THE ROLE AND PRESENCE OF CONFLICTS IN ROMANTIC ERASMUS RELATIONSHIPS

Master's Thesis
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Intercultural Communication
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Abstract The present study assesses the presence and importance of conflicts in intercultural relationships that were created during an Erasmus exchange period abroad. The theoretical background is based upon the concepts of third culture building (TCB) and conflict management styles, both of which were used to explain the various stages of the relationship development. So far the scholarly literature on the subject of Erasmus students is rather scarce and only a few studies focus on intercultural couples' lived experiences concerning conflicts. This study is driven by the need for more developed and valid information of Erasmus couples that in fact form a rather large number of the Erasmus students in total. In the current world where mobility happens almost in a routine-like sense, there is a constant need for updating "old" models and adjusting them to match the needs of such intercultural individuals. An empirical, qualitative study was conducted with 11 intercultural former Erasmus couples. Each couple was in a heterosexual relationship. They were asked to write their own personal narratives related to their relationship development. The couples composed the narratives together in order to achieve honest reflection of the events, furthermore the methods of content was utilized in the analysis process of the stories. The findings show that the presence of conflicts was not a significant factor in the process of building the third culture. Overall, conflicts were scarcely reported to be present at all. The intensive nature of the relationship due to limited amount of time seemed to prevail over the importance of developing the relationships by resolving possibly emerging conflicts.	
Keywords Third culture building, intercultural couples, conflict, Erasmus student exchange	
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Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma analysoi konfliktien merkitystä ja läsnäoloa kulttuurienvälisissä parisuhteissa, jotka ovat muodostuneet Erasmus-opiskelijavaihdon aikana. Analyysin teoreettinen tausta tukeutuu nk. kolmannen kulttuurin luomiseen (TCB) sekä eri konfliktityylien tunnistamiseen. Molempia teoriapohjia hyödynnetään suhteiden eri vaiheiden analysoinnissa ja havainnoissa.
Tähän asti akateeminen kirjallisuus on tutkinut Erasmus-opiskelijoita varsin rajoittuneesta näkökulmasta, ja kulttuurienvälisien romanttisten parisuhteiden konflikteihin keskittynyt tutkimuskanta keskittyy lähinnä parien koettuihin elämyksiin. Tämän tutkimuksen johtavana ajatuksena on luoda laajempaa ja perusteltua tutkimuskirjallisuutta liittyen nk. Erasmus-pareihin, joiden kokonaislukumäärä on itse asiassa varsin laaja. Nykymaailmassa kulttuurienvälinen liikkuminen tapahtuu lähes rutiininomaisesti, joka lisää tarvetta päivittää “vanhoja” teorioita uuteen maailmankulkuun soveltuviksi. Empiirinen, laadullinen tutkimus luotiin tutkielmaa varten, ja tutkimusongelmaa lähestyttiin henkilökohtaisten narratiivien eli kertomusten kautta. Yhteensä 11 monikulttuurista Erasmus-paria osallistui tutkimusprosessiin. Kaikki tutkimukseen osallistuneet parit olivat heterosuhteessa. Kyselyä ohjasi kolme johtavaa kysymystä, ja tarinat analysoitiin kokonaisuudessaan, jotta havaittaisiin usein esiintyviä teemoja. Parit kirjoittivat yhdessä oman tarinansa ohjaavien kysymyksen mukaisesti kuvaillen tapahtumia mahdollisimman rehellisesti. Myöhemmin tarinat analysoitiin sisällönanalyysin tekniikoita hyödyntäen. Tutkimuksesta kävi pääpiirteittäin ilmi, että konflikteilla ei ollut suurta merkitystä kolmannen kulttuurin muodostuksessa. Itse asiassa suuria ristiriitoja ei raportoitu juuri lainkaan. Suhteita kuvailtiin intensiivisiksi rajoitetun yhteisen ajan vuoksi, jolloin mahdollisten konfliktien ratkomista ei koettu tärkeänä.</td></tr>
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“Kolmas kulttuuri”, kulttuurienväliset suhteet, konfliktit, Erasmus-opiskelijavaihto</td></tr>
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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

Together. By one rather concise word, we can sum up the concept of building a new world, as a couple. In this Master's thesis, the relationship building processes and maintenance from the perspective of intercultural couples are studied. More precisely, the focus lies within phenomenon called third culture building, brought forth by a German scholar Fred Casmir. In today's world, as Casmir (1997) already stated in the 90s, daily interactions with individuals from other countries and other cultures are becoming the norm rather the exception. Since the days of this assertion, we have seen the forces of globalization only becoming stronger. It is thus clear that the range of studies also need to bring attention to the changing aspects of (intercultural) communication. The main theoretical support in this study comes from Casmir's concept of third culture building. The research ground on the whole has been somewhat limited up to this point in this field, as many studies focus on finding how strangers adapt or adjust to new cultures rather than looking at the interactions between so-called cultural strangers (Lee, 2006). In this paper we take a closer look on those *cultural strangers* and the creation of *romantic* relationships between them.

Couples, who do not share a similar cultural background, are called intercultural couples in this study. According to Coole (2011) in her dissertation, there have not been many significant findings in the research on actual communication in intercultural relationships. As these couples learn about each other and their cultures, they eventually generally start forming their own, recreated reality known as the third culture. *Third culture building*, paradigm constructed by Casmir, may be seen as a naturally occurring phenomenon that happens by default in certain circumstances. Casmir himself said it is important to focus scholarly studies on "what takes place or took place in third-cultures

which have been successfully built by two people who needed them to survive" (Casmir, 1997, p. 104). In order to strengthen any tool for a positive outcome, one must invest and investigate in the intercultural relationships negative sides as well, not only the positive outcomes and perhaps taken-for-granted effects such as the building of a unique third culture. Other researches seem to have taken for granted that the third culture building has happened. What happens, if it does *not* occur? What kinds of outcomes will it have on a relationship, if the couple does not manage to form a shared culture without forcing it? A third culture is achieved through dialogue between both participants (Hopson, Hart, & Bell, 2012). It is therefore suitable also to consider what kinds of impacts will the lack of it and/or conflicts have on the future of the relationship. In this thesis the presumption is not that the third culture building begins effortlessly along with the new relationship.

Forming a relationship between people who come from different cultural backgrounds reaches a new dimension. It has become far more probable, attainable and easier than in the past. In the 21st century, along with the waves of globalization sweeping across globe, more people travel almost routinely on a quest for better income (i.e. professional migration), educational reasons or simply for a change of scenery. There are new emerging trends, means of communication and transportation, thus we need to continue working to get familiar with the world that is continuously changing due to globalization. Globalization could also be conceptualized as a historically unique condition for international interaction, which in return could be defined by growing interconnection of the world with new technologies (Belay, 1997). Migrants, however, do not necessarily relocate only in the hope of business opportunities. There are reasons outside the employment factor, such as education. "As a response to globalization, internationalization is one of the most important and fast-growing driving forces for higher education in the

new country", and oftentimes the number of international students is the main indicator of success (Zhang & Wildemeersch, 2015). Around the world there are numerous associations helping students to relocate, which may also work as a driving force to change their lives. The Erasmus student exchange programme is said to be world's most successful student mobility programme and the increasing number of participants support the statement, and it is also hypothesized to play an important socio-economic role (Erasmus Facts, Figures & Trends The European Union Support For Student And Staff Exchanges And University Cooperation In 2013-2014; González, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011). Due to its increased popularity over the years but lack of research material of more inspiring nature, Erasmus students are the focus group for this study.

In 2017, it has been 30 years since the first embark on Erasmus exchange, when students from 11 countries spent a study period abroad and took part on a very social experience (Erasmus Facts, Figures & Trends The European Union Support For Student And Staff Exchanges And University Cooperation In 2013-2014). Yet scholars often have looked at the subject from individuals' viewpoint, such as how the Erasmus exchange is in relation to cross-cultural shared experiences and identity (Braşoveanu, 2010) and what the "Erasmus Effect" does to European identity (Mitchell, 2015). Previous research has generally concentrated on the students' daily lives, and even there the existing literature is rather limited (Braşoveanu, 2010). More studies have emerged from a larger, intercultural and international perspective, such as Zhao and Wildemeersch's (2008) study on hosting foreign students in European universities, which underlines the importance internationalization and interculturalization as driving forces in the development of higher education. Majority of Erasmus students relocate in the hopes of meeting new people (The Erasmus Impact Study, 2016). However, the research scene remains insufficient regarding romantic relationships, the focal point lingering on the eco-

nomical and personal/individual levels. In academia, as Papatsiba (2006) contends, the literature around the programme "is an open secret that the main bulk of what has been written is relatively uninspiring" (p. 101). To answer her call, in this study the couples that met during their Erasmus exchange are examined.

There seems to be a void in literature regarding at least these two factors: the Erasmus exchange and interpersonal/intercultural relationships achieved through it. Countless couples worldwide have started out as such, but so far the subject has been somewhat ignored by scholars. It is imperative to understand the importance of such couples: they hold a unique position in the changing world, where after 30 years of rather liberal cultural exchange, countries are now starting to close borders and the general atmosphere inclines that individuals are starting to be more scared of differences or their neighbours. Intercultural couples, such as Erasmus couples, have a significant place to help fight against ethnocentrism and teach how to co-exist with people from other nationalities. As generally in a couple, the implications of a romantic relationship go further than the simple dyad (i.e. both members of the relationship). The cultural exchange spreads further to their extended, respective families and thus it may boost positive cultural encounters, as the families will be encountered with another culture more frequently. It is therefore a necessity to analyse such group of people to understand their way of functioning, as it has not been done before.

Regarding the formation of romantic relationships, it is reported that Erasmus students are more prone to find themselves a transnational partner (Erasmus Impact Study confirms EU student exchange scheme boosts employability and job mobility, 2014). Furthermore, a study by the European Commission (2016) showed, that over 90% of all students evaluated the opportunity to meet new people as one of the five most common reasons for participation in the programme. This shows that the students have a

strong desire to take part in an international experience to gain knowledge of individuals from other cultures other than their own respective ones. Former Erasmus students are reported to have increased chance of having intercultural relationships by 20% compared to those who stay in their own respective countries, and in fact 27% of the students meet their long-term partner during their exchange in another country (Erasmus Impact Study confirms EU student exchange scheme boosts employability and job mobility, 2014). Erasmus exchange period marks an important part of the students' lives, as they explore new cultures abroad independently and may even make decision that change their entire future. Yet the field of intercultural communication research remains deficient regarding the lives and births of "Erasmus couples".

This thesis researches the importance of conflict, whether individuals actively acknowledge its presence or not. First we take a general look into the intercultural relationships and study the application of Casmir's third culture theorem among the intercultural couples. Next conflicts and conflict research will be presented to give more understanding prior to the discussion on the results findings, which will conclude this thesis. As I will combine two concepts (third culture building as a theory and conflicts as a phenomenon) and a new generation (so-called the Erasmus generation) that have not been merged, I will thus be challenging the old ways and contexts of the theory use. Furthermore, the course of time since the beginning of Erasmus until today is an important remark to note. People's attitudes and perceptions have changed drastically over the past three decades of Erasmus exchange. This study may also bring new waves to the existing research conducted in the Erasmus exchange framework. Finally, as there are around one million so-called Erasmus babies born since 1987, it is vital for us to know more of this powerful phenomenon of "Erasmus-love" (Erasmus Impact Study confirms EU student exchange scheme boosts employability and job mobility, 2014).

2 INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THIRD CULTURE BUILDING

In the 21st century, the chances of bumping into a stranger who does not share the same cultural heritage are high. The total number of international migrants has grown at a rate faster than the world's population, adding up to 244 million in 2015 worldwide (Population Facts Trends In International Migration, 2015). The recognition of them as integral and essential feature of the modern lifestyle and increasingly integrated growing economy has indeed emerged in recent years. Yet it has not seen a sufficient investment in developing or "strengthening the tools needed to realize the positive potential of migration while minimizing potential negative consequences in a holistic, balanced and comprehensive way" (World migration report 2010, 2010, p. 31).

As more people move, the odds of finding not only great stories to tell but also a significant other of different origin are equally on the rise. There could be as many reasons for finding a potential partner from other country, as there are intercultural relationships in the world. According to Coole (2011), "barriers such as geographic or social constraints may enhance fascination, as do novelty and unfamiliarity" (p. 21-22). To Coole (2011), culture plays a significant role on a quest of finding "that special someone": who one is attracted to, when and where to date them, how to pursue a potential candidate, and how does one resolve problems. In intercultural relationships, there is generally more than one language involved. The utilization of a third language may also be seen as a path towards a harmonious problem solving: as the two dyads use a language that is not their native language, it can alternate the positioning of the dispute. "I felt we both had more leeway and we were both more accepting of each other because we were foreigners. It's very difficult to fight constructively in a foreign language,

especially when you have different fluency levels" (participant#7). In short, culture's role in relationship building is indeed omnipresent, yet its effects on the relational processes depend on the individuals.

Granted, the International Organisation for Migration, or IOM in short, may explain the behaviour and outcomes of global migrants in general, but they seem to have more focus on the economic aspect. One must comprehend the bigger picture and the subsections of the international migration phenomenon on an individual level as well. Agreeing with Hegelson and Kim (2002), "we live in a global reality that is not uniform, we have to know more about the various ways in which people feel, think, and act" (p. 8), which is why there is always need for new research in such changing world. It may be beneficial for positive outcomes as well – for mutual harmony, and to know how to avoid the "pits and fallouts" brought forth by the unfamiliar situations.

2.1 Intercultural relationship maintenance, development and research

Intercultural couples, like all couples, face challenges. However, the confrontations and tests they have to endure are in some ways unique to others in "conventional", monocultural relationships. The existence of conflicts is both essential and a normal part of a family life - each relationship faces a range of them whether they are inter- or monocultural. However, solving the complex situations vary drastically, especially in cases where the two parties come from different cultural backgrounds and are possibly separated by a very long distance. Tili and Barker (2015) agreed, "the intersection of intercultural communication, marriage communication, and conflict communication remains to be researched and theorized, as this area of communication has been largely ignored by communication scholars" (p. 189-190). What the current world now needs is that the

theoretical models are tested in the real-world settings of yesterday and today (Casmir, 1993). When Casmir started developing his theoretical framework in the late 70s, it was merely the early days for the Erasmus exchange network and numerically there were only few Erasmus couples. However, the time has passed but these two concepts have not been combined earlier. How the relationships are created is of great importance regarding their futures. Particularly intercultural couples' relationship building and negotiation towards a harmonious life e.g. the periods of long distance may have a significant effect on their well-being, and they need more attention in the field of research.

There are four broad types of maintenance strategies (time together, openness, social support, and avoidance) that repeatedly emerge across relationship maintenance studies (Lee, 2006; Dainton, Zelley, & Langan, 2002). Lee (2006) discovered seven themes from her study on intercultural friendships that echoed and complemented the above-mentioned strategies. Though her study focused on friendships contrary to this study on romantic bonds, I argue that they share many similarities concerning the main principles. Naturally a romantic relationship can be a result of a friendship, thus a linkage could be identified between the two relationship types. The discovered themes of (1) positivities/providing assistance; (2) rituals, activities, rules, and roles; (3) self-disclosure; (4) networking and (6) emphasizing similarities and exploring differences matched with Dainton, Zelley, and Langan's (2002) literature review. The remainder three strategies of (5) exploring cultures and languages; (7) conflict/conflict management; and partly (6) of similarities and differences found in the study have not been discussed in previous relationship research (Lee, 2006). Certainly there are indeed differences between romantic and non-romantic relationships, yet the maintenance strategies that Lee (2006) utilized in her friendship-study could be equally seen as a useful tool in the analysis of romantic relationships.

The growing number of intercultural romantic relationship research has indeed been covering more varying issues, yet unfortunately the approach in the previous literature has been from a problem perspective, as opposed to a more positive stance and the *understanding* of how the couple manage their differences (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). According to researchers however, there is an emerging trend to approach the topic by focusing on the relational processes that make the relationships successful (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013), and here is also where my contribution will take place. Earlier studies have primarily been conducted from a rather narrow viewpoint, such as with black-white couples or from a Chinese-Western angle, as the number of the latter is very high (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013; Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver, & Liu, 2015). The focus group of this study, Erasmus students, seem to have been somewhat neglected in the field of research. The aim is to uncover the ways in which couples manage conflicts and negotiate their way into a brighter future together: in short, to understand how they have either succeeded or failed in the process.

Scholars have also studied the subject from a non-racial perspective. Baltas and Steptoe (2000), for instance, studied the psychological well-being among Turkish-British married couples, and confirmed their hypothesis that individuals' differences in psychological well-being is linked to perceptions of marital conflicts due to cultural differences. Horowitz (1999) uncovered how interfaith couples, in which one partner is Jewish, experience Christmas and Hanukah, finding out that negotiation was a key factor in working out conflicts. Her findings are much supported by the framework of the third-culture building, although she did not the aspect include in her analysis: "rather than attempting to create replicas of their own childhood holiday memories, they developed their own unique holiday plans and rituals" (Horowitz, 1999, p. 11). Joanides, Mayhew, and Mamalakis (2002) in turn, examined how specific cultural characteristics

(e.g. individual, family, marital, extended family, faith) may affect couples, and their results suggested that the couples who reflect their own religious background in negative terms, were more likely to suffer from marital and family dissatisfaction. Seshadri and Knudson-Martin (2013) conducted a research on how couples managed their interracial and intercultural differences, pointing four areas of particular interest that arose from their work. The couples were discovered to frame differences in a positive way with discussions, having skills in emotional maintenance by supporting each other around racial and cultural differences, positioning themselves with family and societal contexts even in the face of disapproval, but perhaps most importantly, they created a "we" (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). The "we" refers to a coherent concept the dyads produced together – the scholars saw this an important factor helping the couple establishing their common ground, finding how to work together and to focus on their commitment (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). As some romantic relationships are built on friendship, the individuals may already have a large knowledge of the other. This can work in advantage for the two that would have otherwise been of two complete strangers. Hitherto, certain parts of research among intercultural couples (e.g. interfaith, interracial and so forth) seem to miss the connection between the creations of the unity – of the "we" of a couple. However, the process towards a strong "us" feeling is not simple: the study conducted for this thesis showed that the "building the we was easy but keeping it was a challenge" (participant#6). Bearing the concept of "us" in mind, we will move to the theoretical ground that is used in this study and that support this thesis.

2.1 Third culture building as a theory

We will now examine the formation of one major theoretical contribution to communication studies and vital for this thesis – the third culture building framework by Fred Casmir, which will be later on in this thesis referred to as *TCB*.

As an emerging German scholar, Fred Casmir grew tired of what he considered as substantial shortcomings of the intercultural communication models of the time. He started questioning the adequacy of conventional, both traditional and modern, approaches to the study of intercultural communication, which led to the creation of his framework of third culture building (Hopson, Hart, & Bell 2012; Casrnir, 1999).

The birth of the theory was a result of two major issues that Casmir identified. First, he believed that there were too many theories concentrating on generating and testing cultural comparisons with the goal of creating a complete catalogue of cultural norms and behaviours. Casmir reasoned that such catalogues would inevitably lead to broader and inaccurate generalizations, attempting to summarize findings under headings, which oftentimes are less cultural and more political or social (talk of "Germans", "Americans" etc.). Instead his framework would work as an exit route, freeing individuals from their ethnocentric bias (Lee, 2007). Moreover, Casmir found that the comparison approach led the studies to be conducted as an artefact of culture-comparisons and –contrasts carried out by social scientists. By cataloguing the findings, the results would not be able to be nuanced enough to understand the myriad types of intercultural communication situations. As individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact and produce or create a communicative event, such studies could not explain the actual communication processes involved. In his opinion, by the 60s none of the studies conducted had led to any deeper understanding of why and how humans build relationships

in real life, which goes further than their supposedly constraining cultural repertoires. Casmir critiqued this approach, because it did not reach out to the real situations, instead remained in the realm of hypothetical framework (Hopson, Hart, & Bell 2012; Casrnir, 1999). "Interculturalists", as Broome (1991, p. 243) appoints the scholars, "often use the phrase "third culture" to describe the outcome of a long-term relationship, such as marriage or deep friendship, between individuals from different societies".

Primary qualities

Casmir's attempt with the theory was to evolve a communication-centred paradigm, focusing on identifying co-built cultures and an understanding of how they work (Casrnir, 1999; Casmir, 1993). By *third-culture*, he referred to "the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two different cultures can function in a way beneficial to all involved" (Casrnir, 1999, p. 92). By creating a whole new "platform" in a new relationship, the base setting is more equal to both parties as the couple negotiate their way towards a mutual understanding, or "us" or "we" as it is referred to in this study.

Hopson, Hart, and Bell (2012) drew attention to eight key qualities of third culture building. To begin with, TCB seeks to move forward together and build new definitions and realities, as opposed to trying to fit the other individual and/or their approaches into a priori categories. This will, also logically speaking, result in something new that has not existed before. *Secondly*, the idea of "togetherness" is crucial: TCB helps the individuals to work together, interpret one's ways of communication and understand them better, but it also helps making sense of the other person, and finally, to establish common grounds. *Thirdly*, the deep roots of TCB lies in an egalitarian approach: the ideals of fairness and democracy are vital, as both participants are equal and both of their needs are taken into account, not giving greater priority over another. Lee (2007)

added, that from the third culture perspective, any behaviour where one culture dominates the other is not tolerated – "intercultural communication does not happen just by wearing other people's shoes, it is even more than cultural intersection (similarity)" (p. 254). The question of cultural equality is problematic, however. Among intercultural couples, there is more than one existing culture, which means that the couple need to negotiate their way into harmonious living, more than two individuals from the same cultural background. Naturally each culture include numerous varying traits, such as behaviour, traditions, values, language, and so forth, therefore true impartiality and equilibrium are not that straightforward to establish. Thus the "tolerance", as Lee (2007) proclaimed, may indeed be very difficult to attain. *Fourth*, knowledge plays an important role as well. One must have a certain amount of self-knowledge and/or – discovery, but that alone does not suffice. One should also have knowledge of one's communication partner. *Fifth* point brought by Hopson, Hart, and Bell (2012) is that TCB is always both conscious and deliberate, as they imply mutual effort of both parties involved in the process. TCB cannot be the outcome, if it is done passively, nor will it happen by mere chance. "One party cannot create a third culture. Instead, all participants share in its creation" (p. 793). *Sixth* point is in direct contrast to other culture defining theories – TCB is based in proactive action. To the authors, such other theories describe culture as an overriding force that makes us act in certain ways. Culture, however, is indeed ubiquitous, but it does not indubitably predestine our behaviour any particular way. "Rather, we have the power and the ability to reason and modify cultural behaviors" (Hopson, Hart, & Bell, 2012, p. 793). *Seventh*, the framework has a set goal to see all manners of producing mutually beneficial results – to put in other words; it imagines possibilities for positive outcomes. Though TCB does not directly advocate any particular outcomes, this is an interesting point to note in relation to this thesis,

where the focus lies in the negative aspects as well. The results of TCB should be relatively durable, if the process starts to evolve, however. *Finally*, TCB takes time. The slow and deliberate reflection is necessary to reach the ideal intercultural harmony. One cannot have an express ticket to the outcome; TCB is not a quick fix for any situation or relationship. As long as the intercultural bond continues to strengthen and evolve, so does the process of TCB alongside with it. Although, Casmir (1993, p. 417) later on added himself, "I left more comfortable with the less permanent-sounding term *third realm* because I saw some of these interactional processes as short-term events". He still stressed the importance of long-term timeframe, as the actual culture formation was to be achieved by a significant number of people for their mutual benefit (Casmir, 1993).

The individuals' third culture is therefore characterized by their own unique values and norms, those of which quite possibly did not exist prior to the dyadic relationship (Broome, 1991). These one-of-a-kind third cultures are new and different, in which the participants are able to operate (Lee, 2006), which inevitably makes them unique and nearly impossible to reproduce. They are not only able to create their own set of rules, norms, and traditions, but also even their own language. This is naturally highly couple-depended, as they generally choose what to combine or include according to their best abilities and for the best purposes of the couple. The formation or "selection" of languages may happen consciously or unconsciously. To highlight the full TCB process in general, Casmir and Asuncion-Lande (1989, p. 294) list four fundamental assumptions of the third-culture building paradigm as follows:

"(1) It is open-ended. Not only is it capable of absorbing additional elements, but it also has the potential for instant growth.

(2) It is expansive. It can enlarge its contextual boundaries to include individual, organizational, institutional, and mediated communication situations.

(3) It is responsive to new demands emerging from constant adjustments and re-adjustments in order to realign the participants' own perceptions and expectations of each other and of the situation.

(4) It is future-oriented in that a third-culture marks the beginning instead of the end point of a joint venture that may continue over time. This mood establishes attitudes toward the current situation as the start for increased communication".

Casmir (1993) highlights the importance of active work in the *building* of a relationship; the partners ought to bypass the utilization of mere interpersonal communication techniques that are restricted by predetermined rules, standards, and values in the expectation of predetermined results. In short, the couples need to be involved in an active, coordinated, and mutually beneficial proceeding of relationship building (Casmir, 1993). The utilization of his theory in studies of intercultural couples is only suitable – for example they have their different backgrounds, traditions, and languages to mix together in a new dimension. Such couples have more subjects to agree on, and they need to be more actively engaged in the process of getting to know one another. Casmir's theoretical framework is used as a ground understanding, a direction from where the intercultural couples are possibly coming from. However, we cannot assert that this is undoubtedly the case in every relationship, which is why we look more into the process of building mutual understanding – the importance of building the "us" as Casmir suggests.

As time is one of the most important aspects in the creation of the third culture, it affects the outcome significantly. The time spent physically together is generally very limited among intercultural couples that met during their Erasmus exchange. The exchange periods do not last for a lifetime, thus the couples are forced to face being far from each other, right in the rather early days of their relationship. Additionally, it is

possible that the dyads initially feel stronger sense of community towards the Erasmus students' "society" than to the other dyad. Many relationships, as witnessed from this study as well, have indeed emerged from a friendship. The Erasmus program is said to stimulate a large number of interactive networks of international students, "who share more than a sense of belonging to the same community, rather a common a cross-cultural experience of socialization that gives birth to cosmopolitan identities and associated values" (Braşoveanu, 2010, p. 99). This may also bring about more things to agree on within the couple, as they are a part of a larger community that is very powerful and simultaneously characterizes their individual and collective identities (Braşoveanu, 2010).

Moreover, there is always a chance that the couples' mutual negotiations are left unfinished, when the times comes for returning to their own respective countries. This is rather difficult to assert with full certainty, as there exists no exact timeframe during which the third culture is built. Creating any relationship takes time, but there is a need for knowledge on how such couples manage to keep their relationship alive, regardless of the distance, as they are (or were) still building their own world, i.e. the third culture. It is only throughout the time-consuming process of third culture building where the ends, the values and the interactional rules eventually emerge - which incidentally is a phenomenon very similar to any gradual development of culture (Casmir, 1993). The long distance that separates the couple could either be the deal breaker, or the reason the fight even stronger for their relationship. It solely depends on the nature of the dyads whether they are willing to, capable to, or motivated enough to work through the possible problems that emerge during the time of being apart. In the case of Erasmus love, the departure may arrive too prematurely - in most cases only few months after the initiation of the relationship. The ways to continue the creation of the third culture will face

a transformation, as the contact cannot be done physically any more. Long-distance relationship puts the relationship to a new dimension and changes the communication styles, e.g. the introduction of Skype as a part of daily routines seems to be a popular solution for the continuum of building the relational dialectics. “Through Skype conversations you really build a mutual understanding for the other person, you have to learn to read the other person only through the screen” (participant#9). In short, the third culture does not disappear once the distance intervenes - ideally it changes its form and adjusts along the life situation of the couple. The research participants also identified this transition and it will be more explained in the results section.

2.2 Applications, further development, and problems of the theory

Even though scholars have shared the very same concept of the third culture over the years, they have not used the exact same term in their studies (Lee, 2006). This shows the diversity of the third culture paradigm’s nature, as it is flexible enough to reach more than one research goal. Its versatile characteristics also reflect the time when the previous studies have been conducted, and consequently there is a possibility that the theory will continue to evolve in the future. To name a few significant scholars from the past, Stewart (1983) illuminated the third culture perspective by adopting Gadamer’s “fusion of horizon” concept. He explains “when one understands another, one does not disregard oneself in order to place oneself in the place of the other” (1983, p. 387). Lee (2003) points out that the position of synthesis beyond thesis and antithesis may be an equivalent dimension of the third culture phenomenon. Broome’s (1991) thoughts on relational empathy are somewhat similar to the interpretation of “fusion of horizon”. He perceives the process of building shared meaning as a way to teach intercultural com-

munication, from a relational point of view (Broome, 1991). A similar third culture framework is also echoed in Broome's study, as he (1991) refers his foci of relational empathy de-emphasizing similarity and instead concentrating on the development of a third culture between the communicators, "thus providing a basis for building shared meanings in the intercultural situation" (1991, p. 235). Bochner, in return, speaks of "Mediating man" in his studies, nonetheless he disregards to pay sufficient amount of attention to process and development over the time (Casmir, 1993). Useem, Donohue, and Useem (1986) elaborated the role of the "middle man" and their crucial role in bridging differences between societies and cultures stating that the men were tiny yet vital connection linking the Western and non-Western world. In their time in the late 80s, individuals' possibilities of any global movement or intercultural interaction in general were far less accessible than those of the individuals of the 21st century. This can also be seen from the studies of the time, and third culture framework was generally discussed only from an American viewpoint. "Instead of creating social walls between Americans and nationals, the established American community serves as the foremost means for gaining access to the nationals of the society whose interest and occupational activities converge with the Americans – in short, to the national members of the third culture" (Useem, Donohue, & Useem, 1986, p. 17). Their hypotheses do include similar features, such as the "framework of mutual expectations", and they elaborate how "the patterns of the third culture may offer the illusion of homogeneity which in fact does not prevail" (p. 17). Communication scholars in the last few decades also seem to have abandoned the idea of using a gender in the frameworks; there is less talk of "men in the middle" or "mediating men". Instead, they rephrased and stabilized the academic terms into more equal and broad concepts, such as *the third culture.* All in all, the paradigm

has been developed to a much broader scope than the initial and rather narrow American concept, and will continue to evolve over the time in the ever-changing world.

As third culture in essence is the product or the result of intercultural interaction, and goes further than merely combining the available parts, those of which may have been constrained by the earlier settings – successful intercultural communication cannot thus only be a compromise or an overlap model (Casmir & Asuncion-Lande, 1989). Previous studies draw a line to Lee's (2007) observations of how in intercultural relationships any cultural dominance ought not to be tolerated. Scholars Casmir and Asuncion-Lande (1989) clarify Lee's insight, that efforts must be done to provide the possibility for the third culture creation, that "can create new insights, new goals, new techniques, and new roles, precisely because diversity of experience requires something new without domination by any one of the partners contributing to the process" (p. 289). All in all, what all these approaches seem to have in common is that the goal of any intercultural communication is not to reproduce something, but rather to produce something new among the communicators – in other words build a third culture. Indeed, one of Casmir's observations was that much of the previous significant literature inadequately considers the *relationship* aspect, in particular from the vantage point of their development over the time and the possibility of creation of the third culture (Casmir, 1993). It is therefore typical for such approaches to see the building of relationships as an inevitable outcome of certain interpersonal relations, which could be acquired by anyone (Casmir, 1993).

Over time, the third culture paradigm has yielded a large amount of studies. As the initial setting of the theoretical framework is rather versatile, naturally so are the results in the field of academic research. The theory can be applied in many different

types of studies among intercultural individuals, and in the following chapters we will look more in detail into the most common examples of its application.

A considerable body of recent research has looked at so-called *third culture kids*. The term generally refers to children who travel with their expatriate parents to another country, and spend significant periods of time in their growing years in cultures other than their native ones (Bonebright, 2010). The phenomenon has been studied from a variety of viewpoints. For example, Selmer and Lauring (2014) looked at the adjustment of adult third culture kids versus adult monoculture kids. The authors argued that the early experiences of third-culture kids might lead to having increased multicultural abilities (Selmer & Lauring, 2014). Other studies have focused on grown-up third culture kids, for example taking a professional point of view. In Bonebright's (2010) research for instance, once a third culture kid enters academic or professional life, they may present problems for human resource professionals as they do not identify clearly to any one culture. From a broader perspective, the "rootlessness" may lead to misunderstandings and confusing situations once faced with intercultural interactions. Rudd and Lawson (2010) added that once individuals interact with people in (or from) other countries as part of their business activities, they develop experiential-based knowledge, resulting in the creation of a third culture. The authors explain how individuals' cultural responses to different situations "do not strictly reflect his/her own culture, nor do they reflect any one other culture" (2010, p. 135). Rather, they tend to be a combination of cultural traits and behaviours individuals pick up through exposure to other cultures (Rudd & Lawson, 2010).

From studying third culture kids and their professional relationships, research has also focused on the extended third culture outside the family and work framework – the "new" culture one creates with another by forming a *friendship*. Regardless the fact

that intercultural friendships have been studied since the late 1970s, research foci has generally been on intracultural relationships and oftentimes adopted a noncomparative perspective (Lee, 2006). Lee's (2006) study on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences in intercultural friendships and how they form shared meanings showed that the ways in which the research participants defined a close friendship were in fact very similar across cultures. His findings were contradictory to previous research suggestions. It is thus surprising how little intercultural communication scholars have paid attention to this branch of third culture; for example many romantic relations emerge from friendships, which is why the scarce research on the subject seems inadequate. The range and popularity of third culture research on non-romantic relationships appear to be imbalanced with romantic relationship research, yet both ought to be of equal importance, given the similar starting setting.

In the modern technological world, studies of interpersonal and intercultural relationships have followed the rest of the world as well, and have reached a virtual dimension. In essence, they have shifted the relationship creation into a non-physical setting. As communication is a vital part of any relationship, the developments have enabled new forms for global relationships. "Given the proliferation of social media, virtual cosmopolitanism and the construction of virtual third cultures provide an intriguing new area of research", assert McEvan and Sobre-Denton (2011, p. 252). Methods of communication are by far more developed than to what they used to be, and this radical restructuring has brought people around the world closer to one another. The communication revolution of the last century alongside with diminished costs to communicate has undermined the role of space as a barrier for international interactions, which inherently means that individuals do no longer need physical contact to create a third culture, owing to the existence of social media (Belay, 1997; McEvan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). In-

tercultural couples that for example do not live in the same country, benefit from new digital means of communication, as they are able to stay more in touch and continue the creation of their joint culture. Naturally as the means of communication are facilitated, more research will be needed and subsequently done in the future. At least the digital communication factor ought to be included in studies of international and intercultural communication, as it obviously forms a large part of the every-day communication in these relationships. In the case of the study participants in this research for example, this aspect was discovered very important, as each couple was forced to go through an extensive period of long-distance relationship. In practice this meant that the daily communication was done via some online platform. These so-called *virtual third cultures* surpass corporeal boundaries, however they have deeper outcomes than if one would merely browse the Internet learning about other cultures (McEvan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). For the culture to be created, a strong sense of community within the group is needed, which could be achieved via active engagement with the group's other virtual cosmopolitans by social support, shared behaviours, and the objective of intercultural empathy and mindfulness (McEvan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). Basically what it means is that individuals are able to start building mutual understanding (third culture), without the need of physically being close to each other. Instead of talking to each other face to face, the communication takes place over social media networks (e.g. Facebook) or video calls (e.g. Skype). Braşoveanu (2010) asserts in her study on Erasmus students that social networks, such as Facebook, are essential to the Erasmus spirit, as they are easily at the individuals' disposal for maintaining contact and being always up to date, yet it needs further investigation. As more and more people have access to the Internet and to the large range of communication networks, broader knowledge of building the third culture over social media is imperative, as it certainly differs from the "conventional"

setting. This is also linked to the flexible nature of the Erasmus couples, as many reported to have faced to communicate via virtual means instead of physical contact.

Research examining the complex variations of intercultural relationships in the *romantic* sense has reached an immense popularity. Nonetheless the fact that a considerable amount of research on interracial relationships has been done in the USA, in general there are five themes under a recent focus of attention in regards to studies in intercultural relationships: "the relationships' initiation, motivation, satisfaction, relational focus, and adaptation" (Coole, 2011, p. 25). The scholars have seemed to be particularly interested in researching the couples from Chinese-Western point of view, as many researches have been done on the subject. For example Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver, and Liu (2015) studied the relationship standards and satisfaction in intercultural Chinese-Western couples in Australia, discovering that their findings on partner selection and convergence on relationship standards are important subjects for future research. Lee (2006) in return, studied the construction of relational identity in intercultural friendships, discovering multiple themes in understanding the behaviours contributing to the building of their relational identity. Coole's (2011) dissertation study on relational dialectics in intercultural couples' relationships revealed that continuous negotiations seem to constitute their lives, both internally and externally, and they entail repetitive decision-making and compromising about nearly everything (e.g. holidays, friends, nonverbal communication issues, religion, traditions, celebrations, children's education, gender issues). Studies support that by having an open communication, constructive conflict communication, and intercultural competence in intercultural marriages, they work as strategies for resolving intercultural conflicts (Tili & Barker, 2015). Conflicts are a naturally occurring event in any human relationships, and incidentally they are also of great

importance what it comes to relationship negotiations, which is why we will move over to observing this part more in depth in the next chapter.

3 UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT IN INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

Conflict, as previously stated, is a key concept in this research and we will look at this part more in detail in this chapter, both in general and in relation to intercultural romantic relationships. In this study, two individuals that have been in a couple for minimum of two years constitute a couple. As they have spent more time together, they have had the time to start forming their own methods of interpersonal communication, which may also include disruptions and handling problematic situations. This chapter outlines the general theoretical background, and shows its significance during the third culture building process.

There are various definitions for the word "conflict" in multiple contexts, but this thesis concentrates specifically on interpersonal conflicts. According to Canary, Cupach, and Messman (1995), "conflict refers to discrete, isolated disagreements as well as chronic relational problems" (p. 103), to which individuals tend to respond or manage the situation (Oommen, 2014). When interpersonal conflict is managed completely, it may bring positive changes in a relationship - its presence allows the dyads to reassess the state of their relationship by discussing their desires, needs, fears, and hopes (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Contrariwise, once the interpersonal conflicts are managed incompletely or mindlessly, the outcomes are inherently detrimental for the physical, psychological, emotional, and mental wellbeing (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). It is therefore up to the couple to figure out how to manage these complicated situations, and how much impact they eventually have on the couples' wellbeing. In different situations and interests of research focus, the researchers seem to have looked the topic from their angles and thus creating variance to the field.

In intercultural relationships, there are multiple factors that the communicators need to consider more in depth. Culture has an impact on both perception and management of conflict, it plays a significant role in the constitution of emotion and personal psychological organizations, and individuals' experience of culture is much more complex than merely focusing on race, ethnicity or religion (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005; Tili & Barker, 2015).

Conflict situations in intercultural marriages are a complex occurrence, which are even further complicated by spouses' different value and face orientations (Tili & Barker, 2015). However, the presence of cultural differences may not always be very obvious, or they can be discovered much later on. Additionally, the individuals are often oblivious to their own cultures' impact on their thoughts, feelings, and actions, and how the negotiations of face differ e.g. in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Matsumoto, & Takai, 2000). This may also result into the dyads' overestimation of their abilities to have an objective and accurate interpretation of their spouses' actions (Tili & Barker, 2015). Intercultural conflicts are found to attribute to individuals' different face orientations, which according to the face negotiation theory, "considers the effect of individual and situational factors on face concerns, which then drives conflict behaviour" (Tili & Barker, 2015; Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007, p. 186). The theory is another classic example of proceeding beyond simple cross-cultural comparisons: in the context of social interaction, the *face* represents individual's claimed sense of positive image, and in terms of self or other concern, locus is on *face concerns*, and *facework* refers to the communicative strategies one applies to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge the others face (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Matsumoto, & Takai, 2000). Large number of research and theories generally do not include the lo-

cus of face, which in fact is important regarding conflicts as both self- and other-concerns are relevant when negotiating solutions for problematic issues (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Matsumoto, & Takai, 2000). Tili and Barker (2015) propose that any intercultural union invites the cultural differences into an intimate confrontation, as "individuals of all cultures will tend to presume that their cultural values are representative of truth and/or the way things ought to be" (p. 228). However, this is the part where the couples need to work on negotiation. As for the intercultural union, there may not be a ready-made pattern of how conflicts are handled, for ideally neither of the dyads' culture is dominant. Conflict management is thus one significant example of how the couple has managed to create a mutual understanding: the ability of solving problems ideally makes one of the cornerstones of the relationship. The success of building the third culture thus also affects the consequences of such complicated situations within the couple.

There are five common conflict management styles, as demonstrated in Figure 1: *integrating* (characterized by high levels of assertiveness and cooperation, and for both self and the other person), *compromising* (moderate levels of assertiveness and cooperation, and for both self and the other person), *obliging* (high level of cooperation, low level of assertiveness, less concern for self, more of the other person), *dominating* (high level of assertiveness and concern for self, low degree on cooperation and the other person), and *avoiding* (low in assertiveness and cooperation, concerns for self and the other person) (Oommen, 2014; Rahim, 1986).

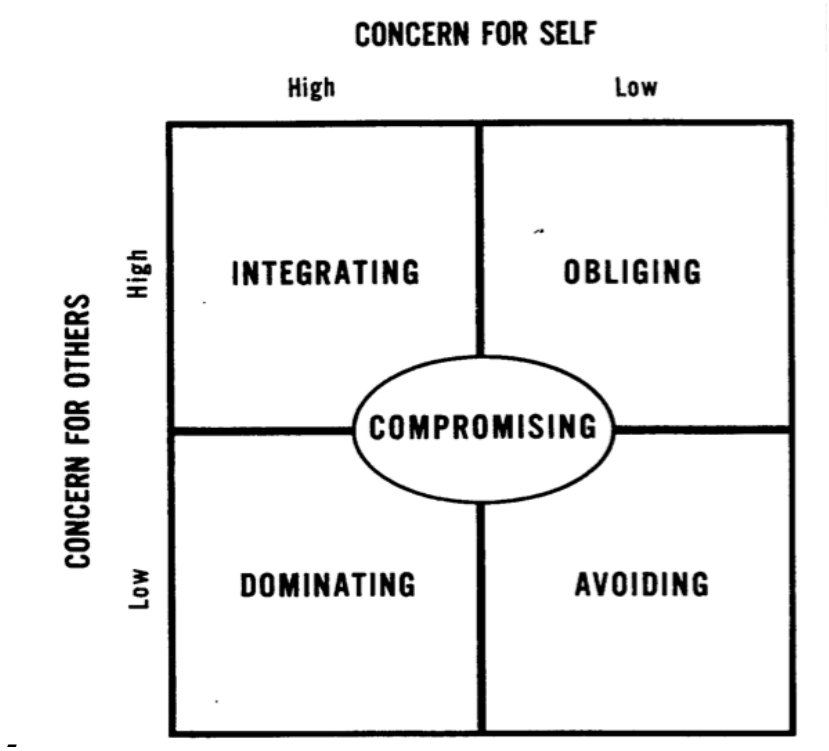

Figure 1: Illustration of the two-dimensional model for styles of handling interpersonal conflicts (Rahim, 1986)

The model in Figure 1 is shaped out of two updates on conflict research. Scholars Blake and Mouton introduced the initial conceptual scheme in 1964 - in their study they classified five modes (styles) for interpersonal conflict handling: forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, and problem solving, and later on their ideology was reinterpreted by Thomas in 1976 (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Followed by further studies, these styles of conflict management were differentiated on two basic dimensions: *concern for self*, and *concern for others*, as showed in figure 1 (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). The first dimension (self) shows the extent to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own concern, whereas the second (others) shows the level a person wants to satisfy the concern of others (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Figure 1 demonstrates the combination of these two dimensions in five specific conflict management styles. However, the illus-

trated dual concern model has received criticism among the communication scholars, for it is not culturally sensitive (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirchbaum, 2007). The framework may be problematic to place in the field of intercultural communication, as it originally studied the patterns of interpersonal conflict. Nevertheless, the basic concept of the dimensions themselves can be used as groundwork in intercultural studies, for they can be further developed by the researched.

In their study in 1979, Rahim and Bonoma elaborated the figure (Figure 1) with an evolved graph (Figure 2), which was earlier presented in Rahim's unpublished manuscript. The updated chart demonstrated the outcomes of the abovementioned interpersonal styles of handling conflict, demonstrating by which methods of conflict management one is most able to gain the best and most productive results.

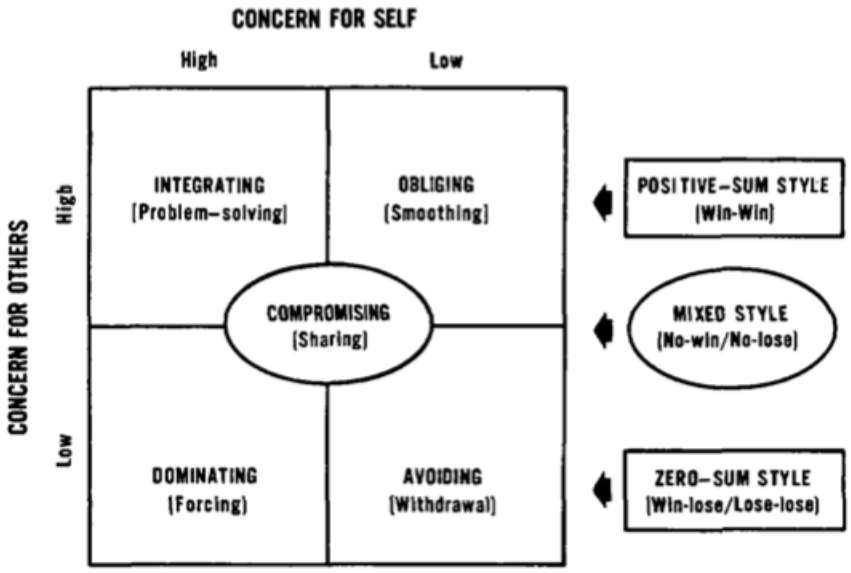

Figure 2: Interpersonal styles of handling conflict (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979)

Conflicts, despite the rather negative connotation of the word, do not always and absolutely mean something bad occurs. In the most important relationships, people do experience conflicts, but it is how they manage them that affect the quality of their relation-

ships, personal development, and risk of interpersonal violence (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Responding to Kim's (2013) call, "we need to move beyond the commonly held view of intercultural conflicts as almost exclusively a negative experience to be avoided or minimized" (p. 655). Even though conflicts do indeed bring tension into a relationship, they invite the partners into a new stage of awareness, adaptation, and identity development; thus conflicts may result in long-term positive consequences (Kim, 2013). Although it is now established that conflict behaviour and relationship development are connected, empirically speaking it is not always clear at what point the arriving conflict represents a symptom of relationship difficulty *versus* when does it contribute to the formation of a relationship (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995).

RQ. 1: How do intercultural Erasmus couples perceive sources of interpersonal conflicts and their role as a part of their relationship development?

Conflicts in interpersonal relationships (either dating or marital) have received enormous scholarly attention and popular interest (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013b). The focus has primarily been in the individuals' relationship satisfaction and relational instability (e.g. breakups and/or divorce rates), and the prototypical studies are based on the problem-solving paradigm (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013b). Among scholars, the frequency of conflicts has also yielded much attention. However, the reported data may elude us, researchers and relational partners, mostly due to the diverse conceptions of what exactly constitutes a conflict (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). There has been a notable shift of focus over the past decades. Until the end of 1990s the scholarly interest lied mostly on comparison between satisfied and unsatisfied couples, whereas lately

research has converted into more in depth with a surge in longitudinal studies with impressive results, such as examining whether conflicts predict changes in relational satisfaction and dissolution (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013b).

3.1 Research in conflicts in the context of intercultural relationships

Studies in the junction of intercultural field and conflicts are complex, as varying explanatory factors exist on multiple levels of intricacy (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013a). Large amount of previous literature on intercultural relationships and how these couples manage their differences have been approached from a problem perspective (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). Studies on interracial /intercultural couples, in turn, have witnessed an emerging trend to approach the issue more a more positive stance, opting to focus on the relational processes that make the relationship successful (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013).

A limited amount of literature that draws directly on the couples' lived experiences exists, but it has prevalently been conducted among Black-White couples (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). According to Stadler (2013) however, the focus is often on the issues that originally lead to the conflict and how they have been resolved, yet virtually inexistent on cultural differences surrounding such disputed issues, people's attitudes toward conflicts and differences in addressing the resolution. In the discussion of intercultural unions, not only the academics but as well the popular media has tended to resolutely keep the focus on race, ethnicity and religion (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). In this study the foci is on the starting circumstances (the short period of Erasmus exchange) and the possible formation of the intercultural couples' third culture, as opposed to focusing solely on one nationality or a religious belief. In most cases among

the Erasmus couples, they are forced to go through a period of long-distance relationship. This study focuses on those crucial moments of how the newly initiated relationship survives though the obstacle of distance, still managing to continue building the third culture.

Lee's (2006) study on understanding the construction of relational identity in intercultural friendships showed that by experiencing conflicts, the respondents were abled to understand each other's interests and personalities better. The ways in which they managed conflicts oftentimes determined how successfully they were to sustain their friendship after the occurred conflict (Lee, 2006). Conflicts turned out to be vital for the friendship: for some respondents the conflicts ended up into rules of their friendships, some felt closer to each other and that they knew more about the other after each conflict (Lee, 2006) In general, the conflict could be the determine point to whether the relationship will last or not (Lee, 2006). Indeed, Lee (2006) studied intercultural friendships, but there are enough similarities between the creation of friendships and romantic relationships to be able to refer to them in this thesis. One begins to create a bond with another individual, and even though the expected result is different, the process is more or less the same, and the conducted studies can be also applied to romantic relationships. Also, once embarking on an Erasmus study period, one forms easily different friend groups, from which the possible romantic relationship may eventually emerge. Based on the study conducted for this thesis, the initial setting for many Erasmus couples was indeed friendship to which they started building their romantic relationship. "We discovered things about each other as friends, without having any additional pressure and this perhaps helped us building a solid and genuine foundation for our relationship to grow on" (participant#1). In any case, the co-construction of a relational identity is the core of an intercultural friendship (Lee, 2006); it certainly applies to intercultural romantic rela-

tionships as well. It is thus logical to move towards the understanding of conflicts in the process of building a relational identity, or also termed, *the third culture* (Lee, 2006).

Regardless of the large volume of conflict research among intercultural couples, a gap can be identified in the research among Erasmus couples. Despite the fact that they fall under the category of intercultural couples, they have not been examined from this viewpoint before. Erasmus couples also demonstrate interesting points and unique turns of TCB, and as conflicts mark a significant field of research, they ought to be studied more than by the past.

3.2 Connecting points between conflicts and third culture building

Many research conducted over the past decades generally seem to focus on the positive traits and outcomes of the third culture phenomenon. In numerous studies, the starting situation seems to be that the two individuals have successfully formed their third culture. Accordingly there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the strategies employed to develop relational identity (also termed "third-culture") within an intercultural friendship (Lee, 2006). Some studies have unearthed the factors and outcomes of *marital* conflicts by the use of therapy (see e.g. Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). It has been confirmed that regardless of the fact that intercultural marriages have increased during the past decades, very few researches have focused on the counselling of intercultural *couples* (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). As one needs to proceed rather far into the relationship to get married, what happens before that?

There are multiple crossroads where the (intercultural in particular) relationship can hit an early end, before "making it official". Key point to understand in intercultural relationships is the question of *time*: the creation of couples' own culture requires time,

and oftentimes the individuals' physical presence is important in its creation. The set-up may not always occur in real life: what happens when there is suddenly a large distance between the dyads, but the "rules" are not clearly established? How do they manage that and still continue the formation of their own culture? These are some of the biggest obstacles for Erasmus couples: a perhaps casually initiated relationship during the short exchange period could turn into something serious, but the means of negotiation are not following quickly enough. Again, the question of time is significant.

For a more profound comprehension of the observable results of intercultural or international processes, one ought to focus on the communication process (Casmir, 1997). These scenarios and other researches seem to have been taken for granted, that the third culture building *has* happened. Ting-Toomey (1991) also suggested, that scholars ought to study how members from varying cultural groups resolve relational paradoxes or dilemmas in different relationship building stages. One must therefore ask: what happens, if *it does not occur*? What kinds of outcomes will it have on a relationship, if the couple do not manage to form their own culture without forcing it? The third culture can only be achieved through interaction and dialogue between the both participants (Casmir & Asuncion-Lande, 1989; Hopson, Hart, & Bell, 2012). What kind of impact will the lack of it have on the future of the relationship?

Communication scholars Tili and Barker (2015) and Lee (2006) noted, that there is a dire need for more in-depth studies examining the processes of third culture building between the dyads in order to widen the knowledge of the nature of third culture building, and also the communication processes contributing to its formation. This thesis accordingly aims to address these issues. A number of trends exist across conflict contexts, consistently findings in one context can be helpful in understanding those in another - unfortunately many of the current conflict research occur in silos with scholars

not citing research from different contexts (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007). In Tili and Barker's (2015) study, key findings suggest that in intercultural marriages the spouses are motivated to undergo acculturative changes, for they enjoy having a chance for not only personal growth, but also for the opportunity of constructing a unique identity as a couple by mixing traits from two different cultures. In short, they form their own culture (i.e. third culture), and the authors point how the studies on couples' attempts to bridge differences and dealing with conflicts still remain as a severely underresearched area (Tili & Barker, 2015). In the creation of an intercultural couple, one starts the process of forming a "new" identity of their "couplehood" – the third culture. As the process begins, so generally begin the negotiations together, towards a unity as a couple, and during that construction of a romantic relationship, conflicts naturally occur. This may be the assumption, but in fact, "the definition of a close relationship in terms of characteristics, such as knowledge of the other, trust, and satisfaction, affects how conflicts are created, construed, and managed" (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995, p. 125). In this study we opt to observe the formation of those two crucial factors in romantic, intercultural relationships: the third culture and conflicts, not assuming that neither of them exist automatically or effortlessly.

RQ2: What impact does the existence or inexistence of conflicts have in the formation of a third culture in intercultural relationships?

4 METHODOLOGY FOR THE RESEARCH

4.1 Aim of the study

An empirical, qualitative research was conducted for this thesis. In this chapter the structure and background for the research are explained in detail. The research questions to guide the study were as follows: (1) How do intercultural Erasmus couples perceive sources of interpersonal conflicts and their role as a part of their relationship development, and (2) What impact does the existence or inexistence of conflicts have in the formation of a third culture in intercultural relationships? The ultimate goal was to achieve honest reflection of the relationship building and conflict communication among Erasmus couples via personal narratives. Both the actual content and verbal choices of the narratives were analysed.

4.2 The European context for research participants

In order to understand the unusual circumstances of finding a partner during such an intriguing period of life, this section goes more in detail of the Erasmus programme itself. The Erasmus programme has been regarded as the world's most successful student mobility programme (Erasmus Facts, Figures & Trends The European Union Support For Student And Staff Exchanges And University Cooperation In 2013-2014, 2015). Due to its increasing popularity over three decades in the strongly changing world, in addition to the large number of Erasmus couples worldwide, the framework was chosen for this study.

For young people, going abroad for studies is a popular and relatively easy solution for an international experience. Young minds relocate rapidly, and in fact most of the international migrants are of working age: in 2015, 72% of the global total was between the ages of 20 and 64 (Population Facts Trends In International Migration, 2015). In this study the interest is on the European territory – as Europe hosts the largest share of working age migrants (Population Facts Trends In International Migration, 2015). There is therefore plenty of space for research in the field and the world changes rapidly. Since the early 2000s, Europe has had the second largest number of global migrants, equalling to 20 million after Asia and their 26 million international migrants (Population Facts Trends In International Migration, 2015). For Royuela (2015), "migration exists as a response of geographic differences in the supply and demand for labour" (p. 474), as he studied migration from ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) to EU with a particular emphasis on urbanisation's role as a pull factor. It may be also one of the attractions of the Erasmus programme for young adults. Migration is indeed an important factor and source for the European lifestyle. In the hypothetical absence of positive net migration, the European population would have declined since the 2000s; however the fact is that Europe was the birthplace for 62 million international migrants, being the second largest globally (Population Facts Trends In International Migration, 2015). With the large cultural variety inside Europe, it offers numerous possibilities for the students.

Even though Europe is often stated to be in crisis, it still remains a strong magnet for its neighbours – in every way (integration, institutions and policies) the EU is said to be the most advanced in the world (Costa & Brack, 2014). There are also ways that facilitate the migration inside the European Union, under which the Erasmus relocations would be listed. Under this agreement, individuals are free to seek employment

or educational opportunities in the EU member states – for these types of migration economics is generally considered the main motivating factor (Guerrina, 2002). Firstly, inter-EU migration was made simpler under the provision of the Maastricht Treaty, which created the European Union. The Treaty states that all EU citizens have a right to freedom of relocation within the EU (Guerrina, 2002), and the changes made into the higher education system in Europe, particularly the introduction of the bachelor's-master's model, has facilitated both European and non-European students' mobility (Zhao & Wildemeersch, 2008). Furthermore, The Schengen Agreement that removes all border control between the member states can be considered as "embodying the concept of Fortress Europe" (Guerrina, 2002, p. 169). More recently, in one of the latest endeavours to develop the higher education system, European countries were engaged in a movement called the Bologna process to harmonize and create a European area of higher education by 2010, to strengthen the European cooperation, and by increasing the attractiveness of European education systems, to provide a response to globalization (Zhao & Wildemeersch, 2008; Papatsiba, 2006). However, on the practical side there seems to be a great deal of uneven changes and reforms along the Bologna Process across Europe, due to the large diversity in European educational institutions' backgrounds (Papatsiba, 2006). She agrees on the pragmatic dilemma: "while there does seem to be some convergence of educational policy at the level of discourse, there appears to be much less convergence in practice" (Papatsiba, 2006, p. 94).

Europe has indeed numerous pull-factors, such as facilitated legislation and the easiness to cross borders. Aside from fostering the European identity, Europe has continuously attempted to further enhance the attraction and competitive position of its higher education as well in other parts of the world (Zhao & Wildemeersch, 2008). More related to the aforementioned European identity, according to Mitchell (2015) the

university student exchange system known worldwide as The Erasmus Programme was partly developed to cultivate European identity among the participants (i.e. students), who complete a short-term period abroad in another European country. On a more international scope, the programme could also be considered as an active attempt to foster good relations among different countries. In the current world that suffers from wars, terrorism, and uncertainty, the Erasmus programme could also even be seen as a nearly carefree way of encouraging individuals for continuous and positive encounters with people from different backgrounds. Consequently, if thought Erasmus exchange the cultural exchange is successful, it may support open-mindness and thus yield into positive effects on a much larger societal level.

The Erasmus Programme was founded in 1987, when 3244 higher education students from 11 countries spent a study period abroad on Erasmus (Erasmus Facts, Figures & Trends The European Union Support For Student And Staff Exchanges And University Cooperation In 2013-2014, 2015). The programme was developed partly to foster European identity among its participants for students sojourning in a foreign country a short period of time, and indeed the vast majority are reported to have felt the mobility experience as an improvement on their European attitude (Mitchell, 2015; The Erasmus Impact Study Regional Analysis, 2016). Since its inception, by the end of academic year of 2013-2014, over 3.3 million students and 470 000 members of staff have moved across the borders, as 34 countries have taken part of the programme and the programme covers not only exchanging students, but academic and faculty staff as well (Erasmus Facts, Figures & Trends The European Union Support For Student And Staff Exchanges And University Cooperation In 2013-2014, 2015). As the popularity has risen exponentially over the decades, it indicates continuing attraction of the programme.

One of the Erasmus Programme's goals is to focus on skills development and to create active citizens. For EU this is vital, as "mobility contributes to combatting youth unemployment, an objective which features prominently in the Europe 2020 strategy for growth and jobs" (Erasmus Facts, Figures & Trends The European Union Support For Student And Staff Exchanges And University Cooperation In 2013-2014, 2015). According to a recent discovery by the European Commission (2016), the Erasmus students gain a significant positive change to their personality traits; the average personal evolvement they achieve in six months through the programme can be seen equivalent to non-Erasmus students' personality change that would have occurred over four years of life.

Thus the Erasmus exchange is not only a study trip in the search of fun stories. At the same time it equips "the Erasmus generation" with social, civic, and intercultural skills and enriches the individuals' personal and professional development. By spending time abroad, one improves their linguistics skills and it promotes greater intercultural awareness: cultural adaption, problem solving, teamwork and critical thinking being some of the best outcomes (Braşoveanu, 2010). According to one research participant couple in this study, "the whole Erasmus experience allowed us to keep an open mind" (participant#7). Living in the host country also helps to get familiar with the local culture, customs and other cultural traits that one might miss if only travelling to the location. However on the "inside", Erasmus students often form a community of their own, as Braşoveanu (2010) discovered in her study among Erasmus students in France. Oftentimes an "us versus them" ideology emerges, the "us" representing the Erasmus student group, thus ruling the "them" (other students, host country citizens etc.) out. These social groups formed during the first period of the semester are mostly intercultural and are in all probability constituted only by the students sharing the same status of "Eras-

mus students" (Braşoveanu, 2010). International students have indeed been criticised for grouping with other students of similar cultural origin or from nations with geographical proximity (Zhao & Wildemeersch, 2008), thus splitting the original group into sub-groups. Whilst being surrounded by numerous new and unfamiliar things such as new language, different food, friends and family, the multicultural students may find solace from each other, as they all more or less seem to be equally alone in the situation. Some of them may be abroad for the very first time, travelling alone for the first time, others spending their first semesters in higher education. However, regardless how the group spirit and mutual shared experiences may generally be seen positive and in the lights of positive outcomes, the phenomenon is not that simple, as the groups are not always formed multinationally.

Nevertheless, the actual impacts of the Erasmus educational mobility cannot be found in the statistical description and, as previously mentioned, merely focuses on the daily lives of the Erasmus students (Braşoveanu, 2010), yet there remains much more to look at. Mitchell (2015) points out, that even though the multidimensional nature of European identity is gaining more recognition, empirical research still mostly continues to operationalize it unidimensionally in practice. The aim of this study is also to demonstrate the longitudinal impacts of such educational exchange: the relationships created during the short period abroad. It is affirmed that these relationships affect the students' entire lives, as it seems that Erasmus initiates long-term relationships (The Erasmus Impact Study Regional Analysis, 2016). In short, the impacts of an "Erasmus relationship" do not necessarily come to an end even though the exchange period does, and this is where the true motivation for this study emerges.

4.3 Interviewing as a method of inquiry

In order to gain full comprehension of the changes and developments in the couples' relationships, they were asked to participate in an empirical, qualitative study conducted via virtual interview. The instructions and the narratives were written in English, and English was used in all contact with each couple.

The couples were to write their history together, as a couple. Scholars have generally relied on self-report measures to study conflict in close relationships, where social actors indicate the experienced beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of behaviour verbally (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). When the data are collected from dyads it is possible to "discern the relative congruence between partners' perceptions of a conflict and observe their role in (un) successful conflict management" (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995, p. 24). Furthermore, narratives display how in international or intercultural conflict some ideas prevail over others, how norms are maintained, reformulated, abandoned, and how identity is constructed, and how power is legitimized (Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007). This is why the couples were to write the answers together, in the form of a narrative or "story".

The couples were to write the open-ended answers together via an online survey document. The couples received in total three questions, and they were delivered to them personally via email. When the couple received the document, they were also fully instructed to how to complete the study. Each question was uploaded to their Google document after the previous part had been completed. This was to guarantee the writing process to remain smooth, easy to follow and not too time-consuming. The instructions and each question were visible for them throughout the process. They were also offered the possibility of rephrasing or adding more thoughts to their previous answers. This

was to make them feel free to disclose openly and have more time to think about the stages.

In *the first section*, which was sent along with the instructions, they were to briefly introduce the reader into them as a couple: who are they, when and where did they meet (i.e. where did the Erasmus exchange take place) and how long have they been together. Generally in the end of the exchange period both dyads were to return home, it brought a change into the relationship that was already established. This is why the couples were also asked to explain their current living situation (are they living together or in a long-distance relationship). The proximity in the relationship building is an important factor, thus it needed to be addressed in the survey as well. The first section's primary goal was to have a general idea of the couple, and to get an idea of how they eventually became the unit they currently are. Once it was satisfyingly completed, they received the following part. In *the second section* the focus moved onto a deeper level of the relationship creation: they were to write about the stage of building mutual understanding, i.e. the creation of the third culture. The use of the exact term "third culture" was avoided, as it may not be very instructive to those who are unfamiliar with the academic literature. Instead, the guiding questions were phrased as creating the "us" or "we" that was shaped during the first year or so of the relationship. Similarly, once this part was completed, they received the final section of the study. *The third part* focused on the more difficult moments of the relationship, by asking them to discuss the complicated situations they possibly faced as a couple. The underlying idea was to find out how they managed conflict situations and other disagreements as an intercultural couple. Furthermore, this section was set in order to discover their personal positions or roles in

a conflict situation, detect changes in their conflict styles, and have as many details and examples as possible to exemplify the story.

In each section they were provided with supporting questions that were carefully worded, as to avoid steering the couples too much in the answering process to a certain direction. Primary goal was to attain honest reflection, and in the course of the entire writing process they were encouraged to give practical examples of real-life situations to elaborate their experiences. Furthermore, some additional neutral questions were added, if the couple needed them to understand the initial question better.

On average the narratives were 4 pages long. Once completed, they were carefully read several times by the author in order to detect patterns and similar occurrences across narratives from different couples, from different backgrounds. This type of research analysis is a scientific tool called (qualitative) *content analysis*, which allows the researcher to conclude replicable and valid inferences from texts by systematically describing, categorizing and/or making inferences about communication messages (Krippendorff, 2013; Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). The actual data utilized in such an analysis can be almost anything, and the method has been used to study several areas, for instance in media processes, media effects, and in other areas of communication studies (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). All stories were treated anonymously and all possible ways of identification were removed in the analysis process.

4.4 Data collection

For this study, 18 intercultural couples were approached via Facebook to inquire their interests of participating in a virtual interview. Each couple turned out to be in a hetero-

sexual relationship, yet this was not a prerequisite for participation. The participants were contacted and the online interviews were conducted from January to February 2017.

In total out of the 18 contacted couples, communication was established and the participation was agreed with 15 of them. However, out of the couples that were reached and gave their consent, 73% completed the study successfully. 11 couples were deemed sufficient to gain a good level of results, not only as it yields into 22 individuals in total but also for the comprehensive nature of their answers. Naturally the limited time did not enable to interview everyone involved with the Erasmus couple phenomenon. However, the acquired interview material was consistently monitored in order to gain the best results possible, reserving a chance to recruit more couples if deemed necessary. The obtained research material from the 11 couples was finally proven sufficient in order to deduce credible and trustworthy findings. Hence, no more couples were sought for participation.

The couples were selected to the study according to two criteria. *First*, the couple was required to have met during an Erasmus exchange period. *Secondly*, they must have been in a relationship for at least two years. The reason for such decision is twofold: the creation of the third culture takes time, and the couples need time to readjust their lives and ways to function as a couple outside the Erasmus circles. Even if they meet in the very beginning of their exchange, couples of less than one year may not have had enough time to work through major issues and life situations together as a couple. That may have affected the results gained from the study. The average duration for Erasmus exchange is six months, which has remained consisted over the past decade (Erasmus Facts, Figures & Trends The European Union Support For Student And Staff Exchanges And University Cooperation In 2013-2014, 2015). This is why the timeframe was set

for two years or more for the relationship duration. As for the creation of third culture, one cannot specify how long exactly the process takes. Also, once the couple finished their exchange periods abroad, they returned to their respective countries. The transition from "new life" in Erasmus exchange back into the original setting in their home countries also needs to be addressed. As the couples initially started at a close proximity during the exchange period, the transition into a long-distance relationship may yield into a set of complicated issues, such as reverse culture shock or other re-settling problems that may have an impact of the couples' wellbeing. Therefore the criterion was set on minimum of two years of time together. The couples would have spent enough time not only with each other shaping their joint reality, but also they generally have had enough time to re-settle their lives after the exchange period. By asking them to analyse the course of events together, they were able to describe the different stages more comprehensively in retrospect.

The couples were found from the official Facebook page for Erasmus+, where they posted an article of an Erasmus couple. The post was written on their open Facebook "wall", where the Facebook users are able to post comments. In practical terms such wall posts are public conversation and it served as the source of finding the couples for this study (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). The couples that openly told their "story" to the public in an informative way (e.g. the time span of their relationship) were selected. This suggests that the method to acquire research participants is *purposive sampling*, as the focus is a specific group (Erasmus couples) at the exclusion of other groups (e.g. non-Erasmus couples) (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). This method turned out to be a very useful and relatively easy channel to find the right people for the best purposes of this study. It also enabled to reach out to couples from different backgrounds by a larger geographical scope, than had I simply posted a question on my own personal Facebook

wall. Interestingly, in the case for all couples, the female partner submitted the comment. Ergo, the couples for this study were selected from the comment section if they matched the criteria according their own brief description (i.e. their comment on the Facebook post).

Snowball sampling was also used in the acquisition of research participants, and yielded in 6% of the total number of couples. Snowball sampling means that the sample is based on participant recommendations (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). This style of participant acquisition is a particularly useful method in studies where the respondents are either few in numbers, or there needs to be a high degree of trust to initiate the contact with the possible participants (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). In this case, there are indeed many couples across globe that would fall under the description, yet studies of personal communication and conflict styles may be a subject a little too intimate for some to share with strangers or for purely research purposes. According to Baltar and Brunet (2012), "the results have showed that snowball sampling was more effective to contact participants from different places" (p. 63). The underlying idea was to reach to couples from as many different countries as possible to gain broader and more fruitful information, which is also why this method proved successful. Hence snowball sampling was adapted as a second method to the data sampling in this study. Couples that I contacted either recommended my study to another couple, or shared their contact information for me to reach them, but the initiation came from their side. The additional couples were also personally contacted to request to participate, as long as they met the participation criteria. Ultimately, communication scholars oftentimes utilize four kinds of non-random sampling procedures: convenience, snowball, purposive, and quota sampling (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). Two of which suited best for this study, that be-

ing purposive and snowball sampling, and were therefore applied in the sampling process.

Initially the first contact with the couples was a personal Facebook message, where they were asked to participate in the interview. When the communication was established between the couples and myself, and after they gave their consent for participation, I invited them to their personal virtual interview document. They were sent a link to a Google document, where the virtual interview took place. The couples we able to write the stories together by using two accounts. Each couple had their own document, where only them and I had access. The acquired material was transferred into a Word document after the couples had finished the survey. The texts were copied in their exact forms, as to avoid any loss of forceful meaning of the text (e.g. font format). Also, this was to avoid any problems of e.g. someone accidentally deleting the material from the virtual Google word document, as it is very easily editable. All in all this method worked in the couples' benefit, as they were able to modify, specify or correct their answers, as opposed to if they were to send only one and final document. The couples and I interacted over the document by leaving comments on the sidebar, and in some occasions I posed more detailed questions. More information was also given via messages on Facebook at intervals. Overall, this type of informal interview style seemed to fit the participants, as the style of communication was rather casual and open. This type of an online interview turned out to be very practical, flexible, and customizable for each couple.

4.5 Data analysis

The process of analyzing the results is three-fold. *Firstly*, the focus is theory-based, leaning on Casmir's theoretical framework of third culture building that was earlier outlined in chapter 2. The emerging themes are discussed according to the four major assumptions of the TCB's nature: it is (1) open-ended, (2) expansive, (3) responsive to new adjustments, and (4) future-oriented (Casmir & Ascunsion-Lande, 1989). The findings are then further developed, continuously leaning on the theoretical background. *Secondly*, Rahim and Bonoma's (1979) advanced model of interpersonal conflict management styles, which was introduced in chapter 3, is applied in the further analysis of conflicts. It illustrates also the outcomes of such styles of handling conflict situations, which is where another focal point of this study is. The application of the framework is to stress the possible consequences of the couples' conflict behaviour, and to identify the most common method of conflict management styles. It furthermore bridges between the processes of TCB, as the way conflicts are managed are said to have an impact on the outcomes in the relationship development process.

Thirdly, an open-ended thematic analysis is applied when studying the narratives. What it comes to qualitative data, this type of analysis can be seen as a rather straightforward way to achieve results, especially with data that is focused on interpersonal/relational issues (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). This approach was chosen to highlight the rising themes from narratives from different couples, from different backgrounds. As such, these themes have an effect in the previously mentioned processes of TCB and conflict management. Owen (1984) noted three-step themes in his study of families and the missing aspects of relational communication. He suggested a process to analyze transcripts of qualitative data as follows: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3)

forcefulness (Owen, 1984; Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). By *recurrence*, Owen (1984) meant rising themes of at least two parts in the data that had the same thread of meaning, despite a possible different verbal occurrence. This in practice "allowed salient meanings to be discovered in the foreground of a report - a theme, while other meanings remained in the background" (Owen, 1984, p. 275). The second criterion, *repetition*, is an extension to the first one (Owen, 1984), and it stands for the use of same wording that manifest from the data. Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2015) elaborate that when such words or key phrases occur, the repetition indicates the significance of such themes. Finally, *forcefulness* illustrates the vocal inflection of the data, which also refers to the significant words and/or phrases. This could be visually identified from a written text by the utilization of underlining, italicizing, bolding, highlighting, or otherwise using all caps or other visual ways. I would also add the utilization of certain smileys and so forth in the text to convey an emotion. Overall this is a tool to stress or minimize certain messages over others (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). In this study, forcefulness is a further instrument for visualizing possible conflicts. From how they are verbally addressed, it is possible to see the underlying messages they convey, whether they were directly addressed as conflicts or not. Finally, the thematic analysis was utilized to emphasize and demonstrate the results of the couples' third culture building process in a practical sense. The interpretation of possible thematic occurrences from the personal narratives allowed gaining insight of what the process requires from the Erasmus couples.

Finally, graph technique was used to simply illustrate the findings from the dyads' self-reports with actual accounts from the stories. Repetitive words that emerged from the open-ended narratives were all more or less linked towards the same goal – *the pursuit for harmony and mutual wellbeing*.

Although the main themes are highlighted in the result analysis section, other minor findings that occurred across the narratives are briefly presented as well. Such findings were not as often repeated or prevalent as the major themes, yet they contained interesting insights on the subject. Echoing Owen (1984), as these smaller themes did not occur in the majority of the stories, it can be agreed and important to acknowledge that they hold less value as the major findings. However, by including them to the analysis they may increase the total value of this study.

5 RESULTS

This chapter comprises three subsections: first analyzing the theoretical background of TCB, followed by an analysis of conflict behaviour, finally finishing in a thematic analysis of the narratives.

On principle, theoretically speaking the third culture building and the emerging themes from the process was discovered to be of great resemblance. Generally however, the couples did *not experience* conflicts as an important role in the process. There was a certain variance in regards to the consequences, as the 11 couples that took part in this study naturally had different relationship conditions and their own unique details. In this chapter the main features are outlined, as there were several similar occurrences. Furthermore, due to the fact that *conflicts were not in general considered as an important factor during the third culture building*, the two research questions are addressed together in the following chapter, and not analyzed separately.

The intercultural couples that took part in the study went through various stages that affected the nature of their relationship. Initially they temporarily lived together in another country during the Erasmus exchange, from where they both eventually returned to their respective countries. As time went by, they generally needed to restructure the various factors in their relationship that may have not been verbally addressed at all during the brief exchange period (continuum of the relationship, moreover where to live, what language to speak and so forth). Need for negotiations generally emerged in each change.

5.1 The prevalence of inexistent conflicts

Little amount of conflicts was reported during the first stages of the relationship, that generally being during the Erasmus exchange (or a certain part of it). Each couple that took part in this study is up to today in a highly involved, romantic relationship with the same partner from the Erasmus time, which guarantees the reliability of their reflections as a couple. They have experienced the possible turbulences together, and could thus report the overall course of events. The couples largely described them to have been able to get to know each other profoundly by having deep and meaningful conversations and finding ways to negotiate, instead of having actual conflicts. This was not a case of avoidance, the couples reported to have rather made a (un-) conscious decision of how to manage with their differences without the "need" of a conflict. These remarks show a contrast to Lee's (2006) study on intercultural friendships: her study showed that the way the individuals manage conflicts oftentimes determine the successfulness of the friendship. Regardless the fact that a large majority of the Erasmus relationships were built on the basis of friendship, the outcome did not show similar implications. Naturally having a romantic relationship includes different expectations of the relationship and perhaps the personal efforts are stronger for the positive outcomes, yet it is still important to pay attention to this particular difference.

The brief time period seems to be one factor explaining the strong nature of the relationship, affirmed by many couples. For example one couple noted, "We both knew our time together was limited, so the first few months of our relationship were very intense" (participant#1). In general, conflicts were not regarded as an important factor during the period, when the third culture building started. The study suggests that the couples were largely keen on having good time together as opposed to "waste time on

fighting" (participant#6). Largely, the couples were reported to have gotten to know each other without any significant conflicts or disagreements, which means that *the third cultures were generally built with a scarce presence of strong disagreements*. The pursuit for harmony within the relationship seemed to be an important objective for the couples that lessened the importance of conflicts. Furthermore, the couples seem to have experienced a bigger incentive on struggling with the distance together, rather than fighting with each other. "There are also feelings, good moments and they give you strength to keep going together" (participant#2). The positioning of the couple against the distance thus seemed prevalent.

5.2 Once the "illusion of Erasmus" broke

A turning point in conflict behaviour for most couples, however, presented at the parting of ways, as the exchange period came to an end. The main moments where couples experienced conflict situations emerged not only in the process of departure, but also during the resettling to a new life situation. The time had arrived to make big decisions about their future, and to redefine the relationship after the initial beginning as a couple in the "Erasmus world" (participant#11). As the dyads returned to their home countries, it brought about a variety of doubts, emotional turbulence and the need to readjust the relationship in a new dimension. For some couples, the first meeting after the exchange was considered as the defining point of the relationship, as the outcome of the meeting would either make or break it. Majority of the couples reported the first true emergence of conflicts at the point of meeting each other in their respective countries. Incidentally at this point, the role of emerging conflicts was influential, as they also were weighting in the decision of whether the relationship would continue or not. Nearly half of the

couples informed to have left their Erasmus towns with negative prospects of their relationship, much of this is possibly due to the short and rapidly changing nature of the Erasmus exchange. “The Erasmus experience is like living in a bubble, disconnected from reality. Everything was fun and exciting and I was sure our relationship would end as soon as we get back home” (participant#7). Whilst being surrounded by a so-called Erasmus bubble, some general or “normal” obstacles of relationship building did not seem to have occurred in these unconventional circumstances, hence were not present. As one couple elaborated, during the Erasmus exchange one might see the relationship through “Erasmus rose coloured glasses” (participant#7). This in turn may lead to the absence of some vital elements in the relationship creation, including the management of negative aspects as well.

Negative relationship expectancy

To begin with, a third of the couples reported to have parted with a negative expectancy for their relationship - meaning that they would see what will happen to due course to their romantic relationship. Some seem to consider the relationship as merely an occurrence during the Erasmus exchange. One respondent reported, “During my Erasmus time our relationship was more like a game” (participant#2), which leaves the relationship to a fragile stance once the Erasmus period seizes. In spite of returning back home without clear prospects for a romantic future together, each couple stayed in close contact with each other and ended up as an actual couple. Most of them had daily interactions e.g. over Skype, where they continued to create the foundation for their current relationship. This in fact turned out to be of vital importance, as it indeed established the basis to the intimate partnership they share today. “All the experience we had made together formed a basement for our married life … we still talk about those days” (participant#8). “To these initial stage together followed a long period of separation, where we

got to know each other more deeply despite the distance" (participant#1), illuminates the weight this time period had on the relationship and its future. Nevertheless, as the couples parted as friends and/or with less clear objectives for a romantic relationship, they still seemed to continue to evolve *together* by having deep conversations. Despite the distance, some couples suggested to have ever more profound conversations than from a close proximity - to rephrase the idea, they kept building their own culture and mutual understanding regardless of the prospects of the relationship. A quick transformation from the initial stage of physical closeness to a long period of separation altered the relational setting; "We discovered things about each other as friends, without having any additional pressure and this perhaps helped us building a solid and genuine foundation for our relationship to grow on" (participant#1). At this stage, the majority of couples did not report any significant appearances of conflicts, which shows again that the role of conflicts does *not* play an essential role in their third culture building process once continued as friends. More likely, *the inexistence of conflicts left room for profound discovery of the other person*. Furthermore, this discovery enables to combine the first two fundamental assumptions suggested by Casmir and Asuncion-Lande (1989): (1) it is *open-ended*, and (2) it is *expansive*. In the purpose of this study, the main characteristics seem somewhat blurred. The first element suggests that the third culture is capable of absorbing additional elements and has a potential for instant growth. In this case it is of course dependent on the nature of the relationship, but in general it shows that the couples were able to transform their personal involvement from a romantic relationship to a long-distance friendship and back, and still maintain a close bond. Yet largely the couples were able to continue evolving their mutual understanding *without additional external pressure directed to the couple that may have resulted in conflicts*. According to the second element, its expansive nature, the third culture can enlarge from its origi-

nal contextual boundary (the Erasmus exchange), and as such is related to the previous assumption. These two elements combined affirm the flexible nature of these relationships, and how it evolves according to their life situations.

Positive or open relationship expectancy

Not every couple finished their Erasmus exchange with a negative expectance of the relationship, however. The transformation from a rather carefree and easygoing relationship surrounded by an open-minded international environment to a *long-distance relationship* caused conflicts of different intensities. The couples generally did not report them to be of great significance, even though they did occur. Once the dyads were removed from their familiar and open-minded setting of the Erasmus circles, they faced a so-called *reality obstacle*. As they were no longer only students, experiencing each other whilst being surrounded by an unfamiliar culture to both (i.e. the Erasmus exchanges' host culture), they were dealing with each other as individuals. Personal unique features seem to surface at this point, once outside the Erasmus circles and its multicultural environment. The majority of the couples started building their romantic relationship from a mere camaraderie, and thus spent a lot of time together with their international friends. As the end of the exchange period followed by the adjustment to the long distance emerged, nearly all respondents experienced at least some degree of conflicts. Regardless the fact that many couples went through an intensive period of getting to know each other during their period abroad, it seems that the interrupted process of third culture building did result into problematic situations. It could be noted that this stage properly began the process of building a mutual understanding, not only the common ground. The process could also be seen as an extension to the third culture they had already started constructing during their Erasmus exchange. Whether it was for instance the external expectations from friends or families, or personal objectives to impress the

other or not to disappoint them, it proved to be a test to the relationship. Discovering the other person's family was another important phase in the process of building their own world, "then you see how the person you love acts around people who were in his life long time before you" (participant#9). In larger sense, these participants did not report to have experienced complications in the process of getting to know the families. When the first "wow was gone" (participant#5), the dyads started to appreciate each other as individuals, and accepting the other as they were by adjusting to the situations.

Conclusions

Despite the different initial settings of the participating couples, they shared similarities in regards to the role and sources of interpersonal communication issues. The roles of the conflicts were not always unambiguous, but certainly urged the couples to find solutions to the difficult moments, whether consciously or not. The nature of the possible situations for conflicts also changed alongside the couples' situations in life and in personal development. Majority of the negotiations generally started to emerge after the re-adjustment phase in their own respective countries had begun.

Cultural differences were named notably often across narratives as a cause for disagreements and misunderstandings, and they seemed to be more prevalent after returning back home; "I started seeing the main differences which sometimes really used to make me crazy" (participant#2). In a way, from this point on the dyads started analyzing their relationship from more non-biased perspective, as they were separated not only from each other but also from "the Erasmus bubble". This was especially the case for couples that parted with a positive future orientation. Being initially surrounded by a patchwork of cultures seems to have altered their views of the other dyad as well. Many couples after leaving their Erasmus towns with positive prospects for their relationships were somewhat immediately encountered with the task of finding cultural harmony

within the relationship, whereas couples with more vague future orientation remained more open to different solutions. In line with the findings, the *role of conflicts was depended on the setting of how the couple launched themselves outside the Erasmus circles*. Nonetheless, as each couple ended up having a romantic relationship, the question of cultural equality emerged sooner or later. As was indicated in Lee's (2007) study, any cultural dominance could not be tolerated from the third culture perspective. A true cultural equality, however, can be very difficult to attain, even though TCB is fundamentally rooted to an egalitarian approach. For the most part, this development stage was visible from the narratives: some couples struggled with the idea of finding cultural equality in terms of e.g. traditions, language and living arrangements, which caused conflicts to some extent. In the majority of cases, giving the issues time and working out the problems together solved all the (unanswered) questions.

5.3 Time

Time is one of the most important features of third culture building paradigm, affirmed by many scholars. As such, this study suggests proposing it as fifth fundamental assumption to Casmir and Asuncion-Lande's (1989) list, which was presented both in chapter 2 and in the result section of this study. The authors indeed acknowledge the relevance of time and how the slow and deliberate reflection process is inevitable for a successful outcome, yet the outcomes of possible limitations were scarcely addressed.

The length of relationship for the couples in this study was set to a minimum of two years. During this time, they have generally had the opportunity to finish their Erasmus exchange, return home and start reconstructing the relationship from where

they left it. No study has directly suggested an accurate time during which the third culture will absolutely be formed; it varies according to the couple.

In the case of former Erasmus couples, time played a significant role in both as a tool in relationship development, *and* as a more or less indirect tool for resolving possible conflicts. *Time and the role/presence of conflicts were regarded highly dependent,* as there were numerous aspects contributing to the development of the relationship. "We went through quite some things, so we develop together, we both change, and the cultural difference is not feelable anymore, we are our own unique culture" (participant#5). The time-consuming process during which the couples defined the relationship generally had a significant impact on the future-orientation; afterwards they were able to decide or not they are "determined to fight for that" (participant#8).

Drawing a line to one of the TCB's primary qualities by Hopson, Hart, and Bell (2012), *knowledge*, the findings suggest a strong connection between this particular point and the concept of time. By knowledge the scholars accentuate the importance of not only self-knowledge and/or -discovery, but also the insights of the communication partner (Hopson, Hart, & Bell, 2012). At this point, the couples were unfortunately exposed to a limited amount of time and opportunities of further discoveries of the other on the spot, due to the predetermined Erasmus period. The study indicated that as the Erasmus exchange came to and end, the couples were left in a situation where they needed to decide whether to continue the relationship or not. This forms also a link between the dyads and the relationships' future-orientation. Nearly all the couples reported to have faced certain degree of *doubts* during the process of their relationship building. *First*, there was a varying occurrence of self-doubt. What do they want, would the relationship last, would it be worth the pain of having a long-distance relationship, or lack of knowledge related to differences stemming from cultural backgrounds seemed to be

important dilemmas. This indicates a lack of self-knowledge to certain extent, as the partner is unable to decide what they want out of the relationship. Time impacts this phase, as the couple is to go separate ways, at least in the sense of proximities. *Conflicts as such were not directly reported to have an influence during this process*. However, the concept of conflicts itself seemed to manifest in different shapes in the stages of relationship building, such as doubt and communication issues. The majority of couples found a solution to each issue stemming from the early stages of the relationship building with increased communication and giving the situation more time. *Secondly*, uncertainty or a lack of knowledge of the other partner's relational intensions was considered as an important factor. Was the other person serious about the relationship or were they simultaneously romantically involved with other people emerged. These three main concepts (knowledge, doubts, time) *altogether were discovered to influence the building of the third culture, as opposed to the presence of direct conflict situations*. "The first year, we naturally had worries about our future in the sense that we were from different countries … in the time we realized that the more time we spend together, the more we connected to each other and those prejudices were automatically proven wrong" (participant#3). In the end the three concepts had an important role: *complex situations drove the couple into finding solutions for the problems*. "The biggest events during the first year of the relationship were meeting the other person in the airport, seeing whether you still feel the same about the other person, re-introducing yourself with the feeling of having the other person by your side, and once again becoming from "I" to "we"" (participant#9). Doubts seemed to generate communication issues, but by investing on this part the couples were able to form a strong foundation of trust. Majority of couples reported to have had deep conversations that generated a strong bond between the dyads, for which in the end they were willing to fight for. Personal development, open commu-

nication, and clear objectives that evolved over time were reported as main features that affected the building of the third culture. One respondent summarized, how "the turning point was one conversation" (participant#4) that brought about a solution to communication issues, even though the relationship was already reported to be on a positive setting.

To conclude, conflicts did not seem to clearly emerge to be able to play an important role in the process; instead it took different shapes in the process of relationship building that eventually had significant future-oriented effects on the couple.

5.4 Common language

Majority of the couples found a mutual language easily, and in general the process itself did not bring about immediate obvious conflicts. The discovery was in line with Coole's (2011) findings, as she noticed how a third language might also lead the couple into a harmonious problem solving. Mainly the couples had agreed on the use of English as their common language, despite the fact that in all cases English is not the native language of either one of the partners. The discovered implications of language choice were threefold:

(1) It was not considered an important or current issue that affects the relationship thus had no serious outcome,

(2) It was seen as a source of occasionally manifesting tension if the other dyad would not learn the other's native language, which in turn reduced the possibilities of full verbal self-expression,

(3) They were not notably referred at all by the couple, which could indicate that the underlying negotiations are currently still in process or left entirely undone.

Conflicts and how they were linguistically managed seemed to be connected to certain extent in the long run. It may either pose a threat to the development of the third culture or help in the process. “We were able to bypass lots of the initial uncertainty exactly because we were speaking a foreign language” (participant#7). Certainly the further developed third culture showed certain signs of complications in the language as well, as numerous couples continued to use the same language in which they started to get to know each other, regardless of the developed language skills (in English or other languages). It proved difficult to change the language later on, and it was reported to feel “strange” to speak a new language, even if the level would be sufficient enough (participant#5). The study furthermore suggests that in some cases it was a question of difficulty or personal efforts towards learning the other language. Still, the importance of the other one learning the other partner’s language was shown important, as it affects they way in which the negotiations are dealt with. “I do get slightly annoyed that I have to speak to him in my second language and that I can’t speak [native language]” (participant#9). The choice of language therefore indicates to have an impact on the overall relational satisfaction. Yet the negotiations for achieving a mutual decision of language choice were not reported to cause conflicts. Then again, it forms a part of the relationship identity (one factor of the third culture), and ought to be addressed as such in the couple for the best purposes of their wellbeing.

Language proficiency also posed complications for the participants, as the levels of fluency was not predetermined. “It’s very difficult to fight constructively in a foreign language, especially when you have different fluency levels” (participant#7). As such, it was elaborated as “fighting is rather passionate … finding the right way to communicate in the heat of the moment is not easy!” (participant#7). Language naturally affects how the communication proceeds, and the levels of fluency thus influence the entire experi-

ence. As one couple elaborated, “In the beginning, when our English was in a less advanced stage, we sometimes had to show/draw/explain things” (participant#5), which could also lead to misinterpretations. Mutual shortages in linguistic skills can also be seen as a factor that brings the couple even closer together, as they have to find a way to understand another. Language deficiencies in communication patterns outside the immediate couple were an equally disclosed subject that presented complications. Problems in communication with the dyads’ families were a frequently exposed issue that caused tensions within the couple as well.

Positive outcomes also appeared out of the language negotiations. To some extent, language kinks were regarded as an amusing side note that brought the couple closer together, rather than causing a conflict. There was a certain amount of noticeable changes in the languages the dyads used, yet the changes were not prone to cause negative outcomes. As one communicates in a foreign language, the methods of understanding the other may equally change. One participant couple exemplified how having a foreign language present alters the initial setting on getting to know the other one (participant#7). By integrating a foreign language, the couple can circumvent some of the initial uncertainties. Instead of analyzing every gesture, other semantics and/or non-verbal behaviours they are used to do in their own language, it can feel liberating and/or seen as an “escape route” from emerging disagreements.

Guerrina’s (2002) elaboration of how “language not only represents a vehicle for the transmission of culture, it is also shaped by cultural norms and heritage” (p. 125) is a great demonstration of the intricate nature of the third culture from linguistic viewpoint. This was also observed by one research participant: “I think it’s extremely important to find access to the language and culture of your partner’s country - also in order to understand their way of thinking and some of their actions” (participant#8). The expansive

third culture building process may never reach an ultimate end, but keep developing over time alongside personal growth. To conclude, the study suggests that majority of the couples reached an agreement in the choice of language, and it did not pose an immediate likelihood for conflicts. Therefore, even though language development forms an important part in the relationship creation process, the role of conflicts was not deemed as a significant factor from this aspect.

5.5 Conflict management styles

Deciphering Rahim and Bonoma's (1979) two-dimensional model for handling interpersonal conflicts that was presented in chapter 3, they suggest that the most suitable style for positive outcome (win-win situation) is either *integrating* (problem-solving) or *obliging* (smoothing). *Compromise* (sharing) is situated in the middle as a mixed style. Rahim (1986) elaborates that a compromising approach is most commonly applied when each party has equal power, which forms a bridge to the importance of equality factor in the process of third culture building. As previously discussed, TCB ought to be equal, avoid any cultural domination or giving greater priority over the other dyad. In this part, we move the focus to these particular aspects of the narratives. The respondents that took part in this study were asked to describe their personal styles to approach a possible conflict. Although at first a considerable number of couples informed to have experienced very little conflicts, they nonetheless explained their conflict management styles rather easily. This also indicates a slight overlook on the importance of conflicts as a factor from the couples' viewpoint. According to the couples, the initial idea was that conflicts do not exist; yet in the end they were more or less obviously interpretable

from the narratives. In this part the most common styles that emerged are introduced, and their possible implications are furthermore discussed.

Most common style in conflict management

Unlike Rahim's (1986) suggestion of compromise, former Erasmus couples displayed *integration* as the most commonly applied approach in conflicts. That is to say, the couples sought high levels of assertiveness and cooperation, for both self and the partner. "We had harder discussions, since we are tempert persons … we respect each other and each other's opinion and in time we learned to give space and respect our wishes and to give support in what the other is doing" (participant#6). This discovery is at odds with Rahim's proposition, as compromising approach suggests only moderate levels of assertiveness and cooperation for both self and the other person. It could however furthermore incline to the fact that deep within the foundation of the unique third culture, there is a chance that true cultural equality has not been reached, as compromising approach is prevalent "to those conflict situations in which both parties have equal power" (Rahim, 1986, p. 80).

Majority of the couples had indeed discovered their own approaches to resolve conflicts, even if they do not fall directly in line with Rahim and Bonoma's styles. "None of us is a fight seeker … I can bury them [conflicts] in my head and I do not have to speak more about them (if it is not really serious) … is the opposite … these two points of view took us some time to connect. Nowadays, we think we have kind of connected them" (participant#11). In the end, the third culture is its own unique concept that should allow the couple to create not only their common ground and mutual understanding, but also styles of handling conflicts. As such, in regards to this study the five common conflict management styles function merely as guidelines in the analysis process, not as ultimate definitions to which each couple ought to be matched with. Either

way, nothing from the narratives suggests that the conflict management styles the couples currently exercise would be in any way permanent or definitely decided. “Over the time we both learnt that we have to compromise a bit more in order to overcome the problems. Also we have learnt more about one another, and so we are able to negotiate better and understand the other person better” (participant#10).

Many couples reported to have experienced little to none conflicts in regards to the development of their relationship. This could suggest why the formation of conflict management styles took a significant amount of time in most cases. The average relationship duration across all couples was 7 years, and the narratives show that the creation of mutual agreement and the discovery of co-built negotiation techniques took a long time to form. There could therefore be a correlation between the lengthy duration of TCB and the impact that the low importance of conflicts has on the development of the management styles.

5.6 Thematic analysis of the open-ended narratives

All couples in this study had their own unique story, none of which were drastically similar to the next. However, similarities were visible from the personal entries they composed. A thematic interpretation is a useful tool to understand relational life and furthermore it may “reveal a more complex nature of relationships than a trajectory toward greater intimacy” (Owen, 1984, p. 286). The first two criteria presented by Owen (1984) are acquainted together in this section, as they are somewhat linked to each other - repetition being an extension of recurrence in terms of thematic scrutiny of text. Table 1 visualizes the findings with citations from the narratives.

Recurrence and repetition

These observations were fundamental concepts in the process of relationship development and had long-term impacts on the couples' relationships. Five main themes were discovered from the narratives. The most visible rising themes were:

(1) *Rapidly evolving relationships*: the predetermined period of Erasmus exchange created a strict timeframe for the young couples, during which time they got to know each other in an intense fashion ("our first meetings as a couple in [Erasmus exchange city] were very intense … we really couldn't part and we used to spend a lot of time together" participant#10),

(2) *Uncertainties*: couples had to manage their life situations, which posed complications for a number of couples ("not knowing when you are going to see the other person again, we each had our own lives in our own home countries, none of us could really immediately move … not knowing was the hardest bit … as a result this doubt caused some conflicts" participant#9),

(2) *Doubts*: inter-relational intensions, unresolved misgivings, or interpersonal indecisiveness manifested as unclear future-oriented expectancies that to some extent caused conflicts, eventually they forced the couple to discuss their options ("she was just up and down with her feelings, it was a time of emotional confusion for her" participant#8),

(3) *Active communication*: majority of the couples stayed in daily contact and continued the negotiations towards a mutual understanding despite the distance or clear future plans ("at distance, at the beginning we wanted to speak every day on Skype … at the beginning, we were more focused on how was the other person feeling more than what he/she was doing" participant#10),

(4) *The splendor of Erasmus exchange time*: many couples described their Erasmus periods as an amazing experience, where they had the freedom and the possibilities that would not have arrived as such outside these circumstances, this certainly had a strong impact on the initial stage of relationship building ("being abroad together and spending some of the most fantastic days of your lives in the company of Spanish, Italian, Irish, Japanese, US, French, Thai etc… friends brought us together in a way, that wouldn't have been possible back home" participant#8), and

(5) *The novelty value of different cultures*: getting familiar with the other persons culture over time was seen as a constant source for curiosity, as everything was initially new, exciting and fun ("none of us was familiar with the other's culture, so there was always something to learn (up to this day) which definitely added an element of surprise, curiosity and novelty to the initial stages of our relationship" participant#1).

All these results of interpretation were of central concern in the early stages of relationship development. Interestingly, as was discovered again from the personal entries, *conflicts were not reported to have an important role in the process*. Furthermore, *repetition* occurred largely in relation to the themes listed above, and it highlights the significance of these discovered central concepts. Six clear repetitive words stood out from the narratives, and they are elaborated in the following table (Table 1) with citations from the narratives.

Table 1 Repetitive words

Trust	"If we were to choose just one word to describe our relationship, it would be trust"(participant#7) "We managed to overcome any kinds of negativity by trusting and talking to each other as much as possible" (participant#3)
Luck/Lucky	"I think we are lucky, we share most of the values and principles we consider vital so any differences of opinion were not a deal breaker" (participant#7) "As far as our personalities, mutual understanding etc. are concerned, we really had a good luck" (participant#4) "We never had a serious fight and we consider ourselves very lucky in this sense" (participant#1)
Intense/Intensive	"We both knew that our time together was limited, so the first few months of our relationship were very intense and lived with the knowledge that we would soon be separated, perhaps for good" (participant#1) "Only after coming back to [home city] … we managed to leave the "friend zone" and slowly start a more intensive relationship" (participant#8)
Honest	"Through Skype conversations you really build a mutual understanding for the other person, you have to learn to read the other person only through the screen, also you have to learn to be open and honest with the other person, so you can really express how you are feeling" (participant#9) "Being honest and talking to each other always helps in the end" (participant#5)
Long-distance relationship	"I could never imagine me to have long-distance relationship … little bit scared me" (participant#11) "They started a long distance relationship until they realized that they couldn't do it anymore and they were supposed to be together" (participant#3) "When it was time for her to go back home to [city] we decided to try a long distance relationship" (participant#5)
Same team	"We always felt a sense of "belonging to the same team", for example when comparing the other person to other people, like friends, parents…" (participant#10) "We never undermine the authority of the other parent [for their child] - we are always one team" (participant#5)

Forcefulness

The last criterion of the thematic analysis focuses on the written form of the narratives. Forcefulness is visually detectable by drawing attention to differences in text formatting (italicizing, bolding, smileys etc.). By changing the text format, the writer is able to pass certain nuances that would otherwise be difficult to transfer from a verbal expression to text only. That is why the last part of the thematic analysis focuses on the verbal expressions: the underlying idea is to detect "hidden" meanings, as conflicts were not always directly addressed in the narratives. As the respondents we asked to use different colours to mark who wrote which part of the story if they so deemed necessary, the font colour differences cannot be freely evaluated as a form of conveying any certain emotion.

Most commonly appeared visual aid to create an additional impact on the text was the use of *smileys*. The use of smileys seemed to be context-dependent, and certainly in relation to the writer's own personal style of verbal expression. Respondents added only smileys with a positive impression as to create more volume and more affectionate impression in the discussed events; e.g. "this semester [Erasmus exchange] changed our lives :-)" (participant#8). Interestingly, in todays' world of highly frequent use of various emoticons and smileys, not every couple used this form of emphasis in the story-telling process. Conversely, in many cases it also seemed that the smileys were used to lessen the affect of the preceding text and/or create a more relaxed impression. "I don't think over as much as [other partner] does. I just like being with her and it just felt right. I'm not an overthinker ;)" (participant#4). One couple talked of the cultural and personal differences in regards to punctuality that affected their everyday lives. "Few times it happened that he case to meeting with 15 or more min delay. After talking abut it it got better, now it is max 10 min delay :D" (participant#11). Over time, the mutual negotia-

tions were in general reported to have improved, “so we are able to negotiate better and understand the other person better. :)” (participant#10). Certainly coping the differences at the time was not experienced too easy or amusing, yet in the narratives even the complications we presqented as a rather entertaining side note or something they may have bypassed relatively easily. Smileys were also inserted to demonstrate a pause in the writing process (“(We had a veeeery long discussion here ;)” participant#4), or they seemed to “summarize” the overall passing of time (“We definitely fight differently now than in the beginning :)” participant#7). All in all, smileys clearly emerged from the majority of narratives and they had an affect on how the stories were constructed and furthermore understood.

The occurrence of *three consecutive dots* (…) appeared in the narratives. As they were generally used at the end of paragraphs, they left a lingering idea that the topic may not be necessarily comprehensively covered between the dyads, or that it is still in process. The idea or situation that was presented in the sentence thus posed uncertainty or a direct need for adjustment and/or communication. “After some time I found an invitation to friends on Facebook, but then I thought that he is nothing serious…” (participant#2). The dots also represented the continuum of time the couple needed to figure out the relationship; “I could not let it [misunderstanding] go, and he could not get why am I ‘pms-ing’ for months…” (participant#5). Bridging to the time-consuming process of third culture building, this form of locution shows the gradual development of the unique third realm in a couple.

Furthermore, some more traditional visual discoveries were found from the texts. As a whole, they were minor in terms of frequency yet nonetheless noticeable, such as increased punctuation marks to create a stronger emphasis (“Like, he stays home, so he is not even involved, but he gets all judgmental on me for making others wait! Others,

not even him!" participant#5), or the use of different size of print ("I WAS very clumsy…" participant#8, "we could tell each other SO MUCH" participant#5). The emphasis of dissimilar text format highlights the importance of this particular factor in the relational development, which ultimately had an impact on the couple. In terms of conflicts, they were not understood as a highly relevant mediator of events, yet the findings still accentuate the overall turn of events as a couple.

All in all, the emerged visual means of passing salient meanings in the texts seemed to be in accordance with the above listed main themes (recurrence and repetition). The discoveries from these three criteria *together* were a further indicator of the role and presence of conflicts in the process of their relationship building.

5.4 Minor findings

Lastly, two minor discoveries are added to the analysis to bring more depth and interesting insights that emerged from the narratives. They appeared to have interesting ideas that could also have applied to other couples, yet all participants did not openly disclose these issuess.

Open communication was discussed in the majority of narratives. However, interestingly a subtheme of *sexual communication* did not arise strongly, regardless the fact that many couples experienced infidelity or moral dilemmas to some extent. A part of the couples were involved with other people than their current partner in the beginning of their relationship, however in general they did not report having further complications related to mutual agreement of sexual dealings or fidelity/devotedness. "The biggest sources of disagreement or fighting have definitely been sex and sex with other people" (participant#10), which indicates a level of uncertainty and lack of communica-

tion that yielded in conflicts. This draws a line to one of the main thematic finding in the previous chapter (uncertainty), and adds another dimension to the discussion of conflicts in an intercultural couple. Time and otherwise open communication seemed to overrule any possible occurring obscurities.

Another interesting observation from the narratives was the rise of the individuals' *own personal identity*, alongside the relational identity over time. The distance was an initial factor that brought the couple strongly together (as show in Table 1, "same team"). However, once the distance factor was removed, the couple rediscovered themselves as individuals in the relationship, which caused conflicts, as the mutual efforts put to the benefit of the relationship emerged. "Feeling that you are giving up something in order to have this life with this person, it was definitely the main cause for conflicts and disagreements" (participant#9). In the end, time had the most important role, as it was the solution to the conflict situations that arose from this reason. "Because at the start our relationship was long distance, when we finally had some time together we got completely absorbed in being together, so when we finally moved to the same country and moved in it took us time to once again discover ourselves separately" (participant#9). Personal growth alongside with constant communication helped to diminish the power of conflict in the third culture building process, which continued even after the long-distance part of the relationship was over.

6 DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was evaluate the role and importance of conflicts in intercultural relationships that were created during an Erasmus exchange abroad. The focus was in the first stages of relationship building, and the theoretical background was based on Casmir's third culture building paradigm. In the analysis of conflict behaviour, the discovered findings were reflected to Rahim and Bonoma's (1979) interpersonal styles of conflict management. The object of this thesis was to discover to what extent conflicts are correlated to third culture building among couples that have met during Erasmus exchange in a foreign country.

For data gathering purposes, 11 qualitative virtual interviews were conducted. As Silverman (2013) noted, "theory without data is empty; data without theory say nothing" (p.377). That is also why an open-ended virtual interview was adopted to this study as a method of inquiry, as it was regarded as the most suitable option for data collection. The applied content analysis offered rich insights on the stages of the relationship development, demonstrating that conflicts were not seen as an important factor in third culture building process. My objective was to produce fresh and valuable information of former Erasmus students, and to demonstrate the extensive impacts the exchange can have on the students' lives. Also, the aim was to further explain the theories in a modern, mobile world, which is undoubtedly a direction to which more studies should move towards. As such, it brings certain amount of theoretical value to the study, as it aims to develop a new theoretical way of thinking (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

The theoretical background of third culture building has received critique in academia. Shuter (1993), for example, argues that Casmir's model lacks incentives for developing third cultures in a relationship. "It is articulated as an inevitable conclusion

that just happens in an intercultural encounter" (Shuter, 1993, p. 431). For that, the supposition of this study did not consider an automatic existence neither of conflicts nor a successful formation of the third culture in a couple. To challenge this ideology, the results from this study prove this argument nearly invalid. The Erasmus couples demonstrated how, with or without active seeking, achieving the ideal level of relational comfort is possible. Consequently the couples were able to build their own so-called world, which is, as Broome (1991) also suggested, characterized by their unique values. The couples then were capable of creating something that possibly never existed before. This idea was supported by majority of participants. However, the theoretical background may bring certain limitations to this study, regardless the precautionary measures. In (qualitative) research, however, theoretical models merely provide a general framework for viewing reality, and thus the concepts used in the study define the research problem (Silverman, 2013). In this study, theoretical backgrounds were utilized as a starting point and a directive force, rather than an absolute truth. Naturally the relevant factors seemed more accessible, when the theoretical background was consulted to a certain extent. For instance in regards to forming the third culture, time is agreed to be one of the most important factors. There are many definitions of time. Casmir (1993) also noted himself that some of the interactional processes are almost short-term events, which indeed can be seen from the lifespan of the Erasmus couples. Among the Erasmus couples, their third cultures can be seen as it has been built of many temporally short-term events (e.g. the actual Erasmus exchange, the period right after it, re-settling and so forth). This shows that if a theory is used too literally in the analysis, the results may indicate the opposite than what actually has occurred or otherwise fallacious. Besides, any theory becomes worthwhile only when it is used to explain something (Sil-

verman, 2013), and as asserted earlier, the "old" theories should be applied in the modern, mobile world as well.

This study brought together these two research orientations of TCB and conflicts. By incorporating the little examined Erasmus couples to the equation, it brought about a unique approach to the study. Both the presented empirical research and previous scholarly literature reveal that there is not much literature on large scale dedicated to the Erasmus framework. In the light of extant literature on conflict behaviours and outcomes, there are no existing guidelines or no particular concern that applies to all studies, which makes each one prevalent (Caughlin, Vangelisti, & Mikucki-Enyart, 2013). Large number of studies may indicate that the subject itself holds a great deal of importance, as more and more people are interested in studying its implications. Initially conflicts seemed as a relevant and rich field to study among young couples, as the dyads only start getting to know one another and creating their own ways of functioning together may eventually yield into fallouts. However as already proven in the results, conflicts were not deemed important in the relationship building process, which demurs the existing idea of their relevance.

Current research findings in the Erasmus framework in general remain rather trivial. Moreover, more research is thus needed to reach the objective of comprehensive, in-depth knowledge on Erasmus couples. In future studies, it would be interesting to utilize different theoretical backgrounds and methods of inquiry. As the concept of time was regarded as a highly important factor in the relationship development, more longitudinal studies are in order for a more profound understanding of the relational development. Furthermore, since conflicts did not make an important factor in the relationship development as proven in this study, future research ought to observe the matter from another viewpoint than conflicts.

Aside from the positive and hopefully literature-advancing outcomes, this study like any had some limitations. *First*, as the survey sample was rather small (11 couples, that is 22 individuals in total), which brings a certain constraint to the scope and cohesion of the findings. In terms of qualitative research, the quest for understanding how many interviews are needed for the study is not an easy question to answer (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). A different number of research participants could indeed be beneficial in future studies on Erasmus couples, as it would no doubt foster the wideness of discoveries. Furthermore, the rather explorative nature of the study on such subjects with little academic research (on Erasmus couples) reminds that the findings should not be generalized too widely. *Second*, there were some detectable drawbacks on the openness of communication between the research participants and myself, which ought to be addressed for the best purposes of this study. As I remained a complete stranger to the participants, it is likely that the probabilities of open disclosures would reduce. Interpersonal relationships are a very personal matter, and the rather negative tone of conflicts as topics could also be experienced as a difficult matter to discuss with me. For instance, the topic of sexual wellbeing was not addressed in the majority of stories, as discussed in chapter of minor findings, yet as a subject it certainly is important to pore over as a couple. It thus indicates the delicate nature of the topic in relation to whom they disclose such concerns. Therefore there remains a possibility that certain important aspects of the stories were left out due to unfamiliarity factor. The ramifications of insufficient styles of disclosure, whether being applied consciously or not, may have affected the outcomes of this study. *Thirdly*, also due to the human nature of the participants, time may have interfered the veracity of the personal accounts. This last notion of validity issues refers to how the course of time may diminish the effects of the events that happened to the couples in the past. The average length of the relationships in this study

was 7 years. Naturally some details will disappear over time and they may be difficult to recall when asked in retrospect. In the end, the building of the third culture is a process that requires an undetermined amount of time, unique to each couples' needs, and sometimes the negative parts of the journey will begin to fade. As one interviewee couple elaborated, "Note: We wanted to start the story with "Once upon a time…" because our story has always been a wonderful fairytale" (participant#3).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Hello you,

Many thanks again for taking part in this study. As you know, it makes a part of my Master's thesis in Intercultural Communication and as such it is very important to me. Your contribution is priceless and I will remain forever grateful to you for all your efforts!

What you write will be used for research purposes only and handled with care. After you have finished writing, I will store the data offline and remove any possible identifying information from it. I will analyse the data personally. In case of using short excerpts from the writings in the thesis, I will make sure that they are fully anonymized as well. The MA thesis is of course a public document, so you will be able to see it yourself when the time comes. It is also possible to withdraw from the study at a later date if you so wish.

* * *

This virtual interview comprises three sections. Once you have completed the question I have added below, I will either make some small remarks/comments, or directly add the next question. You will receive an email as a reminder, so don't worry about missing the questions. When the second part is finished, you will receive the last question. This is meant to make the answering/reflection process easier and less time consuming.

Note: please write the answers together - the aim is not to get a monologue of the events, it's more for the two of your working on this together. :) In case you do not have access to the document with your own log-ins, please use different coloured text to signify which one of you wrote the section (and don't forget to mark down who has which colour). The change of the colour is possible to do in the upper column, where you see the capital A with a black line under it.

Please find below the first "question" to start with. The word question is in quotes, as it ideally merely guides you in writing your story. The form of the answers is up to you, but please be as detailed as possible. It is through little details and concrete examples that a story becomes live. Please do not hesitate to comment/message me at any point in case you have questions.

Here we go!

1. Please write a brief introduction to you as a couple (e.g. background, how did you meet, how long have you lived together or are you still in a long-distance relationship, etc.). If you have some examples or special events in mind from the early days, feel free to include them to the story.

2. Thank you so much for the story! Now we move forwards, along with the timeline. Next I would ask you to look back at the stage of building a mutual understanding - the "us" or "we" if you would like to put it that way. This part is mostly linked to the first year or so of your relationship. So here please write about the

time after the initial meeting and when you started getting to know to each other. Again, please elaborate the story with examples, lessons you learnt and so forth.

3. Thank you! We now start the final part of the story-telling. Now I would like you to remember back to the more difficult moments. In all relationships, there are bound to be some complicated aspects in the process of building a relationship. How do you feel that you managed to overcome issues, possible fights, conflicts, and other disagreements that emerged along the time you started building your (early) relationship? Or did you feel their presence at all? (How) did you manage the cultural differences (language, values, traditions…)? What would you say were the most difficult reasons/sources for disagreements? Do you see a change in your "means of negotiation" over the time? Examples of such situations, advices or lessons you learnt would be great to include to the final chapter.