

## **Building intercultural competences in a sociological perspective.**

### ***The experience of the LLP-IP Interdisciplinary Course of Intercultural Competences***

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*Abstract:* Intercultural competences are a relevant object of study in Social Sciences, as they confront us with the complex and dynamic relationship between knowledge, education and society. Starting from an EU Lifelong Learning Intensive Programme aimed at developing intercultural competences in education, social-work and health-care professionals, I am going to highlight the sociological relevance of an educational path planned and carried out in an international context, with a special focus on those aspects proper to sociological tradition, that it brings into play. This analysis will point out the contribution that sociology may offer to the development of an educational model which fits the needs of an increasingly wide and complex European reality. Starting from the outcomes of both quantitative (questionnaire, *cluster analysis*) and qualitative (*focus group*, reflective diaries) tools of exploration used during the programme, I will show the importance of students' social capital, especially their *bonding* or *bridging* features, in their evaluation of the programme and in their achievement of advanced stages of intercultural sensitivity and competency. This evidence will prove the importance of an educational model that works on social capitals and that itself becomes an occasion for a bridging sociality.

*Keywords:* Intercultural competences, lifelong learning, bridging social capital, experiential learning

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### **The sociological relevance of building intercultural competence**

Developing intercultural competences is a very relevant object of study in Social Sciences, as it confronts us with the fundamental issue of the complex and dynamic relationship between knowledge, education and society.

Dealing with intercultural competences refers to the acquisition of a *modus operandi (habitus)* that allows individuals to overcome, in an effective and appropriate way, (Wiseman, 2002: 209) all criticalities (ambiguities, misunderstandings, miscommunication) : owing to the fact that in one's social acting one refers to cultural codes that differ from the mainstream ones operating in that context. The frame-definition that underlies the research-action at the basis of this analysis, offers a very clear definition of the above-mentioned complex relationship between knowledge, education and society. Intercultural competency means the *cultural-aware* mobilization, managed by individuals, of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, enabling them to cope with unfamiliar and ever-changing problems arising, in work and in life, from encounters with people socialized in a different culture, in view of new and shared solutions. (see Onorati – Bednarz , 2010).

This definition is based on a holistic conception of both competency and of culture, as it includes different approaches to intercultural competences, as a topic concerned not only with pedagogy, that is with the modes and the objects of learning, but also with anthropology, sociology and ethics, as it has to do with the relational dimension of the encounter with the different other.

Aware that these multiple perspectives are inseparable and mutually involved, in this paper I am going to highlight the sociological relevance of an educational path planned and carried out in an international context, aimed at developing intercultural competences in vocational fields, with a special focus on those topics proper to sociological reflection, that prove to be deeply entailed. This analysis will in turn bring to light the fundamental contribution that sociology can offer to the development of an educational model which fits the needs of an increasingly complex and ever-widening European reality.

The educational experience I refer to is an Intensive Programme (IP) belonging to the European Union framework action aimed at promoting Lifelong Learning activities through Programmes of mobility abroad

(LLP). The particular programme we are going to consider is an IP-LLP entitled *Interdisciplinary Course in Intercultural Competences (ICIC)* aimed at developing intercultural competences in three professional ambits: education, social work and health care.

The Programme is in its third edition and is coordinated by the Faculty of Education at the University of Valle d'Aosta. It relies upon a wide and diversified European network, that involves different insitutions concerned with higher education (Universities and Higher Vocational Educational Institutions, both governmental and non-governmental) from six different European countries (Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Turkey). According to the formula of Intensive Programmes, *ICIC* is a *lifelong learning* programme of study addressed to students or users (as in the case of the NGO) of the involved institutions. It implies the construction of an *ad hoc* learning pathway lasting about two weeks, that has to be carried out in one of the countries of the partner institutions. In the case of *ICIC*, the first edition (2007-08) took place in Belgium, in Gent and Bruxelles; the second one (2008-09) in Turkey mainly in Izmir; the third one (2009-10) will take place in Italy, in the cities of Aosta, Turin and Milan. The programme involves 11 teachers belonging to different partner institutions, administrative staff and a group (international, inter-professional) of about 40 students per edition. Apart from the extraordinary pedagogic experimentation it triggers this experience of educational research-action, represents an interesting sociological laboratory, as it creates a relational and comunicative situation that Goffman would call a "problematic field of interaction", in which the habitual practical reasonings based on common sense and the relative order of interaction, with its moral and bonding rules, are completely questioned (Goffman, 1971). The specific multi-ethnic and multi-cultural situation in which the participants are plunged, informally produces the object of study, thus providing a powerful example of socialization as an informal setting for learning which, once acknowledged and valued as such by means of adequate strategies of reflective practices, may turn into an effective model of *education for change* (Mannheim, 1952), whose effectiveness comes simply from the fact that learning is more and more rooted and embodied within *routines* and within the dynamics of daily actions.

In the wake of the European reply to the need to implement a trans-national dimension to the curricula, pinpointed by UNESCO as a priority for the 21st Century (Delors, 1996), this educational experience directly

acts on the individuals' experience of sociality, thus providing an occasion for coping with adequate tools issues that are not new to the sociological tradition, such as the evolution of prevailing knowledge forms according to changing social forms (Scheler, 1926; Mannheim, 1952); the need to dynamically refound the concept of culture in the praxis (Bourdieu, 1980) and hence also the systems aimed at its reproduction (above all the educational system)); the positive effects of weak ties on the processes of knowledge updating and cultural renewal of society (Granowetter, 1983); the relationship between social capital and education (Putnam, 2000 e 2007).

Delving deeply into the matter of cultural complexity, which is the objective of this educational programme, it is evident that those who choose to join such a programme, independently of the specific location, experience a condition of "estrangement" that Schütz specifically ascribed to the foreigner, that is a condition in which the inertia of common sense ("thinking-as-usual") falls into a crisis and the practical schemes of action one normally uses prove to be no longer "trustworthy recipes" (Schütz, 1976: 95). In an up-to-date perspective (Jarvis, 2005 and 2007), the disjunctural experience determined by the close, though temporary, co-existence of people with a different nationality and education, inserted in a framework of formal learning that compels sharing processes in view of well-defined educational goals, gives rise to a critical interaction providing huge learning potential. If such learning potential is valued through proper methodologies, it may represent an effective educational answer to the situation of social and cultural complexity that characterizes our current societies.

The context of the Intensive Programme, especially of ICIC, works as a field of problematic interaction among what Triandis names "subjective cultures", that is "the cultural group's characteristic ways of perceiving its social environment" (Triandis, 1972: 3) that affect the mobilization of resources necessary for the development of skills and competences. According to Triandis, the differences among subjective cultures are responsible for most inter-group conflicts, so understanding these differences as results of social representations anchored to more or less developed cores or peripheries, as well as understanding the way in which they influence behaviour may provide information about intercultural dynamics and improve mutual understanding, communication, and adjustment (Triandis, 1973: 7 and foll.). A situation of proximity, such as

the one created by an Intensive Programme may bring to light those unsuspected forms of diffused racism (“infra-racism”, see Wiewiorka, 1991), mostly owing to mass-media strategies of reproduction of racist prejudice (Van Dijk, 1994 and 2003) and its “normalization” (Giaccardi, 2005), carried out no longer in the name of denial of difference, but rather of its apparent acceptance (Taguieff, 1997). Explorative work on judgements and evaluations provided by students throughout the course, and on their pre-comprehensions (expectations and representations) regarding it, provided precious material that permitted the social researcher to trace back the socio-cultural matrix, often ideological (Sayad, 2002) and even biographical, questioned by the intercultural competence, and permitted the pedagogue to detect the crux entailed by the acquisition of such a competence and to work at the construction of an effective model of intercultural education.

### **Social background as a clustering factor of students’ intercultural sensibility**

During the ICIC Programme, we used a range of techniques aimed at exploring and classifying the way in which students evaluated the learning experience and traced back these evaluations to well defined socio-cultural profiles. As “evaluation” we meant not only the degree of satisfaction (referring both to relevance and to effectiveness) expressed by students with respect to different dimensions of this experience, but a well-articulated *feed-back* that called upon the incentive component of learning through an exploration of expectations, developed awareness of advances in knowledge, relevance attributed to the different components (cognitive, social, organizational) of this learning pathway and, more in general, the relevance attributed by the student to this experience on his/her personal and professional life. To this end we resorted to different quantitative and qualitative survey tools, which were submitted in different moments of the course and some of which had the double function of being at once both didactical and research tools, such as the reflective diaries.

As far as the quantitative analysis is concerned, we arranged a feed-back questionnaire consisting of 47 questions, mainly formulated on a 4 modalities Likert scale, that checked students’ level of satisfaction with respect to different dimensions of the experience.

The questionnaire was thus articulated:

- 3 questions about the profile of the interviewee (nationality, education, faculty);
- 2 about the ability to carry out the preparatory work on-line alone;
- 30 about the level of satisfaction regarding the different dimensions entailed by this learning programme: conception of the course, methodologies used, organization, accommodation, socialization, impact on professional competency (see *infra* cap. 1, § 2 and 5);
- 10 open questions about difficulties encountered throughout the different steps of the whole activity and eventual suggestions for future improvement;
- 2 open questions about the strong and weak points of the course and eventual ameliorative suggestions.

Later some questions concerning the eventual presence of international experiences of sociality in the interviewees' background, which might render a sort of *bridging* or *bonding* social capital to the participants were added. To this end:

- 3 questions about previous experience of mobility abroad (location, duration, reason) and 1 question about sociality/communication with foreign people

We carried out this survey at the end of every edition and each time it showed a high level of satisfaction. In fact the lowest mean score is 2,7 within a range from 1 to 4, while the highest means (>3,5) are associated with answers referring to the crucial goals of the IP: its capability to enhance awareness about intercultural issues, to offer a valid contribution to vocational training, to develop communicative skills and to facilitate the participants' capability to manage heterogeneity and difference in a more effective and aware way.

To the ends of this analysis it is particularly useful to focus on the evidence of some correlations which emerged between the relevance attached to specific dimensions, the criticism with which they were assessed and some factors concerning the profile of the interviewees, such as the kind of education (university/vocational) received, previous experiences of mobility abroad (especially the length), and sometimes the

nationality. The participants' background, such as having relevant experiences abroad, amount, length of stay and reasons for it, networks including foreign people, keeping in touch with them, and so on, proved to influence students' perception of the programme's relevance for their future profession ( $p < 0.001$ ), its capacity to value informal learning ( $p < 0.001$ ) and to provide opportunities for networking ( $p < 0.001$ ).

This evidence led us to assume that information about students' sociality, if combined with their formal education, might outline a sort of social capital that influences student's involvement and interest in this educational experience, thus determining not so much a higher or lower level of satisfaction, but rather a higher level of evaluative insight and intercultural sensitivity. To that purpose we decided to carry out a *cluster analysis* that could allow us to classify students' evaluations according to their profiles. As "social capital", which is the informal background of sociality, may lock or unlock the order of reciprocity and trust in interpersonal relationships according to its characteristics (Putnam, 2000), we decided to include in the *cluster analysis* only those students who answered the questions about experiences abroad and the presence in their networks of foreign friends and acquaintances. We therefore filtered the group of all participants to both editions according to the presence of an answer to such a set of questions (that we submitted after the questionnaire) and went on with a hierarchical *cluster analysis*.

By classifying students' evaluations into 4 groups mainly differentiated by formal educational background (university or vocational education) and by the more or less diversified nature of their sociality (*bonding/bridging* social capital), the *cluster analysis* confirmed and further clarified the evidence which had already emerged in terms of bivariate correlations.

The partition into 4 clusters allowed us to operationalize the complexity of the concept of "evaluation", that cannot be reduced to mere satisfaction, but should rather be meant as the capability to critically acknowledge the multiple dimensions implied by the educational experience, thus becoming itself a meta-cognitive ability and part of the expected intercultural competence. As a matter of fact, the partition into two groups would hide this complexity in the evaluation, as clusters 1 and 3 would merge into one group with a high level of satisfaction, while clusters 2 and 4 would merge into a most unsatisfied group. On the contrary, the partition into four groups renders the evaluation multidimensional by introducing social background as a grouping factor.

### **The clusters in terms of intercultural sensitivity**

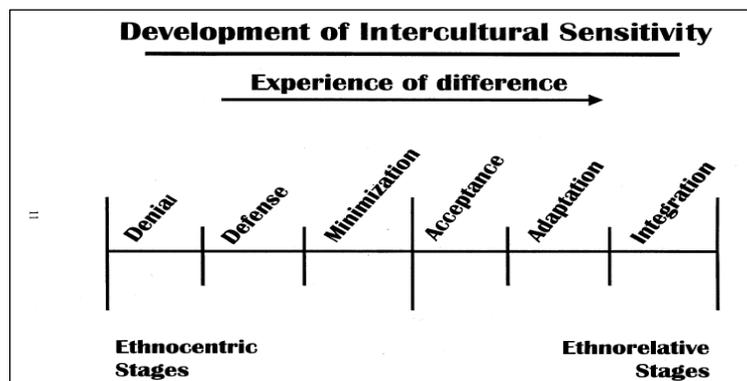
The 4 emerging clusters differ as a result of previous experiences of sociality abroad, different disposition towards issues concerned with managing non-familiar situations, especially deriving from interaction with people of a different culture, a different degree of tolerance of ambiguity, with different effects on the whole evaluation of the Programme and satisfaction.

In the wake of Bennett (2002), we tried to understand the 4 clusters referring to students' different attitudes towards the unfamiliar and strange situations created by this learning experience, in terms of stages of intercultural sensitivity, in order to focus on the crux entailed in intercultural competency and to direct the educational action on this by constructing *ad hoc* developmental tasks (Bennett, 1993). In fact, according to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Bennett (2002), intercultural sensitivity unfolds along a continuum of attitudes towards cultural differences, ranging from ethnocentric stages (negation, defense, minimization) to ethnorelative ones (acceptance, adaptation, integration). This model acts as a framework to explain the observed and reported experiences of people in intercultural situations and to offer a model for predicting possible ways of confronting cultural differences. In general, the ethnocentric stages can be seen as ways of *avoiding cultural difference*, either by denying its existence, by raising defences against it or by minimizing its importance. The ethnorelative stages are ways of *seeking cultural difference*, either by accepting its importance, by adapting a perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity (Landis - Bennett - Bennett (eds.), 2004: 153)

The ethnorelative stages are characterized by non-conforming, non-anxious, self-critical, de-centralized and aware attitudes towards one's own and others' cultures. In Bennett's framework the passage from one stage to another is marked by the cognitive shift to representations that are not so much anchored to stereotypes, as grounded on contextual and experiential evaluation of situations. By using the classical definition of social representations (Farr-Moscovici, 1989), we can say that in the process of

the objectification of experiences, to be precise in the integration of unfamiliar elements within familiar figurative schemes, ethnorelative mindsets draw rather on the *periphery*, that is on the “situationally unstable side” of representations which largely rely upon direct experience, rather than on the *core*, that is the stable “figurative nucleus” which relies largely upon stereotypes (Farr-Moscovici, 1989: 61). The four clusters are placed themselves on such an ideal scale of intercultural sensitivity according to their different characteristics, including students’ social capital.

Fig. n. 1



Bennett's DMIS, from Landis - Bennett - Bennett, 2004: 153

*Cluster 1*, which we labelled as the *satisfied “educated abroad”*, consists of 28 students of various nationalities with a balanced presence of students attending both university and vocational education. Its peculiarity is that all its components have previous experience abroad of varying duration, mainly of an educational kind, usually undertaken in a European country far from their own (what we called “non-close mobility”). As a consequence of this mobility, all members already had foreign friends in their networks. In general they are very satisfied with the experience, but their satisfaction never turns into an uncritical enthusiasm, as would be the case in students on their first experience. Though sensitive to surprise, their non-emotional but “reflective” way of evaluating makes this group more similar to the fourth one despite the different degree of satisfaction.

In intercultural terms, this cluster would definitely be placed at the ethnorelative stages, as their evaluations are lacking in anxiety and more open to understanding and valuing the learning potential of disjunctural experiences. They are not emotional in their judgements though open to surprise. In Bennett's terms this means "tolerance of ambiguity", "cognitive flexibility", "contextual knowledge" (Bennett, 1993). This cluster stays between *Acceptance* and *Adaptation* because their behaviour ranges from non-anxious acceptance of difference, to capability of "differentiation", up to a "metalevel view of cultural difference, including one's own culture" (Bennett, *ivi*). They are able "to internalize more than one world" and "consciously shift perspective into alternative views", showing stage-appropriate skills, such as empathy, problem solving skills, communicative and interaction-management skills (Bennett, *ivi*).

*We split into smaller groups; we took care that every group could communicate as much as possible [...] so our group went to the Dutch and the French speaking organizations. The other group could speak Turkish so they talked to the immigrants. We experienced lots of diversity and interculturality, not only in this area, but also in our group.* (Lynn – Belgium, from her Reflective Diary)

*Amazing experience! [...] it is surprising to what extent different languages can be not a factor of misunderstanding, but rather a factor for healing the misunderstanding* (Maristella – Italy, from her Reflective Diary)

*The exercise was not so difficult to solve. The diversity of the group helped us to have different points of view [...] after a long and intensive discussion we found a common issue to resolve the case* (Eric – Nigeria/Switzerland, from his Reflective Diary)

*As a possible improvement I would suggest trying to create more interculturalism also in the working groups, by mixed groups working at the same rhythm* (Elena – ERAMSUS student in Belgium, from her Reflective Diary)

*Cluster 2*, labelled as *the polemical “never expatriated”*, is a very small cluster, consisting of only 5 participants who had never left their country before this experience. They are Turkish and Italian, all university educated and with no experience abroad nor any foreign friends among their social networks. Totally unused to interacting with foreigners, these students share a strongly *bonding* social capital. Probably motivated by expectations of this educational experience which were too high and inevitably disappointed by the inevitable problems arising from the problematic interaction created by an Intensive Programme, they proved to be wholly lacking in any adaptive capability. They are very emotional and polarized in their judgements. They are particularly enthusiastic about the network opportunities offered by the course (3,40), while they are the most polemical about the logistical aspects concerned with the quality of accomodation, food, and so on (2,00), organization (field work: 1,60), communication (1,40). Probably used to an authoritative educational relationship, strongly dependent on the teacher, they complain about the lack of a paternalistic/protective and directive role in the tutorship. This often makes them polemical, but passive and never constructive in their criticism. In fact, they are too enthusiastic about the social side of the situation, but wholly incapable of suffering the stress which arises from the ambiguity of the situation or of providing ameliorative suggestions. This cluster is still in an ethnocentric stage that might be placed at *Defense*. At their first experience of difference, they react in a very emotional and polarized way. In Bennett’s words, they feel as if they are in “a stage of siege” (Bennett, *ivi*), which makes them dualistic in their thinking, intolerant of the stress which derives from ambiguity (“uneasiness”, “intensivity”), implicitly defensive, lacking in any adaptive mindset and, in the end, not curious and self-segregated in their own culture, as is evident in these words:

*Nice experience (neighbourhood exploration) but I didn’t like that they left us alone [...] in our region there aren’t areas with so many non-nationals, so finding myself in such a situation made me feel quite uneasy* (Mahera - Italy, from her Reflective Diary)

*I had some difficulties adapting because of the intensiveness [...] Intenisveness of the day caused loss of attention* (Duygu – Turkey, from her Reflective Diary)

*Management of the groups was not enough, supervisors could not organize us. I think the food and restaurants were awful* (Ebrar – Turkey, from her Reflective Diary)

**Cluster 3** which we labelled as *the curious “false beginners”* is numerous (29 members) and heterogeneous, mainly consisting of university students, almost all lacking previous experience abroad. Though most of them had never been abroad, they had already had contact with foreign people, something which makes them “false” beginners with a propensity to *bridging* social networks. This group shows the highest level of satisfaction, probably because half of its members have foreign friends with whom they are in steady contact, so this experience appears to them as an opportunity to make their interest in cultural differences, that up to that moment expressed itself only as a potential attitude, real. In these students the emotional side of learning was high, as in the second cluster, but what distinguishes their emotional attitude is that it never polarizes into an uncritically enthusiastic or polemical judgement. Some experiences are very impressive without giving rise to simple rejection or enthusiasm, but rather to reflection and comparison. The inevitable difficulties in group interaction are not felt as an impediment, but as a resource. They are placed between *Minimization* and *Acceptance*, with some shift towards *Adaptation*. We described them as “curious”, an affective quality that, in Bennett’s model, moves individuals to pass from the benign but still dualistic tendency to minimize differences in favour of commonalities, to their acceptance “as viable alternative solutions to the organization of human existence” (Bennett, *ivi*). Their evaluations are still very emotional as many of them are *neophytes* to experiencing difference, but never conflicting and ready to differentiate and even internalize different worldviews (Adaptation):

*[...] Today we had lunch in a social structure, a place where poor and old people spend their time and eat. I’ve never had a meal in a similar place... it was a new and a strong experience for me. I’ve seen poverty and solidarity from close up. It is so strange to think that in the same neighborhood, within a few metres distance there are so many different situations of life [...]. Brussels is not only what it seems. [...].*

*Intercultural cooperation can be an important resource useful to solve particular problems. (Annarita – Italy, from her Reflective Diary)*

*These intercultural relations and working together seem to be the most valuable learning point here, its the real action and interaction between us that's most challenging and interesting. I also think that opening up our feelings and experiences about that together would be useful. I mean reflecting as a group, working in a group like this, to hear others' points of view and discuss the similarities and differences and also difficulties (Pinja – Finland, from her Reflective Diary)*

*I had never been in a the Church, it is the first time for me. So I saw a Church and then we also went to a Mosque. Now I can compare the holy places. I learnt that both religions are monotheistic and both of them have a lot of similarities. I learnt about the differences and similarities between the two religions. I got curious and I did some research about religion, I learnt a lot of new things, so it has been very useful to me. Now I can compare religions, I can use this information in my life (Zehra – Turkey, from her Reflective Diary)*

**Cluster 4**, which we called *The critical-constructive citizens of the world*, consists of 8 students, mainly Finnish and attending vocational education, except for one Turkish university student who shares with the others relevant experience of previous mobility abroad. The members of this cluster are individuals with a highly diversified social capital. In fact they have experiences of mobility abroad diverse in its aims, duration and geographical distance, as most of these experiences took place in non-European countries for a long period (from 1 to 3 years). By relying upon a background that offers them elements for comparison, this cluster is characterized by a *grounded criticism*. In fact, their average level of satisfaction is always between 2 and 3 in a score ranging from 1 to 4. They show an enhanced capacity for evaluation; in fact they provide critical judgements but the peculiarity of their criticism lies in the fact that they are never dull and polemical. They focus on the problems with a moderate, constructive criticism, by considering the *pros* and *cons* of the learning experience without any anxiety, but rather by entering into the nature of the processes and remarking on deficiencies, such as gaps in English skills and active cooperation between the participants within group-works, and finally

by providing ameliorative suggestions. Being students attending vocational education, acquainted with inductive and experiential learning methodologies, they are critical of the practical side of this learning programme, especially the balance between the theoretical and practical parts, even though they appreciate the programme's ability to broaden views on intercultural issues (mean: 3.00). Though particularly attentive to the gap in linguistic skills, their tolerance to differences proves to be very high as they perceive misunderstanding and ambiguity as a challenge and a learning experience in itself, thus revealing an advanced intercultural sensitivity and a mature professional competency. In fact, they display an enhanced stage of adaptive cognitive structures, as their non-emotional, but rather "technical" evaluations, that sound critical, show not only a capability to differentiate and internalize different worlds, but of bi/multicultural frames of reference that make their evaluative attitude "marginal to any particular culture" (see Bennett, *ivi*). The absence of anxiety, what makes their evaluations detached, arises from their capacity for contextual evaluation that regards differences and underpinning values as "constructs maintained by self-reflexive consciousness" (Bennett, *ivi*):

*It would be nice to have more group discussions. I feel like we are now separated according to our nationality: Finnish speak with the Finnish, Italians with Italians. I think that group activities would mitigate these separations [...] the role we have in our group depends a lot on the group. Today I was really more active than in the first group [...] Finnish speak English even if there is just one member of the group who doesn't speak Finnish. Not all the nationalities here seem to do the same (Nina – Finland, from her Reflective Diary)*

*In the future I will understand culture and its conflicts better because we had a small 'conflict' in our group about rules [...] It was good to be in a new group. I was surprised about some things in our group work. The way of thinking was so different. I was the only midwifery student and I had to explain something about the case. The others were teachers or social workers, our way of thinking was so different. Also cultural differences were big in our group work. Some things that were clear to me, were object of wondering to others. I think it is also because of the differences about how we study at school in the different countries (Airi - Finland, from her Reflective Diary)*

*The main difficulties were in understanding each other, it was challenging to work in a multicultural and multiprofessional group where no one spoke English as mother tongue. I learned a lot about myself when working with different people and facing all challenges and good things of group work (Emmi - Finland, from the open questions in the questionnaire)*

### **Bridging social capital and subjective cultures for developing intercultural competences**

During the two *ICIC* editions, various tools of investigation allowed us to understand to what extent a lifelong learning programme - especially one aimed at developing intercultural competences - permitted life-world to come into play in education and how education can render it back to everyday life in terms of effective learning experience, so as to let learning rightfully become a *lifelong* or *lifewide* one. As a matter of fact, in the clusters' interpretation and especially in their re-definition in terms of intercultural sensitivity, the importance of participants' social background clearly emerged, becoming a grouping factor in itself, encompassing evaluation and achievement of different levels of intercultural sensitivity.

The benefit deriving from a rich and diversified sociality not only refers to the development of social and communicative skills, primarily entailed in intercultural competences, but to the evidence that such a social background may become the "raw material" to be valued by an educational programme based on close integration (in an era of educational policentrism) between formal, non-formal and informal learning. The important contribution that sociology can offer to educational sciences is based on such a social and experiential re-foundation of education, which is necessary in order for it to become a European one.

In order to better understand the importance of social background, in the second edition in Turkey, we made two focus groups, one at the beginning and one at the end of the pathway, in order to further explore the importance of subjective cultures, social capitals and personal biographies in speeding up or hindering the development of intercultural sensitivity and finally achieving intercultural competences. The focus groups confirmed the importance of students' backgrounds in their evaluations; in fact

students with relevant experience abroad and used to contact with foreign people - “bridging” social capital – show a higher critical insight into the cultural shock they inevitably undergo in a complex social situation such as the one created in the intensive program.

*Expectations and motivations: thinking-as-usual and subjective cultures in play*

The learning situation created by the intensive programme takes the shape of a social situation in which, in Goffman’s words, “the grouping of individuals and their interpersonal interaction is strictly dependent on the social structure and the communicative conditions prevailing in it” (Goffman, 1971: 19-24). The peculiarity of this situation is that it creates a problematic field of interaction in which the usual practical reasonings of common sense and the related order of interaction with its bonding moral standards, are completely undermined. In that situation the basic assumptions underlying “thinking-as-usual” cease, and “the cultural pattern no longer functions as a system of tested recipes at hand” (Schütz, 1976: 96).

Through these interviews we sounded out students’ incentive component and expectations assumed as thinking-as-usual, that is of the underpinning subjective cultures questioned by this experience. We also checked their influence upon the mobilization of resources for improving mutual understanding, communication, adjustment and overcoming ambiguity as much as possible. In fact, the subjective dynamics they undergo during the course especially represent an occasion for overcoming the polarized assumption of national/non national underpinning any national culture and its representation of ethnic difference (see Sayad, 2002: 367-384).

The motives and expectations declared by the interviewed mainly rely upon *curiosity*, which is the first incentive to open up to difference and start communication, as it is the affective quality of acceptance (Bennett, 1993):

*I wanted to meet new people from other cultures, I wanted to get new experiences and thought that this course would help me to open my mind* (Gabriella – Hungary, cluster 3);

*[...] to meet new people, improve my skills, to know more about different cultures (Irene – Italy, cluster 3);*

*I joined the programme because I wanted to know about a new culture and religious differences. I expected to meet new people to speak with and to get more insight into a new culture. I imagined we would have group trips and lots of talks with different people (Sara – Belgium, cluster 1)*

As already evident in the cluster analysis, students' curiosity is affected differently by the emotional side of this learning experience, which in turn disposes them differently towards the clash with difference. These focus groups further confirm that curiosity is a factor rich in cultural and social context, underpinned by different representations of the other, that mark different ethno-relative attitudes. In fact a generic curiosity towards a different culture and networking is the main incentive, especially in those students who had never been abroad before or, if they had, it had been for a very short time. In most cases this kind of curiosity relies upon representations which come from the media and public discourses, rather than on social practices. This is particularly evident in those students who identify a "different culture" with a "different religion", a distortion rich in the ideological polarization between Western/Christian and Eastern/Islamic at the basis of conflict between civilisations which divide the whole world. Also in this analysis we could not avoid noticing a sort of underpinning demarcation line between Turkish and non-Turkish students as something mirroring belonging to the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds.

The curiosity expressed by non-Turkish students, though not "defensive", is nonetheless quite polarized and largely influenced by the media and public discourses. Non-Turkish students' acceptance of difference highlights a sort *behavioural* relativism (a very early ethnorelativistic attitude), characterized by sketchy, often stereotyped information about the other culture, explored, and in many cases accepted, as an expression of different ways of behaving, but not dealt with in-depth as an expression of different, and often contrasting values.

*I imagined I would find a more closed country but I was positively surprised by local people. As for the course, I expected to find what I*

*found, because I had already taken part in a similar experience (Irene – Italy, cluster 3).*

*[...] A woman feels safer than imagined here (Sara – Belgium, cluster 1)*

Interest in cultural diversity as a generic interest in Islam, with a reduction of culture to its religious features, betrays a poor knowledge not only of the other culture, but also of one's own culture; something that especially emerges in those students who never had direct experience of the Islamic world and consequently fell for the stereotyped and polarized representation of Islam circulating in the West. In these cases diversity is accepted, but the assumption of this diversity is rooted in a conflicting vision. In the wake of Bennett, the developmental task we planned to support these students aimed at refining the analysis of cultural contrasts by acquiring categories for deepening and elaborating cultural contrasts during interaction, in order to tolerate ambiguity better and enhance cultural self-awareness.

The curiosity of a Turkish student participating in the focus group sounds affected by a polarized vision as well, but is definitely more "defensive". Along with the above mentioned motives for getting in touch with other cultures, in the Turkish student there is also the desire to disprove the stereotypes about Turkey circulating in EU countries.

*Outside of Turkey there are a lot of prejudices against Turkey. I wanted to explain that it is not so. My purpose is to communicate with other people; it motivates me, I wanted to understand the people from other countries, to improve my English [...]* (Zehra – Turkey, cluster 3)

This defensive attitude affected the interaction and distorted mutual understanding; in fact the analytical approach to problems typical of Western culture, that often motivated non-Turkish students to ask "inconvenient" questions, was felt by Turkish students as evidence of prejudice:

*I'm aware that some different nationalities have lots of prejudices about Islam. In this presentation [a lecture given by a Turkish expert on Islam] Islamic religion was clearly explained and anyway questions were answered. Some students asked us some questions, but I know that*

*people's viewpoint still didn't change. But it is a different religion, so people may be confused (Zehra – Turkey, cluster 3)*

In this case, the acceptance betrays not only an affective quality rich in a polarized vision us/them, but a defensive position located between defence and minimization. In this attitude we recognize an effort to defend one's own identity - conceived only in the conflicting terms "we/them" - through the paradoxical strategy of breaking down the prejudice ascribed to others. It is evident that this statement oozes with nationalistic rhetoric, probably influenced by the dispute on the controversial entry of Turkey to the European Union. Such a defensive attitude provokes strong anxiety in the participants which disturbs the interaction and slows up social competency and performance, which, on the contrary, demands absence of anxiety (Argyle, 1997: 106):

*[...] We all were very anxious; no one slept the day before. Languages are so different, we are very surprised, the other students are so kind, so friendly, they want to communicate with Turkish people (Zehra – Turkey, cluster 3)*

In the wake of Bennett, the developmental task we provided to overcome this kind of expectation was to promote cooperative activities that stress mediation and team-building, and continuous mixing-up of participants in group work that allows the transfer of skills in different situations. This strategy fostered students' shift towards a relativistic position within their own culture, as proved by the same Turkish student's reflections at the end of the pathway:

*The subjects are very interesting and difficult. We divided again into different groups, so I met everybody. Female circumcision is a very difficult topic. I had heard about it before but I don't have any idea about this topic, so we discussed it and did some research. [...] we used keywords, brainstorming ... it is a different experience. The nationalities are very different and also their points of view [...] I improved, especially my language problems! I communicated with lots of nationalities. I learned the other peoples' point of view. I can compare my opinions (Zehra – Turkey, cluster 3)*

Students who had already had meaningful experiences of mobility, such as study abroad, migration or personal contact with the host Country (clusters 1 and 4), that is to say they were already endowed with bridging social capitals because of their biographies, show starting expectations and underlying thinking-as-usual patterns which are already positioned on the side of adaptation and even of integration. The behavioural relativism hinted at by their expectations already fits into the framework of a temporary adhesion to the other's values in an empathic effort to understand them in-depth.

From the very beginning, students with a background of a long stay abroad or migration showed an interest specifically focused on profession and on the Country they are going to visit. As is also evident in the cluster analysis, these students, mainly belonging to cluster 4, have an enhanced evaluative and reflective capability; in fact they conceived this learning experience not only as an occasion for getting in touch with another culture, but also as an opportunity to go into their own culture in more depth. Take the example of the expectations of this Finnish student who lived in Turkey for one year:

*I imagined we would go a little bit deeper into Turkish habits and religion and daily life matters. Maybe it will come later or not!* (Minna-Maria – Finland, cluster 4)

These students, with relevant experience of mobility abroad prove to be very aware of the *lifelong* (in the whole sense of the word) learning value behind this social and educational experience. For instance, Elena, a Lithuanian girl who moved to Finland to study, says:

*I wanted to exchange my life experience. I am an immigrant too and I wanted to understand if I have prejudices and stereotypes about other people* (Elena, Lithuanian immigrated to Finland, cluster 4)

In these students, the emotional side of this learning experience is mitigated by their previous *bridging* background, so the exposure to another cultural context is felt as an occasion for personal growth that may also enrich them on a professional level:

*I was curious about the project, I thought it might be useful for my future profession as a translator as I could do translations in an intercultural setting.* (Alice, Swiss student in Canada, cluster 1)

*I wanted to learn to communicate with different people and wanted to work with foreigners [...] I expected to experience changes and new abilities.* (Elena, Lithuanian immigrated to Finland, cluster 4)

*I wanted to have contact with students from other countries and wanted to learn different methods to learn and teach. I wanted to see what it is like to work and learn in other countries* (Minna-Maria – Finland, cluster 4)

So although the *curiosity for a bridging sociality* (to meet new people from other cultures) is an affective quality shared by all participants, and shows a disposition to get in touch with other cultures, whether it is an ethno-relative condition of acceptance or not depends on students' more or less diversified experience of sociality and the relative mindsets. In fact these interviews show that curiosity doesn't exclude ethnocentric attitudes of defence. Curiosity relies upon *an expectation of social and cultural empowerment* in those students with little experience abroad, while those students with a consolidated bridging social background show an adaptive mindset oriented towards integration who regard this experience as *a privileged means for professional and personal empowerment*, as any experience of *lifelong learning* should be.

*Misunderstandings: between miscommunication and intercultural challenge*

The course gives rise to a problematic communicative situation in which usual misunderstandings are sharpened by the inevitable ambiguity owing to not sharing the same language and cultural frames. Students, with a limited (or without any) experience of difference, prove to be less tolerant towards ambiguity and tend to regard misunderstandings in terms of miscommunication, by emphasizing their impedimental effects on group communication. On the contrary, students with significant experiences of mobility abroad show lower anxiety about speaking in a foreign language, something that has positive effects on the group-work performance and

learning processes in general. Of course the latter students are, in most cases, also the ones with better linguistic skills (clusters 1 and 4), and their relaxed attitude towards misunderstandings motivated them to perceive the cessation of *thinking-as-usual* as a positive disjuncture that activates a more effective process of cooperation, relying also on non-verbal strategies, so that in the end diversity acted as a reinforcement for communicative and social skills. These “bridging” students understood that ambiguity is a matter of meanings, not of words and that the real problem was not language as such, but different cultural assumptions underlying words. To these students, misunderstanding turned into a unique occasion for starting a critical reflection on objective culture and going beyond the polarized we/them perspective, what Sayad calls national(istic) State “structured and structuring structure” that organizes our representation of the world (Sayad, 2002: 368):

*Today I had a really very rich conversation with a Turkish student from the school where we were having this visit. He was explaining to me what the word “immigrant” means. So it was nice to hear from him how he explained the word to me; it was totally different from the way I had expected the word “immigrant”. It was really nice to exchange opinions about politics and this kind of things...also opening to the people of the East and many other painful things they have in this country. It was really really rich (Minna-Maria – Finland, cluster 4).*

To these students with a rich social curriculum, misunderstanding becomes the pretext for a critical crossing of the objective culture and for experiencing role flexibility and marginal position in the peer group interaction, a condition suggestive of an ethnorelative sensitivity already positioned between adaptation and integration. To them miscommunication also becomes an occasion for meta-communicative skill to formulate what Bennett calls a “metaphrase”, that is a phrase that explains other phrases by making plain the cultural frames underlying meanings and their effects on behaviour (Bennett, 2002: 55):

*I think we have different ways of sharing information or of holding information (metaphrase) because coming from a Western European country means that we are used to analysing things with a critical thinking, and coming here I discovered that maybe for Turkish people it*

*is different; maybe they don't like to talk about the bad things that happened in their country* (Alice - Swiss student attending University in Canada, cluster 1)

*Mixing up and constructive marginality*

All learning activities were conducted in small groups that changed every time a new activity started. Working in small, ever-changing groups is a challenge that compels individuals to continuously renegotiate their roles and finally to remain in a marginal position in peer group interaction. Communication difficulties and cultural shock arising from the mixing up of students was felt as a frustrating situation by more anxious students, and an occasion for empowerment by less anxious one. In the end, this condition that tests social skills to the maximum, was a competence in itself that would allow participants to enhance their role flexibility, and acknowledging the learning potential of such mixing accounts for a mindset capable of a relational and contextualized knowledge:

*I learnt a lot about myself, but I also learnt a lot about how it is to work in a group [...] I worked in the sixth group and I felt it gave me power; I should say it gave us power* (Orsolia – Hungary, cluster 3)

*It would be useful to us to mix up again and to know each other more and to get closer because it's a small group... you open, we're not afraid to talk, we can say our opinions and respect each other* (Elena - Lithuanian immigrated to Finland, cluster 4)

Achieving a “contextualized knowledge” means being able to act in different contexts by building communicative and relational bridges starting from a self-reflective condition (Castiglioni, 2005: 75). It is the capability to build up constructive marginality, not simply as a professional skill but as a personal attitude towards a more flexible identity, and this is one of the core educational goals of the ICIC design.

Apart from the experience of cohabitation abroad with people from different countries, *ICIC* allows students to avail of a cultural climate strongly oriented towards the development of intercultural ethics, based on the capability to thematize and contextualize the experience in terms of

knowledge, thanks to critical and self-critical reflective processes. At the end of this learning experience, almost all participants to the second focus group, especially those who had already started at a high ethno-relative stage, showed a wider evaluative perspective looking back at their own country or at their biographies and personal experience of “marginal subjects” (migrants, members of ethnic minorities) with a constructive attitude:

*I'm from a minority in Finland; I belong to Sami, a people from the North. Before I was not so aware, but after this experience [...] I'm more aware of what the country did to this minority; I now understand what it means that I couldn't learn my native language at school. Now I am more proud to be from this minority [...] so I learnt something about my own country, my own culture (Minna-Maria – Finland, cluster 4);*

*After this experience I think I have a better opinion of Finland, about the social system, because I am also an immigrant in Finland, so I think that Finland has better opportunities for immigrants [...] but I also have to say that in my country there should be improved relationships among people; it is important to care for each other and communicate with people (Elena - Lithuanian immigrated to Finland, cluster 4).*

### ***Exploring neighborhoods: when a social space becomes an informal learning setting***

One of the most relevant contributions that sociology offered to this educational pathway on intercultural competences was the exploration of the multi-ethnic neighborhoods of the host town, including visits to special organizations and interviews with privileged witnesses. This field-work activity, largely based on the methodology developed by the Chicago School, is an attempt to enhance the experiential side of this learning pathway by allowing students to confront the problems related to diversity, such as segregation and poverty and look into eventual local strategies for

integration. In the wake of Park – Burgess - McKenzie (1925), this exploration is also an empirical effort to provide students with a sort of cognitive map of the social changes, Which neighbourhoods in Western towns and cities have undergone due to the ever-changing ever-changing composition of society, owing to the increased mobility of individuals.

By walking around multi-ethnic areas, collecting information through interviews with ordinary people or with privileged witnesses during the visits to the local organizations (schools, social services, hospitals, cultural associations), students could fully immerse themselves in the host town and experience it, no longer as an abstract object or a congeries of individuals and social conveniences, but as a “state of mind”, “a body of customs” and “of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs” (Park, 1925: 1-2). They could experience the different areas of the town as “a neighbourhood, that is to say, a locality with sentiments, traditions and history” (*ivi*: 6), and learn to attach social meanings to such often contrasting sentiments, as emerges from these reflections on the exploration of Brussels during the first edition in Belgium:

*Visit to “African house” in Matonge [the African quarter in Brussels] was nice, we heard some history and about the speciality of the area from the girls that worked there [...] I think that the most important aspect of the visit was the locals point of view about Matonge* (Pinja – Finland, from her Reflective Diary, cluster 3)

*You can't ignore the gap between the African quarter and the magnificent main streets of the central part. It seems like being in two different worlds which co-exist. Today I had the opportunity to know this quarter from another point of view, that of its inhabitants”* (Imma – Italy, from her Reflective Diary, cluster 1)

By exploring, as outsiders, the changing shape that proximity and neighbourly contact with migrants may convey to a town, students could experience an intercultural shock, that provided them with a sense of questioning and estrangement, necessary to develop a decentralised approach to the city and witness migration as a human and social phenomenon.

*[...] at one point, I was the only white person around in a shopping centre and that was a new experience. It gave a new point of view to being an outsider, being stared at and not knowing whether you are accepted or not [...] I think in Matonge I saw a new world, both in a physical and mental way it made me look at things differently: myself, my culture, the normality, the diversity, the complexity* (Pinja – Finland, from her Reflective Diary, cluster 3).

The condition of outsider derived not only from the fact of being foreigners, but also (and mostly) by the fact of being a “minority” in the visited areas, so that feelings of estrangement and cultural shock also occurred in native students, who felt a sense of frustration experiencing marginality at home:

*It was hard and sometimes frustrating, because I'm from Ghent but I couldn't speak my own language in my own country!* (Lynn – Belgium, from her Reflective Diary, cluster 3)

The marginal condition of being an outsider and the fact of cooperating in international and inter-professional groups in this exploration work, Gave them the necessary distance to confront segregation, poverty and local strategies in terms of inequalities and social control. However, also in this case, the capability to distance oneself emotionally and attach sociological relevance to contrasting situations largely depends on their background and ability to use multiple frames of reference in evaluating phenomena. Although this experience was very challenging to all the participants from an emotional point of view, students with a richer social capital in their backgrounds were able to go beyond a sympathetic approach to the city, and proved to be capable of more reflective and less emotional evaluations and reactions to the feeling of estrangement inevitably caused by the cultural shock they received. Students who had never left their home countries remained, on the contrary, at the level of emotional reaction to the shocking clash of cultures, in many cases suffering a sense of uneasiness and fear, largely relying upon media - ethnicization of conflicts. As their reflections show, the lower the level of intercultural sensitivity (see cluster belonging), the more “emotional” were students’ evaluations of the explored phenomena:

*[...] our task was to explore the centre, that is the tourist part but we also found some really interesting immigration parts. Next to the centre you can find many people from Africa, etc.... Sometimes it was a little scary for us, so I just put my camera in my backpack. [...] I think this is a really good thing to explore the city and not just see the tourist sights. You see deeply and you can see the reality” (Zsuzsanna – Hungary, from her reflective diary, cluster 3)*

*Nice experience (visiting Matonge), but I didn’t like that they left us alone, probably because I’m not used to that kind of experience. In the region where I live you cannot find neighborhoods where only non-national or only African people live, like here. So the fact of finding myself alone in a situation like this made me feel quite uneasy (Mahera – Italy, from her reflective diary, cluster 2)*

*[...] I noticed that Brussels has a different face behind its shining and diplomatic aspect. We met lots of people from all over the world. Some of them had good intentions to talk with us, some others not. I also learned that the way of approaching a person is also important” (Ertan – Turkey, from his Reflective Diary, cluster 1)*

*Visit to “La Rose”, “Cosmos”, “KureghemNet”. Discussion with the staff of Cosmos about the risks in Kureghem neighborhoods [...] Illegal activities going on. People express their frustration through violence. They feel their neighborhood is abandoned by the government (Jay – Finland, from his Reflective Diary, cluster 1)*

As recommended by Park himself, gathering data is a necessary action to distance oneself from the observed phenomenon, and even to pass from the observation of a single phenomenon to developing a sociological awareness about it, that is understanding it in terms of social forces at work in the urban context (Park 1925: 142-143):

*To explore an area presented by another group was interesting. We discovered that there are many different ways of life in Brussels. In fact with 65% foreigners, Brussels represents a challenge in Europe” (Eric – Cameroon/Switzerland, from his Reflective Diary, cluster 1)*

*Shadia and I visited a couple of youth organizations and got a pile of statistics about Molenbeek [an area in Brussels with the highest presence of Maghreb migrants], good to have some research based info. Afternoon went fast when we had to put the pieces together (Emmi – Finland, from his Reflective Diary, cluster 1)*

Park connected the study of the city with the capability “to read the newspaper intelligently” (Park, 1925: 3), meaning that by exploring the neighborhood as the basic organization of social life and gathering information about it, it is possible to get an idea of the local interests and to grasp the basis of political control. As a matter of fact, this activity helped students enhance their critical thinking even though not everyone considered the issue so profoundly as to recognize moral attitudes and power relationships behind a physical organization of the urban spaces. The infra-racism mainly *cultivated* by the media, and maybe at the basis of the contrasting feelings of fear and uneasiness of some of the students, proved to have an influence on those people who knew little about that represented reality. Such an experience of field-work can therefore work as a source for collecting objective information and providing a new angle for looking at one’s own reality:

*I was surprised to see my friends so melancholic after the visit, because I think I am used to something worse in my country. The negative conditions have already passivied my reflection (Ediz – Turkey, from his Reflective Diary, cluster 4)*

*We visited the Anderleekt area. During the visit to the centre for young people I wondered how it would be possible to implement such an activity in Ticino. This has been useful in order to look at the differences between this area and Ticino. I realized that even in an area like this, to let an organization work, you have to accept compromises [...] This aspect made me reflect about my strict way of making choices, especially about work, where power relationships between demand and offer are not properly equal (Alan – Switzerland from his Reflective Diary, cluster 4)*

### **Sociology to intercultural education: future perspectives**

After this overview on the importance that social background can assume within a learning pathway such as the Intensive Programme ICIC, we can no doubt say that educational programmes like this may start a process of gap-filling and fine-tuning between the different educational systems of different countries, and pave the way to a European, trans-national model of education, relying on a set of *life skills* necessary for different professions, especially people-centred ones.

What clearly emerges from this analysis is that the nature of starting social capitals of the individuals involved in a learning process can affect learning itself by making students more or less interculturally sensitive and open to cope with unfamiliar factors of disjuncture. At the end of this experience all students showed a shift in their intercultural sensitivity, even though, as in the case of the different kinds of initial curiosity towards the programme, different kinds of ethno-relative sensitivity emerged in the final evaluation. The interviewees show that the inevitable clash with difference turns into a self-critical attitude and constructive marginality, up to the point of achieving a condition of flexible identity in those students with a meaningful experience of cultural shock in their backgrounds. On the contrary, in those students starting with non-bridging or hardly bridging social capitals, intercultural competency achieved the level of the ethnorelative acceptance of difference, sometimes supported by positive discrimination, without thrusting their evaluative skills to the level of open self-criticism. These differences are partly owing to different biographical experience, and partly, or mostly, to the different educational systems and the mainstream cultural frames (objective cultures) in the different countries involved.

This experience confronts us with evidence that should become a priority of the educational systems and cultural policies of any European country. Multicultural societies are the reality of our times, so an ethnocentric, polarized approach to diversity with the consequent removal of differences in more or less open forms of segregation, or any other kind of rejection, is no longer possible nor realistic. The multi-ethnic, multicultural changing society in which we live needs new educational models, more and more centred on the social axis of learning experiences and on mobility as a condition for widening and diversifying one's own social experiences. In an epoch of recurrent education, this is possible only with an educational approach open to the epistemological contribution which comes from the social sciences, and that inevitably implies valuing

the social axis of learning; that means anchoring knowledge to the analysis of the contexts in which the learning process takes place, and acknowledging the learning implications of some informal situations of socialization by integrating them into well structured, formal educational pathways. Promoting mobility in education is an important way to value social axis by fostering informal encounters with difference, but it assumes the condition of a proper educational strategy only when it is underpinned by an educational design that aims at developing cultural awareness, reflective attitudes and socio-cultural Sensitivity. Valuing social axis means developing a sociological sensitivity and working at educational models that become themselves occasions for enhancing a bridging sociality are the cipher of our times, thus contributing to make learning “life wide” (Jarvis: 2007).

This is what we tried to achieve by planning an educational pathway aimed at intercultural competency, based on mobility, anchored to a strong sociological background, and centred on valuing the enormous learning potential of disjunctural experiences (Jarvis 2009) through reflection, in the full awareness that investing in a trans-national education “for Europe” is the highway to the reflexive modernization of a cosmopolitan society, as wished for by Beck and Grande (2004: 136).

### **Methodological note**

In order to classify the provided answers according to the profiles of the interviewees, we performed a hierarchical *cluster analysis* that creates subsequent groupings, starting from bigger groups and going on, step-by-step, with further partitions to create smaller sub-groups, without in any way, in this further partition, disaggregating the individuals from the groups in which they had been previously included. As we included in this analysis some nominal variables such as kind of education, ICIC edition (in Belgium, in Turkey), experience of mobility abroad, we assumed the chi-square distance as a measure to define clusters. In general, the optimal choice for clustering is the one that gives rise to a number of groups that grant a good deal of heterogeneity between the groups and a good deal of homogeneity within every group.

The scree-plot suggests that the best solution would be to divide students into two groups, but this solution would create two clusters that

are too numerous and heterogeneous in their inner composition. The other possibility would be to divide students into eight groups, but it would give rise to many small groups, whose characterization would be hardly significant. The best solution seems to be the division into 4 groups, as we find the highest gap in the heterogeneity among the groups in the shift from 2 to 4 (more than one point in the index of heterogeneity).

**Fig. 1** Scree – plot of clusters distance

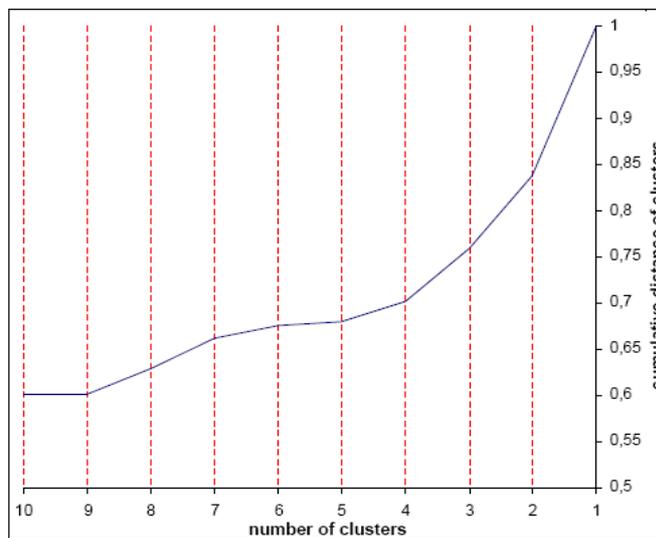
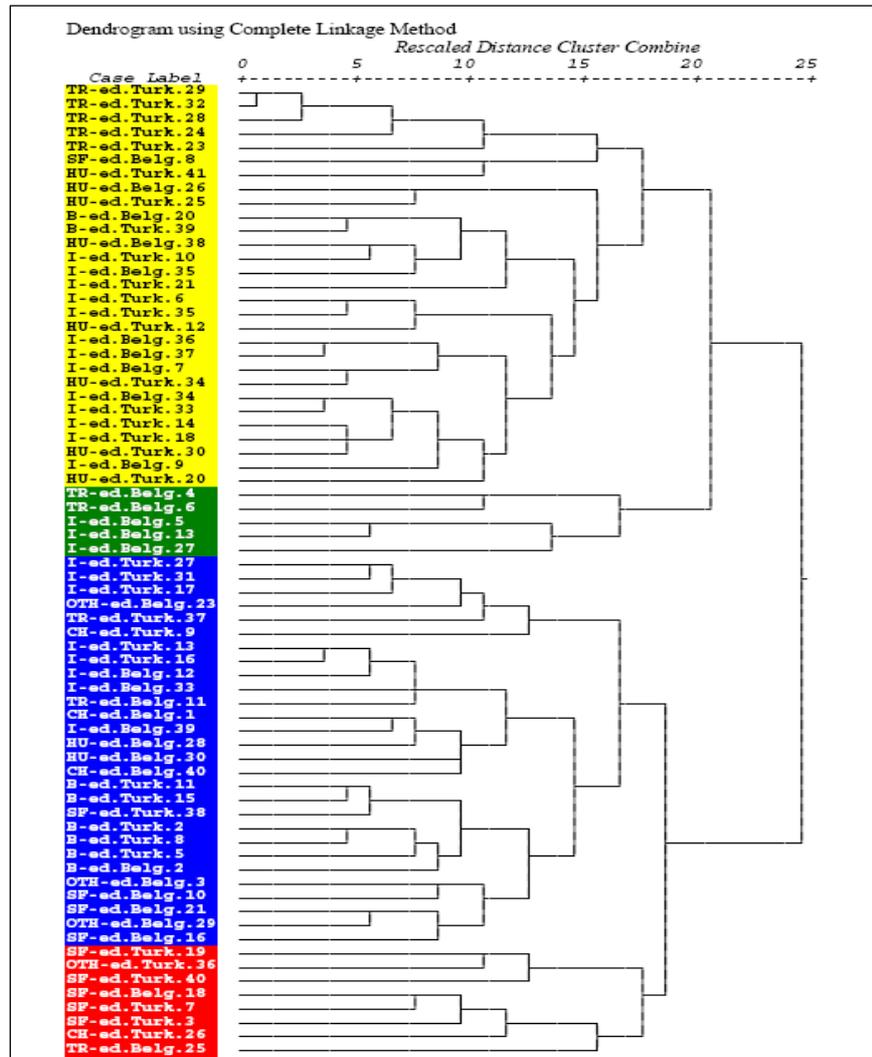


Fig. 2 Dendrogram of the cluster analysis



Key: each case is labelled according to its nationality – the ICIC edition in which it took part (Belgium or Turkey) – and its position number in the database.

The nationality is indicated by the initials of the Country:

B: Belgian, CH: Swiss, HU: Hungarian, I: Italian, SF: Finnish, TR: Turkish, OTH: Other

We used membership of one of the 4 clusters as a grouping variable, so that, once the four clusters were created, we went into more depth with the analysis and tried to understand what had been the most distinguishing items (i.e. differentiated in the most significant way) for the division into 4 groups. We crossed the grouping variable with the average scores of the evaluations expressed by each group and accurately tested the significance of each item for each group with a non-parametric analysis based on the Kruskal Wallis test, that gave evidence of the real distinguishing variables for each group.

As a result we could explore the profile of each group in-depth, according to the average scores of the provided evaluations (range 1 - 4) and compare the provided evaluations for the 4 groups.

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