

University of Jyväskylä
Department of Language and Communication Studies

Master's Thesis in Intercultural Communication
Perceptions on Intercultural Communication Training: academic and practical
implications

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>This thesis focuses on intercultural training. Specifically, the study will analyze some trainings organized for companies’ employees sent abroad for international assignments. The aim of this study is to find out different perceptions of the trainer and trainees on intercultural training. Traditional and critical scholars’ points of view will be also analysed and compared in order to elaborate suggestions for future developments. Moreover, the thesis will consider possible differences between the clients' expectations and the actual results of the training. Accordingly, the gata gathering will be conducted firstly through a survey addressed to trainees before the training and an interview with the trainer. Subsequently, trainees will be interviewed on their perceived outcomes of the training. The purpose of this research is to elaborate trainees’ feedback on the training and compare it to the trainer’s perspective in order to find potential problematic aspects of intercultural training. The analysis of these data will allow the thesis to make suggestions on how to develop the trainings. Also, intercultural encounters are becoming part of every-day life and an important aspect of international companies. Thus, also intercultural training is becoming a very common type of business and a much requested service. This phenomenon needs to be studied in order to effectively help expatriates and their families overcome the fear of "diversity", avoiding stereotypes and understanding inequalities. In this way, it is possible to help expats feeling satisfied with their working and private life, even if far away from home.</p>	
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1. INTRODUCTION

Trainings consist of interventions that aim at developing certain abilities of an individual through the use of several different methods (Bücker Joost and Korzilius 2015: 1998). According to Kupka, Everett and Cathro (2008) cross-cultural trainings aim at teaching individuals to act and communicate in an appropriate way in different cultural contexts, by knowing the customs and etiquette of a specific national culture; whereas intercultural training can be considered as a more developed and modern version of cross-cultural training. In fact, while cross-cultural trainings focus more on learning how to imitate or accommodate people from a different culture, learning “dos and don’ts” focusing on the differences between cultures, intercultural trainings aim at building a long term competence that includes the improvement of communication abilities in general (Kupka et al 2008). Also, cross-cultural training used to focus more on knowledge of certain aspects of a culture, whereas intercultural trainings are much more related to the experiential, emotional and motivational side of intercultural communication (Bücker et al. 2015: 1999). The latter type of training aims at building one specific ability, generally called intercultural competence. This term has many definitions depending on scholars’ position and opinions regarding this topic.

This thesis will give an overview of the two positions academics take on intercultural training and competence, which consist of a traditional one and a more critical one, which tends to suggest new concepts related to these terms. In the same way, academics are divided on

whether it would be possible to teach intercultural communication and how to teach it, thus different scholars adopt different ways of measuring and thinking about intercultural trainings. Furthermore the attention will be on the trainer's and trainees' perceptions of the intercultural training and intercultural communication. These perceptions will be compared and analyzed, in order to make conclusions on some of the main aspects of intercultural training and to provide suggestions for future developments.

Although this study takes into consideration different points of view, it begins describing the traditional point of view with the purpose of looking at the critical line for suggesting possible developments of intercultural training. In fact, the thesis suggests that intercultural training can be a very valid resource for expatriates and their families in order to overcome difficulties of leaving their home and starting a life in a new environment. For this reason, intercultural training needs to be improved to meet trainees' expectations and needs to pay attention to problems such as social inequalities and stereotypes. In this sense, both critical and traditional lines of thought are valid and will contribute to this study.

The choice of this specific topic originates from a personal experience of an intercultural training addressed to exchange students preparing to go abroad. The training organised on that occasion was really useful in terms of anticipating the students' feelings and problems they will probably encounter abroad. The trainers gave suggestions on how to face these challenges by using different mindsets and adopting new points of views. Due to this experience, this thesis recognises the existence of culture and supports the idea that culture might influence communication and, in some contexts, adjustment. Years after the first training, another contact with this subject was given by a university course on intercultural counseling, which increased

the interest on the topic. Moreover, the academic debate represented by critical scholars contributed to the choice of this thesis' topic. In fact, critical scholars seem to criticise intercultural training without giving any practical suggestions on how to improve them, claiming instead that intercultural training should not be organised at all. This thesis starts from the assumption that intercultural trainings can actually be very useful in many contexts. Also, a lucrative business as intercultural counseling will not disappear as long as it is requested by companies, universities and other institutions. For these reasons, this thesis aims at tackling the lack of practical suggestions by applying an academic view and analysing perception from both trainees and the trainer.

The first part of this thesis is dedicated to the role of intercultural competence throughout history, explaining how this term was introduced and how it developed until nowadays' debate between scholars on intercultural communication. This thesis adopts a dynamic and flexible view on culture and intercultural competence, which is applied in order to discuss other themes such as adjustment. Furthermore, the debate on intercultural competence and intercultural counseling is presented, describing the positions and arguments of traditional and critical scholars. Within the debate, the use of terms, new ideas and models are explained, as well as the role of assessment in intercultural competence.

In the methodology section, the data collection and data analysis choices will be explained and justified. Regarding the data collection process, a Finnish intercultural counseling company accepted to participate in this study by providing expats' contacts. Furthermore, expats were asked to answer a questionnaire before attending the intercultural training and to participate in an interview after their training. Additionally, an interview with the trainer was conducted. Data

analysis consisted of thematic analysis, in order to find common themes and codes within trainees' and the trainer's answers. Moreover, in the findings chapter, the thesis aims at presenting themes and codes produced by the data analysis, comparing the trainer's and trainees' perceptions on intercultural training. Themes and codes are organized in wider categories, in order to identify main points of the research. The discussion analyses and summarizes the main points from the findings. Consequently, it provides suggestions for future developments by presenting problematic aspects in the field of intercultural counseling. Additionally, ideas from scholars' who take part in the debate on intercultural training are elaborated and applied in the discussion and conclusion of this study.

2. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

According to Deardorff (2009) “intercultural competence” consists of the interaction between two or more individuals who adopt different techniques in managing communication. This differentiation in processing information and messages depends on the way interactants’ cultural or social groups and subgroups influence them. Deardorff gives strong emphasis on the relational and emotional part of intercultural interaction as well as the importance of the interactants’ personal backgrounds.

The need for social skills to communicate with people from different places of the world dates back to ancient times. Shuang traces it to the time of Aristotle's Rhetoric, which describes the use of different languages and communicative behaviors of people from different places of the world (Shuang 2014: 7)

Human history has always been full of examples of intercultural encounters and therefore the need of communicating effectively with other people, especially for political and commercial reasons, has always been present. However, the term “intercultural competence” started to be used and to be taught officially later on, after the II War World, when the discipline of intercultural communication was more concretely discussed and defined by specialists and scholars (Deardorff 2009: 7-8). During the Cold War, intercultural communication and training studies grew even more in order for scholars and experts to work on political stability and to help in humanitarian matters in different countries. In that period, the need for intercultural training was very requested by individuals working in the Peace Corps and also in the Navy. During the

end of the 1960s many scholars worked with the Peace Corps to assess their intercultural communication skills, trying at the same time to define intercultural competence and its components. Nonetheless, terms such as “intercultural effectiveness” and “intercultural adaptation” started to be used during the next century, when other scholars worked in order to develop a list of characteristics that form intercultural competence. During the 1980s, the first tentative methods and models to measure intercultural competence were developed. During the 1990s, experts studied more defined models and assessment methods that still focused on knowledge and skills rather than the emotional dimension, although some communication, sociological and psychological disciplines were already looking at the relational and contextual side of intercultural interactions (Deardorff 2009: 8-9). During this period intercultural communication studies consisted of the collaboration between different disciplines such as anthropology , psychology and linguistic studies; although throughout the century it became a distinct discipline (Salo-Lee forth. :4).

Consequently, due to social phenomena such as globalization, migrations and digitalization, which started to influence people’s everyday life, the 1990s represent the starting point of major changes in intercultural communication disciplines. The revolution of the field concerned both the methodological and theoretical sphere leading to a reevaluation of the term “culture” (Salo-Lee forth.).

One of the most relevant scholars of the field was Edward T. Hall, who strongly contributed to the development of intercultural communication studies and intercultural training during his work at the Foreign Service Institute between 1951 and 1955. Hall was the first one who focused on non-verbal communication and created contrasting categories, high versus low

context cultures and monochronic versus polychronic cultures, in order to explain to his American clients why people from different cultures behave in certain ways. Additionally, many terms such as “intercultural communication” itself originated from the work of Edward T. Hall. This is shown in his book “The Silent Language” (1959), where he gathered his working experience to give a definition of culture and communication, placing a strong emphasis on non-verbal communication.

Following the work of T. Hall, Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars started researching on intercultural issues, elaborating theories and developing the so-called “cultural dimensions” that consequently became very popular and influential (Deardorff 2009). Even though Hofstede’s dimensions have been subject to criticism since the 1990s, his theory has influenced the field for decades and it is still in use (Salo-Lee forth.).

The development of methods and models of intercultural competence is also described by Deardorff (2009). Throughout the years, studies on intercultural competence developed from models that focused on the singular individual interacting to models that took into account more people and contexts in the interaction. Since 1950, the most popular models would be based on three components: motivation, knowledge and skills. In 1984 Spitzberg and Cupach included two other dimensions: context and outcome. However, at those times the individual was still at the centre of every approach on intercultural interactions (Deardorff 2009: 7).

Five types of intercultural competence models have been used throughout the years. Compositional models present a list of components of intercultural competence and traits that an individual would need to have in order to be interculturally competent. Co-orientational models focus on the effectiveness of the interaction, therefore they relate with clarity, empathy,

perception of accuracy and every other communicative results. Developmental models have something in common with co-orientational models, however they focus much more on the progression of the interaction over time. Adaptational models concern the process of adaptation seen as mutual adjustment of two or more interactants. And finally, causal process models specify commonalities and connections between the various components of intercultural competence (Deardorff 2009: 10).

These models present many problematic aspects caused by a too rational and cognitive conception of human beings. Except for the feeling of anxiety related to culture shock, the models don't take into account emotions involved in intercultural interactions (Deardorff 2009).

Due to the development in intercultural communication studies, cross-cultural communication is currently clearly distinct from the newer term intercultural communication. In fact, cross-cultural represent the old approach adopted by scholars such as T. Hall, Hofstede Trompenaars, which was based on comparison between cultures. The term intercultural conveys the idea that culture is dynamic, negotiated and situational (Salo-Lee and Crawford 2017). This differentiation could be developed thanks to a shift in the way of approaching culture by the majority of scholars throughout the years. During the 1980s the tendency was to consider culture in the macro-level, focusing for example on nationality or ethnicity. This is considered a primordialist approach, which conveys an idea of culture containing people and shaping their behaviours; therefore, in order to understand and analyse culture, comparison was considered the best procedure. From the 1990s the primordialist approach evolved to a constructionist approach by recognising culture on its micro-level. According to this approach, people are considered as first subjects in creating their culture in specific contexts (Busch 2009).

The two just mentioned lines of thought regarding culture, primordialist and constructivist, represent also the development of intercultural communication teaching. Finland was one of the pioneers of this discipline, starting from the 1970s, leading to the establishment of intercultural communication courses and consequently to university degree programs in intercultural communication. At the beginning of this process, comparison between cultures and assumptions on how culture shapes the human mind were commonly used. However, research on the field, social factors such as internationalisation in the 1990s, the increasing migrations and globalization in the 2000s as well as the growing political and economic interests allowed an evolution of the way scholars study culture, causing a debate on intercultural competence (Borghetti 2017).

Throughout the years culture became a dynamic entity which can be created and recreated depending on the context and on the interlocutors, leading to turbulences in academia where traditional definitions, concepts and terms started to be contested and re-elaborated (Salo-Lee and Crawford 2017).

Because of its multidimensional nature and the several aspects related to this term, sometimes scholars use synonyms of intercultural competence or might create other terms that are very related to it, in order to provide more specific definitions. For example, there is apparently a distinction made by several scholars between “intercultural competence” and “intercultural sensitivity”. The term “intercultural sensitivity” is often employed in order to provide a more detailed definition of intercultural competence (Kaufmann et al. 2013, Shuang 2014). Shuang defines it as the individual motivation and capacity to appreciate and recognise cultural differences. In fact, an increment of intercultural sensitivity would provide a good basis

for the development of intercultural competence (2014: 8). Kaufmann et al. make a more distinct separation between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. They describe the first one as the ability to recognise intercultural experiences and the second as the ability to act appropriately in intercultural contexts and interactions (2014: 29). Another term proposed by scholars is “intercultural effectiveness”, which is formed by many aspects such as emotional intelligence (Kaufmann et al. 2014: 32). When referring to an individual's capacity to adapt to different cultural environments, Bücken and Korzilius adopt the term “cultural intelligence” (CQ) as a synonym of intercultural competence (2015: 1996, cited Thomas et al. 2008).

Several scholars criticise the way intercultural competence is used without a specific knowledge of what it describes. Object of criticism is also the interchangeability of this term with many others including for instance the words “multicultural”, “intercultural” or “cross-cultural” (Dervin 2010). Rathje (2007) offers an overview of several approaches in defining intercultural competence, presenting also their contradictory and problematic aspects. According to her, culture does not refer only to national cultures and does not rely on elements that necessarily unifies all members of a community. Instead, culture exists in every sort of collectives, which can overlap and contradict each other. Members of a collective create and share the idea of what is considered normal and familiar. Therefore, culture is not based on stability and consistency between its members but on a shared conception of what is normality and what it is not. The communication between members of different collectives will therefore face a lack of familiarity from the interlocutors. For this reason Rathje suggests a definition of intercultural competence as the ability to create a shared normality in order to create cohesion in the interaction (2007). Intercultural competence would therefore be conceived as a generic skill,

which does not create an “inter-culture” but an actual new culture that can be added to the other individuals’ collectives. According to Rathje (2007), the advantage of this approach is that it does not overestimate intercultural competence by promising any tools for success in communication. However, the ability of creating a culture by bringing familiarity in the interaction can be useful for the interlocutors in order to achieve their interactional goals (Rathje 2007: 264).

Many scholars agree with the view of multiple cultures that exist within national borders. Dervin for instance discusses the difference between “cultural differentialism”, which considers national culture as the because of diversities between people and “cultural mixing”, which refers to multiple diversities within the same national borders, stating that every individual is different (Dervin 2010).

However, Rathje’s position is not against the use of the term “intercultural competence” and it describes it as an actual ability that can therefore be developed. Also, this thesis supports Rathje’s definitions of culture and intercultural competence as the most applicable and less contradictory ones. This approach does not even reject the concept of national cultures, instead it adds the idea of several collectives and several cultures that can coexist together. The main criticism towards intercultural training is the assumption that trainers somehow assure success in intercultural communication. In this case, Rathje’s definition might be the most suitable in intercultural counseling in order to overcome contradictions and to provide a more flexible idea of what trainers aim at achieving with their trainees.

Nowadays, concepts such as “intercultural competence” and “intercultural communication” are still widely discussed in academia, where there are even debates on whether these concepts should even be defined and taken into consideration at all.

3. THE DEBATE ON INTERCULTURAL TRAINING

Intercultural trainings have been a point of debate among scholars. Some of them consider intercultural trainings a necessary tool, especially when addressed to employees sent abroad and representatives in international assignments (Kupka et al. 2008).

In this context intercultural trainings seem to represent an important resource to overcome problems related to intercultural encounters. In her book Kim (2001) considers both culture-general and culture-specific trainings important tools to build sojourners' preparedness for change (2001: 166). In fact, Kim considers preparedness for change one of the key aspects of immigrants and sojourners personal characteristics that facilitate cross-cultural adaptation (2001: 165). Kupka et al. (2008) underline the benefits of intercultural trainings for engaging effective interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds. Kupka et al. (2008) also describe intercultural trainings as a development of the traditional cross-cultural communication trainings, which are based simply on displaying similarities and differences between two or more cultures (2008: 1766). In the same way, Szkudlarek (2009) also claims that the ability to communicate through cultural boundaries has become necessary nowadays. For this reason, the author agrees that intercultural communication skills should be taught to people (2009: 975). In addition to that, she focuses on the ethical issues related to inequalities that intercultural training still does not take into account and sometimes contribute to create.

Many scholars have questioned the validity of spending time abroad as a tool for becoming interculturally competent. Shuang (2014) stresses the necessity of intercultural

training, demonstrating in her study how the simple contact with another culture as a result of travelling is not enough to build intercultural competence. In other words, according to Shuang (2014), even a person who travels very often and has been abroad several times still needs training in order to become interculturally competent.

On the contrary, scholars like Loenhoff (2011) and Holliday (2016) are very critical towards intercultural trainings in general. Loenhoff for example argues that intercultural trainings are built on stereotypes and explicit forms of communication that are almost useless for the participants in order to understand the interlocutor and overcome intercultural boundaries (2011: 62).

Holliday's critique is instead based on suggestions and new directions for developing these trainings. In his opinion, a potential development of intercultural training can be based on the concepts of "blocks" and "threads", "big cultures" and "small cultures", a focus on similarities rather than differences between people, and a new grammar of culture, including Dervin's concept of "simplicity" (as cited in Holliday 2016: 12).

Intercultural training is very related with the concept of intercultural competence, since these trainings aim at building this competence at least in a theoretical way. The different and often contrasting ways of scholars to describe or conceive this concept influences deeply their opinion on intercultural training. Therefore, how a scholar describes intercultural competence usually indicates his or her position on the debate on intercultural trainings. It is possible to recognise two lines of thought regarding this debate. The traditional one asserts that intercultural trainings are useful and necessary in order to teach people how to communicate with members of different cultures, be successful and happy in their tasks and life abroad (Kupka et al. 2008).

Whereas, a more critical line of thought considers intercultural training a way of making profit by taking advantage of nowadays' increasing contacts between people of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds (Breidenbach and Nyri 2009). Scholars who are critical towards intercultural trainings claim that intercultural competence cannot be taught and that mistakes need to be accepted as part of human communication (Dervin 2016). Furthermore, according to these scholars, intercultural trainings would contribute to the power imbalances and inequalities between countries and also between ethnic or social groups (Szkudlarek 2009).

Consequently, part of the disagreement among scholars regarding intercultural trainings concerns different definitions and ways of explaining intercultural competence. Some scholars consider intercultural competence as something that can be taught in classes or learned through exercises, whereas other scholars suggest a more flexible and abstract way of seeing this competence. The latter group often considers intercultural communication competence related to the non-verbal, abstract or inexplicable side of communication processes (Loenhoff 2011).

As mentioned before, it is possible to identify two general positions on this topic, a more traditional and a more critical one. Scholars adopting a traditional point of view claim that there are ways to build people's intercultural competence traits, such as openness towards other people's ways of living and thinking (Kim 2001). For this reason, intercultural trainings seems to be useful not only for businesses in order to make more profits, but also for people such as workers and students in order to start a new life or new studies in another country (Liu 2014, Reggy-Mamo 2008). There are for example many cases of people leaving their home countries in order to follow their partners in their new workplace abroad, or people who had to move to another place for political or economic reasons. These people face difficulties related to the fact

that they didn't move for their own choice but because of necessity, therefore they have difficulties adapting and being happy in the new place. Thus, intercultural trainings do not seem to be always about making profit but they might actually help people being mentally prepared for the change by teaching them intercultural competence. In fact, most of the traditionalist scholars identify specific exercises and learning methods in order to develop this specific competence (Landis et al. 2004).

On the contrary, scholars who are more critical towards intercultural trainings consider intercultural competence as an irrational part of communication processes, which is developed through experiences and mistakes. This ability cannot be taught simply because it represents a hidden area of everyone's mind, it can be developed by everyone but in a personal way through life experiences (Holliday 2016). According to these scholars, the definition of intercultural competence would reinforce stereotypes, power imbalance between culture and the contrasts between people from different backgrounds. In addition to that, this term would not take into account people's personal background as well as minorities and subcultures, placing individuals in very rigid categories represented by their national culture (Breidenbach and Nyri 2009). For some of these academics the concept of intercultural competence should be completely revisioned and intercultural trainings should not even be organised and taken into consideration (Dervin 2016). Whereas, other critical scholars claim that the term should be used very carefully and trainings should be structured around different subjects such as power imbalances and similarities between people (Holliday 2016, Szkudlarek 2009).

Nowadays, intercultural counseling definitely represents a strong and popular source of profit. However, there seems to be other interesting aspects of intercultural counseling besides

the economic one. In fact, there are many examples of intercultural trainings aiming at helping people preparing mentally for the challenges that moving to another country might involve. These trainings can be very useful when they are not based on stereotypes and essentialist conceptions of culture. For this reason, this thesis starts from the assumption that intercultural competence can be somehow taught and trainings should be improved to fit nowadays' new concepts and findings on communication studies. Critical scholars seem to feel ethically superior to this phenomenon and therefore they do not get involved in the field of intercultural counseling. However, this thesis underlines that restricting the discourse on intercultural competence and training on critique does not serve any practical purpose. If intercultural communication scholars do not get deeply involved with intercultural counseling, experts from business studies and other disciplines will take the responsibility of organising and selling these trainings. They will therefore teach stereotypes and generalizations without any help or suggestions from people who have an educational background on this subject. Also, the critique related to the use of intercultural communication discipline as a source of profit seems to be very contradictory since critical scholars work and are therefore paid by institutions such as universities to teach this discipline, making it a source of profit themselves. The best option will be accepting the fact that culture is discussed, thought and sold as a concrete thing; therefore experts need to overcome certain ethical problems and change some too old fashioned beliefs used in intercultural counseling.

The next chapters will describe the debate focusing on scholars' recent studies on intercultural training and intercultural competence.

3.1 Traditional view: intercultural competence can be taught

The academic side which claims that intercultural competence can and should be taught seems to base its point of view on the changes in our society regarding communication systems. Especially the internet and social media, but also the development of transportation facilities have made contacts between cultures much easier and common. However, people do not change together with communication systems and technologies. Therefore, the world is considered not ready to overcome cultural differences without some support from specialists. This type of support consists of intercultural trainings developed to build intercultural competence (Liu 2014).

In her cross-cultural communication theory, Kim (2001) explains host communication competence as formed by culture-specific and culture-general knowledge. Additionally, she indicates three components of host communication competence: cognitive, affective and operational. The cognitive sphere is related to verbal and non-verbal communication knowledge, the affective components concerns the emotional and motivational capacity of sojourners, whereas the behavioral component is related to the tools, skills and resources that facilitate sojourners' communication with the host community (2001: 97-120). This view is very similar to the one of Milhouse (1996) when she points out the goals of intercultural training. According to her study, the trainings should help trainees to achieve cognitive, affective and behavioral goals.

This schematic way of explaining intercultural competence is also adopted by Shuang (2014), who stresses the notions of “effectiveness” and “appropriateness” in defining

intercultural competence. According to her, this competence is the ability to choose the appropriate communicative behaviours and therefore accomplish interpersonal goals while maintaining the face during the interaction (Shuang 2014: 7).

It would seem like every scholar who sees these trainings positively also has opinions on how they should be structured and what kind of learning strategies they should adopt. Milhouse (1996) takes into account different types of intercultural training methods and makes a distinction between traditional didactic methods such as lectures, which belongs to the educational area, and experiential learning such as case studies and simulations, which are usually used in trainings (1996: 71). At the end of her study she concludes that the best structure for intercultural training is a multidimensional approach that includes both didactic and experiential learning materials. These sorts of multidimensional training contain culture-general and cultures-specific knowledge and aim at developing qualities that are considered useful in intercultural communication, such as openness (1996: 72). Kupka et al. (2008) seem to share the same opinion in their study. In fact, they claim that intercultural training should consist of both culture general and culture-specific learning. According to their research, both cognitive and experiential learning are important as long as the trainings are tailored for the specific group of trainees. Specifically, they underline the importance of organizing trainings for partners of expatriates sent abroad for international assignments (2008: 1785-1787).

The distinction between experiential and cognitive approaches in intercultural trainings is explained by Reggy-Mamo (2008), who tested experiential methods in a training tailored for a multicultural class of adults with full time jobs. The author suggests that this group of trainees would benefit more from an experiential learning that does not require "study at home".

Therefore the main points of this training are: getting to know the trainees' own culture, exploring stereotypes, experiencing different cultures and appreciating diversity through simulation games. In this way, the training focused on different learning styles referring to previous studies of different scholars, identifying some experiential learning stages (Reggy-Mamo 2008: 114). The experiential type of training resulted satisfying for the trainees, who previously complained about the heavy theoretical approach of previous similar courses they had taken (Reggy-Mamo 2008: 121). The importance of knowing the trainees own culture is shared by Kim (2001) when she mentions that being aware and conscious about our own cultural identity would help us build tolerance towards other people's culture. She also claims that this self-confidence would benefit adaptation (2001: 109).

Different methods and approaches have been also tested within the field of intercultural business communication in order to give specific points to follow and structure a valuable training (Min 2015). Min (2015) agrees with Reggy-Mamo and Kim claiming that self-awareness and self-analysis are crucial in intercultural communication. Furthermore, understanding and acceptance of the other is very important as long as an individual does not justify or accept everything because of cultural differences. In addition, Min provides an “action plan” to improve intercultural business communication, which includes simple translations that leaves little space for misunderstandings, the knowledge of history, customs and etiquette of a specific country, the development of listening abilities and the tendency of being optimistic in general and open minded towards differences (2015: 197-199).

Another very important aspect of teaching intercultural competence consists of tailoring the trainings for specific trainees groups. Specifically, the study of Kupka et al. shows that in

cases of representatives sent abroad in international assignments it is very important to address intercultural trainings to representatives' partners as well (2008: 1766). In fact, partners seem to exercise a strong influence on expatriates in being successful during their assignment abroad. For this reason, partners should be included in intercultural trainings' programs, which should present both target-culture and general-culture contents (2008: 1787).

Landis, Bennett and Bennett (2004) explain the categories of training, dividing teaching methods into cognitive methods, active methods, intercultural methods and other methods. Cognitive methods consist of teaching approaches related to the acquisition of knowledge. They include lectures, written materials, computer-based trainings, videos, self-assessment, case studies and critical incidents. Active methods aim at teaching skills through experiences and practical exercises. The authors include in this category of methods role plays, simulation games and exercises. Intercultural methods are more strictly related to intercultural themes and include training techniques such as contrast culture, culture assimilator, cross-cultural dialogue, culture analysis and community-based immersion. Landis et al. place under the category called "other methods" visual imagery and fine arts, which are approaches that aim at teaching intercultural subjects through arts (2004: 14-51).

Simulation games seem to represent a very popular and effective method to teach intercultural communication nowadays. Simulations are part of the experiential learning and can include games and role-play where the trainees have to deal with situations that simulate potential real-life contexts. In this case, the trainees are very active in the learning process and the most important aspect of this type of learning method is that it connects deeply with the trainees' emotional side. Therefore, simulations might develop more long-term and stable

abilities (Bücker and Korzilius 2015). As mentioned before, Bücker and Korzilius put a lot of emphasis on emotional intelligence as something deeply related to intercultural competence. For this reason, they claim that cultural simulations are probably the most valid method to improve this competence (2015: 1996).

There are naturally problematic aspects described by some scholars. One of these aspects is nowadays' increasing demand for short-term trainings to teach complex skills such as intercultural competence, which require a long learning process (Kaufmann et al. 2013: 31). The training should aim at developing intercultural competence in the long term, but often the abilities that are acquired during the training are forgotten and lost after some time. This can be problematic, especially in case trainees need to spend a long time abroad. One solution might be to organize more trainings throughout a longer period of time. Moreover, according to Kaufmann et al. (2013), it is possible to gain long-term benefits from a short-term intervention. However, the opposite case might happen, where long-term interventions provide short-term benefits, thus the trainee would be competent in one cultural setting and unable to use his or her competency in other situations (2013: 31).

Due to the shortness of business people's stay abroad, an approach that aims at adaptation instead of integration seems the most effective to some trainers (Salo-Lee and Crawford 2017). Specific exercises are arranged in order to develop a component of intercultural competence called "negotiating reality". Through the analysis of their own cultural traits and reflection on intercultural encounters they experienced in their life, trainees can gain self-awareness, curiosity towards events that are difficult to understand, openness towards different points of view and

willingness to overcome personal convictions about the world by interpreting things in different ways (2017).

3.2 Assessing intercultural competence

Traditional scholars seem to claim that intercultural competence can be developed as well as assessed in several ways, regardless of the way they define this term. Qualitative methods such as interviews and questionnaires seem to be common; however different assessment scales based on quantitative research methods for intercultural competence have been developed and are still used in many studies related to this topic. Some of the most popular ones are the Behavioural Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (1988, 1979), the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993), the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (1995), the Assessment of Intercultural Competency (2006) and many others (Kaufmann et al. 2013: 29).

The method used to assess and teach intercultural competence is deeply related to factors such as the reasons why this competence is needed, the context where it will be used, the age of the target group, whether the competence needs to be learned for a short or long term and so on. For example, an intercultural training organized for business people preparing for an international assignment would probably be much different from a training structured for students getting ready for a year of studies or cultural exchange abroad (Kupka et al. 2008).

However, assessing intercultural competence represents another point of debate in intercultural communication. Critical scholars do not recognise the validity of traditional

assessment methods mentioned before, arguing that assessing intercultural competence might lead to several ethical problems.

A very strong base for criticism toward this type of assessment is the difficulty of defining the components of intercultural competence and how these components relate to each other. Another problem is related to determining universal levels of intercultural competence, in order to define an individual's level after the assessment test is taken. Additionally, according to Borghetti (2017), the difficulties in conceptualising intercultural competence produce obstacles in delineating an interculturally competent performance.

Moreover, several critical scholars argue that intercultural competence does not need to be assessed, since it is considered on the same level with personal traits such as honesty or generosity. In fact, these are values that are not usually assessed, even though teachers might try to promote them to their students (Borghetti 2017).

Another ambiguous aspect of assessing intercultural competence seems to be connected to the essentialistic tendency that such assessment would involve (Dervin, 2010). Dervin explains that, in the context of intercultural competence within foreign language learning, even qualitative methods such as interviews or observation might not be objective and are therefore not convincing assessment methods. The way of assessing intercultural competence is deeply related to the way this competence is defined. Dervin describes three main perspectives of conceiving intercultural competence: cultural differentialism, cultural mixing and the Janusian approach. According to him, the second approach, cultural mixing, is the most acceptable and suitable one for creating an assessment method within language learning in higher education (Dervin 2010).

Assessing intercultural competence really represents a controversial aspect of intercultural communication studies. This thesis supports the idea that intercultural competence does not necessarily have to be assessed through specific methods. Intercultural training does not necessarily aim at getting trainees prepared for everything they will face abroad and expats do not usually need to obtain a specific intercultural competence level. Within education in schools, intercultural communication might be assessed with the aim of observing young people's attitude towards other cultures, in order to discuss stereotypes and prejudices in class. However, concerning the field of intercultural counseling for expats, assessment should not be needed, as a simple discussion with trainees can be sufficient for the trainer to understand how to tailor the training better.

3.3 Critique on intercultural competence and trainings

In more recent studies, the traditional definition of intercultural competence has been criticized and elaborated. For example, according to Loenhoff (2011) intercultural communication competence represents more an activity and a reflexive ability than an actual type of knowledge. Not even linguistic competence can be acquired just through explicit knowledge, as communication is deeply related to the creation of meanings that can be understood through experiences and misunderstandings. Moreover, the author argues that intercultural competence is embedded in implicit knowledge, which is deeply tied to a community's shared knowledge and really depends on its social background. This knowledge is not explicable with rules or rational

connections between actions and communication patterns and therefore cannot be taught in intercultural trainings (Loenhoff 2011: 59). Holliday's study (2016) on intercultural competence is also very recent. Holliday suggests that intercultural competence is hidden in every person's memory and past experiences. Therefore, being intercultural competent means being able to find "threads" between people rather than focusing on "blocks", which are what make us and our way of living different from each other. Threads are generated thanks to past experiences that are part of everyday life, such as going to a wedding, visiting parents or doing the groceries and so on. These activities are shared by most people regardless of their nationality and can therefore represent a common point to share in the interaction. In this way, it is possible to refer to what Holliday calls "small cultures", based on small common situations that every person experiences. In contrast, blocks are created by the idea of national cultures or so-called "big cultures", which usually underline differences between people based on their nationality. Blocks also represent general issues such as politics, religion and so on (Holliday 2016: 1-5).

A very influential part of the academic critique on intercultural counseling focuses on some old definitions related to intercultural communication such as "culture", "multicultural", "intercultural", "diversity", "intercultural competence" and many others (Dervin, Paatela-Nieminen, Kuoppala and Riitaoja 2012). The main point of this critique is to underline how these words are often used as synonyms, without a real understanding of what they describe in specific. The concept of intercultural competence is particularly discussed, since it has lately become quite popular and widely used especially in the academic world. The problematic aspect of the word "intercultural competence" is due to its component "inter-cultural" which is already heavily contested and has therefore no specific and determined definition (Dervin et al. 2012: 3).

Moreover, the so-defined by Dervin “old and tired” concept of “culture” would lead to an essentialistic mindset that not only stresses the differences between people, describing them in a biased way according to some cultural hierarchies, but also gives the idea that intercultural competence can be learned once and be acquired for good (2012: 4). In this context, it is also possible to find relations with the thoughts of Szkudlarek (2009) regarding power imbalances hidden behind the notion of culture (Dervin et al. 2012: 5). Furthermore, the adoption of the plural form of this concept “intercultural competencies” is suggested in order to express its dynamism and instability conveying the idea that the development of these competencies is a life-long process (Dervin et al. 2012). In addition to this, Dervin et al. share Holliday’s opinion according to which everyone is the result of several identity markers and different backgrounds that can have nothing to do with people’s specific nationalities. Therefore, the future of intercultural training might be focused more on similarities between people from different countries rather than the differences that separate them (Holliday 2016, Dervin 2016). Consequently, any sort of intercultural training should be developed in order to help trainees understand the concept of threads and teach them how to find them in the interaction with other people (Holliday 2016: 12, Dervin 2016). In fact, as Holliday discusses in his article, every type of communication takes place in specific contexts with specific interlocutors and their background, thus potentially every-day life experience or situation can be useful to interact in a positive way with someone with a different social or cultural background (2016: 8).

Holliday and Dervin seem to be on the same page regarding the future developments of the notion of “culture” and the structuring of intercultural training, which should be based more on similarities that can be found in people’s everyday life, taking into account the power

imbalance between countries and trying to negotiate a culture “in between” where the interlocutors can meet each other, instead of reinforcing their differences created by a rigid idea of culture (Dervin et al. 2012: 5).

It is clear that also the critique that scholars address to intercultural training is often related to ethical issues. These issues are usually related to stereotypes, rigid conceptions of intercultural communication competence, western mentality bias towards the non-western parts of the world, the direct connection between culture and nation, the lack of consideration regarding different sub groups in a country and so on (Szkudlarek 2009).

According to Loenhoff (2011) intercultural trainings consist of explicit knowledge. Therefore the teaching is based on information regarding the history, society, language and customs of a country. The author points out that implicit knowledge, so called "tacit knowledge", represents an essential element in intercultural communication. This kind of knowledge is difficult to teach because it is connected to behaviors that are not always rational and explicable. Loenhoff concludes that, as children learn the explicit and implicit knowledge regarding communication in their community through experience and imitation, so adults need to learn different communication patterns through experience and misunderstandings (2011: 60). According to her study, intercultural trainings serve the only purpose of giving false certainties based on stereotypes and superficial knowledge about a community (2011: 62-63).

Szkudlarek (2009) does not express an opinion against intercultural trainings. However, she points out that trainers should adopt a more self-reflexive and critical approach and a deeper analysis of intercultural encounters (2009: 976). The main problem within intercultural trainings is related to social inequalities, mainly between the western and the eastern part of the world, but

also between different social statuses within the same society (2009: 977). In western countries for example there seem to be much more organizations that provide intercultural trainings compared to non-western countries. These trainings should be organized on both sides; however two-side intercultural trainings for representatives are actually very rare. Honesty also plays an important role in this context, as communication styles that are taught in previous trainings cannot really be considered part of honest communication (Szkudlarek 2009: 981). Holliday seems to be on the same line on this issue, arguing that traditional trainings contribute in creating a strong “us-them” separation, which relies deeply on differences between people rather than similarities (Holliday 2016: 6).

There is also a criticism related to the economic side of intercultural trainings and the current problematic aspect of intercultural communication being part of a very lucrative business that exploits culture in order to make it a source of profit (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2009). Intercultural consulting companies, expensive intercultural training courses, universities’ degrees in intercultural communication or intercultural management are all good examples of this phenomenon (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2009: 265). Breidenbach and Nyíri critically discuss about the way intercultural “experts” sell intercultural trainings by convincing their clients that intercultural encounters cannot be faced the same way as a normal conversation with a stranger, and that avoiding mistakes in international assignments is worth the cost of their training. Also, students and education institutions seem to be persuaded that being international and interculturally competent is crucial for both universities’ image and students’ future careers. This current situation is considered a result of the work of Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars on culture and intercultural communication studies, specifying that the studies of these scholars has been

used for businesses and often in ways that conflict with these scholars' initial intentions (2009). Furthermore, new phenomena of multiculturalism, immigration and globalization in general are also being exploited for profit by increasing the fear and skepticism towards people from different countries and placing people in contrasting categories (2009).

3.4 New concepts on intercultural training

Some scholars apply a more critical mindset towards traditional intercultural trainings. Thus they try to form new concepts and definitions of intercultural competence and training.

Szkudlarek refers to the work of Evanoff (2004, cited Szkudlarek 2009: 978) regarding "virtual third culture" to suggest a new way of conceiving intercultural communication competence and intercultural trainings. Third cultures can be formed during the interaction; therefore they are situational. In these cases, values are formed thanks to the contribution of both interlocutors through dialogue. When third cultures are created, instead of having two distinct cultures comparing themselves to each other, we have a sort of hybrid that works in that specific situation (Szkudlarek 2009: 978).

Dervin agrees with Holliday regarding the importance of emphasising similarities rather than differences between people and cultures in general, although he is even critical about the use and overuse of the word "culture" and other terms related to it. He seems to be against any sort of intercultural training that consists of learning about a target culture and confrontations between cultures (Dervin, 2016). This position in the debate is based on the argument that

interactions are constructed by all interactants and are therefore situational and context related. It is not acceptable to talk about communication and interactions without taking into account the interlocutors' background. Even though Dervin insists on the fact that it is not possible to teach effective communication, he gives some suggestions on how to think about culture. First of all, his book provides categories on how to conceive culture: solid, Janusian, liquid idealistic and liquid realistic (2016). The solid approach corresponds to the categorization of individuals based on their nationality. In this case the nationality of people becomes something solid that can be easily reconnected to behaviours and way of thinking in order to distinguish individuals (Dervin 2016). The Janusian approach is related to the previous one but it takes into account its problematic aspects, this approach often causes contradictions and instability in the discourse on culture. The liquid idealistic approach tends to refuse every kind of essentialistic ideas about culture. The problem of this approach is that it is based on unrealistic goals, since it is impossible to reach a complete non-essentialism. In addition to that, this approach seems to cause a feeling of superiority in "non-essentialist" people comparing themselves to those who are "essentialistic", and this would not benefit the discourse of culture in any way. The last approach, the liquid realistic, is the one Dervin suggests and adopts. This approach tries to avoid essentialism but at the same time it takes into account the simplicity of human way of thinking. People are complex, and therefore they try to think in a complex way. They understand that the world is made by complex elements and it is full of dynamics, but they also need to simplify the way they conceive the world in order to give explanations for it (Dervin 2016).

Dervin concludes that pure non-essentialism cannot be reached simply because human beings are going to simplify and make generalizations in a way or another. It is unrealistic that people

would always think in a complex way, taking into account contexts, backgrounds and exceptions; instead, people will sometimes fall into the simplicity of their thinking about the world. The only way to improve this situation is trying to think in a complex way as often as possible, accepting the fact that at some point our mind will go back to simple (Dervin 2016). Also, the tendency of controlling communication processes is an object of strong criticism in intercultural training. In this context, failure is considered a positive learning experience. Dervin seems to be in line with Loenhoff's thoughts (2011) when he claims that people learn through mistakes, therefore he considers trainings that aim at preventing any sort of failure in the interaction unrealistic (Dervin 2016: 14).

The problematic aspect of intercultural trainings is represented by the fact that communication processes and business are very associated and treated in the same contest. However, business does not accept mistakes and misunderstandings, whereas communication is characterised by mistakes and adjustment between interlocutors (Breidenbach and Nyri 2009, Loenhoff 2011).

As a result of the academic turbulences on intercultural communication, a side in between the critical and traditional school has been formed. This position represents scholars who claim that there should be improvements and changes in the way intercultural counseling is organised in order to avoid essentialism. However, culture is claimed to be an important part of people's way of living and thinking and therefore should not be refused as a concept (Salo-Lee forth.). A new intercultural communication is proposed, to convey the idea of a constructionist approach that aims at displaying the dynamism of culture. Thus, intercultural communication is still considered as a field that can benefit from many different disciplines. Culture is not seen as a

rigid container generating people's behaviours but is represented through the metaphor of a rhizome, in order to express its dynamism and tendency of changing with time (Salo-Lee forth.).

According to this thesis, the problem related to the critical school of thoughts on intercultural training is that scholars do not give practical suggestions on how these trainings should be changed and organised in order to be considered positively. Scholars' critique is limited to arguments against intercultural counseling in general, without taking into account that this type of business is going to be exploited as long as it generates profit, regardless of scholars' points of view. Intercultural communication academics should be the ones responsible for the structuring of the training, the choice of the themes discussed in it and so on. In other words, they should get involved with this matter and give practical suggestions that can be applied on the trainings in order to improve them.

4. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to discover trainees' and trainer's perceptions on intercultural training. Through the observation of different points of view, the thesis aims at making suggestions on how to develop these types of training. The data were collected through an open ended questionnaire sent to trainees before their training, an interview with each of the trainees after the training and an interview with the trainer. The trainees' answers to the questionnaire and interviews were compared and analysed using qualitative thematic analysis in order to make conclusions on the perceived effects of the training.

The research questions that guide this study are:

- How can intercultural training be improved in order to satisfy trainees' needs and at the same time overcome problematic ethical aspects discussed by critical scholars ?
- How well do intercultural trainings equip expatriates for their adjustment abroad?
- How new ideas from critical scholars can be applied in intercultural training?
- How does the trainer's perception on intercultural training relate to that of the trainees'?

Perceptions are important since they can tell a lot about trainees' real needs and wishes. In fact, employees who relocate abroad might need something more than simple information about needed documents in the host country or some tips on how to communicate with locals. For this reason, assuming that there would be a gap between the trainees' and the trainer's perceptions on the training, it is important to determine whether and how the trainer's and the

trainees' perceptions align. It is also very useful to know the trainer's perception of the training in order to understand how the training is constructed and if the trainer's mindset can be even more aligned with trainees' necessities (Yook and Albert 1999: 2). Perceptions need to be considered as a base for interpretation according to the analysis and cannot be treated as facts. For this reason, perceptions and emotions can be underestimated within academic research, as they tend to be considered part of the irrational sphere of people's minds and often too abstract to be viewed as valuable data. However, some scholars recognise the importance of the emotional sphere as the motive that structures social actions and events. Yook and Albert for example (1999) focused on perception of U.S. undergraduates on non-native speakers. Grosse (2011) studied perceptions of global managers on intercultural competence and its components using questionnaires as methodology for gathering data. Whereas Pérez (2016) used a mixed method of surveys, interviews and statistical analysis in order to study teachers' needs and required competences for adjusting to a bilingual education model. Whatever method is used to analyse data, it seems like intercultural trainings and training within the educational field are often connected to the study of participants' perceptions.

The main interest of this study is the perceived outcome of a small number of trainings; for this reason this research is considered a case study.

This thesis' data gathering was built on qualitative research methods such as open ended questionnaires and interviews. The choice of applying a qualitative methodology was due to the fact that this thesis' data gathering interested a very small group of people. Moreover, the quantity of information gained from both the questionnaire and the interviews was not as important as the actual content of the answers (Silverman 2013: 11). Furthermore, this study's

interest is not on intercultural training from a general point of view; instead, it focuses on details regarding specific trainings and their perceived results. Qualitative methods seemed to be the best choice when searching for detailed information from a small group of respondents in a specific context (Silverman 2013).

Another reason for choosing qualitative research methods is that it would seem like studies on intercultural trainings are often based on quantitative methods (Bücker et al 2015, Kupka et al. 2008, Liu 2014, Zheng 2015). Thus, in order to explore different sides of this field and learn more about it, a different approach consisting of qualitative methods was considered the most adequate choice.

This study was conducted adopting a mixed methods approach, which consists of using interviews and a questionnaire (Silverman 2013). A mixed method seemed the best methodology for a small case study, since it allowed the analysis of different points of view during different stages, providing a bigger and more detailed picture on the whole phenomenon. In fact, the thesis took into account the trainees' answers to a questionnaire before the training, the trainer's plans regarding the structure of the training and the answers to an interview with the trainees after the training. Although sometimes mixed methods lead to difficulties related to the analysis of too many data from different perspectives, in this case all data gathered were well connected, the number of participants was limited and the whole study focused on the same type of phenomenon, which is the training itself. For these reasons, a mixed method was considered the most effective data gathering method for this research (Silverman 2013: 65).

4.1 Data collection

As mentioned before, this study was conducted through a set of interviews and a questionnaire. Specifically, one questionnaire was sent to people who were going to attend the training, in order to find out their motivations and expectations as well as a few personal background information. The choice of using a questionnaire at this point of the study was due to the fact that the answers needed could be short and descriptive of the trainees' ideas and did not need a deep analysis. Also, it was very important that trainees would be willing to be interviewed face-to-face after the training. In this case, a short questionnaire at the beginning of the study required a small amount of time and effort from trainees, avoiding causing them stress or a feeling of using too much of their free time.

Interviews seemed to be the most effective way of gathering data on people's perceptions, especially when these are connected to their life as well. The participants are able to talk freely without being interrupted and to express every possible feeling about the training. Therefore, the main task of the interviewer consists in active listening (Silverman 2014: 166). Active listening is a very important aspect when conducting interviews; it requires not only listening without interrupting the interviewee but also avoiding comments or opinions that might disturb the interviewees' flow of thoughts (2014: 166). Considering the three versions of interview data, which are positivism, naturalism and constructionism, this type of interviews fall under the category of naturalism which consists in interviews that aim at gathering real experiences of participants (2014: 173). Interviews were semi-structured, consisting of both

closed and open ended questions. Therefore, during the interviews, new questions were asked according to what the participants said, although the main prefixed questions were always present.

The data gathering was possible thanks to an intercultural trainer. The trainer acted as contact person with companies requiring their training; she agreed on asking the permission of some of her clients for letting their employees participate in the study. Consequently, it was possible to receive contacts of expats who were going to attend the intercultural training, as they were about to leave or were already relocated abroad for international assignments. Before the data collection began, the data gathering plan with a list of questions for the questionnaire and interviews were sent to some students of the program of Intercultural Communication of the University of Jyväskylä, in order to obtain their feedback and a wider view on the process.

Participants were contacted by an introductory email with a pdf consent form attached. They were asked to read the form and answer the same email specifying their agreement to the consent form's terms. In total, seven participants answered the email agreeing to the informed consent, but only six of them answered the questionnaire. Among those six participants who sent their questionnaire answers, only five were available for the final interview.

Once the consent was given, the participants received the first questionnaire, which consisted of a list of eight questions that had to be answered simply by replying to the email.

The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. What are the reasons why you are attending this training?
2. What do you expect to learn in this training?
3. Have you ever had any other intercultural training before?

4. What do you think intercultural communication competence is?
5. What do you think cultural awareness is?
6. You are about to move to a new country. What challenges do you expect to face regarding your adjustment process abroad?
7. Position covered in the company:
8. Age:

Personal information such as age, and position covered in the company were asked in order to observe whether similar views on intercultural communication could be shared by people of the same age or work position. In this case, future trainings could be tailored more specifically and certain cultural issues could be discussed depending on these factors (Kupka et al. 2008). However, when the questionnaire was structured, the final number of participants was unsure. In fact, the number of participants ended up being quite limited and this made the information on trainees' age and work position not relevant for the analysis.

Knowing about trainees' mindset and ideas of intercultural competence before the training was important in order to understand the developments and results the training produced. Question four and five were related to the trainees' conception of terms commonly used in the intercultural communication field; this information was needed in order to understand what is trainees' starting point on the subject and how their ideas regarding this concept change after the training. Also, the trainer herself expressed her wish for these questions to be asked, which was a very interesting way of testing whether the trainees consider these terms important as well.

The next step consisted of waiting for the participants to have their training and then contact them once more by email in order to fix a time for the final interviews, which were conducted by phone or Skype, depending on the interviewees' preference.

Once the training had ended, a phone/Skype interview was conducted with every participant. In this case, interviews were conducted instead of a second questionnaire because it was important to give participants more space in order for them to talk and express their ideas and feelings. These interviews were used to tell not only whether the training met the trainees' expectations but also about trainees' perceptions on important issues such as the duration of the training, its applicability and their ideas on how it could be improved .

Here are listed the questions asked during the second interview with the trainees:

1. What was your favorite part of the training?
2. What would you change/add to the training?
3. Did you learn something new?
4. Do you think the training helped you develop yourself? Explain
5. Do you think you needed more time? Are you going to benefit from the training in the long run?
6. Do you think differently about intercultural competence after the training? How about intercultural awareness?
7. Do you think you can apply what you have learned in real life (personal and professional)?

8. Did you find out other aspects and problems related to your future adjustment process abroad? How about repatriation? Did you learn some tools to face challenges in this sense?
9. Do you think the training was useful? Would you recommend it to someone?
10. How did they advertise/present the training to you?
11. Do you want to add any other comments about the training?

Question number one was asked at the beginning of the interview in order to understand what sort of information trainees tend to remember better and what kind of content is more appreciated. Question two was important as it allowed the interviewer to find out the contents that were less appreciated by trainees and also whether there was a lack of content according to their opinion. Question three aimed at finding out whether the information given in the training were actually new to trainees. Through this question it was possible to understand whether the information provided in the session increased the trainees' knowledge in intercultural communication. Intercultural communication seems to be the central point of intercultural training; therefore, it was interesting to know whether trainees felt like they gained a wider view of the subject. This is the reason why question four was part of the interview. Also, this information might clarify whether trainees felt like the session guided them towards a personal development or only a professional one. Question five is related to the issue concerning the duration of the training. Some critical scholars consider intercultural competence as a life long learning process and others believe that a short training cannot provide long long term results. Also, as international assignments usually last at least one year, it was important to consider

whether, in trainees' opinions, one day training would benefit the whole time of their assignment. Question six aimed at determining whether the training had an influence on trainees' way of thinking about intercultural communication. The same information was asked referring to the term "intercultural awareness", as the trainer specifically asked to insert this term in the questionnaire addressed to trainees. In this way, it was possible to find out what role these two terms played in the training session. Question seven was asked in order to find out whether, in trainees' opinion, the training contents were merely theoretical or they could somehow be applied in a practical way. Question eight aimed at determining whether the training provided trainees with a wider view of what moving to another country might involve in both short and long run. Question nine was asked to find out trainees' general level of satisfaction regarding the training session. Question ten was included in the list in order to discover how the trainer and the companies describe the training to employees. This information might give an idea of the way companies conceive intercultural training. To conclude, question eleven was asked in order to give trainees the opportunity to talk about issues and topics that were not covered by the interviewer's questions.

Referring to the list of questions addressed to trainees, during the first interview some questions were added in real time. The interview started with the question: "How did the training go?", which was added in order to have some sort of general background on how the participant perceived the training. Also, this question made the conversation flow much more naturally. Some questions that were not part of the initial list were asked in order to clarify certain points. For example, when the interviewee 1 expressed his wish for more information about the specific relocation country the question: "Do you mean from a cultural point of view?" was asked in

order to have a clearer idea of what the participant meant. Also, the order of the questions was slightly changed during the first interview. For instance the question: “Did you talk about repatriation?” was supposed to be investigated later on (Kaufmann et al. 2013).

The interview with the trainer was conducted in order to gather information about the specific profession of the trainer. Furthermore, this interview was important in order to understand how the trainings are usually structured, on what ideas or concepts they are based on and what sort of exercises, discussions or lectures are usually conducted.

The questions asked during the interview with the trainer were:

1. How did you become a trainer and why did you choose this path?
2. What kind of training do you offer?
3. In your opinion, what are the most important goals of the training you offer?
4. What are the main concepts/ ideas you base the training on?
5. What are the exercises commonly used during the training? Could you please give an example of an exercise you usually use?
6. Do you assess the trainees’ intercultural skills before and after the training? If yes how? If not, why not?
7. How do you evaluate the results of the training?
8. How do you know your teaching will benefit the trainees in the long run?
9. Do you have more training sessions during their stay abroad?
10. How is the time and content of the training session divided between relocation practices (explaining what sort of documents they need, how to open a bank account etc.) and intercultural training (such as how to communicate with locals etc.)? examples

11. What do you think intercultural communication/competence is? How about intercultural awareness? Why are these concepts important?
12. Does the structure or content of the training change depending on trainees's needs/age/experience/nationality or other factors? If yes, how?
13. How do you plan on developing your training in the future? Why?

As already mentioned, these questions aimed at finding out the trainer's perception on the training and how the training was organised, since it was not possible to observe it. The first question was asked in order to understand more about the intercultural trainer's profession in specific and to gain more useful background information. The second and third questions were deeply related to the perception the trainer has about the service she offers; thus, it could be useful to compare the answer to these questions to the needs and expectations expressed by trainees'. Questions number four and five were important since the training could not be observed by outsiders. Questions six and seven aimed at determining whether there was some sort of assessment before and after the training, as the content and outcome of the training might change depending on the trainee's preparation. Some scholars discuss the problematic aspect regarding intercultural training being a short-term action trying to teach a long-term knowledge, which is intercultural competence (Kaufmann et al. 2013: 31). This is the reason why questions eight and nine were asked during the interview. During the interviews with trainees, it was noticed that a large part of the session was dedicated to relocation practices; therefore, it seemed very important to include question ten in the interview with the trainer. Question eleven was asked in order to find out how the trainer conceives intercultural communication, since the way

this concept is defined might be related to the way it is taught to other people. Moreover, the trainer asked for these terms to be mentioned in the questionnaire addressed to trainees, therefore it was interesting to know the reason for this necessity and whether the trainees consider these concepts important as well. Question twelve aimed at finding out whether the training is tailored based on different trainees. To conclude, concerning question thirteen, it was useful to ask the trainer how she would develop her training. In fact, the trainer has direct experience on the field and might be conscious of possibilities for developments but also about difficulties in introducing new methods.

Questionnaires were answered by trainees with concise and short answers, stating the most relevant points and information. The interviews with trainees instead, lasted between thirty and forty minutes, whereas the interview with the trainer lasted approximately one hour and thirty minutes. Also, the trainees' and the trainer's answers were all anonymised.

Additionally, this thesis refers to the trainer using the pronoun "she", regardless of the gender of the trainer. This choice was made in order to avoid confusion that the use of other neutral pronouns could cause while discussing the findings.

4.2 Data analysis

The data were analysed and compared using qualitative thematic analysis, which consists of observing the interviews' transcripts in order to identify common relevant themes (Silverman 2014: 217). In specific, thematic analysis is a very commonly used qualitative data analysis

method that borrows some features from other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory and phenomenology. In fact, grounded theory shares with thematic analysis the need of building claims based on data, which are in this case represented by the texts. The main purpose of this method is to find common themes and codes that are compared to each other and to the text itself. Yet, thematic analysis is also close to phenomenological research, as it focuses on people's perceptions and experiences and it is based on the researcher's interpretation of participants' claims (Guest et al. 2012: 13). However, unlike grounded theory, thematic analysis does not necessarily aim at building a theory and, unlike phenomenology, does not limit its field of interest in human experiences but also in social and cultural phenomena (Guest et al. 2012: 18). Furthermore, thematic analysis involves flexibility regarding the quantity or the type of data. Therefore, it can be applied to analyse large and small quantities of data, which can consist of texts, video or images (Guest et al. 2012). This thesis' goal is not to build a specific theory or model regarding intercultural training; instead, its focus is on the perceptions of people involved in the event. At the same time, this thesis aims at finding out intercultural trainings' structure and goals. For these reasons, thematic analysis seems the best option for this type of study.

The main steps of thematic analysis are: text segmentation, identification and labeling of themes, description of codes and the development of a codebook.

Text segmentation consists of isolating parts of text, such as sentences or words, in order to define their meanings. There are several strategies related to text segmentation in thematic analysis, which may consist of different levels of arbitrariness in the connections between the text units. Some strategies involve the use of software programs; however, according to Guest et al., a specific segmentation strategy is not necessary in case a small amount of data is available

(2012: 50). In this thesis segmentation consisted of analyzing the text and isolating text units that seemed to carry a meaning in order to compare them to other units. This process was repeated for several times, until a satisfactory number of themes was reached. Consequently, themes were labeled and codes were connected to their descriptions. The latter process is called “coding” and needs to be completed several times in order to make order in the meanings and relationships between units. The aim of the codebook is to describe the relationships, similarities, differences and coherence found between themes and codes. Specifically, the codebook is a structured and organised system that indicates and describes the codes and their meanings, providing examples of their use (guest et al. 2012: 53).

This method involves a great use of interpretation from the researcher, who has to find themes, codes their links in order to analyse the data. Since interpretation is the most relevant part of the process, reliability might be seen as a problem in thematic analysis. However, thematic analysis represents one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research, as it is very useful for capturing both explicit and implicit meanings of words or expressions (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012: 11-12).

As the questionnaire and the interviews were deeply connected to each other in terms of topics and the phenomenon they describe, they could be compared to each other in order to find common themes. The first step of the analysis consisted of reading the texts and examining them in order to find themes. This case represented an example of exploratory analysis, as the selection of themes and codes were based on the content of the text and the conversation between the interviewer and interviewees (2012: 36).

Themes can be defined as constructs that connect different types of expressions in the text. Furthermore, they can be usually identified as examples of a phenomenon. Themes are not obvious or clear, in fact they need to be found by the researcher through a deep observation of the text (2012: 65).

During this phase of the analysis, themes were searched following Guest et al. (2012) suggested points on how to find themes' cues. According to the authors, the researcher needs to pay attention to recurrent repetitions, used categories, metaphors or analogies, shifts in topics, comparisons, linguistic connectors and missing information (2012: 66). Moreover, the analysis of the text starts with a general overview, which consists of a first observation of the text, taking notes about potential themes. After that, it is possible to begin a deeper analysis, during which the themes look clearer and can therefore be labeled and defined as codes. The definitions of themes and the relations between them allow the first drafting of a codebook which represents the basis for the final analysis (2012: 53).

At this point of the research, data consisted of six sets of questionnaire's answers, five interviews with trainees and one interview with the trainer. The data analysis started with a general review of the transcripts and the questionnaire's answers. It was possible to notice recurring topics, arguments and opinions from trainees, which became the main basis for finding themes and codes. Consequently, additional and deeper analyses were conducted; therefore, some codes were splitted into two different codes, while others were fused together becoming one code. Some new themes were generated while others themes became codes. Following this strategy, the analysis produced ten themes composed by two to five codes.

5. FINDINGS

From the analysis of six total interviews and six sets of questionnaire's answers it was possible to obtain ten themes. In the next sections the themes and codes are going to be presented in five categories. These categories describe the structure and contents of the training, the points of view of trainees, the view of the trainer, problematic aspects of the training in general and the way companies and their interests influence the training.

Theme one is called "adjustment process" composed of three codes: "U/W curve adjustment model", "culture distance" and "adjustment exercises". This theme is related to how adjustment was approached in the training, what was its role according to trainees and according to the trainer. However, the adjustment to a new relocation country discussed in this case was mental and emotional rather than practical.

Theme two is called "flexibility of the training contents" and it includes five codes: "tailoring the training", "training packages", "training for families", "self-reflection" and "impossibility of prediction". This theme concerns the adaptability of the training depending on trainees' and companies' needs.

Theme three is called "duration of the training" and it covers four codes: "long training session", "multiple sessions", "investing in more sessions" and "timing". This theme describes time related matters within the training.

Theme four is named "relocation country" and it is composed of four codes: "country specifics", "country specifics session", "country specific exercises" and "workplace cultures". This theme

is related to the weight the relocation country had on the training contents and on trainees' expectations.

Theme five, "saving time and energy", contains two codes that concern all the information gathered in the training that trainees needed to know before leaving. Its codes are: "optimising time and effort" and "focusing on the assignment".

Theme six, "practicalities", consists of two codes and it represents all those contents provided by the trainer's that help expats with practical issues related to moving abroad. The codes in theme six are: "checklist" and "relocation".

Theme seven is named "the role of companies", it contains three codes and it discusses the role companies played in relation to the training. The codes under this category are named "real clients", "expats and companies" and "companies' awareness".

Theme eight is called "the role of experience" and it combines all the codes related to the way trainees' and the trainer's experiences in international assignments, intercultural training and moving abroad influenced the training. Under this category there are three codes: "learning or revising", "real examples" and "expectations on the assignment".

Theme nine is called "applicability of the training", it consists of three codes and it gathers all codes related to trainees' comments on how to apply the training contents in their private or working life. The codes of this category are "working life", "private life" and "unsure applicability".

Theme ten is the last theme. It is called "intercultural competence" and it is formed by three codes: "changes in trainees' view", "no changes in trainees' view" and "trainer's view". It

combines all codes related to trainees' and the trainer's conception of academic terms such as "intercultural competence".

Table 1

Themes and codes

Themes	code 1	code 2	code 3	code 4	code 5
1. Adjustment process	U/W curve adjustment model	culture distance	adjustment exercises		
2. Flexibility of the training contents	tailoring the training	training packages	training for families	self-reflection	impossibility of prediction
3. Duration of the training	long training session	multiple sessions	investing in more sessions	timing	
4. Relocation country	country specifics	country specifics session	country specific exercises	workplace cultures	
5. Saving time and energy	optimising time and effort	focusing on the assignment			
6. Practicalities	checklist	relocation			
7. The role of companies	real clients	expats and companies	companies' awareness		
8. The role of experience	learning or revising	real examples	expectations on the assignment		
9. Applicability of the training	working life	private life			
10. Intercultural competence	changes in trainees' view	no changes in trainees' view	trainer's view		

Table 2

Categories

Structure and content of the training	Trainees' influence on the training	Problematic aspects	Trainer's point of view	Companies
U/W curve adjustment model	culture distance	country specifics	impossibility of prediction	training packages
adjustment exercises	tailoring the training	long training session	investing in more sessions	relocation
country specific exercises	training for families	multiple sessions	focusing on the assignment	real clients
checklist	self-reflection	timing	real examples	expats and companies
country specifics session	optimising time and effort		companies' awareness	
workplace cultures	learning or revising		trainer's view	
	expectations on the assignment			
	working life private life			
	unsure applicability			
	changes in trainees' view			
	no changes in trainees' view			

As mentioned, the codes were analysed and compared in order to create five main categories in order to summarize study's findings.

All the codes are explained more deeply in the next sections in order to clarify what is their role in the analysis and what broader category they form.

5.1 Structure and contents of the training

This section gathers codes that focus on the structure and content of the training described during the interviews. The content consisted of theories, models and exercises that, according to the data, were often used in the training session regardless of trainees' personal situation.

The first code that arose from the analysis is “U/W curve adjustment model”, under the first theme, “adjustment process”. The topic of adjustment in general seemed to cover an important part of the training; specifically, the data suggested that Oberg’s U and W adjustment model (Oberg 1960/2006) had been taught to each of the trainees participating in the study. It is useful at this point to provide a brief explanation of the model, since it covered an important part of trainees’ comments. According to Oberg’s U model, going to a foreign country as a sojourner involves specific stages. The first is called the “honeymoon phase”, during which the individual feels excited and interested about the new environment. This state of mind does not last forever. In fact, when the sojourner starts facing troubles due to everyday life’s difficulties in a new country, he or she will start feeling frustrated and even hostile towards the host culture.

According to Oberg, communication problems emphasise these feelings of general antipathy toward local people, who start to be considered by the sojourner the reason of his or her troubles. Oberg considers these feelings part of the so-called “culture shock” which, according to him, causes sojourners to start generating stereotypes about the host culture. However, Oberg explains that, by learning new things about the host country’s system and the local language, the sojourner is able to start a recovery from culture shock. During this phase, sojourners tend to use irony to describe their troubles together with a light skepticism towards the host culture. According to Oberg, this mindset lasts until the final stage, which represents complete adjustment. Complete adjustment consists of sojourners’ acceptance of the host culture’s customs and way of living. The U model was developed later into the W model, which takes into account the adjustment process the individual goes through after returning to the home country (Oberg 1960/2006).

Concerning the application of this model to the training, it was possible to notice that the majority of trainees’ indicated the explanation of the U/W curve adjustment model as their most favourite part of the training. The U curve model was very appreciated as, according to trainees, it worked as a tool for understanding their feelings better, allowing them to predict the development of their mental state during the first year of assignment. According to trainees’ perceptions, this model improved consciousness of their emotional situation and the feeling of being in control of their life change. This data might suggest that stability is what expats want to reach when they move abroad by being able to manage their life there.

Interviewer: “ok ok, perfect. And I wanted to ask you, what was your favorite part of the training? Was there something you liked in particular and you want to talk about?”

“I think...what I found most like..well favourite, let’s say like most useful was the like... emh sort of ...adjustment and like that everybody goes through certain phases, like you have this honeymoon phase and then there is sort of like...you go down the hill a bit and then you go up again after you learned to like..learned to ahh... mentally adjust yourself to the new situation...” (trainee 1)

Interviewer: “So how did it go? Did you learn something new?”

“Yeah yeah. I think it’s really useful and helpful to understand about the curve and average time that is needed to fully, as I need, to fully settle in a new life. After this training I’m feeling like: ok I know it’s natural, it’s not just me experiencing the same thing, it’s a natural thing” when you move to a new place emh.. It just takes time, so this helps a lot.” (trainee 2)

Interviewer: “What was your favorite part of the training?”

“There was this thing [...] Adjustment process, that was the word I was looking for...so there are things happening in your mind that you can’t name the words, what is happening, it is something strange. When you know beforehand that this is usually what

people feel after three months or six months or these are the differences that are bothering and it's hard to adjust to, you don't wonder what is wrong with me or other people are stupid, it's just a matter of cultural differences or seeing things differently.” (trainee 5)

It is understandable that the model might be very appreciated by trainees because of its simplicity and its apparent practicality. However, the last excerpt raises an important question: what if expats' experiences do not coincide with the adjustment model given to them? Would that lead to the conclusion that something is wrong or other people are stupid? Would that mean to them that the relocation country's culture is too different? Another risk would be that expats, after being convinced by the model, will purposely manipulate their feelings in order to fit into the model. In other words, they could convince themselves that their experience is going as the adjustment model predicts, simply because they learned about it in the training and it seems very logical.

Additionally, the trainer explained during the interview how she usually approaches the topic of adjustment through Oberg's model:

Interviewer: “I noticed the curve model is very used...”

“Yes, it's a good eye opener, it's very simple. And even though the U model have been used not only for adjustment, you know companies use it for so many other things too, so in a way everybody kind of know it, but very very seldom I meet expats that really understand it beforehand how might, what might it mean to me when I move [...] when

you move abroad it's not your choice will you have adjustment or not, will you go through that adjustment curve or not, it's not your choice and avoiding it doesn't help, usually it makes it harder". (trainer)

Talking about the adjustment process as something unavoidable might cause the problems mentioned above. Also, there is a need for a clarification of what adjustment consists of, the need to define a point in which the adjustment is reached. Some expats might feel like being adjusted to a place consists of being able to work efficiently, have a successful assignment and manage their daily life. Whereas other expats might want to be able to speak the local language and have a lot of local friends before considering themselves adjusted to the new place. The definition of adjustment might really depend on each person's wishes and needs. Simplifying the adjustment process and describing it as an identical path for every expats needs to be balanced out by a more complex way of seeing the development of expats' feelings abroad.

Moreover, previous studies in intercultural communication are fundamental, as they represent the basis for nowadays' ideas and models. For this reason they should be taken into account when approaching the field. However, it is advisable for intercultural communication experts to be up to date with new studies, instead of relying only on older models. There has been an important development on the way culture, adjustment and intercultural communication are approached in academia since Oberg's model. This represents one of the reasons why trainers and scholars should work together.

Nevertheless, the trainer considers the U curve model very useful as, according to her, it does not relate only to the adjustment process to a new culture, but it refers to the adjustment people have

to go through when facing any important changes in their life, as moving to another country. Therefore, according to the data, the potential of this model might not be limited to an intercultural communication discourse, but it could be related to human's need for knowledge and feeling of consciousness of what will happen to their life, in order to be prepared to face difficulties. Trainees' feeling of being prepared thanks to the model could be an illusion. In fact, also the trainer stated during the interview that nobody actually knows how expats will experience their stay abroad, whether and when they are going to experience bad or good feelings. Yet, the training seemed to have the goal of giving trainees something to reflect about and some sort of theoretical support for facing an important change in their life, even if the content of the training might not reflect their actual experience. This might be the reason why the model is still very highly valued by both the trainer and trainees.

Another code under theme one, "adjustment process", is called "adjustment exercises" and it is represented by two of the most mentioned exercises: the already mentioned U/W curve adjustment model by Oberg and the "Present: strengths and weaknesses, Future: opportunities and threats" exercise. The latter can be compared to a SWOT analysis used on trainees' private and working life in the context of the international assignments. According to trainees, this exercise helped them analyse their own situation abroad, looking at potential good opportunities while looking at the same time at possible problems and difficulties that might come up in the present and future time. For this reason, the exercise could help trainees in their adjustment process by guiding them in a self-reflection on their new situation, making them aware of their possibilities.

Interviewer: “What was your favorite part of the training?”

“Definitely I would say the kind of culture aspect, what we discussed about, what I explained earlier is that we went kind of through how Finnish people are perceived by other nationalities, how some specific traits, personality traits, how we behave might be perceived in a different way to what we are used to [...] now thinking about the [...] strengths and weaknesses for my assignment at the moment and then for the future opportunities and threats, so I think that was quite nice and that was the last thing we did, so I think it was good ” (trainee 4)

Interviewer: What are the exercises commonly used during the training? ”Could you please give an example of an exercise you usually use?”

“...One of the last slides I use: “Present time: strengths and weaknesses. Future: opportunities, threats” kind of thing. And I ask people to think about it from their personal life as well as thinking about the international assignment as well as thinking of work. It seems to be a really hard tool..and what I explain, when you talk about the future you can think about after six months, after a year or after five years. Its’ like however you feel like. ” (trainer)

Since these exercises were the most mentioned and apparently most appreciated by trainees, it would seem like trainees found activities or information that allow them to gain control of their

situation very useful. Having control of their situation includes being able to predict what might happen, being able to reflect on strategies to adapt in the new lifestyle and think about possibilities in case something does not go as planned. In this case, the exercise “Present: strengths and weaknesses, Future: opportunities and threats” seems to be very useful to trainees and has the advantage of not referring to the host culture, allowing trainees to reflect on their future without necessarily involving stereotypes or other essentialistic ideas on culture.

Some training’s contents were addressed to specific cultural traits of the relocation country. Particularly, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and Lewis’s model channels were used as models to form a general picture of the culture of the relocation country. These contents create the code “country specific exercises”, under theme four “relocation country”. For example, trainees had an exercise on communication styles, which consisted of transforming, for instance, a sentence from a direct to an indirect style and vice versa.

Interviewer: “What was your favorite part of the training?”

“We had one specific exercise that I think was really really good one regarding the communication styles. So we are used to saying things and, you know, opinions and everything really straight forward, and some cultures.. other cultures might see it a bit rude and this kind of stuff so..specific examples where we actually thought..kind of, we have sentences and we figure together what would be a better way to say that in the new country. ” (trainee 4)

Interviewer: “What are the exercises commonly used during the training? Could you please give an example of an exercise you usually use?”

“...then I have some exercises [...] it’s like comparing direct communication to indirect communication, where I have a sentence where like, for example, emh “are you cold?”, it’s indirect communication, how do you say it directly? Well, that’s usually very easy for Finns because it’s easy to change an indirect sentence to direct, so “are you cold?” in Finnish it would be “I am cold” quite surely if it’s indirect and direct communication and the other way around. It’s very difficult for Finns to make eh...if we have a direct sentence like “there is a mistake” it’s very very difficult for Finns to make indirect sentence out of that sentence...” (trainer)

Comparing cultures and communication styles is a quiet old-fashioned way of approaching intercultural communication. Therefore, it is necessary to refer once again to trainers’ need of being updated regarding new studies and approaches on intercultural communication. Switching from a communication style to another seems an excessively simplistic way of treating communication between different people. From the trainer’s approach, it would seem like expats need to make a work of translation between different communication styles. Therefore, this approach seems very essentialistic and, referring to Szkudlarek (2009), could damage expats’ honesty in communication, as they might not communicate in their natural and genuine way in front of their interlocutors.

The code called “checklist”, contained in theme six “practicalities”, refers to a part of the training that was appreciated and mentioned by trainees who were about to leave Finland. It consisted of a checklist of practical things to handle before leaving the country, such as offices to visit and ideas on how to insure expats’ houses during their stay abroad.

Interviewer: “So how is the time and content of the training session divided between relocation practices (explaining what sort of documents they need, how to open a bank account etc.) and intercultural training (such as how to communicate with locals etc.)?”

“I have a move checklist which I have made, it’s a nine pages [...] is about what is good to know and take care before to leave out of the country. I have hints, like are you going to sell your house or are you going to rent it? or what you are gonna do? that kind of things or well, “remember your home insurance, now if your house it’s empty, check it out from your insurance company do you have a valid home insurance there?, that if something happens there are not negative surprises” so it’s really..very practical”.
(trainer)

Interviewer: “..and I wanted to ask you.. Is there something you would change or add to the training?”

“yeah, of course like.. because it was very like ahh..condensed in a sense that we had only one day ahh..I would.. I think ...we went through some practical stuff, and I

especially liked that she had aah..sort of prepare, sort of like a list of things that you should at least ask that does it might concern you like practical stuff like.. this kind of papers are sort of required at least, or you can ask yourself is this required. And I think that was very like, good practical stuff [...] to improve even, to improve stuff even more would be more focus on the country itself where people are going to.” (trainee 1)

The checklist is described as very practical and useful to trainees. It would seem like this type of content supports expats in a tangible way without addressing the host culture as the obstacle. For this reason, the checklist could actually make the difference in expats’ mental stability during their preparation for the assignment.

Two trainees had an additional training session focused on the relocation country, organised by locals of the place, which they were really looking forward to. For this reason, the second code of theme four “relocation country”, code “country specifics session” was added to the the list.

Interviewer: “Ok, so are you going to have another session?”

“It’s a Skype meeting and then it will be concentrating only on country specific things, we are moving to Thailand, so she is having a colleague of her in the Skype meeting, her colleague is specialised in Asian cultures...” (trainee 5)

Interviewer: “What would you change/add to the training?”

“...I’m just looking forward for the next session which will then focus more on New Zealand part so that is something which will be really new to me so I’m really looking forward to that one.” (trainee 4)

Not all the trainees attended this type of additional sessions. In fact, according to the trainer, companies can decide whether to buy the country specific session for their expats. Thus, this point could represent the first issue related to power imbalance in intercultural trainings. The imbalance might exist between those expats who know more about the host country’s traditions and customs and those who start their assignment without any information of this kind. Also, it is not sure whether expats’ local colleagues attend a training session that aims at preparing them to work in a multicultural environment. This circumstance might cause another sort of imbalance. If knowing about the host culture is considered necessary, then we can assume that expats who do not have the additional country-specific session will have less chances to succeed in their assignment abroad. Thus, these expats might have less possibilities of advancing with their careers.

Another interesting point is the fact that the training covered the specific culture of bosses and colleagues in case these are not locals of the relocation country. Therefore, an additional code named “workplace cultures”, which appears under theme four “country specifics”, is indicated in the analysis.

Interviewer: “Do you assess the trainees’ intercultural skills before and after the training? If yes, how? If not, why not?”

“...then I ask something like “are you mainly working with..” and then there is a list of nationalities. So I can say “ok, you are moving now to China, but you are also working here and there or daily basis with people from Indonesia and others” so I can use that knowledge as well during the training if there is something like that. Then I ask also about the manager, what nationality the manager is and so forth...” (trainer)

Interviewer: “What was your favorite part of the training?”

“...And also then we kind of compared to some other nationalities as well to New Zealand, you know, Australia and China and those other countries where my closer colleagues and my manager will be from.” (trainee 4)

In this part the training adopts a very essentialist approach that could be revised, in order to avoid stereotypes and generalizations. Placing people into rigid categories based on their nationality might be very misleading, especially if their background is not taken into consideration. After all, expats’ colleagues might come from other countries; however, they might have lived in the host country for many years. They might have studied abroad or have a partner from a different country; in general, they are certainly part of several subcultures that shape their lives. The theme of subcultures does not seem to be discussed in the training and this might consequently create unnecessary stereotyping.

5.2 Trainees' influence on the training

This chapter concerns the way the training changed depending on trainees' needs, describing also their points of view on the training contents. Thus, all codes in this section represent the training according to the trainees' perceptions.

The code "culture distance", under the first theme "adjustment process" is important as more than one trainee expressed the idea that adjustment would be easier in a relocation country more culturally similar to their home country.

Interviewer: "Do you think the training helped you develop yourself?"

"...It's funny because we have visited quite many countries and there are some countries that when we go to visit it is like going home because everything works just as you expected it to work like..and then there are some countries where it's very different, like you are not sure how things work or what kind of expectations people have even though there are so many similarities but, then it's very difficult to, it's quite stressful to adjust because if you don't know what they expect then..." (trainee 1)

Interviewer: "Do you want to add any other comments about the training?"

“...she said there is this cultural adjust even if you go to Sweden, in the neighbour country, of course there is some adjustment but the adjustment is much bigger and time and effort consuming when you go to Asia, Africa or South Africa and those countries that may have a poor standard of living, maybe criminality, well not in Asia but in some other continents... totally different languages and especially the long long history and very different culture than european culture, so there is difference where you move and what is the need of the training. I think that should be evident..and also to the other direction...” (trainee 5)

This code is interesting because it presented a discrepancy between trainees’ and the trainer’s points of view. Also, it showed that trainees connected the problematic aspects of moving abroad mostly to the culture and system of the relocation country.

The code “tailoring the training”, under theme two “flexibility of the training contents”, is indicated as the trainer asked questions to each of the trainees about their personal situation, in order to build a discussion and support them focusing on their personal needs.

Interviewer: “What was your favorite part of the training?”

“...the favourite part is that she made a pretty personal training, I don’t mean that we only talked about personal things but she made the training contents more like tailored to..to ahh..to fit into the person. So she figured out...based on a bit of conversation at the

beginning and questions at the beginning, she made it more like: ok, I figure out these are your problems, let's just focus on your problems" (trainee 2)

Interviewer: "Is it very often with one single person or also with groups?"

"...We talk so much about personal life as well, so they get the best out of it. If it's an atmosphere where they can openly ask, discuss, share, whatever concerns they might have about their personal life as well" (trainer)

A code under theme two "flexibility of the training contents" that is considered very important is "training for families", as the training was addressed also to spouses of expatriates. In fact, spouses were not only able to be present at the training together with their children, but could also participate and get benefits from it. Furthermore, according to the trainer, a part of her training session is usually addressed to spouses, asking questions, discussing their specific fears and their motivations.

Interviewer: What are the exercises commonly used during the training? "Could you please give an example of an exercise you usually use?"

"...and then when we talk about the spouses' assignment, it's not really an exercise but I have lots of questions for her: what is your personal assignment? Forget kids, forget your husband... usually it's the woman who is the spouse and so on and they are very difficult

questions because never ever, no one ever thought about, because it's too scary.. ”
(trainer)

Expats' spouses should be supported by the trainer as well, especially by discussing their motivations. In fact, spouses do not move to a different country because of a personal choice, but because they feel the obligation of supporting their partner, often in order to avoid splitting their family. Spouses might encounter much more troubles than expats in adapting to the new situation because of the lack of personal motivations.

“Self-reflection” is another code of theme two “flexibility of the training contents”. Trainees claimed to have appreciated the fact that the trainer guided them in a self-reflection about their own cultural identity and their personal life as well. Self-reflection seemed to be a very important point as, according to the trainer, knowing more about ourselves and how our mind works could help us tolerate and understand more of other's behavior.

Interviewer: “What are the exercises commonly used during the training? Could you please give an example of an exercise you usually use?”

“...we talk about a person's own cultural background so I have a list of questions and a slide there about what is cultural about me, what is my national culture and so forth. So I started to build a mirror, where do I reflect, how does the others see me, how the other understand me, and I believe when you understand more about yourself you are able to understand more from others.” (trainer)

Additionally, the training aimed at providing information trainees would not need to spend too much time and effort searching by themselves. This aspect refers to the code “optimising time and effort”, under theme five “saving time and energy”. In fact, trainees considered the training session as a tool for saving time and effort in order to avoid searching for information about the relocation culture after their work day. Therefore, they expected the training to be a practical and efficient way of preparing for their assignment, which is in line with companies’ need for efficiency and time saving in every aspect, communication included.

Of course, this point was underlined by trainees who did not have a second session on the relocation country organised for them. Thus, this point could represent another reason why the second session should be organised for every expat. All the culture specific information about the relocation country might seem essentialist. However, with a preliminary preparation on culture and its dynamism, reflection and discussion, trainees could then get informed about the national culture of the new country without necessarily falling into a complete essentialist mindset. In this context, as Dervin (2016) also suggests, essentialism cannot be avoided completely. Therefore, even though the concept of national culture involves some levels of essentialism, trainees could still reflect on how people differ from the cultural model and obtain some useful information about the relocation country. Rathje’s argumentation about collectives (2007) might help to overcome the problems that referring to national culture might involve. If the trainer explains the concept of multiple cultures, then the discourse might assume a more complex direction.

Interviewer: “What would you change/add to the training?”

“..we can get some of the reference books or the reference websites to read about the culture just to take a look, it would be pretty benefit ‘cause of course we can google search but it takes really huge amount of time as a side of the work [...] It would be really helpful if I could learn some tips from the books or readings instead of just experiencing and waiting for the feedback, I think it’s really time and energy consuming..” (trainee 2)

The problem of the way culture specific information are valued is that the role of experience is strongly underestimated. In fact, the data suggest that trainees expect to find a shortcut for experience. However, the only shortcut in this case would be through essentialism, which would represent a false solution, or an illusion.

According to trainees, the training guided them in reflecting on some important aspects they haven’t had time to focus on. Therefore, trainees appreciated that they could handle all the practical matters before leaving without having to reflect on a deeper level in their free time.

Interviewer: “What was your favorite part of the training?”

“...So that was really helpful and kind of eye opening as well that although these are things that you kind of know you have heard of these, but you haven’t had time to think about that [...] I have been quite busy now fixing all the practical stuff here in Finland and

everything, I haven't really have time to think you know what sort of other cultures I might have so it was good to take that time..." (trainee 4)

Helping trainees optimising reflection on their lives might sound very strange. However, it seems like sometimes following the companies' timing is very difficult for expats, who often have to prepare for the international assignment with a very short notice. For this reason, even natural activities such as thinking about the future might be rushed together with the discourse on culture.

The code "learning or revising" is contained in theme eight "the role of experience". It refers to the fact that trainees who had already experienced living abroad claimed during the interview that the training didn't provide them with new knowledge. However, they appreciated revising some ideas, theories or reflecting on some feelings they had during their past stays abroad.

Interviewer: "So how did it go? Did you learn something new?"

"...She illustrates how the mental... how your mentality changes as time pass. For example in three, in three months your mentality can be quite positive because everything is new. But after the three months it goes down and it goes up maybe after six months. So yeah it was quite good to kinda review. I knew this theory before but it was good to review the theory together right after I moved to Finland." (trainee 3)

Looking at this excerpt, it is possible to notice once again how certain traditional models are often used in several fields and are taught without taking in account more recent models in intercultural communication.

According to some of these trainees, the training could be more useful to people without any experiences living abroad.

Interviewer: “Do you want to add any other comments about the training?”

“...it’s important that if you have been traveling [...] what you have seen before how broad is your view about different cultures, so if you are young and you haven’t been much abroad the adjustment might be more painful in that case.” (trainee 5)

Interviewer: “What would you change/add to the training?”

“...I was thinking about if I would go for the first time abroad so then the coaching would be even more helpful, you might not even think of some things that might come ahead when you are abroad...” (trainee 4)

The trainer explained that trainees’ personal past experiences were used in order to make them reflect on their future experiences. According to the data, this was considered very useful and it was very much appreciated by trainees. They felt like they could personally relate to the training contents and learn new dimensions on intercultural communication by applying them to real

situations. Many critical scholars insist on the importance of referring to personal and everyday life experiences to reflect on intercultural issues to communicate with people from different backgrounds.

Interviewer: “What would you change/add to the training?”

“...we were able to dig our own experiences from our previous staying in another country so it was a nice mixture of experiences of other people and also experiences of our own history. [...] In the discussion they were very deeply themselves also, it was a very intense training, it mainly her own experiences and our experiences so sort of quite intimate situations also.” (trainee 5)

“Expectations on the assignment” is another code of the theme eight, “the role of experience”, and it indicates that trainees who had experienced international assignments before had expectations on how the next assignment will go. The trainer also compared expats who had already experienced international assignments with expats who were preparing for their first one. It would seem that the training changed also depending on this factor.

Interviewer: “How did the training go? Did you learn something new?”

“...I have lived abroad ahm three times before, so I kind of have some expectations about what can happen and about the kind of culture shock or how there might be..because you

are not that happy and then you miss home and I know it and I experienced that before...” (trainee 4)

Interviewer: “How do you know your training will benefit the trainees in the long run?”

“...Then when I have people who have lived abroad before, our discussions are so much easier because they very commonly start to say so fast that: “oh yes, that sounds so familiar! done that, been there, oh yeah, exactly.” So then my role is to help them to set it up for the right goals that “ok, that’s what happened then, yes you remember at least at some level, but you never know now, it starts from the beginning again the same thing”.

So in one way or the other I know that these discussions help people and organizations.”

(trainer)

By analysing the last excerpt, it is possible to observe a contradiction related to trainees’ adjustment. According to the trainer, every expats goes through the same adjustment process, which is impossible to avoid. Considering this assumption, what remains unclear is the reason why it is not possible for expats to have expectations on their mental development during their next assignment. If there is one adjustment process, represented by a U curve model, then it would be logical to think that the same model can be applied again on the next experience abroad. Instead, the same model is revised and discussed in the training. For this reason, it is difficult to define the line between what is predictable for the trainer and what it is not.

The code “working life” belongs to theme nine “applicability of the training” and it describes the comments of two trainees regarding the benefits the training’s contents could provide them in their working life. For example, in the first questionnaire trainee 2 expressed the wish to learn, for working reasons, country specific information regarding dos and don’ts of specific countries.

Questionnaire: “What do you expect to learn in this training?”

“a. Swedish culture @ work & life. b. a general culture understanding & todo & not todo things of the countries i support.” (trainee 2)

Whereas trainee 4 seemed very enthusiastic about the possibility of applying all the tips and information regarding communication styles in the HR field.

Interviewer: “Do you think you can apply what you have learned in real life (personal and professional)?”

“Definitely, everything comes down to my style of communication, which is something that through my job I have been also thinking about all the time, 'cause I work in HR but it’s quite easy to apply...of course you need to recognise some traits in your communication, so when you are stressed how that changes and things like that so consider that when you have some emotional peaks how that changes and try to turn

those down in a way that I can adapt to the person I am talking with or to the audience. So that is something that can be easily adaptable in the professional life and also just kind of email communication that now I will actually put more effort in checking what I'm actually writing that I remember to put please if I'm asking something, you tend to forget these things when you are in a hurry so definitely maybe double checking my email through before I send it just if there's something that might sound a bit rude." (trainee 4)

The second code of the theme "applicability of the training" is "private life" and it refers to those trainees who could see themselves applying the training contents in their private life.

Interviewer: "Do you think you can apply what you have learned in real life (personal and professional)?"

"Those practical things of course are, aahh...so we discussed quite a bit about this communication stuff and one very good advice what I got was that English language is very indirect in a sense that is more people based whereas Finland...Finnish is fact based. So the difference is that in Finnish you can say that "I want coffee, can I have coffee please?", but in English the same thing could come up very indirectly, in a sense that somebody could say that ahh "this coffee is very good" and they imply the thing that the other one should ask "do you want more coffee?" And sort of like, I think it's is a very good advice that I can apply..." (trainee 1)

Trainees' answers to the questionnaire gave a good idea of what sort of expectations they had regarding the training contents and their application. Very often the expectations were related to country specific information and trainees' future working life in the host country. However, some of the participants also expected to learn how to manage their family or social life in the relocation country.

Questionnaire: "What do you expect to learn in this training?"

"I expect to learn questions to ask myself and questions that we can discuss as a family."

(trainee 1)

Questionnaire: "What do you expect to learn in this training?"

What should I bring with me from home to the new country. What to avoid in interpersonal communication. What sort of bureaucratic obstacles there are in Asia.

(trainee 5)

The third code of theme nine, "applicability of the training", was called "unsure applicability" and it is related to comments of trainees who were planning to apply the training contents in their life, but seemed not sure they could do it right after the training.

Interviewer: “So at the moment you don’t feel like you can actually apply what she told you?”

“In the moment no, but in the future for sure. Mmmmh at this moment maybe I don’t really know much about aah... Finnish society aah... Finnish way of... Finnish way of life, I’m still in the learning process. I would or I would say I’m still in the observing aah... phase for the new environment. Then maybe after a while maybe I start thinking what’s the difference aah ..what are the differences ahh ...what are the challenges, what are the similarities and so on then maybe at the time I would face some difficulties then maybe at the time I can recall what they told me and what... what they taught me, how to handle those difficulties then maybe aah ...then what I learned will be very helpful.” (trainee 3)

Interviewer: “Do you think you can apply what you have learned in real life (personal and professional)?”

“Yeah I hope I could but I know there would be some conflicts, it’s also related to personality. I’m sometimes a very impatient person and I get mad if some situations are as forward as they are. If you come from another country you may know that in Finland we make things fast, we don't talk much and things just happen (laughing). I’m expecting that things are happening without giving any instructions or telling what to do and of course this is not the case and I will have something to attain myself there but the life will teach me I hope (laughing).” (trainee 5)

According to the trainees, the training might be very well applicable in the long run, when expats have the possibilities to connect the reflections and discussion from the training to real life situations. This could suggest that the only way to apply the training's contents is to use them as a support when experiencing situations in the new context.

Theme ten "intercultural competence" presents as its first code "changes in trainees' view". This code gathers comments of trainees who claimed that, after the training, their idea of intercultural competence was changed at least a bit.

Interviewer: "Do you think differently about intercultural competence after the training?"

"Maybe a bit in a way. They had this slide about intercultural communication competence so kind of the theory behind it, so of course I had no clue, I haven't read any theory so in that sense that was interesting having kind of the feminine and masculine culture in a way and what countries were easy to spot there and kind of the power stuff..I can't remember now all of the four elements that is something I would think differently but I think the idea is what I have before, maybe more detailed in a way...basically yes, I think about them the same way but maybe a bit more theory now after the session."

(trainee 4)

Interviewer: "Do you think differently about intercultural competence after the training?"

“Yes, of course I am not young anymore so I have some experience of different situations, we have been living abroad and travelling abroad so we have some experience of different cultures but still..for example we have a cleaner who came from Philippines and I have been wondering why on earth she is behaving like this in this situations and after the training I realise that this is the cultural difference which affects her behavior. So it has been giving me access to my current situation about these cultural differences, you are never too old to get trained I would say (laughing).” (trainee 5)

Interviewer: “Do you think differently about intercultural competence after the training?”

“yeah yeah now that I had the training I think [...] communication competence is more like there are some expectations how communication would go, like in the US there would be I think the small talking ..good example in Finland there is..is very limited...”
(trainee 1)

The last code belonging to trainees’ influence on the training is “no changes in trainees’ view”, contained in theme ten “intercultural competence”. It represents the opposite case, where trainees felt like the training did not change their view on intercultural competence. This was the case of trainee 2 and 3 who stated no differences in their way of seeing this term after attending the training. In general there seems to be no specific intentions of finding an exact definition of the term “intercultural competence” itself, perhaps because of a tendency to focus on practical information that seem more easily applicable in their everyday or working life. Defining certain

terms such as intercultural communication and intercultural competence might benefit the trainer in order to teach and master the subject. However, this might not be necessary in order to overcome ethical problems related to intercultural training.

5.3 Problematic aspects

This section is related to problematic aspects described both by trainer and trainees regarding the training session. It presents some contents trainees wished to be improved, the trainer's difficulties in satisfying every request and obstacles in developing certain aspects of the training.

The first code under theme four, "relocation country", was called "country specifics" and it describes the recurrent wish expressed by trainees for more information about the specific relocation country, mainly from a cultural point of view.

Interviewer: "What would you change or add to the training?"

"...there are some of these small things of dos and don'ts in each country and these mostly make people feel like: ok, this person knows this culture, knows how to talk with us German people or Swedish people. [...] I was kinda expecting that there would be some umh... some of this...some info about what kind of book you can read, what kind of detailed website you can go to to read a little about the culture in different countries..."

(trainee 2)

Interviewer: “..and I wanted to ask you.. Is there something you would change or add to the training?”

“...to improve even, to improve stuff even more would be more focus on the country itself where people are going to.. There’s there’s a lot of general stuff which is great aah.. but then a bit more about aah.. a bit more about the actual like relocation country where you are going to live.” (trainee 1)

According to the data, the wish for more culture specific information about the relocation country was caused by trainees’ need to feel in control of their future, to predict certain situations in order to balance out the feeling of unknown the assignment causes them. Furthermore, according to the majority of trainees, knowing more about the national culture of the relocation country would help them meet locals’ expectations. In fact, from the interviews it seemed that not meeting locals’ expectations represented a source of stress and fear for trainees. For this reason, it might be useful that the trainer informs trainees on the fact that country specific information are not always helpful and can lead to misconceptions on culture.

Additionally, these sorts of information might reinforce stereotypes and assumptions that trainees already have before attending the training. In fact, it is already possible to notice them in the trainees’ answers to the initial questionnaire.

Questionnaire: “You are about to move to a new country. What challenges do you expect to face regarding your adjustment process abroad?”

Home sickness sometimes. Frustration, that other people are not as punctual as I am. Climate. Lack of some hobbies as in home country. (trainee 5)

Questionnaire: “What do you think intercultural communication competence is?”

Have been expatriate for 2,5 yrs in USA. Asia is different. And perhaps many 'mistakes' are forgiven better for a visitor in Asia, the situation is different for a person who lives there, even a foreigner. (trainee 6)

The problem related to this sort of mindset is that it was present in both the questionnaire’s answers and in the final interviews. From the data, it would seem that essentialistic ideas on culture might be confirmed in the training, instead of being elaborated in order to gain a more complex look on culture.

The code “long training session” is the first one of theme three “duration of the training”. In fact, trainees found the training session quite tiring due mainly to its length, which was usually six to eight hours in one day. They expressed the preference for splitting the training in multiple sessions organised on different days.

Interviewer: “Do you think you needed more time?”

“In one session no, it was a bit too long actually, I was very tired after that, it was six hours, from one to seven pm, so it was very exhausting to concentrating on one topic intensively.” (trainee 5)

The problem of essentialist ideas in the training contents might also be related with the limited time available. There could be the need for more sessions in order to discuss essentialism and provide a deeper view on culture.

The second code of theme three “duration of the training” is called “multiple sessions” and it refers to the fact that trainees wished to have additional sessions during their year abroad. Some of them referred to each phase described by the U curve adjustment model.

Interviewer: “The training lasted only one day. Do you think you needed more time?”

“...you know the curve, you know that we will have different stages and this stage where I am is after honeymoon, I am in the stage of being anxious and homesick [...] the next step and I will go to the other stage and in that stage maybe I will need some other kind of advices, other type of tips ..so yeah I think it would be good to have different series of different sessions stage by stage.” (trainee 2)

Many of them could also make an estimation of when the next sessions could take place:

Interviewer: “Since the training lasted only four hours, are you going to benefit from it in the long run?”

“...we could have one more session in a different...in a different day, maybe in two months or three months. Like maybe lecture or discussion about how people usually feel after, after a while.” (trainee 3)

It is interesting to notice that the session itself was not considered too short considering the content needed before starting an assignment. Indeed, trainees suggested that the first session could even be shorter and they could benefit more from multiple shorter sessions throughout the whole assignment or at least during the first year of their stay abroad.

An additional session could be an advantage, not only because it focuses on the national culture of the relocation country, but also because it may release some stress from the expat and his or her family. Additionally, according to the data, the person who gives the second training is a local, and therefore represents one of the first contacts in the relocation country and a person that can be potentially addressed for advice. These are the reasons why trainees who had an additional session of this kind could consequently have more support and an advantage in adjusting to the new life.

Two of the trainees felt like they could have benefited more from the training if it was organised earlier. Therefore, it was possible to obtain the last code of the theme “duration of the training”, which was called “timing”. In fact, trainee 2 attended the training about two months

after moving to the relocation country, whereas trainee 4 attended it just before leaving for the relocation country.

Interviewer: “Do you think the training was useful? Would you recommend it to someone?”

“...I would say, better to have it before rather than what I had here later..yeah because..before the relocation happens, I would say the first two weeks before the relocation happens you need to get aware of it, instead of experience couple of months and then have this training. ” (trainee 2)

Interviewer: “How did the training go? Did you learn something new?”

“ [...] We discuss that in a normal case this coaching session would be very beneficial to have it much earlier than now so..in my case everything happened so quickly, so there was not really time to do this earlier [...]” (trainee 4)

The trainer explained that the training, at least the first sessions, can be considered as a preparation of trainees to the changes that they will face abroad. If this preparation starts when the expat is already in the relocation country or just before he or she leaves, the time available to elaborate the information and tips given during the training session might not be enough.

Therefore, this argument could be taken into consideration when planning future improvements of the training.

5.4 The trainer's point of view

This section describes the trainer's point of view on the contents of the training and the trainer's ideas on some problematic aspects within being an entrepreneur in intercultural counseling.

The first point that was noticed in the analysis is that the trainer did not seem to differentiate the adjustments process depending on the relocation country. Therefore, this might be a discrepancy between trainees' and trainer's points of view. As mentioned before, it seemed like the trainer considered the adjustment not related to the culture of the relocation country but to the life change trainees are about to face when they attend the training. For this reason, according to the trainer, it does not matter whether the expat is moving to the neighbor country or to the opposite side of the world, the difficulties are going to be the same. On the contrary, trainees seemed to consider cultural differences themselves as a strong source of difficulties in the adjustment. While the trainer's approach on the adjustment process might mitigate essentialism on culture, it still assumes that the adjustment curve will be the same for every expats. As mentioned before, this approach could cause expats stress in case their experience does not coincide with the model. The last code, "impossibility of prediction", under theme two "flexibility of the training contents" represents a claim the trainer underlined in order to explain the impossibility of meeting trainees' expectations in predicting how their international assignment will go. The

training was described instead as a support for trainees' life changing more than an actual key for being successful abroad. The training did not aim at giving specific instructions, but at suggesting possible solutions to trainees worries and difficulties.

Interviewer: "What do you think intercultural competence might be?"

"...this is not about getting ready, this is about raising up the understanding to the level enough and to have tools from where to continue that you are really able to learn more instead of just miscalculate or misunderstand, and you are getting just different kind of reactions out of it and that kind of things." (trainer)

Interviewer: "How do you know your teaching will benefit the trainees in the long run?"

"...I also say at the beginning that I didn't have any right or knowledge to point it with my finger that I know how your assignment will go, I don't know. But I wish the same kind of openness from your part that don't decide before how your assignment will go or won't go, because you haven't experienced it yet" (trainer)

The fact that the trainer does not seem to provide a specific definition of intercultural communication might suggest insecurity towards her own field. However, scholars have been arguing against a definition and even the use of the term "intercultural competence". The trainer is still attached to the traditional concept of "culture" but she never refers to intercultural

competence as the training's final goal. Therefore, this thesis does not ask for a more specific definition of intercultural competence, but it will provide suggestions on how to overcome the traditional and essentialistic idea of culture.

Additionally, it was possible to obtain the trainer's view regarding trainees' wish of having more than one training session. This is described by the code "investing in more sessions", under theme three "duration of the training". This code indicates the trainer's wish and availability to organise multiple sessions during the trainees' whole time of assignment. However, according to the trainer, the hesitance of companies in buying more training sessions for their employees represents an obstacle for her intentions.

Interviewer: "True, and it is interesting that the training is very short, it usually lasts one day, but the people go for an international assignment that lasts maybe a couple of years.."

"I wish we could do more of contacting later on and having a discussion like coaching.. more like coaching style thing. But unfortunately companies don't pay it, we are lucky if they pay one or two days, because there are still a lot of companies that think they don't need anything. But I totally agree with you, I would be so happy to have like..living the path with them, the whole assignment from the beginning to the end and if we would be discussing more frequently, that would be perfect for them! So maybe in the future."

(trainer)

In this sense, it is important to take in account how the discrepancies between the trainer's and the companies' view affect the actual structure of the training. Many improvements that could be done are not put into practice due to the companies' mindset about intercultural communication and counseling. Therefore, the discourse on problematic aspects of intercultural training might become at this point much wider and complicated. However, as critical scholars suggest that intercultural competence can be developed through experience without the need of any training sessions, it might be that some companies' mentality is much closer to criticism than essentialism. This point can be very interesting, taking into account that companies are much more difficult for critical scholars than trainers.

Saving time and effort through the training was a point introduced by the trainer as well. In fact, it was stated by the trainer that the main goal of her training is to help expats overcome cultural and personal issues related to the moving, in order to focus on the international assignment easier and faster, benefitting in this way their company as well. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the training could work as a tool for optimising resources. Thus, this point is indicated by the code "focusing on the assignment", contained in theme five "saving time and energy".

Interviewer: "I: How did you become a trainer and why did you choose this path?"

"...for the expats, their families and companies to help, that the movings are as smooth as possible and the expats and their families can concentrate on their lifes and work as fast as possible so that they are able to use their energy to the right things." (trainer)

Experience seemed to be an important factor from the trainer's point of view as well. In fact, the trainer covered this point by describing differences in the training's difficulties, depending on the trainees' experience.

Interviewer: "How do you know your teaching will benefit the trainees in the long run?"

"...participants who haven't lived abroad, they are the most difficult ones and during the day they might be a little bit like "ok, I don't know if this is really affecting me and who cares, I know so much..". Then my goal is that, you know, not that much how they realise they need it today, my goal is that they figure it out at some point that they need it later on when they hit the problems, when they face the problems." (trainer)

Another code related to experience according to the trainer is included in theme eight "the role of experience" and it is called "real examples". This code originated from the fact that all the trainees appreciated the trainer's use of personal examples from real situations or from other expats' experiences of international assignments. Also, the trainer described the development of her career from the first trainings until nowadays and the benefits experience provides to nowadays' trainings.

Interviewer: "...and how did you start being a trainer?"

“I used my experience and my background a lot, a lot, my family background and my own movings. And of course after that from every case I learned a lot, which I was able to use as an example. So it’s not only about learning practices but also about learning stories and examples. [...] I speak in a third form like “people have told”, “other expats have experienced”, “that’s what the studies show”, I never say that you will have this or this will happen to you and those kind of things.” (trainer)

The theme related to experience is very important and interesting also from the point of view of many scholars who suggest using past experience and everyday life stories as a start to communicate with people . Trainees appreciated this approach, as it allowed them to relate to their own stories. In this way, it might be easier for them to remember what they have discussed during the session in their future.

The code “companies’ awareness”, under theme seven ”the role of companies”, refers to a point the trainer brought up during the interview. It represents the trainer’s impression of companies not giving as much importance to intercultural training as they should. In fact, according to the trainer’s opinion, many companies seem to consider themselves very international and therefore do not want to invest in intercultural trainings or in more than one training session.

Interviewer: “What kind of training do you offer?”

“ ...That is what companies need a lot, unfortunately they don't always understand they do because they believe they are so international, they are so experienced and they are this and they are that, but actually they are not able to (laughing).” (trainer)

The last code related to trainer's influence and view on the training is “trainer's view” under theme ten “intercultural competence” and it concerns the trainer's idea of the term “intercultural competence”.

Interviewer: “What do you think intercultural competence might be?”

“For me it means that, you know, people bring the humanity also to the workplace and when we have a different background we have different ways of working, doing, thinking, analysing, habits, habitus, everything is different. So to be able to learn from each other, to build something together, to build the culture together, you need to have a cultural awareness, cultural competence about what is cultural about me and what is cultural about you. Understand the word “competence” is like the knowledge of whatever is affecting it, I don't know do I use it wrong but I like to use those terms.” (trainer)

It is very interesting how the trainer defined intercultural competence. It did not seem important to give a specific definition, as both terms “intercultural competence” and “intercultural awareness” were used to describe similar phenomena. However, according to the trainer, intercultural competence is related to the process of building a culture in between, so the way she

described intercultural competence conveys culture being dynamic and situational. Therefore, it could be that, through experience in intercultural counseling, the trainer developed an approach similar to the one of some critical scholars. This way of defining intercultural competence might convey the idea of the trainer being insecure about the subject of her training. However, this approach fits with critical scholars' wish for a dynamic and less strict way of considering this term.

5.5 Companies

This section explains how companies' interests and needs influenced the structure of the training. Also, this section describes all the options related to different training packages and other services companies can choose from.

The code "training packages" is under theme two "flexibility of the training contents" and it describes all the different training options provided by the trainer. According to her, companies can choose between different packages, depending on whether their expats are leaving for international assignments, coming from abroad, or even for employees who have to work in a new multicultural group. The trainer described in detailed her intercultural packages for expats:

Interviewer: "What kind of training do you offer?"

“...Right now we do working internationally as such, it’s the big picture, under it there we have headlines like for international assignment, moving from Finland, I call it “ready to expatriate”, the first package, which includes moving process, culture as such, your cultural background, adjustment, expats assignment, spouses assignment, children assignment, communication differences, communication channels, cultural diversities, returning back and so on [...] And then the other package for them is “destination x”, which is country/culture specific training which I don’t do but I have forty people working for me here and there [...] for expats it’s only these two modules. Two modules, one package. [...] we help people to move to Finland, so it’s a similar kind of product but it’s for foreigners to move to Finland and I call it “destination Finland, working and living with Finns”, but it’s a combination of “ready to expatriate” and “destination x...” (trainer)

Tailoring the training could be beneficial not only for trainees but, in an indirect way, for expats’ companies as well. Specifically, addressing the training to expats’ spouses is important due to the fact that spouses might not want to move from their country, but they do not want to leave the partner alone during the assignment. Therefore, there might be some motivation related issues and they might also feel frustration because of that. Spouses could be important also for the companies’ interests, since the assignment itself might become problematic if the expat is experiencing personal problems at home with his or her family. For this reason, training spouses could represent a real benefit for everyone.

Furthermore, the trainer explained that companies have the possibility to buy relocation services from the same intercultural counseling company, which provides relocation services to expats who move to Finland from other countries. This is indicated by the second code of the theme “practicalities”, “relocation”. In this case companies have the possibility of choosing between different packages.

Interviewer: “What kind of training do you offer?”

“...it’s not training but I also do relocation, so when somebody is moving we are really helping with the practicalities. From permits, moving, registrating, open a bank account, getting part of Finnish social security system, local transportations, schools, temporary house and then home, day care whatever you have we make it, we do it [...] We can find furniture to your place if you want to, we can help with the hobbies, you know we always take it case by case of course, I have packages. I have three different packages [...] So it depends what level you are and what the companies wanna do, but the average medium package that’s the most common, what the companies buy.” (trainer)

Theme seven, which was named “the role of companies”, contains codes that discuss the role companies played in relation to the training. The first code is called “real clients” and it refers to the trainer’s statement that companies are her real clients and therefore they need to benefit from her services.

Interviewer: “In your opinion, what are the most important goals of the training you offer?”

“The other goal for the company, which are really my clients, for the companies it is that people are working effectively as soon as possible and that they stay, that they are not quitting and the international assignment goes as planned.” (trainer)

This code was considered important as it is often forgotten that the actual clients of the trainer are not employees but companies and this fact plays an important role when studying intercultural training. The second code of theme seven, “the role of companies”, is called “expats and companies” and it refers to trainees claiming that the training could be beneficial both for employees and the companies they work for.

Interviewer: “Do you think the training was useful? Would you recommend it to someone?”

“...I’m sure it would not only benefit the one who leaves but also for the company because then in those cases you might get an understanding what challenges that person might have abroad and how the manager should then take those into account...” (trainee 4)

Interviewer: “How did they advertise or present the training to you?”

“...I thought it’s an obligatory thing to go through because it’s also a benefit for the company to have the families set well to the new culture and the better investment is when the whole family is pleased with the staying...” (trainee 5)

To conclude, with the data gathered it was possible to create five categories. The contents from interviews and questionnaires were related to either the content of the training, trainees perceptions, the trainer’s perceptions, problems related to the training or the role of companies within intercultural counseling. This thesis suggests that all these aspects could be taken into account when discussing about intercultural training.

6. DISCUSSION

This section discusses five aspects of the training, which are related to the use of traditional methods in the training, the application of modern approaches, the role of intercultural competence, assessment methods and the duration of the training. By creating these categories this thesis aimed at indicating some of the most important aspects of the training as well as providing some criticism, in order to help trainers reflect on how future trainings can be developed. To conclude, some suggestions for future improvements are given taking into consideration some practical difficulties that might be related with resources or company policies.

6.1 Traditional and modern approaches in intercultural training

The analysis highlighted several issues and topics discussed by scholars on intercultural training and counseling. The first point that could be described concerns the adjustment process. Kim (2001) for example, insists on the importance of sojourners' preparedness for change in order for them to adapt to a new country. It is interesting how intercultural competence itself is not mentioned as one of the requirements to adapt, referring instead of what might be the components of this ability. The U and W curve model seemed to be understood by all trainees and it was especially recognised by trainees who had already experienced international assignments. The reason for this could be that all the stages included in the model reminded the

very common and normal process people have to go through when they need to get accustomed to a new situation. Trainees tend to find the scheme of the curve familiar and also quite logical and therefore useful to rely on when planning their future stay abroad. However, as mentioned in the findings, it is important to keep in mind the difficulties expats might have in case their mental development abroad does not fit with the model. In fact, the way people adapt to a new situation is completely subjective and suggesting one unique model for every expats is very limiting in this sense. Therefore, some precautions and new arrangements are going to be provided concerning the adjustment process. Furthermore, the statement made by many trainees is related with the idea of Liu (2014) and Reggy-Mamo (2008) regarding intercultural training being a support for a life change and not just a way for companies to be successful in international assignments.

The general structure of the training that was analysed in the study seemed to be quite close to the one suggested by Kim (2001). This structure consists of one part related to verbal and non verbal communication skills, one about the emotional and motivational sphere of trainees and one concerning resources that facilitate the expats' adaptation. In the same way, the training analysed had one part focused on communication issues and communication styles, one part reserved for discussion on trainees' personal issues, and one part concerning the practical aspects of moving abroad. This thesis suggests placing more emphasis on practical aspects and on trainees' personal situations rather than communication skills.

As mentioned previously in this thesis, scholars use several synonyms for intercultural competence, such as "intercultural sensitivity", "intercultural effectiveness" and "cultural intelligence" (Kaufmann et al. 2013, Shuang 2014). It would seem like the specific choice of

words would not involve a drastic change in the meaning. Interestingly enough, the trainer seemed to adopt the same mindset concerning the terminology used. The term “intercultural awareness” was used as a synonym of “intercultural competence”. According to the trainer, these terms include consciousness of other people’s habits, way of thinking and behaving, consciousness of our own cultural identity and how people might perceive us, in order to build a culture in between constructed by interlocutors. Furthermore, this point reminded about Szkudlarek’s argument regarding “virtual third cultures” (2009, cited Evanoff 2004), which is a concept that could be made more explicit in the training in order to allow trainees to reflect more deeply into it. Also, referring to specific academic sources could stimulate trainees' trust on the contents.

Traditional theories and models were still very used to explain cultural differences. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, Lewis’ communication models and other mechanic exercises were used to learn about the relocation country’s communication style. However, the discussion about cultural differences seemed to be used only as a starting point for guiding a reflection on how people can actually fit into the model and to which extent. This kind of reflection was done also by trainees towards their own cultural identity, in order to figure out on what level the general cultural model of their nation describes them. Traditional theories can be beneficially used in the training in order to guide the discussion on stereotypes related issues.

Interviewer: “Do you think the training helped you develop yourself?”

“..‘cause when we went through typical Finnish stuff of course I can recognize some of them in me but not everything, it’s not a 100 percent match so doing some self-reflecting during the coaching...” (trainee 4)

The part of the training concerning cultural differences seemed to start towards a very traditional and even essentialistic direction, but later on it guided trainees in a more complex and critical mindset towards the subject. Said that, the still present essentialistic approach on this matter could be balanced out by a reflection on subcultures, stressing similarities together with differences and discussing the difference between “big cultures” and “small cultures”, “blocks” and “threads” argued by Holliday (2016). This improvement should be easy to put into practice, as the training already introduces a more complex idea of cultural differences, so this aspect could just be deepened. In this way, the training could be closer to Dervin’s idea of “simplicity”(2016), which tries to take into account human tendency and need to simplify, but also tries to put an effort in reflecting on the more complex side of social events and the world in general. Dervin’s concept itself could be specified in the training as a starting point to explain the reason why people tend to generalise and create stereotypes.

Tailoring the training is also a topic discussed by scholars. In particular Kupka et al. (2008) discussed the importance of training spouses. This aspect assumed a very important role in the training analysed. In fact, spouses attended the training together with expats and even their children could be present. The trainer leans here on the view that, in case spouses or expats’ families face too many difficulties abroad, the assignment will be negatively influenced by that. The motivational issues related to spouses who follow expats in their assignment were

considered one of the main topics that need to be discussed. Not only the training was tailored to spouses and families but for single expats as well. In fact, an important part of training contents was created from an initial discussion and during the training, depending on what seemed to be the expat's biggest concerns. In this case, additional sessions could be very useful in order for the trainer to get to know trainees better and create specific contents tailored for them. Specifically, there could be an initial meeting between the trainer and trainees, in order to get to know each other, which would be a chance for the expats to express their needs and concerns. In this way, the training sessions could be better tailored to trainees and their families. The problem related to this suggestion is that it would be time consuming for the trainer and companies might not pay for the service. This sort of obstacle has to be faced not only by intercultural communication scholars but also by people studying and working within business fields and managerial professions.

The code "impossibility of prediction" under the category "flexibility of the training contents" suggested that the training did not aim at building perfect communicators in intercultural contexts nor at conveying the idea of the trainer as an omniscient character in intercultural communication matters. Companies invest in intercultural counseling in order not only to have successful assignments, but also to support their employees in an important life change such as moving abroad.

Within criticism towards intercultural counseling, the role of companies seems to be forgotten or underestimated. However, companies also represent a theme found during the analysis, as this aspect was considered much more important than expected. According to the trainer, companies still have to realise the real potential of intercultural training for their employees. In addition to

that, the trainer stressed the fact that companies are the real clients and this seemed a very important point to remember. Although the service is directed to expats, companies may benefit more from it in the long run compared to trainees. Expats' interest was also that their company would benefit from the intercultural training, since many of them hoped for their companies and working places to be still there after the international assignment is finished. Therefore, it is important to remember that the service must benefit both expats and companies.

Experience is a quite important factor, as Loenhoff (2011), Dervin (2016) and Holliday (2016) suggest. According to them, experience is underestimated in intercultural counseling; however, it seemed like the training changed slightly depending on how much experience in living abroad expats had. According to the trainer's experience, before their first international assignment, new expats appear to be more skeptical about certain contents of the training, whereas experienced expats are usually on the same page with the trainer from the beginning. Therefore, it was possible to conclude that the training can help trainees reflect on their experiences and how these can be useful for building a new life and human relationships in a new country. In other words, the hidden area of people's mind which, according to Holliday (2016), might contain our intercultural competence, can be stimulated by discussions and reflection of previous experiences. Discussion and reflection resulted being one of the most important parts of the training.

In the same way, failure was not necessarily considered something that must be avoided at all cost, even though the training aimed at building favorable conditions for expats to be successful. The trainer explained in the interview that sometimes it is much better for expats to

recognise that the life change that comes with the assignment is too heavy. In those cases, the best option for them is to quit the assignment and return home.

Interviewer: “In your opinion, what are the most important goals of the training you offer?”

“ ...It’s not always bad if you quit, sometimes it’s worst if you don’t, so if you are really causing harm and you are feeling bad bad bad it’s not always the best option either that you just hang around.” (trainer)

Also, the trainer stressed the importance of taking the risk of communicating with people of the new location, having a social life and facing problems together with new colleagues, as this initial effort will eventually reward the expats with a feeling of being accustomed to the new place and the new routine:

Interviewer: “In your opinion, what are the most important goals of the training you offer?”

“...So helping companies, that the international assignment will be as successful as possible, and for expats and their family that they can really make choices after they know enough, and they are able to choose where to use their energy. Integrating, have as local life as possible, it’s harder but people are usually happier afterwards. ” (trainer)

For this reason, failure was something that was taken into account even though the training aimed at limiting it. According to the trainer, she made it clear to the participants that it is not possible to predict the course of their assignment, or what will happen in certain scenarios. This suggested that there was not a specific plan of action when it comes to expats communicating or living their life abroad, but only suggestions coming from people who have been through the same sort of situation. This point reminded of Szkudlarek's argument about honesty and how it can be annulled by the training given to expats (2009). In this sense, by giving suggestions and tips the training did not suggest trainees not to be themselves during the assignment. However, as mentioned, honesty might be damaged in case trainees intentionally adjust their way of communicating in order to fit the cultural model the training provided them. Also, this behavior might create uncomfortable situations for expats, who might feel like they should not act naturally in the new workplace for example. Therefore, the role of honesty could be taken into consideration by trainers.

During the analysis, it was also possible to find relations with the issue of power imbalance between cultures discussed by Breidenbach and Nyri (2009). In this case, trainings as the one analysed by this theses are available for both expats that are going abroad and expats that are arriving to Finland from abroad, as well as expats travelling between third countries. This could be positive in order to avoid power imbalance, as the training is not only provided but also tailored to the single trainee. Furthermore, the trainer asserted that one of the main goal of the training is to overcome the habit of considering everything different as senseless or stupid, in order to open up and build tolerance and understanding towards different people. The training seemed to concentrate on reducing prejudice by building tolerance towards what we might not

understand immediately about other people's way of living. Despite this, one training session could be still not enough to achieve these goals. However, the openness that the training aimed at building is useful for trainees and can be used not only towards other cultures, but also towards minorities of trainees' own country. This point is very important within intercultural communication and can be connected to the discussion on "big culture" and "small culture" by Holliday (2016), as well as the topic of minorities and subcultures suggested by Breidenbach and Nyri (2009). For these reasons, it could be explained to trainees that what they learn during the training can be applied also in their home country, with people from different backgrounds in general.

A part of the training where an essentialist mindset was still evident consisted of approaching the culture of new bosses and colleagues of the relocation country. For example, if a trainee's future boss is a foreigner in the relocation country, then the training would cover the national culture of the new boss, as the trainer explained:

Interviewer: "Do you assess the trainees' intercultural skills before and after the training? If yes, how? If not, why not?"

"...Then I ask also about the manager, what nationality the manager is and so forth so I can use that a little bit and "ok, now you are use to Finland that you go ask directly and you go to your boss' room and he expects you to come and ask. So now let's face the cultural issue that your future boss is from China, I recommend you spending a little bit of extra time trying to know her or his habits..." (trainer)

The tendency of restraining people into categories due to their nationality was still quite present in this case. There could be more attention on many other aspects, for example how long a foreigner has lived in the new country, his or her experiences, personality, background history and so on. It might be useful to start from a traditional view of culture in order to prepare future expats for an assignment, as the discussion could develop and focus on the complex and dynamic aspect of cultural differences. However, identifying single people such as bosses or colleagues in order to connect them to their national culture could be misleading in this sense and could cause stereotypical assumptions. In this context, Rathje's work about culture and intercultural competence (2007) might be useful. Her idea of cultures as overlapping collectives of people with similar views of what is familiar and what is not might help in overcoming the image of culture as a rigid container.

6.2 Intercultural competence

Finding a definition of terms such as "intercultural competence" represents an important point of the debate between traditional and critical scholars. As explained previously, the trainer seemed not to give a specific definition of this term, which was considered also a synonym of "intercultural awareness". Giving an exact definition of the term might give more credibility to the training; however, many critical scholars express the idea that intercultural competence cannot be defined. For example, Loenhoff considers intercultural competence abstract and inexplicable through rules or rational connections (2011). Dervin claims that a definition of intercultural competence would convey the misleading idea that this type of competence can be

acquired once and for good (2016). According to several scholars, stereotypes, prejudices, imbalances and even conflicts would be facilitated through a definition of intercultural competence. For this reason, the fact that the trainer does not give a specific definition of this term could be a positive element, representing the fact that the trainer does not use so rigid categories when approaching the subjects. The trainer seemed to consider intercultural competence more like a tendency, the action of creating a situational shared culture between different people. In case a critical point of view is adopted, criticising the trainer for not giving specific definitions might create a contradiction, as critical scholars tend to be against strict definitions in intercultural communication. When talking about intercultural communication, the trainer seems actually closer to critical scholars' line of thoughts than in any other aspects of her trainings.

6.3 Assessment methods

Concerning possible assessment methods, a qualitative approach was used by the trainer to assess trainees before the training session. However, the assessment did not consist of finding the trainees' level of preparation but more of gathering background information about them, in order to tailor the training. Therefore, a series of questions was given to trainees about their previous experiences in international assignments, in travelling and in communicating with other cultures in general. Also, some practical information were asked, for example whether expats were leaving with their family and so on. Scholars have been discussing the possibility of assessing

intercultural competence. Specifically, traditional scholars study methods to assess this competence, whereas critical scholars insist on the problems of assessing a competence which can hardly be defined and could be developed only through experience and mistakes (Dervin 2016, Loenhoff 2011, Breidenbach and Nyri 2009, Holliday 2016). In this context, the choice made by the trainer to gather background information as a method to assess trainees' experience seemed to be closer to what critical scholars would use instead of rigid assessment scales. In fact, this method did not aim at defining the level of a competence, but at determining the current personal situation of trainees. In order to improve this sort of observation of trainees' experiences, it could be interesting to follow expats' emotional evolution by conducting interviews before, during and after their assignment, asking about their view on intercultural communication.

6.4 The duration of the training

A very interesting theme was "duration of the training" because it represented one of the main points the debate on intercultural counseling is built on. Specifically, critical scholars discuss the problematic aspect of the training being a short-term intervention that aims at teaching long-term abilities (Kaufmann et al. 2013). The topic of extending the training throughout the whole assignment was raised by almost all trainees. The main argument was about being able to reflect on every single phase of the adjustment process, together with the trainer, in additional training sessions. The problem raised by scholars in this case could be at least partially solved by additional sessions organised during the assignment. Also, it is

important to notice that expats do not generally attend intercultural training only once, but before every single assignment they start. Therefore, the knowledge they gain during a training can be refreshed before starting a new experience. Also, the session contained tips and exercises on how to modify the communication style from direct to indirect, for instance. However, according to some trainees, the training looked like a coaching session, or even a psychological session, that aimed at helping and supporting them more than teaching them specific skills.

Interviewer: “Do you think the training helped you develop yourself?”

“...she is bringing those issues into awareness, of course in a very delicate way but she was a mixture of a psychologist and a consultant (laughing).” (trainee 5)

Another point that could be useful is that after the session the material of the training was sent to trainees, in order for them to revise it and remember the reflection and discussion they had with the trainer. According to the trainer, sometimes some more contents are added to the material before being sent, depending on the trainees' needs. To conclude the point related to the duration of the training, trainees expressed their preference for having multiple sessions throughout the duration of the assignment, instead of having one long training session which, according to them, was too tiring. It is very interesting the fact that trainees did not complain about the session being too short, as some critical scholars might expect. Instead, most of the trainees wished the session was shorter and expressed the preference for more future sessions. Also, the first session could be organised well in advance, instead of a few days before the departure or even during the expat's first days abroad. I agree on the points underlined by

trainees on the duration and timing of the training session. Additionally, it could be useful to mention once more the concept of power imbalance from Szkudlarek (2009). In fact, according to the data, some trainees will attend an additional session on the specific culture of the relocation country. The trainer explained that this additional training will be given by a local trainer; therefore, it could represent an advantage as it provides the first contact with a local and an additional space where to discuss the expats' situation. Due to the fact that some companies buy the additional session to their employees and some do not, power imbalance seems to be still present and should be avoided.

The problematic aspect related to these suggestions remains companies' attitude towards investing more money on additional training sessions. Intercultural training could be advertised in order for companies to understand the importance of having more than one session as support for their expats during their stay abroad. In fact, the trainer agreed on the benefit that multiple sessions would have for both expats and companies; however, without the companies willingness to invest on them, these intentions cannot be put into practice.

6.5 Summarizing suggestions for future developments

This section aims at providing a summary and conclusions of the main suggestions mentioned throughout this thesis' analysis for trainings' future development.

For trainees it might be important to understand that adjustment does not necessarily have to follow the U curve model, as experiences are unpredictable and depends on the person's attitude.

If the trainer really wants to discuss adjustment using schemes, it might be helpful to draw different kinds of trajectories that describe the adjustment process. In other words, the adjustment does not have to look like a U or W curve but it might have different shapes. Naturally, these shapes would still not predict with certainty trainees' adaptation process. However, these schemes could be used as examples of how the adjustment might go, allowing the trainer to discuss the mental development that moving abroad might involve. Perhaps, the trainer could gather stories about other expats' adaptation to the relocation country, in order to draw new possible schemes of the way adjustments might go. Furthermore, it has to be clear to trainees that their mental development is personal and they do not need to rely completely on the adjustment curves discussed in the training.

Another suggestion for future trainings concerns the use of exercises that do not involve culture. The exercise "Present time: strengths and weaknesses. Future: opportunities, threats" might be good activity that helps trainees to think and plan their future without necessarily discussing culture or making comparisons between cultures. These sorts of activities should cover more space in the training together with practicalities, such as the checklist of things expats should take care of before leaving. In fact, these kinds of contents are really useful because they help expats in a practical way, without conveying essentialist ideas on culture.

To conclude, future improvements could focus on deepening the non-essentialist side of the training by discussing the concept of subcultures and stressing both differences and similarities between countries. In addition to that, Dervin's concept of simplicity (2016) could be introduced as, even though it might seem too abstract and impractical to trainers, it could really explain how stereotypes are generated. Once people understand the logic and reason

behind a specific behavior, they might be able to change it. As long as stereotyping is an automatic mechanism without logical explanation, people will keep using it as a way to defend themselves from the unknown. By knowing what scholars discuss about stereotyping, trainees might be able to gain consciousness on their tendency of using stereotypes.

Additionally, it is very important that trainees manage to become more open minded towards the others by reflecting on themselves and, according to the data, this aspect seemed to be already part of the training. However, the findings of this study suggested that it could be made clear to trainees that tolerance towards different people could be applied in every situation of their life and continued when they return from the assignment. The message in this case would be that tolerance and openness are not needed only when people go abroad and have contact with other cultures, but it is necessary for people's everyday life.

Although the training analysed in the study seemed to be already well tailored to the trainees and their families, this aspect could be improved if more time was dedicated to getting to know the expats and their families. This could be done for example, during a meeting before the actual training sessions. This meeting could be similar to an interview, and it could be done also from a distance. This way, the first training session would be shorter and less tiring, but still tailored to the trainees' individual needs.

Concerning the duration of the training, this thesis suggested that there should be multiple sessions lasting a shorter time. These sessions could be organised during the whole first year of assignment. In this way expats and their families would be able to talk about their concerns in different moments of their stay abroad. This approach could mentally help trainees to go through the assignment. The last session could be organised shortly after expats return to their home

countries, so that the training would focus on the returning process and expats' difficulties in getting accustomed to their old habits.

Additionally, timing seemed an important factor in intercultural training. In fact, organising the first session when the expat is already in the relocation country or shortly before the expat's leaving might negatively influence the effectiveness of the training. Expats and their families might not have enough time to elaborate the information and reflection they gained from the training. Therefore, this thesis suggested the first training session to be organised not later than three weeks before the expats' departure for the relocation country. This timing was given taking in account the checklist of practical advice the trainer provides. In case trainees realised they haven't taken care of something, then less than three weeks might not be enough time to handle everything. However, it is also important that the training is not organised too early compared to departure time, as the content should be still fresh in trainees' minds when they arrive in the relocation country.

Even though the training tried at avoiding essentialism, sometimes it seemed almost impossible to avoid it completely. As mentioned, traditional and essentialist concepts and models can be used as a starting point in order to help trainees getting into a more complex mindset a little bit at the time. In other words, it is possible to start from the simple in order to build a discourse that is gradually more complex. However, it is important to pay attention to some details, for example describing bosses or colleagues' cultures in case these people were not local to the relocation country. For these reasons this approach could be avoided or reshaped, perhaps following Rathje's suggestion on how to perceive culture (2007).

As already mentioned, companies represented a very important factor that cannot be forgotten when studying intercultural counseling. It is in fact necessary to take into account how companies influence the training. This means that some companies might not invest in some services such as additional training sessions or might decide to send an employee abroad with a very short notice. For this reason, this thesis suggests that scholars who analyse or discuss about intercultural counseling cooperate with business scholars or people working in business administration fields. Intercultural communication is a multidisciplinary field and as such it needs the involvement of different disciplines and points of view. Psychology and communication are very related with intercultural training, but business studies are also essential in order to study this phenomenon. Intercultural counseling is one of the numerous areas where intercultural communication is used; therefore, not taking in account how companies work would mean forgetting a very important aspect of the subject. Intercultural communication and business scholars could work together in order to keep the training updated following new studies on intercultural communication and to raise companies' awareness about the importance of intercultural training for expats. Also, the fact that only some trainees had an additional country specific session represents an imbalance regarding the support trainees receive. However, the trainer claimed not to have the possibilities of providing this type of session for every expats as not every company buys it. For these reasons, certain defects of the training should not be considered the trainer's responsibility, but it has to be connected with the way companies' policies work.

7. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude this thesis on intercultural communication training, it is necessary to introduce once again the research questions that guided the study:

- How can intercultural training be improved in order to satisfy trainees' needs and at the same time overcome problematic ethical aspects discussed by critical scholars ?
- How well do intercultural trainings equip expatriates for their adjustment abroad?
- How new ideas from critical scholars can be applied in intercultural training?
- How does the trainer's perception on intercultural training relate to that of the trainees'?

It is possible to conclude that the study answered all of the questions. Directions for future improvements were found. It was suggested by this thesis that the trainings reserve more time for the trainer in getting to know the trainees and their families before the first training session. Tailoring the training could be in fact an essential point of the training, as Kupka et al. (2008) also claim, culture specific and culture general information are not very useful if the contents are not tailored for the specific trainee. Reggy-Mamo (2008) tried experiential learning for trainees who did not have free time to revise the training and noticed that adapting the training to trainees' needs might give better results than new contents in general. Also, it was suggested that multiple shorter sessions during the first year of assignment could be organised. In this way, the training would no longer be a short-term intervention, thus it might more likely develop long-term abilities. Making the training a long-term intervention might also avoid the risk mentioned by

Kaufmann et al. (2013) of expats being competent only in one cultural setting as the training could go beyond culture specifics and concentrate on the personal aspect of expats' life. Additionally, essentialism should be avoided, especially when describing the culture of expats' boss and colleagues, and there could be more attention on timing the first sessions. Although Salo-Lee's approach (2017) is based on the acceptance of culture as something that shapes people, it also considers people as the first subjects in creating and recreating their culture, which seems in line with Szkudlarek's thoughts on culture being situational and the possibility of building culture in between the interlocutors (2009). Culture in this sense is compared to a rhizome, in order to convey its tendency to change (Salo-Lee and Crawford, 2017). This concept could be easily elaborated by trainees, especially if visually described using the image of a rhizome. Moreover, giving importance to both differences and similarities when discussing culture might give positive results.

Furthermore, companies were considered a very important aspect of intercultural communication training and as such, they should be taken into account when studying this subject. Many of the decisions regarding the structure and organization of the training depend on the way companies work, for example how much they are willing to invest.

The options suggested include also an answer to the second question. In fact, some suggestions were made according to critical scholars' ideas. There should be space to discuss subcultures, Holliday's concepts of "big culture" and "small cultures", threads versus blocks as well as focusing not only on differences between countries but also on similarities. Also, Dervin's approach called liquid realistic (2016) could be useful in order to explain how stereotyping works. In fact, even though the liquid realistic approach aims at avoiding

essentialism, it also considers the simplicity of people's instincts. In order to understand the complexity of the world, people need to simplify; therefore Dervin considers it impossible to completely avoid essentialism. This approach is summarised by the word "simplicity", which conveys the idea of both simple and complex thinking people naturally alternate in relation to the world (Dervin, 2016).

It should be also clear to trainees that the openness they develop during the trainees is very helpful in everyday communication, even in their home country. This is a line of thought that Holliday (2016) suggests when talking about the importance of everyday life experience in order to communicate with people.

Concerning the discrepancies between trainers' and trainees' view on intercultural training, it was possible to notice that trainees tend to relate possible difficulties of the adjustment problems to the relocation country itself, whereas trainer insisted more on working on self-awareness and personal issues, in order to prepare trainees for the changes they are going to face. To facilitate adjustment, the training emphasises the importance of expats' openness which, according to Kim, is an essential quality in intercultural communication (2001). An example of this type of discrepancies is the fact that there seemed to be differences in the way trainees and the trainer consider the adjustment process. In fact, according to trainees the adjustment process would depend on similarities between the home country and the relocation country, whereas the trainer stressed that difficulties expats face are the same, regardless of their relocation country. Moreover, the self-reflection part of the training seemed to be very appreciated and unexpected by trainees, who did not consider their past experiences and their background as a resource for overcoming possible challenges.

Also, there seemed to be a contrast between the way new expats and the trainer considered the adjustment process related issues. As a matter of fact, trainees preparing for their first international assignment were more skeptical about the content of the training compared to experienced expats who, according to the trainer, are usually on the same page with her from the beginning of the session.

This thesis concludes that intercultural training is very beneficial for expats. All the trainees were in fact satisfied by the session and, thanks to their suggestions, it will be possible to improve these services in the future. Expats and their families are people who face a very important life change, in order to bring profit to their companies and to enhance their careers. For this reason, they need support in order to work on their assignment without going through personal difficulties, stress, or family issues. Employees' wellbeing is very important also for companies as they can benefit from it. Consequently, there should be more emphasis on the importance of intercultural training and more investing in training sessions. In this way the trainer will have much more possibilities to improve the training and plan future developments of the services.

Evaluation of the study

There are some limits this thesis encountered and the evaluation is based on Guest et al.'s book "Applied Thematic Analysis" (2014), where useful criteria are listed in order to define how a study can be affected by certain restrictions. For example, the resources available are considered an essential point that influence the outcome of the study. In this case, the training could not be

observed for companies' privacy reasons, therefore very useful data could not be gathered. Thus, the training analysis could only relate to trainees' and the trainer's interviews. Also, without the possibility of being present during the training, it was not possible to apply some critical scholars' ideas in the training analysed. Observing the training would have also allowed me to draft new possible training contents.

Another type of limitation which is also mentioned by Guest et al. (2012) is the time factor. With more time available it could be possible to contact trainees later on during their assignment in order to determine whether they found the training contents useful in the long term. Also, there was a limited timeline in which data could be gathered, therefore the thesis was based on a limited number of participants.

Guest et al. explain also that the heterogeneity of the data influences the study itself. In this case data could be gathered only from interviews. Even though both trainees and the trainer were interviewed, giving a wider description of the phenomenon, the lack of direct observation might have affected the heterogeneity of data. In the same way, interviewing trainees later on after their assignment could lead to a more complete description and analysis of the topic. Furthermore, the fact that the analysis was conducted by just one person might limit the perspectives on the study (Guest et al. 2012: 32-33).

Other types of choices could have been made regarding the data collection as well. The questionnaire addressed to trainees did not produce very valuable data. Therefore, a short interview before the training could have worked better, in order to obtain more interesting answers and to get to know the participants better. Information such as participants' age and work position were not useful for this study; thus, certain questions could have been avoided.

Other types of questions should have been added to both the questionnaire and interviews with the trainer and trainees, such as “What do you think intercultural training is/How do you define intercultural training?”, “What do you think culture is/ How do you define culture?”, “How do you define adjustment?”.

Other types of analysis methods could have been applied for this study. Phenomenology for example, might have been an effective choice, due to its compatibility with humanistic researches. This type of method works very well when a small amount of data is available. Additionally, phenomenology could be optimal for analysing human experiences and for elaborating subjective interpretations and meanings that go beyond the text (Guest et al. 2012). The main reason why this method was not chosen for this study was to avoid excessive interpretations that could take the attention away from the main focus, which was the training. In other words, creating categories and describing the relations between themes and codes helped narrow down the discussion to the most important aspects of the training. However, future researches could use phenomenology in order to focus more strictly on human aspects of intercultural training. For example, future studies could observe the way trainees experience and elaborate the training contents throughout their whole assignment time, or the way the trainer relates with trainees.

Future studies on intercultural training could take the limitations this thesis faced into account. Also, it would be very beneficial if intercultural communication scholars would collaborate with business scholars and vice versa in order to build an analysis of the phenomenon from both perspectives.

Finally, this thesis can contribute to the field of intercultural training, as it adopts a critical mindset but, at the same time, it aims at providing trainers with practical suggestions on how to overcome widely criticised ethical problems. Also, this thesis wants to convey a different view on cultural issues, suggesting that refusing the idea of culture could lead to contradictions and might not help trainers adopting a new approach. This thesis also aims at inviting scholars in getting involved with intercultural training and counseling, not only because cultural issues require the work of experts, but also because intercultural training could become a very useful tool to discuss cultural issues with people working in different fields.

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