

# LIMINALITY AMONG EUROPEAN EXCHANGE STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

There is an abundance of adjustment and identity-based research on international students (Bochner, 1986; Chen, 1992; Dee & Henkin, 1999; Erwin & Coleman, 1998; Furnham & Erdmann, 1995; Henderson, Milhouse, & Cao 1993; Kang 1968; Zhang & Rentz, 1996) that focuses on the various problems associated with movement into a foreign culture. But the links between time spent studying abroad and the implications for students during that time as well as once the sojourn is over have not been sufficiently explored (for an exception, see Scott, 1998). Further, an overwhelming majority of research has focused on Asian students, seemingly working under a tacit and untested assumption that western European students do not face noteworthy difficulties when they sojourn to the US.

This article looks closely at the lives of European exchange students and ameliorates the problems that they experience while studying in a small city in the southern United States. Such a topic is timely for several reasons. First, it is important for administrators, teachers and students alike to understand the problems that international students from all countries face in order to effectively assist them in attaining their educational goals. Second, the numbers of international students that come to the U.S. each year to study increases annually, and we cannot expect the problems associated with cross-cultural movement to simply disappear. Lastly, the broader topic of diversity is one that is perennially important at all levels of education.

Another focus of this research is to suggest the "sensitizing concept" (Blumer, 1969, pp. 147-148) of liminality as a useful

replacement for the more commonly used concept of culture shock. Liminality (Turner, 1964; Van Gennep, 1969), in lay terms meaning "betwixt and between," is developed here to describe the phase during which international students come to terms with their host cultural surroundings. The liminal phase is explicated via a description of stumbling blocks<sup>1</sup>—cultural symbols that impede the ability of international students to interact successfully within the new social milieu. In order to negotiate cultural stumbling blocks, participants create boundaries that separate them from the host culture. Such methods are interpreted as social psychological reactions to liminality, which affect international students both in the United States as well as once they return home.

## REVIEW OF CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH

### *Culture Shock and Liminality*

An individual, upon immersion into a foreign culture, can experience feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression as a result of existing outside one's native symbolic structure (Furnham & Erdmann, 1995; McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996; Stein, 1985). Stewart (1986) discussed a period of "cultural survival," during which the foreigner concentrates on understanding the surfaces of daily life but faces challenges over differences in value on a symbolic level. The anxiety resulting from this struggle has been classically defined as culture shock. Over time, such feelings subside as one becomes more aware of the intricacies of the host culture and develops the skills necessary to interact successfully.

Culture shock is a problematic concept that has been conceived historically as an illness (Alder, 1975; Bochner, 1986) resulting from anxieties aroused by the loss of familiar signs of social intercourse (Stewart, 1986) or a condition resulting from the attempts of individuals to adapt to a foreign environment (both biophysical and social). With these negative connotations in mind, the concept of culture shock is described as the product of an unpleasant process in which individuals adjust to the workings of a foreign culture, "precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1960, as cited in McKinlay, Pattison & Gross, 1996, p. 177). A dichotomy exists in the literature between those

researchers who see culture shock as the result of a passive process of adaptation (Henderson, Milhouse, & Cao, 1993) versus an active process of learning (Wong-Rieger, 1984).

Liminality, on the other hand, should suggest no such vagueness of character. In contrast to culture shock, liminality is seen as a phase during which individuals who have entered into a new social environment actively pursue a means of combating negative feelings and emotions. Whereas culture shock is often conceptualized as an external force that washes over the individual and eventually subsides or passes by, the liminal phase is seen as a process in which the participant is active and conscious of his or her cultural situation.

### *Boundary Negotiation*

Cultural variation exists and is maintained via cultural boundaries (Barth, 1969), even in the face of daily cross-cultural interaction (Erwin & Coleman, 1998). In sociology, the boundary concept has been applied to several different areas of research, such as the dichotomy between home and work identity roles (see Franklin & Clapham, 1997; Hayward, Hardy, & Liu, 1994; Nippert-Eng, 1995, 1996), gender boundaries (see Lamont & Fournier, 1993; Thorne, 1993), and deviance theory (see Rudy & Reeves, 1987; Rudy, Reeves, & Ashworth, 1988). Boundaries are flexible in that different individuals are able to negotiate the same boundary (e.g., the dichotomy of home and work) in different ways.

International students negotiate cultural boundaries in various ways: some rely heavily on others who are culturally similar, forming in-groups (Chung, 1992; Kang, 1968); others experiment employing a more heuristic model (i.e., seeking interaction with Americans) with little or no reliance on their native cultures for continuous support. For the first group, the boundaries that separate American and foreign cultures are emphasized regularly through interactions with other foreigners. For the second group, daily interactions with Americans also remind students of their cultural differences. For both groups, the liminal phase is represented most acutely by stumbling blocks, which are described here as discrepancies in the meaning attributed to signs and objects (Blumer, 1969) between Americans and international students. The misunderstanding of how Americans define cer-

tain words (e.g., friendship) proves to be a significant impedance in negotiating the boundary between native and host cultures.

### METHODS

A qualitative research methodology, specifically ethnography, was employed in this research project, which was conducted in the spring and summer of 1997 in a small city in the southern U.S. that hosts a state university. My research goal was generally to gain an understanding of how European students learned to get along while studying in the U.S. Although I initially had no clear intention of looking specifically at how foreign students negotiated liminal feelings via boundary work, a reliance on letting the important data "emerge" is defended from a grounded theoretical perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

One part-time and eight full-time students were selected from western Europe to participate in the study. Criteria for participation were (a) to stay in America for at least one academic year, (b) to return home the following summer, and (c) to agree to allow me to visit them during that summer. In this way, issues of liminality could be explored for students once they returned home in addition to while they were in the U.S. Seven of the subjects were from Germany; two were from Sweden. Six of the subjects were females; three were males. Five of the subjects were university students; three were high school students; one was in between high school and college and was working and attending evening classes part-time. Students ranged in age from 17 to 26. Four students had previously lived abroad, either as exchange students or as *au pairs*; one student had visited the U.S. once on vacation; the remaining four had never lived outside their home country. The diversity of age, sex, and the amount of previous experience abroad was welcomed as a chance to explore what differences might exist among participants.

During the academic year, I spent approximately 10 hours each week with one or more participants, regularly accompanying them to pubs or discos or coffee shops or eating lunch or dinner with them, at which times we would discuss some of the differences between cultures they had experienced so far, including problems they might be having, or things that seemed peculiar or extraordinary to them. At the same time, I questioned them

about how these issues were different to what they considered normal. All the foreign students I interacted with were aware of my intentions to collect data from our interactions. For them, I was both a known investigator and a participant researcher (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Before participants left the U.S., an in-depth interview schedule was developed, and I spoke with each of them in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. The interview was semi-structured in that a specific list of questions existed, though students were encouraged to discuss topics that diverged from the interview schedule. The first set of interviews lasted an average of approximately 50 minutes. At the end of each interview, I scheduled a period of time during which I would visit participants in their own country and conduct a second interview. Additionally, I provided each student with a small pad of paper that could fit easily into a pocket. I requested all interviewees to take any opportunity to record thoughts they had during the first few weeks they spent back at home. They were instructed to write down any feelings they experienced, as well as any problems they faced, dreams they had, or anything that related to their time in America or to their return home.

I completed a second set of interviews with seven participants in their home countries, which averaged 25 to 35 minutes in length and focused on the renewal of social and familial relationships. Two female students claimed to have no time to be interviewed when I called them. Again interviewees were encouraged to talk about anything that was important to them. During this interview, the notes that students had written were read aloud and participants were asked to comment further on what they had written. These notes were treated as documental data. In all but one case I stayed with the participants for several days and observed some of their interactions and behaviors with friends and family. In addition to completing the second set of interviews, I wrote daily fieldnotes that recorded examples of American cultural artifacts present in Europe. The fieldnotes were treated as data, analyzed, and used for describing the extent to which American culture is salient in Western Europeans' daily lives. The intrusion of American culture in Europe was treated as a condition that shaped the students' pre-exchange conceptions

and expectations. Noting the extent to which this intrusion appeared to me as an American was necessary to better understand preconceived notions of America that may be held by Europeans.

Interviews were transcribed and coded using several categories including liminality, cultural boundaries, stumbling blocks, and friendship issues. The categories used to code the text data were based upon understandings and interpretations that arose in the analysis of various conversations and discussions with foreign students over the previous school year. Conversations focused primarily on friendships, identity, and "culture shock." As a result of these conversations, there were expectations of conflict between American and native cultural systems, and adjustment strategies based on individual, social-psychological factors. Of particular interest initially were issues of friendship and routinization. Friendship proved to be an important aspect of participants' experiences, while questions involving routinization failed to yield data that were considered relevant to nascent research questions.

## FINDINGS

### *Anticipating the U.S.*

The everyday lives of Europeans are inundated with American cultural symbolage, which in turn normalizes European students to American cultural trends. Research has shown that the degree of similarity between cultures contributes somewhat to cross-cultural success (Cui & Van Den Berg, 1991, as cited in Erwin & Coleman, 1998). The awareness of American culture prepares Europeans for some of the most obvious cultural differences (e.g., linguistic, geographic) because they have the ability to learn and evaluate aspects of American culture regardless of whether they have ever interacted with Americans. This assumed understanding, however, did not prepare students adequately.

I really didn't make any preparations. [People] were talking about culture shock and other stuff and I thought to myself, "Hey, I won't have that. I just want to go...." I didn't think that I would be homesick because other people kept telling me [they were not] homesick. Now I don't believe them a bit. Because I don't think I am real fearful or anything, but as I arrived here...I didn't under-

stand anything.... I was really scared and I didn't know what to do and I got bored and really, really homesick. (Ann,' interview)

For most of the participants in this research, a pre-exchange mindset was created in participants through the reception of American cultural symbols in various media (e.g., film, radio, TV). The inundation of American cultural ideals affected international students as they anticipated the U.S. in that most did not make any psychological or emotional preparations for crossing cultures. Even those students who reported speaking with friends said they did not really take stock in what they were told.

### *Liminality*

As the international students entered into American culture, they began learning the "ins" and "outs" of interaction through trial and error, observation and imitation, and other informal methods. During this time, feelings of isolation, uncertainty, a lack of direction, and the lack of a sense of self were natural outcomes, although not always expected. This liminal phase, which coincides with the time during which international students were learning how to interact in their new setting, seemed to be the most difficult as participants struggled between the role-identities they had brought from home and the new roles they were attempting to establish in America. One student, Ann, described vividly her first week in the U.S.

So [I am] in the middle of nowhere and I don't know the accent, and the father of my host-mother has one tooth left and his false teeth were laying in front of him on the table and he was chewing tobacco. It was my first week and I didn't understand a word. I was so scared. Oh, I was really scared. I went to the [student exchange] organization and told them 'I want to change the family' because our next neighbor was like two miles away. There wasn't even a real street, and the financial situation of the family was pretty bad and the parents weren't married, they just lived together, and two of them had different children. It was kind of weird, so I went to the organization and [told them] I wanted to change the family. And they said, "Oh, [another] woman will come and she wants you - go with her." [But] she had a daughter who was nineteen and

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\*I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

failed her driver's license...didn't have a high school diploma, didn't have anything, and I didn't want to go to the family, so I was just, "Can I bring guys over? Can I smoke in your house?" So they didn't want me. And then I called my [parents] and said "get me out of here!" and they organized the family here. (interview)

Students eventually became comfortable with the daily workings of American culture, although the amount of time necessary for each participant varied. When asked how long it took to become comfortable, answers varied from "two to three weeks" to "a couple of months." Answers seemed to depend upon the amount of interaction each participant had with others daily. Not surprisingly, it was not necessary for participants to interact with Americans to become comfortable with America. In most cases, students became comfortable once they had met other international students and established relationships with them. Liminal feelings were most poignant for students before they were able to establish relationships of some kind in America. As students developed relationships in their new environments, they passed out of the liminal phase, though cultural boundaries continued to exist.

### *Stumbling Blocks*

Boundaries were initially felt by students in most aspects of their daily lives. Participants reported encountering various things that made them feel uncomfortable, disoriented, or frustrated—what I describe as stumbling blocks. Characteristic of the liminal phase, stumbling blocks are symbolic representations of host-cultural values or behaviors that contradict the values or behaviors found in the sojourner's native culture. Stumbling blocks represent situations in which individuals encounter new behaviors or actions and interpret them within the context of their existing understanding of the host culture. Stumbling blocks can reinforce ethnocentrism and sharpen criticisms of the host culture, thus reinforcing boundaries.

*Superficiality*—The most common type of stumbling block that students reported experiencing was that of misunderstanding two common symbolic constructs in American speech. "How are you" and "I'll call you" are both phrases that have obvious



differences in meaning when considered from American and non-American perspectives. The perceived meaning of these phrases from the international students' point of view was very different from how Americans use it, as described in the following interview excerpts.

I won't miss the "hey how are you?" Actually at first I liked it because I thought everybody was so friendly. But then everybody walked away and I was like, "O.K., nobody cares." ...I didn't know if they really liked me or if that is just the way they are. (Ann, interview)

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What I thought was strange was that just going through the mall some people would just start smiling at me, and some would say, "how are you," and I didn't even know them and I would stop...because I thought they wanted to talk to me, but they just kept walking. They didn't even care. Nobody in Germany says "how are you" to a stranger. It made me feel good actually. I really liked it because I thought it was...just nice. The people are polite. A person's perspective [is] just to be polite to everybody. (Lisa, interview)

Students originally thought Americans appeared to be quite friendly because of the normalized social act of greeting everyone in this way. As participants were constantly greeted by passers-by on the street, at school, or in the mall, they came to think that Americans were all friendly people. Several of the students expressed an appreciation of "how are you" in conversation, while several others stated that it caused Americans to appear superficial to them. One interesting note is that participants were regularly observed using "how are you" in normal conversation with Americans, including those who expressed disapproval of it during the interview. This is characteristic of the various ways students crossed boundaries in their daily routines—they used the greeting when they wanted to avoid appearing different to Americans with whom they interacted, whether or not they accepted it. As one student talked about her opinion on the matter, she claimed to like it and dislike it simultaneously:

[When people said], "Hi, how are you doing?" and they just walked by, I thought it was really rude in the beginning. You just

have to get used to it, and once you get used to it it's really nice. If [Germans] say, "hello, how are you doing," then we stop and we take the time to talk to them and say "how are your studies going...how is your family...how is that person...." So if [Germans] do that we really take our time and really want to know. That's one reason why I think it's more superficial here [in America]. (Heather, interview)

Similarly, the phrase "I'll call you" doesn't always mean exactly what someone outside of American culture might think. One participant told me that "[Americans say] 'how are you' and they aren't really interested in the answer. And they say 'I'll call you' and never do. In Germany [people] are more reliable" (Ann, interview). Kevin, another German student, echoed her remarks. "[Americans] would come to me and say, 'Yea, I will call you. I promise. You are my best friend,' and everything. But then they never call you back and this is strange" (interview). In conversational speech, Americans often use the phrase "I'll call you," to imply that they are finished with a conversation. Although there is a suggestion that the speaker might indeed call the listener at a later date, the listener may tend not to place much stock in the words of the speaker; the message received is that the speaker is interested in terminating the conversation. Only by understanding what the words mean through action or deliberate inaction can the foreigner gain shared meaning directly.<sup>2</sup>

For all participants, a boundary existed between American and European forms of cordiality, and students were divided in how much they embraced the American form. Americans seemed to be stereotyped most often by foreigners as being "superficial." Students claimed that Americans were superficial in their day-to-day dealings with strangers as well as their friends. Some students tended to find this type of behavior rude in that there was a feeling of untrustworthiness in American social interaction. For a native speaker, the meanings in such statements are understood through shared cultural and social norms of interaction, but to a foreigner, they sustain ideas of American superficiality.<sup>3</sup>

*Friendship*—One of the first things that participants talked about was the superficial behavior of Americans. The topic of

superficiality led into the deeper topic of friendship and how each of us (that is, American, German, and Swede) defined that word. Students reported that, in their countries, friendships are taken more seriously than in America and that many Americans claim people for friends that Germans or Swedes would not.

I asked one student how she would introduce a person she didn't know very well to a third party. She answered with an example. An American student whom she had only known for three weeks or so introduced her to some other Americans by saying, "This is my friend from Germany." The student said she didn't like the use of the word "friend" by the other student and said that she surely would not have used that word in the same situation. Later, she described from her perspective the differences between the American and German conceptions of friendship.

[E]verybody that you meet for the first time here [in America] thinks that you are his friend or her friend.... In Germany friendship really develops, you wouldn't call a friend that you've only known for a few months "a friend." Even with, for instance, my roommate. I got to know her and I really hesitate to use the word "friend," [I] would say... "This is my roommate" or "a fellow student" or something like that. So friendship really means something in Germany. It means a lot. You can rely on the person. (Heather, interview)

Note here her use of the American concept of friend—"you wouldn't call a 'friend' (her concept of an American *friend*) that you've only known for a few months a 'friend' (her concept of German *Freund*)." Another student told me:

You get to learn a lot of people to know, here in America, but actually you don't really know them. Like if you are together with people for four years and always stay with them [as in the German school system], you really know them. And you know what you like [about] this person. Here you know the person but you don't *really* know them. You know them from the outside but you don't really know what is up with their lives. (Kevin, interview)

Similarly, Swedish students noted that Americans behaved differently towards people they called friends. One student, Charles,

stated that none of the friendships he had made in America were as meaningful as his friendships in Sweden. He seemed to think there were two problems with American friendships—trustworthiness and reliability. Jack, the other Swedish student, told me:

I came to think about the friends I had in Ohio. There was a lot of stuff that was being promised like, "hey we will do this and this," and then nothing happened. So in the beginning I totally thought they were more shallow. It is really hard to get to know them really well, deep. (interview)

His experiences with the word *friend* while he had been a high school exchange student years earlier were problematic for him also. And like Heather, Jack used the word 'friend' to describe people who did not meet his Swedish definition of the word. He and other participants interpreted the meanings of such phrases in different ways, but they all became quite used to them and even began using them regularly.

The accusation, made early on by some participants, that Americans are superficial, seems to land a little wide of the mark. The problem is not that Americans are superficial towards their friends; rather it is that the American definition of "friend" seems to include what are, for participants, acquaintances. Nevertheless, these forms of American speech were problematic for international students. It seems certain that further investigation into this area would lead to a greater awareness of such "stumbling blocks."

### *Returning Home*

*Anticipation*—As students neared the end of their sojourns, anticipation again began to dominate their thoughts. Although most students were ready to return, some maintained doubts about what they would find when they arrived. Most anticipated having to pass through an adjustment phase, though the estimated length of time that entailed was uncertain. Students' responses varied broadly: between three days and one month were said to be needed to become comfortable at home. As several of the students had been abroad before (though not necessarily in America), it was possible for them to anticipate what it would be

like for them upon their return. One particular student voiced concern about going home and anticipated multiple problems.

Oh it will take awhile, I think to be comfortable. First of all I know this, because every time when I go back to Germany the first two weeks I hate everything there. I find everything so complicated. Life here is easier. (Pamela, interview)

Her anticipation regarding going home contained a high level of anxiety because she had established an intimate relationship during her stay and now had to consider the implications of leaving the U.S. on more than one level. Most students, however, were more concerned with reestablishing relationships at home rather than attempting to maintain existing relationships in America. That is not to say that existing relationships were unimportant to them; rather that relationships at home were reemerging as priorities.

I think what I am going to do is [watch] everybody, how they act and if they have changed, my friends. I don't think I'll have any problem with my family. I will just watch my friends, especially my best friends. [With] some of my other friends, I don't care, but my best friends because I am a little worried if I have changed or if they have. And so I am going to watch and wait for some reactions and then after a while I'll ask them if I have changed and I guess we'll find out.... (Kate, interview)

German students seemed to be preoccupied with reestablishing pre-existing friendships at home. Such a preoccupation seems natural, though several of the German students had pessimistic attitudes concerning the outcomes of renewing such relationships.

The Swedes seemed less preoccupied than the Germans with such matters. Both Swedish students had already made arrangements to return home only for the summer and to then return to study for another academic year in America, so they were mostly concerned with working to make enough money to support another year abroad. They did, however, note the importance of returning home for the summer and said that it was necessary to reinforce their cultural identities through close contact with fam-

ily and friends. "By playing my Swedish side against my American side...I find my identity. I know myself and I know my limits. Actually I should say [that] I know I don't have too [many] limitations on myself" (interview). Charles' comment suggests that, after his experiences in America as both a high school and university exchange student, he had developed an understanding of his sense of self only by accepting the multicultural aspects of his identity.

*More Stumbling Blocks*—The time spent in America had both positive and negative consequences upon students' attempts to re-establish native roles. They found that it was not possible to simply step back into their former lives. Rather, they were forced to reevaluate their own perceptions of what it meant to be German or Swedish, and integrate those perceptions with the recently acquired knowledge of how American culture governed interaction in similar circumstances.

With the exception of one, all the students admitted passing through a liminal phase when they returned home. The Swedes in particular appreciated the feelings related to being at home. One student described it as a matter of security. "When I'm in Sweden I feel safer. That is my hometown and my family and everything. America can be sort of like an adventure, and home is home. I feel safe [in America], but when I come home I feel more spiritually safe" (Charles, interview). Being safe was attributed to being at home, just as being in America was seen as an adventure. A conceptual boundary existed for him through the longing for both the comforts for home and the adventures awaiting him abroad.

Female students seemed much less excited to be home and reported problems interacting with friends and/or family, and with depression. Problems revolved mainly around friendships, although some revolved around other issues, such as feelings of isolation. Of the four female students, two wanted to return to America immediately but felt they could not, the third was already making preparations to return through another exchange program when I arrived, and the fourth was seeking employment opportunities that would allow her to return. None were willing at that point to fully commit themselves to re-establishing iden-

tities in their home culture. They felt separated from their old friends by boundaries that had been created through their experiences in America. One student explained her feelings:

Kate: I didn't want to be home. And...when I went over to my friend's [house] my sister was there and they were [all] laughing, but I didn't know [why they were laughing] and I didn't want to be there.

Patrick: *Where did you want to be?*

Kate: Back in America. (interview)

Other students shared such feelings, though they expressed them in different terms. Heather expressed the regret that dampened her homecoming and reunion with her parents. "I was just happy that I saw [my parents], but I always had in mind that I would have to stay here [in Germany] and that my time in America was over.... I couldn't be that happy because I always had that in mind, but I was happy [still to see them]" (interview).

In addition, Heather described an important problem that was repeated by many of the students after they returned home. It was difficult to find someone to talk to who had had similar experiences. The difficulties with finding new friends, or with re-establishing old friendships, motivated their desires to return to America.<sup>4</sup> The following two excerpts are taken from Heather; the first is from the American interview and the second is from the German interview:

Well, I know that the thing that helps me most is talking to friends that have experienced the same, because I have experienced that sometimes people don't understand you, because they just don't know how you feel. I think the best is to talk with friends about our experiences. (interview)

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[My friends] didn't understand what I was talking about. They were annoyed or whatever. I really felt left out because my friends...met so many new people and experienced so much stuff while I was in America that I really felt like an outsider again when I came home. It was weird, but I was sitting there and like, "God,

man, they met so many other people," and you don't know anybody and they are talking about stuff that you don't know about. I felt pretty lonely then, too because it was like, you really don't belong there that much as you did before. (interview)

In the first excerpt, Heather explained what she felt would be necessary for her to do in order to begin to feel comfortable again at home—talking with other individuals who had similar experiences. As shown in the second excerpt, however, she was unable to find students who had similar experiences, and the people she did speak to were relatively unsympathetic. Another student, Kate, said that her friends told her to "quit talking about America all the time."

In all cases, students reported that talking to their friends about their American experiences was problematic unless that friend had a similar experience to reference. A basis of commonality was necessary to reestablish friendships quickly; for students whose friends had not lived abroad, the process of reestablishing comfortable, close relations seemed both lengthy and troublesome. Boundaries now existed between participants and their old friends because of a lack of common experiences. Of her return home, Heather said:

[A]ctually I felt pretty comfortable [with my friends] right away, but after our first visits...everybody thought, "well you're only talking about America and that is so annoying." I thought it was really annoying to them that I only...talked about America, [especially] when somebody talked about something and I would say, "In America it's that and that way." People were interested on the one hand, but on the other hand you know, they thought it was really dumb or like annoying. ...At that time, I still had only two or three friends left out of probably ten. The friendships [had] changed. (interview)

She described feeling lonely when she first arrived home, and said that she was so used to her American life, she found it hard to talk about anything else. Her friends didn't understand because they had not been in America with her, and they grew tired of hearing her talk about it all the time.



Liminal issues arose for participants after they returned home, and boundaries now existed where none had existed before. The relegation of students from an insider to outsider role in their native cultures was a largely unexpected consequence of having studied in America. These boundaries were negotiated differently than similar boundaries in America. Whereas students felt an appreciation for being different in America, there was no such desire at home. The problems associated with being an outsider at home were taken much more seriously by participants, who felt more uncomfortable confronting these problems at home than in America. At the same time, liminal feelings were overcome, either by renegotiating their native identities, or by leaving home again for another year abroad.

### CONCLUSION

The similarities between European and American cultures, combined with the deluge of popular American cultural images into Europe, creates a condition in which international students often assume to know America before they arrive. Yet, in spite of the similarities between American and western European cultures (versus Eastern or Asian cultures), all students in this research had varying degrees of difficulty coping with certain aspects of American culture. Coping problems are characterized by liminality, a phase when the students were not yet comfortable interacting in American culture.

Students who lived in more rural areas felt dislocated and generally experienced a more problematic liminal phase because it took longer for them to come to an understanding of meaning in American interaction. However, it was not necessary for students to feel successful interacting with Americans in order to feel psychologically secure. Rather, with a support base of other international students, participants were able to define themselves as insiders in a group of their own making. The need to belong, characteristic of the liminal phase, was fulfilled in an alternative way.

Boundaries that separated American and native cultural norms were realized during the liminal phase as students confronted American cultural symbols. This realization was problematic in that expectations of American culture were often inaccurate. This

inaccuracy is similar to the boundaries between being a high school and a college student. Although they are known in advance and students have ample time to consider and evaluate the expectations that will accompany such a role change, there is a natural adjustment period (Karp, Holmstrom, & Gray, 1998). The international students in this research, however, commonly assumed they knew what American culture would be like and therefore took little opportunity to prepare themselves for the experience.

It seems evident that the amount of psychological strain placed upon individuals who cross cultural and social boundaries lessens as the number of times they cross those boundaries increases. Four of the participants had previous, extended cross-cultural experiences before coming to America. Not coincidentally, it was these students who reported having the least problems during the liminal stage. It is also worth noting that these four students were all older than the participants who reported having the most difficulty becoming comfortable in America. Yet despite the various dissimilarities between participants, all shared liminal feelings, and all participated in actively negotiating boundaries.

After being in America for a year, students had experiences that made them feel different from other people their own age. The groups to which they belonged before going to America had evolved in their absence. At the same time, participants had grown through the exploration of a new culture, creating new identities. The problems associated with redefining their identities at home were worked through by three of the German students as they remained at home. Of the other four students, both Swedish and one German student returned to America the following fall semester, and the other German student went to Spain for one year.

### *Applications*

As others researchers have noted, the need for understanding cultural diversity and facilitating adjustment for foreign students is a growing concern (Shigaki & Smith, 1997). Such a model could serve teachers and administrators well. In addition to students, employers of foreign workers could also benefit. Thus, it is

important to consider the overall utility of this research, and to what other groups it might be successfully adapted.

This research suggests that international students need not become comfortable *with* American culture in order to become comfortable *in* America. Similar findings have been previously reported among Asian students, for example, who form in-groups for social and psychological support (Chung, 1992; Kang, 1968). Stumbling blocks are most likely harder to negotiate for Asian students because of the cultural divergence between Eastern and Western cultures. Boundaries might also be starker for students from Southern versus Northern cultures, hemispherically speaking. In sum, this model should develop an explanation of the ways in which both European and non-European students pass through a liminal stage while negotiating boundaries.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Exploratory research is good at generating hypotheses, models, and, sometimes, new theories. But there are shortcomings in regards to generalizability and analysis, which is problematic for some social scientists (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Such limitations, however, should not subtract from the relevance of this research, as the analysis provides promising findings on the ways in which international students actively ground themselves in a host culture. Instead, future research on the boundary negotiation process should be conducted with a couple of points in mind.

One weakness in this research is that the observation of students began only after participants entered the United States. Comments on anticipation are thus limited to a macro level interpretation of American cultural intrusion and to students' *post hoc* accounts rather than an analysis of data collected through observation while students were anticipating their sojourns. Although students were asked during interviews what types of preparations they made before coming to America, the answers are not sufficient to allow such an analysis, and future research in this area should reflect this by locating potential exchange students beforehand. Such research should include capturing the ways in which exchange students-to-be imagine America before having experienced it, the decision-making process they negotiate, and the resulting preparations they make prior to moving.

Future research should also differentiate between students who have had prior experiences in America and those who have not.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Martha Copp, Tony Cavender, and Scott Beck for their guidance during the project. Additional thanks to Jim Fraser for his comments on a previous draft of this article.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I thank Martha Copp for the suggestion of this term.

<sup>2</sup>There have been many studies on the art of (in)effective communication, such as work by Tannen (1990) on miscommunication between genders. The problem is that international students became confused by the seemingly friendly attitudes of Americans and ended up considering them superficial and untrustworthy when their expectations were not met. The international student must come to understand more than the words that are spoken; they must come to understand the symbolic meaning that others attach to the message.

<sup>3</sup>One participant brought up an interesting point—the *Sie* (formal) and *du* (informal) forms of address in the German language. It permeates the entire language and determines the relationship that one has with another person. The German language both imbeds and supports social relationships, thus establishing a clear boundary with specific rules that govern its usage. Kate described how her mother and a friend of 20 years still used the formal *Sie* form of address with each other, thus maintaining a social space between them. By having only one form of address in English (*you*), Americans do not have such a definitive boundary between formal and informal speech, something that caused some confusion among participants.

<sup>4</sup>Of the four female German students, one actually returned to the U.S. to study for another year, and another went back a year later for a month to visit friends. The third is known not to have returned, and nothing was known of the fourth.

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