Liquid Mobility, Cultural Patterns and Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract

Increased international academic mobility provides a chance for exploring intensified intercultural encounters and the ever-growing spirit of cosmopolitanism. This article argues that academic hyper-mobility creates new environment for intercultural knowledge creation, and cultural patterns play a significant part in shaping the processes of knowledge transfer and creation. This research examines the role of two differing generalized cultural patterns – collectivism and individualism - in everyday intercultural interactions. Empirical fieldwork was conducted among Eastern European academic migrants at the European University Institute in Italy. Several aspects of intercultural dialogue were found to be socially significant for collectivists and individualists, they are: in-group membership, expression of the Self, cultural values, and cosmopolitan dispositions. It is a central argument of this article that cosmopolitan dispositions, which include openness to cultural diversity and mutual willingness to engage with new cultural patterns, are critical prerequisites to effective transfer and creation of knowledge.

Key words: mobility, culture, cosmopolitanism, collectivism, individualism, modernity
**Introduction: Liquid Mobility**

The elegant terms of ‘fluidity’ and ‘liquidity’ were proposed by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) as the leading metaphors for grasping the realities of a present stage of the modern era. Being light, fluid and liquid – this is what empowers modern academic migrants and this is what in turn helps them to be hyper-mobile. Academic hyper-mobility provides a chance for exploring the ever growing spirit of cosmopolitanism reinforced by intensified intercultural encounters. This article argues that academic hyper-mobility creates new environment for intercultural knowledge transfer and creation and cultural patterns play a significant part in these processes. Culture was found to influence many aspects of professional interaction in academic environment (e.g., Hernandez Sheets 2005). This research examines the role of two differing cultural patterns – collectivism and individualism - in shaping the experiences of academic migrants in everyday situations of intercultural encounters.

Several aspects of intercultural dialogue were found to be culturally significant for collectivists and individualists. They include: in-group membership, expression of the Self, cultural values, and cosmopolitan dispositions. These aspects are explored in separate sections, all revealing subliminal interpretations of cultural values, norms and beliefs that play a crucial role in intercultural integration. Findings testify of culturally embedded ways of communication on a variety of levels and in a variety of roles; and demonstrate that culturally embodied experiences may become socially significant. Pan-European environment in Italy was seen by a majority as being cosmopolitan and egalitarian, and therefore favorable for new knowledge creation. It is argued that postmodern cosmopolitan milieu facilitates knowledge transfer and creation of shared meanings.

*Cosmopolitanism* is understood as an “orientation, a willingness to engage with the other … intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (Hannerz 1996:104). Similarly, Calcutt et al. (2009:172) believe
that “cosmopolitanism includes Kantian universalism, cross-cultural competence, and either a
ingenuity to tolerate or engage with otherness”. Skrbis & Woodward (2007:730) add that
“cosmopolitans espouse a broadly defined disposition of ‘openness’ toward others, people, things
and experiences whose origin is non-local”. Based on these definitions, it is a central argument
of this article that cosmopolitan dispositions, which include openness to cultural diversity and
mutual willingness to engage with new cultural patterns, are critical prerequisites to effective
transfer and creation of knowledge.

**Research Methods**

Empirical research on academic hyper-mobility was conducted on the premises of the
European University Institute (EUI) in Italy during a four-month stay. The EUI represents a
vivid example of liquid academic mobility unbounded by a solid “permanent” place of
destination. Fluid hyper-mobility presents a chance to look ahead and preview intricacies of
migration and mobility in the age of liquid modernity which opens up less solid and more flexible
opportunities for settlement.

For this study research data were collected utilizing the qualitative techniques. Participant
observation was performed daily during classes, lectures, seminars, working group meeting and
social events. Additionally, I conducted twelve formal in-depth interviews with academic key
informants and one focus group involving five participants. The interviews were based on semi-
structured questionnaires and lasted for two hours on average. My participants originated from
nine different countries of Eastern Europe, represented both genders and their age ranged from
late 20s to late 50s. All participants possess a vastness of diversified international experience and
can be characterized as hyper-mobile academics.
Cultural Patterns

Research on intercultural encounters can benefit from exploring a widely accepted and generalized dualism of two opposites on a cultural scale - collectivism and individualism. This dualism originated in the field of social and cross-cultural psychology where it has a long tradition of empirical testing (e.g., Triandis 1990; Berry 1994; Berry et al. 2002). These two patterns differ in their depiction of the Self (Kanagawa et al. 2001). Collectivism, as a cultural pattern, describes closely linked individuals who define themselves as interdependent members of a collective, whereas individualism stresses individual autonomy and independence of the Self (Triandis 1995). The Self is defined as interdependent in collectivism and independent in individualism (Markus & Kitayama 1991; 1998; Hui 1988). Additionally, collectivism stresses the importance of aligning personal goals with communal goals and emphasizes relationships. On the other hand, individualism maintains an independent concept of the Self and relies more on an individual own beliefs and experiences (Triandis 1988; 1990; Triandis et al. 1990).

Concepts of collectivism and individualism are social constructs which have been created in the field of social psychology in order to standardize measurements of cultural differences existing among societies (Hui 1988; Hui & Triandis 1986). Individualist cultures emphasize “‘I’ consciousness, autonomy, emotional independence, individual initiative, right to privacy, pleasure seeking, financial security, need for specific friendships, and universalism” (Kim et al. 1994:2). In contrast, collectivist cultures advance “‘we’ consciousness, collective identity, emotional dependence, group solidarity, sharing, need for stable and predetermined friendships, group decisions, and particularism” (Kim et al. 1994:2). Collectivist and individualist cultures differ in many aspects of behavior, attitudes, values and beliefs (Markus & Kitayama 1991) and I explore how people holding collectivist views, attitudes and beliefs interact with individualist cultures. The areas of exploration include: in-group membership, expression of the Self, cultural
values, and cosmopolitan dispositions. These aspects in intercultural dialogue are culturally significant for collectivists and individualists and they are discussed in continuation.

In-Group Membership

When participants of my study were asked to comment whether the Eastern Europeans have a collectivist culture, many strongly agreed. When asked to express their views on whether collectivists have noticeable differences in adjusting to the local individualist environment, everyone tended to agree and many had corroborating stories to contribute. My participants tended to confirm previous research that collectivist culture presupposed greater in-group intimacy in communication, and more disclosure in interpersonal relations (Gudykunst et al. 1988). On the other hand, many were inclined to describe individualist interpersonal relations as more distant, personally detached and sometimes “lacking human closeness”. Some Eastern European collectivists felt acutely the individualist environment of isolation and loneliness, especially in the initial periods of migration.

Expression of the Self

Social researchers describe expression of the Self as interdependent, codependent, and attentive to the needs of others in collectivist cultures, while individualist cultures rely on independent and autonomous expression of the Self (e.g., Triandis 1995). Triandis (2009:24) notes that “people from the collectivist cultures tend to be unusually sensitive to the needs of others, supportive, helpful, and even self-sacrificing”. Similarly, my study felt that collectivist interpersonal connections were more meaningful and more stable, as opposed to more instrumental and less committed in the individualist societies. Many noted greater superficiality of everyday interactions and lesser willingness to open up by individualists. Some participants
have pointed out that individualist cultural values may be seen as selfish and therefore offensive to some from the collectivist perspective. Collectivists commented that individualists would not be instinctively ready to help in the situations when help was obviously needed. Individualists had to be directly approached and explicitly asked for help.

Individualists were described as being easy in shallow initial conversations only and preferring detached superficial interaction. Jessica maintained that while some cultures were happy with initial conversation and socializing, other cultures, like Slavic culture, needed deeper levels of involvement and socializing. Collectivists expected to find friends in people they studied or worked with, but individualists were content with shallow interpersonal relations. Some participants observed that socializing in a more individualistic environment was very much formalized. Jessica gave an example that in German culture she needed to schedule a visit to her friends’ house long time beforehand. She said that in her culture “it is strange to prearrange visits for months in advance. …We are used to satisfy our needs for communication in an easier and faster way”. Greater formalities created more interpersonal distance and detachment.

**Cultural Values**

Participants were asked to talk about their experiences in noticing cultural differences. This question prompted many discussions of how differences in cultural values are approached, interpreted and negotiated. Westerners were described by many as tending to be carefree and take things for granted. Louisa also saw substantial differences: “Western Europeans are more liberal compared to the Eastern Europeans. … I think our culture is more traditional and we have more serious approach to things”. Stefan attributed these differences to the fact that Western societies were richer compared to the Eastern ones and Westerns might feel less anxious about their future. He felt that sometimes Western students did not really try their best in education because they still could have jobs somewhere and use their networks and they knew that
whatever happened they had different alternatives. Easterners took their education too seriously and they got extremely nervous if it did not go how they expected. Chantal made similar observations that people from Western “contented and cozy countries” had an advantage of not needing to think about their future careers, unlike Eastern students who were very preoccupied and serious about their future.

Some noticed that even discussions of negative and conflict situations were avoided in the West. Chantal said that it was not appropriate to express pessimism or talk about difficulties abroad. She saw that everyone tried to stay optimistic no matter what. Even when she knew for sure that the person had problems, when asked “how are you doing”, they would frequently say “perfect”. Similarly, Alex described different approaches in sharing personal information in collectivist and individualist cultures. In the West, he said, people would rather go to speak to their psychologist instead of speaking to their friends: “When you ask them “how are you?” and they would say “great!” Other participants also observed that only people from the collectivist cultures would share their problems with their friends instead of wearing a happy and independent mask.

**Cosmopolitan Dispositions**

Hyper-mobile academics were found to display certain cosmopolitan dispositions that helped them to be successful in intercultural interactions and career advancement. “Long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” define cultural habitus (Bourdieu 1986:243). People’s cultural habitus, i.e. “a system of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu 1977:72) that individuals display in relations with others, were found to be the crucial components of successful intercultural dialogue. It can be envisioned that cosmopolitan dispositions facilitate intercultural dialogue, knowledge transfer and creation of shared cultural meanings. The idea that “willingness to engage with the other” leads to better societal-wide outcomes is central in a
very influential work conducted by Florida (2002; 2005) on global competition for talent. Hyper-mobile academics were found to display many cosmopolitan dispositions. They were disposed to be extra attentive and extra sensitive to culturally different situations, as Jessica noted. Likewise, Chantal expected to find many new and dissimilar things abroad. She was so over-prepared for difficulties that anything that she encountered did not seem to be difficult.

Many participants had favorable expectations of learning about many cultural differences. Thus, Louisa described enjoyment in interacting with people from different cultures: “Their worldviews are different and you have to adjust to different viewpoints and it takes time to figure out that people are different. But it is also interesting to see how different viewpoints can be”. Jane also told that “it was genuinely interesting… to hear someone speaking who experienced [diverse] societies and realities.” Similarly, Nick enjoyed new culture very much: “everyone is very open and there are much more social and agitated people who care more about everything that is public”. Ted also noted that preserving one’s own cultural distinctiveness could be of a great advantage. Alex agreed that “being different is not necessarily your drawback”. It was only a lack of adaptation that mattered: “But when you adapt, those differences can play on your behalf”. Ryan was quite convinced that being collectivists, Eastern Europeans have cultural dispositions to “easily mix and interact” with other people, especially because they applied extra efforts, such as learning foreign languages. Jessica also was certain that Slavic cultures were more communicative, open and social. In her view, Slavic cultures had “more needs in social life” compared to Western European cultures.

These comments revealed that the capability to deal with difficulties depended to a great extent on the person’s habitual dispositions, propensities and inclinations rather than situations presented to them. Some participants learned to thrive in the new culture and found it even to be more comfortable and enjoyable for them. Sophie noted: “It is a different culture but it is probably in some ways better than [at home] in terms of acceptance and appreciation people have
toward you. … You feel different but I don’t think it is a hindrance”. In Jessica’s words, there were always cultural differences, but what mattered was which of them had any significance, especially when mediated by cosmopolitan dispositions.

Cosmopolitan cultural training was discussed by many as a way of mediating intercultural differences and promoting cultural intelligence. Susan spoke very highly of the cross-cultural training she received on “how to manage people from different cultures and what kind of difficulties we might face”. In her opinion, lack of cross-cultural training “creates many problems.” Intercultural training aimed at developing effective communication skills across cultures is a new thriving field of study and research (Ang & Van Dyne 2008) and this study testified to its increased significance.

Conclusion

This article examined culturally embedded and socially significant aspects of intercultural communication, such as: in-group membership, expression of the Self, and cultural values. Cosmopolitan dispositions were found to be favorable conditions for professional integration, knowledge exchange and creation. The main findings reveal very significant aspects of intercultural dialogue that shape professional encounters leading to knowledge transfer and creation. Intercultural encounters highlight the need to possess mutual dispositions to global, universal and cosmopolitan values and attitudes. Recent research on intercultural encounters emphasizes the need for developing cultural awareness and cognitive style of communication as well as cultural competencies and cultural intelligence which are widely used in intercultural training programs nowadays (Peterson 2004).

Cultural awareness and cognitive style of communication relate to acquiring knowledge on cultural differences in values, beliefs and motives (Borden 1991). The term cultural competencies suggest meeting basic communication requirements in intercultural encounters, and
cultural intelligence is a broader term and it is understood as highly developed abilities in intercultural communication (Peterson 2004). Further, cultural intelligence includes linguistic, cultural, interpersonal and attitudinal abilities attuned to a different culture (Peterson 2004:87-105). Expression of feelings was also discussed as an important part of communication that is culturally specific. Understanding and expressing emotions contributes to what Goleman (1998:7) termed emotional intelligence, understood as “managing feelings so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothly toward their common goals”.

One of the findings of this study is that creating shared meanings is especially easy where cultural dispositions include acceptance to new knowledge and new cultural patterns. Pan-European environment in Italy was seen by a majority as being cosmopolitan and egalitarian. It was conducive and favorable to new knowledge creation. Thus, it can be argued that postmodern cosmopolitan milieu facilitates knowledge transfer and creation of shared meanings. Being attuned to different cultures on many levels has been considered a necessary cultural attribute in the age of modernity. Cultural openness involves “the search for, and delight in, the contrasts between societies rather than a longing for superiority or for uniformity” (Urry 2000:7). Cultural openness is the main characteristic of cosmopolitan disposition, a stance that may be conducive to generating new forms of critical knowledge (Hannerz 1996:103-9). But cultural openness alone can be a limited and diffuse understanding of cosmopolitan attitudes (Skrbis & Woodward 2007), and cosmopolitanism has to entail universal ethical commitments and “a distinct ethical orientation towards selflessness, wordiness, and communitarianism” (Kendall et al. 2009:22). My findings are in direct support of these observations.

The idea, that cosmopolitan disposition leads to better societal-wide outcomes, is central in a very influential work conducted by Florida (2002; 2005). He argues that, in the knowledge economy, territorial competitive advantage is based on ability to rapidly mobilize “The Creative Class” (2002) seen as a combination of skilled people, resources and innovation capacity. Above
all, it stems from being able to generate, attract and retain an effective combination of talent, creative people in the arts and cultural industries, and diverse ethnic, racial and lifestyle groups. Florida (2002) offered a formula of combining three Ts – Technology, Talent, and Tolerance – resulting in long-term prosperity, development, and innovation. Creative people endorse all types of diversity manifestations and migration is clearly praised by Florida (2002:750–51).

Recently, Florida (2005) showed how the U.S. in the last years has been losing its economic advantage and its reputation as a big talent attracting magnet. In Florida’s (2005) opinion, causes of the U.S.’s declining position in the global competition for talent include growing cultural intolerance, social inequality and restraining security measures adopted after 9/11. These limitations have reduced the “willingness to engage” which resulted in an exodus of talented people, jobs and opportunities. It supports the idea that the expectations of the creative class are openness to diversity of all kinds, and above all else the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people (Florida 2002:218).

Finding societal “willingness to engage” in the new place has been very important for collectivist participants in particular who thrive in a supportive and encouraging environment. EUI participants testified that they felt the most possibilities for self-expression in mostly egalitarian pan-European milieu where culturally-dominant forces were subdued. This cosmopolitan cultural environment has been described by many as ideally combining multiple cultural influences and thus, presenting a favorable setting for uncovering and developing one’s talents. It is a main conclusion of this article that cultural dispositions of openness to cultural diversity and mutual willingness to engage with new cultural patterns are critical prerequisites to effective transfer and creation of all types of knowledge.
References


