Culture and Identity in Study Abroad Contexts

After Australia, French without France

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Introduction

The recent phenomenon of intercultural exchanges in Australia by French academic sojourners raises key issues concerning borderless higher education, such as, for example, implications of brain drain, competition between home and foreign providers of e-learning, effective international collaboration between institutions, and cultural identity remodelling. Numerous studies have been carried out on academic sojourners, but much of the research to date has focused on the academic dimensions of their experience (see Hofstede, 1980; Liberman, 1994; Shade and New, 1993). By comparison, few studies have addressed issues relating to the social and cultural dimensions of the exchange process (e.g. Blackledge and Pavlenko, 2001; Storti, 2001b; Weaver, 1994). These dimensions are however of central importance to understanding the nature and impact of the study abroad experience. This book investigates the impact of the acculturation and repatriation processes and the language experiences of French academic sojourners on their perceptions of cultural identity. When sojourners enter a new society with distinctive cultural norms and values, it stands to reason that identity changes may result from intercultural contact between visitors and host society members, as identity transformations occur in response to temporal, cultural and situational contexts (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). When sojourners are required to adapt to an unaccustomed sociocultural milieu over an extended period of time, they need to learn new cultural repertoires and competencies. Adjustment to an unfamiliar culture necessitates changes in cognition, attitudes and behaviour, without which culture shock and acculturative stress may occur (Taft, 1988).

My interest in French academic sojourners in Australia began in January 2003 as a result of the sociolinguistic interactions of French sojourners with their host society on my university campus. Academic sojourns in Australia are a relatively new phenomenon for French-

speaking students, although they are beginning to increase rapidly. It is therefore timely to investigate the experiences of this group of sojourners. It is important firstly to establish how individual French academic sojourners perceive themselves in relation to French and Australian identities, how they deal with potential identity conflicts, if they succeed or fail in crossing cultural identity boundaries and finally how heterogeneous the group is given these parameters. Important considerations in studying sojourners are:

1) Who do the respondents believe they are initially?
2) Who do they believe they have become at the end of their academic sojourn? In other words, how have their perceptions of their identity changed? and
3) How did they perceive their changing cultural identity or a sense of discontinuity during and after their acculturation and repatriation processes?

Definition of Sojourner

The definition of a 'sojourner' is complex according to Furnham (1988) and many descriptions leave a lot to be desired. This is due to the narrowness and limitations of descriptions which fail to make the distinction between sojourners and other types of travellers, or to show how sojourners fit into more specialised role categories (Church, 1982). Brein and David (1971) employ the term 'sojourner' to refer to many types of travellers including students, trainees, technical assistants, tourists, businessmen, military personnel, missionaries, foreign-service officers and professors, among others. It is not within the scope of this book to include an in-depth discussion on the distinctions between sojourners and other groups of cultural travellers, but in order to understand the term 'sojourner', one must briefly address the variables that are unique to the different types of sojourners and that distinguish them from other travellers such as migrants, refugees and tourists. Several criteria can be used for this exercise. Two critical features that define sojourners are motive and

time frame, which Furnham (1988) has identified as being the most salient, giving an indication of the temporal extremes that set apart major groups of travellers from sojourners. Furnham (1988) argues that sojourners are voluntary travellers whose objectives are specific and goal-oriented. Sojourners have a specific purpose for travel and have an express desire to fulfil the requirements of their sojourn, whether this be educational, business-oriented or voluntary work.

The motives for travel characterise tourists by their leisure-oriented activities, migrants by their belief that some long-term need will be satisfied in the host country thereby improving their economic and social situations and their possible plans for a return home if they fail to realise their objectives, refugees by their involuntary displacement through forces outside their control, where escape is an important consideration, and sojourners by their express desire to fulfil the requirements of their sojourn. International students or academic sojourners differ from their counterparts because they go abroad to gain further qualifications in foreign countries, whether or not this is sanctioned and funded by their governments. Academic sojourners are categorised as temporary residents in a country other than their own who participate in international educational exchanges as students (see Paige, 1990). Their relocation abroad is voluntary and their return home is anticipated and planned. This group may be further differentiated from other sojourners by the nature of their motives: educational, culture-learning and personal development (Eide, 1970; Furnham and Bochner, 1986).

Furnham and Bochner (1986) argue, however, that culture learning and achieving personal growth are not high on the list of priorities for this group as the majority of foreign students are instrumentally motivated, that is their focus is on the acquisition of qualifications and experience or professional training which they believe will offer more lucrative opportunities when they return home. It also seems their objectives rarely match those of organisers of international exchanges, for instance because of changing criteria which are contingent on the perspectives of the sponsors, the recipient nation, the establishment and so forth. The tensions that arise from discrepancies in motives between organisers and international students

are often paralleled by those affecting other sojourner groups, particularly volunteer workers.

Sojourners can be effectively distinguished from migrants and refugees through the perspective of time frame. This criterion is clearly salient as the status of sojourners is bounded and they are perceived as temporary residents although the term 'temporary' may cover several years. Sojourners voluntarily go abroad for a specific assignment or contract for a relatively short period of time, ranging between six months and five years, with the objective of returning home at the end of the sojourn (Berry, 1990). Migrants and refugees immigrate for much longer periods if not permanently to their country of choice, thus the time frame is non-finite or unbounded. Migrants may choose under very different circumstances to return to their homeland after a number of years, possibly repeating the process of emigrating once again due to problems experienced with their repatriation. The indeterminate length of stay of refugees sets them apart from sojourners as their time frame may be bounded or unbounded depending on developments in their home country (see Ward et al., 2001). Tourists travel for a short and finite period, their commonly brief visits affording them visitor status. The comparative brevity of time that the average tourist spends travelling, as well as their relative affluence, set them apart from other travellers such as migrants and refugees. The time perspective thus specifically disting-uishes all sojourners from immigrants, as well as their fellow trav-ellers through a broad definition of time.

A final criterion employed to distinguish between the different groups of travellers can be understood in terms of consequence of the sojourn experience rather than a definition. This involves an indeter-minate degree of integration which clearly varies between groups as this criterion characterises what their travel experience will be like. The nature of the experience remains an external involvement for tourists whose motives are largely recreational and travel oriented. Therefore negotiation of integration is not necessary. Migrants and refugees need to negotiate their integration into a new society and it is incumbent on both groups to make a concerted effort to adapt to the new setting if they wish to function comfortably within that society. However, the degree with which they adjust is contingent on the

acculturation strategy they select: assimilation, integration, marginal-isation or separation (Berry, 1991). This choice is also dependent on the host society and its attitudes and receptiveness toward migrants and refugees.

Sojourners must also negotiate their integration into the host society. They are more committed than tourists to their new location but less so than immigrants and relocated refugees. Contrary to the patterns of adjustment pertinent to immigrants, the temporary status of sojourners does not imply the same process even if their sociocultural adaptation is contingent on the degree of their willingness to adopt the values of host nationals and on their acceptance by the hosts (Eshel and Rosenthal-Sokolov, 2000; Sussman, 2002). As they acknowledge the transitory nature of their cultural experience, their motivations and expectations regarding cultural adjustment and adaptation may differ significantly from immigrants. The cyclical nature of the sojourner: acculturation and repatriation, the process of adjustment and the outcome of adaptation, culture shock and reverse shock accentuate the complexity of the relationship between these phases. Essentially, the sojourner's cultural identity, determined by the degree to which he or she identifies with the home country and the host country during the bounded sojourn will diverge considerably from that of the immigrant (Sussman, 2002).

A particular factor relevant to the academic sojourner's integration into the host community concerns the need to adapt to the academic demands of their host institutions. It is essential that they adjust to the different academic practices and expectations and particularly to language demands of the foreign country if they are to function effectively within that educational milieu. The students are immersed in an academic environment because they are expected to engage in 'culture-learning', especially the learning of academic culture as well as intellectual endeavours in order to succeed. The role of 'unofficial ambassador' of their country of origin is likely to be thrust on academic sojourners as much as on other groups of tra-vellers.

However, given the young age of academic sojourners in general, this role may be espoused or rejected and depends largely on the type of welcome or acceptance they experience. Their self-esteem may be

affected positively if their reception by host individuals demonstrates genuine interest in them. Conversely the effect can be negative as a result of prejudice from host nationals. Learning in this situation, whether of knowledge, skills, customs or attitudes, implies a process of personal goal-seeking, coping and defense which ultimately influences the outcome of the sojourn. The rupture in their established interpersonal network, the culture contrast and the concurrent difficulties in communication experienced by the foreign students generally culminates in problems of adjustment. Ultimately, the burden for successful adaptation to the new educational setting rests firmly on their shoulders (see Ward et al., 2001). Analysis of the psychology of the contact experiences of academic sojourners, in terms of motives and other variables such as timeframe and type of involvement help to define this group to a greater degree. Predicated on the examination above of the diverse groups of travellers, a working definition of academic sojourners can now be presented to suit the purposes of this study. Brewster Smith's (1956) definition of the phenomenon of cross-cultural education which characterises academic sojourners still holds true today and is relevant, as it clearly sets them apart from analogous groups of sojourners. It is succinct and it encompasses the salient dimensions of time and motive:

> Cross-cultural education is the reciprocal process of learning and adjustment that occurs when individuals sojourn for educational purposes in a society that is culturally foreign to them, normally returning to their own society after a limited period. At the societal level, it is a process of cultural diffusion and change, involving temporary 'exchange of persons' for training and experience (Brewster Smith, 1956 p.3).

This definition distinguishes study-abroad students from other analogous groups of sojourners because they are sojourners and not emigrants, with the explicit aim of engaging in academic pursuits, exchanging cultures and knowledge through academic instruction. Sojourning students are immersed in foreign surroundings for a finite period which inherently implies an element of marginality or alienation and of dual membership, different from the irregular allegiances to which the emigrant must adjust. The sojourner may choose to avoid

this issue by leaving physically or psychologically, in the process rejecting one or the other membership. Immigrants generally cannot leave as easily. Sojourner involvement is not only contingent on adaptation at an individual level but also a societal one where cultural diffusion is epitomised through reciprocal processes of learning and adjustment that may have far-reaching implications if this quandary is not resolved (Brewster Smith, 1956).

The book is divided into six chapters. The introduction provides an overview of intercultural encounters in general, distinguishing academic sojourners from other analogous groups of travellers. Chapter one examines briefly the intricacies of the themes adopted for this project, culture shock, reverse culture shock and cultural identity issues. Fundamental concepts are discussed in order to better understand why intercultural encounters may be problematic for sojourners. This chapter also provides the background for comprehending the data chapters. Chapter two describes the framework utilised to structure the project and outlines the eclectic methodology employed in the investigation. Chapters three and four document the findings of the study and introduce the arguments arising from the data on culture shock and reverse culture shock respectively. Chapter five explores the overarching arguments that grow out of the descriptive chapters three and four. It investigates the prominent themes which emerge from the data, focusing on the remodelling of cultural identity of the French sojourners as a result of their intercultural experience. Finally, chapter six evaluates the implications of cultural identity transformations on academic sojourners and recommends measures that can be adopted to minimise the impact these may have on student sojourners worldwide and on the future of intercultural transitions in the twenty-first century.