The cross-cultural transition experience. Phenomenological analysis on a group of international students

Maria Grazia Novara¹, Giuseppe Ruvolo²

Summary
This study is focused on exploration of experience of cultural transition that has lived a group of international students (European and not European) host at an Italian University during particular experiential segment marking the transition from their culture of belonging to the new social and cultural context. From an epistemological point of view that aligns with the phenomenological tradition with individual and group interviews, it was monitored with a longitudinal methodology as the representation of the transit cross-cultural adaptation to the context it emerged from the interviews are associated through the dominant narrative themes. The results show how in the early stage of contact with the new culture, the group of students, both European and not, have felt a sense of disorientation associated with the loss of its cultural matrix. Over the next step of analysis is rather more clearly the difference between the group of European students, whose performances evoke an adjustment process easier and less based on feelings of ambivalence and close relationships that characterize the group of non-European students.

Keywords: Cross-cultural transition; international students: phenomenology.

Introduction
The travel experience and contact with a new cultural reality carries extraordinary events that separate from the usual daily practices and the matrices containing the own Self. (Foulkes, 1973). The cross-cultural transition is an issue so complex that it has been the subject of study in various disciplines which have been interested to its analysis for different purposes. Anthropology, sociology, ethno-psychiatry and psychology have offered explanatory models of the phenomenon with an emphasis on both interpersonal and social aspects until to the cultural ones. Widespread attention has been placed on the final form of the appropriation in the host culture, until the last century in fact the long-term transitions were most practiced (Brown, 1992).

Conversely, the growth of short-time transit, the so-called “temporary migration”, which finds its highest expression in the case of sojourners, in recent years has had a growing attention in psycho-sociological research.

In fact, if the migratory events that characterized the last century have found in the literature a fruitful discussion on the possibility of its processes and outcomes, there are few scientific researches on modern migration trends, which have more peculiarity of temporality and passage than the definitive inclusion in a country other than their own.

¹ Psychologist, PhD in Public Relation, Expert in innovation start up management (e-mail: novara_mg@libero.it).
² Full Professor of Psychology of the organizations and institutions. Department of Psychology, Palermo University.
The term *sojourner*, whose etymological roots refers to a stranger and a host, indicates a category of individuals who moves to a foreign country with the intention to return to their homeland after a predetermined period of time. In this category we can find several figures: managers, diplomats, missionaries, trained technicians.

Among these figures we have chosen to focus on the experience of living cultural transition international students, they choose to carry out part of their academic education in a foreign country. This specific category of sojourners seems particularly interesting. Intercultural transition engages for them in a crucial period of development, which affects not only the formation of future professional identity but mainly it’s linked with an evolutionary step towards independence and separation from their belonging matrices (Foulkes, 1973).

The student, who lives in a foreign country, leaves behind him the <<common matrix>> (Foulkes, 1975) that connects him to environment of origin. The codes etched in his inner world can hardly be reflected by the reality host. The actions that in familiar environment are immediate such as the rituals of everyday life, moods and so on, in other spaces and places may become problematic (Mignosi & Ruvolo, 2008).

In line with this presupposition, this research was guided by a general area of interest which relates to exploration and understanding the experience of foreign students in international mobility in dynamic terms. The design of the study is qualitative in nature. This research has had as its primary purpose the understanding how individuals construct their own meanings, how they give meaning to the world and their experience in the world (Charmaz, 2002). The method chosen was phenomenological option that is particularly suitable because of its use in the study of realities related groups or communities of individuals that share certain conditions or experiences understood like dynamic reality.

Thus, the fundamental aim was to represent the lived experience by these sojourners during their first academic year at the host university in Italy, through dominant narrative themes emerged from in-depth interviews and group in-depth interviews. Our sample was consisted by 52 undergraduate students enrolled at first year because we were interested to analyze the particular segment of cross-cultural transition from their country to host country. This study can be defined longitudinal and has followed the methodological principles of phenomenological research as outlined by Kruger (1981), Giorgi (1985) and Polkinghorne (1989). This method applies a rigorous analytical procedure to naïve descriptions of lived experience, with the goal of arriving at a descriptive statement that characterizes the essential structure of that experience as it appears in consciousness and it’s emotionally lived (Peterson, 2003).

The choice of this epistemological option was dictated by a broader perspective. Indeed this research represents the exploratory phase of a wider project and its virtuous continuation will be the implementation of a intervention phase.

The exploration through the phenomenological approach, often defined as a “science of beginnings” (cfr. Seamon, 2000), is appeared in this sense valuable, precisely because the core of its analysis is the experience lived and told by protagonists: international undergraduate students. The theoretical point of view that has supported the interpretation of results refers to the groupanalytic and intersubjective perspective (Foulkes, 1973; Rouchy, 1987; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, 1994). They are two areas of study and research that explain and understand the human nature of experience as relational and culturally oriented. In

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conjunction with these theories, we might say that the “cultural incorporates” (Rouchy, 1987) stands for all programmed and non-mental behaviors structuring interactions between individuals belonging to the same culture. These are the cultural “incorporates” that function without our knowledge like automatisms, and render interactions synchronous and comprehensible. They are linked to the structure of relational space and lived time. In this sense, the inner world of the student, that somehow it must be expressed in another place than those who feel they belong, you suddenly feel, creating an effect that is critically alert to the existence of own Self.

Majority of studies that examines the international students population highlights that environmental and psychological difficulties characterized the student’s adaptation process in the new environment. These studies often comprises quantitative surveys and questionnaire studies. Highlighting the limited presence in Italy of systematic studies on the experience of international students, we have chosen to conduct a qualitative study to explore the dimension of cultural transition of students sojourners. With the projected increases in international student enrollment in the Italy (in connection with an increasing number of mobility programmes), a specific knowledge of their lived experience and their needs are necessary especially in the implications for sojourners wellbeing and cross cultural competence on Italian campuses (they are only 2% of all universities population in Italy). Through qualitative exploring of the crossing culture dimension and the experience (positive and negative) that characterizes this transition, this research will contribute to promote knowledge and broaden the competence about welcoming services for this group of academic users (international students), particularly for professionals who support this population. From our point of view, Italy is living a strong crisis about the welcome of foreign people. In this sense it seems important promoting knowledge to develop strategic potential of University, because it can become a place to promote peace culture.

**International mobility**

Mobility inside university has originate from the Renaissance age, when the mobility had cultural importance (Corradi, 1988). The phenomenon of student mobility between universities involved the majority of universities internationally. Each university involved in the circuit of trade has aimed at monitoring their bodies for this phenomenon, in fact, are drawn up annually accurate dossier on the composition of the foreign student population in (incoming) and outgoing (outgoing) from each one. In the area of psychological research there are several studies on the phenomenon, linked with the process of adaptation (’s adjustment process) of international students in their host country, the result of adaptation (adaptation of the outcome), the experience academic associated with the test results, relationships with family and colleagues, the levels of stress associated with language difficulties (Ward & Kennedy, 1993).

To summarize all contributions as one theoretical argument, more than other factors that emerge as crucial in the experience of student-sojourner are connected to five areas related to the experience of transition: 1) Area related to the culture shock, 2) Area related to the negotiation of self in social activities; 3 ) Area related to the possible racial and ethnic discrimination, 4) Area related to communications skills, 5) Area related to stress academics. Finally this phenomenon has a multidimensional nature.
Research

Our research has focused on three aspects of the experience of international students. First, we analyzed how the meaning and essence of experience is to be developed during the first academic year, in parallel, we tried to understand the feelings and thoughts experienced by students in relation to the transition process in the new context, then, studies on cultural distance as a predictor of stress acculturation (Berry, 2005), finally we focused on the exploration of possible differences between European and non-European students. Knowledge of this possible difference seems important in view of the design of specific services for students from very different cultural contexts from the Italian, (for example to the Arab world or the Asian one), which may have dissimilar needs and demands from colleagues Europe.

The final sample of our research was composed of 52 international students, including 15 males and 37 females (M= 20.54 age; SD= 2.509).

International students representing 20 different countries and different ethnicities (Asian, European and Black/Caribbean/African) have participated in this study, 27 sojourners come from European country, 25 from non European country.

Data were gathered from in-depth semi structured individual and groups interviews. Interviews were conducted in Italian, were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

The same procedure was replicated for three times during the first academic year, about every three months. Sixty-one interviews, involving 52 participants in total, were undertaken. Twenty five participants were interviewed individually (59 individual interviews), twenty seven in groups interview (12 groups interview). While every section of group interview lasted one hour and half, the individual interview lasted between 21 and 69 minutes in the first step (M=41); between 31 and 82 minutes in the second step (M=49); between 39 and 77 minutes in the third step (M=56); Seventy percent of them participated in all three steps of the research.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>Benin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is. Mauritius</td>
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<td>Malta</td>
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<td>Morocco</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perù</td>
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<td>3.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polonia</td>
<td>4</td>
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Results

The following tables show the dominant themes emerged over the three steps of longitudinal research. The first refers to the analysis of individual interviews, the second to group sessions.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominants Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>individual interview</td>
<td>groups interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disorientation</td>
<td>Disorientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling of strangerness</td>
<td>Feeling of strangerness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambivalence growth/change</td>
<td>Ambivalence trust/mistrust</td>
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<td>Relation with context</td>
<td>Conflict with institution</td>
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<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Need recognition</td>
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<td>Need of support</td>
<td>Need of support</td>
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The following summarizes the main themes found in the analysis process:

**Disorientation** - The theme of disorientation connotes the cultural experience of transit particularly in the first phase of permanence in the new reality host, where issues related to the linguistic and adaptive in general are extremely pressing. Compared to the incidence of this theme is to be noted that in the experience of non-European students it takes more the form of crisis pregnancy in the intermediate step of the analysis, six - eight months of stay in the new culture. This evidence fits with different models described in the literature, including the U-curve model of Lysgaard (1955) which summarizes the processuality in three basic steps: 1) initial adaptation, 2) crisis, 3) adaptation. The feeling that characterizes this issue in the narratives of students takes many forms: from disorientation to uncertainty, feelings of loneliness and sadness.

**Feeling of strangerness** - The theme of the feeling of strangerness and alienation connotes the stories of students throughout the whole process of analysis. Thus the feeling of strangerness is a structural experience of transition and binds to configurations not only intersubjective, but also identity. As stated Grinberg and Grinberg (1975) the concept of identity and self refers to both structural and experiential dimension in which the components are combined mental and physical functions and the representations they generate.

**Ambivalence growth/change Vs Ambivalence trust / mistrust** - The ambivalence is a theme that in the process of analysis shows greater significance in the last two steps of both individual and group interviews. In either settings, the dimension related to the distance from their home
country, has assumed the connotation of a kind of interstitial space, a break with the times and cultural spaces previously inhabited by the students (Profita, 2005).

**Relations with the context Vs Conflict with the Academic institution** - The delicate relationship with the context: the university and the multitude of relational objects in it (services, colleagues, professors, other international students, etc.) are an important theme across all the steps of the interviews, with a slight thickening theme in the second and third step.

**Sense of belonging Vs Need Recognition** - The relationship with their matrices of belonging is a basic issue that accompanies the experience of transit in all its cultural process (Rouchy, 1987). It is precisely the gap between their own culture and the new cultural context that is the transitional space in which the sojourner can doing new experience of self. Compared to individual interviews, the family dimension is very present, and it changes during the process of analysis. If in the first two steps are predominant attitude of melancholy absence, at the end of the first academic year (corresponding to the third step of interviews), students appear more inclined to experiment the host environment. The group setting has shown a centering instead on the *hic et nunc* experience of transit and the need to be recognized as part of the host community.

**Bisogno di supporto** – La dimensione del supporto è una condizione condivisa da tutti gli studenti, seppure sia più incidente tra quelli non europei. Questi ultimi a differenza dei colleghi europei spesso riportano come la mancanza di un’efficiente rete organizzativa e un’efficace conoscenza di tutti i servizi offerti dall’università agisca da barriera ad un buon adattamento. Spesso nelle narrative, emergono dinamiche di idealizzazione di eventi relazionali in cui gli studenti si sono sentiti autenticamente accolti e facilitati. Il bisogno di supporto viene altresì espresso come bisogno di avere uno spazio in cui potere esprimere le difficoltà legate all’adattamento nel nuovo contesto e potere confrontarsi con chi esperisce un vissuto simile.

**Need support** - The size of support is a condition shared by all students, although it is more incident among those outside Europe. They, in contrast to European counterparts supported by two associations in the area especially designed for the facilitation of their integration in the new environment, often referred to as the lack of efficient and effective organizational network knowledge of all the services offered by universities to act as a barrier to a good adaptation. Often in fiction, emerging relational dynamics of idealization of events in which students have felt truly welcomed and facilitated. The need for support is also expressed as a need to have a space in which power to express the difficulties in adapting to the new context and be able to compare experiences with those who experienced a similar. This element is well understand the deep motivation and participation demonstrated by the students included in this study that during the course of research have had the opportunity to share their experiences related to the experience of cultural change that transition implies.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of the cross-cultural experience as a process along the first year of university, allows us to associate this event to a real rite of passage, an anthropological space where students reconsider their self-identity and their identity boundaries.

It is interesting comparison of the themes that emerged during the individual and group interviews. In the latter group dimension acts as a unifying factor and socializing, students in fact
have shown a capacity for mentalization of their experiences related to cultural change and adaptation to a new context, accompanied by a feeling of recognition within the institution host. In sum, in light of the findings it seems clear that an intervention aimed at enhancing the integration of the group of non-European students, that have shown the need for a specific orientation within the context of Palermo, would be consistent with the primary function of the university as an agency of transnational mobility, as enshrined in the Bologna Process, ensuring greater attractiveness of European higher education against citizens from countries outside Europe and improving the internal and external Public relations system.

References


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*i* Part of this research was presented in “V Congresso nazionale Arip. Psicologia, ambiente e salute per un turismo di qualità”. 15-17 October 2009, Viterbo.