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# Who I am Depends on Where I Am: The Impact of a Sojourn on Home and Host Country Identity

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# **Who I am Depends on Where I Am: The Impact of a Sojourn on Home and Host Country Identity**

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## **Abstract**

Acculturation research convincingly demonstrates that moving to a foreign country may not only cause adaptive changes in an individual's home country identity but may as well initiate the identification with the receiving society. Nevertheless, the knowledge on how identity formation is influenced by the migration process itself and in how far it may differ for temporary migrants, such as sojourners, is still fragmented. Therefore, this paper aims at extending the existing research by applying a longitudinal mixed methods approach; 176 German high school students were surveyed before, during and after spending one year in the US. Analyses reveal that, in comparison to a control group, transition increased the exchange students' German identity beyond the sojourn. Furthermore, US identity increased strongly during the exchange but dropped after returning home. Additionally, the results of 24 semi-structured interviews conducted one year after the exchange present insights into the meaning of the development and maintenance of those identities over a period of 2.5 years. The results contribute to the understanding of home and host country identity negotiations by investigating the impact of three triggering events and their qualitative meaning: the anticipation of the exchange, the actual transition to the US and the return to Germany.

## **Introduction**

Over the past decades it has become increasingly popular to spend time abroad. Particularly in the educational sector, this trend is persistent. Although much attention is paid to the impact of higher education and work-related sojourns, the first chance to spend an extended period of time in a foreign country comes much earlier, namely during high school. While a diverse body of research has analyzed the effect of a sojourn on psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, the impact on home and host country identity has received little attention. This is surprising because acculturation research suggests that both identities may become particularly salient due to intercultural contact while living abroad (Berry, 2004).

The membership in a group allows individuals to distinguish themselves from members of other groups. The underlying processes have been formulated in *Social Identity Theory (SIT)*. While personal identity is suggested to be more salient in intragroup contexts (e.g., Germans among Germans in Germany), social identity becomes more salient in intergroup contact (e.g., German sojourn students in a host country) (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Therefore, in daily life, in interaction with similar others, home country identity usually remains unformed and disregarded (Boehnke & Fuss, 2008), although underlying scripts concerning the self in relation to the national group are active and become the normative standard (Sussman, 2000). But if an individual is pulled out of the familiar context, for example as a result of a sojourn, home country identity may gain relevance because life abroad increases the awareness of the group membership.

Changes in home and host country identity are among the major adaptations due to cross-cultural encounters. According to John Berry's multi-dimensional acculturation model (e.g., Berry, 2001), newcomers in a society have to make decisions concerning their identity on two independent domains, namely whether they are willing to maintain their heritage culture and identity and if they are willing to identify with and participate in the host country. However, studies assessing the conditions under which those identities gain relevance or interact with each other (c.f. Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005) are usually conducted with migrants only. Yet, particularly during adolescence, a time where identity consolidation is central to the individual (Erikson, 1968), spending a limited time abroad, for example through an exchange in high school, should have a strong impact on the exploration of home and host country identity (Berry, 2004).

Although some studies assess identity in an educational sojourn context directly (Thomas, Chang, & Abt, 2007), it is often treated as one of many factors predicting other socio-psychological outcomes of the acculturation process (e.g., Ward & Searle, 1991). Research which systematically investigates the impact of a high school year abroad on home or host country identity is scarce. Available findings suggest that an educational exchange has an impact on the way participants perceive themselves either by increasing the importance of the membership to the group of exchange students out of a shared feeling of rejection (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003), by fostering the exploration and evaluation of one's own national identity (Dolby, 2007), or by forming a host country identity (Sassenberg & Matschke, 2010). To the knowledge of the authors, no single study assesses the interplay of both identities. Furthermore, identity construction involves dynamic processes that evolve over time. However, effects of time on the perception of identity are typically studied cross-sectionally rather than longitudinally.

To counter the methodological challenges of encompassing longitudinal research and to extend the knowledge on psychological adaptation of high school sojourn students, this paper takes an acculturative approach integrating social and developmental psycho-

logical concepts of adolescents' identity development. By employing a mixed methods panel design, the study aims at assessing if a high school year abroad increases home and host country identity. Furthermore, its goal is to understand which meaning the development and maintenance of those identities has over a period of 2.5 years.

In a first step, data from a quantitative survey study assessing 176 German high school exchange students at three points in time, namely before, during and after their high school year in the US is compared to a control group of friends not going abroad (N=213). Building upon the quantitative results, 24 of those students were interviewed about one year after their return to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between their home (German) and host country (US) identity. The longitudinal design allows for the direct investigation of developmental aspects of identity construction as well as the causal direction of effects. Therefore, this approach investigates to what extent home and host country identity are flexible, adaptive constructs which can undergo change within the scope of a temporary sojourn.

## Mixed Methods Design

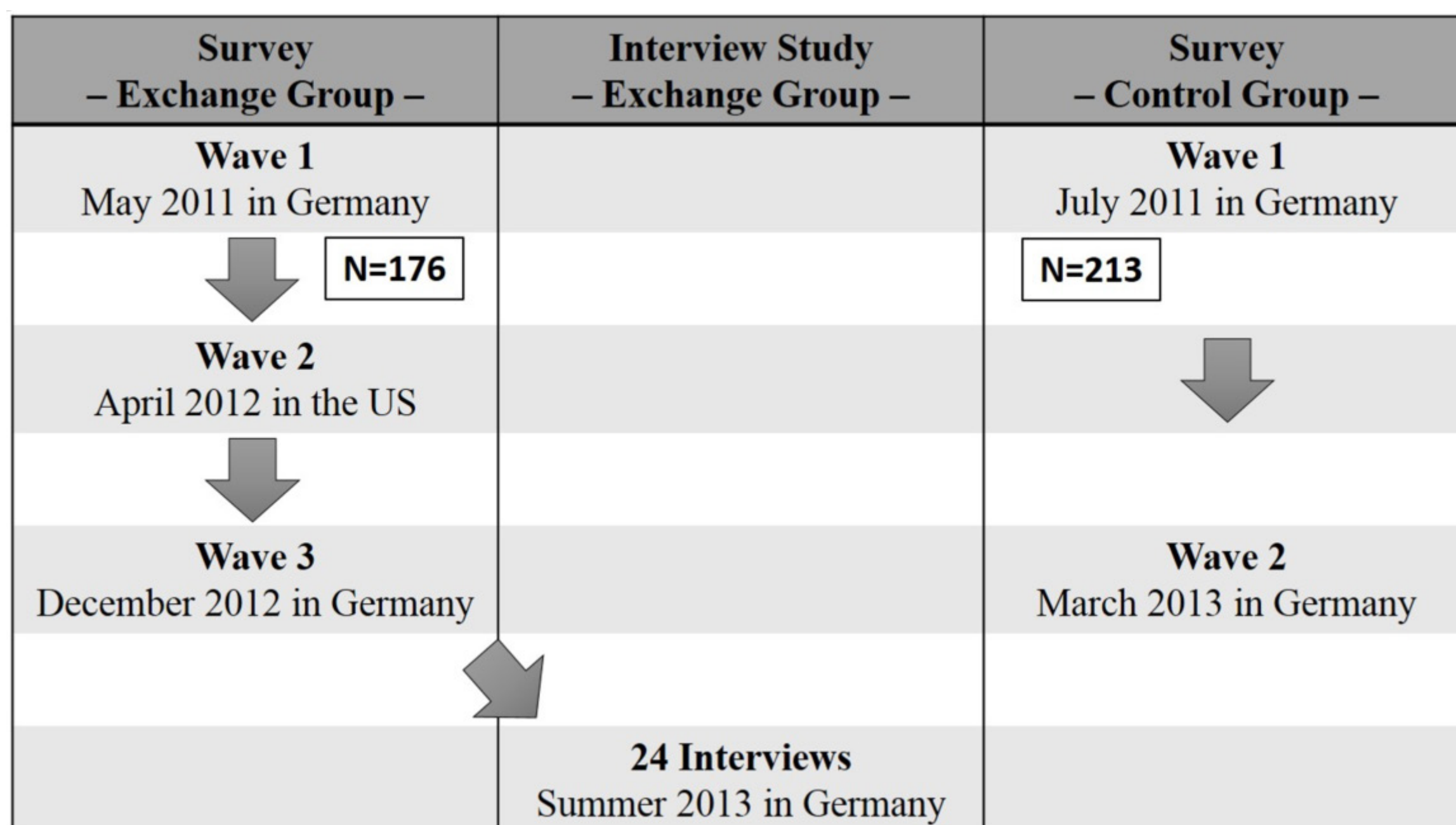
### Quantitative Study

The empirical data presented in this paper are part of a larger longitudinal mixed methods project on the influence of an exchange year abroad in one of 33 different countries worldwide on the identity development of 817 German adolescents in cooperation with the German *Youth for Understanding* (YFU) Committee (for a detailed description please refer to Kuhl, 2012). Between 2011 and 2013, participants were surveyed before (Wave 1), during (Wave 2) and after their high school year abroad (Wave 3). Analyses in this paper focus on those students who spent their exchange in the US (67.5 % of the initial study sample). Data are available across all three waves for 176 participants. To ensure that possible changes in identity can be ascribed to the sojourn and not to overall societal or other changes, the results are compared to a control group of friends with no exchange intention (N=213). The latter participants were surveyed twice, parallel to Waves 1 and 3. Figure 1 illustrates the study design. For the control group data imputation was used to utilize as much of the available data as possible.

Overall, samples are rather homogenous. At the beginning of the study, participants were on average 16.7 years of age with standard deviations a bit lower for the exchange students (SD = .71) than for the participants in the control group (SD = 1.45). Female participants were clearly in the majority with 77 percent in the exchange sample (72 percent in the control sample); this is, however, typical for the gender distribution of YFU students from Germany. The only major difference between the exchange and the control group was the proportion of participants with a migration background, being around 15 percent in the exchange and 36 percent in the control group.

**Instrument.** To assess both home and host country identity in each survey wave, the revised version of the *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (MEIM-R) (Phinney & Ong,

2007) was adapted. It was designed content-free using the same questions for the assessment and comparison of different groups, enabling us to measure both German and US identity in each individual independently. Participants were asked to rate each item individually concerning their degree of agreement. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not true at all” (1) to “completely true” (5).



**Figure 1**  
*Longitudinal Mixed Methods Research Design*

## Qualitative Study

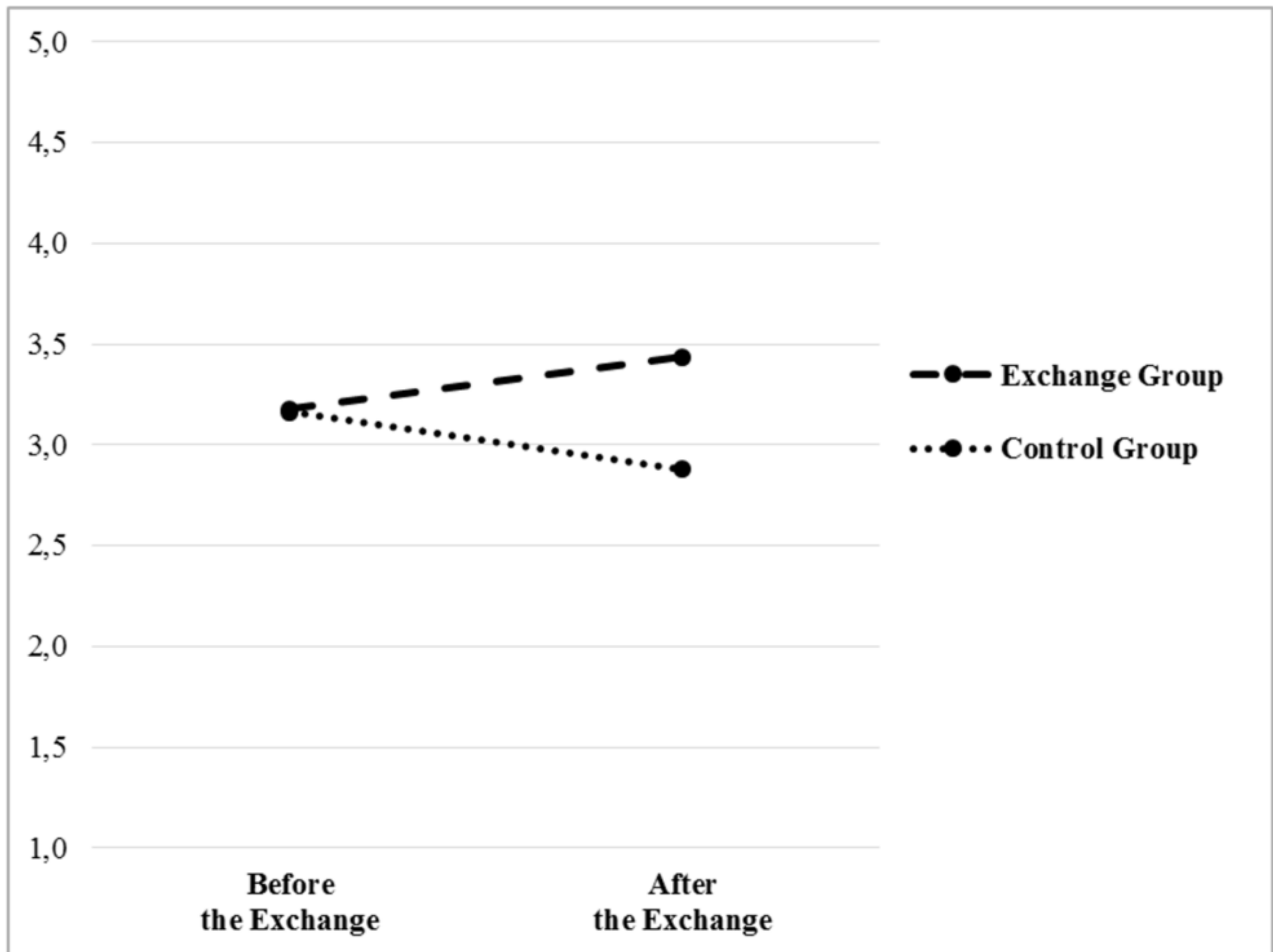
In addition to the survey study, 24 students who had spent their exchange in the US and had completed all three waves participated in a semi-structured, problem-centered interview (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) one year after returning home. The interviewees' mean age was 17; four of them were male. On average, the interviews lasted 83 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed. To reduce the large amount of material and to extract relevant themes and categories, *Qualitative Content Analysis* (QCA) was used (Schreier, 2012). For the mixed methods approach of this study, QCA had two major advantages fostering the integration of the quantitative and qualitative results. First, the original coding frame was established deductively and built on selected topics of the interview guide. Since this guide was based on theoretical concepts operationalized in the survey, it supplemented the quantitative part of the study. Second, while working with the material, QCA allows the inductive expansion of the coding frame by adding implicit as well as explicit themes and sub-themes the participants bring up during the interviews. Therefore, in this specific mixed methods research setting, QCA not only provid-

ed the researcher with a deductive method of qualitative data analysis; inductive coding extended the quantitative findings and added new aspects to the comprehensive understanding of the research endeavor.

## Results

### Longitudinal Survey Analysis

In a repeated measures ANOVA, the change of German identity from before (Wave 1) to after the exchange (Wave 3) was estimated comparing the exchange and control group. Gender and migration background were treated as between-subjects factors. To reduce complexity, the reported results are limited to change across time. The model revealed a significant interaction effect of German identity and the two compared groups,  $F(1/414) = 16.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . Pairwise comparisons clarified the direction of effects. As Figure 2 illustrates, German identity increased significantly for the exchange group over time,  $F(1/414) = 6.14$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , while a significant decrease occurred in the control condition,  $F(1/414) = 12.30$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Further pairwise comparisons reveal that this difference in the level of German identity developed over time. Before the high school year abroad, both groups exhibited a similar level of German identity with a mean difference of .01 ( $F(1/414) = .20$ ,  $p = \text{n.s.}$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ ). After the exchange this difference between the groups emerged as significantly larger ( $\Delta = .55$ ),  $F(1/414) = 28.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ .



**Figure 2**

Change in German Identity from Before to After the Exchange in Comparison to the Control Group

*Exchange Group:  $F(1/414) = 6.14, p = .014, \eta^2 = .02$*

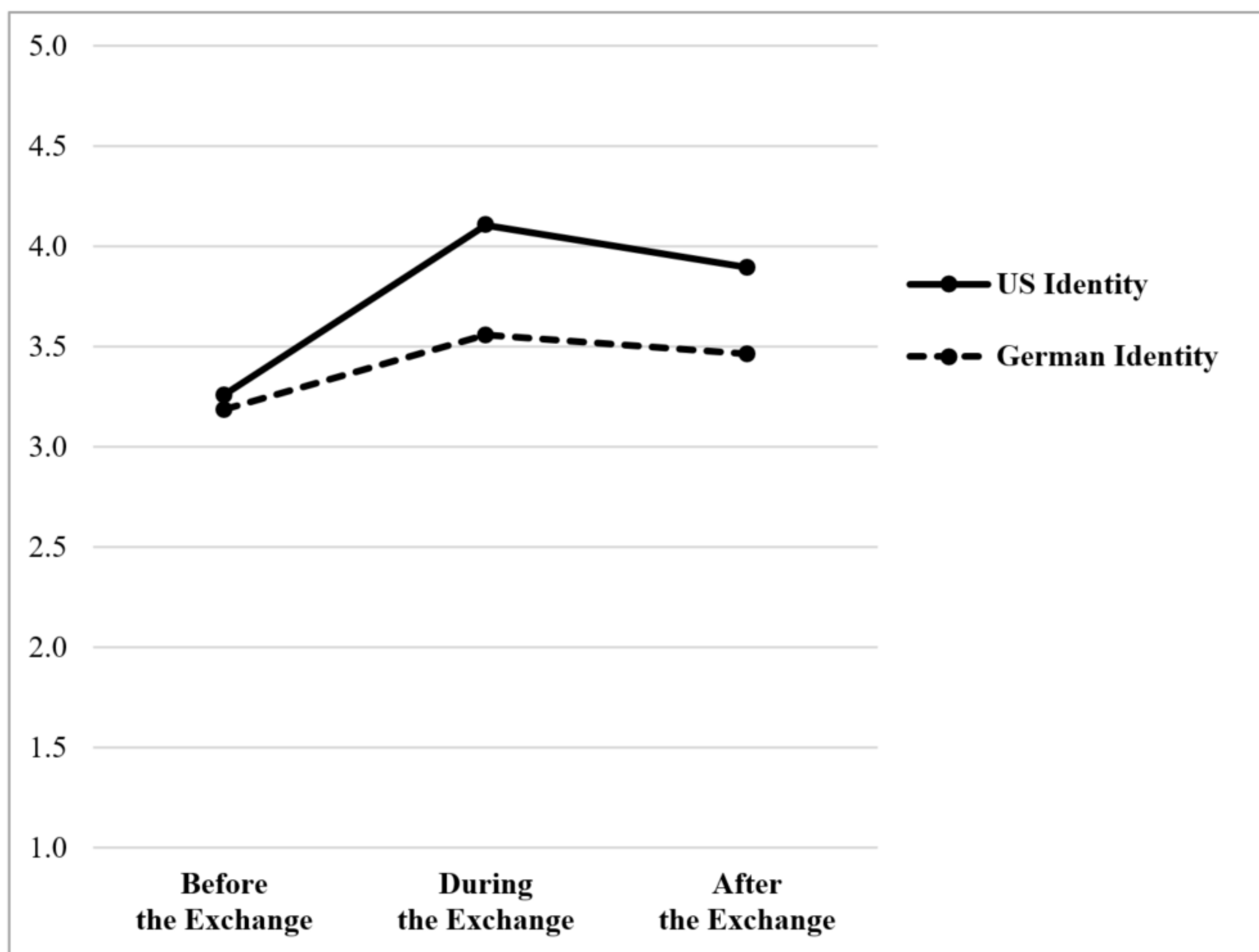
*Control Group:  $F(1/414) = 12.30, p = .001, \eta^2 = .03$*

Since the control group was only assessed in Waves 1 and 3, the development of home and host country identity throughout the exchange (Wave 1, 2 and 3) had to be estimated separately for the exchange group in a repeated measures ANOVA with two within-subject factors, namely the German and US identity. For reasons of space restrictions, we are, however, only able to highlight the most important findings of that analysis without offering details.

Tests revealed significant ( $p < .05$ ) mean differences across time and between the two types of identity. Pairwise comparisons disentangled the type and direction of effects, as illustrated in Figure 3. While the German identity increased from Wave 1 to Wave 2, and in a comparison of Waves 1 and 3, the decrease from Wave 2 to Wave 3 was not significant. This means that German identity was significantly lower before the exchange than during or after it and remained relatively stable when comparing mean scores during and after the year abroad. In contrast, for US identity, differences were significant for each time-point comparison. Accordingly, the exchange students' host

country identity not only increased significantly during the sojourn, the drop after returning home was significant as well.

Besides the differences in the mean level of both home and host country identity over time, further pairwise comparisons illustrate the relationship of German and US identity at a given time point. The analysis revealed no significant difference between both identities before the exchange. Surprisingly, during the year abroad, the mean level of US identity emerged significantly higher and remained stronger than the German identity after returning home.



**Figure 3**

*Change in German and US Identity Before, During and After the Exchange.*

*US Identity:  $F(2/171) = 33.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .28$  German Identity:  $F(2/171) = 6.3, p < .005, \eta^2 = .07$*

In summary, the analyses presented above clearly show that a high school year abroad has a significant, positive impact on the strength of home and host country identity among German adolescents. While German identity decreases in the control condition during the year peers spent on the exchange compared to before, the results reveal a significant increase of German identity in the exchange group. Analyses of additional data for the exchange group obtained during their year abroad exhibited three relationships. First, German and US identity increased significantly during the sojourn, suggesting that the assumptions of acculturation research (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005;



Berry, 2004) also hold for this particular group of temporary migrants. Second, while the strengths of US identity dropped significantly three months after returning home, the level of German identity remained stable on a higher level than before the year abroad. Third, on average the exchange students identified to a greater extent with their host than with their home country at any given time. Those last two results seem unclear, even counterintuitive at first. To uncover the underlying mechanisms causing those results, the next section turns to the interview study. Furthermore, the qualitative study extends the longitudinal assessment of the exchange students' identity development because the interviews were conducted nine months after the last survey, about one year after the participants had returned home.

## Interview Study

Interview analyses point towards an ambivalent German identity (Kühn, 2015) before the year abroad: On the one hand, the preparation for the exchange increases the students' awareness of their cultural heritage but does not yet lead to an active engagement: *"Before I went abroad I did not think much about Germany"* (girl, #18). Furthermore, identifying with their home country is challenging for the participants because the only deliberate confrontation with their German identity occurs in association with World War II. Finding a way to integrate the historical past into their identity is avoided at this stage: *"It's somehow difficult to say we are German because something about Nazi or so always resonates,"* (girl, #6).

Concerning the stronger host country identity prior to the exchange, the interview analysis confirms the assumptions by Sassenberg and Matschke (2010). Not only did the anticipated exchange have a positive impact on their attitudes towards the US but most interviewees deliberately picked this country as destination because they perceived themselves as fitting in there. Through extensive education in school, (social) media and magazines, those interviewees felt close to American culture and exhibited a strong wish to belong: *"You always see it in the movies, all the sights! And America has so much to offer and so many different landscapes and cities"* (girl, #22). Combined with positive expectations about the American way of life, their future host country served as a figure for identification already before the exchange. Taken together, although the awareness of their own cultural heritage was increased through the approaching exchange, in daily life German identity only played a marginal role, holding an ambivalent connotation because dealing with WWII was difficult for the students at the time. In contrast to this, the attitudes towards the US are rather positive. Together with a strong wish to belong to the US, this explains the rather high host country identity scores before the exchange.

Continuing with the exchange itself, quantitative analyses of survey Wave 2 revealed the expected significant increase of both home and host country identity, a result which is supported by the qualitative study. Furthermore, the interviews illustrate how both identities changed during the sojourn and which factors fostered identity consolidation.

After the arrival in the US, the exchange students soon realized that their expectations about the country and its people did not match their actual experiences overseas. *“Different, just very different. Uh, first of all of course the region, and, uh, school, family, everything was different!”* (girl, #14). After an adaptation phase, life in a host family as well as the school triggered the exploration of what constitutes the US. Compared to their life in Germany, sojourners experienced a strong national pride and US identity which coincided with rejecting their German heritage.

*“That’s the point of it, to identify with it, to get to know what constitutes America, its culture [...]. That’s why I identified with it and tried to adopt and drop my values and accept the Americans for the time I was there”* (girl, #4).

Nevertheless, over time the knowledge of and experience with the US became more detailed and the exchange students developed a more reflected perception of their host country. On the one hand, fascinated by the feeling of inclusion into the culture through the participation in US national rituals such as singing the national anthem or reciting the pledge of allegiance, they developed a strong US identity. *“You are constantly confronted with the national pride. This rubs off on you. [...] I didn’t realize that suddenly I said WE and not YOU anymore,”* (girl, #2). On the other hand, extreme forms of national pride were observed with caution and always connected to the horrible consequences blind national pride had during the dictatorship of the Third Reich.

*“It feels great there! You have a community, simply a team spirit! You really feel that you are part of a group. But then I think, was that not the same in Nazi Germany? They were part of the group as well. And if you think it through you realize how dangerous this can get. But in the moments there [in the US], you don’t think about it because you feel strong, not alone.”* (girl, #22)

Although interviewees remained ambivalent about their German identity, the positive perception of Germany in the US as well as the need to position themselves when discussing comments, questions or jokes about WWII with Americans caused the sojourners to reevaluate their national identity. *“I really expected that they say: ‘Uh, Germany, Nazis!’ But they show, ‘We think well of you!’ I think that has a lot to do with me liking being German now,”* (girl, #7). The continuous experience of such positive feedback about their home country in turn often led to a conscious commitment to Germany, usually for the first time. *“Sure, I became more patriotic. [...] Of course, I explored it more and as a result I felt more German,”* (boy, #11). Taken together, the intense cultural experience in a foreign country caused the active exploration of the participants’ German and US identity. Often this process led the students to commit to their German identity as well as to their newly developed US identity for the first time.

Finishing this analysis with the final phase of the exchange experience, namely the return back home, survey results showed that both identities were still stronger three months after the exchange than before, although US identity dropped substantially. Qualitative analyses provide insights to understand this pattern. As proposed by litera-

ture on culture shock (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), coming home is often more difficult than anticipated. Although the interviewees still held both their German and US identity, they were confused about the role each of these identities should play in their daily lives back home. While the exchange students internalized certain aspects of the US culture which were central to their identity after the return, at the same time characteristics of the German culture which are vital for their family and peers in everyday life, had lost their (normative) relevance in the US context. Therefore, they had to negotiate which parts of their US identity they could maintain in Germany and which had become incompatible.

*“Somehow there is a German Lena and an American one. Now I have to somehow find the middle course, who I want to be in this moment and with whom my environment can deal better because if I were the American Lena completely, I would get in trouble because it does not work to be in Germany as you are in America.” (girl, #7)*

One goal of the mixed methods approach in this study was that both quantitative and qualitative analyses would inform each other and contribute to a generalizable as well as specific picture of home and host country identity of German sojourn students. Since the interviews were conducted nine months after the last survey, a second aim was to explore if the qualitative data could contribute to the understanding of later developments. In line with literature on reverse culture shock (Szkudlarek, 2010; Ward et al., 2001), interviewees described a difficult transition period of about six months followed by the phase they went through at the time of the interviews: they had resettled, rebuilt friendships, found their place in their family and caught up in school. Although the majority of students reported that they went back to their normal everyday life, their exchange year had a lasting impact on their identity. The outstanding trend from the quantitative data seemed to continue throughout the year after returning home. While the German identity remained a central and vital part of the students' overall identity, the American part continuously moved to the margin. Nevertheless, certain aspects of their US identity were still important to the participants and often had a differentiating function in distinguishing them from their peers who did not participate in such an intercultural experience. *“There are definitely situations where I think, I cannot really decide: does my American heart want to answer or my German one?” (girl, #1).*

## Conclusion

Although a large body of research focuses on the interplay of home and host country identity processes in migrants, this topic is hardly investigated among educational sojourners and even less among high school students. The first aim of this paper therefore was to broaden the current knowledge by investigating if an exchange year in the US increases not only the home country identity of German students but also causes identification with the host country beyond the sojourn experience. Furthermore, although

still not standard, in the past years the number of longitudinal studies has increased but many questions remain unanswered. To accomplish the second aim of this study, namely to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying processes causing the possible changes in the level of both identities, a demand-tailored mixed methods panel design was employed.

The results showed for the first time that even a relatively short sojourn of one year has a far-reaching impact on the identity of the participating adolescents. Through an intense intercultural encounter fostered by the life in a host family and community as well as the attendance of a local school, the belonging to a geopolitical unit became salient. The meaning of Germany as their heritage was consciously explored and evaluated and caused an increase in the sojourners' home country identity. Similarly, participants delved into a new, foreign culture which not only supported their understanding of their relationship with Germany but created a strong US identity as well. As the interviews illustrated, the increase in both identities was not motivated solely by an emotional commitment to the respective country. Rather, the exchange students consciously evaluated positive and negative aspects and deliberately defined what those identities meant to them and which aspects (such as excessive national pride) they rejected for themselves.

The study succeeded in substantiating the meaningful effects a high school year abroad has on identity development as well as the attitudes towards the host country (Thomas et al., 2007). The decision to go abroad and discover a foreign culture goes beyond the adventure of discovering the world: Spending a high school year outside of Germany changes the way the participants perceive themselves and their social surrounding beyond the exchange experience, likely in a permanent way. Furthermore, it fosters their critical evaluation of the meaning Germany has as their home as well as the US as their host country.

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