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Coping with cultural dissonance in study abroad: affective reactions and intercultural development

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Abstract

This paper investigates feelings and emotions in intercultural development through an analysis of students' journals. It looks into the affective reactions to life in Spain and how these relate to the intercultural development of a cohort of 26 American students participating in a calendar year study abroad programme (SAP) in a Spanish university, a pertinent study given that Spain, which hosts 9,5% of total American students abroad, has become the third preferred destination of American university students (Institute of International Education, 2019).

Although the literature on cultural dissonance highlights the prevalence of feelings of distress when sojourners are removed from their social support systems, findings divulge a myriad of feelings classified into 9 areas that show a balance between uncertainty and stress of study abroad (SA), and excitement and feelings of well-being.

Departing from affective reactions, analysis has likewise been conducted on how students come to terms with a different reality. Data evince that understanding new meanings and symbols is done through a comparative/contrastive problematising orientation through which SA is presented as challenge rather than as threat.

The paper concludes that SA and reflection upon it contribute to reassess and shift frames of reference, influencing intercultural development and personal growth.

Keywords: American sojourners/students; affective reactions; emotions and feelings; intercultural development; study abroad.

1. Introduction

Human beings interpret the world through frames of reference, structures of assumptions that allow us to understand life and experiences and that can only be expanded, replaced or altered through critical reflection on individual assumptions (Mezirow, 1997), which mainly occurs when we are confronted with a different reality through intercultural experiences (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006). The appreciation of cultural differences and the development of intercultural competency is one of the chief goals of study abroad programmes (SAPs), characterised by their potentially life-altering effect.

2. Feelings and emotions in intercultural development

2.1. Interculturality, a multifaceted construct

Intercultural growth constitutes one of the most salient outcomes of SA. The complexities of intercultural development have spurred multifarious frameworks of intercultural competence (IC) to encompass the processes through which individuals succeed in relativising cultural practices and understanding otherness by discarding preconceived notions.

In the context of study abroad (SA), the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) examines how sojourners refine their understanding of cultural differences in a six-step paradigm that views intercultural sensitivity in an escalating continuum departing from denial, defense and minimisation (ethnocentric stages) to reach acceptance, adaptation and integration (ethnorelative stages). In ethnocentric stages, individuals heavily rely on their cultural framework by denying, accepting—although polarizing—differences (as either superior or inferior) or dismissing cultural differences as nonexistent or unimportant. Ideally, contact with the host culture (HC) should lead to ethnorelative stages of neutrally accepting differences, positively adapting to them and integrating one's own and other frames of reference in a new identity.

A further influential paradigm is Byram's five-component conception of intercultural communicative competence (1997). It comprehends intercultural attitudes (openness or curiosity), knowledge (of how human beings interact and of one's own and the interlocutor's cultures), skills of interpreting and relating (interpreting documents/events from a different culture and relating them to document/events from one's own culture with a similar degree of significance), skills of discovery and interaction (learning about the new cultural practices under the constraints of real-time interaction), and critical cultural awareness (critical assessment and appreciation of other and one's cultural perspectives, practices and products). Likewise, Fantini et al. (2001) distinguish four interrelated dimensions of IC—knowledge, skill, attitude, and awareness of the self and the other—, intertwined with abilities and personal attributes (flexibility, patience, appreciation of differences, suspending judgement, adaptability, curiosity, open-mindedness, self-reliance, empathy or tolerance of ambiguity) (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006).

In a similar vein, Deardorff (2006) proposes a Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence expressing movement from a personal to an interactive level. Respect, openness and curiosity emerge as requisite attitudes to step forward to a second level, skills (listening, observing, interpreting, analysing, evaluating and relating) and knowledge and comprehension (deep understanding of culture). Operating these attitudes, skills and knowledge leads to the third level, desired internal outcomes (adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative views and empathy), which usher in a fourth stage, desired external outcomes (adequate intercultural behaviour and interaction as a result of the previous components).

The three dimensions of Williams' (2009) Reflective Model of Intercultural Competency—cognitive (knowledge of norms, values and behaviours), affective (flexibility and open-mindedness) and behavioural (problem-solving skills and culturally adequate people skills)—are operationalised into four desired outcomes for SA students: enhanced understanding of international/cultural issues, flexibility, open-mindedness, curiosity and critical skills.

Byram's IC five-component framework, was reviewed by Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoint-Gaillard & Philippou's (2014), who present a four-element model containing feelings and attitudes, behaviours, knowledge and skills, and the new component of action-taking or pro-active reaction—cooperating on joint ventures or challenging one's worldview and behaviour—as a consequence of the preceding components.

The foregoing discussion exposes the intricacies behind the concept of intercultural development. Commonalities, however, are observed, such as the relevance of behavioural, affective and cognitive elements embodied in personal flexible traits and attributes (curiosity, openness, respect for otherness), cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and specific skills (analyse, interpret, relate, observe, listen and cognitive skills) (Deardorff, 2006). They facilitate "awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; and self-awareness of one's own culture" (Deardorff, 2006: 247), both external and internal outcomes of SA (Miller-Perrin & Thompson, 2014).

2.2. Affect in study abroad (SA)

Intercultural development in SA is marked by affective reactions, physical and emotional reactions to a specific situation. Experiencing otherness during SA sparks a potentially constructive disequilibrium and disorientation (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011) that may prompt transformative learning, the reassessment and consequent alteration of frames of reference through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997).

This discomfort has been analysed in acculturation and culture shock literature from two perspectives: sociocultural/behavioural and psychological/emotional (Brown & Holloway, 2008a). From the field of psychology, this phenomenon is conceptualised in a classical J-form (conflict, adjustment and satisfaction) or U-form bend (fascination, depression, gradual and

total recovery). Even though a W-form bend, with similar stages in both SA (novelty, conflict, adjustment and satisfaction) and the readjustment experienced upon sojourners' return home (difficulty, satisfaction and acceptance), is also possible (Brislin & Pedersen, 1976). However, current research emphasises that, since culture shock is not universal, not all students experience the traditional pattern of fascination, hostility/frustration, final acceptance and adaptation. Understanding cultural dissonance is an unpredictable, dynamic and personal phenomenon whose phases overlap and where some students experience initial fascination, whereas others feel negative emotions (Brown & Holloway, 2008a; Irwin, 2009; Petkova, 2009).

Alternative sociocultural approaches propound that culture shock appears when "the firm grounding in one's symbolic world is lost" (Irwin, 2009: 352), which instigates a clash between sojourners' perceived meanings and the new codes. Cultural dissonance is perceived in terms of consciousness and relates to how individuals figure out the new meanings and shared symbols. Petkova (2009) distinguishes three stages. In the unawareness phase, sojourners are oblivious to the culture shock experienced and comprehend HC from the prism of the home culture (HOMC). In the partial awareness stage, HC is compared to HOMC, although interpretations transpire by the perspective of HOMC. In the full awareness phase, understanding and interpretation of HC are achieved through the viewpoint of HC, generating a hybrid identity. Hence, transition occurs from ethnocentric and judgmental reactions shaped by individuals' cultural filters to questioning deep-rooted cultural assumptions and developing critical cultural reflection based on comparative and contextual thinking (Marx & Moss, 2011). Throughout this transition, HOMC remains at the core while stronger links with HC are formed (Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer & Lee, 2011).

Cultural dissonance becomes an intercultural learning experience only if it allows individuals to reduce the uncertainty of facing life in an unfamiliar environment, which demands constant readjustments to cope with unknown social practices and discourses (cognition), unfamiliar ways of communicating and conducting oneself (behaviour) and mixed and often negative feelings at the onset of sojourners' stay (affection).

Affection plays a fundamental role during SA. Loneliness, feeling out of place, anxiety, depression and homesickness are often reported, although perceived cultural similarity seems to reduce homesickness (Pedersen et al., 2011). Even sharing the language of HC and HOMC does not prevent sojourners from experiencing anxiety, miscommunication, misunderstanding, embarrassment and disorientation (Marx & Moss, 2011; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Frequently described emotions are bewilderment, confusion, anxiety, disappointment, stress, anger and embarrassment, whereas positive feelings like pleasant surprise or fascination are less frequently depicted (Petkova, 2009). Affection seems to be pivotal in initial stages, when emotional experiences are especially intense. In research conducted among postgraduate students in England (Brown & Holloway, 2008b), sojourners reported feeling nervous, adrift, dissatisfied with aspects of life in HC, depressed, longing for home, lonely,

stressed and sleepless; the only positive feeling discovered being excitement. A similar study (Brown & Holloway, 2008a) revealed that some students experienced disorientation (navigating the new city and carrying out simple everyday activities), anxiety (stemming from misunderstandings, limited language competence or the weather) and homesickness (which correlated with loneliness). Sociocultural adjustment seems to be achieved, to a certain extent, with the passage of time, whereas psychological adjustment is more variable and personal. Brown and Holloway (2008a) also found out that sojourners believe that SA influences their personal growth, identity and intercultural perspectives.

However, SA may not spur transformational change and intercultural growth unless sojourners endeavour to experience the HC, as active engagement in HC and friendship formation with host nationals—together with co-nationals and international students—lead to satisfaction, contentment, more social connectedness and the absence of psychological stress, loneliness and homesickness (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011; Hunley, 2010).

The never-ending dynamic and life-long developmental process of intercultural development (Fantini et al., 2001) is governed by individuals' experiences with otherness. Should they not be positive, intercultural growth during the SA may go through a period of stagnation or even regression (Schartner, 2016). This is why further research on sojourners' affection and how it may impact on how they come to terms with life in the host community is vital.

3. Goals and research questions

This paper analyses how it feels to be a foreigner during SA and how these emotions relate to the way sojourners build their knowledge of HC and their orientation towards it. The research questions that guide this research are:

1. What are students' feelings, emotions and physical reactions to life abroad?
2. How do sojourners' affective reactions relate to their knowledge building and intercultural awareness of their experience in HC?
3. What is students' orientation when reflecting on these issues?

4. Methods

4.1. Participants and context

Participants were a cohort of 26 American students from a US public university registered in a yearlong SAP in a public southern Spanish university, 5 (19,2%) males and 21 (80,8%) females aged between 19 and 69: 2 (7,7%) were 19, 23 (88,5%) between 20-25, and 1 (3,8%) was

69. On average, participants had studied Spanish for 2 years; 3 had previously visited Spain as tourists. One (3,8%) student's Major and 19 (57,7%) Minors were Spanish.

SAP was conducted in Spanish, except for a first-semester course on Intercultural Communication taught 4 hours a week by the author. For 8 weeks, the course addressed students' perceptions of and experiences in HC in the light of relevant intercultural issues (identity, stereotyping, culture, culture/language fatigue, culture shock, socialisation, group membership/ascription or intercultural interaction).

4.2. Procedure and instrument

At the end of this 8-week period, sojourners submitted a journal with reflection on a minimum of five momentous (inter)cultural experiences in HC and/or elements of HC they found prominent, striking or bewildering. This approach impelled students to explore topics of their choice as an awareness-raising path to comprehend SA experience. As journals were written in English, there were no language competence constraints, which allowed sojourners to concentrate on the message, enunciate ideas smoothly and compose elaborate texts (Elola & Oskoz, 2008).

These journals constitute the research tool. Journals, like other forms of self-narratives, become powerful sense-making instruments that facilitate insight into how individuals comprehend new experiences (Deardorff, 2006; Pavlenko, 2007). Writing journals is likewise considered to be a therapeutic coping mechanism, mainly during the first phases of SA, a stage of probable psychological distress (Schartner, 2016).

Although 2,2% of American sojourners participate in long-term SAP (Institute of International Education, 2019), this study may also prove valuable for short-term (57,5%) and mid-length (30,3%) SAP as it was conducted after an eight-week period, the final stage of short-term, or the initial and probably most decisive phase in mid-length and long-term programmes. At this stage sojourners have potentially enhanced their abilities of interpretation and sense-making from insightful perspectives rather than succumbing to hurried first impressions (Marx & Moss, 2011).

4.3. Data analysis: coding, thematic analysis, frequency analysis and co-occurrences

The data, 74 pages (35.328 words) of students' journals, were analysed to address each of the research questions. To ensure interrater reliability, the data were analysed, labelled and coded twice, and then categories were refined through ATLAS.ti.

The inductive approach of grounded theory, analysing data without pre-established categories, was followed to identify affective reactions. This facilitated qualitative data analy-

sis, including frequency analysis and co-occurrences. Evidence of frequency was gathered through sojourners' mentions of words associated to feelings/emotions (mainly adjectives such as 'stressed' or verbs like 'love'), which were used as indicators of their affective reactions to life abroad.

Co-occurrences of affective reactions and two further fields, knowledge building and orientation, were obtained by examining how students build their arguments on their experience in HC. Elola and Oskoz (2008) distinguish factual from relational knowledge. Four categories were pre-established to investigate knowledge building: factual with a focus on Spain, factual with a focus on the USA, relational Spain-USA and relational Spain-USA-other communities. Following Young & Schartner (2014), four categories were pre-established to examine students' orientation towards the message: positive ('I like'), negative (a problem), neutral (just a surprise) and problematising (a challenging situation without evident negative orientation).

5. Results

The results are presented in two sections: affective reactions of sojourners to living in HC and how sojourners' affective reactions relate to their knowledge building and awareness of their experience. Quantitative data on the number of mentions for affective reactions and co-occurrences between feelings, knowledge building and orientation are supported by quotes gathered from students' journals.

5.1. Affective reactions to living in the host country

The data show 55 keywords (120 mentions) encapsulating students' feelings, emotions and physical reactions to life abroad (appendix A). They have been classified into 9 central categories (figure 1): 'exhaustion', 'embarrassment' and 'vulnerability' constitute the least frequent categories; 'uncertainty', 'anxiety' and 'yearning' become relatively frequent fields; the most frequent domains are 'well-being', 'frustration' and 'excitement'. The categories are presented below in this increasing order of importance.

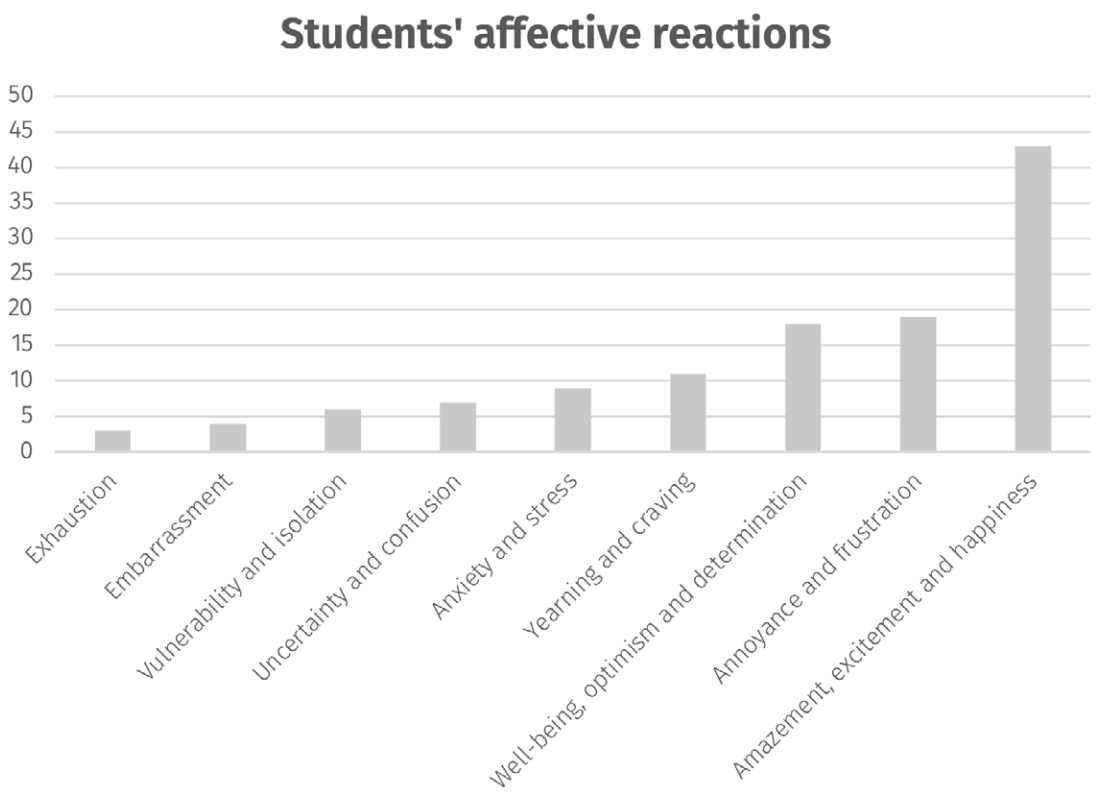
Exhaustion

The least frequent category is exhaustion. Sojourners expressed feeling 'exhausted' or 'drained' because of the numerous adjustments needed to adapt to life in HC. Their mental and physical fatigue was triggered by efforts to communicate in the foreign language, and striving to comprehend the subtleties of and not misunderstand HC:

> This entire interaction [in Spanish] was draining. (Student12, S12)
>
> I'm mentally and physically drained because I'm trying so hard to get everything right. (S5)

FIGURE 1

Students' mentions of physical and emotional reactions clustered by theme



Embarrassment

Sojourners admitted being 'embarrassed' or 'ashamed' of their co-nationals' behaviour in class (S3), the possibility of committing *faux pas* and breaching social norms (S16), or their limited language competence (LC) (S7).

> When I see how students from the US dress for class, their posture, I am appalled and embarrassed. (S3)
>
> They told me it was very rude to drink out of my bottle at the table. The whole experience was quite embarrassing. (S16)
>
> Not fully grasping the language and using broken Spanish makes me feel ashamed. (S7)

Vulnerability and isolation

Terms such as 'disconnected, handicapped, helpless, vulnerable' reveal vulnerability. Students' 'toddler level Spanish' induced a strong feeling of helplessness which may cause iso-

lation and disconnectedness (S7). Vulnerability was also experienced when simple everyday actions, like navigating the city, became hurdles (S21).

> I had almost no idea what was being spoken. I felt disconnected. I was a deaf man in their conversation. (S7)
>
> [I got lost]. I felt truly helpless. I am inevitably handicapped by the obvious language barrier. I am more vulnerable. (S21)

Uncertainty and confusion

Students acknowledged being 'lost, confused, regretful, unsure, discouraged', and defined themselves in these terms (S8). Deficient language skills, probably the most powerful personal limitation in early stages of the sojourn, made students lament the decision of embarking on SA (S7):

> The lost, confused, and vulnerable Americans. (S8)
>
> I remember the feeling of being discouraged and regretful of coming to Spain. My host's family knew no English. (S7)

A different type of uncertainty emerged when individuals noticed that SA led them question their taken-for-granted assumptions, which progressively led to shifting their frames of reference:

> Gypsies are something I have never really given much thought to, whether or not "I like" or "respect" them. I'm still unsure of how I feel but I'm happy to be thinking about it and widening my views. (S17)

Anxiety and stress

Keywords within this category are 'anxious, nervous, stressed, apprehensive, afraid/fearful, insecure, scared, terrified'. Apprehension about breaching cultural norms (S7), language skills and the language barrier were evident in the sample, mainly when limited LC hindered everyday tasks and made them intimidating or daunting experiences (S9):

> The anxiety of breaching cultural norms was immense. (S7)
>
> Going to the grocery store has been terrifying because I have no idea how to ask for anything. (S9)

Insecurity and stress were also caused by the fear of not comprehending HC and failing to make the most of SA (S7):

> The fear of failing to understand this beautiful culture is too important for me. (S7)

Yearning and craving

There were elements that students acknowledged craving, though the feeling of missing the family was explicitly mentioned by only one student. In general, sojourners yearned for certain aspects from their HOMC, such as the feeling of independence (S9), food and the way of eating (snacking vs. big meals, or eating when and where hungry instead of at home according to Spanish schedules) (S9). But they also emphasised that cultural information and language expressions discussed in the Intercultural Communication course provided them with the tools to stop longing for some of these things (S1).

> I miss about America [...] the more independent feel of everyday life, and the snacking instead of big meals. (S9)
>
> Eating wherever and whenever is something I miss about my home but also won't stop. (S17)
>
> The day we reviewed simple things such as how to order coffee, tea and blended drinks, I've felt so much more comfortable walking into a café! [...] I didn't have to miss out my favorite drinks. (S1)

Desire also related to HC, for example, S10 declared that she was jealous of the Spanish education system. Besides, sojourners who were initially living with host families, and then moved out, affirmed missing their family (S13):

> I am extremely jealous of the Spanish education system. In the US, the cost of a university is very high. (S10)
>
> I miss them [host family] a lot but plan to have them over for dinner. (S13)

From general perspective, sojourners were becoming aware that, upon their return to the US, they would miss aspects from HC such as food, monuments and host nationals, issues raised in the Intercultural Communication course:

> I will miss the little things that we discussed such as the little streets, tapas, walking by the beautiful cathedral on my walk home and most importantly the people. (S26)

Well-being, optimism and determination

The sample expressed their well-being. First, they perceived that they were successfully adapting to HC ('adjusted, normal, comfortable'), feelings expedited by awareness of HC norms (also debated in class) (S1). Second, sojourners welcomed the safety of the host city ('secure, safe'), a small southern Spanish city (S3). Third, life in HC makes them 'less stressed' and 'more focused':

> It definitely made me feel a little bit comfortable knowing the norms here. (S1)
>
> It has been a joyous relief to be in a place where I feel safe. (S3)
>
> I'm less stressed and more focused here. (S5)

Finally, networking and engaging in joint activities with host nationals (S21) made students 'hopeful, positive, determined' to succeed in their SA.

> I played pingpong with my Spaniard friend. I carried an hour conversation in Spanish with my housemate. All events of this day have contributed to me feeling adjusted. (S21)

Annoyance and frustration

Students felt 'angry, annoyed, offended, upset, uncomfortable' because of non-verbal behaviour (such as staring), local men making catcalls to American girls on the street (S9) or the mere fact of being in a new country (S25).

> I was annoyed and even offended by the staring. [...] When men make comments towards me when I am simply walking down the street, these gestures have always made me uncomfortable. (S9)
>
> I was so annoyed by just being in a new country. (S25)

An unexpected source of discomfort was experienced when speaking English with co-nationals in Spain (S23):

> I felt uncomfortable. I am so used to hanging out with and challenging myself to speak with Spaniards that talking to people from the States was just too easy. (S23)

The terms 'sad' and 'heart-wretched' appear although, contrary to expectations, they did not express sadness or loneliness, but discomfort at some aspects of HC, such as smoking or stray animals (S17).

> It makes me extremely sad to see stray animals roaming the streets looking for trash to eat. [...] That it is just normal here is something I will never get used to and look down on the people who think it's okay. (S17)

Sojourners often experienced frustration, either because they were dissatisfied with everyday aspects—siesta time or the apparent inactivity on Sundays (S11)—or when encountering difficulties in communication, especially fast connected speech (S5):

> At times, I found this frustrating [...] siesta time or Sunday. (S11)

> She complains and gets frustrated because my English it too fast for her. But that's how I feel when she's speaking Spanish. (S5)

However, even frustration could end on a positive note as students gained awareness that it was part of the process:

> I get frustrated; but it's all part of the amazing experience. Through the hardships, I've only realized positives. (S8)

Amazement, shock and excitement

Astonishment constitutes the most salient affective reaction, apparent in terms such as 'appalled, astonished, impressed, surprised, shocked, excited, pleased, happy, not alone'. The language barrier surprised sojourners because they expected to be able to resort to English in the host city (S12). Food was likewise a source of amazement; it was perceived as different, or simply impressed sojourners, for example, olive oil or fresh food (S25):

> I was surprised no one knew English. (S12)
>
> I was so impressed by how fresh everything is. (S25)

Further shocking aspects were sociocultural issues (i.e., part-time jobs in Spain (S19) or the fact that parents 'overprotect' their children) or sociopolitical issues like the public healthcare system (S10) or illegal immigration (see next section):

> I was surprised that students do not have a part-time job as they go to school and that their parents are responsible to fund the part of school that is not paid for. (S19)
>
> I was very shocked when I learned that Spain has a public healthcare system. (S10)

Excitement, happiness or even being in disbelief were verbalised when sojourners realised that they were really in HC, when they went to places which reminded them of similar concepts in HOMC (*mercados* in Spain and farmers' markets in the USA) (S4), when they saw monuments (S12) or when they met host families and locals (S12):

> Walking into the Mercado was exciting. I would always enjoy attending the farmers markets back home, and it definitely made me happy to see it was a similar concept. (S4)
>
> I was happy to meet some locals. [...] Seeing the cathedral [...] I was super excited. (S12)

From a broader perspective, the analysis of processes and notions such as culture (S5) or culture shock in class seemed to stimulate students and give them the feeling of not being alone as they observed that co-nationals went through the same stages in their adaptation process (S26):

> Culture is extremely important. And fascinating. I love studying other cultures, observing their way of living, and relating it to my own. [...] When we were asked to define the term culture in class, I got excited. (S5)
>
> It was important that we talked about culture shock in class. This made me realize I wasn't alone and that even though I didn't realize it, other students felt the same as I did. (S26)

Finally, S11 reported on the excitement of discovering the unknown, meeting otherness and understanding what being a host-national means:

> I am excited to make new discoveries about what it means to be a Spaniard. (S11)

5.2. Affective reactions, orientation and knowledge building

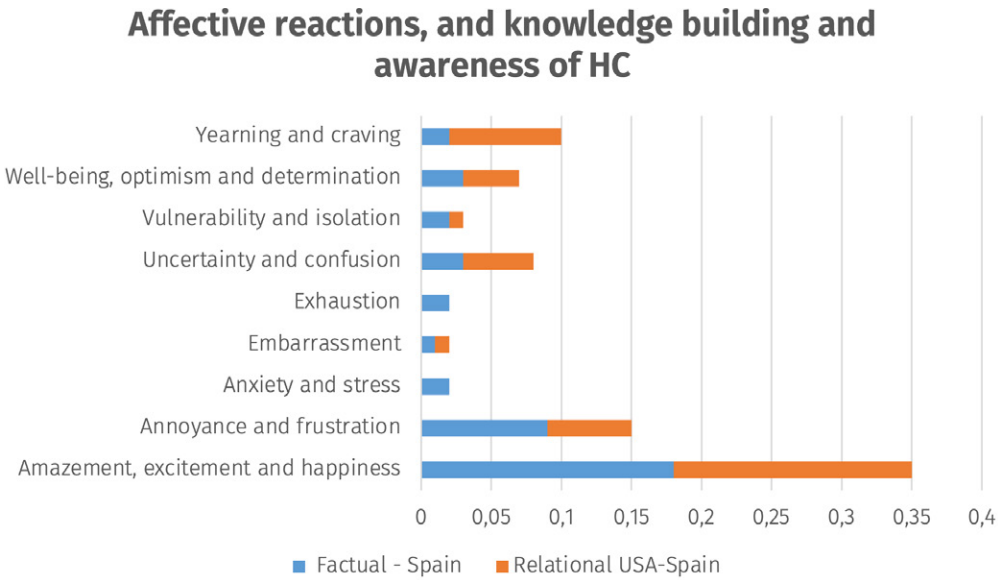
This section explores how affective reactions relate to students' knowledge building and awareness of HC. It also explores students' orientation when addressing these issues. ATLAS.ti co-occurrence analysis tool has been used to this end.

5.2.1. Affective reactions and knowledge building or awareness of HC

Figure 2 shows co-occurrences between the 9 affective themes identified and how sojourners build their knowledge and awareness of HC. This has been examined according to whether information is presented in a factual way (analysis of Spanish or American cultural aspects in isolation) or in a relational way (relationship between Spain, the USA or any other community).

FIGURE 2

Co-occurrences between affective reactions and knowledge building or awareness of HC



The figure reveals no factual information of the USA, the tendency being to build knowledge of HC either by reflecting upon HC or by comparing it with HOMC. Data also indicate that no other community is used as a point of reference.

Exhaustion, or *anxiety and stress* correspond to feelings sojourners exclusively relate to life in Spain. *Vulnerability and isolation* are predominantly linked to HC, whereas *yearning and craving* are mostly associated with HOMC. For the remaining affective reactions, *well-being*, *uncertainty*, *embarrassment*, *annoyance* and *amazement*, there seems to be a balance between references to HC and to HOMC. As many of these elements are evident in students' quotation above, the following are additional illustrative examples. *Amazement*, *excitement or happiness* were often conveyed at HC practices, such as the tendency to overprotect children (S4) or eating-time as family or friend-time (S6).

> It surprised me that their parents cooked every meal, everyday for them, as well as do their laundry, [...] as if they were young children. (S4)
>
> I love how the act of eating food is a way to spend time with family and friends. (S6)

Sojourners also expressed their surprise at aspects of HC by comparing them to similar elements in their HOMC, from everyday elements (food or schedules), to deeper sociocultural and sociopolitical issues like illegal immigration (explored in class):

> I was surprised in class to hear that Spain is having an illegal immigration problem that is very similar to California. [...] The big difference is that for Africans it is more dangerous to cross the Mediterranean. (S9)

A second example is *annoyance and frustration* at concerning practices like smoking (S3).

> It is heart-wrenching to see so many smokers (S3)

When compared with the US, students noticed that etiquette and non-verbal behaviour in Spain follows different patterns, patterns that it is possible to try to embrace:

> There are many things that the Spanish find rude that Americans don't, and vice versa. [...] Spaniards tend to stare at people and it is considered normal. In America, staring is rude. [...] Now I am trying to embrace it by even staring back. (S9)

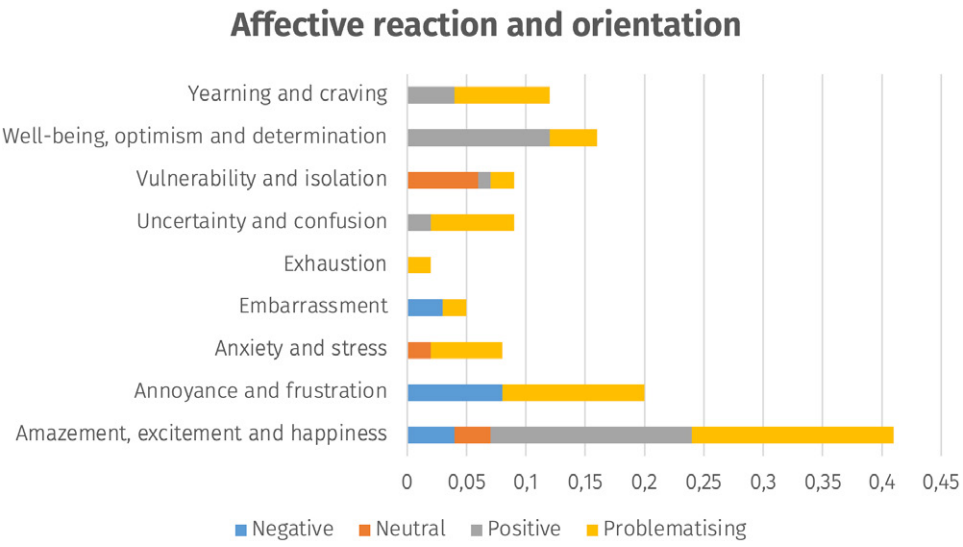
To conclude, individuals tend to grasp a different reality by comparing it with their own community, to which their frames of references are deeply anchored. Even though most seem to strive to understand life from the perspective of HC, a strong attachment to their own values surfaces.

5.2.2. Affective reactions and orientation

Figure 3 displays co-occurrences between students' affective reactions and the orientation of their message.

FIGURE 3

Co-occurrences between affective reactions and orientation



The only feelings discovered in arguments with negative orientation fell within *embarrassment*; likewise, negative orientation was present in *annoyance* and *amazement*, although these categories entwined with other types of orientation. In general, neutral orientation surfaced when discussing events leading to *vulnerability* and, secondarily, *anxiety* and *amazement*. Interestingly, some positive orientation was found in *yearning*, *vulnerability* and *uncertainty*, and, as expected, in *amazement* and, especially, *well-being*. In general, the tendency for sojourners is to explore their affective reactions through problematising orientation, presenting and discussing the challenges inherent in a situation.

Taking *amazement* as an example, negative orientation was perceptible in S5's considerations about schooling and age in HC (addressed in class), whereas neutral orientation occurred when S15 debated the phenomenon of tourism.

> Another thing that surprised me during our discussion is that children are forced by law to go to school until they are 16. For me, 16 is far too young to make that sort of decision [...]. In the US, schooling is enforced until the age of 18. (S5)
>
> I never really experienced tourism. Every since I've been in Spain I have noticed so many different elements of tourism. (S15)

Positive orientation materialized in *well-being* (*tapas* makes S20 feel 'cultured'), but also in *yearning*; for instance, the size of the host city seemed to have helped students not to miss the convenience of having a car (S20):

> I mostly love tapas. [...] If I want to be social and don't want too much to eat either. It makes me feel very cultured with southern Spain. (S20)
>
> The size makes it so easy to get anywhere that I don't even miss having a car at all. It makes my stay here easy and comfortable. (S20)

Problematising orientation pervaded in all categories, though it prevailed in *annoyance and frustration*. Facing everyday practices, such as schedules (S11), or cultural differences (S9) presented an obvious challenge:

> One of the first things that requires quick adjustment was the schedule, and under the surface of that the whole concept and attitude towards time. (S11)
>
> I have hit a very rough patch and these are the cultural differences that have been driving me nuts. (S9)

A further illustrative example with problematising orientation was *uncertainty and confusion*; S8 expanded on a situation in which she asks a boy for directions:

> Once he saw my confusion with the language barrier, without hesitation he decided to just walk me to my destination. At first thought, you may think it is because he is a male and I am a female so there is some type of underlying purpose for his kindness, however that was not the case. (S8)

To finish, the pervasiveness of problematising orientation revealed that it is common for sojourners to reflect upon their experience of SA as a challenge rather than as a threat.

6. Discussion: emotional reactions and intercultural development

The findings evince the all-important role of affection when adjusting to HC. This study concurs with prior research on sojourners' affective reactions, such as anxiety, feeling out of place (Pedersen et al., 2011), embarrassment (Marx & Moss, 2011; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), confusion, stress, anger (Petkova, 2009), nervousness, dissatisfaction with some aspects of life in HC (Brown & Holloway, 2008b) and disorientation (Brown & Holloway, 2008a).

Data disclose major phenomena yielding affective reactions, namely, limited language competence, verbal and non-verbal communication, unawareness of or difficulty in coping with everyday life patterns of HC, fear of breaching social norms and disorientation.

Limited language command and the possibility of miscommunication does not only cause *anxiety* (Brown & Holloway, 2008a), but a wide range of affective reactions—*exhaustion*, *embarrassment*, *vulnerability* or *uncertainty and confusion*—, whereas non-verbal communication practices (such as staring) or unfamiliar (and sexist) practices like catcalling trigger *annoyance and frustration*. Besides, contrary to American students' expectations and despite its status as lingua franca, English is not spoken in the host city, a puzzling circumstance for American sojourners in Spain. Lack of language proficiency has been reported to reduce contact with HC and, therefore, constrain its understanding (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006). However, data suggests that limited language command does not necessarily hinder communication and prevent engagement in joint activities with host families and host nationals, which spurs feelings of *amazement*, *well-being* and *positiveness*.

Unawareness of or difficulty to cope with everyday life patterns of HC (schedules or food) is a source of *surprise and amazement*, but also *stress*, *annoyance* and *frustration*. In particular, sojourners do not seem to expect to come across the disorientation implicit in the difficulty of fulfilling simple everyday activities (Brown & Holloway, 2008a) such as shopping. Moreover, there is *fear* and *embarrassment* of misunderstanding (Marx & Moss, 2011; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011) and breaching social norms.

Although one student expresses *yearning* for her family, sojourners especially miss food and the way of eating in their HOMC. Surprisingly, the sample does not mention feeling homesickness, depression and loneliness, often discussed in the literature (Brown & Holloway, 2008a; Pedersen et al., 2011). Since there seems to be a correlation between cultural dissimilarity and distress (Brown & Holloway, 2008a), it is possible that factors such as the similitude of weather in California and southern Spain activate perceived cultural similarity, which seems to reduce homesickness (Pedersen et al., 2011).

Although students are cognizant of their outsider status, they convey an array of feelings of *amazement* and *well-being*. Results echo positive feelings reported in prior studies, like pleasant surprise, fascination (Petkova, 2009), excitement (Brown & Holloway, 2008b) and—in connection with active engagement in HC and friendship formation with host-nationals and co-nationals—satisfaction, contentment, more social connectedness and the absence of distress and feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Moreover, data attest to a diversity of positive emotions which tend to be absent from the literature, as sojourners admit feeling 'not alone, impressed, pleased, fascinated, adjusted, normal, comfortable, cultured, secure, safe, happy, less stressed, more focused, hopeful, positive and determined to succeed in SA'. Factors leading to well-being are networking and engaging in joint activities with host-nationals and co-nationals, but also lifestyle in the host country, living with host families, the perceived safety of a small-size host city and the course on Intercultural Communication.

Students explicitly expand on the usefulness and purported benefits of intercultural training during SA. Data demonstrate that intercultural training may foster understanding and discovery of cultural issues. Helping sojourners grasp the basics of the host culture and unwritten cultural norms gives them feelings of relief and comfort, equipping them with tools to stop longing for things. Intercultural training is likewise valuable to understand sociocultural/sociopolitical phenomena, and key intercultural concepts like language fatigue, identity, culture, socialisation, group ascription, stereotyping or culture shock. Furthermore, the possibility of discussing the rollercoaster of emotions experienced with co-nationals furthers awareness of shared experiences and feelings. Therefore, this study seems to substantiate the need for intercultural pedagogy and guided reflection (Pedersen, 2010) to heighten intercultural awareness and growth during SA.

A relevant finding is that initially distressing feelings, like *uncertainty and confusion*, may instigate intercultural awareness and personal growth. Acknowledging willingness to widen one's views on how others live (i.e., the student who reflected on ethnic groups like the Roma in HC) shows tolerance for ambiguity, a crucial intercultural attitude (Barrett et al., 2014) and the first step to shifting frames of reference, a sine qua non of intercultural development. Similarly, perceiving *frustration* as a positive emotion, a part of the amazing experience of SA, discloses intercultural awareness. Besides, the *anxiety* of failing to understand HC and make the most of SA indicates individual's preparedness and respect for otherness (Barrett et al., 2014). Finally, this preparedness and other intercultural attitudes such as acknowledgement of identities or empathy (Barrett et al., 2014) are disclosed in the *excitement* of embarking on the journey of discovering what it means to be a member of HC. Further indicators of transformational change are the aspects of HC sojourners believe they will miss on their return to the USA.

Results indicate that students grasp life abroad by comparing new experiences with their HOMC, relational knowledge (Elola & Oskoz, 2008) necessary to learn about otherness by focusing on similarities and differences. Prior studies maintain that comparisons to life in the US are a fulcrum for reflection on sojourners' experiences in SA (Talburt & Stewart, 1999). Many affective reactions expressed by students—and that range from *uncertainty* to *well-being*—relate to how they feel in HC in connection with HOMC and the events or situations that trigger these feelings. Nevertheless, there are emotional reactions that seem to be experienced solely as a response to life in HC, like *exhaustion* or *anxiety and stress*, while emotions like *yearning and craving* chiefly belong to HOMC. Data confirm psychological stress and physical exhaustion as responses to SA, coupled with aspects students long for from their HOMC. Results also demonstrate that to explore reactions to HC like *uncertainty*, *embarrassment*, *annoyance* or *amazement* and *well-being* sojourners examine events or situations lived in HC in the light of similar experiences in HOMC. These findings are consistent with the literature that emphasises the need for awareness, valuing and understanding differences (Deardorff, 2006; Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006), critical cultural reflection based on

comparative and contextual thinking (Marx & Moss, 2011) and the need of developing the intercultural skills of interpreting and relating (Byram, 1997).

To finish, the presence of 'negative' or 'positive' feelings does not necessarily parallel with negative or positive orientation, as the predominant orientation in students' analysis of their experiences abroad is problematising. Contrary to the literature on cultural dissonance, which tends to highlight negative feelings, the balance of positive-negative emotions, coupled with a prevailing problematising orientation, suggests that students perceive their experience of SA as a challenge, mainly an exciting challenge, rather than a bed of roses or an insurmountable obstacle.

7. Conclusion

This paper brings to the fore the relevance of students' affective reactions in the process of deriving coherence from their SA experiences. The cultural dissonance arising when being removed from their familiar environment propels multiple emotional reactions. Contrary to the literature, which highlights sojourners' feelings of distress, in this study, affective reactions indicating discomfort are comparable with expressions of well-being displaying preparedness for otherness and intercultural development.

In their journey of discovering new meanings and shared symbols, most sojourners seem to reach Petkova's (2009) partial awareness stage, where HC is compared to HOMC from the lenses of HOMC, although some of them may be approaching the full awareness phase, where interpretation takes place from the prism of HC. Results seem to imply that 8 weeks in HC, the final period of short-term and the initial phase in mid-length and long-term programmes, may be sufficient for students to go through the unawareness phase of cultural dissonance. In this process, critical cultural reflection stemming from comparative and contextual thinking (Marx & Moss, 2011) may developed by sojourners who, although keeping HOMC as the main point of reference, begin to establish stronger bonds with HC (Pedersen, Neighbors, Larimer & Lee, 2011).

The disorientation and constructive disequilibrium students experience (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011) seems to lead to an old-new self and transformative learning, reassessing and altering their frames of reference through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997) that seems to be mediated by affective reactions to SA experience. This study supports Brown and Holloway's (2008a) finding that students consider that SA positively affects personal growth, identity and intercultural perspectives, attesting to variation in sojourners' cultural identities and perception. As S8 puts it:

> Life is all about perception, and my perception has broadened more than I would have ever imagined. (S8)

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9. Appendix A. Feelings, emotions and physical reactions to life abroad: students' mentions

(Not) Alone (1)	Apprehensive (1)	Adjusted (1)	Afraid / fearful (1)
Angry (2)	Annoyed (3)	Anxious (1)	Appalled (1)
Ashamed (1)	Astonished (2)	Comfortable (4)	Confused (3)
Craved (things) (1)	Cultured (1)	Determined (1)	Disconnected (1)
Discouraged (1)	Drained (2)	Embarrassed (3)	Excited (13)
Exhausted (1)	Fascinated (1)	Frustrated (7)	Handicapped (1)
Happy (6)	Heart-wretched (1)	Helpless (2)	Hopeful (1)
Impressed (1)	In disbelief (2)	Insecure (1)	Jealous (1)
Less stressed (1)	Lost (1)	Loved (things) (2)	Miss (9)
More focused (1)	Nervous (1)	Normal (1)	Offended (1)
Pleased (2)	Positive (1)	Regretful (1)	Sad (extremely) (1)
Safe (2)	Scared (2)	Secure (3)	Shocked (2)
Stressed (1)	Surprised (12)	Terrified (1)	Uncomfortable (3)
Unsure (1)	Upset (1)	Vulnerable (2)	