A BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE
ON YOUTH EXCHANGE AND RELATED PROCESSES

Abstract

After focusing on the experience of a woman of French origin who “paved” her way to Germany and “Europe” in her youth and all by herself, we turn to the biographies of young people who spent a year in another European country by making use of a foreign exchange program. This involves an institutional pattern with distinct phases: applying, being selected, being prepared, being sent away, staying abroad (in a foreign family and school) and coming home. We also look for the biographical conditions which create a special receptivity for such a project of going abroad, for the significance of such experiences in the biographical phase of adolescence, and for the consequences, especially with regard to “getting involved”, committing oneself to transnational and European projects and (sometimes) developing a self-identification as European. At the end we discuss some more general (theoretical and practical) implications of this research, which is based on the analysis of narrative interviews with former foreign exchange students which were conducted within the EUROIDENTITIES project.

Keywords: youth exchange, adolescence, potential space, being exposed to the unfamiliar, collective history, self-identification as European.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amélie Métraux, a 60 year old woman of French origin, lives together with her German husband, a retired professor and legal scholar, in a big German city

1 We wish to thank Catherine Delcroix, Lyudmila Nurse and Dirk Schubotz for helpful comments.
2 She was interviewed by Anja Schröder-Wildhagen in 2009.
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– a city in which she has been living for almost four decades now. She teaches at the languages department of the local university and is working on a doctoral dissertation on new procedures of the early acquisition of foreign languages (a topic of theoretical and practical concern which has interested her for a long time). Amélie Métraux has an adult daughter from her first marriage.

When discussing her biography we discovered that she has qualities of a pioneer – a pioneer of establishing cultural contacts between members of European nations: France and Germany – and has developed a very strong self-identification as “one-hundred percent European”. This can be seen, e.g., in her creative long-term professional and academic action scheme of creating conditions for “intergenerational learning” in the context of the early acquisition of other languages. What she finds fascinating and would like to promote are free and non-prescriptive settings of language learning in which members of the grandparents’ and grandchildren’s generations participate in order to learn the languages of European neighbours, preferably the neglected languages of small nations, e.g., a Slavonic language (instead of English as lingua franca which everybody learns anyhow). She strongly favours the notion of a “Begegnungssprache”: a “language for meeting the other”.

The intensity and style of Amélie Métraux’s academic and professional project are closely tied to biographical experiences which can be discovered in her narrative. When she was still a baby in the late 1940s, her family had migrated to Canada and – a few years later – to the United States, but they returned to France when she was a teenager. Her younger siblings, who had grown up in an English speaking environment, experienced major problems when returning to France from the United States: difficulties which had to do with a loss of their language and an extreme communicative isolation. This is one of the biographical sources for her constant concern of how to learn languages at a young age. She was also quite eager – and also successful in doing so – to create conditions for her daughter to learn French as a child in a predominantly German speaking environment. And she has good memories of her daughter getting deeper into the French language when spending her summer vacations with her maternal grandparents in France.

But Amélie Métraux can be regarded as a pioneer in a different sense, too, and that is why we have decided to start our discussion by turning to her: She paved her way to Germany and to the German city in which she has taken root already during her youth, and all by herself, i.e. after her family’s return from the United States – a time when she found it difficult to feel at home in the small French town.
A big turning point in Amélie Métraux’s educational career – but beyond that: a decisive point in her life – is the acquisition of the German language (as a second foreign language) in seventh grade. Since she is able to speak English (as a bridge to German) like her mother tongue and because of her family’s favourable disposition to things German she learns the German language quite easily and is very interested in it. During this phase of her life she likes to watch a TV program (run by Albert Raisner, a French entertainer and harmonica-player) called “Rendez-vous sur le Rhin” in which French and German pop singers participate – a program which she “really absorbed, (...) I never had the opportunity to hear or read German.” When the moderator tells the audience that the program might be helpful to arrange contacts with pen-friends in Germany, Amélie Métraux writes right away and gets into contact with a girl from a big German city – the city where she, Amélie Métraux, has been living at the time of the interview for many decades. (Her former pen-friend is still her best friend in this city at the time of the interview.)

Amélie Métraux and the German girl become close friends, a process which the interviewee recollects vividly and in a detailed way, e.g., when she remembers how her grandfather, the son of her German great-grandmother, had hosted her shy and clumsy friend in Paris on her first visit to France without speaking any German himself. (She tells about this episode in a humorous way and gives the impression as if she had participated in this encounter herself.) The narrator is still enthusiastic when looking back at how both of them had helped each other to get into the other’s language and culture. (“We got along very well right from the beginning. She had an immense interest in France and I had an immense interest in Germany.”) When she and her friend (who became a teacher of French and Spanish) look back at this time together they enjoy telling each other that they had somehow antedated sophisticated pedagogic concepts (of “tandem teaching” etc.) in an intuitive way (“we were really born language teachers”). During this time in the sixties they visit each other in Germany and France several times and only speak the language of the country where they just happen to be, etc. They also help each other with their preparations for their final exams in high school and seem quite successful in tutoring each other, since both of them get very good marks in the respective language exams. – In looking back she celebrates something like a special affinity between her and her friend and a European enthusiasm: “And for us Europe was always/ that was somehow always/ well, as I said, this positive idea which I had about Germany was still intensified, since I was hosted very warmly.”

We will not go deeper into her biography at this point, but would just like to mention that her close relationship with her German friend developed into a deep link with this particular city. There are different aspects which we found

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3 Her paternal great-grandmother had come from Germany “as a young girl” – a fact which is being kept alive in family narratives: “So she had been the first one who had gone to Europe.”

4 She spent a year in the German city (“her” city as she emphasises) as a teaching assistant during her time as a university student and decided to return for good because of her German boyfriend
intriguing: the fact that Amélie Métraux developed her own biographical action scheme of exploring something new (in a situation which she found unsatisfying and which involved the risk of her marginalisation); that she did it so early – during her early adolescence – and without any supporting structures of an organisation; that this process was marked by mutual intense curiosity and shared creativity in learning about the other’s culture and acquiring linguistic competencies; and that all of this had manifold consequences, opened up new options and is still visible in her current projects, orientations and self-identification as a “European”.

We would like to build on the case of Amélie Métraux to search for similar biographical processes which was marked by mutual intense curiosity in another European culture and language might take shape during adolescence, that this implies developing close relationships with members of another society and that all of this might have manifold and long-lasting consequences, also with regard to one’s identity and civic engagements. When studying interviews with some activists of civil society organisations from Poland and England we discovered the relevance of cross-cultural encounters during their high school days which left a lasting imprint on them. We also found instances of the biographical significance of extended involvements during the “European Volunteer Service”.

But the biographical processes which especially remind us of Amélie Métraux’s experiences are those which can be found in narrative interviews with former exchange students who spent a long time (usually a year) in another European country: they lived in a host family, went to school and made friends in their host country. There is one important difference though: While Amélie Métraux paved her way to another European country all by herself, exchange students become part of a “program” and can rely on the supportive structures of an organisation.

Becoming and being a foreign exchange student means entering a sequential institutional pattern which involves applying, being selected, being prepared, and future husband, but also because this city provided an escape route from an unattractive life as teacher in the French public sector that had been pre-arranged for her by her parents without her real consent. Her life was not easy – she had to study again at the local university and take her final exam there (but she nevertheless enjoyed this time at the new reform minded university in a period of the aftermath of the student movement); she lost a lot of time with a doctoral dissertation project which was not well supervised and then discouraged by her supervisor when she became pregnant; she had a hard time combining her life as a mother and in the academic world; she went through a divorce (and remarried after some time), started teaching and finally attained a permanent lectureship at the university; the latter also gave her the foundation to pursue her new and current dissertation project, which she is enthusiastic about.
being sent away, staying abroad (i.e., living in a family of strangers and attending a new school in a foreign language) and coming home. While sequential institutional patterns can certainly facilitate one’s orientation in a strange new situation and environment, it might also be the case – but this is an empirical question – that it sometimes interferes with one’s own action scheme and that it might even supplant one’s own motivation and initiative which, as Amélie’s experience shows, are necessary conditions for generating a sense of discovery of what is new, different and even strange, as well as developing a “methodology” of learning together.

In the following, we will therefore attempt to reconstruct and analyze the processes of becoming familiar with other European socio-cultural settings and belongings in the course of one’s participation in youth exchange programs. “Becoming familiar” also refers to the experience and learning that take place in an intimate setting of strangers, that is, somebody else’s family. This setting is characteristic as well as unique for high school students’ exchange. The exchange furthermore takes place during adolescence, a time of intensified questioning, reflection and shifting belongings. We will attempt to consider these dimensions that are relevant to such intensive and extensive experiences of participating in youth exchange programs in our discussion5.

We will follow how – sometimes – very interesting things develop at home again after returning from abroad and look at – changing – national and European self-identifications, as well as at a possible development of meaning resources and civic participation and involvement. Also, while becoming an exchange student is an institutional pattern which becomes increasingly common among European high school students, it is important to keep in mind the variety of the structural processes which can be found in young people’s life courses.

5 Birte Egloff (2011) describes a currently ongoing project on doing autobiographical interviews among the participants of several generations in a German-French youth exchange program. Interestingly, also in this study many interviewees trace back their adult involvement in different kinds of intercultural activities and partnerships to their high school exchange experience (Egloff 2011:129). Karin Reindlmeier’s study (2010) on diversity awareness is based on participant observation in youth encounters; however, these are short-term encounters between young people from different countries and do not involve an extended stay in another country. Among the – few – quantitative studies we could locate on the experience of youth exchange we found those of Alexander Thomas, a Regensburg psychologist, interesting (Thomas 2008–2010). Very helpful for us in understanding the history, praxis and concepts of international youth exchange have been the study of Andreas Thimmel (2001), of Rudolf Leiprecht (2001) and the writings of Manuela du Bois-Reymond (1999 with S. Hübner-Funk, 2007, and undated).
Anja Schröder-Wildhagen and we conducted seven narrative interviews with former exchange students from Germany – alumni of one of the big non-commercial youth exchange organisations – who spent one year in another European country (mostly Scandinavian countries, but also France) and one interview with a young man who had spent a year in England as a member of the European Volunteer Service. Of course this is a specific sample: Since we got to know our interviewees through an exchange organisation most of them happen to be quite active in the organisation and in some related endeavours. We will also make use of five interviews which were given to us from our colleagues from Poland and Wales. These interviews sometimes contain interesting contrasts with our German materials which we will refer to in between.

Most of our interviewees were still university students; the memory of their year abroad during high school was still quite fresh. Our special focus is on what has been happening around this year abroad when they were between sixteen and eighteen years old.

2. BIOGRAPHICAL CONDITIONS

When thinking of the collective, familial, and biographical conditions which contribute to Amélie Métraux’s early action scheme of trying to make new friends in another European country several things come to mind: especially her family’s history of emigrating (a few years after the end of the Second World War) and re-migrating, the favourable image of Germany as part their own family heritage – an ancestor had come from Germany – which is kept alive in family story-telling, and Amélie’s difficult situation as an adolescent in a French environment which appears alien to her. She constructs Germany as an interesting and attractive

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6 We would like to thank Kaja Kaźmierska and Marta Kowalska for bringing these interviews to our attention.

7 Her remarks reveal the importance of family story-telling in constructing and discovering “where we are from and what’s special about us”. Even though she does not comment on it explicitly, her great-grandmother had left Germany for France when the two countries still regarded each other as arch-enemies. As the narrator comments, her family’s positive image of “Germany and the Germans” had not been a matter-of-course among members of the older generation, especially in the North of France where the family had been at home.

8 At this point we would also like to mention that Lyudmila Nurse pointed out to us “that Amélie was already an inter-cultural communicator by the time she established her interest in Germany. She grew up in the U.S.A. and Canada, with the latter having a long tradition of bi-lingualism. Therefore, I do not think that ‘paving’ her way to another country was a biographical ‘accident’
place, e.g., by watching a TV program which features French and German pop singers together

The analysis of our sample of former foreign exchange students who had gone abroad during their adolescence thirty or more years after Amélie Métraux’ paving her way to Germany for the first time also reveals different collective, familial and biographical conditions which one has to take into account when trying to understand how a special receptivity for and interest in the idea of spending a year in another European country emerged in the first place. For most young people who consider spending a year abroad as exchange students the United States of America is still the No. 1 place to go, kids who want to go to another European country are still a minority. But it would be mistaken to assume that they are a distinct subgroup right from the start. There are many contingencies which come into play when applicants mark countries (in Europe or outside of Europe) in their application papers and state their priorities. In any case some of our narrators mention (in looking back at this phase of their lives) that they found it attractive to spend a year in a country which was not too far away from Germany but seemed sufficiently different at the same time.

But we are running ahead of our story. At this point we are just focusing on the biographical conditions for the emergence of a disposition for such a project in general. In comparing our interviews the following conditions could be discovered (conditions which sometimes overlap and interact with each other):

• An early exposure to and friendly interest in people who seem to be different: Narrators talk about experiences in nursery and elementary school with other children for a person like her, taking into consideration the time line of her biographical experience, of emigration and exposure to a multi-lingual environment in her childhood.

Lyudmila Nurse who has done extensive research on the role of music in identity making suggested that it might be worthwhile to analyse the TV program which Amélie had watched in order to shed light on her biographical decision. As she remarked, “music unites people more than anything because it is extremely emotional and because your heart is open and susceptible to influence.”

Of course there are ambitious parents who impose such an action scheme of becoming a foreign exchange student at high school age on their children (for different reasons). One interviewee who became active in her organisation as a volunteer mentioned that it is important to discover such things during the selection process since such kids would run into trouble if they had not identified with such a project themselves. None of our interviewees had experienced such an action scheme as imposed by their parents, but some also mentioned that they were reluctant and had doubts in between about the wisdom of going abroad – especially when there were delays in finding a family for them, when the first contact with the future family did not appear so promising or when they had the impression that they would end up being placed not in a major city but “in the middle of nowhere”. 
dren who look different, talk and act differently and whose mothers prepare strange and interesting meals. They remember their fascination and amazement with the diversity of ways of living. Hanne, who grew up in the inner-city district of a big German city, remembers that the pupils in her elementary school class who (like herself) did not have a “migration background” were a small minority. When she started to go to a grammar school (Gymnasium) in her fifth grade she found her new school environment much more weird and boring and missed the multicultural setting which she had been used to: “not as colourful and mixed as I knew it from elementary school”. In contrast to such experiences of becoming familiar with “diversity” which are commonplace in many German schools\textsuperscript{11} – especially in lower class districts of cities where a lot of migrant families are living – one narrator (Matylda from Poland) mentioned that her well-to-do parents had taken a special effort to expose her to an elite educational milieu which contained “diversity” as a program: a bilingual (Polish-French) school which tried to create favourable conditions for developing students’ interest in another language and culture\textsuperscript{12}.

\begin{itemize}
  \item An experience of marginalization in childhood and youth and the estrangement from a narrow environment. While Hanne, who had just been mentioned, found her elementary school environment exciting, she suffered from the milieu, the homogeneity and elitism of her secondary school and looked for a way to escape. Karsten suffered from the cold climate in his family when his parents became estranged from each other and at the same time he felt awkward, self-conscious and lonely among his peers. Frederic ran into trouble when he found out that he was gay and did not have many people whom he could turn to. He was looking for an escape outside of his familiar environment in order to avoid running across another boy whom he had fallen in love with but who did not return his feelings. In all these cases going abroad appears attractive as a response to a difficult life situation. Sometimes (as in Karsten’s and Frederic’s case) one could even identify a trajectory of suffering (Schütze, 1992, 1995), and then going abroad serves as an action scheme of escape.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{11} The fact that it has become commonplace does not mean that this development does not meet with fierce resistance. Recently a referendum was successful in the city of Hamburg which was dominated by upper class parents who were eager to overthrow the policy of the city government to provide for an extension of the time of joint schooling during the elementary school phase. Such an extension would have meant that children of migrant families and children without “migration background” would have spent more time together as pupils – and that exactly was a red rag to the promoters of the referendum.

\textsuperscript{12} In Matylda’s case this seems to have been successful. She spent some time in a French boarding-school afterwards.
Different ways in which the family history and family milieu might become relevant: Some narrators mention that family story telling became important in creating images of certain countries and keeping them alive – also against the backdrop of the collective history (when, e.g., the father of one former exchange student vividly remembers stories which create a very positive image of the Danish resistance against German occupation during the Second World War). Memories of family travelling contribute to impressions of certain countries – this is the source of Hanne’s fascination with Northern Europe – just as the lack of such experiences leaves its imprint, too: Zula, whose parents had come to the GDR as students from an Asian socialist country and who had moved to West Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall, remembers that her family had been exposed to heavy travel restrictions in Europe because they did not have German citizenship. Overcoming borders and moving freely in Europe became important biographical topics to her. – The case of immigrants shows that family history can be part of a collective history in different ways, or different altogether from the collective history of the country of residence. As qualitative-interpretive studies have shown, such a difference bears on belongings as well as political socialization (Georgi 2003, Mecheril/Hoffarth 2009, Inowlocki 2006).

The importance of the collective history (as already revealed in the last example): This topic figured quite prominently in interviews with three former exchange students who had grown up in the GDR – e.g., with regard to the abolition of travel restrictions and the deeply felt need of families to explore new territories, but also in the context of sensing resentments against “the other Germans”. Sven remembers that going to France as an exchange student also had the meaning of avoiding West Germany. Now – much later – he finds it is about time to get to know West Germany. It appears that similarly to the younger generation in families of immigrants “going to a third place” is seen as a solution of feeling like a stranger in what seems more “close to home”. For young people like Sven who had been socialised in the former GDR, it seems that going abroad presented a way out of going to West Germany. (While this is different, of course, from growing up in an immigrant family, there might be a similar motive during adolescence in going to a third country rather than staying in the country where your ways or belongings are constantly questioned and publicly debated.)
3. GETTING READY

The idea of going abroad is sometimes introduced by parents, older siblings or friends who had themselves spent a year in another country and then provided encouragement to do the same. Young people learn about the availability of exchange schemes and think about countries where they would like to go. In imagining these countries and comparing them, their symbolical representations play an important role, e.g., of a “far away” versus “closer” country; of “north, cold and snowy” versus “south and warm”; of what seems a highly individualised choice rather than “where everybody else goes”; and of what the country’s language signifies. When applying, they then also calculate their chances of being placed in a country of their choice: “Which countries do I have to mark so that I have a chance to go to a country where I would really like to go?”

As an example of developing fantasies about favourite countries, we quote from our sequential report on the interview with Zula, a young Asian German woman:

“When she was very young, the U.S.A. ‘had always been a kind of dream land’ for her, during her ‘rebellious phase’ (as a part-time member of a Punk scene) it had lost this appeal (‘the capitalist America’ had the ‘image of the enemy’). She developed a special liking for Finland, especially because she did not know much about it. Even though it was still Europe it felt quite different. She recounts that she was active in constructing a positive image of this country: by using stories of her aunt who had shortly visited Finland; by selecting Finnish sportsmen as her favourite athletes; by interviewing a Finnish exchange student (when she was a member of the staff of her school newspaper) who compared Finnish people with coconuts (‘hard outside and soft inside’) – an image which she liked; and by being attracted to snow and the cold climate.”

She is thus actively involved in turning Finland into an attractive place for herself. It is also important that this should be a place which she does not know much about, i.e., a space which is left to the imaginary, which she can fill in with her own images. (This relates to the key importance of “potential space” during adolescence, which we will come back to in our discussion.)

Here comes another excerpt from a sequential report – this time on the interview with Aneta, a young woman who grew up in East Germany. The following sequence also refers to her choice of a country:

“By coincidence, her girl-friend showed her an information leaflet for an exchange year. Aneta renders their conversation in direct speech: Her girl-friend wanted to go to the

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13 Terms, phrases and sentences which are put in quotation marks within the following excerpts from sequential reports are taken from the respective narrative interviews.
U.S.A., Aneta ‘not at all’. She took the leaflet home, however, and from the 25 or 30 other countries marked Russia and Finland (she would have marked Iceland, but it was not listed). She says that she still cannot reconstruct her choice, she simply decided: ‘I thought to myself, I do not need to go far away.’ Without knowing anything about Finland, she thought the idea was just great.”

The initial scene which introduced the student exchange to Aneta seems to be rendered in direct speech because of its ongoing dramatic content of decision, action, agency and change and also because of the epistemic potential of an intuition that was confirmed in consequence (she spent her year in Finland and regards it as a good experience). It seems that Finland represents to her a place as far away as she can go within Europe: a country she knows “nothing” about, thus representing a new potential space, but close to home.

The application process takes a long time; specific modalities differ among the organizations¹⁴. Sometimes applicants have to go to a hearing (this was the case in our interviews), sometimes they are invited to a leisure-time meeting, where they are also being observed by alumni and members of the organization at the same time: They have fun, play together, are encouraged to be open about themselves, but at the same time they are being observed – and are chosen or not chosen or put on a waiting list. (We have learned about these experiences from alumni of another big non-commercial organization.) This experience can be very hard, very disappointing and can also be burdensome or disruptive for peer-relationships, and close friendships might break up: Why did they get selected right away, whereas I was put on a waiting list? Do they present themselves more attractively than I do? Do they have a more attractive personality than me? Young people are especially vulnerable and unsure about themselves. The mixture of having leisure-time fun together and then being selected or not (on the basis of “my” behaviour during such a weekend) is a weird arrangement and can lead to lasting irritations among those who are not so lucky as the ones chosen right away.

After being accepted, the young people still have to wait for a placement. Sometimes their place is allocated very late before their intended departure (depending on the availability of families which have volunteered for the organization). During this time, the program participants have to go to preparatory meetings. We quote again from the sequential report on the interview with Zula:

“Zula enjoys the memory of her preparatory meeting lasting for a week where she was together with about thirty to forty other (future) foreign exchange students. The narrative still reveals how much she enjoyed the special atmosphere: the many conversations with

¹⁴ As mentioned before, most of the interviews were done with alumni of one international non-commercial organisation.
other students about their chosen country, for example. She was surprised when she learned that many of them had also chosen Finland. Zula was impressed about a lecture on democracy and the meaning of being a kind of ‘ambassador’ to another country, but the lecture which impressed her most and moved her to tears was the speech of the president of the organisation who talked about his meeting with Polish exchange students and the special task of German exchange students to build bridges during their stay in Eastern Europe (and to show that something has changed in Germany). She remembers (and is somewhat amused about it in retrospect) that she and other students who had chosen Western European countries almost felt somewhat guilty for not going to Eastern Europe. She remembers that she ‘admired’ the others (who sometimes stuck to their destination despite the objections of their parents) and felt ‘egotistic’ for choosing the easy road.”

Going to Finland in fact was not exactly “the easy road”, as it is very difficult to learn the Finnish language, but Zula was successful in this regard.

4. AN EXCURSUS: SOME NOTES ON ADOLESCENCE THEORY

At this point we would like to refer to some aspects of adolescence theory to shed light on some of the phenomena which we encountered in our interviews. While the concept of “youth” denotes a phase between childhood and adulthood that takes place in or between rather institutionalized settings during a specific number of years, such as between 14 and 18 years, “adolescence” is not defined in terms of an age period but characterised by the reflexive processes brought about in the individual’s reaction to her or his bio-psycho-social transformations experienced from the onset of puberty. (In fact, some researchers consider any intensive reflexive period in response to a personal crisis throughout adulthood as a form of “adolescence”, as undergoing transformations with all the self-questioning this might involve [Mecheril/Hoffarth, 2009].

Experiencing oneself in “crisis” because of suddenly markedly different desires, needs, capacities, and relations with others was first seen by Erik H. Erikson (Erikson, 1968) as characteristic of the changes encountered during each developmental phase in life, from early childhood to late adulthood. Adolescence, however, constitutes specific challenges because one’s parents are no longer in the centre of one’s emotional attachments, but these rather shift towards other objects of love and desire, towards (future) partners in intimate relationships. At the same time, it becomes necessary to make plans for ending school and/or continuing studies that should lead to one’s own professional choice and qualification. Importantly, shifting belongings also refer to one’s relationship to shared, collective and intersecting notions of gender, social class, nation, and
ethnicity. Orientations and involvements change, access to and participation in public (media) spheres become of imminent importance.

As Erikson recognised, a “moratorium”, or time-out period from fixed obligations and institutionalized settings is a necessary condition for encountering these challenges, thus a time when young people are given time and space to work out what went wrong and hurt them when they were younger and in order to imagine, find and create their own solutions. The concept of “potential space” (Erdheim, 1982, Bosse, 2000, King, 2002) implies such a “second chance” and, at the same time, offers possibilities of transition that can be explored. But the conditions for experiencing a “potential space” are unequally distributed, globally and also in different European societies, depending on forms of modernization and on class, gender, educational and political systems (Leccardi, 2006).

Adolescents characteristically experience things as though they were the first to ever feel and think this way, as nobody ever did before. Expressions of their experience, their perception and reflection can indeed create sources of “generativity”, of shared innovation.

Beyond our very specific middle class sample, we can think about cases which we do not find in our sample, of young people who have restricted possibilities for experiencing “potential space”. We think youth exchange programs should give more support for such possibilities especially also to young people in less privileged situations, because this constitutes an important moment of innovation in people’s lives and in society.

5. BEING EXPOSED TO THE UNFAMILIAR

When we consider in which ways the time of youth exchange can be conducive towards experiencing “potential space”, we have to take into account what it can imply to accommodate oneself to encountering and living with strangers. Living in a foreign country and in a family of strangers is certainly a period of hard work, because young people have to find their place in a new and strange environment, observing relationships and building their own in their host families. As strangers, they have to work hard to find their place.

There are moving examples of finding new possibilities of communication and a shared community— and also in discovering a new spontaneity in oneself.

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15 One can find an impressive sequence about such experiences in the interview with Kalina, a Polish woman, who had been interviewed as a “transnational worker” by Agnieszka Gurdala. Kalina had spent her year as an exchange student in the United States. It is remarkable that she
Karsten, a young man from East Germany, had felt very lonely in his German home environment. He had a very unhappy family situation, he always felt awkward and like an outsider in his class. An important and recurring topic in his interview — and something which he still marvels at — is that he felt quite different when he went to other countries in Europe. When he first went on a stay abroad as a member of the European Volunteer Service\(^\text{16}\) doing ecological work he still preferred to live on an isolated farm. While his need for retreat and privacy had turned him into an outsider among his peers at home, he felt accepted by his new peers when he said that he enjoyed living on the farm: They found this interesting and did not stigmatize him.

Of course there are prolonged experiences of awkwardness, irritations and crises, sometimes young people change their host family if they cannot overcome the experience of not feeling at home. In such critical situations it is extremely important to have trustworthy local representatives of the exchange organisation around: counsellors who might help the young person to see things in a new light, who encourage, mediate and sometimes are helpful in arranging a change of the host family\(^\text{17}\).

\(^{16}\) We mention him here even though his experience of a one year stay abroad differs in some respects from the experience of foreign exchange students who lived in families and went to high school. Similar experiences of a surprising new quality of relationships and a new relationship with oneself in a foreign environment in which one can start anew can also be found among exchange students.

\(^{17}\) Marta Kowalska gave us the interesting interview with a young woman from Rumania, Daniela, who had come to Germany at the age of 14 on a “sports scholarship” because she had been identified as an especially gifted and promising basketball player who was attractive to a German basketball club. After her arrival in Germany she lived with a German family that was also involved in the social world of basketball. Living in this family was marked by extreme alienation and isolation, since the whole family arrangement was part of an exploitative project which can actually be regarded as a kind of child labour even though this was concealed (“sports scholarship”): As far as we can see, the overriding interest of those who had arranged her stay in Germany was to make use of her qualities as an athlete. – We mention this case here since it sheds light on the structural differences with a responsible youth exchange arrangement which is organised and supervised by a non-commercial organisation. In Daniela’s case there was no one around whom she could turn to when life in this family became unbearable. Of course we do not claim that counsellors of youth exchange organisations are always sufficiently sensible and responsible. They might make wrong decisions which create turmoil and prolong an unbearable situation.
Changing the family sometimes occurs after they have had the chance to compare their experiences with the experiences of other exchange students. Starting to compare might happen already right at the beginning of the exchange year when young people have the feeling that the other host families who pick up their new (temporary) member are much more easy going and cordial than the tense strangers who pick “me” up. (Inge, who had been in Finland, tells about such an experience in a detailed way in her interview.) Changing the family is the most radical way of dealing with disappointments, but there are also ways of establishing rapport after initial difficulties. Narrators described their strategies of, e.g., acquiring the right to use the kitchen. There are different divisions of labour in one’s own family of origin and in the host family, different systems of rights and privileges, different gender patterns. To give one example: Hanne, a young woman who had grown up in a feminist commune in a big West German city, was kept out of the kitchen in her host family where only the mother took care of cooking. She described how she devised a plan how to earn her way into the kitchen by negotiating with her host mother to cook something German.

In another case, a young woman felt some awkwardness in her relationship with her host mother. She then became very reflexive in establishing rapport, by her use of what she herself termed “rituals”, e.g., by looking at photographs together with her host mother. In this way, she could do something together with her. Young people develop communicative skills even though it is not a happy experience all the time to be in a strange family.

When asking how such experiences become formative for young people we sometimes found that they develop a quasi-ethnographic glance, including an interest in small things. Inge who had also gone to Finland gives elaborate and very detailed accounts of Finnish cooking or regional diets. In our interpretation session of this interview, some of the researchers reacted nervously when reading such detailed descriptions; others were full of admiration of her interest in very, very small things which represent the other culture in her eyes.

And of course there is also an interest in learning about other national narratives, which is very important in the interviews with the former German exchange students, especially learning about the place of the Germans in these other national narratives through stories about the 2nd World War.

One might call this “the burden of the collective history”, but of course young people going abroad might also experience that their country is something like a white spot on the mental map of members of their host country — something which is irritating as well (as our colleague Marta Kowalska mentioned with regard to the experience of Gosia, a young Polish exchange student in the U.S.).
The topic of the burden comes up in the interview with Hanne who had gone to Northern Norway, a region totally devastated by the German army. But there is also the surprising experience of being able to cope with it in unexpected encounters and of creating a bridge. We quote from the sequential report of the interview with her:

“Hanne remembers that people enjoyed talking about tricks which the local population had played on the German soldiers. – A girl friend of hers told her they could be good friends, but she couldn’t take her home because of her grandmother who had painful memories of the German occupation. (Hanne accepted this position of her friend, especially because of her memories of her own great-grandfather who had had Alzheimer’s disease and had had difficulties in realizing the time in which he lived, e.g., expressing fear of black people.) When the same grandmother reacted very friendly and even enthusiastically when they met by accident, the girl-friend was quite astonished. Hanne was moved by the reaction of her friend’s grandmother and her interest in Germany.

However, the inadequate analogy that Hanne creates between the stereotypical and racialized perception of her great-grandfather and the actual painful experience of the Nazi occupation is not clear to her at this point.

There are many instances of the burden of the collective history (as in other European countries) in the interviews with the narrators who all belong to the generation of the grandchildren. Even Zula (whose parents had come to the GDR as students from a socialist Asian country) cannot avoid the particular sense of humour of Finnish kids when they greet her as a German by doing the Nazi salute.

Another excerpt from the sequential report of the interview with Hanne:

“The narrator talks about the stigmatisation and social exclusion of children of German soldiers in Norway until the seventies (in order to provide some background on the general atmosphere). People’s reactions to her were marked by an open and friendly curiosity against the backdrop of the collective history. Many people talked about Haider’s success in Austria. Hanne remembers her conversations with her host mother who was a teacher of German: Her host mother did not understand the critical stance of many Germans to their own nation. She said that she ‘couldn’t understand at all that it is not possible to say that one is proud of one’s nation.’ Hanne says this made her think. (The organization had prepared the German exchange students in stressing the Nazi past as something which was unavoidably ‘theirs’.) Hanne said that during her stay in Norway she emphasized her pride in her local identity as a citizen of a particular German city, but that there would be nothing which she could be proud of as a German. Experiencing the Norwegians’ pride in their own country had made her think a lot about why this was not possible among Germans”.

This excerpt also illustrates in which ways political socialisation processes can take place during adolescence, namely through being confronted with the
perspective of the other and through comparing stances and positionalities that differ from those one is habitually used to.

Other exchange students – friends from other countries – become really important during this time. They develop some solidarity, some kind of humour by talking behind the back of members of their host society. They also become important by providing a chance to compare their respective life circumstances and thereby finding out what is particular for “my” case and what “we” share. Sometimes this is an important condition for finally deciding to develop an action scheme of leaving the host family for another family (if the organisation consents).

The relationships with host parents and siblings can become and remain highly significant after returning to the home country; sometimes young people lose contact or just stay in touch with only one family member. Sven who had spent his year as an exchange student in France developed an especially close relationship with his host parents. But his case also reveals which misunderstandings and disappointments can emerge in such a situation. When Sven returned to France for a two year apprenticeship as a carpenter (not too far away from where his host family lived) his host father, who had been ill for a long time, died. Sven sensed some disappointment of his host mother that he did not show the commitment and sensibility in this phase which could be expected from a “real” son – a problem which is still painful for the narrator at the time of the interview. He is happy that his host mother communicated that they still feel close to him and appreciate his attachment to their family.

The exchange participants sometimes encounter a problem abroad which workers and volunteers of the organization refer to as the phenomenon of a “virtual umbilical cord”: Because of the availability of mobile phone, e-mail communication, facebook and skype they sometimes continue – and feel obliged – to participate in an (almost) everyday communication with their families and friends and therefore find it difficult to really familiarize themselves with the new and strange environment. The process of becoming familiar is being slowed down, if it happens at all. Their free time is being absorbed by moving and “being stuck” in already familiar networks which are being kept alive electronically. This kind of difficulty is a rather recent phenomenon which was unknown in the times of slow mail correspondence.
6. COMING HOME, LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD AND GETTING INVOLVED

Coming home might be a complicated process for the young people, their families and their friends who had stayed “behind”: They need time to adjust to each other and to respect that they had gone in different directions and gathered experiences which are difficult to share. Narrators also mention some disappointment about a lack of interest in their experiences among those who had stayed at home. Some of them try to find a refuge in their everyday life which reminds them of their experience abroad and provides a contrast to a German environment which appears inhospitable. For two returnees from France and England who lived close to the Polish border, crossing the border once in a while and spending some time in a Polish environment and atmosphere provided such an escape route. For one of them Poland turned into a fascinating place in its own right: He feels much more at home there than in his German town, has learned the language, has found a Polish girlfriend and wants to live there in the future.

For most of the interviewees in our sample it remains important or becomes important after some time to get together with other former exchange students again; sometimes they get involved in coaching younger kids who go abroad. Coming together with other former exchange students gives them a chance to learn that they are not alone in feeling awkward in their old environment. The organisation provides opportunities for making sense of the year abroad, for developing skills for getting involved as volunteers (as team leaders, leading group discussions etc.), for time-outs (e.g., a “gap year” after graduating from high school in order to do voluntary work in the social sector when they are still reluctant to commit themselves to a certain course at university and feel they need time to find out where they want to go), for developing action schemes of experiencing something new and for discovering new biographical topics. For example, Inge who had gone to Finland as an exchange student went on a practice placement to Russia and lived in a Russian family for half a year.

The exchange organisation which figures most prominently in our interviews has developed an annual seminar which all returnees have to attend before going home to their families again: a seminar in which the participants are strongly invited to identify themselves as “Europeans”. (The seminar which takes place in a European country is attended by all the exchange students who had spent a year in another European country.) We have the impression (based on our interviews) that this “bridging” event has become biographically significant for many of the former exchange students: something which sticks out in their memories as
something exceptional and something shared with others and gives some sense of direction to their future life. This is an excerpt from the sequential report on the interview with Hanne when she talks about this experience at the end of her year as exchange student:

“Before returning home the European exchange students who had spent their year in other European countries had a Europe wide meeting for a couple of days (in Denmark) which she experienced as extremely exciting. ‘That was the biggest festival of my life.’ 300 European exchange students. ‘And we did not sleep for four days.’ About half of them were speaking German. The languages of communication were German and English. – Very exciting. They also had an official topic but she forgot what it was about. Very exciting that so many nations could have fun together. Every exchange student wore a tag with two flags, in her case: the German and the Norwegian flag. She says it was a common experience that students (like herself) felt closer to the country where they had just spent a year. ‘It was something strange. And you could start feeling close to something which was not your own.’ And it was totally irrelevant where you were from. According to her something like that only functions in such an environment and for a short time. Hanne says that it functions among members of nations which have traditionally not been friendly to each other. Exciting: the strange view on one’s own country. How foreign exchange students told about their experiences in Germany and were enthusiastic. You as German could not be enthusiastic about Germany but about Hungary or Norway. – Hanne says that it would have been possible for her to return to such a meeting as a volunteer later on, but she never did that again because she wanted to preserve her memories of this special event. The seminar was ‘such a sacred thing’ for her that she did not want to attend a later seminar and have negative experiences.”

The experience keeps on “working” throughout later life. – Zula sounds very similar even though she focuses more on (what you might call) the “non-Woodstock” elements:

“A week-long seminar in Czechia after her stay in Finland which Zula talks about enthusiastically. 350 European foreign exchange students who had just spent a year in another country plus volunteers. The impressive diversity of languages. ‘Diversity of thoughts’. Extremely interesting. Overriding theme: human rights. Talking about it with so many different people. All young people about the same age. E.g., Finnish students who had been in France who spoke to French students who had been in Germany. Many people from former Soviet states. – Zula mentions that she developed a special interest in these seminars as a volunteer later on. She also took part in the preparatory seminars (for German exchange students). Developing skills in leading groups. Enthusiasm for the seminar and ‘Europe’. Learning about different approaches and values, but common European project. Learning to make compromises. – Before the year in Finland Zula had no interest in Eastern Europe. This changed after the seminar in Czechia when she got to

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11 When reading the description Fritz Schütze felt reminded of the atmosphere of „evangelische Kirchentage“, big public events of the protestant church in Germany, which oscillate between mega parties, political rallies, conferences, bible classes and meditations.
know kids from Eastern Europe personally. Enthusiasm when getting to know kids who went to Croatia and other Eastern countries. Her hope to ‘incite a European identity’. Later on she went to Estonia and Lithuania in this context.”

Subsequently Zula becomes very active in “recruiting” foreign exchange students in a “European group” (many of whom had not been in another European country but overseas and had become used to identify themselves as “Europeans” during this time), similar to the “Latino group” (returnees from Latin America who share and celebrate their memories).

Another excerpt from the sequential report on the interview with Zula:

“In contrast to Hanne, Zula also talks about specific procedures in which kids had to take over perspectives which were strange to them (something which she experienced later on when she participated in these seminars as a volunteer). That’s what she says right at the end of her narrative: Parliament simulation at the seminar for young Europeans of her youth exchange organisation. Students had to represent their host countries in a ‘parliament’. They were really good at it. (E.g., topic of homosexual marriages. Kids taking over a ‘hard core’ official Polish perspective, even though they were much more liberal personally). Impressive. A representative of the European Commission who was present said that he was thankful for having had the chance to see this. In Brussels he would see the ‘Europe of words’, here he could see the ‘lived Europe’. Europe in its diversity. No one asks for consensus. She talks about a ‘Streitkultur’ (an atmosphere of constructive debate), but also fairness. Seeing the young people as European citizens. What is handed down to them today will carry fruits tomorrow. As she says, ‘That’s great for me.’”

The performative quality is noticeable here: They talk about Europe, reconciliation etc., but use procedures of a European arena at the same time.

These and other sequences of the sequential report on Zula’s interview led one reader to the critical assessment that she is merely a “mouthpiece” of the organisation (selling its ideology), but we are convinced that she is not. Her enthusiasm about these experiences is deeply rooted in her own biography as a member of a migrant family from a distant country which could not take free travelling in Europe for granted. Among our interviewees she is the one who is most committed to and outspoken about a European project (values, procedures of a free debate etc.) that also includes a deep concern about the discrimination of minorities and about a “fortress of Europe” which tries to erect walls at its borders.

Some of the former exchange students develop a “recreational career” within the organisation (cf. the interviews with Zula, Hanne, Aneta and Inge), but of course there are manifold consequences of the year abroad beyond their volunteering work for the organisation – consequences which are visible in decisions, activities and commitments: e.g., the choice of their course of studies, biographical projects, further stays abroad (Erasmus etc.) and a strong European orientation,
e.g., a fascination with the particularities and the language of a neighbour country that reminds us of Amélie Métraux’s professional project, which we mentioned in the beginning. Some of our interviewees, especially Zula, Hanne and Aneta, developed a strong European self-identification and a non-intrusive and undogmatic “mission” to promote a European collective identity and to engage in what one might call “European neighbourhood work”. Their year abroad, but also cross cultural experiences afterwards (especially in the context of counselling and accompanying (future) exchange students and returnees), serve as resources for keeping such projects alive and for giving meaning to them.

7. MORE GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

In concluding, we would like to raise some theoretical as well as practical considerations with regard to youth exchange programs and related conditions of developing European orientations and belongings. First of all, we would like to emphasize the significance of going and staying abroad in terms of a “potential space” during adolescence. As we have tried to show, having such a possibility can enable biographical “repair work” of what was difficult and remained unresolved in one’s own family and regular place of residence. It can also literally open up new horizons and put young people into a position of finding themselves in a strange place and developing meaningful ways of communication. When things go well, especially with the members of their host family and the school they attend – many passages in our sample of interviews relate to the school experience abroad, mostly very positively, something we could not go into here – this encourages young people to attempt an understanding from within the country they have come to. This can include learning difficult and unfamiliar languages (such as Finnish), noticing local customs and ways, and understanding historical narratives based on very different experiences than those known from home. (Since our sample mostly consisted of program participants from Germany, the history of the 2nd World War came up in countries that had been occupied by Nazi Germany.)

Such learning processes take time. Our interviewees critically comment on certain short term arrangements, or arrangements which don’t really “pull” young people into the local environment and culture. In this regard there are a lot of similarities between extended youth exchanges in family settings and placements in the context of the European Volunteer Service (as in the interviews with Karsten and Magda), which entail serious (ecological, social) work projects and commitments within the local community abroad. These would present favourable
conditions and processes for fostering new belongings and generate orientations and self-identifications with more than one European country. To work this out, it is also important to provide spaces for making sense of the year abroad and to engage in biographical work (in the interview with Inge it was mentioned that after her return her organisation did not provide enough opportunities for such self-reflection and that she had to turn to another organisation).

In the cases we discussed here we found sometimes emphatic self-identifications as Europeans. We understand this as an experience based “grounding” for participating in the arena discourses and debates of what we have termed “European mental space” in our EUROIDENTITIES research project. Young people develop different kinds of images of Europe, as very elaborately expressed by Zula and Amélie. In Inge’s narrative we find a deep appreciation of the European Union as a place where the rule of law exists and minorities are protected (something which comes up for her when travelling with other young people through parts of the former Soviet Union).

With regard to policy implications for youth exchange we strongly suggest to make use of the ideas and suggestions of former participants. There is a lot of practice wisdom of volunteers and workers of such organisations which should be taken into account (cf. the organization of the bridging seminar at the end of the exchange students’ year abroad, which often becomes a biographically significant event and serves to strengthen a personal and collective self-identification as European). Then, we see a bias favouring young people from middle class backgrounds in exchange programs (Thomas, 2008–2010), while especially such an experience abroad could provide remedies for the original biographical situation and as a possibility for a “second chance”. We would thus want to emphasize the need for critical self-reflexion of the middle-class bias in supporting stays abroad and of possible traps in selecting procedures.

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Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiamy analizę przypadku Francuzki, która “wydeptała” swoją drogę od niemieckości ku europejskości a następnie przechodzimy do analizy biografii współczesnych młodych ludzi, którzy spędzili rok w jednym z krajów europejskich w ramach wymiany edukacyjnej. Wiąże się to z koniecznością wejścia w określony wzorzec instytucjonalny obejmujący: aplikację, wybór, przygotowania do wyjazdu, wysłanie do innego kraju, przebywanie za granicą (u obcej rodziny i w obcym środowisku szkolnym), powrót do domu. Wskazujemy na specyficzne uwarunkowania biograficzne wpływające na znaczenie wyjazdu, który przypada na czas Adolescencji, co wiąże się z określonymi konsekwencjami biograficznymi zwłaszcza w wymiarze zaangażowania w międzynarodowe projekty, pracę nad tożsamości i budowanie identyfikacji europejskiej. W części końcowej analizujemy bardziej ogólne (praktyczne i teoretyczne) rezultaty badań w oparciu o inne materiały zebrane w ramach projektu Euroidentieties.

Słowa kluczowe: wymiana młodzieży, adolescencja, potencjalna przestrzeń, historia kolektywna, bycie Europejczykiem