Identity Formation in Early Adulthood:
Localisation versus Globalisation

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Personal Identity

The research aim is to study the impact of international educational exchange programs on identity formation in early adulthood (18-25 years). The field of identity studies is very diverse, whereas the respective research output remains quite fragmentised. Nevertheless, identity is among the most commonly studied constructs in the social sciences (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Cote, 2006). The number of publications on identity issues increased with each decade from the 1960s to the 2000s (Vignoles et al. 2011). The approach to identity in psychology tends to have an individual focus and places more emphasis on the mental traits, states and dispositions of a person in predicting subjective and behavioural properties of identity. Sociologists tend to have a social focus – for them, identity is realised strategically and circumstantially through one's interaction with others. To differentiate between these approaches, some authors (Cote & Levine 2001) use metaphors: the "well metaphor" assumes that identity formation is a matter of "finding oneself" by matching one's inner resources to available social roles; the "mirror metaphor" assumes that identity is found in social processes: the self emerges as a mirror to the social processes in which it participates.

Apart from focus (personal versus social), identity models differ in terms of their ontological stance: whether identity can be understood as fixed and independent of human consciousness (objectivism) or as indeterminate and dependent on social constructions (subjectivism). A number of models from psychology and sociology tend to be inclined towards objectivism – Marcia's identity status paradigm, Cushman's conception of the "empty self", Stryker's structural symbolic interactionism and Ulrich Beck's concepts of late modernity. Among the models capturing more subjective aspects of identity are

McAdams's life-story approach, Gergen's postmodernist theory of self and Goffman's interpretative model of symbolic interactionism.

The difference between the theories also lies in whether they view identity as discovered (e.g., Waterman 2011), personally constructed (Berzonsky, 1990) or socially constructed (Stryker, 2007). Methodological approaches are likewise different – qualitative versus quantitative methods. Building a comprehensive picture of the identity field through a literature review was an important step in refining and reconsidering the theoretical basis for our research. During the team meetings, each model was discussed separately and points of convergence and divergence among them were analysed.

Eric Erikson views identity as a subjective feeling of self-sameness and continuity over time. Marcia's model of identity defines identity in empirical terms of exploration and commitment. Exploration is the process of studying different alternatives in relation to important life areas (occupation, relationships, personal ideology, etc.); commitment is a decision-making process regarding one of the alternatives. Further developments of Marcia's model elaborate initial terms of exploration and commitment into identity dimensions: commitment making, identification with commitment, exploration in breadth, exploration in depth and ruminative exploration. Exploration in depth and identification with commitment represent the dimensions by which existing commitments are re-evaluated and revised on a continuous basis. Exploration in breadth was defined as the degree to which adolescents search for different alternatives with respect to their goals, values and beliefs before making commitments. Exploration also refers to an in-depth evaluation of one's existing commitments and choices to ascertain the degree to which these commitments resemble the internal standards upheld by the individual. However, exploration has also been found to be accompanied by heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms. Exploration is subdivided into reflective and ruminative exploration. Commitment making is defined as the degree to which

young people have made choices about important identity. However, commitment is also multidimensional - the degree to which a person feels certain about, can identify with and internalises his/her choices (i.e., identification with commitment) is also an important component of identity formation (Luyckx et al. 2008).

McAdams's model of identity is also based on Erikson's seminal work (1985, 1993, 1996). The idea is that identity is a life story. This notion suggests that language is a text out of which identities are constructed, justified and maintained. This model asserts that people living in modern societies inject their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalised and evolving narratives of the self. Narrative approach can be regarded as attempts to interrelate internal psychological processes and societal messages and demands.

Identity formation and cultural changes

Some authors (Arnett 2002) argue that the primary impact of a new socio-historical context – specifically, globalisation – is exerted on identity formation, which is expressed in the formation of bicultural-local and global identities and identity confusion. The concept of acculturation is relevant in this respect. The concept of acculturation was initially defined as a unidimensional process, which may result in a low or high level of acculturation. The other widespread model of acculturation views it in terms of two dimensions: receiving-culture acquisition and heritage-culture retention. Within Berry's model, these two dimensions intersect to create four acculturation categories—*assimilation* (adoption of the receiving culture and discard of the heritage culture),

separation (rejection of the receiving culture and retainment of the heritage culture), *integration* (adoption of the receiving culture and retainment of the heritage culture), and *marginalisation* (rejection of both the heritage and receiving cultures) (Berry 1997). This model is criticised mostly for its "one size fits all" approach. The model does not consider migrant type (voluntary migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, sojourners). More recent approaches to acculturation consider acculturation a multidimensional process (Schwartz et al. 2010, Schwartz et al. in press). The impact of the encounter with a different culture is supposed to differ substantially in accordance with characteristics of the group, the receiving culture and the context of the encounter. It can be said that participants of international educational exchange programs are a special sub-group within a large population of international migrants exposed to different cultural/national backgrounds. Most of the research on acculturation is performed on migrants, who differ from international study program participants in several ways. Most of the migrants studied are persons with low social status living among the higher social-status majority, and most of them intend to remain in the host country. Exchange program participants are representatives of their home countries, and their primary intention is not permanent residence in the host country. International students are present in a host country on a voluntary basis, which is not always the case with migrants, and the duration of international students' stays is usually shorter (Sassenber & Matschike 2010). These features make the international student population quite distinct and research focused on changes during their acculturation worth studying.

What changes during the process of acculturation? We suppose that acculturation changes some aspects of identity. Identity structure is made up of two parts: personal identity - goals, values and beliefs associated with different aspects of life (occupational choice, moral standards, sexual and dating styles, family relationships, political preferences, etc.) and collective identity – people's self-perceptions that are associated with membership in

different social groups. Cultural (national) identity is part of collective identity. For much of recent history, culture has been "taken for granted" as the realities that shape, constrain, and guide those tasks and processes that are prescribed versus proscribed within a given national, cultural, ethnic, or religious group. However, with the advent of globalisation and the unprecedented mass international migration that has occurred globally during the last 40–50 years (Sam & Berry, 2010), more people are exposed to cultural streams and realities other than their own (Vignoles et al., 2011). One's cultural orientation has, therefore, been increasingly recognised as an aspect of identity rather than as a taken-for-granted reality (Schwartz et al. 2012). Our research was focused on changes on personal identity in the face of a different cultural environment. The findings in several chapters and research articles on immigration and sojourn investigation have showed that research on persons whose personal identity develops in situations in which cultural identity is changing or is in flux has yet to be studied (Schwartz, Montgomery & Brionis 2006). Little research has addressed the effect of a temporary rather than extensive intergroup contact on personality and identity (Sassenberg & Matschite 2010). The following research attempted to fill this gap through the study of change in personal identity from the process as well as the content perspective.

The Research Questions for the current study are as follows:

1. Do some aspects of identity (goals, values, beliefs) undergo a change in the context of studying abroad?
2. Are culture/nationality and religion more salient for the identity formation process during study abroad?
3. How do these aspects differ between those with study abroad experience and those without such experience?
4. Is the complexity of social milieu reflected in the identity structure of individuals who have had an international experience? Does these

individuals' identity structure differ from their previously observed identity structure?

5. Does identity confusion increase after an international study experience?

6. How do identity formation dimensions (exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, ruminative exploration, commitment making, and identification with commitment) change after the study abroad experience? How do these dimensions differ between persons with study abroad experience and those without such experience?

Method

Design

Pre and post measures of identity variables were administered to both control and experimental groups. Thus, the experimental group was measured before (O1) and after (O2) the international experience (X). The control group was measured twice (O3, O4) during the same time periods.

Pre and post measures –   O1   X   O2
                            O3   0   O4

The reason researchers give most frequently for using a pre and post design is their interest in assessing a change resulting from some influence (Pedhazur & Pedhazur Schmelnik 1991). The difficulty connected to possible differences between the experimental and control group participants could have been a result of inter-individual differences. The pre and post design considers this difficulty. Another factor is controlled by this new design: with pre- and post-tests on both groups, we can control the influence of time and experience, which by themselves can have an influence on participants.

Sampling and recruitment of respondents

The control group consisted of 30 young adults who were selected by international study programs to continue their education in various countries of Western Europe. Only in one case were potential participants for the

experimental group contacted directly during their orientation meeting at Ilia State University. The recruitment process appeared to be quite long and difficult. As we did not have direct access to the potential respondents, we also used the so-called "snowball" method – we asked our immediate interviewees about their project mates and thus increased the total number of respondents.

To make the control group equivalent to the experimental one, it was formed using short-listed candidates who ultimately were not chosen. Several organisations involved in exchange programs (IREX, DAAD, American Councils, Nuffic, OSGF, Ilia State University, Tbilisi State University) were contacted to obtain information about the participants. Most of the organisations refused to provide direct contact information; thus, a letter explaining the purposes of the research was prepared and sent by e-mail to potential participants.

The recruitment of participants for the control group appeared more problematic: it was only possible to obtain e-mail addresses, and only two persons responded. In one case, it was possible to obtain direct contact information on all of the participants in an exchange program at Tbilisi State University.

It appeared that all of the students were between 19 and 22 years of age. Accordingly, only half of the control group participants were recruited from the list. Equivalence of experimental and control groups in terms of age was decided to be a more important factor than participation in the selection process (the mean age of the experimental group participants was 23). Another portion of the respondents was recruited from the Ilia State University student population, and their age and academic achievement level were controlled.

Thirty-one members of the control group and 31 members of the experimental group were measured in summer 2012. All participants were given memory

sticks as souvenirs and incentive to take part in the measurement process for the second time after a year. However, at the second, post-measure stage, in summer 2013, 6 participants dropped out; 56 of the initial 62 participants were still involved.

Measures

Three independent instruments were prepared for the study.

1. McAdams's life story interview guide was translated into Georgian and discussed in detail during team meetings with interviewers. The interview consists of several parts: 1) a life chapter section, for which the respondent was asked to think about his or her life as if it were a book and to divide the book into chapters, providing a title and plot summary for each, 2) a key scenes section – the respondent was asked to describe in detail eight specific scenes, or nuclear episodes, that stand out clearly in the story. These episodes include a peak experience (life-story high point), a negative experience (low point), a turning point experience, the earliest memory, a significant childhood memory, a significant adolescent memory, a significant adult memory, and another significant memory, 3) a future script section – containing sections on the future - future goals and life projects, 4) a challenges section – life challenges, loss experiences, health problems, and failures/regrets, 5) a personal ideology section, containing questions about religious/ethical values, social/political values, and changes in social and political values, 6) a life theme section, and 7) a reflection section.

During the first stage of the research, all of the interview sections were covered during the interview. Because of concerns regarding time and informative value for the research, some topics were not asked of the participants during the

second stage; only the following sections were covered: key scenes (a peak experience, negative experience, turning point experience, significant adult memory, and other significant memory), future script, personal ideology, life theme and reflection. One section was added to the interview guide that contained questions about change – specifically, changes in values and beliefs, everyday life and cultural aspects of identity.

2. Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS) (sample items). The DIDS focuses on five dimensions of the identity formation process: commitment making ("decided on the direction I want to follow in life"), identification with commitment ("plans for the future offer me a sense of security"), exploration in breadth ("regularly try to figure out which lifestyle would suit me"), exploration in depth ("work out for myself if the goals I put forward in life really suit me") and ruminative exploration ("doubtful about what I really want to achieve in life").

Procedure

The time and place for the interview and the administration of two other measures was negotiated with the participants. The approximate time for the entire procedure was 1 to 1.5 hours. All respondents were rewarded with flash-cards as an incentive for their participation.

Study participants completed two self-report measures – the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS) and Need for Closure Scale (NFCS) – during individual meetings. The DIDS is composed of 25 items, which participants

complete using a 5-point Likert-type rating scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

The Need for Closure Scale consists of 47 Likert-type items, which offer response alternatives ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Of the 47 items, 10 items are designed to measure the sub-facet "preference for order and structure", eight items measure the sub-facet "preference for predictability" ("predictability" in the tables), seven items measure the sub-facet "decisiveness" ("decisiveness" in the tables), nine items measure the sub-facet "discomfort with ambiguity" ("ambiguity" in the tables), eight items measure the sub-facet "closed-mindedness" ("closed mind" in the tables), and five items form a lie score.

Each participant was then interviewed in accordance with a procedure described in McAdams et al. (2008). At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked their age and about their travelling experience. The interviewer began by asking the participant to think about his or her life as if it were a book and to divide the book into chapters, providing a title and plot summary for each. Following the discussion of their life chapters, the participants were asked to describe in detail eight specific scenes, or nuclear episodes that stand out clearly in their stories. These scenes include a peak experience (life-story high point), a negative experience (low point), a turning point experience, the earliest memory, a significant childhood memory, a significant adolescent memory, a significant adult memory, and another significant memory.

For each scene, the participant was to describe in detail what occurred, when the event occurred, who was involved, what the participant was thinking and feeling during the event, and what, if anything, the scene says about the participant or his or her life story. Next, the participant described what he or she saw as the future chapters of the story —detailing plans, hopes, dreams,

goals, and so on for the future and describing any ways in which these future possibilities may provide opportunities for creativity or making a contribution to others. Then followed a section in which the participant identified challenges, important health issues, and themes of loss, failure and regret. Next was a section on personal ideology containing a number of specific questions on religion, politics and values.

The interviewer asked the participant to describe his or her religious beliefs and values and how they have developed over time, to describe political views, and to answer a series of more philosophical questions, such as "What is the most important value in human living?" Finally, the interviewer asked the participant to think back over the entire interview and to discuss the extent to which the interview suggested a dominant theme or message in the story. By the end of the process, the participants received a present (a memory stick) as a reward for participation and an incentive for participating in the second round of testing.

Results

The research involved several questions - the first three were answered using narrative analysis.

The data were studied using the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006). All interviews were transcribed by interviewers. The researcher familiarised himself or herself with the data by reading each narrative. The texts were processed and partially coded with the assistance of NVivo – data analysis software. For the purposes of the present study, interview sections addressing change were selected. One portion of the data on change was dispersed among different narrative sections; the topic of change was determined not by key-word but after reading extended passages of texts. The second portion of data was gathered in a special interview section about change. These parts were analysed together. Next, in the change-containing sections, initial codes were generated - interesting features of the data were coded in systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. Then, potential themes were defined and all relevant codes were gathered under each theme. The themes initially selected were reviewed a number of times during analysis, and the final ones were generated. The change topic was covered rather extensively in the exchange program participants' narratives.

Question1. Do some aspects of identity (goals, values, beliefs) undergo a change in the context of studying abroad?

Several change-related themes emerged repetitively in the data. Below, we will discuss these themes.

<u>Self-exploration and personal growth</u>

One of the most recurrent themes regarding change in the exchange program participant data was self-exploration and personal growth. Changes in social environment and new academic and everyday living challenges are mostly understood as opportunities for self-exploration, which were accompanied with an increase in self-confidence.

"In fact, this changed my attitude towards the world around me, towards various cultures and towards myself; it helped me get a clearer idea of my own interests and develop confidence that nothing can prevent my ideas from coming true."

The topic of exploration was salient, particularly in terms of professional interests and abilities. As one of the participants noted, *Though I was pretty sure of what I wanted to do in life when I was leaving [Georgia], now I am much more confident that I have chosen the right career path.* The new experience gave the participants a chance to discover their own abilities in the face of a new academic environment: *The graduation paper that I wrote was … was indeed the top of it. Because before I had thought I could not speak the language at all and I would have never imagined I would get a diploma in Spain. And, gosh, I did it in a year's time. That was a real breakthrough."* Together with the theme of self-discovery, a theme of increased self-acceptance was evident: *Well, I 100 percent accepted myself the way I am. That one year was full of challenges, headaches and self-pestering, like 'it's all wrong what you are doing', or 'I am*

dead awkward. But then, I fully accepted myself, and now, I think whatever I am, or whatever I am doing or not doing is absolutely normal, and there is nothing wrong about it. So, this was the biggest shift in values, that is, in assessment standards I had, which I had thought I fell short of. Now, I think it will be great if I become better, I mean, if I make efforts to advance, but I am no longer upset with what I am.

Together with increased self-acceptance, increased self-confidence was recurrently revealed in the stories - successful coping with new challenges is an important source of self-pride and optimism: *I grew - that is, when you do something and your dreams come true, you get more self-confident and you think, 'I can make it'. Now I am sure about it.*

Overall, the changes that occurred during the exchange year were summarised as "personal growth" – *When you live alone one year, you depend only on yourself. The experience you get, the goals you reach and the challenges you face – all this helps you grow personally.*

One of the main aspects of growth was increased acceptance of failures and less successful moments in life. Even experiences that appear frustrating are viewed as meaningful in terms of development. *One can learn from everything. In this regard, if you cope with it and don't let yourself down … that's a psychological point. Sooner or later, something will come along. But you must make it and get through. If you do, you become stronger, and next time you come across similar obstacles, you are prepared. That was my experience, and I also understood you aren't always going to be successful. Failure may also come along; I understand this.* Sometimes, even a loss of self-confidence in some respects reveals a chance to discover something new about oneself: *It is difficult to say for sure, but in a sense, I kind of lost self-confidence, because of the differences in the results, here and there, which was to be expected, but I had*

not realised it before. I believe I benefited, as my diligence and efficiency grew. In fact, previously, I did not have a clear idea of my own resources, and in this regard, I became more self-assured.

Independence, freedom and individualism

The context of studying abroad creates conditions for reflection on independence and self-responsibility: *Individuality is the main point, the experience of living alone. You experience anew that you are a 'grown up'. You depend on yourself. But at some point, you may feel bored with this [with living alone]. Your parents take care of you, and you may not like it when all the time, for 20 years, they look after you, but when you realise you are left without care, and have got to look after yourself….*

The importance of self-organisation and self-discipline was connected to the theme of independence: *Probably, I became more organised. I mean, my discipline grew, because earlier I did not quite like it that in my family … family chores are distributed so that others take care of you, and this mostly is your mother, or father. And by living alone, I kind of managed to overcome the negative qualities fostered by excessive care.*

For some participants, the experience was a turning point in discovering their need for independence: *Now I know for sure that I want to live alone, because I got used to it. Yes, I miss my home, my mother's dishes, when you get up and have nothing to do. This is very important. But in a week's time, I knew that I prefer to prepare breakfast myself. But this is a different sort of independence.*

The theme of individualism as an important aspect of change related to independence emerged in the data. Attitudes regarding family value were mentioned: *We still are members of a closed society; only one type of lifestyle is acceptable here, for instance, the role of family. I have always been more independent, but one of the most important things that I acquired is that I pay*

less attention to what others think. In some texts, emphasis was made on increased distance in interpersonal relations, which may be regarded as another aspect of change in the direction of more privacy and individualism: *I often used to do this – give advice. I thought when my friend was in a difficult situation, I needed to act. This has changed. If my friends need my advice, they won't hesitate to come to me and ask for it. But I am not going anymore to interfere on my own.*

In the face of a different culture, characterised primarily by a loose cultural pole, the distinction became salient: *You come out and everyone is looking at you in some way. Not that they are filled with animosity, but they scrutinise you from top to heel: who you are, what you wear, how you walk, how you talk – they pay attention to everything, while there, among the foreigners – and they were from many different countries – you don't feel you are weighed up; you are accepted as you are, irrespective of what you wear, how you behave, where you live - nothing matters.*

I've started to take it all easy, let's say in terms of what I wear. There, I understood that however oddly one may be dressed, that's his/her business, his/her choice, and this does not mean that you are to criticise that person and be taken aback. My attitude changed in this regard and in many other ways. I started to feel more respectful for one's free choice.

New relationships and increased tolerance

The changes associated with new relationships were a salient topic in our study participants' narratives:

To tell the truth, among those things that I gained during the period is getting acquainted with people and establishing relations. These are my gains too, apart from my western education. The academic process was what united us.

Basically, they were my course mates, also lecturers, colleagues, people older than me, those who worked on a doctoral dissertation – I worked on my Master's – so, not all of them were my course mates. .. . During my stay abroad, I thought over many things. You see how people live there, and on the other hand, you see Georgia and its efforts towards integration, and you see how much we still have ahead to become part of that world. I thought over many things, including human relations, and I myself, sort of, grew during the period. I received life experience – that's the main thing – diverse experience. Relationships are mostly experienced as enriching and facilitative for personal growth: *But friends that I acquired were more important than the academic experience, because I went there with other students who I had already made friends with during a month in Istanbul. They became my family members and we got very close. The environment where I lived and the people I used to meet and talk with every day were so pleasant, delightful and helpful; I enjoyed meeting them every day – people of different nationalities and of different professions and disciplines – not only the program participants. Where I stayed was a residence for master and doctoral students, and our relations were so important, and I can remember so much positive, as if that year I lived in a bubble.*

Encounters with new people from diverse cultural backgrounds and life-styles contributes a more diverse vision of things: *I do not anymore see things single-coloured, as I did earlier – like black and white. Now, I think more and more over what it is that matters",* which leads to the growth in tolerance towards diversity: *Earlier, if a person was different from me, I would not criticise him/her but would not make friends with him/her either. But now, if I see that a person differs from me in terms of certain values, this isn't going to stand in the way; on the contrary, now I can talk about this and at the same time be friends with that person. Earlier, I would neither talk about that nor get closer to that person: he/she would go his/her own way and I would go mine.* These changes in tolerance are connected to decreases in intolerance such as the following:*"I've*

never been phobic and have always been quite tolerant, but anyway, like a usual, average Caucasian, I shared some stereotypes, and this, so to say, multiethnic, multinational, multi-sexual, multi-everything environment had an effect, of course. For example, in Georgia, I never had homosexual friends, but here, we have normal friendly relations and I've never had that sort of feeling … ." Such a change may also be labelled as a change in personal openness, as, according to one participant, "*I can accept, how to say, can tolerate the acceptance of something/someone that is different; I can accept friendship with people from different cultures, with different religious affiliations and sexual orientations... *" A change in student openness (self-selection effect considered) was found in Zimmerman and Neyer's (2013) longitudinal study, and gains in international relationships appeared to be a powerful mediator explaining this change.

Question2. Are culture/nationality and religion more salient for the identity formation process while studying abroad?

Increased tolerance and diminishing stereotypes were mentioned in our research group narratives: *I shared some stereotypes, and this, so to say, multiethnic, multinational, multi-sexual, multi-everything environment had an effect.*

The other theory of cultural contact is social identity theory. In terms of cultural transition, when an individual moves between cultures, the theory suggests that becoming part of an out-group heightens the sense of salience of one's identity in the face of an out-group (Tajfel, 1982): *Now I pay closer attention to the roots of our traditions. I always ask a question: why do we do that? For example, why do we gather at a table after a burial ceremony? What's behind this tradition? I put all these questions and try not to do things blindly, which I probably did earlier.* One issue discussed was the value of work and organised work, which is discussed at different levels and with examples ranging from the very general to the concrete: *"One of the most important points is that I was among people from many different countries, whether developed, developing like us, or underdeveloped – those behind us, and I always watched closely to see how people from developed countries differ from us and what the key to their success is. Among the central reasons is their diligence, organised work. Lecturers as well as other people I met there, successful students, have their daily life organised and manage it all perfectly well. Before that [in Georgia], my lifestyle was rather disorderly; my mealtimes, and everything else, was all mixed up, and this was rather bad.*

Increased organisation was also discussed using personal life-style examples: *My lifestyle also changed. I had a more organised life there, I looked after myself, jogged, worked out.* A more organised life style implies a healthy life

style and a different approach to nutrition as well: *"my diet also changed; before that, here as well as in the US, I used to eat McDonald's meals and similar stuff. Now, since the start of this year, I have given up McDonald's, Coca Cola and other sparkling drinks. I've started drinking a lot of still water. So, my lifestyle has changed a lot. My lifestyle became healthier. If before I had never thought about how much boiled stuff I was supposed to eat during a week, I started paying attention to that. I saw how that mattered for them… . I had never thought of not eating after 6 before, but now I know that nothing can make me eat in the evening. In this regard, I've become much more disciplined.*

In some cases, a new culture was labelled as the routine of everyday life: *"I got used to routine. I established it for myself. I mean, I don't get up at seven in the morning – I get up at three p.m. but I do the same things every day.*

Another topic concerned communication style differences: *Well, in a new culture, you face the same situations, when you don't know how they will respond even to a simple phrase you say to them, or when they talk to you, you may not be quite sure what they mean. It's just different communication styles that exist in different cultures.*

One aspect of the home culture is the influence of social norms, which was discussed during the section on independence: *It's a rather unpleasant thing in Georgia that everyone tries to be your mentor, to point out things to you, regarding, once again, what you wear. Here, I don't very much care how I am dressed. I put on what I want and know that no one is going to stare at me. I can put on sportswear and go and sit at a lecture …*

An interesting aspect of change is the increase in the level of belonging to the home country: *I have always wanted to study abroad, and during that half year, I had a chance to get acquainted with other cultures. As a result, I better*

understood that I belong here. As I have mentioned, I share liberal ideas and may not agree with the views of many of my co-citizens, but now, I know for sure that my place is here, and I truly belong to my culture. But this does not mean, of course, that you have to think in the limited way your culture requires and not in some other way. I also understood that it is only here that I can settle down and do all I want. Some participants reported a strengthening of family values: *This last year, I've become more conscious of family values, which is quite different from what I thought earlier. My perception of it has become sharper, and I started paying more attention to it.*

Furthermore, respect to one's own culture was viewed as a condition for the proper estimation of other cultures: *I understood that you must love your culture and your country, at least in order to deserve others' respect and to be able to appreciate other cultures. For example, there I spoke to one lecturer for almost an hour about Georgia. He had thought Georgia was Russia's colony, and I explained him how it all was in fact. My county and my culture are very important to me.* This quote clearly illustrates a sense of group distinctiveness, which provides an individual with meaningful identity that has value and tells one who he or she is (Spears 2011).

Question3. How do these aspects differ between persons with study abroad experience and those without such experience?

The theme of change was covered less extensively in the group without international study experience. However, some change themes similar to those introduced by the exchange year participants emerged. Self-exploration and increased self-confidence were mentioned as important aspects of change: *During that period, I gained work experience and completed my postgraduate courses. I met many people and could see what they were like, what their self-concept was. In this situation, you may be encouraged to reconsider your own priorities: if they think about themselves this way, you too can have ambitions and become more self-confident. My outlook broadened during this one year, and now, I think I can do more. I started looking for new opportunities and want to change my life for the better.*

Independence was also mentioned as an important change topic: *Now I live alone and have to do everything around the house myself. I used to live with my mother and granny, and we tried to divide the chores and help each other. Now, of course, this has changed and I do it all myself. I got used to it, and even think what I do is fine. To tell the truth, this was not easy, because all my life I used to live with my family, and when there are three women in a family, it's quite different. Now that I started living alone, I found this very difficult, but got used to it. I became more independent and self-confident, which, I believe, is good for me".* Increased tolerance was also revealed in data on the change topic: *Nothing special. Well, we used to talk a lot at training sessions; we watched many films, and some of my beliefs have changed since. Before, I had been somewhat aggressive to what I did not like. Now I understand that's not quite right. If you don't like something in a person, that's not your business and you should not feel aggressive towards him/her. It's up to him/her to live one way or the other,*

and you should not interfere. You have your own life and he/she has his/her own. I think something has changed in me in this regard.

One change theme that did not emerge among the group of exchange program participants was connected to the married life transition: *The most positive point in my life there was the fact that my husband was beside me all that time, and I felt more self-confident and hopeful beside him. I know that I can rely on him and that he is always there for me, and there, I saw this especially clearly, I saw that I had made the right choice. I used to live with my family before, and now we live alone and I understand that I made the right choice, and my life will change for the better: I am sure about it*" Future such transitions were also discussed: *It has been a year already, and the result will be in a month: I will get married. I've become sure of it. It was especially important because I did not plan anything, and did not even think of it, especially of … . When I joined the program, my plans were quite different, but I met him and just got baffled. Now I need to compromise sometimes, to be supportive of him. It had an influence on everything.*

The cultural aspect of the international exchange experience creates a more specific context. One important facet is increased awareness of one's in-group in the face of an out-group –"*Now I pay closer attention to the roots of our traditions –* which is a mechanism of social identity functioning (Spears 2011). The second facet is self-expansion, which means the inclusion of the other in the self – *"I definitely acquired new values – healthy lifestyle, for instance. I had a neighbour who led a healthy life in terms of food, workout and so on, and I too became conscious of it. I had never thought about this before, but started to see this in a different way.* The self-expansion model assumes that a fundamental human motivation is expansion of the self - people are motivated to acquire resources, perspectives and identities as a means of increasing self-efficacy and

their ability to achieve goals (Write et al. 2001). We believe that these two facets are uniquely connected to international study programs.

Question4. Is the complexity of social milieu reflected in the identity structure of individuals who have had an international experience? Does the identity structure of these individuals differ from their previously observed identity structure?

Narrative complexity was assessed through an adaptation of the conceptual/integrative complexity scoring procedure developed by McAdams et al. (2006). The procedure, often used in coding political rhetoric and argumentation, assesses the extent to which a verbal or written account shows differentiation and integration of thought. In the current study, a single trained coder coded three scenes (a positive experience, a negative experience, a turning point experience) for narrative complexity by making a simple yes/no judgment. The account received a score of 1 if it showed any evidence of differentiation of thought, as when the writer incorporated multiple points of view (e.g., role taking), mixed motivations (e.g., doing a single thing for many conflicting reasons), complex emotional experiences (e.g., combining opposite emotions at the same moment), or contradictory aspects of the self. The account received a score of 0 when no such evidence of multiple points of view, mixed motivations, complex emotional experiences, or contradictory aspects of self could be found. For each participant, scores were summed across the 3 scenes to arrive at a total score, ranging hypothetically from 0 to 3. The table below provides scores for the narrative complexity of the interview texts:

Table 1: Mean Scores for Narrative Complexity

Group	N	Mean	SD
Experimental			
Time 1	**28**	**1.64**	**0.9**
Time 2			

	28	1.07	0.8
Control **Time 1**			
	29	1.34	0.9
Time 2			
	29	.93	0.9

In the experimental as well as the control group, the narrative complexity of the texts decreased.

A mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance was conducted to assess the impact of having/not having an international study experience on the participants' scores for narrative complexity at two different time points-the pre-test and the post-test. There was not a significant interaction between group type and time (Wilks Lambda =.99, F (3, 55) =2.03, p =.15, partial eta squared=.005).

Time was observed to have a substantial effect (Wilks Lambda =.84, F (10, 55) =10.02, p=.003, partial eta squared=.15), with both groups showing a reduction in narrative complexity scores over time.

The main effect comparing two groups with and without international study experience was not significant (F (1, 55) =1.3, p=.26, partial eta squared =.02).

The results showed a tendency towards decreased narrative structure complexity as an effect of time, which contradicts the theoretical logic of development. At this point, this result may be explained by the weakness of the evaluation procedure, which needs further refinement.

Question5. Does identity confusion increase during an international study experience?

We did not observe direct mentions of identity confusion during the interviews. However, there were episodes pointing to the evaluation and re-evaluation of one's own abilities and future prospects:

Many things happened all at once. I was disappointed in many ways, and my self-esteem was very low. I don't know anything, I'm a complete idiot, what shall I do next year? My parents and friends would tell me, of course, you must try again, but I said, I know nothing. I'd better learn to be a carpenter.

A new environment pushed our respondents to reflect on themselves and their own capacities. Most of the young adults reported negative experiences connected to the study process abroad. According to them, the study process abroad is different from that in Georgia; it is more difficult, time and energy consuming and demanding.

The education system is absolutely different, and I got frustrated. The materials they assign to read within one course - they may know you won't make it but anyway – the volume was probably the same as during my entire bachelor studies, and all the time I was tortured by a feeling that I was behind all the deadlines. I was permanently stressed out, as I saw I wouldn't make it in time, and would get flunked.

….probably during my studies there, because it was an absolutely different system of education. For instance, you read something but this does not help. You are to criticise Kant, Hegel, and provide arguments to get good grades. That's a terrible system. You have to sit in a library from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. but this does not help. You get up at 6 a.m. but only have 10 minutes to eat. I was

rather time conscious. The biggest challenge was to live a high-speed life: only 10 minutes for bath, and regrets over another 10 minutes wasted on eating. That's a crazy lifestyle. You live a speedy life. You can neither go shopping nor go walking or enjoy a week-end once or twice a month, because you have to write a paper. That's horrible. That was living in time, living a quick life. How can you be in haste and do everything simultaneously, and at the same time, do all that at least at an acceptable level? This was perhaps the biggest challenge to get over. I wonder how I got over all this: I had to write up 2 papers in 15 days, and be critical and academically correct. You have some 15 days for an around 50-page paper. We had to write research papers too. You are to do that quickly and be critical. It was quite difficult, because we were short of time and had to work fast. In a word, I went through a rather difficult examination period in a totally different educational environment.

Our respondents experienced negative emotions not only because they had a difficult time attempting to learn but also because their self-respect suffered – they encountered a different, more difficult learning system. They felt confident and knew they were among the best in their home universities and they became almost the worst in their host universities. This difference in their positions was a serious blow to their self-esteem:

The hardest of all was to cover the reading materials I was assigned, because that alone was not sufficient and I needed to cope with background reading as well. That was too much, and I was stressed out at first. I felt very low in the first two months because in the previous two years, I worked and knew that I was free after 6, and could read or do whatever I wanted. I was free at weekends too. But it was not like that there: I had to read 24 hours a day – as I woke up, I started reading and then saw economists in my dreams: I found this really hard. On the one hand, the reason probably was that I thought I was among the best since I was sent there – among the best in my group, or at the department. But there, I found myself among the last ones. Perhaps, that was

the main point … . It was a personal thing rather than academic. That was the biggest challenge, especially lately. How I coped with it? Step by step. I sat in the library all day long, and there was no computer for me, nothing. I would study a lot. The first period of the first term was the worst. There were two periods in a term, each lasting two months, and we used to cover two subjects within a two-month period. It was intensive learning that added to my stress. Finally, it so happened that my grades in the second term were higher by two points than in the first. So, I advanced on a ten-point grading scale. They were very happy about it, because they observed us like test animals and were happy to see how we developed and advanced. But it was very difficult to achieve. I was very stressed out at the beginning, seriously stressed out.

Another difficulty concerning the same topic was time constraints. Students reported that the pace of time was different, faster; they had little time for fulfilling various tasks:

The most serious challenge was my first exams in France. In fact, it was a physical challenge I had to overcome, because in a couple of weeks I was to produce quite sizeable texts through observing all standards of academic writing, which, at least in Georgia, is not focal. I somehow coped with it and overcame the challenge. The result was quite positive.

Some of the young adults had devoted a lot of thinking to their professional career and were determined to seriously consider this issue: *I am still thinking a lot about that. I've got some ideas about where to do my master's, and in what field. I want to continue my studies in Italy again, but haven't yet taken the final decision about the study area. I will use this one year to better understand where I see myself.*

At the same time, they were more confident in their future plans and prospects and in themselves and quite sure that they understood themselves well:

Among the most important points is that, though I had very clear ideas about what I wanted in life when I was preparing for my studies abroad, now I am even more confident that I have made the right choice in terms of my future profession.

I imagine my next future in the same way as the previous chapters. The difference is that in this new chapter, the protagonist – that is, myself – is more self-assured and relatively more content with what he is, because he has cognised himself and has accepted himself as he is.

I understood that it is not important, and the free environment where you immediately come across different ways of thinking within the same society helped me accept some of my own personal traits. After that, I developed a quite different understanding of some questions, and that was really very important.

In conclusion, identity confusion does not increase while living abroad; young adults encounter serious difficulties in a different, new environment. Overcoming these obstacles make them stronger and more confident.

Question6. How do the identity formation dimensions (exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, ruminative exploration, commitment making, and identification with commitment) change after the study abroad experience? How do these dimensions differ between persons with study abroad experience and those without this experience?

The identity formation dimensions were measured using the DIDS (see description on page). To use the scale, developed in Belgium, we first needed to create a Georgian version. The development of the Georgian version of the scale was a long and difficult process, involving a number of instruments and a large sample size.

The sample consisted of 675 students from Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. They were recruited from several departments of the university such as sociology, psychology, educational science and health administration. The gender representation was 31% male and 69% female. The mean age of the participants was 22.13, ranging from 17 to 31 (SD=2.5). After negotiation with different professors of classes from the various departments, the students were given the DIDS scale during a specially arranged period of their regular classes. The average completion time ranged from 30 to 40 minutes.

The five-factor structure of the Dimensions of Identity development scale was reviewed for the Georgian sample using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Three indices were used: the chi-square statistic, which tests the null hypothesis of perfect fit to the data, the comparative fit index (CFI), which compares the specified model to a null model with no paths or latent variables, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), which represents the extent to which the covariance matrix implied by the model deviates from the covariance matrix observed in the data. All of the indices showed a poor fit

of the data to the initial five-factor model fit: x^2 (df=265) =1681.442, CFI =.766 and RMSEA =.088.

Finally, the three-factor solution for identity formation processes showed an acceptable fit for the Georgian results. Exploration in breadth and ruminative exploration produced one factor, commitment making and identification with commitment created a second factor, and exploration in depth (including only two items) created the third factor, with the following fit indices: x^2 (164) = 531.55; p < .001; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .058 (90% CI = .052 to .063); SRMR = .068.

The following seven items from different sub-scales showed very low loadings and were dropped from further analysis:

- ✓ One item from the identification with commitment sub-scale: "Because of the path of life I have mapped out, I feel certain about myself".
- ✓ One item from the exploration in breadth sub-scale: "Think a lot about how I see my future".
- ✓ One item from the ruminative exploration sub-scale: "Doubtful about what I really want to achieve in life".
- ✓ Two items from the exploration in depth sub-scale: "Talk regularly with other people about the plans for the future I have made"; "Regularly try to find out what other people think about the specific direction I want to take in my life".

There were very high correlations between the commitment-making and identification with commitment sub-scales and between the exploration in breadth and ruminative exploration sub-scales (table 1).

Table 2: Correlations among DIDS Variables

Subscale	Exploration in Breadth	Exploration in Depth	Commitment
Exploration in Breadth	-----------------------		
Overall	--		
Men			
Women			
Exploration in Depth			
Overall	.60***	-----------------------	
Men	.62***	-	
Women	.54***		
Commitment			
Overall	-.19***	.53***	----------------
Men	-.18*	.59***	---------
Women	-.23***	.49***	

Therefore, the initial question 6 was reformulated in the following way:

How do identity formation dimensions (exploration and commitment) change after the study abroad experience? How do these dimensions differ between persons with study abroad experience and those without this experience?

The data on the exploration and commitment dimensions of identity formation are provided in the tables below (see tables 3 and 4):

Table 3: Mean Scores for Commitment Dimension

Group	N	Mean	SD
Experimental			
Time 1	29	4.3	0.5
Time 2			
	29	3.9	0.9
Control			
Time 1	27	3.8	0.6
Time 2			
	27	3.8	0.7

A mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance was conducted to assess the impact of having/not having international study experience on participant's scores for the commitment dimension at two different time points-the pre-test and the post-test. There was a significant interaction between group type and time (Wilks Lambda =.91, $F_{(5, 54)}$ =5.3, p=.02, partial eta squared=0.9). There was a significant main effect for time (Wilks Lambda =.92, $F_{(5, 54)}$=4.2, p=0.4, partial eta squared=0.7).

The main effect of two group differences was not significant ($F_{(1, 54)}$=2.1, p=.15, partial eta squared=.04).

Commitment scores changed in the experimental group after a certain period of time, but they did not change in the control group after the same period of time. Therefore, we can conclude that commitment decreased in the experimental group; after gaining study abroad experience, young people's commitment lessened.

Exploration scores did not change over time:

Table 4: Mean Scores for Exploration Dimension

Group	N	Mean	SD
Experimental			
Time 1	29	3.3	0.8
Time 2			
	29	3.3	1.1
Control			
Time 1	27	3.6	0.9
Time 2			
	27	3.7	1.3

A mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance was conducted to assess the impact of having/not having international study experience on participant's scores on the exploration dimension at two different time points-the pre-test and the post-test. There was not a significant interaction between group type and time (Wilks Lambda =.98, F (0.54) =.67 p=.4, partial eta squared=0.1).

There was not a significant effect of comparing two groups (F (1, 28) =2.1, p=.15, partial eta squared=.038).

There was not a significant main effect for time (Wilks Lambda =.99, F (5, 54) =1.9, p=0.6, partial eta squared=0.004).

Exploration processes do not change as a result of study abroad, whereas commitment changes: a year abroad affects commitment making, as young people make fewer commitments. It would have been logical to expect an increase in exploration to be the cause of less commitment making, but this is

not the case, as exploration does not change among these young people. They simply make fewer commitments after returning from abroad. Another possibility is that they made more commitments before leaving to study abroad; this assumption can be confirmed via the interview texts.

Conclusion

This paper examines personal identity changes caused by international study program experience. This topic is rather uninvestigated in the personality and social psychology field despite its actuality in the contemporary context. An increasing number of young people all around the world are given an opportunity to study abroad (Zimmerman & Neyer 2013). International mobility is one of the best possible settings in which to study personality-environment transactions. Personal identity is viewed as a core of personality, which is shaped by the interplay of personal and contextual factors.

Different conceptualisations of personal identity have been used by various authors (Erikson 1968, Marcia 1966, McAdams, 2001). In the current study, process-oriented and narrative approaches to identity were used in an attempt to describe the construct empirically with corresponding qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

The first research question was focused on changes in the content of personal values, goals and beliefs. Qualitative analysis of life story interviews with young adults who spent a year abroad revealed change themes such as self-exploration and personal growth, increases in personal independence and the value of individualism, and the acquisition of new relationships, resulting in

increased tolerance towards others. These themes were revealed by almost all exchange program participants, with a couple of exclusions, whereas the same change lines were outlined in the narratives of very few of those who did not leave Georgia, and if outlined, were done so to a much lesser extent and with much less intensity. We suggest that movement towards independence and personal growth are universal lines of development at this age but international exchange creates conditions for the acceleration of this process. Tolerance of others, however, increased mostly in the narratives of those who spent a year abroad and can be regarded as a result of international experience.

The second research question concerned cultural aspects of identity, which were supposed to become salient in exchange program participants' narratives in the face of a different culture. The narratives revealed the accentuation of aspects of one's own culture after contact with a different culture. The main themes of contrast concerned the organisation of work and everyday life and relations among people. These themes can be classified under personality type in terms of individualism–collectivism (Markus & Kitayama 2010). Georgian society is an example of a collectivistic culture, in which parents and other people one is close to intervene in one's personal life, and Western society is an example of an individualistic culture, in which nobody touches one's personal space. Thus, our participants compared the individualistic host culture with the collectivistic home culture and observed clear differences, devoting more critical thought to their own culture.

The third question was connected to the changes in the identity structure of persons facing a multi-cultural and different environment. The international experience did not produce change in narrative structure complexity, but time influenced the structure, making it simpler in both groups. The reason for this result is not clear at this point. One possibility is the difficulty with the assessment procedure. Additionally, this finding may suggest that young

people became more focused on their own needs, self and interests, thus losing understanding of the positions of others.

In terms of personal identity formation processes, the international study exchange context leads to decreases in commitment regarding personal identity goals; the same did not occur with participants without such experience. This result confirmed the initial hypothesis that exposure to diversified social contexts and life-styles will lead to changes in commitments to different personally important goals, values and beliefs. However, participants with and without international study experience did not differ in terms of exploration – level of exploration did not change as a result of time or international study experience. These data point to the clearer situation of young people who have planned to go abroad for a year. At the time of planning, their commitment is quite high – they have made a decision to continue their study abroad and are very happy with their choice and future opportunities unfolding for them. After finishing their studies and coming back home, they do not have any more clear goals, and therefore, they are not as happy with their future prospects.

The changes occurring in young adults who spend a year abroad point to some features of emerging adulthood, the concept introduced by Jeffrey Arnett. Emerging adulthood unfolds between the adolescence and adulthood stages and lasts until 25, and in some cases, even 29 years. Socio-economic and cultural changes, which are reflected in demographic characteristics such as the prolongation of education, short-term jobs and an increase in the age for entering marriage and parenthood, have created a foundation for emerging adulthood as a new life stage in developed countries such as the USA and Western European countries (Arnett 2012). From a psychological standpoint, this stage is an extension of moratorium, as according to Arnett, emerging adulthood is a time for identity explorations and making choices concerning work and family life. Commitments regarding important life goals were stronger in the international exchange program participants before going abroad.

According to Arnett, emerging adulthood is an age of *possibilities*, when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives (Arnett 2004). We suggest that exchange program participants became less confident in their commitments after encountering new possibilities for new definitions of their goals; several options for life direction are still possible.

The personal identity of young adults undergoes change in the face of international exchange study programs. These changes are reflected in content (goals, values, beliefs) as well as process (decrease in the commitment dimension). These changes - increased tolerance, a broader perspective of one's own culture, a stronger focus on one's own self and the formation of fewer commitments - push young people in the young adulthood phase to move into the emerging adulthood phase as a result of the study abroad experience.

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