seem very open and nice". Even my family has started to notice how I have become more comfortable in socialising with strangers and they tell me that I seem more confident. However, when visiting Sweden, I am still careful about initiating conversations with strangers, as this is something that is perceived as odd and deviant in my country. What I have experienced can be explained through the concept of liminality. Liminality has often been investigated in terms of tourism practises, where tourists are believed to undergo a behavioural change while on holiday, when they find themselves in a so-called 'liminal state' (Graburn 2001; Maoz 2006; Mckercher and Bauer 2003). For example, Selanniemi (2003) discusses how being a tourist permits an individual to become freed from social commitments, which changes their behaviour. Maoz (2006) emphasises that being abroad leads to relaxation of social norms where behaviours that would normally be suppressed at home become acceptable. From my perspective, being an international student away from home for so long has contributed to the suppression of my usual reserve and has opened the way for less restrained social behaviour.

As mentioned before, my cultural identity has had a strong influence upon my personality and behaviour. Yet, encountering different environments has made me go through a process of cross-cultural adaption. The outcome is the development of an intercultural identity as mentioned by Kim (2001). Kim states that becoming an intercultural person involves the development of cognitive complexity which sees the separation of the new culture from the old and the development of a wider perspective. I started my journey fully bonded to my own cultural identity with a reserved and passive nature, and now, I am fully capable of functioning in a multi-cultural environment.

The end of the journey

In a final reflection on my academic sojourn in countries outside Sweden, I conclude that this journey has not been easy as I have had to face countless obstacles in new, unfamiliar environments. However, even though my experience has been tough, I am astonished at how much my perspective has broadened. I have learned so many things about myself, my culture and other cultures that I never thought was possible.

Firstly, I have learned the importance of being tolerant towards people who have different values, norms and opinions from my own. My beliefs and values should not be held up as the truth. Every culture has a different way of communicating, in terms of social interaction, greeting rituals, personal space, norms of politeness, and behaviour in group work.

Secondly, it is vital not to make assumptions about peoples' behaviour or characteristics. It is better to be open to other cultures and to get to know people first in order to form one's own opinions about other cultures and individuals. With this mind set, I have had the opportunity to get to know many different people I never thought I would get along well with. I am surprised to realise how narrow-minded I used to be as I believed that Swedish norms, values and behaviour have always been 'right' and that everyone else was wrong. I started my journey with little cultural knowledge, but I can now proudly describe myself as a person with great cultural awareness and tolerance.

 I know I am far from the only one who has experienced such a growth in tolerance and acceptance due to my exposure to other cultures. Studies by Brown (2009) and Brown and Holloway (2008) of international student adjustment indicate that students went through a transformation related to their self-conception and cross-cultural awareness. Brown (2009) found that students revealed a high degree of change in values and attitudes after spending time abroad: they had become more open-minded towards other cultures, and had acquired culture-specific skills. Indeed, I can identify with these students' stories as I realize how life-changing my travel experience has been. I have learned the need to acknowledge differences in order to function in an increasingly mobile and multi-cultural world. In this regard, I have most probably enhanced my future employability as I have the cultural skills required to work in a globalised world (Cushner and Mahon 2002).

The change I have gone through can be explained through Taylor's (1994) cultural learning theory which details the process becoming interculturally competent. He states that individuals often experience a transformation out of a necessity for survival and for relieving stress and anxiety. In order to achieve this, they need to see their world from a different perspective. Furthermore, when the experience does not fit the behaviour and values of individuals' own culture, adjustment to the other culture is necessary to be able to handle the new experience. This happened constantly during my journey. For example, in order to deal with the overwhelming and uncomfortable experience of having people 'too' close to me, I needed to accommodate the norms and behaviour of the other culture.

Through the process of cultural learning, I have managed to become an intercultural person as described by Kim (2001) and I have been able to achieve the mind-set of 'cultural relativism', which refers to the notion that no single culture has the absolute criteria for judging another culture. Hofstede (2001 p. 454) argues that "if we begin to realize that our own ideas are culturally limited, from that moment we need the others: we can never be self-sufficient again". However, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) further state that no human being can escape their own values at all times. If they do, they will

become alienated and will lack a sense of identity, which is vital for a feeling of security. Even though I have gone through a great change during my journey, I have managed to keep my own identity. Yet, I am not afraid anymore of what is unfamiliar; I am willing to embrace it.

I believe however that my experience of cultural change will contribute to some difficulties on my return home. My increased cultural awareness may create conflict with people from my own culture. I have widened my knowledge and have rejected some aspects of my own culture, but people will be the same when I return, as many of them believe that the Swedish way of doing things is the right way. They will hold prejudice and stereotypes about other cultures, and have opinions about what is considered 'normal'. This phenomenon is described by Ward et Al. (2001) as 'reverse culture shock', whereby individuals might experience the same difficulties in adjustment to their home environment as they did when arriving in the host culture. Reverse culture shock was further investigated by Pocock and Mcintosh (2011) who explored the return of 24 OE (overseas experience) travellers and found that the majority felt estranged, isolated and misunderstood after returning to their home country. Similarly, Steyn and Grant's (2006) study of the re-entry experiences of apartheid-era political exiles returning to South Africa revealed confusion and self-doubt regarding how to function in the home society. As I have gone through significant change during my international sojourns, I have started to realise that my interests, stage of life and world views are completely different from those of my best friends at home. I am just at the beginning of my career, eager to explore the world and to engage in global issues, in contrast with some of my friends. I believe that these disparate interests could lead to frustration the day I return.

Writing about my experiences has given me the chance to thoroughly reflect upon my situation as an international student, and what it means to be away from home. The use of autoethnography has helped me to open my eyes to my own cultural programming and to cultural diversity; it has also made me realise that the feelings I have experienced are explicable. Holman Jones (2005) states that autoethnography changes the world we live in for the better, I hope that my deepened understanding of the world will be, if only minimally, a force for good.

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