EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF HOST FAMILIES IN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH EXCHANGE[i]

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ABSTRACT:

Between 2006-2007 twenty narrative interviews were conducted with German host parents concerning their experiences with the one-year stay of a guest student in their family. The study was executed as a one-year students' research project as part of the research-oriented MA course "Intercultural Communication – Intercultural Competence" at Chemnitz University of Technology.

The interviews were analyzed by means of Grounded Theory (Strauss/Corbin 1990), which revealed that the guest families' experiences are determined not only by the personality/character and socio-cultural background of the guest student, but to a higher degree by the specific motives, wishes and expectations of the host parents. Both socially shared and individual norms, attitudes and values proved to guide the host parents' interaction with their guest, to some extent explicitly, but mainly in an unconscious and implicit way. The action chains as explicated by the interviewees can be understood as individual coping strategies for not least cultural difference, that in themselves can turn out to be problematical (i.e. when they mainly serve the regulation of self-esteem, or when

experienced difference is wrongly attributed to culture instead of e.g. developmental processes of adolescence). Hence, in comparative analysis both challenges and potentials of intercultural learning (as defined in the CfP) from hosting a guest student could be identified, and recommendations for better practice could be derived. Especially the latter should be discussed in a practitioner-scientist-dialogue.

Introduction

Encountering cultures, opening your mind and enriching your family life – these are but a few examples of reasons with which international youth exchange organizations try to recruit host families who would like to host an exchange student of an international youth exchange program in their home for a certain time (see Gisevius/Tsudome/Suwalski 2007, 106). However, what is the host families' motivation to welcome a foreign adolescent in their home for a longer period of time, mostly a one-year stay, and what are their experiences during that time? What are the challenges and problems, how do host families cope with them and what are the consequences? Within the Master course "Intercultural Communication – Intercultural Competence" at Chemnitz University of Technology[ii] we conducted a study focusing on the perspective of host parents.[iii] The results of this study will be the topic of this article. At first we are going to point out the scientific as well as the practical relevance of host families' perspectives in connection with international youth exchange, followed by the presentation of the study and its main findings. Finally we will discuss some possible conclusions related to intercultural learning.

Current State of Research

Host families as actors in international youth exchange have not been investigated much. Despite their vital character in connection with exchange programs, their perspective has hardly been examined in studies up to now. Most studies predominantly focus on adolescents and their experiences (e.g. the study by Bayerischer Jugendring, a Bavarian youth association, 2001/2004; or Bachner/Zeutschel 1990). If members of the host family are interviewed, it is rather to gain more knowledge about the exchange *students* and *their* learning and development processes (e.g. Hammer 2005, AFS Educational Results Study). There are only a few empirical studies that consider host families as their object of research. Moreover these studies and their results are difficult to compare due to major differences in format of the exchange program, main research question, theoretical framework of the study, research design and applied methods.

1) For an example of difference in format, the two oldest studies on host families focus on host families of Pearce Corps Trainees (Gordon 1974) and those of human service professionals (Lowe/Askling/Bates 1984). Another study (Vollhardt 2004) examines host families as part of a one-year exchange program. Thus, different assumptions on the relationship between host parents and exchange students are prevalent depending on the

type of exchange program. Compared to a one-year stay, the student in a shorter exchange program is rather seen as a 'guest' than a 'temporary family member'.[iv]

2) In some studies (e.g. Grove 1984) the main research question focuses on experiences of host families. In other studies though, the focus on host families results from a more general research question being modified by theoretical and practical research considerations. So for example in a study conducted by Vollhardt (2004), the positive impact of intercultural contacts on mono-cultural persons was meant to be examined, but because of theoretical considerations the author then focused her research on host families.

3) An example of differing underlying theories and concepts can be seen in Lowe and colleagues (1984) application of the concept of 'multicultural people' (Adler 1977) and the 'mediating person' (Bochner 1977), while Vollhardt (2004) draws on Thomas' action and learning theoretical model of intercultural competence (Thomas 2003) as well as on the theory of the fundamental attribution error (Ross 1977).

4) A further problem is that the mentioned studies use different methods and research designs. Apart from general methodological questions regarding quantitative versus qualitative methods there remains the problem that it is impossible to draw conclusions on *change processes* when a cross-sectional design is used. The majority of studies used quantitative methods as well as cross-sectional research designs (Gordon 1974, Lowe et al. 1984, Vollhardt 2004). Only one study commissioned by AFS (Grove 1984) used a qualitative longitudinal research design.

Due to the small number of studies focusing on host families and the difficulty in comparing them for the reasons mentioned above, there is still a lack of systematic findings on the perspective of host families within youth exchange – especially in terms of intercultural learning processes.

The family system in the action field of 'youth exchange'

In the following, when speaking of youth exchange, we refer to one-year programs where the exchange student is staying with a host family for about one year and attends a local school. According to the majority of exchange organizations, the term 'host family' implies not only married couples with children but also single persons or couples without children. Usually the host families do not receive any financial support by the organization but have to pay the costs themselves. Organizations of certain exchange programs recommend the host family to accept the exchange student as a *full member of the family* with all his rights and duties and not to regard him as a *guest*. Looking at this task of integrating the exchange student into the

family, it is surprising that the perspective and experience of host families has not yet been really approached. This is also surprising in view of research interested in aspects of intercultural communication and intercultural learning since socialization and enculturation to a large extend take place in the family.

Hence, particularly when there is an encounter of different family cultures, as in the case of youth exchange, it is possible to explore experiences and strategies of coping with cultural differences (Fig. 1).
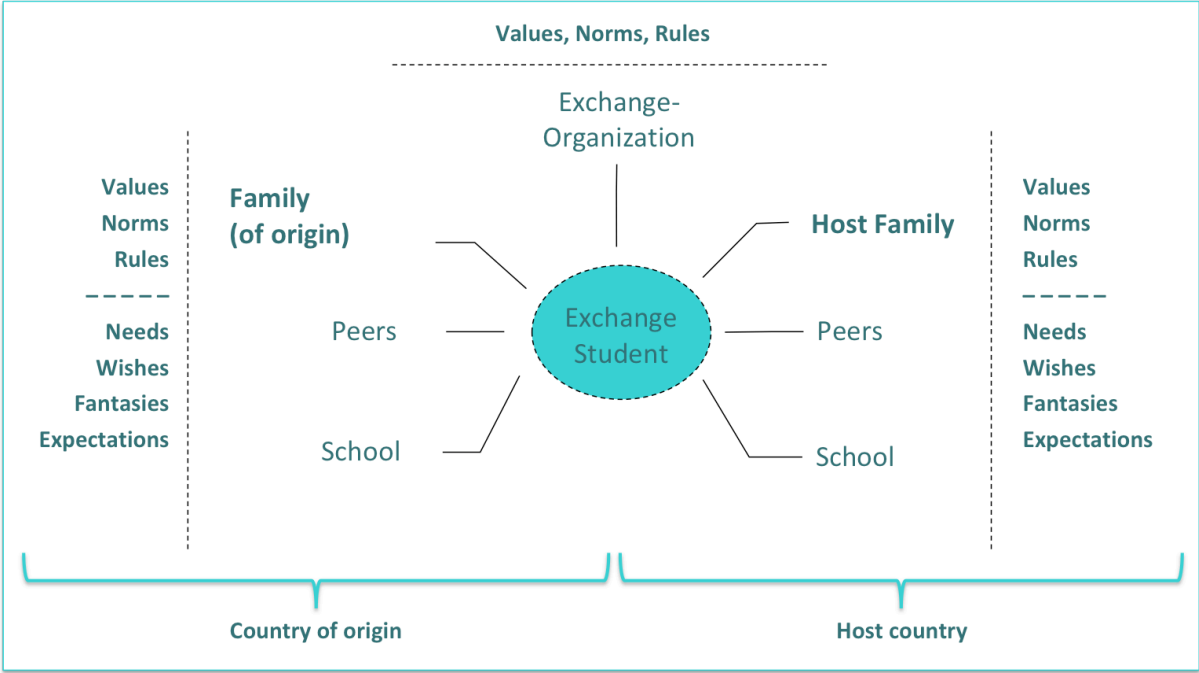

Fig. 1: Actors in the action field and cultural influences in international youth exchange (focus on exchange student).

In a family a person adopts values, norms and rules which are foremost meant to regulate family life and interactions within the family and suffuse those with meaning. The values, norms and rules are of course applied to wider social contexts such as school or work and society at large, as well. Parents pass them on either consciously through their education ('Erziehung' in German) or unconsciously. Hence, a specific family culture evolves, which is part of a more general cultural context. Concepts of normality are mostly shared by all members of the family system – at least to a certain degree. It can not be assumed though that an outsider knows and/or shares these concepts that are the product of socialization processes within family and society and which can thus be culturally very different.

As an outsider, the exchange student, who has been socialized in a different family system, acts, at least to a certain extent, according to different norms, values and rules. When s/he enters the host family with her own family socialization, constellations within the host family system start to change. Thus, both parties (host family and exchange student) have to go through adaptation processes since both are facing (cultural) differences: the exchange student has to integrate into the family, while the host family has to stabilize the established family system. To the host parents, the stabilization of the family system is of high personal relevance and value since it involves *their own* family which they have created over many years according to their desires and needs and within the frame of their means.

The exploration of the host family's perspective reveals youth exchange related aspects of intercultural communication that do not come into view when the exchange student's perspective is the entire focus. Due to their age and developmental stage host parents have more implicit and explicit cultural knowledge compared to the exchange student. Due to their roles as parents and educators they are also more used to explicating this knowledge. Thus, they can better explicate which values and social norms they stand for and which rules they want to apply both within the family and outside. This inclines the hosts to reflect their own expectations of normality to the extent to which they perceive that the exchange student does not automatically know and/or share their concepts of normality. When doing research on intercultural communication processes, the focus on host families' perspectives and especially the 'irritation' of the family system due to hosting an exchange student can reveal two things: it can give information about the family system and its values, norms and rules as well as about the host families' experiences and coping strategies concerning cultural difference.

The study

In our qualitative and explorative study we accordingly focused on the perspective of host families in a one-year exchange. We were interested in experiences, reflections and the impact of the exchange as perceived by host families. The following criteria have been used for the selection of the interviewees:

1) The families should have hosted an exchange student for a longer period of time (at least half a year).

2) The last exchange student should have departed at least six months before.

In this way we wanted to ensure that the hosting experience had been sufficiently long to necessitate mutual adaptation processes on the one hand while on the other hand making sure that the interviews were not overshadowed by any acute conflict and that there had been enough time for the interviewees to reflect on their experiences. So between 2006 and 2007 twenty narrative interviews were conducted with one or both host parents. All interviewees had a (marriage) partner and at least one own child. The majority of the interviewees was from Saxony. In some cases the socialization in the former GDR is of significance. The interviews were analyzed by means of Grounded Theory (Strauss/Corbin 1990) and following Straub's (1993, 1999) method of constant comparison by determinative and reflective forms of interpretation against different horizons of comparison within the framework of relational hermeneutics (Straub/Shimada 1999; Straub 2006). At first, all interviews were literally transcribed. These transcripts were then segmented and each segment paraphrased (reformulating interpretation). In the next step, case stories were constructed. Afterwards, open, axial and selective coding was done on each interview and categories were developed in order to reconstruct manifest and latent structures of meaning and to understand the distinctiveness of each case. In the following comparison across all the cases, similarities and differences were identified, before we tried to explain the specifics of youth exchange from the host parent perspective.

Findings

Due to the methodology and methods used in this study the findings reflect the *retrospective* views of the interviewees at the time of the interview. To what extend the situations, which the host parents chose to relate in the interview, had the same meaning in the related situation itself, would have to be researched individually in each case. This is especially important to bear in mind when looking at changes of behavior and attitudes as described by the interviewees. To 'prove' such changes would necessitate a longitudinal research design.

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Not astonishingly, the analysis of the interview data revealed that hosting an exchange student for host families is not only positive but can be problematic, too. The descriptions of experiences show at least some similarities with other studies considering host families. The evaluation of the exchange experience of the interviewees is closely related to:

- their motivation for hosting an exchange student;
- their adopted roles towards the exchange student;
- their expectations towards the exchange student and their perceived (non)fulfillment,
- as well as the perceived self efficacy in coping with (cultural) difference.

So, in the following we shall present some of these major aspects.

Motives

Results show that the decision of a host family to host an adolescent for one year appears to be determined by specific motives. These were mentioned both explicitly by the host parents as well as derived through analysis of the interviews. The main motives for hosting an exchange student are thus:

- an interest in and curiosity about the other;
- the wish to experience variety in everyday-life;
- a sense of mutuality in the exchange, when host parents wish to return something for their own child's participation in an exchange program;
- the chance to explore new family constellations;
- empty nest-Syndrome
- the desire to help;
- social recognition.

Whereas all these motives could be identified in every interview the valence of each motive and so the structure of motives differs among the interviewees. Moreover the motives are not independent from each other: On a more abstract level they can be integrated according to considerations in the terms of action theory since they all apply to the regulation of action potential (Boesch 1991) or perceived self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) and therefore align with the host parents' 'self-theory' (Epstein 1979). Thus, they are closely related to the increase of self-esteem.

Roles

In every family, there are more or less well defined social roles *sensu* Goffmann (1956/1997) (such as father, mother, daughter, son, brother, sister, wife, husband, and so forth), which determine the interactions between family members. The content of these roles differs not only among different societies but also among families. Moreover, assignments of roles and associated role expectations as well as behavioral patterns are all subject to constant negotiating processes amongst the family members in the development of a family system (see Schneewind 1999). Additionally, there are roles family members take on towards outsiders which – like the roles within the family – are also connected to complementary roles. Foremost in the context of our study these are the roles of the 'host' and the 'guest', both of which are highly complex in a historico-cultural sense as well as very different among cultures (see Friese 2009). As we have seen, hosting an exchange student requires his integration into the family system. This goes along with the assignment and taking-over of

specific roles. As mentioned earlier, there is a certain ambivalence concerning the status of the exchange student as a 'guest' versus his status as a 'temporary family member'.

The roles our interviewees took over themselves were:

- (host) father or (host) mother that is 'temporary' father or mother,
- host,
- friend, and
- assistant for someone in need, or what we have termed 'development facilitator' or 'development aid worker'.

Complementary to these self-assigned roles, there are those that are explicitly or implicitly assigned to the exchange student such as: child, guest, friend or someone in need of help (Fig.2).
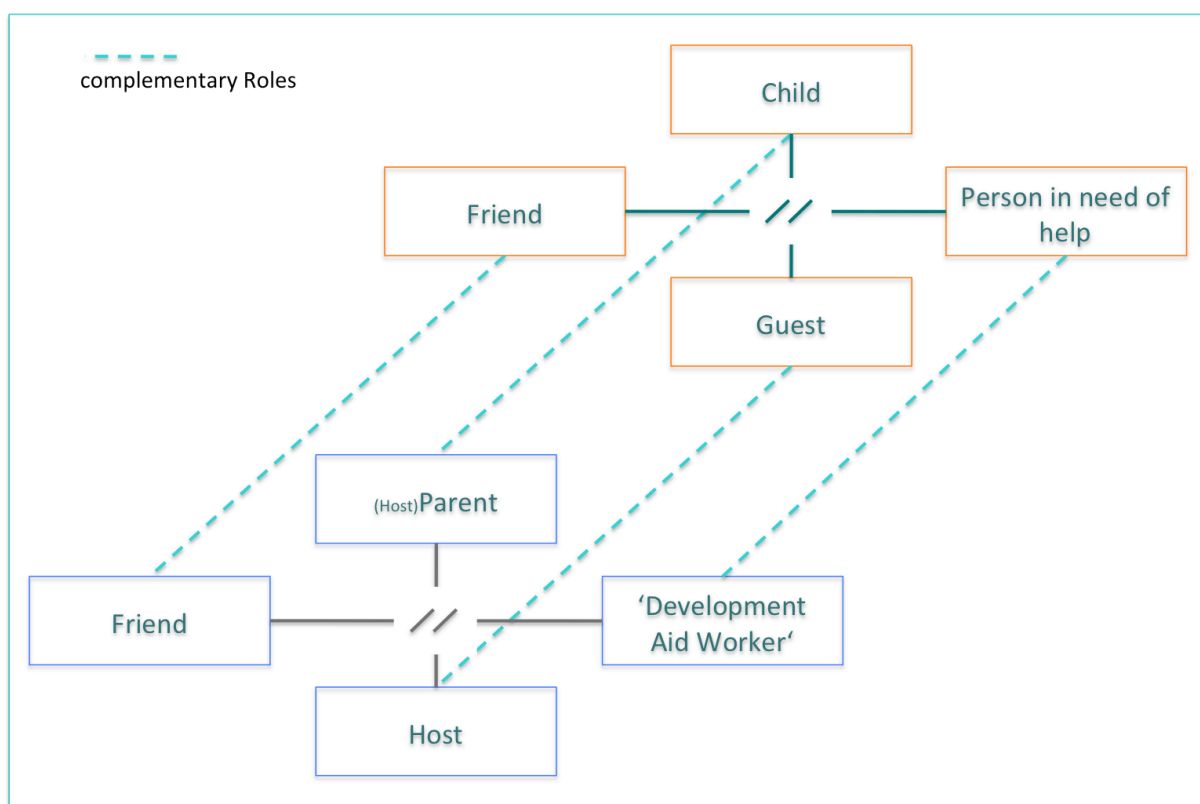

Fig. 2: Role matrix in international youth exchange.

(Host)Father or (Host)Mother

The roles of (host) father and (host) mother are closely connected to the parent's individual ideals of education. Accordingly the role tasks appear to be diverse and highly individual. Amongst these are integration of the exchange student into the family system, care for the 'child' and support in difficult situations, but also to know 'what is best' for the adolescent.

Host

Unlike the role of (host)parent, the research participants do not explicitly allot themselves the role of the host. We derived this role from the fact that the exchange student is described as a guest and sometimes is explicitly called so. The main tasks associated with the role of a host are to entertain and to get the exchange student accustomed with the country and language.

Friend

Besides the roles of host parents and hosts, which appear to be obvious based on the ambivalent term 'host family', there is also the role of a friend. Especially for host mothers the role of a friend seems of vital importance, as they like to view themselves as a friend or a confidant of the exchange student.

'Development Aid Worker'

The role as an assistant for someone in need is closely connected to the motive of 'helping'. It is often influenced by societal and/or educational ideals. Two tasks are connected with this role: helping someone who is in need, which mainly concerns practical aspects of daily life, but also to support the exchange student in the process of personal development which is closely connected to the implicit conviction to know best what is good for him.

In our study the aspect of supporting someone in his personality development is closely connected to working in the social or educational profession, whereas helping someone in need is related to the motive of social recognition. In terms of the assistants' role the young adult is pretty much forced into the role of someone in need: Be it a 'case' that needs to be resolved or someone who is received and taken care of. This perception of the exchange student carries a particular potential of conflict when the hosting of an exchange student is used as a means to fight the 'empty nest-syndrome' or when host families highly expect the exchange student to enrich their daily life. For this role-assignment to be psychologically functional for host parents it is important that exchange students are not too independent and particularly requires that they do not 'disconnect' too much from the (host) family.

So host parents see themselves in different roles and also assign varying roles to the exchange student. Particularly in case of highly contrary roles like (host) parents and host or friend and assistant for someone in need, inner conflicts can occur due to role confusions. It appears to be difficult for host parents to negotiate which roles they (want to) take on, which expectations are related to these roles and also in which role they see the exchange student and what they thus can expect of him. The interviewees stated that they explicitly talked about their expectations on behavior and sometimes got into heavy conflicts. But since mutual role assignments often happen to be implicit, the role of the exchange student was basically determined by which role the host parents (in a given situation) ascribed to themselves and/or vice versa. The analysis shows that host parents (and certainly exchange students, too) see themselves confronted with different and partly intractable challenges that particularly result from role-assignments that remain implicit and are non-complementary as well as from different views on features of a role.

Expectations towards the exchange student

Closely related to the personal motives to host an exchange student as well as to role-assignments are the host parent's expectations with respect to the exchange student. The interviewees in our study mentioned several expectations they hold towards the exchange student. Foremost amongst these is the exchange student's integration into and adaptation to the host family and its social environment. Further expectations are partly closely connected to the expected integration. The exchange student is expected to generally show interest, initiative and commitment, and especially to put an effort into learning the national language. S/he is also expected to share something from his or her own country and culture, thus satisfying the host parents' curiosity and infuse variety into daily life. Integration is thus not automatically granted to the exchange student. S/he has to actively strive for it. Last but not least s/he is expected to show respect, recognition and appreciation towards the host parents. When these expectations are not met host parents feel that their own efforts are devaluated,

their social recognition reduced and their goals toward hosting an exchange student not fulfilled.

Role conflicts

It appears to be difficult for host parents to negotiate which roles they (want to) take on, which expectations are related to these roles and also in which role they see the exchange student and what they thus can expect of him. Thus, many of the problems and conflicts described by the interviewees can be understood as role conflicts. Challenges arise from the following aspects:

- host parents as well as exchange student take on different roles at the same time;
- role-taking and role-assignment is both situational *and* independent of situations;
- the assignment of roles is often implicit;
- host parents and exchange student often act on the basis of non-complementary roles;
- the ideas about the specifics of the roles and connected expectations concerning behavior differ individually and culturally;
- due to different reasons the expected role behavior might not be shown
- and finally, acting according to different roles does not only refer to role expectations but also to expectations of expectations – that is what oneself believes the other one expects from oneself and/or attributes to oneself.

However, if the host parents are aware of the different roles and role expectations as well as the problems which potentially result from them, the adoption of several roles can benefit the development of the exchange student's personality, but can also have an effect on the host parents' self-concept: By means of aware and reflected confrontation with different role expectations the 'subjective space of possibility' (Frey & Foppa 1986) is broadened, and since in this respect both individual and cultural differences play a role, it could also be referred to as intercultural learning.

Managing (cultural) differences and coping strategies

Being confronted with differences in the everyday life of the (host) family affects both the interviewees' self-image and the family's self-conception. As stated above, the way the interviewees retrospectively evaluate an exchange student's stay in their family is closely connected to the extent to which expectations towards the exchange and the exchange student were fulfilled.

Hence the evaluation is at the same time strongly linked with the interviewee's motives for the exchange as well as with the fulfillment of the involved persons' roles. By means of our empirical data it is possible to demonstrate that the described problems and coping strategies (and thereby the interviewee's managing of cultural differences) can be understood as the regulation of self-esteem through processes of social attribution. The exchange is experienced particularly positive when the strategies to cope with differences successfully contribute to minimizing or dissolving the experienced cognitive dissonances (Festinger 1978) and thereby stabilize or increase self-efficacy and self-esteem. This includes the behavioral patterns toward their exchange students, the described effects, and the evaluation of the effects as *explicated* by the interviewees, as well as the latent meanings reconstructed through analysis of the interview transcripts.

While it is generally assumed that hosting a (foreign) exchange student inevitably confronts the members of a host family with cultural differences, it actually rather seems to be the

ascription of cultural difference as reason for experienced problems which often constitutes the difference as 'cultural'. The following findings show how the interviewees described strategies of solving problems in the interaction with the exchange student that arose on the basis of experienced differences.

Communication with the exchange student

Communication is not only used as a means of establishing a relationship but also as a way to clarify expectations and to solve conflicts. If a problem can be solved, for example, by the host father or the host mother discussing it, he or she feels positively confirmed in his or her action potential and self-efficacy.

Showing Initiative

Showing initiative as a strategy in coping with problems resulting from differences generally means to actively seek contact with the exchange student and to get involved oneself, i.e. accepting responsibility for bridging foreignness and differences, for example, by the host parents seeking clarifying dialogue. At the beginning of the exchange period most interviewees do that, but later on some of them describe different coping strategies for problems resulting from differences, which refer to differences in self-concepts and attribution styles.

Showing initiative strengthens the "action potential" (Boesch 1991) as well as – if the desired effect occurs –the feeling of self-efficacy, thus it increases self-esteem. However, if the feeling of self-efficacy is low it comes to strategies which are supposed to prove the impossibility of initiative, for example, by pointing out the (incompatible) personality of the exchange student and the associated irreversibility of his behavior. In connection with the role of an 'assistant for someone in need' the 'showing initiative' strategy has different characteristics: it means basically undertaking certain tasks for the exchange student including the definition of development objectives for him/her, as due to his/her age or origin etc. s/he is assumed not to be able to do it by him/herself. This strategy is extremely resistant concerning the regulation of self-esteem. It is obvious that exchange students benefit from the comprehensive support; at the same time the strategy imposes on them the role of someone in need and they are not able to disengage themselves from that role since the assistant for someone in need, due to his/her age, experience and sometimes especially his/her profession (as teacher, social worker etc.), knows better what is good for the students. It is obvious that thereby not least socio-culturally highly specific development models and objectives are imposed on the exchange students for reasons of regulation of self-esteem by the host parent(s); such 'cultural imperialistic' behavior is based on the self-confident assumption of always already knowing which cultural or individual factors cause the problems.

Implementing the 'ideal of education'

According to their role as parents the host parents however try another way to implement their own ideal of education and thereby maintain their family system in terms of their own ideas. Basically, this ideal of education is highly normative and holds culturally and individually very distinct ideas. Correspondingly there is a wide range of actions used to implement it. This varies from taking care, worrying, to offering help and allowing room for the development of personal potential. Changes on part of the exchange students which conform to this ideal of education are experienced and evaluated in a positive way by the host parents.

Due to the importance of their ideal of education for the host parents' self-concept, problems in implementing their own ideas into the everyday life of the host family pose a direct threat to their self-concept and lead to a decrease of self-esteem. Role ascriptions that are

incongruent, individually and culturally distinct or remain implicit, cause problems which are highly significant for the interviewees, even though they obviously lack sufficient options of explanation, that would meet their own expectations and those of the exchange students likewise.

Emerging cultural as well as individual differences can hereby be experienced positively or negatively. Differences which can be assimilated into the host parent's existent self-theory (sensu Epstein) have the effect of broadening the self-concept and enhance self-esteem. They thus directly satisfy some of the described motives. However, differences which cannot be assimilated pose a threat to the self-theory and decrease the feeling of self-esteem.

Acceptance vs. Rejection

In case of conflicts emerging from perceived differences of ideas one coping strategy is the acceptance of these differences without the need to explain or resolve it (e.g. "people are different, one has to accept it…"). The strategy opposed to 'acceptance' is the rejection of experienced differences. The own point of view is insisted on and the exchange students are asked or required to behave according to the host parents' concepts of normality. Both strategies allow the maintenance of the own self-image that is naturally different in each of the two cases. However, it is relevant in this context to perceive 'acceptance' as a strategy in terms of the regulation of self-esteem, that indeed pragmatically dilutes the problematic nature of emerging differences, but neither resolves them through understanding nor should it be confused with appreciation or even 'intercultural competence' (Nothdurft 2007).

Exaggerating vs. Trivializing

Another pair of opposites in the context of the regulation of self-esteem are the strategies of 'exaggerating' and 'trivializing'. Exaggerations, for example about the own commitment, the efforts for the exchange students, etc., serve as positive confirmation of the self-image. Host parents contrariwise also fall back on linguistic trivializations in order to lessen the importance of incidents like an argument, withdrawal, not participating in excursions, etc., and thereby decrease the threat to their self-esteem that otherwise would emerge. But exaggerations are also to be found in the context of explanations for the emergence of problems. To emphasize negative personality features of the exchange students or cultural differences as cause of a problem has a beneficial effect for self-esteem since it takes the responsibility to solve the problem off the host parents: they themselves can simply not do anything. Even in failure (eg. when the exchange is prematurely terminated) this strategy – in combination with the strategy of acceptance – leads to an increase of self-esteem, though this requires that the made attributions are socially shared by the host parents' significant others (eg. their peers, neighbors, etc.).

Causal attributions

The host parents' narratives include all forms of causal attributions (Weiner 1986) both concerning the exchange students' behavioral patterns which are perceived as different, and the problems emerging from interacting with them. Basically, all humans make attributions that benefit their self-esteem (cf. Epstein 1979; Hewstone & Antaki 1992). Often those attributions are associated with the effort of minimizing emerging cognitive dissonances in order to keep the own self-theory consistent and constant. As you would expect considering relevant theories of attribution (Heider 1958; Jones & Davis 1965; Kelley 1972, 1973; Weiner 1985, 1986), host parents attribute *success* in the social interaction with the exchange students at least partly to themselves. Their efforts and endeavors as well as their openness and tolerance etc. are described in detail. These are partly described as a result of their active concern with the exchange students and thereby recorded as a personal success. At least in the

beginning of the exchange relationship the host parents ascribe problems (especially concerning participation in the household, language learning or integration into the social environment, for example in school) to a lack of effort on the part of the exchange students. In case the problems persist host parents' external-variable attribution decreases and external-stable attribution increases. Host parents then attribute either to cultural difference or to personality traits of the exchange students.

In our context it is particularly interesting that cultural attributions are mostly made in a very stereotypical and undifferentiated way. After a one-year stay of an exchange student in one's family, which is associated with the explicit objective of getting to know other cultures and with the subjective impression of having learned a lot from the social interaction with the foreign exchange student, something else could be expected here. However, when interpreting these findings, again in terms of regulations of self-esteem, it becomes clear that interviewees who experienced major difficulties with their exchange students make particularly stereotypical attributions. In doing so they refer to (national) stereotypes which the listener most probably knows and which thus allow them to describe the exchange students as typically 'American', 'Chinese' or the like. By this means the individual character of the exchange student, and/or the character of the relationship between exchange student and host family, is neglected as far as possible, which enables the interviewees to avoid (joint) responsibility for arisen relationship problems and thus support their self-esteem.

Acts of Compensation/'Ersatz' action

The failure of an exchange (relationship) always means a particular threat to the self-image of all parties concerned. Within the frame of our hypothesis of regulation of self-esteem, the termination of an exchange can also be interpreted as a strategy of keeping one's own self-concept consistent and of protecting it against changes which could otherwise be necessary. Indeed, this is only successful if the host parents are able to resolve the emerging dissonances (between their objectives and motives in terms of the youth exchange and their demands on themselves) by means of appropriate and socially shared causal attribution, and thereby protect their self-esteem. If an exchange student withdraws from the exchange relationship though, and moves to another family, this poses a far more challenging threat to the self-esteem of the previous host parents. In this case it is obvious – also for others in the social environment – that the failure of the exchange relationship is not only due to the exchange student.

In case the motives and objectives associated with international youth exchange are too important for the host parents' self-concept, the dissonances resulting from the withdrawal can only partly be reduced by means of causal attributions. In order to retrieve self-esteem without having to change their self-concept, other strategies are necessary. Committing themselves as a voluntary workers in youth exchange, without hosting exchange students anymore, is an example for a way out of this predicament. The latter avoids experiences that could again pose a threat to their self-esteem while the former not only involves social appreciation but also increases their feeling of self-efficacy.

Family System and Development Processes in Adolescence

We do not deny the influence of actual cultural difference in interaction between host parents and their exchange students. Based on our research, we never the less state the opinion, that difficulties and problems experienced and described by the host parents can mainly be explained on the basis of attributional processes for the benefit of self-image and stabilizing self-esteem – even in cases where interviewees attribute problems to cultural differences. Beyond that, the changes in the family system caused by the youth exchange on the one hand

and the development process in adolescence on the other hand lead to problems that are specific to youth exchange and that partly produce the need for the coping strategies described above.

Differences that are caused by contrary development processes on the part of the adolescent and the family system are often not recognized as such. While going abroad as an exchange student represents a severance process that is, albeit accelerated, typical for adolescence (cf. Erikson 1973, Marcia 1980; Havighurst 1972), the settling in a foreign (host) family system requires strong adaptation which is untypical for this age. The host family is confronted with thereto complementary 'irritations' of the family system (cf. Schneewind 1999). The foreign teenager has to be integrated into the family system, while it would be developmentally typical for the family to loosen the ties with an adolescent. Since the exchange student only stays in the family for a limited period of time, it is the integration and not the severance process that is most important to the host parents. Differences and problems that stem from these parallel individual and familial development processes are again often wrongly attributed on culture or the personality of the exchange student.
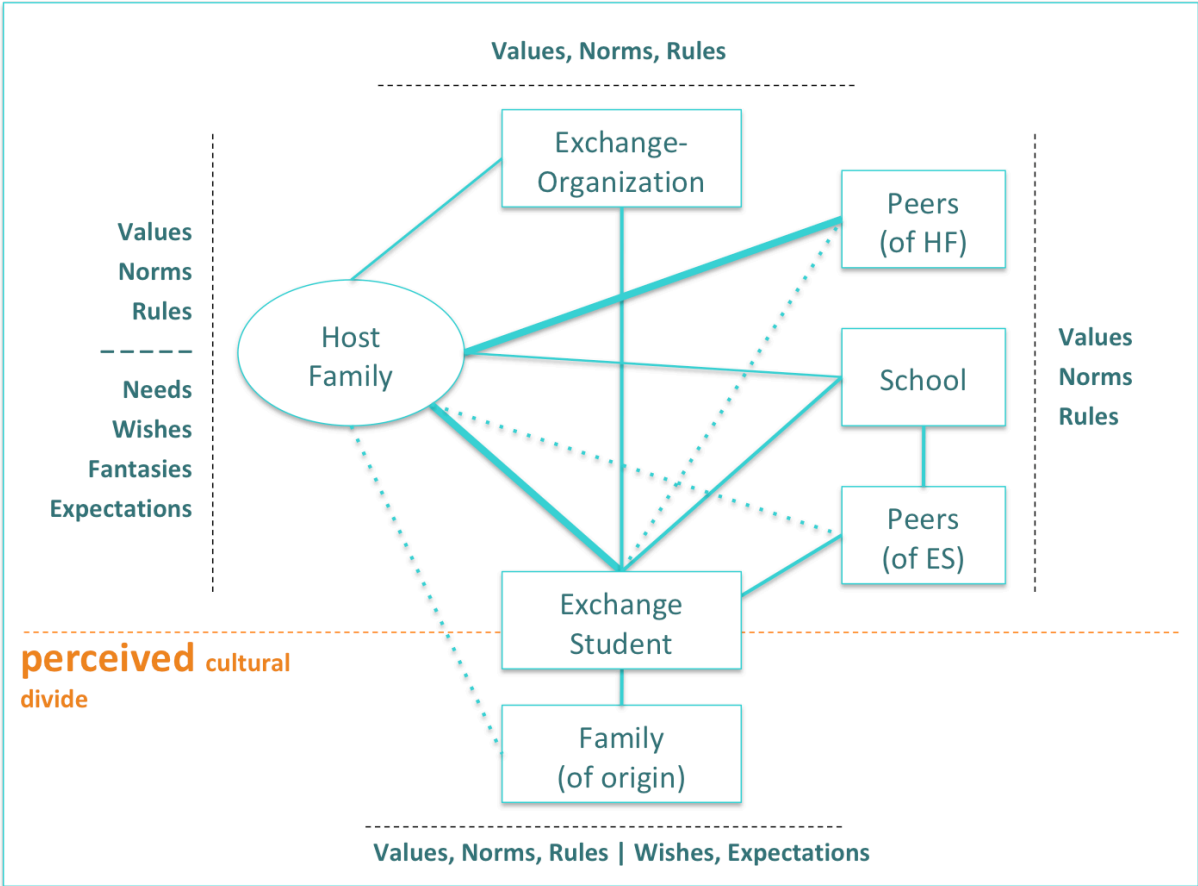

Fig. 3: Action Field and importance of social relationships as perceived by host families.

Conclusion

We thus come to the conclusion that the strategies for dealing with the experienced differences can be understood rather as processes of self-esteem regulation and stabilization

of the family system than as intercultural learning processes. In fact, especially problematic exchange experiences show that these mechanisms can actually hinder intercultural understanding. Despite this pessimistic sounding interpretation, the results of our study might be useful, if the shown aspects are understood as typical challenges in international youth exchange. In line with existing offers for host families such as (culture specific) preparation and information (see Gisevius et al. 2007) our findings can be utilized in two relevant areas: the selection of host families and the support of host families and exchange students alike when interaction problems arise.

Concerning the selection of host families, exchange organizations should be especially sensitive towards signs of problematic self-image or unstable self-esteem. In case of problems during the exchange the local supervisor should be able to assist the host family by paying attention to attribution processes related to raise self-esteem and looking for alternative ways of attribution. They should also be sensitive to problems that arise from the contrariness of the development processes involved. This would offer possibilities for intercultural learning for host parents that go way beyond what they can learn by themselves from interacting with exchange students.

Intercultural learning would then take place while 'working through' the problematical situation and understanding of the host parents' coping strategies with the supervisor. When transferred to everyday life with the exchange students the resulting self-awareness could then contribute to shift the focus from threatened self-esteem and open the host parents' eyes to real cultural differences. Host families would thus be better able to achieve their own goals such as widening their horizons and experiencing cultural variety in their everyday-life. At the same time this would enable them to better support their exchange students in their developmental process. On part of the supervisor this kind of coaching requires a high level of analytical and communication skills. Since international youth exchange is highly dependent on voluntary engagement, though, this task remains difficult to implement. Our results also show that not everyone who, based on his own (problematic) experiences, commits himself to help host families, is actually able to do so. Therefore we suggest that at least supervisors should be especially carefully selected and trained to interpret attribution processes and self-esteem related coping strategies. This is relevant when it comes to new support services for host families. It is also relevant for a systematic and reflected implementation of culture-specific preparation courses.

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[i] This paper is based on a slightly longer German version which is available at http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/ikk/ik/files/de/content-162.html.

[ii] For information on the research-oriented M.A.-course "Interkulturelle Kommunikation – Interkulturelle Kompetenz" at Chemnitz University of Technology see http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/ikk/ik/files/en/index-1.html.

[iii] Apart from this research paper a master-thesis is forthcoming that will present the individual case-stories as well as a more detailed comparative analysis across our sample.

[iv] Note however that in German a common term for 'exchange student' is 'guest student'. Thus in German there is – already on the level of language – a much stronger connotation with the guest status, even in connection with longer stays.

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