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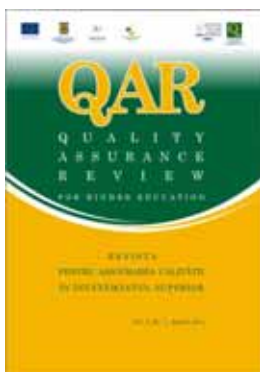


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Identity Changes caused by Mobility Programs. Study-case in the Erasmus Intercultural Community

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Identity Changes caused by Mobility Programs. Study-case in the Erasmus Intercultural Community

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Abstract: *The present article focuses on the social consequences of the internationalization of Higher Education at the microsociological level. Part of the process of internationalization of education, the educational mobility programs and their consequences have long been studied through statistical means and, thus, neglecting the effects at the individual level. The current paper brings forwards an in depth depiction of the educational mobility experience and an analysis that sheds light on the medium term social outcomes of such programs.*

The study case is based on empirical data collected amidst the incoming Erasmus students' community in Bordeaux, France, in the 2009/2010 academic year. The 8 months long fieldwork, aimed at exploring the daily interactions of Erasmus students, provided data which were analyzed making use of identity and community theories, while considering the structural local and global influences as well.

Keywords: *educational mobility programs, ERASMUS, identity, community, cultural diversity.*

Rezumat: *Articolul de față se axează asupra studiului consecințelor internaționalizării învățământului superior la nivelul microsocial. Ca parte a procesului de internaționalizare a educației, programele de mobilitate educațională și consecințele acestora au fost studiate îndelungat prin mijloace statistice, neglijând astfel efectele obținute la nivelul individului. Lucrarea prezentă aduce în prim plan o descriere în profunzime a experienței mobilității educaționale și o analiză care evidențiază urmările sociale pe termen mediu a acestor programe.*

Studiul de caz este bazat pe date empirice colectate în mijlocul comunității studenților Erasmus din Bordeaux, Franța, în anul universitar 2009/2010. Cercetarea de teren realizată timp de 8 luni s-a concentrat pe explorarea interacțiunilor cotidiene ale studenților Erasmus și a oferit astfel datele care au fost analizate prin intermediul teoriilor identității și comunității, ținând cont, de asemenea, de influențele structurale locale și globale.

Cuvinte cheie: *program educațional de mobilitate, ERASMUS, identitate, mobilitate, diversitate culturală.*

1. Introduction

The internationalization of Higher Education is considered to be a response to globalization: “internationalization is found to signify predominantly a search for student markets domestically and abroad rather than positioning the university’s knowledge at the service of others in less advantaged parts of the world”².

Out of the sea of processes that shape the phenomenon of internationalization of education, I have chosen as the subject of the present paper the educational mobility programs, represented here

¹ PhD Student, beneficiary of the project “Doctoral scholarships supporting research: Competitiveness, quality, and cooperation in the European Higher Education Area”, co-funded by the European Union through the European Social Fund, Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013

² Stromquist, Nelly P., *Internationalization as a Response to Globalization: Radical Shifts in University Environments*, in “Higher Education”, Vol. 53, 2007, No. 1 (Jan.), pp. 81-105.

by the Erasmus³ program. As Păunescu and Precupețu⁴ underline, “mobility should not be looked at only as an academic experience, but as an opportunity to enrich the political, social, cultural and economic experience of the students”. Therefore, although the former object of research can be approached from various angles such as the European educational policies dealing with mobility, the continental changing labor market, (the birth and development of) European citizenship and identity, in the following pages I shall focus on the consequences of such mobility at the individual identity level. More precisely, in the present article I will show how participating in the Erasmus program affects the identity of social actors, by stressing the way in which cultural diversity and mobility (in its geographical as well as social and cultural forms of) experiences are lived and interpreted by the students who benefit from a mobility educational program. The empirical input of the study is drawn from the field research I have performed last year in the academic city of Bordeaux, France, amidst the incoming Erasmus students whose mobility experience was unfolding there during the 2009/2010 academic year.

2. Theoretical background

The field research was aimed at the daily experience of incoming Erasmus students, with a focus on the identity related issues that come up in an intercultural social environment in the context of individuals’ geographical mobility.

Thus the frame of work was limited to the microsocial level of the quotidian interactions of social actors. A large amount of theoretical directions that set out the conceptual borders of the paper stem from the interactionist current, especially the late works of the Chicago School: Goffman’s stigmatization processes and impression management⁵, Becker and Lemert’s versions of the label theory⁶, Matza’s neutralization techniques as well as Anselm Strauss’ negotiation of social norms and definition of the identity concept as a trajectory⁷. According to Fine⁸ we can still debate whether or not there was a second Chicago School in the post-war period, but the mentioned authors’ theoretical commitment to the interactionist perspective is not to be questioned. In the same lineage we will find Fredrik Barth’s fundamental study *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of cultural difference*, which brought a new vision in social research, due to its outlook on the processes that back up communities⁹.

The main landmark in treating the subject of the consequences of the internationalization of higher education at the individual’s level is the concept of identity. Jenkins’s exploitation of the interactionist label theory is most useful in dealing with a field study case such as the present one; moreover, I have kept in mind when dealing with different forms of collective behaviour the analytical distinctions between group and category, respectively virtual and nominal identities¹⁰.

Tied to and also intertwined with the problematic of identity is yet another “umbrella-concept”: community, which, as Eric Hobsbawm points out has never been used “more

³ The name of the mobility program comes from the philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam, a precursor figure of scholarly mobility, but “the acronym ERASMUS may also be read as EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students” (ECET, 2011). The impact of this program at the European level is justified by its mass popularity, but as well by its figures: more than 2.2 million students have participated in more than 4000 higher education institutions in 33 countries (ECET, 2011).

⁴ Păunescu Mihai, Precupețu Marius, *Erasmus Students’ Mobility. Insights from Bulgarian, Polish and Romanian experiences*, București, Ericom, 2007, p.19

⁵ Goffman, Erving, *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*, New Jersey, Pelican Books, 1990; idem, *Viața cotidiană ca spectacol*, București, comunicare.ro, 2007.

⁶ Munch, Richard, *Sociological Theory. Volume 2. From the 1920s to the 1960s*, Chicago, Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1994;

⁷ Strauss, Anselm L., *La trame de la négociation, sociologie qualitative et interactionnisme*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1992; Munch, *op.cit.*

⁸ Fine Gary Alan (ed.), *A second Chicago School? The development of a Postwar American Sociology*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

⁹ Barth, Fredrik, *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of cultural difference*, Boston, Little Brown and Co., 1969.

¹⁰ Jenkins, Richard, *Identitatea socială*, București, ed. Univers, trad. Alex Butucelea, 2000.

indiscriminately and empty than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life”¹¹.

On the other hand, the nature of the subject - dealing with identity and community in daily life - also imposed a bridging of the microsocal perspective to the macrosocial, in order to determine to which extent the structural or institutional frameworks influence the individual experience and identification processes. I have retained the following authors' outlooks on the subjects of (post)modernity and globalization as major processes which interfere and condition social interactions, identification processes and community dynamics: Beck's¹², Giddens'¹³ and Bauman's¹⁴.

3. Methodology of research

3.1 Research context

“Erasmus community” - synthesis of the sociological literature related to the subject

Skimming the sociological literature on the subject matter will help us distinguish two types of analysis of the educational mobility program: an official statistics-based report type of research aimed at improving educational policies and independent studies, more “down to earth” in focus, aiming at the exploration of the actual experience of mobile individuals. For the current paper, the latter type of studies has proven more helpful, by laying down paths to be verified and further developed.

Most of the researchers who studied the daily life of the Erasmus students make use of theories that deal with the bonded concepts of identity, community and belonging. Whether they speak about the interactions between Erasmus students in terms of “families”, “cocoon” or peg communities” in Bauman's¹⁵ sense, as Fred Dervin¹⁶ does, or “quotidian nuclei”¹⁷, the main frame of analysis is constant. In addition, the “jump into the unknown”, made by students who leave behind all their social and cultural points of reference in order to benefit from a mobility program, is noted and analyzed by several authors. For instance, on one hand the status of “foreigner” is highlighted as favoring interaction between Erasmus students (who consider themselves peers and unlike the locals)¹⁸, and on the other hand, as a coordinate for the development of new social ties and values at the same time¹⁹.

¹¹ Day Graham, *Community and everyday life*, London, Routledge, 2006.

¹² Beck, Ulrich, *Ce este globalizarea?*, București, Editura Trei, 2003.

¹³ Giddens Anthony, *Consecințele modernității*, București, ed. Univers, trad. Sanda Berce, 2000;

idem, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1991.

¹⁴ Bauman, Zygmunt, *Globalizarea și efectele ei sociale*, București, Antet, 1999;

idem, *Etica postmodernă*, Timișoara, Amarcord, 2000;

idem, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000;

idem, *Identity in the globalising world*, in “*Social Anthropology*”, ed. European Association of Social Anthropologists, vol. 9, 2001, nr.2, pp.121–129;

idem, *Comunitate. Căutarea siguranței într-o lume nesigură*, Filipeștii de Târg, Antet, 2001.

¹⁵ The well known sociologist Zygmunt Bauman dedicates many of his works to the theme of community and identity. The postmodern constructivist perspective on identity links it to the ever increasing number of „peg communities”, which last as long as the spectacle goes on and individuals consider themselves members of the same audience. The „peg community” is a solution for facing increasing rising individual insecurity, by providing its members with short-term affiliations and identities.

¹⁶ Dervin, Fred, *Se déconditionner en déconditionnant? Regards sur des discours d'enseignantstagiaires FLE en mobilité en Finlande*, unpublished, 2008, available on the web page [<http://users.utu.fi/freder/rennes.pdf>] accessed 23th January 2009.

¹⁷ de Federico de la Rúa Ainhoa, *La dinámica de las redes de amistad. La elección de amigos en el programa Erasmus*, in “REDES”, 2003, June, available on the web page: <http://revista-redes.rediris.es>.

¹⁸ Dervin, Fred, *Mascarades estudiantines finlandaises dans le sud de la France*, in „2èmes rencontres jeunes et sociétés dans le sud de l'Europe et autour de la méditerranée”, unpublished, 2004, available on the web page [<http://jeunes-et-societes.cereq.fr/PDF-RJS2/DERVIN.pdf>], accessed 23th January 2009;

idem, *The Erasmus experience: halcyon days of hypermodernity*, unpublished, 2007, available on the web page: <http://users.utu.fi/freder/general.pdf>, accessed 15th January 2009;

idem, *The repression of us and wehoods in Erasmus students' narratives about their experiences in Finland*, unpublished, 2009, available on the web page: <http://users.utu.fi/freder/>.

de Federico de la Rúa Ainhoa, *Networks and Identities. Borders of solidarity and borders of identification of European exchange students*, in „REDES - Revista hispana para el análisis de redes sociales”, Vol.7, 2004, nr. 5, oct-nov.

¹⁹ de Federico, de la Rúa Ainhoa, *Amitiés européennes. Les réseaux transnationaux des étudiants Erasmus*, in “Informations sociales”, n 147, 2008, available on the web site: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-informations-sociales-2008-3-page-120.htm>, accessed 24th January 2009.

The social groups that Erasmus students form in the first period of the semester(s) they spend abroad are mostly intercultural, or even constituted only by students that share the same status – the Erasmus student or “foreigner” one. It becomes thus, relevant the usage of the collocation “intercultural community” in order to address this interactive phenomenon, especially if we take into account de Federico’s works that state the following percentages regarding the interactions that Erasmus students participate in (see Table 1, Annexes) or their evolution on the length of their mobility stay, statistically analyzed inasmuch that it offers a clear image of the dynamics that Erasmus students go through²⁰. In addition to this, the theme of the Erasmus „community” is often backed up by the lack of contact to the locals and to the imaginary opposition to their „parallel” community – the natives’ one²¹.

Fieldwork context

The interactionist paradigm’s traditional field approach and the design of the study case go hand in hand with the recommendation made by Păunescu and Precupețu²²: “the main criterion for the quality of such a program need to be based on a student centered approach”, while bare statistics (e.g. the number of participants or months spent abroad etc.) cannot provide insight into the quality or nature of the mobility program such as it is experienced by the international students who enroll in it.

Although the study case’s aims are not directly dealing with macrosocial phenomena and the interactionist framework favours the individual level of interpretation and negotiation of social life, I have nevertheless taken into account the structural (or institutional) variables that can trigger the development of different individual paths of experiencing the mobility program.

Most of these variables are linked to the specific social environment offered by the city of Bordeaux. With one of the oldest Faculties²³ in the world and the largest campus in Europe²⁴, Bordeaux is a young city, with a student population of 65.000 compared with a total of 239.642 inhabitants in 2008²⁵.

Most of the students in Bordeaux live on campus and their only practical mean of transportation to the city is the tramway, which sums up 7 stops from the most distant part of the campus to the city centre. Therefore, adding up to the desolate aspect of the campus, the international students (living on campus) complain about the relative isolation they live in.

Another aspect worth considering when analyzing the daily interactions of Erasmus students with other international students or French ones is the diversity of their study fields: the Bordeaux University is made up of four Universities, several Research Centers and other educational institutions, which account for the large number of students, and especially, incoming international ones: 4500 each year.

Accommodation is an essential feature of the daily interactions during the mobility experience. According to Philippe Leicht, the director of Mission Vie Etudiante²⁶, more and more international

²⁰ de Federico de la Rúa Ainhoa, *La dinámica ...*

²¹ Ballatore, Magali, “The Erasmus programme: toward more cooperation or more competition between Higher Education institutions?”, in *Fifth International EUREDOS Conference Modernising European higher education: priorities, ideas and challenges*, 23-25 May 2008, Aveiro, 2008, article available on the web page: http://www.fup.pt/cipes/docs/eventos/pdf_docs/Magali%20Ballatore.pdf, accessed 23.01.2009; Sauzet, Sofie Ørsted, *Youth and the Erasmus Programme - An Analysis of how the European Youth is Shaped and Reshaping in the Erasmus Programme as Policy and Practice*, Pædagogik og Uddannelsesstudier, Roskilde Universitetscenter, unpublished Master’s thesis, 2008, available on the web page: http://en.scientificcommons.org/sofie_%C3%98rsted_sauzet;

Härtel, Melissa, *«Erasmus» ou la construction d’un espace culturel européen*, Geneva, Institut européen de l’Université de Genève, 2007; de Federico, de la Rúa Ainhoa, *Amitiés européennes...*

²² Păunescu Mihai, Precupețu Marius, *Erasmus Students’ Mobility ...*, p. 20

²³ Information about the history of the University of Bordeaux is available on the web site of the University Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3, http://www.u-bordeaux3.fr/en/university/bordeaux_3_a_long_story.html.

²⁴ The Bordeaux university campus’ construction started in the late ‘50. Its area covers 230 hectares and spreads over 4 km, in the Bordeaux, Pessac, Talence and Gradignan communes. The data is available on the CUB’s web page (Communauté Urbaine de Bordeaux), <http://www.lacub.fr/grands-projets/plan-campus>.

²⁵ Figures are available on the City Hall’s web site, www.bordeaux.fr, and the original source is the newspaper Journal officiel, 1/01/2011.

²⁶ The student association Mission Vie Etudiante, from inside the Bordeaux II University, offers international students the opportunity to participate to social and cultural activities, part of which are designed to put them in contact the local community.

students each year prefer to leave the campus, because of the poor comfort level and its' relative isolation, in order to find better accommodation in rented flats in the city centre; Erasmus students usually share with other international students the lent off flats. This point demonstrates de Federico de la Rua's²⁷ statements about the "daily life nucleus" formed by Erasmus students; moreover, I have noticed that this kind of social, "family-type", groupings tend to be visible on campus as well, undermining the structural forces (for example, the single rooms accommodations and the distances between the different campus' areas).

Being part of the UNESCO heritage²⁸, the interviewed students take pride in showing around the city visiting friends or family. Moreover, Bordeaux's surroundings have become as well, for almost all the incoming Erasmus students, well known tourist attractions: the beaches in Arcachon and the famous Dune de Pylar, the medieval picturesque Saint Emilion, the posh beaches and resorts in Bayonne and Biarritz, and even the "far away", less popular Bergerac.

The previous description of the general context of the daily experience is essential for putting on the map the main points of reference of the interviewed students, thus enabling the reconstruction of individual journeys and daily interactions amidst the studied social network.

3.2 Methods of collecting data

Studying social life from the individual's or social group's level implies a series of methodological precepts and a certain approach to the "field". A qualitative methodology was thus needed for the present research, and the design of a study-case, based on a singular geographical space and a sole generation of individuals, was considered to be optimal. In addition to this, the theoretical framework, based on the theories and methodological contributions of the symbolic interactionism, has influenced the design of the current study-case. The interactionists have introduced in the sociological research of the early 20th century methods belonging to anthropology, which proved useful when applied to the urban social life of a growing metropolis, such as the intercultural Chicago²⁹.

Therefore, the methods chosen for collecting data were in depth interviews and participative observation. Field notes and informal interviews drew the guidelines for conducting the interviews. The fieldwork period lasted 8 months, starting from the beginning of the academic year 2009/2010, when Erasmus students arrived in the host city – Bordeaux, France, until June 2010.

In addition to the ongoing observation of three groups of Erasmus students (two of them having arrived in France in September-October 2009, and one that began its mobility program in January-February 2010), I have conducted 30 semi-structured interviews. In order to grasp the larger picture of the phenomenon, I have taken into account and selected interviewees according to the variables that could set different paths for the mobility experience: age, gender, nationality, study field, accommodation, level of French language and of other (if any) languages spoken, length of mobility scholarship etc. Moreover, I have interviewed the president of a student association which organizes social and cultural activities for the international students, and a South American exchange student, who was member of one Erasmus group, as well.

²⁷ de Federico de la Rúa Ainhoa, *La dinámica...*; idem, *Networks and Identities...*

²⁸ The link between the place of the mobility experience and the social identity of the students is highlighted by their attachment and often "romantic" vision on and relationship to the city of Bordeaux and its surroundings. The most interesting case is represented by M. (Italian, 24 years old, studying Political Sciences and International Relations), who lives in his home country in Rome, the city with the highest number of buildings subscribed in the UNESCO heritage list. M. talks about his mobility experience and links it to the fact that Bordeaux is part of the UNESCO heritage, although he realizes that in the eyes of his friends back home, this fact will count for little. On the other hand, the importance and the significance of the status of the city they performed their educational mobility program in are shared within the Erasmus community.

²⁹ Fine, *op.cit.*; Coulon Alain, *L'école de Chicago*, Paris, PUF, 1992; Le Breton, David, *L'interactionnisme symbolique*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

3.3 Field notes

The present subsection is meant to highlight the way in which the initial design of the research and some of the field premises have been re-written, once the field work began. These methodological hypotheses concern my position as a participative observer and the way I would interact with the observed subjects.

The structure of the field work initially set clear borders of the subject – identity in daily life of the international students – and of the category of individuals to be interviewed – incoming Erasmus students, who participate most of the time in daily activities within their peer groups. Time and space barriers were assigned: Bordeaux, 2009/2010 academic year. Given these limits of the initial design, the immediate contact with the studied subjects brought forward the following assertion: part of the identity references and belonging feelings experienced by the students were inevitably transnational, cosmopolitan. Therefore, questions about the relationship with their family and friends at home or in Europe in general, were asked during the interviews. Moreover the consequences of this educational mobility “experience” affect them deep enough, and therefore do not stop at the end of the Erasmus program.

The imperative to learn and speak French in order to be accepted as a peer by the vast majority of the Erasmus students (especially after the first part of the accommodation period) was unexpected, due to the premise that I could have conducted the interviews in English, Italian, Spanish (to a certain extent) and Romanian³⁰. Communication in the Erasmus network was facilitated by the use of Facebook, which became the main mean of communicating with one’s group of friends and with the acquaintances’ network, being that mobile phones were rarely used, mostly for emergencies, and usually just for transmitting short text messages.³¹

Yet another aspect worth mentioning in connection to the field work is the use of my “ex-Erasmus” status in order to be regarded as a peer mobile, and be accepted and invited at various Erasmus group activities.

4. Educational mobility’s consequences at the individual level.

The collocation “educational mobility” is somewhat unbalanced. Most of the interviewed students seem to cherish more the mobility part than the educational one. Nonetheless, the experience is always viewed as educational, as enrichment of the self and of one’s skills - social, cultural, linguistic or, even if less likely, academic ones.

Mobility is the main theme of the discourses captured in the field research during interviews or through observation. During their stay in the host country, mobility becomes for the Erasmus students both a social value and a social norm, while being at the same time the main coordinate of the experience, doubled by the (cultural) diversity imperative of the social milieu.

But why are mobility and cultural diversity so important in the life of Erasmus students?

In order to understand better their central position in the system of reference, we need to

³⁰ The paramount importance that the international students assigned to the learning and practicing of French language is obvious from the following anecdote. Once my level of French was good enough I have started performing registered interviews with the Erasmus students I knew best. Two of them, Italians, but with a good enough level of French, preferred to carry out the whole interview in French, rather than Italian. The moral of the story is that, even though another language – their native one, in this case – would have provided us with better skills of communication, the preference for practicing French was decisive.

Other students managed to learn other foreign languages, besides French, during their stay in Bordeaux: a Romanian student learned Italian, while an Italian youngster learned Spanish. Thus, the activities of learning and practicing foreign languages are subscribed to the more general pattern of behaviour guided by the enjoyment and consumption of cultural diversity.

³¹ During the field research I have witnessed an unexpected disproportion of the usage of communication means: while most of the interviewees had only few telephone numbers in their agenda, they have had developed from scratch a considerable network (sometimes containing several hundreds) of Erasmus/international friends on Facebook. The German, Spanish and South American students, who had in their home countries accounts on networking websites similar to Facebook, had to create new accounts when in France, on Facebook, in order to keep in touch with people they got to know there further to develop their social network. But Facebook was not only a key element only in the communication with newly made friends from France, it also mediated the relationship with “people back home”.

follow the birth and development processes of the Erasmus community and identity, with their associated social values and norms.

The shared status, understood in Jenkins'³² sense as a nominal identity, of “Erasmus” or “foreigner”, creates the premises for the high interactivity between Erasmus students from the beginning of their mobility stay. Their similar situation – few or no social contacts and practically no cultural references for the new environment – and the constraint to re-create anew their social life and network pushes them towards a constant availability towards the others; but mere interactions, no matter how frequent, are not sufficient for creating a feeling of belonging. Respecting Barth's contribution to social research, community cannot be born without its opposition to another one. Thus the Erasmus community is born partially through an opposition the host community (represented mainly by the local students, with whom they have little interaction). In addition to this, the feeling of belonging together and sharing essential traits is due to the selective investment of social characteristics³³. Although the Erasmus students seem not always conscious of the role of mobility in defining their social status, the latter is nonetheless invested with the symbolic power to delimit the two collective identities: the mobiles – Erasmus students, and their peers³⁴ – and the non-mobiles – the Others. The “Erasmus label”, or the nominal identity with its mobile and culturally different connotations, thus turns into, in most cases, a virtual identity³⁵.

The Erasmus students construct a solid base for a feeling of belonging, never experienced before the mobility programme, through social praxis sustaining their values and the subsequent set of social norms. Mobility is reinforced by practicing it under the shape of travelling as much as possible, until the destination loses its importance, and the trip and being mobile become the goal itself³⁶. Keeping a constantly “curious tourist gaze” and sharing, exchanging with and consuming the Other and his or her cultural differences, strengthens the role of cultural diversity in the Erasmus intercultural community. This is done especially through organized social occasions – for instance, dinner parties or other events where the food, drinks, music and dance of the Other is consumed – or on a daily basis, in the most banal of conversations, where both mobility and diversity (in all of their forms) are ever-present.

Another aspect worth mentioning about the Erasmus “experience” is precisely its subjective nature and its drive for reflexivity. While the degree of one's tendency of analyzing his or her own experience and identity may vary, most of the interviewed students have shown awareness when asked about their evolution and trajectory, even high reflexivity about the implications of this period of their life.

As I have shown, the structural factors described in a previous section and the biographical differences of each individual do not deter them from sharing a common identity (among many others, such as a national, regional or gender related one). Thus, by the time the Erasmus program is over for their generation, these mobile youngsters share similar interests (which they have constructed as such, of course) and attitudes: they have become more tolerant towards diversity of all sorts, more autonomous, confident, flexible and predisposed towards reflexivity, considered by Giddens³⁷ essential in talking about self-identity; starting out from scrap, in an unfamiliar social milieu, the Erasmus

³² Jenkins, *op. cit.*

³³ Barth, *op. cit.*;

Brubaker Rogers, Loveman Mara, Stamatov Peter, “*Ethnicity as Cognition*”, in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 33, 2004, No. 1, Feb., pp. 31-64; Tajfel, 1981, p.63 *apud* Ferreol Gilles, Jucquois Guy, *Dicționarul alterității și al relațiilor interculturale*, Iași, Polirom, 2005, p.330.

³⁴ As well as the Erasmus students, the international students that take part in other similar educational programs which involve geographical mobility are integrated (at the collective imagination level, and sometimes even in the daily social praxis) in the “mobile community”. Moreover, I have documented as well a mixed group where Erasmus students were interacting on a daily basis with a French local student, who was actively involved in their group life; and, at the same time, some of the members of the group were South American exchange students. Therefore, labels are flexible and prone to constant reinterpretation to suit the social situations that the subjects find themselves into.

³⁵ Jenkins, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Brașoveanu Alina, *ERASMUS - European Educational Mobility Program and Cross-Cultural Shared Experience and Identity*, in „*Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Studia Europaea*”, Vol. LV, 2010, No.4, pp.85-104.

³⁷ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity...*

have acquired skills needed for successful networking activities, which will certainly prove useful in the professional future.

Corroborated with the findings of similar studies and researches³⁸, the present article concludes that the mobility experience is an efficient opportunity to improve the relating to the Other (and to handle cultural diversity in general) and interpersonal and intercultural communication skills, as well as dealing with new and challenging social situations, thus becoming more flexible and better equipped to work in teams. At the same time, the students go through a process that makes them more self aware and the Erasmus mobility program is viewed as an experience, integrated in one's biography, not only from an academic point of view, or for the professional horizons it broadens, but as a broader experience, a "self-development one", as many students put it.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, even if the meaning they assign to the educational mobility experience might vary (only to a certain degree, because the central elements presented in the earlier section are ubiquitous in their discourses), the Erasmus students share, a common feeling of belonging, not tied to a prescribed territory. This is probably the most interesting aspect about the collective identity of Erasmus students: although local references are, of course, important (as I have mentioned, students take pride in Bordeaux's status as an UNESCO symbol), their identity and social network is above the mere territorial belonging. The social network they create for themselves intertwined with social values and attitudes (such as tolerance and fascination towards cultural diversity, flexibility in its' social, cultural and geographical sense and certain aspects of individualism), along with a feeling of belonging and a reflexive identity is the basis for a common, collective experience³⁹ This experience, performed through the use of "social imagination"⁴⁰, is viewed as the same, but always different, for all the Erasmus students all over Europe.

Thus, the real bet that is won by engaging oneself in this educational program is not necessarily winning scholarly, but socially and culturally. Some students' slogan "Once an Erasmus, always an Erasmus" is more than true: Erasmus identity once integrated in one's social identity, will be "reactivated", along with its values and attitudes, when needed⁴¹: in intercultural encounters, in academic or professional situations.

6. Limits of research and further developments

Data gathered from the field research give us an insight about the individual's interpretation of his or her (experience of/as) Erasmus⁴². Nevertheless, for an in depth analysis of the long-term consequences that the mobility program has on these young Europeans, further study is needed. For instance, a development of the present research could be directed in the area of the preservation of social values and attitudes, as well as social relationships between ex-Erasmus, viewed in the shape of a transnational network.

³⁸ Păunescu Mihai, Precupețu Marius, *Erasmus Students' Mobility ...*, p.74-75;

Velea Luciana Simona, *Valoarea adăugată a programului Erasmus de mobilități pentru studenți*, București, Institutul de Științe ale Educației, 2004, p.21-38

³⁹ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity...*
idem, *Consecințele modernității...*

⁴⁰ Apparudrai, Arjun, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000;

⁴¹ Tajfel, 1978, p.66, *apud* Byram Michael, Tost Planet Manuel, *Identité sociale et dimension européenne. La compétence interculturelle par l'apprentissage des langues vivantes*, Graz, Strasbourg, European Centre for Modern Languages & Modern Languages Division, 2000;

⁴² Although not the most elegant manner of speech, I have chosen the expression that almost all the students I have interviewed used when talking about their mobility experience: "my Erasmus". The personal pronoun and the very familiar way of talking about a complex educational program, part of a larger European educational policy, shows us that the international students have internalized the identities constructed during their mobility experience under the name of Erasmus.

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Annexes

Table 1. ⁴³

Erasmus students' friends	Percentage
Erasmus students	80%
Local students (French students)	17%
International students	3%

⁴³ The present table is a reproduction of the table presented in the paper "La dinámica de las redes de amistad. La elección de amigos en el programa Erasmus" by de Federico de la Rúa Ainhoa, published in "REDES", 2003, June, available on the web page: <http://revista-redes.rediris.es>.