

## Conceptualizations, Images, and Evaluations of Culture in Study Abroad Students

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the cultural dimension of sojourners' learning during study abroad periods. By examining the cases of two Canadian learners of German who studied abroad in Germany for 1 year, we aim to amend discussions in existing research on what kind of cultural learning may take place during study abroad and how cultural learning may be conceptualized and operationalized. Our results suggest that assuming that study abroad leads to a heightened intercultural sensitivity, to more cultural knowledge, and to an increased intercultural competence, is problematic with respect to the conceptual underpinnings of "cultural learning." The notions of culture that underlie much of what participants consider "cultural learning and experience" often remain essentialist. We therefore propose to replace the interculturality paradigm by a transculturality paradigm as it allows us to capture the complexities of study abroad and cultural learning more accurately.

### Résumé

Cet article examine l'aspect culturel de l'expérience d'apprentissage lors de périodes d'échange à l'étranger. En nous appuyant sur l'exemple de deux apprenants canadiens de l'allemand qui ont passé une année en Allemagne, nous cherchons à contribuer à la discussion sur le type de connaissances culturelles acquises lors de l'échange et à préciser comment l'apprentissage culturel peut être conceptualisé et mis en usage. Les résultats de nos observations suggèrent qu'il est problématique de s'attendre à une augmentation de la sensibilité et de la compétence interculturelles et à l'apprentissage de la culture à cause de la notion même de « l'apprentissage culturel ». Les notions de culture qui sous-tendent ce que les participants considèrent comme « expérience et apprentissage culturels » restent souvent basiques. Alors, nous proposons de remplacer le paradigme interculturel par un paradigme transculturel, ce qui permettrait de mieux rendre compte de la complexité de l'expérience des échanges et de l'apprentissage culturel.

## Conceptualizations, Images, and Evaluations of Culture in Study Abroad Students

### Introduction

Study abroad (SA) is commonly perceived as one of the most successful ways to allow for cultural learning and the development of cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. This perception seems well grounded: When students go abroad, they have the chance to experience other cultures first-hand, they can immerse themselves into new cultural environments, and, as many would say, expand their “interculturality.” Much recent research on SA (see below) has suggested that there is indeed a correlation between SA and cultural learning, and that intercultural competence can be fostered through SA.

In this study, we focus on the cultural dimension of sojourners’ learning during SA periods by investigating their conceptualizations, images, and evaluations of “culture” over the course of long-term SA. In particular, we are interested in: (a) how sojourners’ conceptualizations of “culture” develop over time, (b) how they relate their experiences to stereotypes and common discourses about culture, and (c) how learners’ insights and conceptualizations connect with their narrated engagement in various communities of practice and learning opportunities abroad. By examining the cases of two Canadian learners of German who studied abroad in Germany for 1 year, we aim to amend discussions in existing research on what kind of cultural learning may take place during SA and how cultural learning may be conceptualized and operationalized.

Our research results suggest that assuming that SA leads to a heightened intercultural sensitivity, to more cultural knowledge, and to increased intercultural competence is problematic with respect to the conceptual underpinnings of “cultural learning.” The notions of culture that underlie much of what participants consider cultural learning and experience often remain essentialist, dichotomizing a cultural “us” versus “them.” We argue that such essentializing discourses of culture often remain unnoticed in studies of SA, because they are framed according to what we refer to as the interculturality paradigm. A closer look at the interculturality paradigm reveals that it is based on an inherently dichotomous framework of Self and Other, which oftentimes prevents researchers from recognizing essentialist notions of culture that underlie interculturality frameworks. We propose to replace the interculturality paradigm by a transculturality paradigm as it allows us to capture the complexities of SA and cultural learning more accurately, that is, the complex relationship of culture and subjectivity. Based on the poststructuralist notion of the multilingual subject (Kramsch, 2009), the transculturality paradigm may help us avoid some of the pitfalls of the interculturality paradigm, namely, stereotyping, dichotomizing, and homogenizing culture and identity. In conclusion, we briefly discuss some pedagogical suggestions that aim to foster transculturality in language learners and sojourners.

### Theoretical Background and Research Overview

Research on SA experiences in higher education generally acknowledges that SA offers unique possibilities of cultural learning. In this section, we give an overview of this research as it pertains to our current understanding of cultural learning during SA periods.

While mid- and long-term SA programs have steadily decreased over the last years due to the increasing popularity of short-term programs (Dwyer, 2004; Institute of

International Education, 2014), research and practice tend to credit especially programs of longer duration with providing “learners with ample time to cultivate language and cultural proficiency along with opportunities to establish and participate in social networks” (Castañeda & Zirger, 2011, p. 545). Such assumptions, however, appear to support a problematic, rather uncritical treatment of cultural learning during long-term SA. While longer sojourns indeed offer more potential learning opportunities, the quantity and the quality of language and cultural learning may nevertheless differ considerably (Huebner, 1995; Kinginger, 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). With regard to cultural learning in particular, it also remains challenging to assess complex and fluid concepts such as “cultural sensitivity/proficiency,” “interculturality” or “intercultural competence” in the context of SA. This is due in part to the fact that the concepts themselves have been defined in oftentimes different ways (e.g., Byram, 1997, 2008; Deardorff, 2006; Hu, 2008; Kramsch, 1998; Schmenk & Hamann, 2007; Volkmann, Stiersdorfer, & Gehring, 2002) and thus require researchers of SA to come to terms with constructs such as interculturality, cultural proficiency, or intercultural learning. Furthermore, in order to determine and assess the actual cultural learning that takes place during SA, researchers have to operationalize the constructs accordingly. In this article, we chiefly focus on the concept of culture that sojourners construct in their narratives prior to and during SA. We first turn toward previous research on SA and interculturality, looking at the respective approaches and theoretical conceptualizations that inform the study of sojourners’ cultural learning.

Looking closer at approaches to operationalizing culture, one can roughly distinguish between two main directions (Gogolin, 2003; Jackson, 2014): a product-oriented and a process-oriented approach. The first approach defines culture as a consistent, objectively existing system that is composed of traditions, practices, and perspectives that can be localized (often in the form of “national” culture) and separated from one another. The second approach conceptualizes culture as a dynamically evolving system of different overlapping and entangled forms of perception, expression, and interpretation that is neither homogenous in nature nor a discrete entity, but “a site of struggle where various communication meanings are contested within social hierarchies” (Martin, Nakayama, & Carbaugh, 2012, p. 28). Typically, recent studies in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have distanced themselves from the first, historically older conceptualization of culture and, instead, have promoted a process-oriented understanding of the term, which, in turn, has formed the basis for discussions of interculturality. In this vein, scholarship on (inter)cultural learning and competences has moved from traditional functionalist/positivistic paradigms to more critical approaches that see “the traditional approach as reinforcing stereotypes and homogenizing cultures” by overlooking “questions about the relationship between and among culture, communication, and politics” (Martin et al., 2012, p. 27). As Kramsch and Uryu (2012) argued, dualities based on Self versus Other have become obsolete in the light of current globalization, migration, and technological developments and thus give way to imaginations of culture as essentially hybrid, that is, as sites of difference and contestation.

Such critical conceptualizations of culture and interculturality have found their way into models of intercultural learning to varying degrees. While earlier models such as Schumann’s (1978) acculturation model and Hofstede’s (1984) value-orientations framework were based on views of cultures as static entities, shared by all members within certain (national) boundaries, recent models display a more fine-grained understanding of culture and cultural learning, even though they may not necessarily entail critical

perspectives and a fundamental questioning of us versus them dichotomies. While numerous models have been devised by scholars of different fields—including Deardorff's (2006) pyramid and process models of intercultural competence—the most influential on discussions of interculturality and investigations of sojourners' cultural learning within the field of SLA have been Bennett's (1986, 1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) and Byram's (1997, 2008) notion of the "intercultural speaker" who possesses "intercultural communicative competence." Bennett's model is based on the distinction between the concepts of "ethnocentrism" versus "ethnorelativism" and defines a six-stage process of cultural learning, in which the goal is for learners to shift smoothly between different cultural worldviews and to perceive their own "marginality." Byram's model, on the other hand, establishes an array of specific competences of affective, behavioural, and cognitive nature (the five so-called "*savoirs*"), which are said to aid learners in understanding and analyzing beliefs and values, and thus in mediating between different social groups and dispositions. While Bennett's and Byram's models move beyond notions of "national culture" and surface phenomena when describing a more complex development of interculturality in language learners, they still remain at the level of culture(s) or sub-culture(s) as rather discrete entities between which individuals move or mediate.<sup>1</sup>

Empirical studies examining cultural learning in SA contexts also reflect varying degrees of critically conceptualizing culture as well as considerable differences in the level of complexity and introspection reached with regard to the intercultural learning process and its products. Some studies employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, operationalized with, for example, the Inventory of Cross-cultural Sensitivity (Cushner, 1986) or the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer & Bennett, 2001) to measure cultural learning in short-term SA programs. The results of such studies (e.g., Hamad & Lee, 2013; Martinsen, 2011; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004) generally have suggested that students improve their intercultural sensitivity through SA, with specific factors such as time spent interacting with native speakers (Martinsen, 2011) and length of sojourn (Medina-López-Portillo, 2004) acting as predictors. Nevertheless, Medina-López-Portillo (2004) noted that although some "participants became increasingly aware, over time, that culture permeates every aspect of life" (p. 188), they "returned from Mexico [their SA destination] speaking about its culture in absolute terms" (p. 195), and thus questioned the extent of intercultural learning possible even on mid- and long-term sojourns. Similarly, in her investigation of short-term SA in Germany, Brubaker (2007) confirmed that students equated cultural learning with identifying and comparing tangible cultural differences and, moreover, were limited in their deeper investigations by their lack of an investigative framework and language to express their thoughts.

Studies using qualitative approaches, on the other hand, tend to connect models of intercultural learning with notions of identity to reach more introspective results. Based on Bennett's (1993) DMIS and Kramsch's (1993) notion of "third place/culture," Smolcic (2013) investigated an SA immersion experience for teachers and found that guided reflection practices with cultural facilitators (instructors, host family, researcher) increased her participant's intercultural learning. Jackson (2013) also employed Bennett's model along with poststructuralist identity theory and found that sojourners' "self-identities" and intercultural learning were affected by a complex interaction of sociocultural factors (e.g., social networks, host receptivity), personality attributes (e.g., degree of ethnocentrism, reflexivity), depth of investment in language and intercultural growth, and degree of self-

analysis/reflection. Her participant, Kingston, a Hong Kong Chinese who studied abroad in Canada, appeared often to rely on an us versus them discourse and “had difficulty accepting cultural difference, and, by the end of his stay, his social networks consisted almost exclusively of Asian students and his Chinese relatives” (p. 199). By closely exploring the developmental trajectory of her participant, Jackson has drawn a complex picture of sojourners’ intercultural learning and has suggested that pedagogical intervention may help learners arrive at more nuanced views of culture and cultural learning (see also Brubaker, 2007; Jackson, 2009). The tendency of sojourners to experience a strengthened sense of national identity, possibly connected with a consolidation of negative stereotypes of the host environment, has also been reported in other studies (e.g., Isabelli-García, 2006; Jackson, 2008, 2010; Kinginger, 2008; Plews, 2015; Tusting, Crawshaw, & Callen, 2002; see also Block, 2007; Kinginger, 2009). Plews (2015) thus concluded that previous research on intercultural learning in SA contexts “might lead to a simplistic equation in which less intercultural is equated with more national and more intercultural equals less national” (p. 286). Plews’s study of Canadian sojourners rather questioned such trends by showing the complexity and variability of aspects of nationality and interculturality in learners’ self-constructions.

Overall, previous research has indicated that SA impacts sojourners’ intercultural learning process and culture-related aspects of their subjectivities, even though the nature and the outcomes of this learning process may differ widely and may not necessarily correspond with the hopes of increased intercultural learning that both students and educators may have. Furthermore, although the employment of introspective research designs appears to promote a more nuanced and critical conceptualization of culture and intercultural learning beyond a binary model of pre-existing cultures, the very conceptualization of culture on the part of participants has often remained vague. Research hence has tended to forego the question of how learners actually view and conceptualize culture as a result of SA and as part of their increased (or decreased) interculturality. We argue that learners’ conceptualizations of culture should be the starting point of investigations into matters of (inter)cultural learning. This is the basis of the current study.

### **Methodology**

Our investigations are based on two case studies with Canadian learners of German who studied abroad at German universities for 1 year; we call these two learners Lisa and Kris. Lisa is a fourth-year undergraduate student of German; she is of German heritage, but did not start learning German before high school. Lisa’s only prior border-crossing experience was a short trip to the United States. Kris is a third-year undergraduate student of German; he is of Latvian heritage, which plays a major role in his narratives. He possesses prior sojourn experience from a 3-month high school exchange in Germany.

In this analysis, we focus on data collected before and during (i.e., up to the end of) the first SA semester. The data were collected with semistructured interviews: in the case of participant Kris, the interviews took place pre-, mid-, and post-first-SA semester; participant Lisa was interviewed pre- and post-first-SA semester. Only Kris’ mid- and post-first-SA semester interviews were conducted remotely via Internet voice call while he was in Germany; all other interviews were conducted in person while the participants were in Canada. Also, over the course of the first SA semester the students wrote biweekly e-journals. Our data analysis is influenced by the principles of both narrative analysis and

critical discourse analysis. Narrative analysis allows us to reconstruct learners' experiences and beliefs by analyzing how they relate and evaluate their SA term through the creation of meta-narratives (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008). Critical discourse analysis proved to be a useful additional method of analysis for the data, as we were interested in exploring the students' notions of culture in more detail. Given that the participants both refer to prior knowledge and beliefs about culture, about Germany and the German language, as well as about cultural learning, we wished to identify the discourses they actually draw upon in their narratives, and their functions within the narratives. Our interest lies in inquiring "into the relationships between language and social configurations of education" (Rodgers, 2004 p. 3) in order to reconstruct the ways in which sojourners interpret and make sense of their experiences abroad, how they conceptualize culture, and how this in turn informs their narratives. With its focus on power and discourse in constructions of social configurations (e.g., Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2004; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), critical discourse analysis allows us to relate the participants' narratives to other discourses in the domain of language and culture and, hence, to identify possible influences on individuals' beliefs and sense-making strategies. The nexus of power and knowledge as it pertains to the field of SA becomes salient in participants' narratives about their learning and experiences. Especially in light of the manifold ways of conceptualizing the notion of culture to which today's students are exposed in language education, in research, in the mass media, and so forth, we can assume that sojourners' narratives will draw on a variety of discourses when talking about their SA experience and about what they perceive as culture.

## Research Results

### Case Lisa

**Pre-sojourn.** Prior to her stay in Germany, Lisa's expectations of her sojourn are strongly influenced by a romantic idealization of Europe as the place where she feels destined to spend her future. Lisa lived with her parents all her life and never traveled outside North America; she desires to become part of "European communities" in order to gain access to the cultured, sophisticated, and mature living that she imagines to be possible there:

Lisa: ya actually I'm I've been convinced ever since high school that I would be living in Germany or at least Europe, when I graduated and like start my REAL life . . . I just think I would get along with Europe very well.

Resembling the case of Alice in Kinginger's (2004) study, Lisa's missing first-hand experience with crossing borders is replaced by romantic representations of Europe, her admiration of the Europeans she met, as well as her wish for a change of life, which is connected with the imagination of an elevated "European identity":

Lisa: every European person I know that just, there's something a little bit different about them . . . something that I really like, I don't know. And of course I've seen pictures and it's so much more beautiful than here and a lot older . . . buildings and

so much more culture and I just feel like I've been in the same place for far too long and ready for something different.

Lisa's construction of herself as being capable of adjusting to living in Europe is further based on her German family heritage. She identifies family traditions such as ways of cooking and celebrating Christmas as markers of her high adaptability to German culture, revealing a focus on cultural surface phenomena. Her conceptualization of foreign cultural phenomena is also mirrored in her treatment of culture as represented in German studies classes and SA seminars. She values factual information and advice based on ostensible rules of behaviour (see also Brubaker, 2007), whereas the historical contextualization of cultural objects and the complexity of contemporary cultural phenomena appear rather irrelevant to her:

Lisa: in the higher courses . . . I think that was when I learnt what Germany was really like . . . 'cause we . . . didn't focus so much on history but more on what's happening now. And like what's happening in theatre, in books, and stuff NOW . . . whereas . . . history, that was also really interesting but it's not relevant anymore.

While learning about cultural objects and underlying beliefs and value systems in class, Lisa's focus is geared toward practical elements of everyday life, which she may deem relevant particularly for fulfilling her wish to live in Germany. Her above explanation suggests that her conceptualization of culture is based on the assumption that contemporary surface differences between Canadian and German lifestyle can be singled out, explained, and overcome through factual knowledge. One can therefore say that Lisa views culture as a set of facts that can be observed and "learned," and that are dissociated from history. Furthermore, Lisa's notion of culture prior to her sojourn is characterized by a set of beliefs about Europe, and Germany in particular, as well as about herself. She idealizes "European" aspects of life that she considers more sophisticated and refined (on the basis of cultural surface phenomena such as pictures), and she implicitly idealizes herself as a potentially or inherently European self who is more sophisticated than her Canadian peers who are not of European descent. Moreover, her explanations quoted above reveal an "organic" understanding of culture and identity, which underlies her narratives: It seems as though Lisa believes that through her heritage she possesses the seeds of Europeanness that will somehow thrive in a European habitat and allow her to grow into the desired sophisticated self. How this growth may occur is not the focus of her thoughts; in fact, she seems to assume that this growth will somehow come about naturally.<sup>2</sup>

**In-sojourn.** After having studied in Germany for a semester, Lisa feels that she has succeeded in fulfilling her desire to gain more independence and maturity through living in Europe:

Lisa: the biggest thing is probably that I've become more independent . . . I've lived with my parents before I left and now I've lived on my own and I've been traveling and I've been buying my own groceries and doing my own cleaning and everything and it feels good to take care of myself . . . I think I've really grown up and it's time to go out on my own.

Since Lisa believes that she was successful in developing a more independent and adult sense of self, she can maintain her initial assumption of belonging to Europe as the place of a mature and sophisticated lifestyle. In comparison to her pre-SA conceptualization of Europe as one singular, undifferentiated entity, her travel experience allows her to begin to perceive Europe as an agglomeration of different, distinct cultures in contrast to “multicultural” Canada:

Lisa: Canada is so multicultural and it's so different to be over there [in Germany/Europe] . . . it's not as multicultural . . . and it's kind of interesting because they have a REAL culture and every country I went to, I was like yes . . . this is noticeably Germany, this is noticeably Denmark, this is noticeably Sweden, whereas here . . . no one here is Canadian, but the people there . . . they're actually German and Swedish and Danish.

Lisa's conceptualization of culture draws on the notion of national culture as a consistent and objectively existing system of traditions, values, and practices (see also Gogolin, 2003, on this concept of culture). Canada appears as a confusing mixture of different national cultures, whereas European countries are putatively “more pure” with unique differences and homogenous compositions. Her concept of European culture has thus been differentiated according to her experience of Europe as a multinational place, yet the very notion of culture specifically has remained unchanged for her.

Corresponding to Lisa's reliance on surface phenomena, she still reveals the initial trust in the value of dos and don'ts recommendations and factual information about Germany:

Lisa: so I wish actually that we had some sort of like meeting before we went there, like saying like “oh these are the common brands for like bathroom things and these are the common brands for this and deodorant in German is called this and not this.”

This excerpt reveals a further factor that may contribute to Lisa's cultural learning process: She seems to prefer being told about cultural facts to exploring the new environment herself. Her wish not to expose herself to the possibly unsettling challenges of intercultural learning experiences serves as a strategy that ultimately allows Lisa to preserve her desired subject position as mature, sophisticated, and apt to live in Europe. As this kind of exploring is often assumed to lie at the heart of intercultural learning, we can conclude that Lisa's attitude toward cultural learning prevents her from enjoying discoveries. Instead, she views the need to figure things out for herself as strenuous and unnecessary. She would clearly prefer to be told the practical rules so that she can get things right immediately (and be the sophisticated self rather than become it through her own activities/engagement). This is in keeping with the organic view of culture we mentioned earlier.

In situations in which the construction of Lisa's successful life in Europe is contested, her conceptualization of culture helps her to fend off such challenges:

Lisa: I feel really foreign . . . and I feel really proud to be Canadian . . . I've bought a Canadian flag and put it on my door. I want people to know that I'm Canadian. But even though my family is from Germany, we have a lot of German traditions and stuff. I don't really feel when I'm over there [in Germany], more so though



when I'm with my uncle because . . . it's my family and we talk about things that are familiar to me, but when I'm living there [in Germany] on my own in my residence and just going about the town, I feel really foreign like, especially with the language, it's such a barrier.

Lisa shares an apartment with mostly German roommates, and she faces difficulties in overcoming the feeling of foreignness and in integrating into German-speaking communities. She uses Canadian symbols that clearly set her apart from the society she intends to access, which appears to be a defence mechanism that helps her compensate for the realization that her German heritage does not guarantee easy integration.

Although this excerpt may appear inconsistent with Lisa's wish to belong to Europe and her investment in constructing "European" identity facets, her self-defence nevertheless serves the overarching purpose of creating a positive self-image. She believes that shifting the focus toward her "unique and special" Canadian origin possibly allows her access to desirable communities, which she finds difficult to achieve through engaging in German-language based practices alone. Lisa's conception of culture therefore leads her first to construct herself as potentially German/European (idealizing the Other), and upon facing difficulties in attaining seamless integration, she refocuses on herself as Canadian. Clearly, she refers to a notion of culture that is nation-bound and characterized by a strict either/or dichotomy, which she never questions. Besides, the organic metaphor that underlies her concept of culture seems to prevent her from engaging in intercultural dialogue and seeking to discover and explore her new environment. She gives up her initial desire to develop a European/German self, foregrounding (and possibly retreating to) her Canadian self instead.

### Case Kris

**Pre-sojourn.** Kris' pre-SA conceptualizations of culture are influenced by rather extensive experiences with crossing borders and participating in multilingual and multicultural environments: He has been involved in the Latvian community of his Canadian hometown throughout his life, has prior sojourn experience as a high school student in Germany, and works as a customs officer at an international airport.

Kris highlights the importance of his Latvian heritage in his narratives. He explains that he grew up in a Latvian-speaking household, regularly attended a Latvian language school, and is part of a fraternity that organizes exchanges with Latvia. As a result, he describes himself as "split" into a Latvian and a Canadian self:

Kris: Culturally, I'd say that I'm a Latvian-Canadian . . . It really is almost a fifty-fifty split . . . I've grown up in Canada, I identify as a Canadian, I am proud of the Maple Leaf, I love hockey, you know I love winter and all those typical Canadian things, it's you know I'm proud to be Canadian really . . . But I'm also proud to be Latvian and those, in my mind, they don't interfere with each other, they just exist in parallel.

In his explanation, Kris purposefully aligns himself with symbols he recognizes as (stereo)typically Canadian and identifies himself as culturally split between two distinct

ethnic/national groups, Canadians and Latvians, which from his perspective peacefully co-exist in himself.

Concomitantly, he shows a curiosity for the underlying notions and cultural values as transported through language. He explains that his partly Prussian grandmother sparked his interest in learning German because of her frequent use of German idioms:

Kris: My grandmother is three quarters Prussian . . . she was always busting out little proverbs and *Sprichwörter* and stuff like that. So, I always wanted to know what they meant . . . and so I had a driving urge to to understand, not just . . . know the literal translation, “oh this is what I just said,” but actually understand what she was saying.

On the one hand, these excerpts shed light on Kris’ conceptualization of culture: He seems to conceptualize cultural identity as a container, when he gives precise percentages to indicate cultural heritage (50/50 in himself, 75% Prussian in his grandmother). This view reflects a notion of culture that is characterized by a nativity/heritage dimension: The decisive elements for Kris are place of birth/ancestry and place of upbringing. He thus constructs culture in two ways: First, as a reified and separate entity and, second, assumed to be a part of himself. His assertion that he is 50/50 Latvian/Canadian indicates that he seems to locate culture both outside and within persons (the latter in his case is split, but he asserts that his two cultural selves do not clash but somehow complement each other). It can therefore be said that he hints at his cultural hybridity. However, his view of his cultural self as a container remains cumulative (50/50), consisting of (separable) Canadian and Latvian parts. This notion of culture is in some ways similar to Lisa’s organic view of culture, but it is based on biographies, not on potential growth and development. On the other hand, the excerpt demonstrates Kris’s reflective stance toward language, which causes him to construct multilingualism as a complex phenomenon with multiple layers. When his grandmother used and translated German proverbs, it seems that Kris desired a deeper understanding of the belief systems behind her utterances. Throughout the pre-SA interview, Kris reflects repeatedly on the distinction between the literal meaning/translation of words (the “conventional” aspect of language according to Kramersch, 2009) and the cultural, social, or personal meanings that their usage evokes (the “symbolic” meanings, Kramersch, 2009). Similarly, when he talks about multiple languages, he narrates his awareness of how different languages interact in multilingual minds and influence one’s way of thinking about the world and what symbolic forms are chosen to express one’s worldview:

Kris: I think . . . there are certain words that you use in certain situations in any given language . . . and when you translate those in your head, whether you’re doing it consciously or unconsciously . . . if you translated that literally into whatever their native language is, it’d be perfectly fine, but it, it just has a different feel to it, and I noticed that, when I speak Latvian or when I speak German, my word choices, well is affected by you know kind of how I think in English.

This awareness of the different functions of symbolic forms and sociocultural embeddedness of the multilingual mind may result from Kris’s involvement in multilingual communities throughout his life.

In addition, Kris's perceptions of culture also draw on his prior sojourn experience in Germany. In his narratives, he appears to: (a) refer to the discourse of distinct nation-based cultures, while also realizing the stereotyping that comes with this thinking, and therefore attempt to (b) detach himself from essentialist conceptualizations of culture. He thus arrives at more micro-level descriptions of experienced differences, for example, when he talks about his first sojourn in a major German city:

Kris: it was actually completely different because you know in my house [in Canada] we live on an acre of land and you know there are seven of us in the house, plus animals, huge lawn, fruit trees everywhere . . . it was totally different, going to a little townhouse where you got neighbours on both walls and . . . little yard in the back . . . really went from living in the suburb to living in the city . . . but also you know you're going from North America to Europe, right, here everything expands outward, everything is big, it's all about the extra-large coke and the supersized meal, right, and you drive everywhere.

While Kris starts to analyze the micro-level characteristics between his Canadian home in the suburbs and his sojourn home in a large city as simply based on differences in lifestyle, his explanation of those differences then glides into a macro-level, generalizing comparison of putative North American versus European qualities.

Overall, it seems that Kris's prior sojourn experience and intensive involvement in multilingual communities in different places help him partly to focus on concrete experiences and develop more complex understandings of the interactions of language and culture. When narrating cultural experiences, however, he expresses his ideas with reference to generalizations, drawing on discourses of culture as nation-based entities that are distinct from each other.

**In-sojourn.** After a few months of being in Germany, Kris's conceptualizations of culture have changed slightly. On the one hand, he appears to draw on stereotypes and generalizations more extensively to make sense of his sojourn experiences and align himself with specific communities. On the other, he appears to be aware of this practice and reflects on the functions and nature of such stereotypes. At first, Kris expresses that he feels that his sojourn has strengthened his "Canadian identity," which he assumes results from the tendency to "identify by [our] differences":

Kris: I would say that I have a[n] almost slightly stronger sense of Canadian identity because it's further away and it's it's kind of what I miss . . . And you know, it's weird you're kind of stuck in the middle . . . the Canadian side comes out more when I'm away from Canada and the Latvian side comes out more when I'm in Canada, usually because really . . . you identify by your differences, you know.

Apparently, Kris recognizes his search for appropriate subject positions and changes in cultural alignment in response to changing communities he wants to associate with or dissociate from. As part of his "Canadian identity" he reports to dissociate himself especially from being identified as American (see also Marx, 2002; Plews, 2015):

Kris: a lot of people go “oh American, Canadian, same thing” . . . the kind of [analogy] that I draw is “oh ya, German, Austrian, Swiss, same thing” . . . there are very significant cultural differences . . . the British influence on Canada is still fairly strongly felt, Canadians are much more socialist . . . I mean that’s a bad bad word in America, if you mention socialism, you know immediately you’re a dirty communist, but I think that Canadians recognize that socialism and communism are two different things a little bit more than Americans do.

Kris’s reasoning for why he dislikes being mistaken for an American is based both on generalizations of complex ideological notions and related behaviours/interpretations by certain groups, as well as on his ability to draw comparisons and relate different cultural stances to historical developments to explain his own reactions.

Similarly, Kris narrates his cultural experiences in Germany and his view of German culture by drawing on a set of stereotypical ideas, which he supports with specific observations and partially qualifies by contemplating the general functions of those stereotypes:

Kris: I do suffer from a couple of the . . . perceptions of Germans, for instance . . . the stereotype of being very efficient or . . . excellent engineers . . . but to be fair, how much of that really is . . . stereotype and how much is reality, is a matter of some debate . . . For instance, the Autobahn . . . there were a couple of points where the road kind of dips into . . . a valley . . . and in Canada that road, you know, would have gone down into that valley . . . no, massive street bridge, hundreds of feet in the air, just gigantic concrete structure and I thought about it for a bit and I realized, ya if somebody is going 180 kilometres an hour in their car and if they have to go . . . around a hill . . . that’s going to be a little bit dangerous . . . every stereotype is at least loosely based on facts.

While Kris is rather aware of his repeated employment of stereotypes and national/ethnic categorizations, he simultaneously justifies and distances himself from them, both with specific examples and by considering their functions (see also Tusting et al., 2002). It seems that Kris’s extensive experience with crossing and living in-between cultural and linguistic boundaries allows him to look beyond the surface, to consider the different cultural memories that certain notions may evoke (e.g., “socialism”) and to reflect on the function and feasibility of stereotypes as employed by himself and certain communities. Nevertheless, his conceptualizations of culture and cultural practices post-SA have to some extent solidified in comparison to his reflections pre-SA, when he at least partly gave less nationalizing descriptions of his observations.

At the same time, his narrative shows that he is searching for an appropriate way to construct his experiences (see also Brubaker, 2007). The categories (i.e., discourses) available to him are based on the assumption of national differences. However, he realizes that these categories are somehow insufficient and result in stereotyping. Kris’s grappling with constructing himself and his experiences abroad is thus characterized by a quest for making sense of cultural diversity and hybridity, on the one hand, and avoiding cultural stereotyping, on the other. He seems to be stuck in the discourse of culture = nation, conscious of its shortcomings, yet he does not know of alternative discourses that he could

draw upon in order to make sense of his experiences and do justice to the complexities of his perceptions of culture and identity.

## Discussion

### Lisa's and Kris's Cultural Learning Experiences

In line with previous research (e.g., Brubaker, 2007; Jackson, 2010, 2013; Kinginger, 2004, 2008; Plews, 2015; Wilkinson, 1998; see also Block, 2007), the results of this study suggest that studying abroad clearly impacted these learners' constructions of culture and identity. Both students try to narrate their experiences abroad with reference to notions of culture and language, simultaneously constructing themselves as subjects-in-process who develop profoundly while on exchange. Similar to what previous research has shown, their narrations contain moments of positive and negative stereotyping (e.g., Jackson, 2008; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002); of a strengthened sense of national identity in light of feelings of frustration and foreignness in the host country (e.g., Isabelli-García, 2006; Kinginger, 2008, 2010; Plews, 2015); and of reflexivity, self-analysis, and questioning of stereotypical notions (e.g., Cook, 2006; Jackson, 2013; Smolcic, 2013) when being prompted to narrate their experiences as part of the interview situation.

However, the two cases also suggest that the respective conceptualizations of culture of the two students are based on common-sense notions. Culture is interpreted as a pre-existing set of facts that somehow shape people. As a result, when talking about culture, both participants get trapped in a discourse of cultural dichotomies that inadvertently leads to stereotyping, due to an underlying us-versus-them construction of cultures as static entities. Kris seems to be aware of the inherent traps of this notion of culture, yet he cannot escape it as he does not have an alternative model of expressing and differentiating his experiences with multiple discourse communities, while Lisa is happy to position herself vis-à-vis generalized images of national culture that allow her to understand herself and the Other, and construct a positive self-image.

In terms of interculturality, Kris clearly shows that he is on the way to becoming an intercultural speaker in Byram's (1997) sense, whereas Lisa actively avoids questioning herself and others, as well as opening up toward challenges and discoveries. She remains in the realm of the familiar and both her idealizations and her beliefs about Canada and Germany remain largely unchallenged. Her notions of culture and the respective national cultures appear reinforced as they provide her with a soothing clarity. Overall, her SA experience leads Lisa to confirm her prior beliefs. What changes is her perception of Europe as one whole (she now views it as several wholes that are nevertheless the Other when compared to Canada), and she views Canada in a more positive light, which allows her to maintain a positive self-image.

Lisa's pre-SA conceptualization of culture as a homogenous entity, identifiable through surface phenomena, clearly carries over into her sojourn narratives and interpretation of learning experiences. Her desire to maintain and demonstrate her independent, mature, European subject position prevents her from grappling with the multi-faceted, contradictory, and dynamic nature of cultural phenomena, which could contest and confuse her sense of self and imagined participation in European communities. Rather, she appears drawn to facts and symbols that provide explanations and help her to project her desired self.

Kris, on the other hand, shows evidence of intercultural communicative competence as defined by Byram (2008). He possesses a substantial amount of knowledge about self, other, and interaction (*savoir comprendre, savoir apprendre*). He also demonstrates interpretive and discovery skills when it comes to culture and cultural encounters (*savoir*) and he is able to relativize himself and to value others (*savoir être*). Regarding the domain of Byram's (1997, 2008) *savoir s'engager*, Kris's explanations indicate that he is able to reflect on political dimensions of culture and, to some extent, possesses critical cultural awareness. He displays substantial intercultural sensitivity, as on several occasions he tries to link observed behaviours and experiences with possible backgrounds of the phenomena in question (historical, political contexts). Yet, Kris's conception of culture remains trapped within a dichotomizing, essentialist, stereotyping discourse of culture as a measurable entity.

Even though the participants differ considerably when it comes to intercultural awareness and sensitivity, they both rely on common-sense notions of culture that restrict their options of meaning making prior to and during their SA. It is for this reason that we argue that the complexity of culture ought to be given greater critical attention in the context of SA research and programming. Given that the current two participants showed on the surface what one would classify as intercultural competence or sensitivity (albeit at different levels), but underneath the surface the participants clearly refer to rather simple, rehearsed, and essentialist notions of culture, it seems important to us to investigate this underlying notion of culture more closely. In the following section, we argue that differentiating the common-sense notion of culture that our participants refer to might remain unnoticed in research that seeks to identify instances of intercultural competence. Our findings suggest that it would be beneficial to rethink the framework within which cultural learning can be studied in SA research. At the same time, the findings have important implications for language programs, that is, the educational paradigm of interculturality needs reconsideration as well.

### **Common-Sense Notions of Culture**

By *common-sense notions of culture*, we refer to a concept of culture that is widespread among students and instructors. In brief, *culture*, according to this view, is taken to denote a set of facts that influence people, resulting in culturally specific "mentalities," which play out at the level of communication, behaviour, and everyday life.

For a long time, this view of culture also dominated scholarly accounts of intercultural communication and learning. However, as Blommaert (1991) pointed out, there are several difficulties and shortcomings that characterize such essentialist notions of culture:

1. Monolithic: Culture, race, ethnicity are put together into one complex of influences on communication.
2. This cultural influence seems to be independent of discourse-internal adaptations. It is "always there" a priori.
3. Transcendental: Conflicts in intercultural communication are seen as cultural conflicts that arise independently of social, political, and other influences. (p. 14)

Similarly, in many studies of SA, conceptualizations of culture remain inherently monolithic, stable, and transcendental, as research into SA students' achievement of intercultural sensitivity or competence is often based on a binary framework of sojourners' home culture versus the respective host culture. Once this binary has been established it is almost impossible to escape what we would call an epistemological fallacy: Culture is seen as a set of influential factors, and individual students (or other people they encounter) are assumed to be bearers of their respective culture. Given the very setup of foreign language study and SA experience in research into interculturality and SA, it is almost impossible not to equate language with culture and to get trapped in a common-sense notion of culture. If a student from the US studies French, takes part in an SA program in France, and encounters other people, places, and so on, one can hardly escape the logic of binary thinking and cultural essentialism—namely, the assumption that this student will experience French culture and compare it to American culture. The implicit equation of culture, language, and probably nationality as well is at the same time based on a monolithic concept of culture as a pre-existing entity that influences people, thereby homogenizing them and comparing them to another (homogenized, monolithic, and stable) entity, that is, the respective student's own culture. Caught up between the us-and-them meaning making (on the part of students, instructors, researchers, and others), the resulting view of culture is inadvertently limited by the strict binary logic of Self/Other. It results in what Friedman (2014) has identified as

presumptuousness in thinking that there is some kind of a priori knowledge that we can acquire so as to truly understand how members of another group think and act in particular situations. Such an approach reflects a kind of rigid essentialism that labels groups of people in ways that confuse intercultural knowledge with stereotyping. (p. 14)

Tied to the logic of the binary epistemology of self versus other, every attempt to capture interculturality thus inevitably leads to a focus on difference. This echoes Welsch's (1999) critique of what he calls "the traditional concept of culture": "The concept is unificatory," it is "folk-bound" and "separatory" (pp. 194ff.).

In the narrative accounts of their SA experience, the participants in our study draw on a traditional or common-sense notion of culture, that is, on the discourse of cultural difference, and even though they reflect on it to different degrees they remain unable to escape the reductionist, monolithic concept of culture as an entity. Common-sense notions of culture can therefore be said to inhibit cultural learning to the extent that the students lack meaning making resources that allow them to conceptualize culture as something heterogeneous and unstable that might not only influence people but that might itself be open to change and thus individual agency. As Friedman (2014) concluded, "people tend to perceive culture as given. They are usually unaware of the dynamic, on-going intersubjective loop through which they shape and are shaped by culture" (p. 18)

Such a critique of the perception of culture requires that the notion of interculturality also be reconsidered, as it is inextricably linked to the Self/Other binary and to an inherently static view of cultures as entities (see also the contributions in Dervin & Machart, 2015). As Welsch (1999) explained:

The conception of interculturality seeks ways in which such cultures could nevertheless get on with, understand and recognize one another. But the deficiency in this conception originates in that it drags along with it unchanged the premise of the traditional conception of culture. It still proceeds from a conception of cultures as islands or spheres. For just this reason, it is unable to arrive at any solution, since the intercultural problems *stem* from the island-premise. The classical conception of culture *creates* by its primary trait—the separatist character of cultures—the secondary problem of a structural inability to communicate between these cultures. Therefore this problem can, of course, not be solved on the basis of this very conception. The recommendations of interculturality, albeit well-meant, are fruitless. The concept does not get to the root of the problem. It remains cosmetic. (p. 196; orig. emphasis)

The epistemological fallacy mentioned above originates in the problem Welsch is tackling in the foregoing passage; namely, the very notion of interculturality is conceptualized on the basis of a traditional, common-sense notion of culture, precisely because the presumed stance presupposes the existence of two different places, that is, cultures. Once one has conceptualized sojourners (and others) as located between cultures, it is almost impossible to avoid the epistemological trap of binary thinking and reinforcing the common-sense notion of cultures as discrete entities that exist prior to cultural learning and experience. Regarding the conceptual dimension, the notion of culture that underlies such arguments remains rather undertheorized and simplistic. Assuming that students come from one culture and immerse themselves into another is based on the assumption that cultures are discrete entities that are pre-existent, ready to be experienced and studied. Studying abroad, within this conceptual framework, is then conceivable only as an experience that allows for an accumulation of cultural knowledge and an immersion into the Other. Resulting from this view is a theory of intercultural competence that is chiefly focused on knowledge and experience of two different cultures, situated in two different linguistic environments. Consequently, difference tends to be maximized and becomes the main focus, which in turn leads to a homogenized view of the two dichotomized cultural dimensions, associated with the Self and the Other. In practice, this view leads to stereotyping, and it does not allow for a more flexible conception of subjectivity, that is, of subjects-in-process (Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

As Welsch (1999) reminded us,

cultures de facto no longer have the insinuated form of homogeneity and separateness. They have instead assumed a new form, which is to be called *transcultural* insofar that it *passes through* classical cultural boundaries. Cultural conditions today are largely characterized by mixes and permeations . . . . The concept of transculturality . . . is a consequence of the *inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures*. These encompass . . . a number of ways of life and cultures, which also interpenetrate or emerge from one another. (p. 197; orig. emphasis)

Following this thought, we propose to replace the interculturality paradigm in SA research and language education with a transculturality paradigm, which we argue is more



appropriate when wanting to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism in conceptualizing culture in the context of language education.

### **The Interculturality Paradigm Versus the Transculturality Paradigm**

Adopting a transculturality paradigm in the context of SA research as well as in the domain of language/culture education not only provides a theoretical basis that may help avoid the pitfalls of essentialist notions of culture, it also allows for a more flexible conceptualization of subjectivity and cultural learning. Instead of viewing learners and sojourners as selves who are influenced (shaped) by one given (own) culture and who encounter another given (host) culture that potentially clash, the transculturality paradigm allows for a view of “the individual—the subject—as diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing over historical time and social space. Subjectivity is conceived of as multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered” (Norton, 2000, p. 125). Norton (2000) suggested that subjectivity ought to be conceived as a “site of struggle,” which “is a logical extension of the position that identity is multiple and contradictory. If identity were unitary, fixed and immutable, it could not be subject to change over time and space, nor subject to contestation” (p. 127; see also Kramersch, 2009; McNamara, 2012; Weedon, 1997). This notion of subjectivity will be beneficial to understanding SA and cultural learning in more nuanced ways. Instead of conceptualizing learners or sojourners as “bearers” of culture who accumulate cultural knowledge and skills, it will be possible to overcome such inherently static views of Self and Other and replace them with a concept of subjectivity that is always actively engaged in cultural interaction: We participate in different discourse communities, shape them to some extent, and are shaped by them. This process is ongoing, and it requires constant dialogue and questioning. As a result, neither subjects nor cultures can be thought of as static, but rather as constantly in process.

Besides, the transculturality paradigm seems more appropriate in light of the “multilingual turn” that has informed much of the recent debates in applied linguistics (e.g., Kramersch, 2009; May, 2013). It also strikes us as an appropriate framework within which to integrate the concepts of translingual and transcultural competence (TTC) as suggested in the 2007 report of the Modern Language Association (MLA) into approaches to study and make sense of SA experiences. We therefore propose to broaden the view of cultural learning so as to do justice to the ecology of SA learning and meaning making.

According to the MLA report (2007), “the idea of translingual and transcultural competence . . . places value on the ability to operate between languages” (p. 3f.) Kramersch (2010) explained this as follows: “The ability to operate between languages is not an exercise in playful polyglottism or inconsequential code switching. It is the much more risky circulation of values across historical and ideological timescales, and negotiation of nonnegotiable identities and beliefs” (p. 18). Similar to translingual reflection, transcultural reflection involves critical questioning and self-distance: “Reflecting on the world and oneself means reflecting on the way that our and the Other’s realities mutually construct each other through symbolic systems like language, texts, films, and the Internet” (Kramersch, 2010, p. 18). It is for this reason that Kramersch (2010) concluded that the “development of translingual and transcultural competence requires us to critically examine the very categories by which we compare ourselves to others” (p. 19).

In the following, we will highlight some pedagogical conclusions that we feel ought to be addressed given the foregoing perspective; however, we do not claim that we propose

a finished model. Rather, we offer some points for further discussion with the goal of overcoming the essentializing and simplifying discourses of interculturality that have hitherto dominated SA discourses and that seem to reduce our chances of understanding—and preparing and supporting—students' SA experiences.

### **Pedagogical Considerations and Suggestions for Future Research**

What our data have shown is that although both current participants' narratives suggest that they engage in cultural learning, even though in different ways and to different degrees of reflection and intercultural communicative competence, they both lack a framework of reference that would allow for a less fixed and static conception of culture and of subjectivity.

Taking the notions of TTC as the basis for a more reflected view of culture and subjectivity, one can conclude that formal cultural learning ought to start long before students may or may not participate in SA. To begin with, it is important to differentiate the notion of culture early on, so as to overcome the widespread idea that cultures are national and linked to one language. Common-sense notions of culture, and the nexus of “target language,” “target culture,” and “target language speaker mentality”—all of which are highly problematic notions—need to be deconstructed and critically investigated in language programs at university. The goal of cultural learning is all too often interpreted according to this simplistic equation, resulting in an imagined ideal native-speaker-culture that students wish to participate in or belong to, and that they contrast with their own culture and language. As part of this reflexive practice, instructors may also want to address the theme of stereotypes, however, not with the goal to eradicate them or substitute them with the “truth.” Rather, students should be encouraged to examine “how stereotypes are created and co-constructed and what they tell us about the people who resort to them” (Dervin, 2012, p. 187), which may also involve reflections on the notion of subjectivity.

Sensitizing students to the complexities of culture and subjectivity is possible at all stages of their language education. Similar to what Firth and Wagner (1997) called the deficit model that underlies traditional education in language learning, we propose to focus on our students' experience in a multitude of different cultures (defined as discourse communities, see Kramsch, 1998, p. 10), for example, at home, at school, or with their peers. Once they understand that they do indeed participate in a multitude of different cultures (with or without having traveled abroad), it is possible to disentangle common-sense notions of culture, language, and identity, and to help students to reflect on their own cultural experiences (i.e., view students not as lacking cultural knowledge about the Other, but as experienced cultural participants) in a multilingual and multicultural world. We argue that TTC can be developed through tasks and modules aimed at reflecting on culture, self, and language in a multilingual world. If students are to overcome simplistic common-sense notions of culture, it seems pivotal to us that language programs include modules and possibly courses that focus on language and subjectivity, and multilingualism and subjectivity, perhaps through experiential learning designs that combine reflection and action. Designing courses and modules for language programs can include cultural reflections from the outset, which focus on the students' prior experience with multiple discourse communities, as well as with discourse communities in other language environments.

Differentiating the notion of culture is a task that language programs need to address systematically and that may go beyond language courses in a narrow sense to include also so-called content courses taught at the advanced levels. This poses a considerable challenge to program directors and instructors alike, but we believe that it is the most important task for language educators if they wish to help students become transculturally and translingually competent. We are aware that most language textbooks do not provide much that could help achieve this goal. It is therefore necessary for curriculum designers and instructors to sensitize students to explore, for example, cultural environments mediated by the new language (often presented as rather homogenous in textbooks) and seek to participate in some of the discourse communities to which they have access (via the Internet, local groups, etc.; e.g., Schmenk, 2017). The goal is neither to ask students to compare their own with the Other, nor is it to teach them as much knowledge about the Other as possible. Rather, it is to allow them to experience and reflect on themselves as cultural participants and agents.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Byram's (2008) detailed account of what it means to educate students for intercultural citizenship can be read as an attempt to overcome the view of culture as a discrete entity, yet the application of his model in research does not require operationalizations of culture that transcend the boundaries between a presumed "own" and the "other," or "host," culture. We will return to this point later.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa's conceptualization of culture thus suggests that it is based on a conceptual metaphor (Johnson, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) that centres on the view of culture as organic.

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