

**Intercultural communication experiences of foreign students with a focus on their perspectives of national, cultural and ethnic identity:  
Case of Exchange and Degree Students in Jyväskylä, Finland.**

**Master's Thesis**

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## Tiivistelmä – Abstract

The aim of the study is to learn about intercultural communication experiences of foreign Exchange and Master degree students in Jyväskylä, Finland with a particular attention to the perspective of national, cultural and ethnic identity concepts.

The study is qualitative in nature. The goal in creating the interview themes was to cover a variety of topics to allow the informants to speculate on different situations related to intercultural communication experiences in Jyväskylä, their country of origin and their national, cultural and ethnic identity. To reach the diverse perspectives on the subject individuals of different cultural origin were interviewed. The interview group involved Exchange and Degree students coming from South Korea, Germany, Nigeria, China, Taiwan and Cyprus. The informants arrived to Finland 7-8 month prior to the interview.

The results indicate that interviewed students in most of the cases felt excitement on arrival to Finland. Entrance into a new culture was not accompanied by a culture shock. The culture shock occurred when students experienced culture fatigue and language shock. However, it is noteworthy that academic environment did not bring challenges to the interviewed students mainly due to the university significant support for international students such as orientation week, tutor program, diverse students' activities on campus and services offered by international office.

Multicultural university environment and communication with people of other cultural background states in contrast to daily interactions with culturally similar individuals at home. Both abstract and culture-specific knowledge about communication with culturally different groups influenced on students' national identity. In most of the cases, multicultural university environment made students identify and strengthen to certain extent their national identity. At the same time an outsider's perspective at their native cultures and integration to a new environment brought some changes to students' behavioral repertoire, language capabilities and orientations. However, individual sense of ethnic, cultural or national identity is a complex ongoing process that develops over time and through communication with others, thus it is never stable and tends to change as society does.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication experiences, foreign/international students, national, cultural, ethnic identity

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>1. Introduction</b>  | 6  |
| 1.1. The Context of the Study                                     | 6  |
| 1.2. The Aim of this Study  | 7  |
| 1.3. How the Study Is Arranged                                    | 8  |
| <b>2. Theoretical Background</b>                                  | 8  |
| 2.1. The Concept of Identity                                      | 8  |
| 2.1.1. The Nature of Identity                                     | 8  |
| 2.1.2. Defining National, Cultural and Ethnic Identities          | 11 |
| 2.1.3. When Does National, Cultural and Ethnic Identity Matter?   | 14 |
| 2.1.4. National, Cultural or Ethnic Identity and Cultural Contact | 14 |
| 2.2. Intercultural Communication in Education Context             | 16 |
| 2.2.1. Defining Intercultural Communication                       | 16 |
| 2.2.2. Student Mobility   | 18 |
| 2.2.3. Intercultural Learning                                     | 21 |
| 2.2.4. Intercultural Adaptation                                   | 24 |
| <b>3. Methodological Framework</b>                                | 28 |
| 3.1. Aim and Research Questions                                   | 28 |
| 3.2. Qualitative Method of Research                               | 29 |
| 3.3. In-depth Interviewing  | 30 |
| 3.4. The Selection of Informants                                  | 31 |
| 3.5. Interview Arrangements                                       | 32 |
| 3.6. Data Analysis  | 32 |
| 3.7. Interviewee's Profil   | 33 |
| 3.7.1. Previous Intercultural Experience                          | 34 |
| 3.7.2. Aim of Studying in Finland                                 | 35 |
| <b>4. Findings</b>  | 35 |
| 4.1. Communicating in the English Language                        | 35 |
| 4. 2. Experiencing Clash of Values                                | 37 |
| 4.3. Working in a Multicultural Group                             | 40 |
| 4.4. Intercultural Learning                                       | 42 |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| 4.5. National, Cultural and Ethnic Identity in Contexts  | 44        |
| 4.6. Learning about Country of Origin  | 46        |
| 4.7. Feeling Belonging to a Racial, National, Cultural and Ethnical Group                            | 47        |
| 4.8. Identity Conflict   | 49        |
| 4.9. Identification When Living Abroad   | 50        |
| <b>5. Discussion</b>   | <b>52</b> |
| 5.1. Intercultural Experiences of International Students in a Sociocultural and Academic Environment | 52        |
| 5.2. National, Cultural Identity Salience  | 56        |
| 5.3. Identity Development  | 57        |
| <b>6. Conclusion and Further Research</b>  | <b>59</b> |
| 6.1. Limitations of the Study  | 59        |
| 6.2. Implications for Further Research   | 60        |
| <b>7. Bibliography</b>   | <b>62</b> |

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. The Context of the Study**

The number of university students travelling abroad to complete part of their studies through such programmes as ERASMUS or ERASMUS MUNDUS or to complete their full degree and enhance their education by adding an international perspective, increased rapidly within the last decade. Student mobility became a visible international activity aiming to promote internationalisation. The vast majority of international programmes were established above all to encourage students to participate in intercultural dialogue in the hope of promoting a 'global understanding' and growing empathy for other cultures.

In 2007, over 2.8 million students were enrolled in educational institutions outside of their country of origin. This represents 123,400 more students than in 2006 which amount to an increase of 4.6%. The global number of mobile students has grown by 53% since 1999 (with an average annual increase of 5.5%) and is currently 2.5 times the 1975 figure with an average annual increase of 11.7% throughout this period (UNESCO, 2009).

Concerning Finland, statistics suggest that the number of students from abroad studying in Finland increased by 1 237 students when comparing 2007 and 2008 figures (UNESCO 2009, 2010).

Although the rapid growth in the international population is a positive trend, research findings show that foreign students often struggle to adapt to life in a new country and to their new academic environment (Ying & Han, 2006; Fritz & Chin & DeMarinis, 2008; Teichler, 2009; O'Reilly & Ryan & Hickey, 2010). Newcomers tend to experience difficulties in understanding their new feelings about host country and changing feelings about their country of origin. They often wonder if their country mates living in this new environment have the same concerns and worries and what they feel about new rituals and values from the perspective of their mentality. Furthermore, students who have not experienced living abroad before in many cases experience problems because of lack of knowledge about the adaptation process and culture shock prevention strategies. There are two broad areas of

students' needs that are commonly identified: academic needs with particular attention to language proficiency and students' social comfort and psychological needs.

Fortunately, experiences of staying abroad by foreign students are not as negative and difficult as might be concluded from such a perspective. Although international students' experience abroad commonly challenges a person's sense of well-being, it encourages students to develop adaptive personality. The situation of studying away from home inspires to find coping strategies and learn about self.

Current research will cover topics of culture shock, language learning and adaptation of international students staying in Jyväskylä, Finland for their studies. Asking questions and discussing students' experiences in adaptation, intercultural and language learning help to understand personal experiences, challenges they faced and what kind of environment students lived in when studying in Jyväskylä. And at the same time this research will aim at investigating international students' experiences from the perspective of national, cultural and ethnic identity. In fact these concepts were studied extensively in social psychology as well as in ethnography fields but not in intercultural communication (Smith, 1991; Hall, 1996; Eriksen, 2002 to mention a few). However, cultural heritage, mentality and origin have a particular influence of individual experiences abroad.

## **1.2. The Aim of This Study**

The current study is targeted at international exchange and Master degree students who stayed in Jyväskylä, Finland for 7 – 8 months. The research will look at the intercultural communication experiences by foreign students with particular attention to the perspective of national, cultural and ethnic identity concepts: how do international students experience intercultural opportunities while staying in Jyväskylä, Finland? What is happening to them, their national, cultural and ethnic mentality and values? Is this process regular? What do international students think about their national, cultural and ethnic identity? How far do they go in adapting to their new environment?

To sum up, the overall goal is to learn about intercultural communication experiences by foreign exchange and Master degree students in Jyväskylä, Finland with a particular attention to the perspective of national, cultural and ethnic identity concepts.

### **1.3. How the Study Is Arranged**

This thesis is compromised of six chapters.

Chapter 1 forms an introduction to the current thesis explaining the context, aim and the implications of the study. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical background of the research and approaches identity issues and intercultural communication in an educational context. It will explore the concept of identity in national and multicultural environments in general, and more specifically in an educational context in the case of the international migration of students for a short period of time. The methodological framework of the research including the research questions and methods used to collect and analyze the qualitative data are presented in Chapter 3. After which in the fourth chapter the data is analyzed and research findings are disclosed. Discussion of the findings and references to the previous research composes Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 deals with the limitation of this study and implications for further research.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. The Concept of Identity**

#### **2.1.1. The Nature of Identity**

Scholars have offered various perspectives on studying identity. A communication perspective emphasizes that the self does not create identities alone; instead, they are co-created through communication with others (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). In other words, identities emerge when messages are exchanged between persons. Abrams et al (2003) emphasizes that identity and communication are mutually reinforcing. By communication, they mean not only language, but actions, rules, behavior, discrimination and labels. Going further, they consider how communication is



manifested and changed when individuals hold positive, moderate and negative social identities. Obviously, individuals who share a salient self-categorization feel confident to communicate core dimensions of their common social identity. As an illustration, paralinguistic features such as accent, dialect, idioms and ingroup language with normal speech rates, as well as crowd behavior and outgroup rejection can all signal a positive social identity. As an opposite example, groups who have a negative social identity might modify their accent or dialect.

Social identity theory proposes that an individual's self-concept is composed of both social and personal identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The central tenet of social identity theory is that groups with which individuals identify determine their social identities. Age, gender, profession, nationality, region, religion, and so forth all serve as different social identities and have their own cultural components of shared values, habits, and history. Generally speaking, research conceptualizes identity as a multidimensional concept.

Hall (1996) in his turn distinguishes three different conceptions of identity. These are: (a). enlightenment subject (b). sociological subject, and (c).post-modern subject.

Briefly, the enlightenment subject is based on the conception that the essential center of the self is a person identity, which one gets once is born and remains essentially the same throughout the individual's experience.

The sociological subject that was partly presented above reflects the 'interactive' conception of identity and self, according to which identity is formed in the interaction between self and society. And society mediates to the subject the culture such as values, meaning and symbols of the worlds one inhabits. In contrast to the enlightenment subject, sociological subject assumes possible shifting. The subject, who has used to be seen as one having a unified and stable identity, becomes composed of several, sometimes contradictory, identities. Thus, the process of identification, through which we project ourselves in these cultural identities, has become more open, but problematic in the same time. Lacan (1997) appears to be saying that rather than speaking of identity as a finished construction, it should be spoken of identification as on-going process. Moreover, he adds to it that identity

arises not from the fullness of it but from the lack of wholeness. By that, the author emphasizes the connection between inside and outside worlds in the process of identification. It is important to mention the role of society in the process of identification since we constantly strive to define ourselves in relations to the world in which we live. To put it in other words, we gain a sense of who we are based not only on how we see ourselves, but also on how others see us. Identity, therefore, is not a static phenomenon, but continually negotiated and subjective to societal and situational contexts.

And the last but not least approach is post-modern subject. It assumes that there is no fixed or permanent identity. There are different identities at different times (Hall, 1996). Moreover, if one feels that has a unified identity throughout the individual's experience, as previously stated by the enlightenment subject, it is because one constructs 'a comfortable story' or 'narrative of the self' about oneself. Hall contends that

'The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representations multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily' (Hall, 1996, 598).

In late modern societies the structure of identity remains open and that tendency is a normal one, as there would be no history without it (Laclau, 1990). As an illustration to the dynamic nature of identity might be the emergence of the European Union. It gave a new meaning to the notion of being 'European' as an identity. Similarly, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 has caused many Americans to reconsider what it means to be 'American' (Martin & Nakayama, 2007).

The concept of identify is challenged as well by the fact that people can identify with a multitude of groups: gender, age, religion, nationality, to name a few. Not to mention multicultural people, a group that is currently dramatically increasing in number. Multicultural people are 'those who live on the borders of two or more cultures and often struggle to reconcile two very different sets of values, norms, worldviews, and lifestyles' (Martin & Nakayama, 2007, 197). In addition to multicultural identities based on race and ethnicity, there are multicultural identities

based on religion, sexual orientation, or other identities. Another group of people who experience multicultural identities are so called global nomads. These are people who grow up in many different cultural contexts because their parents moved around a lot (for example, missionaries, international business employees or military families). In any case, there is a close relationship between identities and social circumstances. Moreover, identities may change as society does (Eriksen, 2002). Identities are ambiguous and this ambiguity is connected with a negotiable history and a negotiable cultural context.

### **2.1.2. Defining National, Cultural and Ethnic Identities**

The terms of ethnic, national and cultural identities are often used interchangeably, although it is not always a case. Valk & Karu (1997) in their research about attitudinal and behavioral attachments to the group use for the purpose of generalization the term ethnic identity. Moreover, they state that ethnic identity is obviously a more basic phenomenon than national identity. At the same time, Smith (1991) argues that national identity and the nation are complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components – ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic and legal-political. Moving further, Kim (2007) in her analysis of differing academic conceptions of cultural identity does not explain why she suggests that cultural identity includes such related concepts as subcultural, national, ethnolinguistic, and racial identity. Thus, the relationships among these three concepts are taken for granted that in many cases becomes misleading.

From the point of post-modern subject, national identities are not things we are born with, but are transformed within and in relation to ‘representation’ (Schwarz, 1986, 106). By representation the author means the meanings and images created in society about particular nation. He follows the idea that a nation is not only a political entity, but a system of cultural representation in the same time. He states that people are not only ‘legal citizens of a nation’, but participants of the idea of nation as represented in its national culture. It refers to what Anderson (1983) names ‘imaged community’ when talking about national identity.

Researches indicate that the origins of what it is termed national identity are complex in its nature. Starting with the definition, nation is defined as

‘a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members’. (Smith, 1991,14)

Based on the definition, the national identity are complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components – ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic and legal-political. Smith (1991) tends to explain his concept by saying that nation unites two sets of dimensions. The one, as he explains, is civic and territorial and the other - ethnic and genealogical, but he emphasizes that proportions vary from one case to another. Later Smith (1991) put the same idea into different words when claiming that national identity comprises both a cultural and political identity, as it is located in a political community as well as a cultural one. Cultural identity is often conceptualized as part of national identity. However, cultural identity has an additional element to consider: each individual might enact various cultural identities over the course of a lifetime as well as over the course of the day (Collier, 1997). But the definition of the cultural identity in this sense depends on what the author assumes by culture. Collier (1997) defines culture as ‘a historically transmitted system of symbols, meanings, and norms’, where a certain stress is placed on the communication process in definition (Collier, 1997, 36). Identity management theory (Imahori & Cupsch, 2005) in its turn recognizes that individuals have multiple identities, of which cultural (as well as relational) identities are central to interpersonal relationship development with culturally dissimilar others.

But coming back to the discussion about national identity, Lewis (1985) brings different perspective to the same question. Seeing from the anthropological perspective, Lewis understands nation as a culture-unit. Moreover, he sees no reason in distinguishing between tribes, ethnic groups and nations, since from his opinion the difference appears to be one size, but not the structural composition or functioning. (Lewis, 358) The same idea is expressed by Eriksen (2002) who states that one important difference between nations and other kind of community including many ethnic communities, concerns scale.

In the same time there is a various criticism against equating ‘ethnic groups’ with ‘cultural groups’. Moerman (1965) argues that cultural boundaries do not necessarily correspond with ethnic boundaries. Going further, Moerman questions

criteria, which constitute ethnicity. From his point of view, ethnic group is not marked by specific shared traits such as religion, language or customs. Nash (1988) in his turn brings the metaphors of 'bed, blood and cult' as criteria by which ethnic groups might be distinguished. By that he means that all ethnic groups consider themselves as 'biologically self-perpetuating', that they have the ideology of shared ancestry and shared religion. However, it is mentioned by both authors (Moerman, 1965 & Nash, 1988) that criteria to ethnicity have been challenged on many occasions.

In any case, many scholars agree that ethnic groups tend to have notions of common ancestry. Thus, ethnic identities can be seen as expressions of metaphoric kinship. But the notion of ancestry seems to be ambiguous itself, as another question is raised by many anthropologists: how many generations one has to go back to talk of shared ancestry. Moreover, such a criterion of imputed shared ancestry reduces the possible number of ethnic categories in any society (Eriksen, 2002).

Considering the differences between national and ethnic group, persons who share the same nationality were born in a particular culture and spent a significant number of years and a period of socialization in that country. Such socialization promotes particular values, beliefs, and norms. At the same time, ethnic groups share a sense of heritage, history and origin and in most but not all cases share racial characteristics and many have a specific history of experienced discrimination (Collier, 1997).

Going further, Phinney (1992) brings a provocative idea when saying that individuals might define themselves as a member of a certain ethnic group, but not perceive themselves as being a 'typical' member of the group. Gudykunst (2001) takes this idea further and gives a few illustrations of the activities associated with the ethnic memberships as a behavioral component of ethnic identity. These are eating ethnic foods, engaging in ethnic behavioral patterns, speaking and writing the languages of the ethnic groups, sharing networks with ethnic group members and demonstrating common communication styles. To support that view, Collier & Thomas (1988) suggest the theorem that claims that the more cultural identities are avowed; the more important they are relative to other identities.

### **2.1.3. When Does National, Cultural or Ethnic Identity Matter?**

Eriksen (2002) claims that individuals have many social roles and possible identities, but he questions when and how national identities become the most relevant ones. Staying abroad is considered as one of such social situation when national identity might become of high importance. However, he mentions that it is often up to the agents to decide upon its significance.

Kim (2007) comes to support that view by suggesting that through extensive and intensive experiences of intercultural communication an individual's cultural identity undergoes a gradual transformation. This identity transformation is described as an emergence of an 'intercultural identity', that is more flexible and less rigidly bound by group categories.

Generally speaking, social identity becomes most important the moment it seems to be threatened or challenged. Changes such as migration, change in industrialization, political, economic or social change might constitute such a perceived threat. However, the threat can be interpreted as an uncertainty that we experience anytime we meet someone. Berger & Calabrese (1975) say that we try to reduce uncertainty when we communicate with strangers more than we do when we communicate with people who are familiar. In addition, they mention that we experience uncertainty especially when we meet strangers from other cultures or ethnic groups.

### **2.1.4. National, Cultural or Ethnic Identity and Cultural Contact**

There are several theories that either tangentially or directly address the link between culture contact and cultural, national or ethnic identity; however they suggest different predictions on the identity change (Sussman, 2000).

Contact hypothesis theory (Allport, 1954) proposes that knowledge that an in-group member has in a close relationship with an out-group member can lead to more positive intergroup attitudes, which could lead to effective interaction between groups and decrease prejudices. But it was stressed that it happened if the contact with members of other groups went under certain conditions: equal status between groups, common goals, cooperation between groups, and all sanctioned by institutional support (Allport 1954 in Schuitema & Veugelers, 2011). Further research confirmed (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) that contact with members of other

social or cultural groups reduces prejudice towards this group; although it appeared that the four conditions enhanced the positive effect of the intergroup situation but are not essential.

However, the results also showed that they vary across different contexts: in some situations, intergroup contact will reduce prejudice, but in other situations intergroup contact will have only a slight or even a negative effect on intergroup attitudes (Schuitema & Veugelers, 2011). And the premise that cultural contact results in decreased prejudice and lead to cultural identity change remains untested (Sussman, 2000).

Next, cultural hybridization theory (Hermans and Kempen, 1998) states that the greater the connection across cultures, the more these cultures begin to closely relate and combine with each other so that complex mixtures are created. The process of interconnection and hybridization leads to the development of new forms of cultural identities. In time of culturally diverse societies, the phenomenon of belonging to more than one cultural group and moving between such groups is no longer unusual (Campbell, 2000). Some are multicultural as a result of being born to parents from different racial, ethnic, national cultures; others are multicultural because they grew up in cultures differ from the country of origin or spend extended time in another culture or married someone from another cultural background (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). At time of globalization and the increasing interconnections between cultures it is possible to belong to particular country by citizenship, while at the same time identifying with one or more special cultural group within the nation (Gunew, 1998 in Campbell, 2000).

Furthermore, acculturation theorists directly addressed the link between change in cultural attitudes, behaviors, and cultural identity as a consequence of cultural contact (Graves, 1967 in Sussman, 2000; Berry, 1990). Contact may have distinct results, such as the borrowing of certain traits by one culture from another, or the relative fusion of separate cultures. Motivation for the cultural transition is significantly different for the immigrant compared to the sojourner (Sussman, 2000). However, those only temporarily in contact and who are without permanent social supports such as sojourners, international students or expats may experience more mental health problems than those more permanently settled and established in a new cultural environment such as ethnic groups (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987).

Cultural transitions for sojourner who had few or infrequent contacts with country of origin transform one cultural identity into a new one especially in case of prolonged culture contact, although, alternatively, contact with new culture may result in strengthening native culture identity (Berry, 1980). However, a variety of demographic, social and psychological characteristics can modify the acculturation process.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) holds the idea that individuals are socially constructed units and self-concept derives largely from group identification. What is more, this theory incorporates the idea that people maintain positive social identities by comparing their in-group against an out-group (Padilla & Perez, 2003). In other words, social identifications are influenced by two motives: the need to be unique and need to belong which means need to belong to a social group and distinctive from another group (Brewer, 1991 in Padilla & Perez, 2003). So, presence in a new culture, an out-group in the theory terms, heightens the salience of one's identity in contrast to the out-group.

‘Thus, the social identity tends to become more salient in intergroup contact (an expatriate living among host nationals, for instance), whereas personal identity is more salient in intragroup contexts (repatriate among compatriots, perhaps)’ (Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994 in Sussman, 2000, 359).

## **2.2. Intercultural Communication in Education Context**

### **2.2.1. Defining Intercultural Communication**

Scholars in the field of intercultural communication (Porter & Samovar, 1998; Bennett, 1998; Gudykunst, 2003; Martin & Nakayama, 2004) consider the link between culture and communication and assume that intercultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produce a message for consumption by a member of another culture. In many respects the relationship between culture and communication is seen as reciprocal.

‘What we talk about, how we talk about it, what we see, attend to, or ignore; how we think; and what we think about are influenced by our culture. In turn, what we talk about; how we talk about; and what we see help shape, define, and perpetuate our culture’ (Porter & Samovar, 1997, p.24)

If this simplified definition bring further, the idea is that intercultural communication considers those elements of culture that most influence interaction when members of two different cultures come together in an interpersonal setting



(Porter & Samovar, 1997). However, as the authors further explain these are many elements to mention that bring the change in intercultural communication, such as language and language style, nonverbal behavior, diversity in perception of social objects and events, unique form of communicative interaction.

At the same time, different conceptualization of culture brings various perspectives to the phenomenon of intercultural communication. For example, intercultural communication can be seen as one type of intergroup communication, thus many types of communication can be included in intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2003). Illustrations that are suggested are communication between able-bodied and disabled, intergenerational communication, communication between members of different social classes and interracial/interethnic communication (p.163).

However, it is important to be aware that communication for everyone is both cultural and individual (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). And communication patterns that seem to be related to member in particular cultural groups might not apply to them. Bloembaert (1991) supports that view when says that seeing the other interlocutor as a typical member of his culture means ignoring other influences upon communication behavior such as individual or social. He is going further by saying that intercultural communication is primarily an interpersonal communication and the only difference is that the interlocutors are culturally different. But he argues that the differences like various set of values, intentions, conceptualizations and categorizations, as well as their perception of communication behavior are situation-dependent and can be assigned to the individual characteristics.

That idea is manifested in the assumption that people are best identified as members of particular cultures (Scollon, 1997):

‘To put it simply, this view of intercultural communication assumes that Americans act like Americans and Chinese act like Chinese’ (Scollon, 1997) and their behaviors can be understood by investigating their ‘home culture’.

However this viewpoint might lead to ‘stereotyping interculturalism’, ‘naïve interculturalism’ and ‘sophisticated interculturalism’. As an alternative view, Scollan suggests to bring a meditational view of intercultural communication when seeing situational rather than only cultural aspects of behavior. Thus, it can be assumed that

the degree to which a communicative exchange is intercultural depends on how many identities and experiences individuals share. (Singer, 1998)

Lusting & Koester (1993) refers to culture as 'a learned set of shared perceptions about beliefs, values, and need that affect the behaviors of relatively large groups of people' (p.26). Since culture shows the enduring influence of the social environment on our behavior, every communicator might be seen as a product of his/her culture (Andersen, 1997). Going further, culture can be viewed as 'an invisible mechanism' operating in our thoughts and that becomes visible when it is severely challenged (Hall, 1984). At the same time, cultural behavior might be confused with personal traits because both are enduring phenomena (Andersen, 1997)

Any communication interaction takes place within social and physical context. When people are communicating within their culture, they are usually aware of the context. However, context in intercultural communication has a strong impact on communication process (Porter & Samovar, 1997). Unless both parties are aware of how their cultures affect the contextual element of communication, they might experience major difficulties in communication. Thus with the respect to the definitions posted above, in the current study intercultural communication will be seen as communication between people from different cultural background.

### **2.2.2. Student Mobility**

Globalization brings changes in different facet of the present life. It has influence on political, economic, social and cultural spheres. Besides all, there has been a considerable growth in educational opportunities and higher education is viewed as rapidly globalizing nowadays. In 2007, over 2.8 million students were enrolled in educational institutions outside of their country of origin. This represents 123,400 more students than in 2006, an increase of 4,6%. The global number of mobile students has grown by 53% since 1999 (with an average annual increase of 5,5%) and by 2.5 times since 1975 with an average annual increase of 11.7% thought this period (UNESCO, 2009). Concerning Finland, statistics suggest that the number of students from abroad studying in Finland increased in 1 237 students if compare 2007 and 2008 (UNESCO 2009, 2010).

However, there are some points that challenge the analysis of comparative mobility between countries. Widely variant definitions of “international” or “foreign” students in education systems across the world are one of the obstacles. More to the point, this research refers to the concept introduced in the most recent Global Education Digest (2010) UNESCO. According to UNESCO, internationally mobile students are “students who have crossed a national border and moved to another country with the objectives to study” (UNESCO, 2010, 94). The UIS refers to student’s country of citizenship or country of permanent or usual residence or country of prior education when define mobile student. But the problem is that most countries use only citizenship to define mobile student whereas a considerable number of foreign students have already lived and probably attended a secondary school before returning to their country of citizenship for the purpose of study (Rivza & Teichler, 2007).

A further problem is gaps in terms of the availability of data both with regard to whole countries or particular universities or organizations. Another illustration is that many countries do not include short-term, a semester or year, students in their educational statistics. As well as was mentioned above the variant definitions of “international” or “foreign” students cause the problem that many countries present only the number of foreign students defined by citizenship. Thus, statistics of foreign students does not depict the present situation and become an indicator of international student mobility (Teichler, 2004; Rivza & Teichler, 2007; UNESCO 2009, 2010).

Generally speaking, internationalisation in higher education has been a debatable topic in Europe since the 1990s. The term internationalisation has been employed regarding different themes such as student, academic staff and occasionally administrative staff mobility, similarity or heterogeneity of national systems of higher education, transnational education and education reform (Teichler, 2009). However, the focus of the current research is student mobility or student exchange. Student mobility becomes one of the main aspects of internationalisation of higher education despite that fact that internationalisation of education with EU is a relatively new phenomenon that appears after the mid-1980s. (Raikou & Karalis, 2007). Overall, there are four stages of internationalisation that can be distinguished:

the first stage that happens before the mid 1980s can be named as individual because of the lack of involvement of the higher education institutions; the second period (mid 1980s to mid 1990s) is known for collaboration between institutions; the third one is marked by start-up of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students – ERASMUS program (from 1995 onwards). The ERASMUS is widely viewed as ‘a major trigger for a qualitative leap of internationalisation activities’ (Teichler, 2009, 104). And the fourth stage is distinguished by the beginning of Bologna Process (Wachter, 2003), which is shaped primarily with the purpose to make higher education in European countries more attractive from other parts of the world and facilitate intra-European student mobility (Witter 2006 in Raikou & Karalis, 2007).

Intra-European student mobility known as well as horizontal mobility is an exchange that takes place between countries and institutions of more or less the same level of economic and academic quality. It is seen by many as an opportunity to widen the horizon through experiencing contrasting academic environments and to enhance one’s intercultural understanding, whereas, vertical mobility from developing countries to economically and academically advanced countries might be undertaken besides all because of the lack of facilities and study provisions in areas of specialization at home and as well as the first step for immigration (Teichler, 2004).

Teichler (2009) mentions that students from other parts of the world are primarily expected to adapt to the educational, cultural and social environment of their host institutions, whereas students mobile within Europe ‘might challenge established practices and contribute to educational innovation’ (Teichler, 2009, 102).

However, certain disadvantages of the student mobility phenomenon have been discussed as well. From the organizational point of view, student mobility is said to set many expectations that are not always a realistic case (Raikou & Karalis, 2007). Not to mention additional costs for the individuals involved in this initiative (Teichler, 2009). Besides that, student mobility is assessed controversially as a “brain drain”, “flooding by foreign students” or “commercialization of trans-national higher education” (Raikou & Karalis, 2007) that might risk the quality of higher education. Moreover, cultural diversity and internationalisation do not automatically lead to

intercultural contacts and intercultural learning experience. Many international students group in their national communities or in sort of international reservation, for example, so-called Erasmus communitites, where European exchange students mainly spend time and communicate with other European students (Otten, 2003). It might result in less contacts with people of other cultural background and local students. In addition to it, internationalisation does not always mean that diversity is used as a resource in the classroom. Academic work assignments tend to stay monocultural and monodisciplinary if teachers do not take advantage of the multicultural environment in classrooms (Nilsson, 2003).

All things considered, it is widely mentioned that despite the growth in the student mobility, in the time of internationalisation and globalization of higher education study in another country gradually loses its exceptionality and professional value.

### **2.2.3. Intercultural Learning**

The integration process and learning about other cultures and oneself are experience that exchange students go through once staying abroad. The degree to which one masters this knowledge depends on the long of stay, differences between host and home cultures, the environment one lives in and activities one does. And the ability to deal constructively on an interpersonal level with cultural diversity and learn about other cultures is priorities student set before leaving home for a new country (Teichler, 2009). Thus, intercultural learning is clearly an important part of internationalisation.

The outcome of intercultural learning is intercultural competence (Otten, 2003), that is seen as a long-term change of a person's knowledge (cognition), attitudes (emotions), and skills (behavior) that helps to build positive and effective relationships with members of other cultures both abroad and at home (Bennett, 1993; Dignes & Baldwin, 1996). Deardorff (2006) puts this idea further when saying that the internal outcome, which involves an internal shift in frame of reference, enhances the external observable outcome of intercultural competence that can be described as acting and communicating appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations. However, this change inevitably causes stress in the stranger's psyche

(Kim, 2001), cognitive irritation, emotional imbalance, and a disruption of one's own cultural worldview (Otten, 2003).

The development model of intercultural sensitivity by Bennett (1998) becomes a classic illustration of the process of learning in intercultural environment. Bennett talks about a continuum divided into six phases of learning: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and integration. The sojourner is gradually moving from ethnocentrism toward the state of ethnorelativism, when instead of using 'one's own set of standards and customs to judge people', sojourner 'is comfortable with many standards and customs' (Bennett, 1998, 26). Although this model does not describe the conditions for the learning process, it is interesting to mention that his model in a way explains a learner's subjective experience of cultural difference rather than the objective behavior (Otten, 2003). As well it gives a clear idea on the direction in which 'one's state of awareness and the process of learning underlying it, should progress' (Zielinska, 2007, 20).

Referring back to the statement that intercultural learning causes the change of a person's knowledge, attitudes and skills, it is obviously seen that the gradual changes in these three aspects are the actual process of intercultural learning.

To start with the attitude component, it worth mentioning the characteristics of adaptive personality presented in Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001). She mentioned three basic characteristics: openness, strength and optimistic outlook of mind. Kim believes that openness enables sojourners to perceive and interpret various situations in a new environment without being judgmental. Openness here incorporates other similar but more specific components, such as flexibility, open-mindedness and tolerance for ambiguity. Strength represents 'internal capacity to absorb 'shocks' from the environment' (Kim, 2001, 85). The personality attributes discussed above, openness and strength, are closely related to another attribute: an optimistic outlook. In the book Kim refers to Maslow's concept of metamotivation (1969) to explain that 'positivity is similar to a drive beyond mere desire to survive physically and socially' (Kim, 2001, 177). Besides these three characteristics, respect to other cultures (Deardorff, 2006) can be included as well in the attitude components.

The knowledge component comprises various cognitive aspects such as knowledge about others and ourselves and about various aspects of communication (Martin & Nakayama, 2004), including culture-specific and culture-general knowledge.

Self-knowledge is one of the skills that is seen important by many scholars in intercultural communication field in order to maintain successful intercultural interactions. The skill is named differently in research literature. It can be referred to as self-awareness (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), self-actualizing search for identity, self-consciousness, (Spitzberg, 1989), self-knowledge (Vulpe,T & et al, 2000; Martin & Nakayama, 2004) and many others to mention. However, it is understood by many as ‘knowledge of one’s own background, motivations, strengths and weaknesses’ (Vulpe,T & et al, 2000). Cultural self-knowledge brings a lot of benefits as well. Hunet & et al (2006) state that ‘a person should attempt to understand his or her own cultural box before stepping into someone else’s’ (Hunet et al, 2006 cited in Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, 14). By that the authors mean the ability to understand one’s own cultural norms and beliefs that influence extensively on the perception while staying abroad, as well recognize cultural differences and diversity.

Vulpe,T et al (2000) defines knowledge of the host country and culture as core expertise required to achieve intercultural competence. However, Rathje (2007) emphasizes on the fact that approaches equated intercultural competence to specific cultural competence, is immediately narrowed to for example ‘USA competence’ or ‘Switzerland competence’. It stresses the important of culture-general knowledge apart from the specific competence.

But culture-general knowledge has another risk that learning about others in only abstract terms might lead to stereotyping (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). But they advised at the same time that it is often better to learn about others through relational experience.

Last, but not least component of intercultural competence is skills. Overall, scholars among others factors distinguish the following skills that the sojourner should obtain to communicate successfully in intercultural settings: ability to cope

with the stress of culture shock and ongoing challenges of living in another culture (Vulpe, T. & et al, 2000), empathy (Deardoff, 2006), ability to adapt communication (Gudykunst, 1993) and ability to adapt to different cultures. Communication scholar Ruben (1979) devised a list of universal behaviors that actually included some attitudes discussed above. These behaviors are ‘a display of respect, interaction management, ambiguity tolerance, empathy, relational rather than task behavior, and interaction posture’ (Ruben, 1979 cited in Martin & Nakayama, 2004).

Thus, it is obvious that intercultural learning is inseparable from intercultural competence. Intercultural learning basically involves learning of the different aspects of culture, personal nature and behavior. It is not just about acquiring new knowledge at the cognitive level; it requires participation in social experiences that stimulate learning also emotional and behavioral levels. At the same time, it worth mentioning the point made by Vulpe & et al (2002) that the individual who possess all these qualities – knowledge, skills and attitudes – would be ‘super-human’ (Vulpe, T. & et al, 2000, 5). It is important to remember that experience of cultural differences and obtaining of at least some of the qualities mentioned above might in any case stimulate intercultural development. And exchange programmers as one of the initiatives encourage intercultural learning (Jong & Teekens, 2003; Nilsson, 2003; Otten, 2003;).

#### **2.2.4. Intercultural Adaptation**

International migration, for a short or long period, represents a classic situation where new comers have to cope with substantial cultural change and adapt to a new environment. The migration can be classified under the headings of voluntary or involuntary, depending on the nature of the transition. Even when the transition is a voluntary one, international migrants differ in their motivation to adapt to the new environment (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). In the case of immigrants, their move to the host society is a permanent one and they are concerned with the relationship to the new environment. However, international mobile students, who are the target of the current research, have less need to adapt to the host culture since their stay is only temporary. Also hosts might not expect culturally appropriate behavior from short-term sojourners (Kim, 2001).



However, several studies have indicated that international students experience more adjustment problems than their domestic fellow students and have limited resources to deal with these problems. Furthermore, researchers propose that this is because of range of demands placed on the individual including the pressures created by language difficulties, academic difficulties, and financial problems, lack of social support, loneliness and sociocultural demands (Ying & Han, 2006; Fritz & Chin & DeMarinis, 2008; O'Reilly & Ryan & Hickey, 2010).

Language is seen as the major barrier in adaptation of international students (O'Reilly & Ryan & Hickey, 2010), since it influences on academic performance abroad and socialization with the fellows. Furthermore, findings from a number of studies have indicated that international students reported on experiencing problems relating to differences in study techniques, test talking and classroom instructions.

Besides the challenges stated above and financial problems, students mention about tendency to feel deep sense of loss when leaving friends and family behind (Ying & Han, 2006; Fritz & Chin & DeMarinis, 2008; O'Reilly & Ryan & Hickey, 2010). Several studies report that students find it difficult to get to know local peers and make host national friends (Fritz & Chin & DeMarinis, 2008). Differences in social interaction styles have been suggested as a reason for preventing international students from building close relationships with host students (Cross, 1995).

Research findings by Ye (2006) indicate that international students experience less negative emotions when they are more satisfied with their social network of support. Research findings by O'Reilly and colleagues (2010) confirm that the high level of English proficiency helps to experience low levels of stress and loneliness, since they get social support from the fellow students and local friends.

However, Zhou and colleagues (Zhou & et al, 2008) believe that most of the literature suggests that significant problems for international mobile students arise from the unfamiliar academic environment. And in their turn they suggest to consider the problems involved in educational adaptation within the broad context of the students' cultural adaptation, as they state that international students inevitably engage in culture learning and at the same time pursue their academic goals.

Moving further, Ward and colleagues (Ward & Kennedy, 1993) see intercultural adaptation as the process that incorporates psychological and sociocultural dimensions. And they propose that these dimensions are presented in the literature as stress and coping, culture learning and social identification theories. Zhou and colleagues elaborate on this idea by saying that these three theories consider different components – affect, behavior and cognition (ABC) – when people are exposed to a new culture (Zhou & et al, 2008).

The first theory, culture learning, has its origins in social psychology and focus primarily on behavioral aspects of intercultural contact. However, it is stated that the process of adaptation is influenced by a number of variables, including: general knowledge about a new culture; length of residence in the host culture; language proficiency (Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001); quantity and quality of contact with host nationals and friendship networks (Bochner, McLeod & Lin 1977); previous experience abroad (Klineberg & Hull 1979); cultural identity (Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001); the internal conditions of the sojourners such as preparedness for change, ethnic proximity and adaptive personality and as well as environmental characteristics like host receptivity, host conformity pressure and ethnic group strength (Kim, 2001).

The main notion of the second component, stress and coping, assumes that people engaging in cross-cultural encounters need to adapt and develop coping strategies and tactics. Adaptation is regarded as an active process of managing stress. Relevant variables include degree of life change (Lin, Tazuma & Masuda 1979 in Zhou & et al, 2008), personality factors and situational factors such as social support (Kim, 2001; Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001).

And last, but not least, social identification theories focus on the cognitive components of the adaptation process. It suggests that during cross-cultural contact, people consider themselves in a much broader context, which can lead to anxiety-provoking change in perception of self and identity (Zhou & et al 2008). There are two major conceptual approaches used in social identification: acculturation and social identity theory. The process of acculturation to a new culture can produce a feeling of loss of cultural identity in some and stimulate personal growth for others

(Chen & Starosta, 2005). Mansell (1981) pointed out that sojourners experience to some extent four emotional and affective states in the process of intercultural acculturation: alienation, marginality, acculturation, and duality. At the same time, social identity theory considers how group membership affects individual identity (Tajfel, 1981). Associated research includes work on uncertainty avoidance (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984), which requires the ability to predict and explain one's own behavior and that of others during interactions. This highlights the role of knowledge of the host culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984) and degree of cultural similarity (Gudykunst, 1983; Kim, 2001).

Thus, these three perspectives together offer a foundation for a comprehensive model of cultural adaptation. In contrast to early models of culture shock that is based on medical perspectives and focused on mental health issues, later models are based on wider social, psychological and educational theories (Zhou & et al 2008). Moreover, ABC model in particular considers adaptation first as a process that occurs over time, rather than at one time (Bennett, 1998), second as an active process rather than a passive one and last but not least it addresses the characteristics of the person and the situation, which brings more comprehensive perspective to the question on intercultural adaptation.

At the same time, it is useful to distinguish adaptation from assimilation. Assimilation is the process of resocialization that expect to replace one's original worldview with that of the host culture, where as adaptation is the process when one is supposed to broaden one's own repertory of behavior, communication practices and beliefs with the traditions and practices of the host culture (Bennett, 1998).

Over the last decades scholars have tried to identify stages in the intercultural adaptation process. Adler (1975) describes intercultural adaptation as a transitional experience that makes an individual goes from a low level to a higher level of self-awareness and cultural awareness by moving through the phases of contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and independence. However, among the research in this area, U-curve and W-curve patterns are two most popular models used to explain the development stages of intercultural adaptation (Chen & Starosta, 2005).

One of the main characteristics of the adaptation process is that elements of the original culture can never be completely erased (Anderson, 1994), thus new comers undergo a natural struggle between the need to learn and adapt and the resistance to change (Kim, 2001). However, Brim (Brim & Wheeler, 1966 in Gudykunst & Kim, 1984) believes that the only changes taking place are in overt role behavior, as a person can conform to role requirements but not necessarily accept the underlying values.

However, international students can reduce their cultural adaptation to the bare minimum in order to fulfill their role as student, since their stay is only temporary. But in any case, every individual in a new culture must adapt to environmental changes at least minimally: climate, language, social rituals and behavior, communication style are a few to mention (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984), so at the certain extent international student even with minimal adaptation have to undergo a natural struggle between the need to learn and adapt and the resistance to change (Kim, 2001).

### **3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS**

#### **3.1. Aim and Research Questions**

As the researched literature showed, students' experiences abroad had not been studied extensively from the perspective of national, cultural or ethnic identity. Going further, the case of international students in Jyväskylä, Finland is unique in its nature. Thus, the overall goal is to learn about intercultural communication experiences by foreign exchange and Master degree students in Jyväskylä, Finland with a particular attention to the perspective of national, cultural and ethnic identity concepts.

To achieve that goal the following research question was posed:

**RQ How Exchange and Degree Students in Jyväskylä, Finland undergo intercultural communication experiences in regards to language proficient, adaptation, academic and social environment with a particular attention to perspective of national, cultural and ethnic identity?**

### **3.2. Qualitative Method of Research**

The scope of the current research is to produce knowledge on experiences, feelings, perceptions and understanding that, in this case, international exchange and Master's university students undergo when speculating on the topic of their national, cultural and ethnic identity particularly and intercultural communication experiences in Jyväskylä in general. Qualitative research examines life experiences to understand and assign meaning to these experiences (Frey et al, 2000). It provides information on the 'human' side of an issue and reflects on how people experience a given research issue (Mack et al, 2005).

Because I am interested in the phenomenon of perception of international students' national, cultural and ethnic identity when staying in Jyväskylä, Finland and I am willing to learn about personal exploration of the issues, I took a phenomenological approach to the current study. Phenomenological analysis is designed to offer an insight view on how a given person in a given context makes sense of a given phenomenon (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, 2011). It is based on reflections, experiences and discussions of the researched phenomenon.

As for the methods, there are several common methods to collect data such as focus groups and in-depth interviews (Frey et al, 2000). Not to mention about stories or life-stories as a method. Each method is particularly suited for obtaining a specific type of data, thus they provide different perspectives on the topic.

Focus groups as a collection method are effective in helping researchers to learn the social norms of a community or subgroup (Mack et al, 2005). Although focus groups could provide a large amount of information over a relatively short period of time, it is not the best method for acquiring information on highly personal or socially sensitive topics such as subject of the current research.

Life-story method, which is a personal narrative and story of personal experience, is aimed to explain individual's experiences and ways of describing a

certain phenomenon (Opłtaka, 2001). In theory, this method meets the needs of the current study. But technically, if consider written narratives, this method might bring challenges in finding participants for the interviews. It requires good writing skills from participants. But in most of the cases, international exchange and Master's university students do not speak English as their mother tongue. Besides that, this method eliminates the chance to ask additional questions and clarify the cases unless it is combined with the interviewees as data collection method. However, verbal stories and narratives might become a part of in-depth interviewing when the interviewer asks the participants to tell the stories or bring examples of their experiences concerning the research phenomenon.

### **3.3. In-depth Interviewing**

In-depth interviews are designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic (Mack et al, 2005). It has pre-set range of questions, but how the conversation goes depend on the setting and each individual person responds to the questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This possibility to ask new question based on what interviewee says enables to get a better understanding of individual's experience.

Moreover, it is a onetime action, when the researcher and participant meet and discuss the topic, which makes it easier to recruit participants for interviews.

I conducted in-depth interviews, established within broad topic related to the student's perceptions of their national, cultural and ethnic identity when studying in Jyväskylä and their intercultural communication experiences at the place. The goal in creating the interview themes was to cover a variety of topics to allow the informants to speculate on different situations related to intercultural communication experiences in Jyväskylä, their country of origin and their national, cultural and ethnic identity. The questions were designed to provide the material to learn everything the participants could share about the researched topic. Thus, in-depth interviews became an effective method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. In particularly, this method enables to learn about the perspective of individuals in opposite to group norms of a community (Mack et al, 2005).

### **3.4. The Selection of Informants**

Researchers must establish strategy by which to select the individuals. Recruitment strategy is determined by the objectives of the research and characteristics of the study population (Frey et al, 2000). A number of interviewees, which may or may not be fixed prior to data collection, depend on the resources and accessibility. But, criteria for selection can also changed if informants were not useful in answering the research questions (Mack et al, 2005). Thus, the process of selecting informants is guided, but remains flexible at the same time.

In the current study, the criterion in recruitment strategy was to engage individuals who are international exchange and Master's university students and stayed in Jyväskylä for 7 – 8 months and at best come from various cultural backgrounds. To recruit participants to interview, I selected networking sample as a method. Meaning that, I had recruited informants among my friends and classmates. I had talked to all informants face to face and then sent a message via e-mail to all participants explaining the nature of my research. However, I did not send questions in advance to keep the interview as a conversation rather than question-and-answer sequences.

In regards to the current research, I reached the diverse perspectives on the subject by interviewing individuals of different cultural origin.

In summary, I interviewed six participants. The interview group involved individuals coming from South Korea, Germany, Nigeria, China, Taiwan and Cyprus. Three participants represented exchange students who came to study at the University of Jyväskylä for 2 semesters and 3 other participants were Master's students who came to the same University to pursue a Master's Degree. By the moment of the interviews, all participants stayed in Jyväskylä for 7 – 8 months. The first interview was considered to be a pilot study. Due to the smooth running of the conversation, diverse perspectives that the interviewee brought to the studied phenomenon and profound comments on the researched subject, the interview was included in the final data.

It is important to mention that I was familiar with the informants before interviewing them. I met participants of the research at the different University courses or knew them from other friends. Before interviews, I spent time with the informants in informal settings.

### **3.5. Interview Arrangements**

The date and time of the interviews were scheduled via e-mail at a convenient time for both the researcher and the informants (in April and May 2010). The choice of the setting for the interviews – my apartment except for two appointments that were held in the room for group work at the University Library – was that so that the informants could feel comfortable and not feel uncertain about or be distracted by the setting. Interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the informants. Each individual signed a consent form (see Appendix A) before the interviewing started.

The interview questions were posed in a relatively systematic manner, but allowing for improvising questions at the place. And the interview outline (see Appendix B) was used as a guideline. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 hour to more than 2, 5 hours (over two appointment times). According to informants, they took advantage of the situation to discuss their experiences and feelings with someone who listen them with interest. It was important that the interviews took place nearly at the end or after 7 – 8 months of staying in a foreign country. Participants mentioned that it was a good way to review and reflect on their international experiences. And they were encouraged to add additional topics or thoughts as they felt appropriate.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

The interviews were partly transcribed and partly processed in a form of report. By report I mean a transcribing of selected data and presenting some information in outline. Thus, I got transcribed data on the basis of recordings and notes I made during interviews. At one interview, the tape recorder failed in the last 20 minutes of the conversation. The interviewee replied to the missing questions in a written form a few days after appointment. The written answers to the questions were also included in final data. Overall, there was about 13 hours, 12 hours and 53 minutes to be precise, of the information recorded during interviews.

I based my study on the Thematic Analysis. This method identifies and categorizes the essential topics or themes out of data and enables to have closer look at the data (Aronson, 1994). I applied inductive coding which is usually opposite to deductive coding along the distinction in terms of what constitutes a theme: existing



theoretical ideas that the researcher brings to the data or the raw information itself (Yardley & Joffe, 2004). Although it should be noted that no theme can be entirely inductive, since the researcher's knowledge and preconceptions will influence on categorization. But at the same time inductive themes are useful in terms of bringing new approaches.

Moreover, when transcribing interviews, I did not refer to the questions I used at the appointments to avoid categorizing themes in the same way as the questions at the interview. Besides that, absence of the questions enabled to listen to what interviewees think, believe and how they see the world reality.

After transcribing and preparing data, I read the entire transcript for meaning and sense. Through the explication process, these comments were grouped into 13 meaning units. For each meaning unit, I generated a word or brief phrase. Next, I wrote an introductory sentence to provide context to the theme statements.

While not all themes applied to all informants, patterns did surface. The quotes drawn from the interviews were not edited. Interviewee's words, including hesitations and pauses are presented. A series of dots in the middle of a quote signifies the pauses the speaker took to think the answer over.

Each quote is accompanied by a code that states for the origin of the respondent. Thus, if the quote is followed by the code [Chinese], it means that these words belong to the interviewee who came from China. The participants of the interviews came from various cultural backgrounds. They represent 6 different countries: China, Nigeria, South Korea, Taiwan, Cyprus and Germany.

### **3.7. Interviewee's Profile**

The average age of the interviewees is 23. The youngest one is 21 years old and the oldest is 28 years old. All of the interviewees are female. The participants of the interviews came to Finland in early August or early September 2009, so by the moment of the interviewing (April and May 2010) they stayed in Finland for 7 or 8 months. Half of the participants, 3 interviewees, travelled to their home countries on the Christmas holidays throughout their stay in Finland, whereas the other 3 participants either stayed in Finland or travelled in Europe, but not to their home countries. Among all participants only one informant mastered the Finnish language

at the level 3 in the national language system. The rest of the participants attended Finnish 1 or Survival Finnish. They mainly communicated in English and used the basic Finnish skills only when the situations ask for it.

### **3.7.1. Previous Intercultural Experience**

Most of the participants had relevant intercultural experience before they came to Finland. One interviewee stayed for her Bachelor's Studies in the country another from the country of origin for 3 years. Besides that, she has foreigners in her extended family.

Another respondent spent one year for compulsory national youth service in other part of the country to where she had been grown up, so she happened to live in a new ethnic environment and experienced intercultural communication within her own country.

One interviewee attended a language school in Canada for one month. What is more this experience motivated her to apply for an exchange in Finland. Another informant was involved in mentoring experience and helped exchange students while being in her home country. One participant had gone through quite extensive intercultural experience before coming to Finland. She was involved in school exchange for one year, experienced a one year volunteer service abroad, worked for AFS (one of the world's largest community-based volunteer organizations) and attended conferences and seminars on the topics related to intercultural communication and tolerance. Just for one respondent, studying in Finland was a first foreign experience. In reply to the question about her previous intercultural experience, she referred to her interactions with American teachers back home. So, all the experiences that the interviewed students went through can be listed as follows:

- Taking Bachelor Degree or completing language studies in country different to the country of origin;
- Engaging in youth exchange or voluntary service abroad;
- Mentoring foreign students in home country;
- Attending conferences and seminars of culture-related topics;
- Having foreign tutors teaching at school;
- Having foreigners in extended family.

### **3.7.2. Aim of Studying in Finland**

All participants came to Finland for studying. Half of the participants represent exchange students, who came to Finland to fulfill part of their studies, whereas another half of the interviewed students came to pursue a Master's Degree in Finland. Although all participants have the same goal in principle: to get degree or complete part of the studies, their motives can vary. A few of the respondents consider studying at Finnish university as a first step in immigration to Finland or Europe. A few other interviewees after exchange experience think about coming back to Finland to pursue a Master's Degree. For some students studying in Finland became an opportunity to learn about other cultures and broaden their horizons.

## **4. FINDINGS**

For the most part, living in a new country was a mind-opening experience for the interviewed students: meeting new people, experiencing different social environments, learning the language and new traditions. However, the adaptation period occurred in every case. And after the exciting beginning of living in a new country, students faced practical as well as adjustment problems.

### **4.1. Communicating in the English Language**

In the interviewed group, English is a foreign language for all participants except for one informant who came from Nigeria. Within the group of non-native speakers, communicating in English brought difficulties to all students. Reasons that caused these problems could be named as follows: lack of specific vocabulary as well as the inability to make jokes, to be sarcastic, or to translate idiomatic expressions from their mother tongue into English. This results in difficulty in keeping the usual communication style and in expressing their thoughts and feelings in a foreign language as can be seen in the following:

So, sometimes I did not...I could not get my point across and felt quite...stupid. That was like in general, but then yeah...It is still difficult even with my friends to say what I really want to say, because it is not my first language [German]

I am not confident about my English level. And also in real life I have so many acquaintances that I could not explain myself to clear...very clearly. And somehow...and the most frustrating thing is that I could not find the way to solve this. I am still struggling in the process [Chinese]

At the same time, communicating in English in a multicultural environment became a challenge for the English speaker as well in terms of accent, intonation and using certain words. The same as for non-native speakers, it took time for the English-speaking student to learn to adapt her communication style so she could reach a mutual understanding with those who speak English as a foreign language. As the student shared, she hadn't realized before coming to Finland that there is a difference in how people speak English and finding other words, phrases and taking other intonation than she used to turned out to be difficult experience:

Maybe in the back of my mind I really think that everybody speaks English. Not even just speaking English, but everybody speaks English the way I do, the way I was brought up to speak English. But coming to Finland and being in contact with different people from different countries, I realize that we kind of speak the same language differently. When I went to Helsinki a few days ago, I had an interview with an English man, I was so relaxed...I was so...I speak English like I would speak it in Nigeria, like I would speak to any Nigerian or any African person. It was really cool...(smile and laughter)...There were some words that I was using that I would not use if I am speaking... with maybe...maybe China...maybe some other country. I am sure if I use these words, the person would not understand what I was saying, but I was speaking with him and felt so good like to speak in English like you are used to (laughter). [Nigerian]

Having pressure from unfamiliar environment, students were wishing to have common language and fewer barriers in communication with their friends and colleagues. In a general sense, it became difficult for foreign students to express their thoughts in English and at times they had to refer to a dictionary or the Internet or use non-verbal communication.

But what is important to mention is that language proficiency had a significant impact on how international students adjusted to the new environment. Their academic performance and relationships with peers depended on their language skills and in some cases how students built their social environment depended on their language proficiency. Surprisingly, Asian students as the interviewee reported further felt more comfortable with each other despite the language barrier. Probably

the reason was not connected with the language issue, but similar cultural behavior and reactions to uncertain or embarrassment situations:

My Korean friend and I are more comfortable when we talk with Asian friends, even though I do not know any of Japanese or Chinese. We have common topics to talk about. I do not know why...and it is...and we all cannot speak English very well, so we just talk very comfortable if we do not know about...if the words not come up to my mind, it does not matter. We just explain with gestures and body language and they understand, I do not know the word, but they understand [South Korean]

In some cases students felt more modest than they used to be, less talkative and at times less social. Seeing this change in their behavior, it took time for students in some cases to get used to their new social roles (for example move from being the life and soul of the party to a less talkative and cheerful person) or vice versa several students found that they can become more easy-going because the English language helped them to become straightforward compare to their more hierarchical native language system and they did not feel the emotional meaning of the words.

Another issue is regional language differences or dialects. Language classes in most cases did not prepare the students for it and they had to master this part of language learning by themselves. However, this challenge might turn into an important skill that students acquired while staying abroad. Being in Finland, students faced a situation when their peers, teachers and administrative personnel spoke English as a foreign language. It created a comfortable learning environment when everyone could learn from each other. At the same time, meeting and communicating with people of diverse cultural and language backgrounds enabled students to learn different accents and dialects and prepared them for speaking English in a global setting.

#### **4.2. Experiencing Clash of Values**

Finland was a new country for students to settle in, find social networks and adjust to a sociocultural environment. The interviewed students found themselves in a constant comparison between Finland and their countries of origin. As one of the informants shared at the interview, she compared academic environment and studying formats in Finland and her home country. However, the university system might reveal the cultural orientations in the society to what is learning, studying,

teaching. By seeing communication between teachers and students, classroom arrangements and teaching approaches, a lot might become clear about cultural value orientations: authoritarian or democratic orientation, role behavior, mobility and openness to change or orientation to traditions, concept of time and high or low cultural context.

Even in the mode of teaching, it is quite different, it is quite...although sometimes you would say that...maybe Nigerian teacher teach much more in details, they go deeply down, down down and here we sometimes just have slides and...in comparing the teaching style, though here it is high technological like we have the slides, we have the projector; we have everything that you can work with. But some lecturers just read everything basically from the slides. And that is it...yeah. But...we have some good ones here too, who really carry you all along through the lecture and are able to blend theories with practice so much so well that you really understand what they are saying, they give you lot of examples from real life situations, from different perspectives [Nigerian]

Thus, by being exposed to different classroom and teaching system particularly and other country and cultural orientations generally, students might question their opinions about education systems; socialization practices; government systems; life orientations and as a result their values. Students throughout their stay in Finland faced behavior or situations that they could not explain by judging from their cultural perspectives, such as everyday situations, differences in communication styles, power distance, and hierarchy as well as other culture related situations. And the extent of cultural misunderstandings was conditioned by the culture gap between host and home countries, in other words the cultural distance between the sojourner's culture of origin and Finland. Students who came from European countries seemed to have less cultural misunderstandings compared to African or Asian students, because of fewer cultural differences, previous contact with people of European background and above all more chances to travel home.

In some cases cultural differences related to behavior or social norms that could be learnt within a course of time. Students might face some problems the first time, but then ask their local friends or tutor to explain, learn to follow this norm and understand that this is how it is done in these cultural settings. But in others cases these differences could touch more inner principles or even philosophy that people

share back home. In the following example of a German student, it seemed clear to her that Finnish people use first names, however when it came to the actual communication and correspondence, she had to find right arguments to explain to herself that what is she doing is the right behavior in this cultural settings.

I have learnt from my tutor and also in the Finnish class that they use first name. But when I wrote my first e-mail using the first name, I felt so impolite... I think after I wrote an e-mail and waited for a half an hour before I sent it...But I was thinking that if I do not use first name, but I will write like Mr. or Ms I do not even remember the name, maybe they will feel that it is impolite that I value them this high like a prime-minister or something <...> But, you know, the person replied and everything was fine. So, I found like maybe this is the way to do, maybe I just have to start doing it [German]

As for the Taiwanese informant, she had to struggle and compromise her behavior in Finland with the usual repertoire. The actual words she got used to say in Taiwan when achieved or accomplish certain things were not only surprised her foreign friends, but even cause misunderstanding and certain irritation among them:

Foreigners think being modest is...I mean some foreigners I met... they consider being modest is a kind of behavior that are not natural, are not true, kind of lie. But for us for me still I cannot help being modest. I mean... because...being modest is considered to be a virtue for us. We always told that being modest...No matter how many accomplishments you have, no matter how good you are, you have to say: 'Oh, I am not that good. It is all because of luck'. And for some of my friends, they consider it a bit offensive...So, now I am sort of in a dead lock. Like I don't know I should follow, you know? <...> But now I sort of try to say in a different way when being with my foreign friends. Because they take my former statement a bit offensive...so, that's why I change it a little bit saying 'I think I did well this time, but I think I still have road to improve' [Taiwanese]

Values are normally expressed through verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Nonverbally people tend to communicate their values through social rituals. However, the way the ritual is performed might vary from one country to another. For a number of students, this difference became a new cultural experience and they realized that it is hard for them to get used to another way of showing friendliness, keeping conversation and communicating:

I still...I still deep inside feel like act on my own values...I still feel excluded...when people do not talk to me...and sometimes although we are friends, never touch or say that I am a friend or I am important for them...I can understand that it is not done this way in Finland, but...I cannot change my feelings so much <...> It feels something is not fine, but when I think about it, I know that it is fine because it is a different culture...that kind

of...that sometimes makes me feel upset, that makes me feel frustrated [German]

Another type of clash of values happened when interviewees found values in Finland as more attractive and applicable to their own life perceptions than values in their home countries. Interesting to mention is that due to their outsider's perspective students found explanations to social practices and reasons why people do it this way:

And the people here [*meaning in Finland*] are quite work-oriented, they like their work I think, they quite...like...not ambitions, they take it serious somehow. I do not know. And there [*meaning in Cyprus*] if you go to public service, people who works there, they have their children with them. They can answer the phone or they cannot answer the phone if they want or they can leave at some point, go to the doctor without asking [Cypriot]

When I am walking on the streets in Taiwan, I am worried about what I wear. It is a trend...or...yes I think it is a trend that people grow or they tend to put more anxious on appearance. <...> But here I found....you can...be...you can wear whatever you want...because no one....it seems that no one cares... <...>How you dress yourself is sometimes...not sometimes...it is usually speaks your status, your family, you financial condition etc. <...> But here the society is equal...the more money you earn the more tax you give...have to give. So, and so people in a way...they do not care what brand you have or how many brands you wear [Taiwanese]

Values fundamentally influence our behavior in society. They tend to be the basis of all the decisions we make and provide standards. Thus the change is slow. Important feature of cultural value orientations is that even slight change in behavior in a new cultural setting without denial the actual value takes time and effort from the actor.

#### **4. 3. Working in a Multicultural Group**

Group work in a multicultural environment turned out to be the most challenging experience. All interviewed students referred to the conflicts, misunderstandings or challenges they went through while completing a group assignment. However, African and Asian students happened to be involved in more difficult situations that touch personal and cultural values mainly because of the cultural distance between the sojourner's culture of origin and Finland. For the most part, interviewees felt confused when they faced opposite views to what work is and how it should be done,



but they still had to work together on one project. The difficulties that interviewees experienced could be grouped into several categories:

| Category  | Example   |
|---|---|
| Different attitudes to work                         | For me, coming from Nigeria...I don't know...we kind of...we kind of associate so much to a group work, especially when we have different groups in a class. That is solidarity sort of between everybody...everything you discuss you are not supposed to share with people from other groups, even if your friend or your best friend is people from the other group <...> I do not know if that in Europe... But I am not sure people really attach so much intimate, so much sentiment to group works as such...I am not so sure [Nigerian]   |
| Individualistic or collectivistic value orientation | We were in the team...and from my perspective we were quite close to each other, because we worked together and we somehow gone through some challenges during the weekend as a group. I think that our relationship somehow becomes closer. So, we walked inside the room and there were no chairs and people think that it is better to sit on the mattresses which were piling up. One Finn, girl, she started pulling one mattress. And when she was doing this, I thought that she would help others to pull enough number of mattresses for others to sit. Because in my experience of team work, the group member would automatically take care of others and bring the mattress and preparing the mattresses for others. And then finally after all the other group members were sitting then he or she could take care of herself or himself. But then in Finnish culture it is quite different. And then I found out others were also taking care of themselves, pulling one mattress without considering others. So, (smile and embarrassment) I have learned...to also just bring one mattress for myself [Chinese] |
| Differences in other cultural dimensions            | And then even communication among the group members...sometimes in Nigeria I would have feel somehow to contribute, I would have feel somehow to say: 'Okay, let's do it this way. Let's not do it this way'. ...But here I find it hard to do that, because I always think: 'Okay. I don't want to offend anybody. I do not know what somebody will feel if you say: 'okay, let's do it this way, let's do not do it this way' or whatever [Nigerian]  |
| Diverse ideas about roles                           | Next time, when we were cleaning the cottage together, the new leader of our team said something after she is   |

in a group

done the cleaning tasks. She said what surprises me a lot. She said: 'Ok. I have finished my part. And I can leave now'. It was not that pleasant for my ears somehow...Because in my culture it would suppose that people help to each other when they finish their own task. And as a leader, people would expect more from him or her and would expect more than just her portion of work [Chinese]

Group work in a way became the most intensive intercultural experience. Interviewees had to consciously listen to their colleagues keeping in mind language and cultural barriers in order to come to a common understanding on the project and distribution of the tasks. Although students stated a number of problems in the course of group work, they benefited from getting new perspectives within intercultural dialogue.

#### **4. 4. Intercultural Learning**

Intercultural learning needs reflection of individual and collective social experiences with people from other cultures rather than mere intercultural encounters as such. Interviewed students were not only facing new situation and solving ethical dilemmas, but were trying to find the balance between the behavior at home and in Finland. As cited in the extract below the Chinese informant went through a natural struggle between individual and collectivistic orientation in Finnish and Chinese environment correspondingly. To dispel the feelings and thoughts that they might be becoming a betrayer to their own cultures, interviewed students went through a difficult process in which they had to decide what is important, which values they cannot deny, and determine how to tolerate the changes they were going through:

I was quite used to the culture that people are helping each other, but then here people are quite individual and taking care of their own stuff. When I realize this, I started thinking whether I should change myself...But finally or at that stage I thought that it is nothing wrong to do things in a Chinese way. I still think that I would be happy when I was able to help others, so...I think I will not change about this value [Chinese]

Intercultural learning is a process. And it takes time to understand and adapt to a new culture and to learn about social rules and traditions. This learning goes through the psychological, personal and social conflicts. Time and experience are the key words. In the case of the students' experience in Jyväskylä, they learnt how to react to and explain behavior of people of various cultural backgrounds without

being offended or taking it personal. As it stays in the example below misunderstanding in communication might lead to frustration, however multicultural perspective to communication with others and idea in mind that speech habits might vary among cultures helps to build mutual understanding with interlocutors:

At least I think I more confident when I deal with people of other cultures, because now I know...for example, now I will not feel offended if they just interrupt me or if they just got my point and state their arguments...so at least I can say that I am more confident, so at least this confidence helps the communication to go smoothly [Taiwanese]

One of the main factors that encouraged adaptation was previous intercultural experience. Integration to a new environment became easier for a couple of informants in a way that they were familiar with the phases of the adaptation and found it less frustrating or critical. As the German informant shared further she knew her psychological type and her personal reactions to stressful, uncertain situations and unfamiliar environment. This knowledge encouraged her to take adaptation less dramatic:

What is easy to be in Finland after the other things I have experienced is maybe I understand better about phases I go through, like the feelings I have. Of course I cannot change them, they can always come up...like I can be sad, I can be happy, I can be in this honey-moon period, I can be in a really bad period...and knowing about it will not change my feelings like feeling frustrating, feeling lonely, feeling isolated, but it makes me understand it better [German]

However, the intercultural learning depended on individual, idiosyncratic factors such as the person's coping strategies or dimensions of personality. What is more, the motivation to succeed at the particular task, to learn and complete part of the curriculum in this case, became an important factor as well. Students with low motivation stayed at the stage of cultural identity salience, whereas international students who reported less stress or misunderstandings in the new culture were utilizing different strategies for social and cultural learning and had a positive approach:

I adapt to one culture only after I understand...only after I know why you do that...for example they hug me (*refer to her experience in Barcelona, Spain*) and I was surprised and I asked do you usually do that? Who teach you to do that? And why you do that? And they told me that this is how they treat their friends, sort of show their friendliness and intimacy. And I think that the idea

is good then I will take it. But then if I do not like the story I will not take it [Taiwanese]

Overall, integration to a new culture became for the most part a challenging experience with difficulties in expressing thoughts in a foreign language, adjusting to a new social reality, experiencing clash of values and cultural conflicts. But after living in a new culture for a period of time, informants gradually learnt through communication activities to convert from a newcomer to an experienced communicator in a host environment. The extent to which they adapted to a host environment depended on their language proficiency, satisfaction with their home environment, future plans for studying and living as well as the cultural gap between the country of origin and Finland.

#### **4.5. National, Cultural and Ethnic Identity in Contexts**

Interviewed students experienced a heightening of the importance of their national, ethnic or cultural identity when they either happened to be in a multicultural environment or when they experienced a situation in which different national groups were in competition with each other. These kinds of situations included discussing politics; watching the Olympics, and participating in national sport competition or even more typical, everyday situations when they were abroad:

Once I was running this race in France, I felt like I am from Cyprus, I represent Cyprus in this thing. Maybe I am the only one from Cyprus. Most of the time I am the only from Cyprus. That makes it important for me. Really... It makes me unique or I do not know <...> It is not a nationalist pride, but it is a feeling that you belong somewhere and you should be proud of that [Cypriot]

And I always feel like in Olympics or sport game with another nation...and I always feel that I am Korean, yeah, Korean, this victory, always sing [South Korean]

When it comes to issues of politics or issues that has to do with tribal or ethnic issues and all of that...then you feel more like...that you are from particular tribe or sometimes when there are conflicts between two tribes...then I am talking as one tribe and not as Nigerian anymore [Nigerian]

What is common in these examples is that students felt a sense of belonging to a national, cultural or ethnic group when being united with their countrymen. However, the feeling of belonging was influenced by the presence of other cultures

and ethnic groups. Intercultural settings became an important condition in the unification process.

Finland and the Finnish university environment became a multicultural situation. Students on an everyday basis came in contact with other cultures and lived in a multicultural environment. In that environment they were first of all identified through their gender, then nationality and only after that by profession, age or social status. This new cultural and social environment stressed their national, cultural or ethnic background. The question 'where are you from' tends to be the most asked question. Multicultural environment and presence of many different national and ethnic groups might require certain categorization in order not to get lost. And students asked and were asked about their origin, so to be placed in a certain group:

I think national identity is so important especially when you are abroad. Because that is really part of you...just like you said it is a second question or the most asked question: 'where are you from?'...it is kind of your name...name is...like people...what they are going to call you later and then where are you from? So that is national identity; that is really important [Taiwanese]

Gradually multicultural settings strengthened their identity. In such diverse environment, people of various cultural backgrounds lived and worked side by side. They, in a way, became representatives of their cultures. And this kind of environment encourages people to think about their origin and their culture. As in the further example of the German interviewee, experience of meeting people of different cultural backgrounds and getting to know them became learning about self and own national identity. Students identified themselves in contrast to what they are not, indicating that identity means being the same as oneself and as well as being different:

Culture like the place where one comes from and grew up definitely influences the identity and we can understand this only in contact with others. Maybe something like you cannot know who you are if you don't know who you are not. That would describe my experience in this field best. Now I also understood that I will always be German whether I like it or not and that this is not always a bad thing. There are positive aspects of it as well [German]

#### 4.6. Learning about Country of Origin

While living in a multicultural environment students tended to be asked about their country of origin. However explaining to their friends and acquaintances certain facts such as social habits and rules, history and culture of their countries was not an easy task in the beginning of their stay. Language skills and lack of specific vocabulary in terms of historical, social, cultural and at times political issues became an obvious barrier in communication on these topics. And it deals as well with the students' ability to explain to people of other cultural backgrounds what might seem obvious to them. While staying abroad, students got a chance to learn about other countries and to compare the multicultural and their home environments. This outsider's perspective that students got while being abroad enabled them to have a new look at their home countries and their culture systems. This experience made them see their countries from the outside and provided them with a much wider view. As in the extract below, the Taiwanese student after experience in Finland got enough new information and personal observations to discuss education system back home and in Finland and what is more realize what suits her best. As a result, this interviewee as well as a few other informants got new perspectives to what seemed to be so obvious for them when they lived in their cultural systems:

I think it is because of the [Taiwanese] educational system. I cannot blame teachers...I cannot blame teachers for organizing less interactive or boring lectures. Because like I also think that I should take some responsibility because I do not ask teachers<...> So I think it is a also because of me, because like...in junior high schools and high schools we are asked to not learn, but to study for what is going to appear in the examinations... that is an unhealthy education system in Taiwan. Students when they are in the elementary schools and junior high and then high schools...so like...in those 18 years they do not know what is learning...really... they do not know what is learning ...they study for their future schools...and some even more pathetic, they study for their parents...because they do not want to let their families down. And I was that kind of student before I studied here [Taiwanese]

Talking about social and political situations and at times sensitive cultural topics, students became involved in intercultural dialogue. It broke the stereotypes about culturally-different others and gave them the opportunity to hear stories from other parts of the world. This experience broadened their outlook on what life is like on other continents as well as in culturally-different countries. Besides that, the

experience of living in a multicultural environment and travelling abroad brought to several interviewees the realization that they have a lack of knowledge about their own cultures, which persuaded them to learn more and travel more within their countries:

Now when I am going to travel in Europe, I think that I have not travelled in Korea. And I want to see Korea <...> I want to know more about Korean culture. I think I have lack of Korean culture <...> If I want to communicate with international and intercultural people, I should have my own identity and I think that Korean culture and Korean beautiful things can be basis of my identity. I want to know more than now [South Korean]

#### **4.7. Feeling Belonging to a Racial, National, Cultural and Ethnic Group**

In some cases, the identity that students referred to depended on the context or situation. In a way their references to a regional, national or racial identity were defined by where the communication process took place, with whom and what the subject was. In all cases that are cited below, by referring to local, European or racial identity, students were trying either to identify themselves with the community or create a comfortable context for themselves:

When I went to Malaysia, it was not important at all that I was German. Because for them, we are Westerners <...> I think that when I travel outside Europe I would define myself (also when talking to others) as a European, inside Europe as a German (maybe as being originally from West Germany but living in the Eastern part of the country now). Inside Germany I would refer to myself as a (North-Rhine) Westphalian <...> So I think that my perception of myself changes depending on where I am and with whom I talk [German]

My Korean friends and I are more comfortable when we talk with Asian friends, even though I do not know any of Japanese or Chinese. <...> Yeah...And we have similar culture...kind of competitive and politeness somehow and high context. We do not say directly, just very far away. So, we yeah...And even if they are not Korean, sometimes we feel the same things about [South Korean]

Then, the identity that students referred to was influenced by individual culture and religion. By that I mean, cultural or religious explanations of what people as country mates believe in and what ideas they share. In a couple of interviews, students shared that they consider it to be destiny or nature that they belong to a certain national group. The explanation they give might connect with the story-

telling or myth that they share with their country mates when it comes to the cultural identification:

But maybe in terms of identity, being a Taiwanese is...a destiny...destiny is a mission...destiny...I am destined to be born in Taiwan and because Taiwan is now in a...in a...weak situation, so...being a Taiwanese...especially being a Taiwanese abroad is a mission for me to do my best to tell about it...to make people know more about it...so being a Taiwanese is a destiny and it is a mission to me [Taiwanese]

It is just very natural to be a Chinese...I am born to be a Chinese...that is why it is not important. I mean I could be a Finn, I could have been a Russian, but just nature chose me to be Chinese [Chinese]

However, informants referred most often to national identity. Regional, ethnic or tribal identity usually was not significant because of the lack of knowledge in a multicultural setting about regional division or ethnic and tribal groups. Thus, interviewees tended to generalize their identity in a multicultural environment in order to be accepted and identified in a multicultural group as the Nigerian student explained:

For my nationality, I know that when I name my nationality, almost everybody knows where I am from. But my ethnicity, well...I know that people might not know the name when I mention the name. But when I mention my nationality, quite an a lot of people know Nigeria, they are aware of Nigeria <...> At home [*in Nigeria*] I feel like representative of my tribe really, but here [*in Finland*] I feel like an ambassador of Nigeria...But at home I feel more like Yoruba [Nigerian]

While being abroad, students experienced being identified primarily by gender and nationality and only after that by profession, age or social status. However what happened is that students tended to generalize their identity in such a way as to not refer to regional, ethnic or tribal identity because of the lack of knowledge about these divisions and traditions in multicultural settings. In a way a new multicultural environment stressed their national, cultural and ethnic backgrounds; they tended to be asked about their country of origin, traditions, political and social issues and their experiences in Finland as representatives of a certain country. For the most part, students became aware of the stereotypes people hold about their countries, they learnt to explain social and political situations, talk about sensitive topics, and in doing so they became ambassadors of their countries to some extent. However, for several students this experience made them realize that



they have a lack of knowledge of their own cultures which persuaded them to learn more and travel more around their countries.

#### **4.8. Identity Conflict**

Identity conflicts in a multicultural environment are possible manifestations of cultural misunderstandings, conflicts and personal adjustment problems. Interviewed students referred to disputed political statuses in their home country and stereotyping as causes of embarrassing situations in a multicultural group. These conflicts appeared because of the presence of different cultural patterns and the clash of stereotypes. Students arrived in Finland with different levels of experience in intercultural communication. For several students, this experience was the first contact with people of other religions and origins. As the German interviewee further shared she faced situations when people were searching in her behavior for well-known stereotypes about Germans. And probably feel more confident in communication with her when found certain proof for their expectations:

And then people have these generalizations that like you know...you do not have humor because you are German; you are punctual and hard-working...there is not point trying not to be like that and there is no point in extremely trying to be like that. The point is to be yourself. But the problem is that people search for these kind of stuff [German]

Students processed cultural differences in contrast with their own cultural practices. Meeting different nations, they experienced frustration and excitement, which is a mix of feelings in its nature. Trying to process new information they learnt about other cultures, sometimes they preferred to follow an easier way by using categories and stereotypes.

The diversity might strengthen the feeling of belonging to a certain group: ethnic, cultural or national. By that students kept in touch with their cultural roots. It provided a feeling of security in time of uncertainty or diverse cultural environment. For several students, that experience encouraged them to feel the ideas and beliefs of their ethnic, cultural or national group as more applicable to their personal orientations. For the Taiwanese student, the political tension between China and Taiwan had an influence on her relationship and self-awareness in a group of Chinese students. What might not have caused conflict and tension before seemed to become a sensitive and personal topic in a multicultural group:

When I meet Chinese people, I feel anxious...but gladly in Chinese do not ask...like they do not use nationality they use like where do you come from and I can say Taiwan ...really...honestly when I first met my roommates and also my roommates' friends, I felt really anxious about saying where I am from. Actually I feel a bit ashamed about being nervous when they ask me, because I should be proud of where I am from. I should be proud of Taiwan [Taiwanese]

#### **4.9. Identification When Living Abroad**

Students faced situations when their usual cultural behavior was no longer appropriate within new cultural contact. As in the following extract, The Nigerian interviewee explained that the actual environment influenced on her socialization behavior. These situations of cultural adjustment and lack of fit between one set of cultural behaviors and the new cultural context, led individuals to modify their behavior, cognitions, or both:

Before coming here, before coming to Finland, you know I see myself as a part of in-group you know; always attached to a set of people. But here I am not really interested in making friends. I do not know. I believe that we are here for some purpose and we...really... Maybe it is Finland...it is the Finnish orientation...maybe, you know, being in a society where you believe that every man is for himself you do not have, you do not necessarily need to have friends. Maybe Finland has had impact in my life in that way that I am not really interested in having long list of friends, long list of acquaintances I am always in contact with [Nigerian]

For several interviewed students, identity centrality (term coined by Sussman, 2000) which refers to the significance of cultural identity to the sojourner was salient. As it states in the following extracts, despite the social, personal and psychological stress, students were still stick to their cultural values and feel the sense of original identity:

I think being in a foreign environment and experiencing differences makes you feel more about your own identity [German]

I have the feeling that I cannot choose the nationality I have regardless what kind of experience I have or I had...the sense of Chinese in myself forever <...> I really might not be typical Chinese after my studying in here... my values; some of my values have changed. I have seen the Chinese society or Chinese culture more clearly after the comparison with the culture here...And I...my identity will not change, but my mind-set, my behavior might change [Chinese]

At the same time, if cultural identity centrality is low and intention to succeed at the particular task is high, the question remains do students have the ability to recognize culturally appropriate behaviors, to learn them and to engage them in appropriate situations? One of the interviewees referred not to partial change in behavior, but to multiple identities. By that, she meant several identities to choose from depending on the environment, language, situation and people around:

Sometimes I question myself. Last night I was with the Finnish guy. We were speaking Finnish. And I was wondering... I understand him speaking Finnish to me now and I understand him perfectly. And what is happening to me? And then I go to meet the French people. And I speak with them and it is so much fun and I feel that I belong with them. I feel like I belong with... It cannot arise that I am from Cyprus. It happened to me that I realize that I am going towards different things, but it does not necessarily mean that you are going away from your country, you experience things, you learn and it is nice <...> You just think about yourself in many ways, you just think about...so, being in different places, speaking different languages and seeing different people. It is like having parallel lives at once <...> I become like multidimensional personality. And being able to see, you stop being absolute and think the things in one straight way. It is tough, because you feel the transformation is happening. It is like being another person sometimes, but maybe you like this person more [Cypriot]

Intercultural adaptation as a process incorporates psychological and sociocultural dimensions in that it takes an individual from a low level to a higher level of self-awareness and cultural awareness. Every sojourner went through an individual adaptation process even within one social environment. The extend of the adaptation depended on the external factors of the environment and community; and internal factors such as a person's coping strategies or dimensions of personality.

Although some international students may have reduced their cultural adaptation to the bare minimum in order to fulfill their role as students, since their stay was only temporary. But in any case, every individual in this group had to adapt to environmental changes at least minimally: climate, language, social rituals, behavior, and communication style to mention a few. To a certain extent international student even with minimal adaptation had to undergo a natural struggle

between the need to learn and adapt and the resistance to change. To some extent interviewed students had adapted to the host culture as long as they understood and applied the cultural rules of social and academic life appropriately, and used to some extent the behavioral repertoire, beliefs, and conventions of the host culture. The adaptation stage and experience of being in the culturally diverse environment fostered multicultural thinking in the students. Throughout the interviews, students applied to their personal and national orientations, but got new repertoires of behavior, in some cases new language to express ideas and thoughts, as well as new social system to refer to. So, as sojourners successfully adapted to the new culture by modifying behaviors and social thought, cultural identity develop as well.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. Intercultural Experiences of International Students in a New Sociocultural and Academic Environment**

The results indicated that interviewed students in most of the cases felt excitement on arrival to Finland. Entrance into a new culture was not accompanied by culture shock. However, the culture shock occurred when students experienced culture fatigue (Guthrie, 1975 in Chen & Starosta, 2005), language shock and adapt to new education system (Hoff, 1979 in Chen & Starosta, 2005).

The difficulties that international students face tend to be categorized by four types. The first two challenges are exclusive to their international status such as language incompetence and social communication difficulties and the other two are common for young people such as adolescence identity conflict and academic challenges (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The problems indicated by Furnham & Bochner are consistent with the view of other researchers who pointed out at tendency that international students feel loneliness and deep sense of loss when leaving friends and family behind (Ying & Han, 2006; Fritz & Chin & DeMARinis, 2008; O'Reilly & Ryan & Hickey, 2010); difficulties in getting to know local peers and make host national friends because of differences in social interaction styles (Cross, 1995; Fritz & Chin & DeMARinis, 2008), problems caused by unfamiliar academic environment (Zhou & et al 2008). However, some of the problems

experienced by international students are universal and applicable for international and local students (Zhou & Todman, 2009), although other researchers propose that international students experience more adjustment problems than local students and have limited resources to deal with these problems (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

It is noteworthy that the interviewed international students did not seem to experience significant academic difficulties and university-related problems. This finding may be explained by the fact that the university provided a significant support for international students such as orientation week, arrival training, diverse students' activities on campus and services offered by international office.

However, students reported on misunderstandings caused by differences in language, communication style, behavior, social practices as well as cultural dimensions and orientations.

Language as one of the most important differences between cultures became a barrier in adaptation. All interviewed students including native-English speaker reported difficulties in speaking English because of lack of specific vocabulary as well as the inability to make jokes, to be sarcastic, or translate idiomatic expressions from their mother tongue into English. This results in difficulty in keeping the usual communication style and in expressing their thoughts and feelings in a foreign language.

Students assumed that it is also the result of language teaching and testing practice in school where the focus of instruction and examination is on reading and grammar through written exercises (Zhang & Mi, 2010). Thus, some of the interviewed students were not capable for informal communication with their peers when arriving to Finland. In most of the cases, students learned the differences between formal and informal language in the course of time and practice.

What is more, students were not prepared at school or university classes to identify and understand different accents and dialects. Nonnative interviewees ironically mentioned that they tend to speak globish (coined by Jean-Paul Nerriere) within their international community. Meaning that they speak simple English, at times literally translate words and idioms from their native languages. The ability to speak English relying on the vocabulary of 1500 words might help students to build

social network and communicate with their peers, although misunderstandings might occur due to lexical or phonetic obstacles (Grzega, 2006). However, this vocabulary might not be sufficient for the academic purposes and contradict the university standards.

Host universities might resolve language-related problems to some extent by setting a higher language proficiency level for admission (Zhang & Mi, 2010). But it means that chances of exchange and Master's Degree students with less proficient level will be limited while studying in a foreign institution considered being an intensive language learning environment.

Interviewed students experienced challenges when completing a group assignment in a multicultural context. The challenges they referred to could be grouped by several categories: different attitudes to work; individualistic or collectivistic value orientation; differences in other cultural dimensions and diverse ideas about roles in a group. In most of the cases students experienced difficulties because of different cultural concepts of what group work is and other cultural dimensions.

Adler (1991) suggested categorizing the diversity between cultures along six different dimensions: what is the nature of people; what is person's relationship to nature; what is a person's relationship to other people; what is primary mode of activity; what is concept of space and person's temporal orientation. He believed that each member of the multi-cultural task group bears difference with other members on the outlook of himself; relationships with others, the world and nature (Adler 1991 in Steven et al, 1998). Adler's conceptualization overlaps to some extent with Kluckhohn and Stordbeck's (1961); Condon and Youself's (1975); Hall's (1976) and Hofstede's (1984) Models in terms of basic classification of value orientations. But do these differences really important for group development? (Steven et al 1998). Different beliefs and cultural mental programming of group member has direct impact on the group development. Miscommunication might occur because of clash of different approaches to work and life that those members brought to the group. However, as one of the strategies for managing conflicts and misunderstandings in multicultural settings is agree on the rules that group will follow such as group

appointments, handing deadlines, bringing feedback and critics and other important points, although coming to agreement in those points requires a group solidarity and participation of every member.

There is a discussion in related literature about cultural adaptation of international students as short-term sojourners. In theory international mobile students have less need to adapt to the host culture in compare to long term sojourners. Their stay is only temporary. There is a belief that hosts might not expect culturally appropriate behavior from short-term sojourners (Kim, 2001), although this might vary across cultures. However, several studies indicated that international students experience more adjustment problems than their domestic fellow students and have limited resources to deal with these problems (Ying & Han, 2006; Fritz & Chin & DeMARinis, 2008; O'Reilly & Ryan & Hickey, 2010).

For the interviewed students, integration to a new culture became a challenging experience with difficulties in expressing thoughts in a foreign language, adjusting to a new social reality, experiencing clash of values and cultural conflicts. And the cultural distance or degree of difference between the sojourner's culture of origin and the host culture (Ward et al. 2001), within-person factors, such as the person's coping strategies, dimensions of personality, life changes and social support (Ward 2004), and motivation to fulfill an overseas task (Sussman, 2000) are seen as an important factors in adjustment process. But for the most part, interviewees learnt how to operate in a new cultural environment in a course of time and experience. Sociocultural adjustment, with its focus on coping with everyday life, is said to improve over time as a result of social learning (Ward et al. 2001).

However, international students can reduce their cultural adaptation to the bare minimum in order to fulfill their role as student, since their stay is only temporary. But in any case, every individual in a new culture must adapt to environmental changes at least minimally: climate, language, social rituals and behavior, communication style to mention a few (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984), so at the certain extent international student even with minimal adaptation have to undergo a natural struggle between the need to learn and adapt and the resistance to change (Kim, 2001).

Although every student went through an individual U-curve process: honeymoon, crisis, adjustment and biculturalism period (Lysgaard, 1955 in Chen & Starosta, 2005), the pattern occurred: students' intercultural learning process went along with feelings of fear, anxious, uncertainty and excitement, relief and happiness, doubts, comparison and gradual growing.

## **5.2. National, Cultural Identity Salience**

While studying in a multicultural class, students went through experience when being identified primarily by gender and nationality and only after that by profession, age or social status. Individual easily identifies with a gender category, and the first question that students asked after name is the country of origin. In some cases, students might be inquired about their major or future profession, but is not always a case. However, interview findings indicated that being in a foreign environment made students identify and strengthened to certain extent their national identity. Reference to particularly national identity is caused by the reason that students tended to generalize their identity in a way they did not refer to regional, ethnic or tribal identity because of the lack of knowledge about local divisions and traditions in multicultural settings.

Thus, communication with people of other cultural background stated in contrast to daily interactions with culturally similar individuals at home. The latter creates an environment where cultural identity remains unformed or unrecognized (Sussman, 2000), where the former enabled sojourners to identify themselves in compare to what they are not, in a way get the identity by the comparison with 'others', non-members. Identity in its nature means being the same as oneself and as well as being different. Every social community or identity is exclusive in the sense that not everybody can take part. Groups and collectivities are always constituted in relation to others. A shared European identity, for example, would have to define itself in contrast to Muslim, Middle Eastern or Arab identity, possible also in relation to African, East Asian and North American identities – depending on the social situation (Eriksen, 2002).

The situation of being in a multicultural environment might lead to native cultural salience. Stryker and Serpe (Stryker & Serpe, 1982 in Sussman, 2000) also noted that identity salience leads to behavior consistent with that identity such an



anecdotal evidence of a U.S. sojourner who celebrates the 4th of July only when living in other countries (Sussman, 2000).

Cultural identity salience differs along the cultural dimension of loose or tight cultures, coined by Triandis (1994). In tight cultures there are many rules, norms and standards for correct behavior whereas in loose culture there are few rules, norms or standards and people have different point of view about correct behavior. Furthermore, there is difference in “punishment’ for breaking a rule, in other words people are likely to be criticized in tight cultures and have “it does not matter”-approach in loose cultures (Triandis, 2004). In regards to a cultural identity, for members of loose cultures cultural identity might be neither clearly prescribed nor salient whereas for participants of tight cultures cultural identity elements are clear and salient (Sussman, 2000). It is believed that members of a tight culture upon their arrival to a new culture would rather experience affirmation of cultural identity (Sussman, 2000). This cultural background in a way influences on sojourner’s adjustment - coping strategies. In this sense, some cultures better prepare their members for the experience of being expatriate (Sussman, 2000).

### **5.3. Identity Development**

Experience of living and studying in a Finnish environment for 7-8 months provided students with culture-general knowledge about intercultural communication and culture-specific knowledge on the Finnish and other cultures that students came across over the period of their stay. For the most part, interviewed students were motivated to succeed at studying and living in Finland. Motivated at such students underwent though a sociocultural adjustment: climate, language, social rituals and behavior, communication style to mention a few. By exposing students to differences in thinking and practice of foreign and host cultures offered them the chance to see themselves through the eyes of those other cultures (Chen & Starosta, 2005).

“Rather than having one pair of cultural glasses that defines and clarifies the world, sojourners have multiple lenses through which to interpret a variety of culturally influenced behavior” (Sussman, 2000, 368)

In case of interviewed students, the talk is not about biculturalism. For the most part, students referred in their stories to their countries of origin and cultural orientations. But biculturalism is marked by attitudes and behaviors that are independent from the influence of the birth (Adler, 1975).

However, both abstract and culture-specific knowledge about communication with culturally different groups influenced on students' cultural identity. Identities are never stable but always changing (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). By being social constructs, our identities always develop through interaction with others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986 & other social science researchers). By being exposed to a multicultural class, new foreign environment, interviewed students went through a new range of experience that brought some changes to their behavioral repertoire, language capabilities and orientations. However, identity development is a complex process that everyone experience in an individual way: some people spend more time in one phase than do others and the way they experience these phases are diverse.

Generally speaking, ethnic, cultural or national identity on a large scale may be seen as a set of ideas about individual group membership. These dimensions might include: self-identification; knowledge about the ethnic culture and feeling about belonging to a particular group (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). From one side, interviewed students have got a new perspective at their native cultures by comparing home and Finnish cultures and being ambassadors of their countries of origin, in terms of cited theory they modified their self-identification. On the other side, international students have adjusted for a certain period to a Finnish culture, although they were not officially belonged to this culture. Thus, individual sense of ethnic, cultural or national identity develops over time, in stages, and through communication with others.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

### 6.1. Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations concerning the findings of the current study. In regard to the methodology, the most obvious limitation is conducting interviews in a foreign language for the researcher and interviewed students. Among all participants, English is a foreign language except for one student who came from Nigeria. Generally speaking, students managed to apply their experience, bring examples from their lives in Finland and back home and talk about sensitive topics except for one case when interviewed student struggled to communicate her thoughts and perspectives in English.

Another limitation for the current research is individual-biased replies to the research questions. The investigated phenomenon: national, cultural and ethnic identity and intercultural communication experiences required in some cases cultural perspectives from interviewed students, however at times interviewees applied personal explanations and experience which is natural.

Further, there was no measure done on contextual or environmental issues at the university or society that could affect the nature of intercultural communication experience those students had while staying in Jyväskylä, Finland.

The results might be biased by the procedures of data collection, analysis and selection of informants. However, the selection of informants was not guided by strict criteria. The criterion in recruitment strategy was to engage individuals who are international exchange and Master's university students who stayed in Jyväskylä for 7 – 8 months and at best come from various cultural backgrounds. By the end, all students willing to participate in the study were female. The current study was not aimed to see the differences in how students of different gender experience life abroad, however the pattern might occur.

What is more, ethical issues can result from unintentional misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the informants' meanings. However, questions were designed so that researcher got to hear about how students themselves see the investigated issues and what they think and believe. And there was no clearly hypotheses stated before the interviewing started.

## **6.2. Implications for Further Research**

Although this study's findings are not generalizable to a wider population, the results in any case present implications for students going on exchange, volunteers working at exchange programmers, administrators and individuals working at International Exchange Services at University and Collage.

Traditionally, sojourners see their intercultural experiences from the perspective of adaptation or integration in a new sociocultural environment. Intercultural adaptation refers broadly to the process of increasing level of fitness to meet the demands of a new environment (Kim, 1988 in Chen & Startosta, 2005). And the entrance to a new culture is generally accompanied by culture shock. However, experience of entering a new society and adjusting to a local culture might be studied from the perspective of national, cultural or ethnic identity. And there are research factors that require additional investigations. For example, how ethnic group strength (coined by Kim Y.Y.) could affect on national identity salience while being abroad; how positive/negative or neutral relationships between host and home country and presence of stereotyping influence on national identification.

Then, investigation of national identity as a studied phenomenon must be supported by culture-specific knowledge. Some cultures confer nationals with norms, values and behavior whereas others – no; the loyalty to a culture of origin and national pride are all import factors in regards of the studied phenomenon.

The way how interviewed sojourners experience a reintegration process by returning home might provide important body of knowledge to a studied phenomenon.

Further, the link between intercultural communication experiences and perception of national, cultural and ethnic identity could be studied within different groups of sojourners such as PhD students, exparts, missionaries, immigrants and refugees by considering voluntary or involuntary migration, different length of stay and overseas tasks. At the same time, the phenomenon of identity is a difficult concept to operate. In a way, it is more individual construction guided by the personal psychology and sociocultural context. Individual difference variables might clarify why some sojourners experience profound changes in cultural identity and other return from an overseas task with little change.

What is more, the results raise issues and concerns that might inform discussions aimed at students' experiences abroad on exchange period or while competing a University Degree.

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**APPENDIX A: Letter of Consent****LETTER OF CONSENT**

Dear participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take part as an interviewee for my Master's Thesis Project. I am a Master's student in the Intercultural Communication Master's Programme at the Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä. My Thesis is about relation between students' intercultural communication experiences and their reflection on their national or ethnic identity. The target group is exchange and master students who stay in Jyväskylä since September 2009.

I will record the interview in order to be able to concentrate on our discussion. The recording will be listened only by me. The information will be used only for the purpose of the current Thesis and removed from my computer when the Thesis is completed and accepted. Your name and other personal information will remain confidential when I use quotations from the conversation.

If you agree to the statements above, please sign the following form:

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact me at +358 417819230, or [tatiana.natarova@gmail.com](mailto:tatiana.natarova@gmail.com). You can also contact Professor Maarit Valo, my supervisor at the Department of Communication, by telephone at +358 14 260 1518, or by email at [maarit.valo@jyu.fi](mailto:maarit.valo@jyu.fi)

I very much look forward to speaking with you. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Yours Sincerely,

Tatyana Natarova

### **APPENDIX B: Interview Outline**

- Would you please state your name, so that I can identify the tape?
- How old are you? What is your major?
- What is your nationality?
- Would you please tell about your previous intercultural experience? If informant did not know what exactly I mean by 'previous intercultural experience', I specified that it regards to any experiences one had with people of other cultural or ethnic origin (family, studying abroad, taking part in language courses abroad, implementing mentors obligations etc.)
- Interactions with locals and internationals: Do you spend time here with locals, international students or your country nationals?
- What do you think about your interaction with locals?
- What do you find challenging in communication with people from another countries?
- What is still difficult to you in communicating with people with various cultural backgrounds?
- Do you think that stories your friends might tell to you about their countries help you to understand their communication style?
- Experiencing host country: What is exciting and interesting for you about the Finnish society?
- What was your first 'aha moment' about the Finnish country?
- Do you think after your stay here that you understand better the Finnish society?
- Foreign language: Do you find it easy to speak other foreign language than your mother tongue?
- How often do you speak your mother tongue?

- How often do you contact to your family and friends from home?
- University: How will you describe your academic experience?
- Do you find it easy to interact with your teachers and university staff?
- Life beyond academic experience: How is your life in Jyväskylä beyond the academic experience?
- What is about your interactions with classmates?
- Could you easily find the topic to talk with your classmates?
- What are the most important things you learn here from your interactions with the people?
- Do you feel that you change as a result of your stay in Jyväskylä? If so, how?
- Here in Jyväskylä you quite often have to tell where you come from. What do you feel when name your nationality or ethnicity?
- Awareness about your country of origin: What do you think about your own culture?
- What is the culture you come from?
- What do you usually tell people about your country?
- Do you consider yourself as ambassador of your country?
- Did you happen to make cultural theme evening or any other activity where you can present your culture or language?
- If somebody asks you to share negative stories about your country, would you know what to answer?
- Have you ever happened to discuss with your country nationals about your experience in Finland?
- Learning about your culture when staying abroad: Have you ever compared your country to Finland?

- Being in Finland, you probably feel more precisely what do you miss from home, what is important to you?
- What is important to you in your life?
- What are your values?
- Do you think it is more personal or cultural constructions?
- Have you ever experienced the clash of values between your home country and Finland Taiwanese, Russian, German...?
- What do you miss about your culture while staying in Finland?
- What is important for you in your culture?
- Is it important to you to be Taiwanese, Russian, German...?
- What does it mean to you to be Taiwanese, Russian, German...?
- What do you mean by national or ethnic identity?
- Are you proud of being Taiwanese, Russian, German...?
- Imagine you have a chance to live in any country in the world. What would be your choice?