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# U-Curve, Squiggly Lines or Nothing at All? Culture Shock and the Erasmus Experience

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## Abstract

Despite their controversial status in the current literature on sojourner adjustment, classical U-curve and four-stage models of culture shock continue to enjoy remarkable popularity. This study aims to investigate their validity by starting from (recollected) sojourner experience. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 students who had taken part in the European Erasmus exchange to see if any adaption patterns would emerge that tally with previous conceptions or offer alternatives to them. Our results show that neither moments of crisis or shock, nor any of the four stages or the typical culturally induced adjustment problems were generally reported. Accounts instead focused on success, personal growth, and a three-phase structure that divided the experience mainly in terms of social contacts and eventfulness. Furthermore, emotional ambivalence emerged as a distinctive feature throughout the entire stay. We propose that the specific characteristics of the Erasmus experience account for some of our results. Students' close relationship with their international peers, which is one of these features, may thus facilitate cultural adaptation.

## Abstract in Spanish

A pesar de su estado controvertido en la literatura actual sobre la adaptación de todos los que pasan tiempo en el extranjero, los modelos clásicos de choque

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cultural de curva en U y de cuatro etapas continúan tener una gran popularidad. Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar su validez partiendo de la experiencia (recordada) de un residente temporal. Aplicando un enfoque cualitativo, realizamos entrevistas semiestructuradas con 50 estudiantes que habían participado en el intercambio europeo Erasmus para ver si surgía algún patrón de adaptación que coincidiera con concepciones anteriores u ofreciera alternativas a las mismas. Nuestros resultados muestran que, en general, no se informaron momentos de crisis o choque, ni ninguna de las cuatro etapas o los típicos problemas de adaptación culturalmente inducidos. Las representaciones, en cambio, muestran el éxito de los estudiantes, el crecimiento personal y una estructura de tres fases que dividió la experiencia principalmente en términos de la densidad de eventos y contactos sociales. Además, una ambivalencia emocional emergió como un rasgo distintivo durante toda la estancia. Proponemos que las características específicas de la experiencia Erasmus dan cuenta de algunos de nuestros resultados. Para dar un ejemplo, parece seguro que las relaciones de los estudiantes con sus compañeros internacionales de estudios facilitan la adaptación cultural.

**Keywords:** culture shock, cultural adaptation, U-curve, European Erasmus student exchange

## Culture Shock and Adjustment Curve Models

One of the central tenets of intercultural contact studies is that “interacting with culturally different individuals or functioning in unfamiliar physical and social settings is inherently stressful with outcomes ranging from mild discomfort to severe, debilitating anxiety” (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 16). Ward, Bochner, and Furnham see strong “evidence indicating that meetings between culturally diverse people are inherently difficult” (17) as they state in their standard textbook on “the psychology of culture shock”. The notion that such encounters (almost invariably) involve some form of ‘shock’ goes back to early (and often rather anecdotal) examples of intercultural research from the 1950s, as proposed for instance in the work by Kalervo Oberg (1954/1960) and Sverre Lysgaard (1955). The term ‘shock’ itself expresses a feeling “when something very unexpected happens, especially something bad or frightening” (*Dictionary of Contemporary English*), and is still much in use in both academic literature and popular reasoning, despite more recent ways of thinking about the phenomenon in terms of adaptation problems or acculturation processes. Oberg’s classic conception of culture shock comprises a four-stage development that has sojourners abroad, during the “first few weeks” (178) of their stay, experience a honeymoon phase in which they are fascinated by the novelty of their host culture, before they will fall into a period of regression, which is

“characterized by a hostile and aggressive attitude” (178) towards it and growing importance, if not idealization, of their home environment. According to Oberg, this is followed by a third phase in which sojourners still feel superior to their host culture, but approach it with humorous detachment and gradually adapt their behavior to suit the conditions, norms, and expectations of their host societies. Such adjustment ultimately reaches completion in the fourth stage, that of “recovery” (179), in which sojourners are at relative ease with life abroad, no longer feel cultural anxiety, and accept the customs of the host country “as just another way of living” (179).

Parallel to the culture shock model there emerged and evolved cross-cultural adjustment models that integrated the notion of ‘shock’ and were accompanied by visual illustrations that “purported to describe and even predict a ‘typical’ trajectory that such stressful encounters would produce” (La Brack 1). These most frequently also centered upon discussions of four stages and were given visual expression in a U-shaped graph in a coordinate plan whose y-axis indicates the degree of adjustment, the x-axis the time of stay. Lysgaard, the pioneer of the so-called U-curve adjustment hypothesis, thus found that Norwegian students who had stayed in the US six to eighteen months reported lower adjustment than those who had stayed either less or more than that time span (49). Deducing a regular adjustment development during any one longer stay abroad from these figures, Lysgaard’s and later studies modeled on his found a general pattern that goes from initial fascination via disillusionment (the actual stage of culture shock or ‘crisis’) and adjustment (in which appropriate behavior is accepted and learned) to a phase of “mastery” (Black and Mendenhall 226), in which there are still “small incremental increases in the individual’s ability to function effectively in the new culture” (226).

Though their exact terminology for the phases may vary, there have been many who have found evidence for a U-curve development; some, supporting the general idea, have gone on to argue for a J-curve development (228-9), taking into account that during the phase of mastery, adjustment through experience and learning remains incremental and cannot but be higher than when the culture is first encountered, i.e. during the time of initial but largely uninitiated fascination; others have expanded the U-curve model to also accommodate phenomena that occur after sojourners’ return to their home countries, finding evidence of ‘reverse culture shock’ when those coming back realize they have been changed by their experience abroad and “no longer ‘fit’ in the same place [they] did before going” (Kracke 3177).<sup>1</sup> These often conceive

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<sup>1</sup> Like discussions of culture shock, most of which for a long time had a distinctly clinical flavor (Furnham and Bochner 163), discussions of shock after re-entry, especially in their early days, had a tendency to make rather much of and also largely pathologize the

of the entire experience as two connected U-patterns, or a W-shape (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 34). Yet others have argued for more fundamental changes to the U-curve or different shapes altogether, such as a W-like shape for the experience abroad alone (with a phase of 'surface' adjustment wedged in between two crisis periods) or the inverted U-curve suggested by Ward and colleagues (e.g. Ward and Kennedy). Testing the validity of the U-curve by means of longitudinal studies, the latter found evidence of an inverted curve, with indications of psychological and social problems at the beginning, clear improvement at about the middle of the stay, and increased psychological stress towards the end of the experience (299-301). Ward, Bochner, and Furnham point out that the traditional culture shock and U-curve propositions' insistence on 'entry euphoria' contrasts sharply with stress and coping literature, in which it becomes clear that the most severe 'problems' occur at the initial stages of the transition, during a phase of "moderate distress" (81), after which non-cultural issues gain salience and sojourners settle into a routine.

There is a striking discrepancy between the longevity and popularity of culture shock and U-curve models in research, training, counselling, and popular belief, and the skepticism with which they have been met, even among those who propose them as useful concepts, let alone those who have long discarded them as "simplistic, reductionist, or overly deterministic" (La Brack 1). On webpages, in blogs, books, brochures, and academic articles on the subject of going abroad, representations of U-curve graphs and references to a number of adjustment stages are legion. It seems, indeed, there is hardly an advice piece by international student offices, study abroad organizations, expats, and ex-sojourners that goes without at least mentioning, if not discussing seriously, notions of shock and curve. Often there is a mixture of incontrovertibility and factual prediction on the one hand ("this process generally occurs"; "The W-Curve") and distinct admission of the severe limitations of the models' applicability on the other ("you may not experience it exactly as described [...], your personal 'curve' may look more like a long squiggly line"; "The W-Curve"). There are not few researchers who share this ambivalent stance: Ward and colleagues, for instance, conclude that after decades of testing, the U-curve model, in its classic form, should be rejected (Ward and Kennedy 293), that it is not "accurate" (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 82) and derives a lot from

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phenomenon. In his much-quoted account of reverse culture shock, Dan G. Hertz defined sojourner return as a "crisis situation" (252) whose various clinical manifestations ranged from mild symptoms of stress to a "wide range of neurotic disturbances" (253) and related "maladaptive" coping mechanisms (252). Waud Kracke, in his encyclopedia entry on culture shock, states that, coming back changed to the familiar, "[m]any people feel *even more* difficulty in readjusting to their *own* culture after returning from abroad than they did adjusting to the foreign culture" (3177; first two emphases ours; third in the original).

“armchair speculation” (80). Still they also add that it may have “heuristic” value, and is no “sheer fantasy, a mere illusion” (82), as there keep being samples that sometimes confirm (parts of) the model. La Brack admits to having “used the ‘curves of adjustment’ for almost three decades” in spite of noticing that for many of his students “the models did not fit their experience particularly well”, being “neither accurately descriptive nor particularly predictive” (2).

Apart from criticism that curves and shock models are imprecise and far from reflecting “a universal reality” (2) – most probably not even what a majority of sojourners experience – there has been sustained reservation about the precise methodologies and conceptualizations that have underlain them. Black and Mendenhall point out that few studies supporting the U-curve hypothesis, while being empirical, make use of statistically sound methods, and that many conclude longitudinal effects from mostly cross-sectional data (231; Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 80). They find particular fault with some studies’ asking subjects to recall retrospectively their level of adjustment at different points in the past, sometimes going back more than 12 months. It has also been noted that ‘adjustment’ in and across the various studies is variously operationalized, being about comfort, or satisfaction, or mood, or academic morale, or attitude towards host culture, or effectiveness (231), or hard-to-disentangle mixtures of these; ‘shock’ and ‘crisis’ likewise have been understood to emanate from a failure to communicate, or severe value conflicts, or social or emotional isolation, or again, a mixture of these. On the note of precise causes of (non-)adjustment, then, for Black and Mendenhall it is the greatest weakness of most U-curve studies that they seek to demarcate and describe phases but mostly remain silent on why the phases should occur the way they do and why there might be transition from one phase to the next: what exactly brings about the honeymoon phase, “what might tend to exaggerate or limit it”, why must time elapse “before the full impact of the culture shock phase is felt” (232)? Similar criticism has been leveled at Oberg’s proposition, which fails to identify what factors exactly contribute to culture shock, and to what degree: a general unfamiliarity with any or all aspects of the new culture (climatic, linguistic, political, legal, social etc.) or – as suggested, for instance, by Bochner and Furnham (164) – a lack of social skills that would help cross-cultural travelers to cope with concrete “social situations, episodes and transactions” and thus improve their situation abroad (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 65). For Ward, Bochner, and Furnham, a lot of “confusion” (83) has been created by researchers indiscriminately using multiple outcome measures in their curve and shock testing, and by their not separating affective, cognitive, and behavioral

processes neatly enough, nor the different groups of sojourner types they run their tests on.<sup>2</sup>

## Qualitative Research and Erasmus Culture Shock

In view of such ongoing controversy, and amid widespread admission that the models do not fit students' experiences very well, we hold that there is a lot to be gained by turning the procedure around and starting with the experiences, listening to the stories told by students, collecting and comparing them, and then seeing whether a particular pattern, if not graphic shape, emerges from these. If the models don't fit the experience, this may be an indication that the experience – as a more holistic phenomenon, as something lived through and recalled – needs to be looked at more closely, and that models should be extracted from that basis. Such a procedure rests on the assumption that significant occurrences of disorientation, perplexity, frustration, and anxiety – especially when they deserve the name of 'shock' or 'crisis' – but also fascination, elation, or simple contentment will well be remembered by subjects, even after a couple of months. There may be some loss in the precision of measurements, in the exact isolation of individual stress factors, in not having a statistical validity of data registering, for instance, academic morale or psychological mood at different points in time during a stay; there may be, on the contrary, certain effects of distortion, caused by faulty memory, heightened roles of social desirability, subjects' overall self-concepts, mental processes of coping with (and reporting on) past experience. A problem overcome, a joy felt in the past may not appear as intense as it was perceived when first encountered. Yet there are clear gains making up for such imprecision: the approach pursued here also rests on the assumption that subjects are capable of making sense of their past experience in a meaningful way, and that they may have to bring a lot to the discussion of how their cultural and psychological adjustment unfolded, what their main problems and joys were, how many stages they went through (if any at all), what these stages were about, and how and why they may have proceeded from one to the next. The perspective and views of the subject (Flick 82), we hold, need to be taken into account in discussions of culture shock and curve models. These can act as an important counterbalance to the preponderance of quantitative approaches, which – it could be argued – have split complex experience into multiple measurements, with a view to isolating factors as clearly as possible, but have often failed to offer full and integrated readings of the complex processes a sojourner experiences when abroad. It is not difficult to imagine a longitudinal study producing curve results on for

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<sup>2</sup> The marked differences in the time parameters of most curve studies have been identified as a further serious weakness. Quite early on, Austin T. Church remarked that they made the "U-curve description so flexible as to be meaningless" (543).

instance ‘mood’ and another study producing different curve results on ‘academic performance’, pointing to contradictory evidence of problematic adaptive development, when after all is said and done, and polemically put, students thus tested would not testify to having had any serious problems at all during their stay. A qualitative approach validates sojourners’/students’ capacity to make sense of events and processes – especially those that concern their own experience – seeing them as ‘experts’ on the time they stayed abroad. In addition to validating autobiographical sense-making, qualitative research can integrate subjective theories sojourners/students have to offer on that which they practiced and experienced – and by reconstructing and collating subjective views arrive at intersubjective or collective statements/readings of experience.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of the present study is hence to find out whether, under the conditions of the European Erasmus student exchange, major cultural adaptation problems are reported on by sojourners, what concrete aspects of the experience these are possibly about, whether they form distinct patterns (in terms of their types and sequence), and whether or not they can be represented graphically in the shape of a U-curve, an inverted U-curve or any other model that would yet need to be abstracted from the responses. There is a distinct sense in which this study seeks to ascertain whether sojourners’ responses at all confirm the psychological crisis and cultural loss narratives focused on by culture shock research, or whether they do not rather make sense of the experience abroad more positively in terms of transition, incremental change, and progressive development.<sup>4</sup>

That said, it is important to bear in mind that culture shock stories, under the conditions observed by this study, are not expected to equal or surpass those reported by literature on other types of stays and sojourners. Culture shock has been related to a number of variables that potentially lessen its occurrence. Compared to other stays abroad, first of all, student exchange is marked by its “relatively benign character” (Furnham and Bochner 161). Research on international students has also found that sociocultural adaptation runs more smoothly when there is increased cultural knowledge (or ‘intelligence’) and language fluency among sojourners, and when there is extensive contact and

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative studies of subjective sense-making, and their important contribution to empirical social research, see Flick (82-6).

<sup>4</sup> See also Kracke (3177), who identifies two such strands in anthropological writing on living abroad experiences: negative views that stress the loss of one’s old culture, mourning, and psychological crisis, and more positive views that stress transition, development, and learning.

less cultural distance between sojourners and members of the host culture (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 66). Motivational aspects, like interest in the other culture, and self-determination also play an important role and ‘predict’ lower culture shock (Presbitero 30; Yang, Zhang, and Sheldon 96). These are criteria fairly well fulfilled by the stays and students that are looked at in this study: all students have freely opted for an Erasmus stay, they have chosen the countries they wanted to go to, some of them staying in countries whose language and culture is also the subject of their studies (see below); all report a high degree of intrinsic motivation for exploring another country and culture. There may be variations on the cultural distance scale (between, say, Germany, Spain, and Lithuania), yet all the destinations are European, there is a perceived common link between sojourners and hosts, maybe even traces of a common European identity (Byram 33-4), knowledge of the foreign environment, for most, is not next to nothing. Additionally, the immediate contexts of living and studying are relatively similar to what has been experienced at home: there is a certain conformity to the international(ized) student experience, English can be used as a lingua franca, and there are those that have suggested the existence of an “Erasmus bubble” that makes close and potentially stressful intercultural encounter with the host culture in fact rather rare (though it may foster rich interpersonal encounters with students from other countries; Dervin 117; Byram and Dervin 6; IEREST 63); not to mention the extensive support structures proffered by the Erasmus program and the host universities, which can be assumed to further reduce students’ sense of isolation and disorientation.

Still, culture shock and problems of adaptation *are* again and again discussed in connection with Erasmus student mobility, both by students and researchers (Papatsiba 37-8; Murphy-Lejeune 23-4, 28; “Erasmus: Coping with Culture Shock”). Papatsiba, for instance, points to the various challenges faced and reported by Erasmus students (such as adjustment to a foreign academic system and unfamiliar sociocultural norms, the building of new social networks; 38), while Krzaklewska and Skórska seek to “verify” the existence of culture shock under Erasmus conditions, placing special emphasis on the cognitive dimension of such stress and noting how Erasmus culture shock largely results from students’ lack of “adequate information” on what to expect during their stay in a particular country (105). For us, Krzaklewska and Skórska’s study is illuminating in that it addresses the gap that exists with respect to testing for culture shock during relatively short stays like an Erasmus term abroad (they point out that most theories have been developed from looking at longer sojourns; 106) and in that it uses a qualitative, interview-based approach that takes seriously the subjective perspectives of those having made the experiences.

Building on the 18-interview study by Krzaklewska and Skórska, we have extended the number of interviews to 50 and have been intent on discussing potential problems and successes in as open a way as possible, prompting phase-related answers but avoiding questions suggestive of “critical moments” (114).

## The Method of This Study

The method chosen was the semi-structured interview, which means respondents, as a rule, were asked nine open-ended questions in a fixed order. Depending on their answers, the interviewer sometimes deviated slightly from the schedule, dropping a question that had already been touched upon, probing for more detail with others, or asking for clarification and examples. The general aim was to give the respondents ample opportunity to recall adjustment phenomena, negative *and* positive, without prompting or pushing ideas of ‘shock’ and ‘crisis’. The overall framing of the interview, which was also made clear when students were invited to take part, was their ‘Erasmus experience’, potentially stretching from the time of their application to their return home.

The interviews were started off with questions like “how was your stay?” and “why, do you think, was it the way you state?” Then, there was a question asking for students’ motivation prior to the time abroad (“what were the reasons that made you apply for and take part in an exchange?”). This was followed by a series of questions that related to students’ intercultural encounters, their relation to (members of) the host culture, and their reflections on personal and cultural learning processes: “how did you come into contact with members of the host culture?”, “what is your image of members of the host culture (and has this changed in any way)?”, “what is your connection to the host culture (and has this changed in any way)?”, “what do you take away from the whole experience?” If, by that point, no negative experiences had been mentioned at all by the respondents – which actually happened quite often – the interviewer included a question like “were there also problems?” Before the interview was rounded off with a question of whether and why students would (or would not) recommend an Erasmus experience to their fellows, they were invited to share their views on whether there was a potential phase structure to their stay abroad (“would you go along with the notion that your time abroad can be divided into different phases [and, if so, which would these be]?”). In case respondents asked back whether the interviewer had in mind particular areas of experience, they were assured that this was not the case and encouraged to develop their ideas freely, so as not to bias their answers in any way by privileging aspects of mood and well-being, academic adaptation, sociocultural

adjustment, personal effectiveness or knowledge of and attitudes towards (members of) the host culture etc. The questions students were invited to answer were thus about what they experienced, eliciting autobiographical reminiscence (including perceptions, attitudes, emotions), and about how they made sense of what they had experienced, eliciting 'lay expert' knowledge and reflection (the "subjective theories" on how the stay proceeded and how it affected their views and personal development; Flick 203).

The participants of this study were students of Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany. They were on average slightly above 23 years of age and in the later stages of their bachelor's degree at the point of the interview. The median length of their stay was five months. The interviews were conducted, with very few exceptions, no earlier than two months and no later than four months after the sojourn. 60 per cent of the interviewees had been to a country whose language, literature, and culture was also part of the philological subject they pursued (e.g. students of Romance languages going to Spain), the rest having spent time in countries more or less unrelated to their principal academic interests. The other subjects included, for instance, the law, media studies, social science, and biology. The three most frequent host countries were Spain (14 interviewees), the United Kingdom (10), and France (8). Others included: Ireland (4), Sweden (3), Poland (2), Estonia (2), Italy (2), Hungary (2). We found that the main advantage of such a mixed field was that we could control for effects resulting, for example, from the higher level of prior knowledge students may have had of their host country as well as from the supposed different cultural distances between Germany and the respective host countries. If no discernible patterns of difference were to emerge from our data concerning the overall level of satisfaction with the sojourn, it could be inferred that the level of prior knowledge and the specific make-up of the target culture had no significant influence on this variable.

The interviews were conducted in German and normally lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. They were recorded and partially transcribed. The material (both transcribed and audio) was extensively read and reread (and relistened to), using the constant comparison method and deviant case analysis (Rapley 140-1). This way we determined the most salient response patterns and checked for validity by establishing the frequency with which they occurred and the weight given to them by our interviewees. Our overarching coding scheme was informed by questions of how students evaluated their stay, and of whether, how, and why they divided it up into periods.

## Results

### Challenge, Not Shock

In trying to answer the question whether the label ‘culture shock’ is appropriate in the context of Erasmus exchange students who spent one or two semesters in their respective host countries, it is important to determine if and how experiences of shock and crisis are reported, how often such themes arise, and whether, overall, the stories that are told revolve around crises or successes. To begin, it is informative to consider the answers our participants gave to the question whether any significant problems arose during their sojourn. Interestingly, slightly less than half (21 out of 50) responded that they did not encounter any significant problems while abroad. Some even pointed out what an easy time they had, a case in point being one student who said the following about her stay in Sweden:

“They [Swedish people] were very, very obliging and I have never had such a problem-free stay abroad, because with Erasmus everything is clearly structured [...] and everything is really made very easy for you.”  
(interview 40)

Considering the topics that accounts of difficulties most frequently revolved around, it is helpful to differentiate between those that actually arose and those that were only imagined during reported episodes of anxiety or worry. When phases of anxiety were described they related mostly to the topics of finding friends, finding accommodation, living away from home for the first time, and generally being able to master the challenges ahead. They occurred, for the most part, during a relatively short phase of adaptation to the new environment in the beginning of the sojourn, as described by a large majority of our participants (see below).

Challenges or frustrating situations that actually arose were typically about signing up for classes, not being able to choose classes that fit students’ interests or the degree courses they were pursuing at home, finding accommodation (especially in cities with difficult housing markets, such as Madrid), and not being satisfied with the accommodation standards. In many cases, the difficulties that were reported can be classed as minor inconveniences, such as opening a bank account (int. 15), not being able to take the bus due to a strike (int. 12), or not being able to take all classes exactly as anticipated (int. 29). While these problems, for the most part, were not, on reflection, related by students to intercultural issues, it must be mentioned that there was a tiny

minority who, during the interviews, suggested a link between the problem encountered and the perceived cultural difference of their host environment (alluding to British housing standards or French striking, for instance). Yet such references, if they were made at all, were sympathetic, humorous or ironic rather than adversely critical or disparaging. Additionally, in almost all cases, the situations could be resolved to the interviewees' satisfaction and were, therefore, not described as impacting the overall quality of the sojourn.

The few more significant problems that were reported were usually coincidental in nature and cannot reasonably be described as resulting from contact to the host culture, such as a student falling ill (int. 41) or the loss of a mobile phone and a sports injury (both int. 10). Even with both these mishaps, the interviewee who reported them stated that: "at the end of the day, you got out of it in one piece. At the end of the day, I'm laughing about it to be honest", and responded to the opening question "how was your stay?" that it was "amazing" (int. 10). In a similar vein, many students characterized the events they reported as (retrospectively very rewarding) challenges, rather than as (purely negative) problems, let alone crises or moments of shock:

"It was magnificent... to gain a foothold on your own in a foreign country, to get into the spirit of the culture and... to start from scratch again. [...] In Ireland you felt like a first-year again. [...] I thought it was great. I liked it a lot. I did have some smaller difficulties and unpleasant situations, but that's all part of the experience." (int. 30)

"Especially academically it was a very nice challenge and... yeah, I learned a lot, many new things, and I enjoyed it immensely." (int. 13)

"It makes you so much stronger, because you hadn't... I mean, it's not always easy and rosy. [...] It is totally great, but there are some things where it was difficult, for example at uni in the first days, that you had to get used to it again. [...] So, it makes you so much stronger in everything – self-confidence, in terms of the language, of speaking... yeah, and just having the courage to jump in at the deep end." (int. 2)

"I got a lot out of it for myself having done something like this, because I actually was a little bit afraid of going there alone. And the way I mastered it and handled problems and the planning, I personally got a lot from that... that I know that I could do something like this again in the future maybe, because I would accomplish it... that is one of the most important points that stayed with me." (int. 28)

The problems the latter interviewee refers to were that she had to insist on a place in student housing, which she had been promised earlier, and that her flight home was cancelled with relatively short notice. As she managed to sort out both situations by herself, this contributed considerably to her increased sense of self-efficacy. The quotes above illustrate that the stories our participants told, in relation to problematic situations, were largely about challenges (varying from very slight to more significant) successfully overcome, and a clear feeling of resulting personal growth:

“I got much, much more confident and a lot more self-reliant, because I had to really manage my things myself, especially in the beginning. [...] You had to move out of your comfort zone again and again. I really learned a lot from that.” (int. 26)

In response to the questions asking for the potential effect and outcomes of their stay, most students explained that they personally grew in a meaningful way in terms of independence, self-confidence, and similar ‘soft skills’, such as the ability to approach strangers more openly (e.g. int. 7). Remarkably, 43 of our 50 interviewees described this in some form or another.

“You should just do it for yourself, so that you develop personally, that you develop academically and that you... I’d say you just mature more quickly.” (int. 10)

It is possibly our clearest and most salient result that the overall quality of the sojourn was rated very highly, i.e. that almost all of our participants reported very high levels of satisfaction: of the 50 interviewees only four<sup>5</sup> did not answer the opening question in a clearly positive fashion. The vast majority expressed a very positive attitude, responding for example: “[it was] unbelievably great. I think it was the best part of my student days so far” (int. 49), or “it was definitely the best thing I have done in my entire life up to this point” (int. 36). One student described his sojourn as “incredibly great”, going

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<sup>5</sup> Even these four did not necessarily evaluate their stay negatively. One responded it was “so-so, alright” (int. 16), but still said it was “nice” later on. Another answered she was “disappointed” (int. 43), but it became clear in the course of the interview that this related only to the fact that her coordinator at home had misinformed her and that she could not receive any credits for the classes she had studied abroad. She turned out to be very happy with all other aspects of her sojourn. One student said it “began lovely” (int. 41), but took a bad turn when she fell ill. The fourth one stated he had “mixed feelings” (int. 7), because he felt that older Spanish people looked at him disparagingly (due to being foreign) – the unhappy exception that proves the rule –, but he still developed friendships with younger Spanish people, whom he described as “open and nice”, and spoke of his “great flat share” with Spanish and Italian roommates with whom he had an “amazing time”.

on to explain that he, therefore, “started to advertise for Erasmus” within his circle of friends of his own accord (int. 39).

Additionally, almost without exception the interviewees seemed to have a greater appreciation for the culture of their host country, stating, for example, that they learned to love Spanish culture (int. 1), that they felt at home in Ireland (int. 36), that a part of them had become Estonian (int. 35) or that Poland had become a home away from home (int. 39).

## Phases of the Stay

When asked, as sketched above, if they would want to divide their sojourn into different phases, only a single participant stated that “I cannot really answer that at the moment, I think” (int. 7), whereas two said “not necessarily” (int. 48) and “not really” (int. 34) but, nevertheless, went on to describe distinct periods during their stay. All others were readily willing and quick to describe different phases during their sojourn, with many beginning their account with an enthusiastic affirmation like “yes, definitely” (int. 14) or “most certainly” (e.g. int. 18, 35, 36, 40, 43). Students who spent just one semester in their host country divided their sojourn into three phases – beginning, middle, and end – with remarkable regularity: 31 out of 39 single-semester sojourners mentioned these three periods in some fashion.<sup>6</sup> 23 described them explicitly, whereas one half of the remaining eight outlined four phases, usually adding a subdivision to the middle, while for the other half one of the three phases (usually the second) was implied by saying things such as:

“So, there were some initial difficulties, but afterwards it was just so good. I met lots of really great people from all over the world and really made friends for life... yes, and I fell in love with my new French home town very much.” (int. 15)

Although we will focus here on this very salient tripartite structure, it is worth mentioning that those who spent not one, but two semesters abroad (10 out of 50) usually reported alternative patterns. Only one (int. 36) out of ten spoke of three phases. The majority (six students) recalled just two while a smaller group (three students) described four or more. Generally, those who stayed a whole academic year mentioned the break between the semesters as a very significant moment of change – a topic we will come back to briefly in the section discussing the way our participants accounted for their phase

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<sup>6</sup> The most relevant pattern for the other eight is a bipartite division into a beginning phase and the rest, which is offered by six of these eight students. Of the remaining two, one chose not to answer (int. 7), while the other described a much more detailed pattern of subdivisions with at least six distinct phases (int. 41).

distinctions overall. Before this, however, we will have a closer look at each of the three phases mentioned above, which we have dubbed according to the way they were typically described by our interviewees: 1) excitement phase; 2) routine phase; 3) farewell phase.

### Excitement Phase

If there is one thing, besides the participants' overall positive evaluation of their exchange, that stands out with unmistakable clarity, it is the remarkable consensus among our interviewees that their sojourn had a distinct beginning phase, which they remembered as essentially different from the rest of their time abroad by being dense with novel experiences, opportunities, tasks, and challenges. Only three out of 50 did not describe such a period. For many, it seemed to begin even before their arrival abroad with a kind of nervous excitement that could be either positively valenced and was then described as joyful anticipation, or when it was negatively valenced as anxiety or nervousness. Similarly, the first phase itself was largely characterized either in terms of worries, stress, and slight initial difficulties, or in terms of heightened excitement, kaleidoscopic impressions, and the joys of exploration and novel social interactions. Some interviewees explicitly described the first period as "more exciting" (int. 42), their own mood as downright "euphoric" (int. 10), "extremely enthusiastic" (int. 43) or "overwhelmed" (int. 36), pointing out the newness of "everything" (int. 42, 43), which for those drawing a less than positive balance may have amounted to some feeling of "stranger anxiety" (int. 36) on their part. For quite a few, the initial phase was characterized by both negative and positive emotions, a complex mixture of feelings, a state in-between positive and negative tensions:

"Well, in the beginning... of course, totally enthusiastic and... but also somehow a little afraid. So that is... sometimes very contrary emotions, but they were just there, because, of course, you didn't know anybody." (int. 5)

"I was a little bit afraid of it... I mean, I imagined a total horror scenario... I go abroad, I don't find a flat... and then to realize that you can do it on your own, that you're old enough to, well... deal with problems – that helped." (int. 4)

"In the beginning, everything was super exciting, of course. You had to settle in. You got to know so many new people and this whole organizational stuff about the timetable and uni in general." (int. 27)

“The initial phase is the most thrilling one, because it is about: ‘how will you get settled in? Will you get to know anybody, or will you be alone for the next six months?’” (int. 23)

The time was registered as ‘thrilling’, as a strong pleasurable feeling that was tinged somehow with doubt and insecurity as to what the immediate future would hold, whether things would go well, and whether students would find themselves equal to the tasks of organizing their life and building, from scratch, new social relationships. Questions abounded. It is noteworthy that by those who did remember feeling ‘foreign’ or ‘strange’ at that stage, such perceived out-of-placeness was not necessarily processed in terms of national/cultural difference, but in the widest sense possible as not knowing *any* other people or having *anywhere* to stay:

“You felt much more like a foreign student in the beginning, and I think this has a lot to do with looking for a flat... to arrive, first of all, to calm down a little bit.” (int. 25)

“So, I did have a few difficulties in the first two weeks with the adjustment and that I totally felt like a stranger. [...] And there was always this slight panic of ‘What if nobody likes me there? What if I don’t find anybody?’” (int. 49)

The topic of meeting new people and making friends, which is illustrated very well by the last quote, came out as arguably the most crucial issue for most of our interviewees and was frequently mentioned in delineating the different phases. It also figured prominently in accounts that were not quite as emotional as some of the above, and in which students simply described in more neutral terms the things they did or the slight challenges they might have had to overcome in the beginning:

“I was there a little bit earlier, before the semester began. So, for me there was this phase: preparatory course, language course, getting to know people.” (int. 41)

“I think that roughly the first four weeks were definitely [about] getting used to it. I arrived one week before classes started. You first had to... you didn’t know many people, yet. You first had to learn to get by and find out what’s the best way to get to Ikea or how to best use the train ticket and so on.” (int. 46)

In summary, the topics that played the greatest roles in our interviewees’ recollections of this first phase were, in order of importance (i.e. frequency with

which they were mentioned and weight that was given to them): meeting new people and finding friends; finding accommodation; signing up for classes and other organizational matters; exploring the area and learning how to get around. Overall, this phase received markedly more attention than the others, and was often registered as an ambivalent time, a time of alternating stress and relief, of positive excitement holding in check or gradually replacing anxiety. On that note, it was also frequently described as being about “settl[ing] down” (int. 5, 15) and “getting used to it” (int. 22, 46):

“It actually got better and better, because you settled down more and more, and that happened relatively quickly. So, after like two, three weeks you had really arrived in a way.” (int. 15)

### Routine Phase

Participants usually reported settling into a routine after the excitement of the first weeks had passed and any worries about not finding friends, accommodation or suitable classes had been allayed. Although it might sound less thrilling than the turbulent beginning period, students generally reported being the happiest or most satisfied during this middle phase, which typically lasted about two to four months (in a single-semester sojourn). Most seemed to welcome the change of pace to a more relaxed lifestyle, while there were, apparently, still enough novel experiences to be had for it to be stimulating, and before the parting sadness of the last weeks began to sneak in:

“The last four weeks, that was totally... the phase to say farewell to everybody. [...] So, the first three, four weeks, I’d say, was the phase of getting used to it. In between was actually like... when you were fully there, and just lived.” (int. 22)

“When it had settled down a bit... also the first one, two weeks of uni and such... then there almost was something like a routine, and you knew: ‘alright, now everything is organized. Now the first excitement has passed.’ Then you actually enjoyed it.” (int. 5)

“It got better and better when I started going to uni. I was there two weeks before uni started. And then I already met my circle of friends, which still grew a little bit later on, but basically these were already the people [she spent time with]. And then, towards autumn, [...] was the best time of the stay, because we also went on trips together.” (int. 30)

“And then, when you have a flat, you can breathe easily. Then you are up for the whole thing, especially if you have Spanish roommates like I did, you get involved with the culture and go out often.” (int. 18)

“Everything gets a bit routine-like and, well... nevertheless, it always stays exciting because of all the events, as I said, that always... something new happens all the time.” (int. 6)

The enjoyment interviewees gave voice to in many cases derived from their having found a “rhythm” (int. 11), a “structure” (int. 28), a “routine” (int. 29). There is a sense of having fully “arrived”, of “feeling at home” (both int. 27) which is tied to an immersion in everyday life, a taking part in ordinary activities and some of the practices particular to the host culture. However, for a few students who especially enjoyed the more intense novelty of the first weeks, the quieter routine phase was not as satisfying. The following quote illustrates this, also highlighting again the commonly identified three-phase structure and usual focus on social circles and friendship:

“Many Erasmus students had the same experience: the first month was a real high. I mean, it was totally... you got to know each other, you met new people every day and were going out constantly. And then it got a little bit quieter after the first month, when uni begins, when you realize everyday life is coming. I’d say that was a little bit of a low. Then it gets more like medium, neutral. And then, at the end, it was again... well, a high, but also a low, because you were sad, right? Everybody... it was nice, though, because we all had the same problems – the Erasmus students, I mean.” (int. 14)

### Farewell Phase

Most students mentioned a sadness towards the end of their stay, a melancholic feeling of parting, of saying farewell to their newfound friends and ‘second home’ abroad. This is often ambivalently mixed with positive anticipation of returning home to family and friends.

“There were people who flew home before me and at some point the group was getting smaller and smaller and every time somebody left we were crying.” (int. 38)

“After a very cheerful stage you got into a slightly more depressive phase, because on the one hand you want to go back, but on the other hand you don’t want to leave after all.” (int. 18)

“Towards the end it was like... a laughing eye and a crying one. A crying one, because I loved it so much. [...] But also a laughing one, because I knew: I’m going back to my family.” (int. 1)

Expectably, the reports of parting sadness were linked to the overall positive evaluation of the sojourn shared by the vast majority of our interviewees. The few students who were not entirely satisfied with their stay did not mention this feeling. For example, the following student was unhappy with the way teaching was structured:

“Towards the end, I was relatively certain that I wouldn’t prolong my stay [by adding a second semester], because you... when, for example, at a French university... you’re just very unfree in the way you work. That’s why I thought at some point: ‘this is enough.’ But it was... it was also like: ‘it was nice, but this is enough now.’” (int. 16)

Besides the sadness of having to bid friends farewell and the anticipation of returning home, other topics that were frequently mentioned in this phase were: having to learn for upcoming exams; trying to get everything out of the experience as the end approaches, for example by travelling and doing things that ‘were still on the list’; and sometimes money getting short towards the end.

## Demarcating Factors

The most important factor informing our interviewees’ demarcation of the different phases, as well as their reported well-being and satisfaction, thus turned out to be other people, i.e. being alone at first, meeting new people, making friends, sharing experiences<sup>7</sup> with them, and having to bid them farewell in the end. This is further supported by the fact that, as hinted above, the participants who spent two semesters abroad usually (seven out of ten) mention the break between the semesters as a very significant moment of change, which they describe largely in terms of people leaving and having to find a (partially) new circle of friends:

“After the first semester I had made many friends and I got along great with everybody. And 90 per cent of the people I met in the first semester went home after that semester. That was kind of a point for me when I thought: ‘well... and how will it continue now? Will I find people in the second semester again that I’ll get along with just as well?’” (int. 4)

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<sup>7</sup> Most frequently mentioned are travelling and going out (partying), but less joyous occasions, such as worrying about financial difficulties and having to study for tests, also play a role and are sometimes mentioned in the context of ‘a burden shared is a burden halved’.

Other students delineated phases according to the wider group of people they mingled with the most – in this case other international students in the beginning and members of the host culture in the subsequent phases:

“Because, in the very beginning, you’re thrown in only with Erasmus students. The first two, three weeks were only with Erasmus. And then you were suddenly together in class... purely Spanish people.” (int. 33)

In our detailed description of the three most typical phases above, we have mentioned other themes besides students’ personal relationships and social contacts, such as finding accommodation, registering for classes, and studying for exams. While these were far from universally reported, it is still important to note that they do not describe different degrees of well-being as such (let alone feelings of homesickness or not fitting in culturally), but rather relate to questions of how to organize everyday life and academic work.

More interestingly, another general factor can be abstracted from the accounts, especially from the descriptions of the beginning phase as turbulent, exciting, stressful, and full of novelty: the (perceived) amount of change, density of memorable events or intensity of the overall experience. This concept tallies quite well with the neutral notion of ‘stress’ or ‘arousal’ that Krzaklewska and Skórska employ in the context of their cognitive approach to culture shock: “an inevitable result of every change (understood as every unfamiliar situation) is stress, even when the change is positive” (109). The following remarks by two of our interviewees are very fitting illustrations of this abstract concept:

“In the beginning everything was just new. [...] In the first weeks there were a lot more events. You met almost like 200 new people every day. Because, it’s like... the people were still new. And, at some point, groups had formed, like after a month or so, and I also had my group of like ten, 15 people, with whom you did almost everything.” (int. 34)

“It’s just that there is so much that is happening, because you are totally... time is just rushing by, because you meet so many people and there are just loads of events in the first days.” (int. 45)

In other words, it can be argued that a dominant structuring principle of our interviewees’ phase demarcations derives from differences in the way ‘time’ was perceived during different periods of their stays (in the beginning: hardly enough to contain all the experiences; in the middle: a pace of life somewhat similar to what was normal in their home countries; towards the end: the feeling that precious time goes by too quickly, and should be savored).

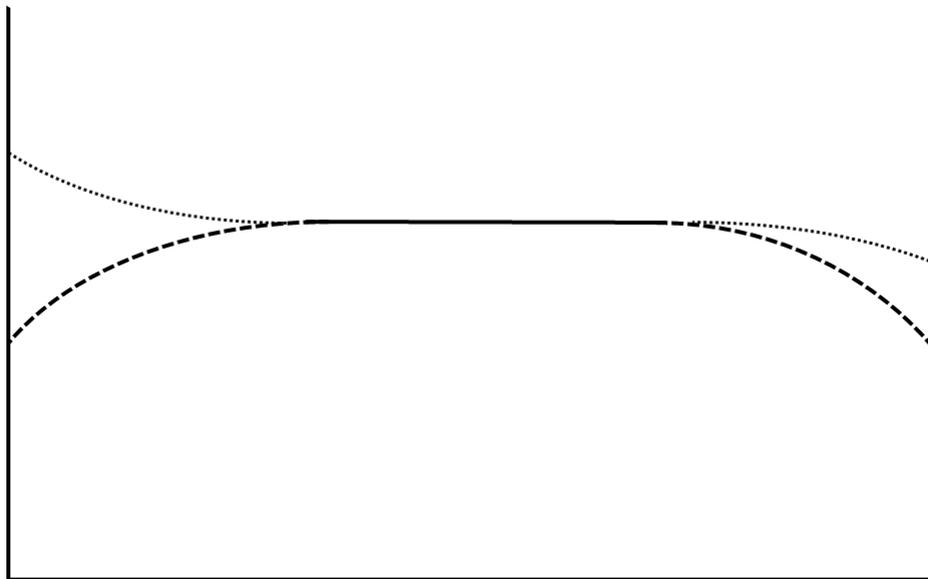
## Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study on sojourner adaptation add to and put in perspective the outcomes of previous (and, to a large extent, quantitative) research literature in a number of ways. First, the Erasmus students interviewed here do not, as a rule, think of their sojourn and the intercultural encounters made in terms of crisis or shock at all. The stories they tell are about manageable obstacles and challenges that can be overcome, rewarding experiences that in retrospect contributed significantly to their personal growth in terms of independence, confidence, self-reliance, and self-efficacy. If adaptation problems are discussed at all, they appear as short and mostly mild forms of anxiety (what could be called ‘micropanics’), but never suggest any extreme affective states like aversion or shock. We also find it particularly interesting in this context that the non-occurrence of crisis or shock narratives is not restricted to those students that, by way of their academic interests, can be expected to have higher degrees of knowledge of their host culture, greater linguistic competence, and a more pronounced motivation to delve into the foreign culture. On the contrary, even those students who went to a country they had not had any particular relation with and did not know the language of did not recall moments of culture shock or serious adaptation problems. Neither was there an observable correlation between answers on adaptation problems and the countries and cultures students had been to, i.e. their various degrees of cultural distance from the sojourners’ home country (even if such distance in the Erasmus context is little anyway). This is remarkable in that it runs counter to general research findings that state a correlation between sojourners’ levels of knowledge of the host culture as well as their possession of skills to communicate and interact with members of the host culture and the degree to which adaptation problems occur (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 42-4, 66) or those studies that subscribe to the culture-distance hypothesis, which predicts fewer adaptation problems in host countries that are culturally more similar to that of the sojourner (11-3, 66). No matter where our interviewees had stayed, and what their cognitive, behavioral, and affective preparation had been for the encounter, their recollections of adaptation were not distinguished by these factors.

Second, if there are any models or graphic representations that can be abstracted from the responses these come out as a three-stage structure and a rather flat inverted U-curve, charting phases of excitement, routine, and farewell. Coming out as a bell shape rather than U-curve, our results support findings by Ward and Kennedy as well as Krzaklewska and Skórska, who point to the occurrence of stress, anxiety, and maladaptation in the early stage of a sojourn especially, arguing against blanket assumptions of an immediate honeymoon stage. The classic four-phase model registering shock and

adaptation phenomena in the second and third stages cannot be confirmed by our research. Our interviewees, on the contrary, identified adaptation problems in the first phase, if at all. These, in addition, were of an organizational and social, rather than a cultural or intercultural kind. They were usually also reported to be over within a matter of days. The curve we suggest here is a mere sketch (see figure 1), meant to illustrate a general and hugely abstract tendency.

**Figure 1. A Three-Part Bell Shape: the graphic abstraction of sojourners' contentment during the study abroad period as collected from the qualitative responses of the Erasmus students**



It distils from the many squiggly lines of personal narration an ideal-type trajectory. In so doing it elides many individual differences in the responses (such as one respondent's answer that there were short negative periods during her otherwise very positive stay, prompted for example by receiving bad news from back home; int. 22). Also, our curve cannot but remain entirely unspecific about the exact timings of the phases (the first phase was reported to have lasted between a couple of days and one and a half months, the second between one and a half and four months) and the precise processes and states that respondents took to be relevant for periodization (psychological, internal factors or social, cultural, external factors). It seeks to take into account, in phase one, the difference between those who report a preponderance of anxiety and those who report a preponderance of enthusiasm in the mixture of excitement that characterizes that stage. It suggests that for those starting at rather high levels of enthusiasm the curve may, indeed, not have a bell shape, but may be

falling in principle, with a longer period of leveling out during the middle routine stage of the sojourn. The graph also indicates that there were marked differences in students' experiences of the last, the farewell phase, with some feeling a lot sadder than others about having to say goodbye to their friends and the place that had become their temporary second home, some looking more forward to going back than others. The relatively high position of the graph in the diagram is meant to illustrate the generally high levels of satisfaction and well-being reported by students. While the graph proposed here captures the development of students that stayed for one term, it is fair to say that for those staying a second term there is a repetition of the bell curve shape during the second part, when in around January they have to face again the excitement of making friends, finding classes, and settling into some form of routine.

Third, the interviews showed that, in retrospect, all phases identified here, especially the first and last, but also (to a certain extent) the one in the middle, are characterized by high degrees of emotional ambivalence on the part of the experiencing subjects. The first phase is one of anxiety *and* enthusiasm, of feeling strange *and* part of a group, of experiencing stress in both a positive *and* a negative sense. The final phase holds a mixture of feelings of imminent loss *and* anticipation of what's to come after a return home, a sense of an ending in ways both positive (as an accomplishment) and negative (as an irretrievable experience). Our interviewees might have felt most profound enjoyment during the phase of routine, when they had settled into everyday life, yet in the interviews it became clear that this enjoyment resulted a lot from the fact that the routine was a different kind of routine from the one they had left behind at home, an alternative normality that held just about the right amount of newness, challenges, and excitement to make it stick out from everyday everyday life. We would propose that such psychological ambivalence, together with participants' constant negotiation and renegotiation of new sociocultural practices, is a distinct trait of an Erasmus sojourn, and that such ambivalence can best be studied by a qualitative method asking subjects about their experiences and reflections, rather than isolating different factors from one another, quantifying each neatly, and looking at the individual parts of an experience that is, in practice and recollection, always lived, constructed, and reconstructed as one.

## Conclusion

The question remains as to why our interviewees did not experience any problems with cultural adaptation to speak of? If culture shock has been seen as an "essential part of adapting to an unfamiliar culture" (Kracke 3177), and if our Erasmus sojourners did not experience any, this might after all not add new

insights to culture shock research, but merely mean that the Erasmus students actually never seriously had contact with and came close to adapting to that unfamiliar culture. The Erasmus experience, as mentioned above, seems to be characterized for most students by having very close relationships with other international students, potentially at the expense of having close contact with local people, and especially with those outside the university, as suggested by the concept of the “Erasmus bubble” (Dervin 117; Byram and Dervin 6; Byram 37). The international student community constitutes what could be called a primary group for Erasmus students, activities and interests are mainly those shared in that group, identification lies with the group of international students rather than with the general student population at the host university, close friendships between foreign and local students are not the rule but the exception (Viol 477). Yet contact behavior (beyond that primary group) in our sample varied greatly, ranging from some who stated that they had remained almost the entire time within the ‘bubble’ and had barely had any meaningful contact to members of the host culture (like one student in Hungary who did not speak the language and had no particular intention to interact with members of the host culture; int. 34), to others who felt intimately connected “to the whole culture, the way of life and the language” of their host country via their many and close Spanish friends (int. 33). Bubble or not, such a hypothesis of non-engagement with the host culture would also contradict the subjective perspective of the students. Almost all professed to have a greater appreciation for their host culture, stating that they had made a ‘second home’ abroad (int. 15; int. 27; int. 39), that they were planning to return in the near future (int. 18), that they felt certain aspects of the host culture had become a part of them (int. 35) or that they wished certain things in their home country would be more alike to what they had experienced abroad (such as the food [int. 1], a relaxed way of life [int. 22], the warm-heartedness of the people [int. 4]).

Looking at the high stress levels that remain at the beginning of the stay, Krzaklewska and Skórska have suggested that it is primarily a lack of information that causes adaptational problems (108). However, our results show that the degree of cognitive or behavioral preparedness is not reflected in a marked difference in participants’ perceptions and responses. Even where students are without a lot of cultural information shock is not an issue. And: remaining anxieties and unease cannot be put down simply to a lack of data. Consider the topics our participants worried about the most: finding friends, finding accommodation, wondering whether they will make it in the new environment. Those worries are allayed not by gaining information, but friends, a place to stay, and experience. Information, such as fixed time-tables, clear

syllabuses etc., may be somewhat helpful in this process, but will do little to reduce worries or stress, we suspect, about whether one will be able to keep up with the rest of the class and fulfill the teacher's expectations, for instance.

We would like to suggest different reasons for the comparatively smooth adaptation process of the Erasmus students interviewed. Cultural adaptation research has pointed to the role of friendship networks and social support structures in promoting adaptation (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 44). A relatively high level of organizational and social support is one of the hallmarks of the Erasmus student exchange (especially when compared to other types of sojourn or even student mobility, which see many sojourners confronted with much more existential problems, such as anxieties over money, fundamental orientation, threatening isolation). Erasmus structures provide support and a fundamental security as to one's place and status in the host culture. Then, the whole Erasmus experience is primarily a group experience of being foreign. Our interviews have shown how centrally important friendships and social networks are for the well-being of the students. They also indicate that students find reassurance and comfort in the fact that their primary peers, the other international students, share the experience of adaptation, of starting from scratch as it were (as one student quoted above put it: "it was nice [...] because we all had the same problems"; int. 14). If adaptation is thus a joint process in Erasmus student groups, it is also important to acknowledge that what is being adapted to is largely and especially at first not a perceived cultural monolith, but a mixed cultural group – this is intercultural adaptation in a highly intercultural setting, which in itself is produced by those engaging in that process, by the contributions of each sojourner, which arguably lowers the stakes of personal failure and increases the sense of social participation.

While national difference during Erasmus gains salience (IEREST 8), this is a difference that is perceived as multiply different, that is evaluated largely positively, both one's own difference and that of others (Flaake and Viol 36-8), and that is experienced as always already bridgeable by intercultural engagement. Erasmus students can thus be seen as participating in a process in which (both national and international) culture is experienced as "something people do", and not just as "something people have or which they belong to" (Piller 9). Cultural adaptation in such contexts becomes a joint, rather playful, and provisional enterprise not fraught with the pressures of having to fully adapt to or acquire that one target culture (or otherwise be lost), which it might have in situations where individual members of a foreign culture are confronting alone – and feel called upon to successfully transition by themselves

to – an apparently homogeneous and self-contained host culture. Coming back to the much-cited notion of the bubble, and sticking with the general image, our contention would hence be that, if it exists, this bubble rather works as a semi-permeable membrane which is in fact conducive to cultural adaptation (not preventing it), preparing students for stressless intercultural contact beyond the Erasmus circle, framing and filtering intercultural contact so as to take away the strain and keep moments of shock to a minimum. We propose the concept of the bubble as a facilitator for multiple and shock-reduced intercultural adaptation.

Lastly, the interviews strongly suggest that potential anxiety is held at bay by students entering into an experience that is limited to a definite and relatively short period of time (and by their knowledge that the time is limited and manageable). Classic culture shock models often related to year-long or open-ended stays, frequently registering the crisis period between three to six months (La Brack 1; Black and Mendenhall 226-30). With two-thirds of them being no longer than five months, our Erasmus stays were well below such periods and were duly seen as defining a contained experience, as leading towards a clear aim, and – quite importantly for students' sense of security – as having a distinct time structure, which was observed not just in retrospect, but arguably also during the experience itself. The interviews suggest that potential problems were seen less negatively as students were aware of the limitedness of their time abroad and of these problems being part of the general Erasmus story. Students' reactions, it can be argued, testify to their placing themselves in a narrative of experience that has the typical Aristotelian elements of any story – beginning, middle, and end – made concrete in the shape of the particular Erasmus story of excitement, routine, and farewell. This is a story that is personal as much as it is collective, speaking of individual as much as of group experience. And it is a story that provides temporary stability and coherence for the Erasmus self, guarding it against potential threats by culture shock and adaptation failure. Similar to what Anthony Giddens has argued about the narrative project of “self-identity” in general, the Erasmus experience is framed and stabilized in a relatively coherent identity narrative in which the self “forms a trajectory of development from the past to an anticipated future” (75), a story of becoming, of a self “as reflexively understood” (53) by the Erasmus student in terms of his or her collectively framed individual experience abroad. It seems to us that this is the main reason why, as has been remarked, the difficulties European students abroad encounter are “transient rather than lingering” and deep “identity crisis” among them is rather unlikely (Murphy-Lejeune 26).

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