

We are on the same boat, but still I am from another culture: the lived experiences of learning in groups

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to learn in a group of people from different cultures? How does one encounter people from different cultures when there is no clear 'quantitative' domination of any culture? By asking these questions the paper represents a hermeneutic phenomenological study that explores the phenomenon of learning in a culturally diverse group. A phenomenological study is undertaken with young people (18-30 years) from different EU countries who participated in learning mobility project European Voluntary Service and had long-term volunteering experience abroad. The research concentrates on the lived moments of vis-à-vis intercultural encounters during learning process in groups. Specifically, through the descriptions of lived experience and phenomenological reflection the paper describes how young people experience self and others while they are learning in culturally diverse groups. Lived experiences of young people lead them into 'no-man's land' (Waldenfels, 2011) where connection and separation simultaneously exist.

Parole chiave: Learning mobility – Intercultural encounter – Lived relation – Hermeneutic phenomenology

Siamo sulla stessa barca, eppure appartengo ad un'altra cultura: esperienze vissute di apprendimento in gruppo

Che cosa significa "imparare" all'interno di un gruppo di persone appartenenti a culture differenti? In che modo un individuo incontra persone di altre culture, quando non vi è una chiara predominanza "quantitativa" di nessuna cultura? Questo lavoro costituisce uno studio di fenomenologia ermeneutica che indaga, attraverso gli interrogativi indicati, il fenomeno dell'apprendere all'interno di un gruppo culturalmente eterogeneo. Si è condotto uno studio fenomenologico con giovani (18-30 anni) provenienti da diversi paesi dell'Unione Europea, che hanno partecipato ad un progetto di mobilità con finalità di apprendimento del Servizio di Volontariato Europeo e con un'esperienza di volontariato all'estero di lunga durata. La ricerca si concentra sui momenti di interazione interculturale vis-à-vis durante il processo di apprendimento in gruppi. Nello specifico, attraverso la descrizione di esperienze vissute e la riflessione fenomenologica, lo studio descrive come i giovani percepiscano se stessi e gli altri quando si trovano ad apprendere in un gruppo culturalmente eterogeneo. Le esperienze vissute dai giovani conducono gli stessi in una "terra di nessuno" (Waldenfels, 2011) dove unione e separazione esistono simultaneamente.

Keywords: Mobilità per l'apprendimento – Scambi interculturali – Interazioni – Fenomenologia ermeneutica

In the short French film “Vers Nancy”¹ directed by Denis we see a train which is going to the border town called Nancy in France. Two people are sitting in one of the compartments: the French philosopher Nancy and a student Samardzija from Romania, who moved to live in France. The film starts in the middle of their conversation:

Philosopher: It’s odd you should say you wanted to be imperceptible when you arrived in France, because imperceptible means, literally, that you can’t be seen. So you didn’t want to be seen as a foreigner.

Student: Yes, I wanted to gain admittance. Be here, not be... seen as different, and not disturb the established order. Avoid... adopting a stance in which I could be rejected...or even deported (Denis, 2002).

This small extract from the vis-à-vis talk uncovers the complexity of intercultural encounters that might occur among different cultures. The extract reveals Samardzija’s wish to be accepted in France without disturbing the established order of the country and without being seen as different, as a foreigner. But as Nancy reacts, then it means that a foreigner cannot be seen. In the essay *L’Intrus* Nancy (2002) argues that a stranger or foreigner should have a quality of an intruder, “that is to say, being without right, familiarity, accustomedness, or habit” (ibidem, p. 2). Of course, it is difficult to admit an intruder but, as Nancy (ibid.) puts it, receiving a stranger must entail experiencing his or her intrusion, otherwise a stranger would be absorbed or “naturalized” before she/he enters a new territory. Indeed, Samardzija wanted to get admittance and at the same time not to disturb the existing order of the host country. In other words, she did not want to be the intruder and was ready to be appropriated by a new environment. Yet in France, Samardzija is a cultural other and, implicitly, an intruder. This is highlighted by Pietro (2015):

The other’s presence represents a constant threat and danger to the ‘self, as she can have influence on the self’s life without taking into account, or even contradicting, the self’s own will and desires. From the perspective of the being as an autonomous essence, the self cannot but fear the other. (ibidem, p. 300)

¹ The short film by Claire Denis *Vers Nancy* is a segment of the collection of short films *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello* (2002). The ten-minute film is based on the text of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’Intrus*, in which Nancy discusses intrusion, immigration, and hospitality in relation to French national identity (McMahon, 2010).

However, not only does Samardzija's presence in France "raise" a threat to locals, but also her wish to be accepted and admitted by locals is implicitly related with her uncertainty and fear of being rejected or even deported. In general, the term *intercultural encounter* "carries" a great weight. The verb "to encounter" derives from the Old French word *encontrer*, which means "meet, come across; confront, fight, oppose" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2016). Thus, Samardzija implicitly knows that the host country has the "right" or "power" to accept or reject her. The Etymology Dictionary also refers to the weakened sense of the word "encounter" as to "meet casually or unexpectedly" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2016). Thus, an encounter with others is also firmly related with experiencing the unknown and/or the unexpected. When Samardzija goes to France, she becomes dependent on others. She wishes to be accepted by others in France, yet she can only presume possible reactions from others.

Despite the fact that before and during the mobility program a young person is provided with different safeguards that may create a safer or a more desirable space (e.g., he/she can choose the country and the institution and negotiate the duration of the stay, he/she has coordinators or mentors who support the learning process in a chosen country), from the first step he/she faces the unknown and unexpected world. Laura from Romania, one of the research participants who volunteered in Lithuania in the *European Voluntary Service* project, recalled the moment of traveling to the host country:

In Riga airport I realized that there is no way back. I'm really far, really far away from my home... The only question in my mind is, "What have I done? Where am I going?" I only knew my coordinator's face, only this thing, nothing else... (Laura from Romania, ex-volunteer in Lithuania)

Such moments as staying in a foreign country and living in a new cultural environment, sharing the living spaces with people from different cultures, obtaining the learning experience in culturally diverse groups, and communicating in a foreign language during the learning process create real and intense encounters among people from different cultural backgrounds. On the one hand, these encounters implicitly create opportunities for intercultural learning and lead towards the desired learning outcomes. A number of empirical studies (e.g. Gill, 2007; Holmes, Bavieri & Ganassin, 2015) present a broad spectrum of learning outcomes that arise from the real intercultural encounters: intercultural awareness, development of the understanding of interculturality, empathy, etc. On the other hand, intercultural encounters do not necessarily mean positive interactions that in a short period of time can lead towards fruitful results from the educational point of view. Therefore, it is imperative not to simplify this concept as encounter among humans, according to Koskela and Siljander (2014):

is not a meeting of the safest kind, just like an encounter between two ships at a sea is a crash course of those two ships moving in converging directions. (ibidem, p. 75)

This study concentrates on the lived moments of real *vis-à-vis* intercultural encounters during the process of learning in culturally diverse groups. The study is conducted with young people from different EU countries who participated in the learning mobility project *European Voluntary Service* and had a long-term volunteering experience abroad. Through the description and interpretation of the pre-reflective lived experiences I come closer towards what it actually is to learn in a group of people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Method

The Hermeneutic Phenomenology Approach

This empirical study employs the qualitative research methodology and applies hermeneutic phenomenology approach proposed by van Manen (1997a; 2014).

Phenomenology aims to investigate and express phenomena in rigorous and rich language, precisely as they give themselves, and phenomenology may attempt to examine the conditions and origins of the self-giveness of the phenomena. (van Manen, 2014, p. 65)

Therefore, a phenomenological study orients to the meaning or essence of the phenomenon – an event or the lived experience – as it shows or gives itself. While all phenomenology is descriptive as it focuses on the description, but not on the explanation of phenomena, some scholars distinguish between descriptive and interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenologies (Finlay, 2012). Van Manen (1997a, 2014) draws on Heidegger's and Gadamer's ideas and argues that interpretation is inevitable in a phenomenological study because phenomenology is concerned with meanings which tend to be not only implicit, but also hidden. Van Manen (1997a) seeks for a balance between description and interpretation processes in phenomenological research and says:

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a descriptive (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an interpretive (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) "facts" of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the "facts" of lived experience need to

be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process (ibidem p.185).

Thus, the main task of phenomenological research is an interpretive description of the primordial meaning structures of the pre-reflective lived experiences. In order to be attentive and sensitive to both descriptive and interpretive processes, van Manen (2014) applies philosophical method of the reduction and philological method of the vocative. The underlying idea of the reduction in a research is to gain access to the world of pre-reflective experiences-as-lived in order to grasp and bring hidden, invisible, ordinary meanings of investigated phenomenon into visibility and nearness (van Manen, 2014). By applying the reduction a researcher attempts to bracket prejudgments, theoretical assumptions and common understandings. He/she opens himself/herself and in this way restores direct contact with the lived world. The vocative dimension in a hermeneutic phenomenological research becomes active during reflective writing process and embodies possible meanings of the investigated phenomenon. The main aim of the vocative is to bring a phenomenon closer towards a reader, let things “speak” by themselves and create resonance despite a reader has never encountered a particular phenomenon that is studied. Therefore, during writing process a researcher should be sensitive to language, attentive towards how the text enriches understanding about a particular phenomenon and constantly ask himself/herself “How the text speaks to us?” (van Manen, 1997b; 2014). Thus, phenomenological writing cannot be seen as only presentation of research results, on the contrary, it should be considered as an inseparable part of phenomenological research process.

Van Manen and Adams (2010) stress that phenomenology is not only the method that is guided by applying clear procedures and principles; it is also an attitude that relies on researchers’ perceptiveness, interpretive sensitivity, creative insight, writing skills and comprises a fascination with the singularity of investigated phenomenon. Saevi (2013) points out that phenomenological attitude demands from a researcher pace of slowness and a certain passive reflecting, writing and reading attitude that let researcher “to dwell comfortably in the space of hesitation” (ibidem, p. 5). In other words, slowness and even passivity let a researcher stay open to the researched phenomenon, approach its hidden and invisible meanings and even feel comfortable in the moments of uncertainty.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was primary developed to suit educational environments. According to van Manen (1997a), education requires a phenomenological sensitivity to the lived experience of the learners’ lifeworld, the hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense in order to see the meaning and significance of educational situations and demands an evocation of the educator’s pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact. Adams (2014) points out that the hermeneutic phenomenology approach is “especially adept at uncovering and fostering practical insights, communicative thoughtfulness and ethical sensitivities in professional teaching practice” (ibidem, p. 23). Therefore, this approach in education field focuses *on* and is meant *for* educational practice.

Research Participants

The research focuses on young people (aged 18–30 years) who participated in the learning mobility project *European Voluntary Service* (part of *Erasmus+ Programme*, previously part of the *Youth in Action Programme*) and concentrates on their lived moments of learning in groups of volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds. It is important to consider that:

From the phenomenological point of view, we are not primarily interested in the experiences of our so-called subjects or informants for the sake of being able to report on how this or that person experiences or perceives something. Rather, the aim is to collect examples of *possible human experiences* in order to reflect on the meanings that may inhere in them. (van Manen, 2014, p. 313)

Thus, the study used participants of the *European Voluntary Service* project as such a context is in line with the investigated phenomenon. This learning mobility project is viewed as truly non-formal learning experience which one of the key features is training and evaluation² that guide young people during the learning process (EVS Training and Evaluation Cycle Guidelines and Minimum Quality Standards, 2014). The *Erasmus+ Programme Guide* (2017) states that the non-formal learning activities with young people should employ participatory methods, offer a space for interaction and sharing of ideas among participants, and aim at minimizing passive listening. Thus, during the learning process, young people are immersed in intense interactions in groups and can hardly “avoid” direct intercultural encounters. These encounters can be named *micro* intercultural encounters because during trainings young people are interacting and learning only in volunteers’ group. Sometimes volunteers may have encounters with local people of the host country, yet this is not a rule.

The paper describes and interprets the lived experiences of 4 young people from different EU countries (Croatia, France, Latvia, and Lithuania). The criterion for selecting a young person for this research was his or her long-term – longer than half a year³ – volunteering experiences abroad. The cultural background did not serve as a significant criterion for the selection of participants as, in van Manen’s (1997a) words, the emphasis in phenomenological research is on the meanings of investigated phenomenon. Thus, the lived

² The research focuses on the Training and Evaluation Cycle (TEC) designed by the European Commission as an integral part of participation in the European Voluntary Service project. TEC provide young people with guidance and support throughout their volunteering, it contributes to risk prevention, conflict solving, and provides the space to develop personally and professionally. It consists of: a) the *on-arrival training* for voluntary services lasting 2 months and longer; b) the *mid-term evaluation* for voluntary services lasting 6 months and longer. Young person has a right and obligation to attend both TEC sessions during volunteering period.

³ The duration of the volunteering period is agreed upon by the young person and Sending, the Coordinating and Hosting organizations. The minimum duration of the volunteering period is 2 weeks, and the maximum duration is one year.

experiences are “borrowed” from other people “in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience” (van Manen, 1997a, p. 62). To put it more precisely, I wish to understand what it is like for a particular person to learn in a culturally diverse group and to look at the possible meanings of learning in culturally diverse groups, an aspect of human experience as a whole.

In order to preserve the anonymity of research participants, they were given pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Interpretation

The lived experience of learning in a culturally diverse group is a starting point for the description and interpretation in the present study. The lived experience is an “experience that we live through before we take a reflective view of it” (van Manen, 2014, p. 42). In other words, the lived experiences show the pre-reflective living moment, the moment of what was happening during the real situation, “here and now”. The lived experiences used in the study are gathered via individual in-depth interviews. The interviews with young people were conducted at the end of the volunteering periods or after finishing the volunteering in a foreign country. Afterwards, the collected pre-reflective lived experiences were constructed into anecdotes (or stories) following van Manen’s (2014) guidelines and recommendations for creating a proper narrative structure of an anecdote. Van Manen (1989; 1997a; 2014) systematically develops the concept of anecdote that is based on the collected lived experience and is carefully crafted by researcher. Henriksson and Saevi (2012) consider van Manen’s suggested concept of anecdote as a key element in hermeneutic phenomenology approach. In a phenomenological text:

An anecdote speaks to us much in the same way as a good novel or a beautiful poem does. It evokes feelings of recognition, points to experiential possibilities that we have never encountered before, or leads to thoughts whose possibility we were not earlier aware of. (ibidem, 2012, p. 58)

Thus, in this study crafted anecdotes become significant medium to evoke phenomenological text, to begin reflection process and to bring the phenomenon of learning in culturally diverse group into nearness. Every anecdote used in the study reflects the experiential and pre-reflective moments of the young people who were learning in culturally diverse groups. An anecdote becomes a narrative device that is used as a concrete example of the investigated phenomenon. However, it is important to note that:

[...] phenomenology does not reflect on the factualities of examples – facts or actualities. Phenomenology reflects on examples in order to discover what is exemplary or singular about a phenomenon or event. Examples in phenomenological inquiry serve to examine and express the aspects of meaning of a phenomenon; examples in phenomenology have evidential significance: the example is the example of something experientially knowable or understandable that is not directly sayable – a singularity. (van Manen, 2014, p. 258)

Therefore, each description of the lived experience should be viewed as a phenomenological example that seeks to reveal meanings and singularity of the phenomenon of learning in a culturally diverse group. A researcher does not compare different lived experiences, does not look for sameness or repetitive patterns in different lived experiences and does not aim to provide empirical generalizations. Rather, he/she seeks to grasp exclusively unique and singular aspects of an investigated phenomenon. In addition,

the phenomenological attitude comprises a fascination with the moment: the uniqueness or singularity of an experience or event. This moment is different and unique like every moment is always different and unique. (van Manen, 2014, p. 257)

Thus in this study every anecdote reveal a unique and singular meaning of experiential moment of learning in culturally diverse group.

The interpretation of the collected lived experiences is organized by using five existentials: lived relation, lived space, lived body, lived time and lived things and technology that, as van Manen (2014) points out, belong to everyone's lifeworld. These existentials are also helpful universal themes to explore the aspects of our lifeworld and of a particular phenomenon that is studied. The description and interpretation of the lived experience in this study concentrate on the lived relation existential and guide the interpretive reflection towards how the self and others are experienced in the frame of the phenomenon under study (van Manen, 2014).

The description and interpretation of the lived pre-reflective experience is organized by the anecdote – reflection structure. Such structure is chosen following Adams' (2014) notion that:

prereflective-reflective rhythm mimics the main methodological gestures of this kind of research: a wondering, 'perpetual beginner' reawakening to the lifeworld via recalling the primordial sphere of our everyday lives. (ibidem, p. 52)

Thus, I describe each given anecdote and interpret phenomenologically the significance of the pre-reflective lived moments recalled. In order to grasp the meanings of collected lived experiences and cultivate insights related with the investigated phenomenon, I also use film material, philosophical works (of philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernhard Waldenfels), and other materials related with the investigated phenomenon.

Learning in a Culturally Diverse Group: The Lived Relation

I am not really myself

Roth and Harama (2000) state that:

learning a new language and living in a new culture changes how we relate to the Other and to the world; learning a new language therefore changes who we are, how we experience ourselves, and therefore our Selves. (ibidem, p. 3)

Volunteering in a foreign country undoubtedly “requires” that the young person uses and develops foreign languages skills. The *Erasmus+* Programme Guide (2017) envisions that:

multilingualism is one of the cornerstones of the European project and a powerful symbol of the EU’s aspiration to be united in diversity. (ibidem, p. 10)

Therefore, linguistic diversity and promotion of foreign language learning is one of the specific objectives of the *Erasmus+* Programme. As a result, young people are provided with linguistic support before and during the learning mobility in a foreign country. As some findings of the research-based analysis and monitoring of the previous Youth in Action Programme indicate, participation in the program projects contributes to young people’s development of all key competences for Lifelong Learning; in addition, one of the most distinct developments is reported in the competence of communication in foreign languages (Research-Based Analysis of Youth in Action, 2014). Therefore, foreign language use and development become significant everyday activities during learning mobility in a foreign country.

Trainings and evaluation processes that are organized during the volunteering period are no exceptions. The learning process during trainings is mostly organized by using the

lingua franca, mainly English. Matilde shares her personal lived experience of using the English language during on-arrival training:

We got a task in smaller groups to find a way to protect the egg when it is falling down from the second floor. Our big group of volunteers is divided into smaller ones. I'm in a group of five people. We are all standing in a small circle and everyone begins to share ideas on how to protect the egg, but I just can't start talking... I'm not feeling comfortable when I need to speak in English with volunteers. I don't like to hear myself talking in English and I'm not really myself when I'm speaking in English. Suddenly, one of the volunteers asks me: "What do you think?" Very slowly I am starting to talk. I need more time to explain myself, but they do not really listen to me. I start to feel like a 'bomb'. I just can't go to volunteers as easily as I could do it with French people. I can't react as I would like to. I have an enthusiasm to do this task, but I can't go into it completely. I'm not myself here and I feel I'm out of this group (Matilde from France, ex-volunteer in Lithuania).

Matilde is in the situation where everyone (including herself) speaks English and the learning process goes in the English language. However, she finds it difficult to endure the moment when she needs to speak in English during the training. Matilde feels uncomfortable and she cannot go easily into contact with the other volunteers as she could do it in France. The foreign language use requires time from Matilde and other volunteers, but "*they do not listen*". Matilde feels she is becoming a "bomb" that could explode any time.

Willingly or not, we hardly escape the use of a foreign language during the process of learning in culturally diverse groups. A foreign language becomes the main key for communication, personal expression, and representation. Yet, the process of using a foreign language in a way also transforms a usual and stable way of communication, expression, and seeing ourselves as we are used to. Herewith it might raise inner and outer tensions. According to Roth and Harama (2000), moving into another language is a deeply uprooting, self-transforming experience, hence also a threat to the experience of personal identity. Moving into a foreign language also means losing one's old sense of the relationship between the self and others. It seems that a foreign language threatens Matilde's identity. She cannot feel the same person as she used to be in her home country. Matilde also loses the old sense of the relationship with others she had in France. She cannot go into the same contact with volunteers, react and joke as she could do it in France. Matilde even cannot listen to herself when she is speaking in English and seems to become a stranger to herself. As it was mentioned previously, multilingualism can be seen as an aspiration to be united in diversity. Matilde does not feel unity with the group; on the contrary, she feels excluded from the group. The English language blocks her interaction with other volunteers; nevertheless, she has the enthusiasm to do the given task. In the essay *L'Intrus* (2002) Nancy writes:

Identity is equivalent to immunity, the one identifying itself with the other. To reduce the one is to reduce the other. Strangeness and strangeness become ordinary, everyday occurrences. (ibidem, p. 9)

Thus, if our identity is functioning as immunity, then its function is to protect us, to maintain a stability of what is known and familiar to us. Whereas the necessity of using a foreign language threatens us, brings us into tension and questions our own identity. Because of that it might be difficult to build a relationship with others and stay in the learning process with a group of people.

Non-belonging to the group

It is difficult to be in a group and do the task when you are the only one who doesn't speak German. I didn't want it at all, but I needed to work in a group where the only person who couldn't speak German was me. Other people in my group spoke English, but still the task was in German. Someone from the group explains to me the task in English and asks me if I have an idea on how to do it. I feel that I have an excellent idea. They will really like it! I look to the volunteer who sits next to me and start explaining my idea in English... I explain it to him and then he translates to the rest of the group into German. I continue... and he translates again. Suddenly I realize that I can't hear the rest of the group while I'm explaining my idea in English. I don't hear what is happening around me. They are talking about the task but I don't know what. Such a desperate feeling, when you want to be a part of the group, but you just aren't... I suddenly say: "Never mind" and I stop explaining. I'm like an alien in this group. The only thing that remains for me is to sit and listen to others. It would be so good if right now there was be a volunteer from our four. Then I could share how bad I feel, that we are wretched and do not understand anything (Asta from Lithuania, ex-volunteer in Germany).

Asta was one of the four volunteers in the whole group who could hardly speak and understand the German language. Reflecting back on her experiences in the culturally diverse group, Asta recalls the moment from the on-arrival training where she had a task in a small group of volunteers and was the only one who could not speak German. We see that even though learning during the training is organized in the German language, implicitly the entire group divides itself into the German and English speaking subgroups. The English group for Asta provides security and intimacy as she can talk about many things with them, whereas being with group members who speak German presupposes exclusion "...when you want to be a part of the group, but you just aren't". Even though during the task other volunteers are helping Asta by explaining things in English and translating them into German, she cannot

feel an equal part of the group. Asta is willing to be with others and attempts to express her ideas. Yet she realizes that while she is explaining her idea to one volunteer, she does not hear what is happening in the rest of the group and around her; she misses being “here and now”. Nancy (2000) notes that being-with a group is related to sharing the simultaneous space-time; in order to say “we”, one must present the “here and now” of this “we”. Schutz (1976) named the immediacy of space and time as essential characteristics of the face-to-face situations. Thus, during the learning process, the confirmation of being with others is related to the feeling of being in the simultaneous space and time. Yet, when we start missing this feeling, our belonging to the group begins to melt. Asta does not see any sense in continuing to explain her ideas to the group as others are “somewhere else”. She excludes herself and feels alien in this group. The only wish in such situations is to be with those who could be closer to us than the group which is somewhere else.

What does it mean to be an alien in a group? Philosopher Waldenfels (2007) distinguishes between two forms of experiencing otherness: otherness and alienness. Otherness comes through the process of delimitation or difference which opposes same and other. Waldenfels (2007) gives examples of a pear and an apple, or a table and a bed and says that one is simply different from the other and nobody would claim that one is alien or foreign to the other. Meanwhile, “...alien does not simply appear different, rather it arises from elsewhere” (Waldenfels, 2007, p. 7). Alienation emerges from the simultaneous processes of *in-* and *ex-*clusion, i.e., I am where you cannot be, and vice versa. Thus, when we talk about alienation in groups, we enter the processes of inclusion and exclusion – “I’m in or out of the group”. According to Waldenfels (2007; 2011), the sphere of alienness is separated from my sphere of ownness by the threshold similar to that which separates sleep and wakefulness or age and youth, and no one can stand in both sides of the threshold at the same time. Asta cannot overstep the threshold that excludes her from the rest of the group as she cannot speak German the way others do. Indeed, the foreign language becomes a threshold between Asta and the rest of the group which excludes her from others during the learning process: “I cannot follow what is happening around me; I cannot feel and share the same time and space with others; I cannot be an equal part of the group, which leads to the feeling of non-belonging to the group”.

Waldenfels contends that the experience of alienness is determinate and has a paradoxical character. “We call a place alien if it is where I am not and cannot be and where I am nevertheless, in the manner of this impossibility” (2011, p. 73). Thus, in intercultural environments we can talk about a relative alienness which corresponds to a state of appropriation. Yet:

[...] there are two [alienness – S.K.] that we encounter over and over again; that of inaccessibility of the particular region of experience and sense, and that of non-belonging to the group. In the first case, something is alien to me or us; in the second, others are alien to me or us or vice versa. It is thus possible to distinguish between a cultural and a social alienness; yet, obviously, both determinations

go hand in hand since culture itself presents as a social process, and socialization in turn is dependent on cultural symbolism (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 74).

Thus, experiencing alienness becomes an “ordinary” experience we could live through when we are learning in a group of people from different cultural backgrounds.

Do we become similar or do we remain different?

Today is the middle of the mid-term training. We start the day by sharing in a group circle our feelings today. I hear others share their feelings and the first thought that comes to my mind is that we all came here for the same purpose and left our cultures behind. We are staying here together for seven days. All the time I'm surrounded by the same people. I feel how we are searching for this new common way to communicate. We start to raise similar questions; we start to create very similar jokes. And right now we are sharing very similar feelings we have here! I'm getting a bit tired, but while I'm here with other people, I have to accept them. From the first moment in this training I feel that I'm leaving my culture behind and other volunteers are leaving it too. It is like being in a commune. Here we are all becoming the same and creating a new culture, EVS culture (Ana from Croatia, volunteered in Portugal).

We rapidly become close to those who are similar to us. If we look at young people who choose to participate in the learning mobility programs situation, we can define many similarities which connect all of them, like participation in the same program, coming to a foreign culture for the same purpose, having common learning experiences during the training and evaluation processes, etc. Besides, all volunteers are foreigners in a host country. Indeed, it seems that such conditions as having the same purpose or staying in the same place for seven days also make Ana become similar with others and even enable the creation of their own culture. We could define volunteers as a group of people who take some time to establish what Dervin and Korpela (2013) have named a “cocoon community”. Authors say (ibid.) that:

Cocoon Communities gather around a specific purpose, around imaginaries or for contextual reasons, predominantly on a short term basis, be it within national boundaries, abroad, transnationally or online. (ibidem, p. 4)

In general, the term *community* refers to a group of people who are living in a particular local area or have a common ownership or a common interest (Webster's Dictionary, 1994). Thus, being in a community is implicitly connected with relating or belonging to somewhere or to someone. Whereas the primary function of cocoon is protection. Cocoon generally is defined as a protective covering (Webster's Dictionary, 1994), thus being in a "cocoon community" provides belonging and also protection. As we see from the description above, a "cocoon community" is temporal. When we look at the process of learning in a group from the perspective of time, we can say that it is also clearly bounded in time: "I know the beginning and end of the learning activity I am taking part in". In a clearly defined setting it becomes easier to make a "cocoon" that creates a communal belonging. Moreover, as learning in a group of volunteers is framed in a short-term basis, it becomes easier to leave "our" cultures and differences behind and to begin the formation of a new cultural cocoon. We are born with a predisposition towards sociality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), thus our primary wish is to go into contact and relate with others. When we come to the unknown cultural environment where we do not know anyone, our primary wish is also related with creating a "social net". During the training Ana feels like being in a commune. The primary meaning of *commune*, according to Webster's dictionary (1994), is "to converse and talk together, usually with profound intensity and intimacy"; *commune* is also defined as a "close-knit community of people who share common interests". Thus, a commune in a way corresponds to a "cocoon community": we create a close-knit relation with someone who shares similar interests, beliefs or has the same goals; moreover, in a cocoon community and in a commune we are granted intimacy and intensity of interactions.

Yet, Laura recalled an opposite experience:

There was a moment when we didn't have the Internet in our office, so we had to go to work in a cafeteria. All the four of us, volunteers, were sitting together. I'm sitting with my laptop on my knees and we are going through the "Human library" description that was around one hundred pages long. We need to have a common decision on how we will present the "Human library" to people. We are going through the description and I keep hearing from them "No, I mean this...", "No, I mean that..." In the description we see the same words, but each of us has a different perspective. It becomes so frustrating, like bumping into the wall I want to go through. I start to look at them and think "Damn, just stop it..." But we have to go through the description again... I know that we have one goal and we have to reach it together. Now I feel really close to them, almost like sitting in one boat. They listen to me, they respect me. We are in the same boat, but still I'm from another culture. I try to relate to them, yet I can't forget that I'm from a different culture and I have a different perspective too... (Laura from Latvia, ex-volunteer in Portugal)

Laura also sees similarities that connect her and rest of the girls during the task; she feels close to others and describes this feeling as sitting in one boat. We could say that Laura's metaphor of sitting in one boat expresses her feeling of being in the same situation or position as other volunteers, which makes them feel close to each other. Indeed, during the task Laura actually realizes that even though they sit in one boat and "are rowing" for the same purpose, they still have different cultural backgrounds that separate them: "In the description we see the same words, but each of us has a different perspective".

Wu (1991) states that the:

self-consciousness of being a foreigner always leads to the realization of the dissimilarities from others and their daily activities and social conventions. (ibidem, p. 270)

Thus, when we learn in a culturally diverse group, we can rapidly find a connection with each other, yet aside we face moments of self-realization of being from different cultures. As it was mentioned earlier, when young people opt for learning mobility in a host country, they all find themselves in the same position that strengthens their relation with each other and gives an impetus for them to create their own "cocoon". We could say that the cocoon formation is highly beneficial as it can satisfy our need of belonging with each other. Yet, looking from the time perspective, the cocoon-making process is fragmentary. In a new cultural environment we do not know anyone and feel the inner pressure to relate to somebody. But deep down we know that being in learning mobility is not eternal. So it becomes easier to leave our cultures behind and create something new that would unify us because we know that we can return to our cultural environment and take our cultures back any time. Thus, a cocoon community is not really an "organic organism" and it seems that an array of similarities presses volunteers to connect with others in the group, as Ana puts it, "*while I'm here with other people, I have to accept them*".

The moment of realization of dissimilarities is challenging, frustrating, and even painful. As Laura describes it, it is like bumping into the wall we want to go through. It seems that in such moments we are entering the in-between relation: we feel connected and close and at the same time separated from the others: "*I try to relate to them, yet I can't forget that I'm from a different culture and I have a different perspective too...*".

Concluding Remarks

The proper way to encounter another person is to be open to them, to be ready to see new dimensions, new facets of the other, to recognize the possibility of some fresh perception or

understanding, so you may know the other better, appreciate that person more variously. This is, actually, how we ordinarily treat each other as persons. We do not treat each other as case histories, or instances of some psychological or sociological reality - not, that is, in personal encounters. Nor do we come up against each other as if the other were merely an inanimate object, incapable of reciprocation. (Greene, 2001, p. 53-54)

We could name such a viewpoint towards the interpersonal encounter an aspiration that educators would wish to have or create during the process of learning among members from culturally diverse groups. Yet we have seen that the interpersonal encounter is a complex process as it embraces such aspects as confrontation, tension, and power relations. Also, we should not forget that nowadays peoples' mobility becomes more intense, sudden, and unexpected for different political, social or educational reasons that not only motivate but also force people to move from their home countries to other cultural environments. Importantly, youth mobility has expanded and diversified in Europe in recent decades because of two factors (King et al., 2016). The first factor is the post-2008 economic crisis, which resulted in increased youth unemployment rates and pushed them to move abroad in order to become economically independent. The second factor is movement provisions within the intra-European context, the transport cost reductions of budget airlines and cheap coach travels. In view of the intensity, suddenness, and unexpectedness of encounters, it becomes difficult not to see the cultural other as someone who is threatening and intruding into "our" established order and stability; it becomes difficult not to see others with fear and distrust. Yet, as Pietro (2015) states, we fear others because we are not separate beings, but, on the contrary, we are dependent on each other and our existence cannot be explained without referring to others, without an encounter with others. Thus, a direct intercultural encounter with others ties us much stronger than we could imagine or want.

The actual lived experience of young people grasps the complexity of possible relations between self and others during learning situations in groups. On the one hand, young people in culturally diverse groups experience proximity and relation with each other like rowing in the same boat for the same purpose and putting equivalent energy to reach the goal. On the other hand, moments of self-exclusion and distance arise when you say to yourself that "still I'm from a different culture". Philosopher Waldenfels (2011) relates the word of interculturality with the in-between sphere which cannot be reduced to something of its own or integrated into a whole. He says that in this in-between sphere things that happen between us belong neither to one of us, nor to all of us.

It rather constitutes a no-man's land, a liminal landscape which simultaneously connects and separates. (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 71)

Being and learning in culturally diverse groups lead us into a “no-man’s land”, a place that does not belong to us; this allows us to leave our cultural backgrounds behind; this simultaneously connects and separates us, or rather, we are in a continuing two-sidedness of inter-relation: being *in* and being *out*, being *with* and being *alone*. It seems that when we are going through the learning process in culturally diverse groups, we come to different relational thresholds. Sometimes we are able to overstep them and get close to others and sometimes we do not have the strength or possibilities to overstep them.

We might wonder what the educator’s role and function should be when he/she is working with a culturally diverse group of learners. From the educators’ point of view it becomes important to seek a deep and thorough understanding of what constitutes learning in culturally diverse group phenomenon in different contexts because every intercultural encounter is unique, singular, and situation-specific.

As educators we must act responsibly and responsively in all our relations with children, with youth, or with those to whom we stand in a pedagogical relationship. (van Manen, 1991, p. 12)

Thus, seeing singularity and uniqueness of every encounter among persons from culturally diverse backgrounds would, in the words of van Manen (1991), lead educators towards thoughtful and tactful actions and decisions in real educational situations.

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