International Experiences – is there an effect on intercultural sensitivity?

An explorative study conducted at Stockholm University

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ABSTRACT

The presented research is an explorative study, aimed to identify differences in intercultural sensitivity of Swedish students with international experience, Swedish students with no international experiences and international students studying at Stockholm University. The research is placed within the field of higher education. International experiences are seen to be a key to intercultural competences and it is universities who need to prepare students for the demands of the globalized job market.

The research is of qualitative nature and relevant data was collected by the means of semi-structured interviews. The data was coded according to qualitative thematic analysis and then analyzed and discussed in accordance to the researcher questions and existing literature in this field.

The study revealed that there is no general difference in intercultural sensitivity between the three groups analyzed. However, international students show higher sensitivity in terms of respect of cultural differences and open-mindedness, while students with no international experiences show less sensitivity in terms of interaction involvement and suspending judgment. The identified themes offer valuable information on individual perceptions of cultural differences. This information can be used to improve measures and actions to increase intercultural sensitivity at Stockholm University.

Keywords

Intercultural sensitivity, culture, international experiences, study-abroad, intercultural competences, Stockholm University
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“Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends.”

(Angelou, 1993, p. 12)
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DMIS  Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity
EEA  European Economic Area
EMN  European Migration Network
ERASMUS  European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students
EU  European Union
ICSI  Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory
IDI  Intercultural Development Inventory
IS  Intercultural Sensitivity
ISS  Intercultural Sensitivity Scale
OECD  Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
1 INTRODUCTION

“The development of intercultural sensitivity describes how we gain the ability to create an alternative experience that more or less matches that of people in another culture. People who can do this have an intercultural worldview.”

(Bennett, 2004, p. 74)

We live in an interconnected world where different cultures, values and norms run into each other on a daily basis. May it be at work, during business meetings with international partners or colleagues or at school with exchange students or at home with our neighbors. We are exposed to other cultures and their values and norms every day and we expose our culture, including values and norms on a daily basis. Olson & Kroeger (2001) state that: “Global transportation, communication, commerce, and migration have transformed our world into a politically, economically, and environmentally interdependent web. What happens in one locality to one culture affects other cultures, although we may not see how the connecting strands tug on each other.” (p. 116). So how does this cohabitation work? Naturally, cultures and their encompassed values and norms are of a great variety and often are opposed to each other. Are we simply accepting the difference or do we possess certain competences to adapt our behavior accordingly? Olson & Kroeger (2001) argue: “We are not necessarily educated to perceive this global interconnectedness, nor have we been educated to make life choices with full awareness of the global implications of our choices.” (p. 116).

Of course, living together in peace and accepting each other’s differences is only one side of the coin. In today’s world we must also be able to compete globally and expert knowledge and professional skills are not sufficient enough to do so successfully. Nowadays, cultural diversity is manifested in the global marketplace, resulting in the necessity of employees to manage and interact with diversity by the means of intercultural competences (Fantini, 2000; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This necessity results in the need of companies to search for candidates with international experiences. In order to meet the demands of international experiences in the competitive environment of the job market, students increasingly participate in international exchange programs (OECD, 2014). Studies have found, that study-abroad programs can increase students’ intercultural sensitivity (Engle &
Engle, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001), which is increasingly important in the globalized world. The importance of intercultural competences is underlined by Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) as follows: “To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures.” (p. 416).

1.1 Aim & Objectives

This study aims to explore whether international experiences, such as studying-abroad or working abroad, support the development of intercultural sensitivity as part of intercultural competences of university students at Stockholm University. Thereby, a small-scale comparison will be made between three groups of students: Swedish students with previous international experiences, Swedish students with no international experiences and exchange students from other countries studying in Sweden. Subsequently, this research aims to explore the following research questions:

1. Do international experiences influence intercultural sensitivity characteristics of students at Stockholm University?
2. Do students at Stockholm University show characteristics that promote intercultural sensitivity?

In order to answer the research questions, the following objectives have been determined for this study:

• Identify components characteristically to intercultural sensitive persons by the means of interviews
• Analyze and compare the relationship between international experiences and intercultural sensitivity of the three groups mentioned above

1.2 Significance and Rationale

Previous assessments of intercultural competences have mainly focused on quantitative data and have been less explored from a qualitative standpoint. However, Deardorff (2006)
found in a study on appropriate assessment methods of intercultural sensitivity as a student outcome of internationalization, that a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, rather than one or the other, is needed to comprehensively explore intercultural sensitivity.

Intercultural competences, including intercultural sensitivity is an important research area in the field of international and comparative education. According to the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2012 more than 4.5 million students attended higher education in a country other than their country of citizenship. The report further states that “One way for students to expand their knowledge of other societies and languages, and thus improve their prospects in globalized sectors of the labor market, is to study in tertiary institutions in countries other than their own.” (OECD, 2014, p. 342)

Universities and schools are expected to prepare students and pupils for their working life. Intercultural competences have become increasingly important in the international job market. This is also being taken into account by the Swedish government. According to a government bill, international students can “contribute to strengthening the international environment and diversity, promoting understanding of other cultures and traditions, whilst proving invaluable for the development of the economy.” (European Migration Network Sweden, 2012, p. 14). It is therefore not only important to send students abroad but also to invite students from other countries. However, Olson & Kroeger (2001) argue that even though we engage in intercultural communication “intercultural sensitivity does not come naturally; unfortunately, we are more likely to ignore, copy, or destroy difference.” (p. 116). In accordance Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) also emphasize the importance of intercultural sensitivity in connection to the development of intercultural competences: “greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence.” (p. 422).

But what exactly is intercultural sensitivity and how can it be developed in a way to support the advancement of intercultural competences? In order to answer these questions, it is foremost important to establish if those, who we expect to develop it, have a general sensitivity towards other cultures. In order to meaningfully establish this, it is necessary to shed light on students’ experiences, especially international and study-abroad experiences and compare them on the basis of these experiences. This study will provide information on intercultural sensitivity among students at Stockholm University and could be supportive in
the development of further methods and actions of intercultural sensitivity at Stockholm University.

1.3 Limitations

This research is of qualitative nature and has a rather small sample size, as it focuses only on one university and the number of interviewees was rather small. Therefore, the possibility of generalizing the results is not given. Financial as well as time limitations have led the researcher to focus upon one institution, that is Stockholm University.

English has been chosen as the research language. This thesis is pursued in the course of a Master Program, in which the language of instruction is English. Furthermore, the researchers limited ability of the Swedish language supported the decision to conduct this research in English. This, however, may affect results as all participants, with the exception of two, have English as a secondary language, including the researcher herself. Nonetheless, the researcher made use of her mother tongue (German) to read upon relevant literature for this thesis.

1.4 Structure

This study is compiled of seven parts. The first part of this thesis provides a general introduction into the research topic of intercultural sensitivity. This is followed by the presentation of the aims and objectives for this research, including the defined research questions. Moreover, the significance and rationale of this study are elaborated on and finally limitations of the study are discussed. The second part deals with the conceptual and theoretical framework of this research. Thereby, relevant theories and concepts are discussed. The third part provides the methodological framework for this thesis. It elaborates on the research strategy, research method and analytical framework. The fourth part provides a brief contextual background on Sweden and on Stockholm University, demonstrating the research setting. Moreover, the research participants will be briefly introduced, however under the careful consideration of maintaining their anonymity. Also the data analysis process will be shortly described. In the fifth part the findings of the
collected data are presented, followed by an analysis and discussion of the results in the sixth part of this study. The final part provides some concluding remarks and suggestion for further research.
2 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will elaborate on key concepts and theories as well as frequently used terms and expressions in the field of intercultural competences and especially intercultural sensitivity. The reader should note that the definitions provided are not exclusive and more are available. However, the most suitable definitions have been chosen for elaboration in order to guide and conduct this research. The definitions and conceptualizations have been chosen on the grounds of their relevance to the exploration of intercultural sensitivity in relation to international experiences.

2.1 Relevant Concepts

The concepts requiring definition and explanation for this study are Culture, Intercultural Sensitivity and Study Abroad. The concepts of intercultural sensitivity and study abroad address the question of “what” in this study. Culture has been viewed in regards to The Hofstede Model of Culture. This model “describes the effects of a society’s culture on the values of its members, and how these values relate to behavior.” (Adeoye & Lawrence, 2014, p. 6), therefore offering a plausible concept to support the analysis of the findings of this study.

2.1.1 The Hofstede Model of Culture

“The number of definitions of culture is notoriously large” (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004, p. 58). As Hofstede & McCrae (2004) asserted – culture is a broad concept and it is out of the scope of this paper to present an overview of all conceptualizations on culture. Therefore, the researcher decided to focus on the conceptualization of culture according to the Hofstede Model. This model has been developed out of a study of national culture differences. Thereby, a database was used, which had been collected by IBM, a multinational cooperation in 71 countries, containing the results of 117,000 questionnaires (Hofstede, 2011). Hofstede (2011) defines culture as follows: “Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 3). The Hofstede Model distinguishes cultures according to the following six dimensions:
Power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-/short-term orientation and indulgence/restrained (Hofstede, 2011). Power distance is defined by Hofstede (2011) as “the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.” (p. 9). Rather than from above, it is determined from below. Small-power distances countries are characterized by limited dependence while large-power distance countries are described by high interdependence. For example, in small-power distance countries, subordinates easily approach and contradict their bosses, while in large-power distance countries subordinates are very depended on their superior following his lead rather unquestioned (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The second dimension, individualism/collectivism is defined as follows by Hofstede (2011): “Individualism on the one side versus its opposite, Collectivism, as a societal, not an individual characteristic, is the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups.” (p. 11). Within individualist societies it is the individual that stands in focus and is required to take care of him/herself and family. In contrast, collectivist societies are characterized by strong groups, individuals think and act in favor of the group (Hofstede, 2011). Also, people within individualistic cultures are under the assumption that their values are applicable to the entire world, while collectivist cultures base their identity on the social system to which they belong (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Moreover, individualist and collectivist societies are opposite in their conversation behavior. Individualistic cultures are low-context communication cultures, meaning they focus on verbal communication, while collectivist cultures are high-context communication cultures, hence, illustrating an indirect style of communication (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Masculinity/femininity “refers to the distribution of values between the genders” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 12). In masculine societies values such as achievement and success are predominant, while feminine societies are characterized by the caring for others and the quality of life (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Uncertainty avoidance indicates “to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations.” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10). A structured life by rules and formality describes cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance, while cultures with low uncertainty avoidance are more open to change and innovation. The fifth dimension, long- versus short-term orientation is defined by Hofstede & Hofstede (2005) as follows: long-term orientation is the “fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards – in particular perseverance and thrift.” (p. 210) and short-term orientation is the
“fostering of virtues related to the past and present – in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of “face”, and fulfilling social obligations.” (p. 210). The sixth dimension, which was added later, is that of indulgence vs resistance. Indulgence refers to “a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun.” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15). Restraint means “a society that controls gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15).

2.1.2 Intercultural Sensitivity

Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman (2003) argue that “greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence.” (p. 422). Also Chen & Starosta (2000) explore intercultural sensitivity as one aspect of intercultural communication competence. They describe intercultural communication competence as “an umbrella concept which is comprised of cognitive, affective and behavioral ability of interactants in the process of intercultural communication.” (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 3). The three conceptions that comprise the concept of intercultural communication competence are: intercultural awareness (cognitive aspect), intercultural sensitivity (affective aspect) and intercultural adroitness (behavioral aspect) (Chen & Starosta, 2000). The development of intercultural competences is not only a matter of learning differences and similarities of cultures and their norms and values, but it is also a matter of being sensitive towards these differences and applying appropriate behavior. As Chen & Starosta (1997) put it: “intercultural awareness (cognition) is the foundation of intercultural sensitivity (affect) which, in turn, leads to intercultural competence (behavior).” (p. 5). Figure 1 illustrates the triangular model of intercultural communication competence according to Chen & Starosta (2000).
Chen & Starosta (1998) define intercultural awareness as “… the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how we think and behave.” (p. 28). Greater intercultural awareness is seen to decrease the probability of misunderstandings in intercultural encounters. However, in order to develop a higher level or any level of intercultural awareness, one must understand that we are all cultural beings. Without this understanding there is no foundation for learning to recognize differences in culture and interpret behavior appropriately in intercultural interactions (Triandis, 1977).

Chen & Starosta (1998) define intercultural adroitness as “the behavioral aspect of intercultural communication competence that stresses these skills needed for us to act effectively in intercultural interactions.” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 28). Adroitness in general refers to an individual’s ability to interact with others as well as adapt to the environment. The extent to which an individual accomplishes an intended effect by interaction with others or the environment, provides a basis of measurement for adroitness. Language ability, behavioral flexibility, interaction management and identity maintenance are skills that characterize intercultural adroitness from the perspective of people. The ability to manage changes is relevant when considering intercultural adroitness from the viewpoint of the environment. Therefore, intercultural adroitness is something that can be improved and learned, mainly by the means of socialization and by showing empathy (Chen, 2005).

“Intercultural sensitivity…is the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural
differences.” (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422). This statement about intercultural sensitivity coincides with the conception of intercultural sensitivity, provided by Chen & Starosta (2000). They state that intercultural sensitivity “is an individual’s ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication.” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). While Hammer et al. (2003) simply refer to an individual’s ability to discriminate cultural differences, Chen & Starosta (2000) also emphasize on the willingness and motivation of individuals not only to discriminate, but also to understand, appreciate and accept these differences with the intention of a positive outcome in an intercultural encounter. The willingness and motivation to change personal behavior in order to show respect to other cultures is also stressed by Bhawuk & Brislin (1992): “to be effective in another culture people must be ... willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures.” (p. 416). Considering intercultural sensitivity from Chen’s & Starosta’s (2000) as well as Bhawuk’s & Brislin’s (1992) standpoint it revels to be a dynamic concept, that requires active participation of the individual in intercultural interaction. However, Chen & Starosta (1997) and Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) recognize that the motivation to understand, appreciate and accept cultural differences is not sufficient to become an intercultural sensitivity person. They argue, that an individual must also possess the following characteristics (Table 1) in order to develop intercultural sensitivity (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992, p. 416; Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 7):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>• Self-esteem</th>
<th>• Empathy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Self-monitoring</td>
<td>• Interaction involvement / Sociability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Open-mindedness</td>
<td>• Suspending judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flexibility</td>
<td>• Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tolerance</td>
<td>• Interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Besides the characteristics specified above, Fantini (2000) also mentions curiosity, a sense of humor and tolerance for ambiguity as personality traits to a foundation for the development
of intercultural sensitivity. Olson & Kroeger (2001) complement the list with the following characteristics: adaptability, intercultural relations and cultural mediation. Thereby, intercultural relations refer to the ability to form intercultural interpersonal relationships. “Cultural mediation requires the ability to serve as a bridge between cultures.” (Olson & Kroeger, 2001, p. 119). Additionally, Fantini (2000) stresses the importance of learning a second language or rather the proficiency in the mother tongue of the country in which one encounters intercultural interaction. He argues that language “both reflects and affects one’s world view, serving as a sort of road map to how one perceives, interprets, thinks about, and expresses one’s view of the world.” (p. 27). While individuals can learn how to become more sensitive towards cultures through the development of certain international traits, they will never be able to fully comprehend the “other” culture as long as they do not speak and understand the native language of this culture (Fantini, 2000). After conducting a study on “Language Acquisition and Intercultural Sensitivity Development in Relation to Study Abroad Program Design”, Engle & Engle (2004) concluded that learning a foreign language increases the probability of developing greater openness and intercultural sensitivity towards other cultures. Moreover, Olson & Kroeger (2001) found in a study on global competency and intercultural sensitivity that “Speaking one or more languages other than English with advanced proficiency increases the likelihood that someone will be more advanced on the Bennett Intercultural Sensitivity Scale.” (p. 132). Deardorff (2006) on the other hand concludes in her study, that the role of language learning and its significance to intercultural sensitivity remains a controversial issue among international researchers and administrators.

Regarding intercultural sensitivity as something that requires certain characteristics raises the question, how intercultural sensitivity can be developed from the basis of these characteristics. Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman (2003) argue that “greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence.”(p. 422).

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1 Bennett’s Intercultural Sensitivity Scale refers to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity according to Milton Bennett and will be elaborated on in the further part of this chapter (see sub-chapter 2.2.1)
2.1.2.1 Exploration of Intercultural Sensitivity

This sub-chapter will discuss the following three assessment methods of intercultural sensitivity: The *Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)*, the *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)* and the *Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI)*. All three methods are of a quantitative nature, using the instrument of questionnaire in combination with a five-point (IDI and ISS), respectively seven-point (ICSI) Likert-scale. No qualitative assessment methods of intercultural sensitivity were found in the review of existing literature in this field. The following points have been considered in the selection of methods that are relevant to the exploration of intercultural sensitivity within this study:

- Relevance to the assessment of intercultural sensitivity as part of intercultural competences
- Applicability of content to qualitative assessment

Compared to other instruments, the IDI, the ISS and the ICISI have a specified focus on intercultural sensitivity, while other assessment methods are concerned with a more general assessment of intercultural communication competences.

The *Intercultural Development Inventory* is an instrument, which enables to assess the effectiveness of intercultural encounters and individuals’ orientations towards cultural differences. Thereby, the IDI uses the developmental stages of the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)*\(^2\), to identify an individual’s progress in the development of intercultural sensitivity. After the completion of the IDI, individuals are presented with a profile of their worldview corresponding to their level of intercultural sensitivity (Hammer et al., 2003). Thereby, the worldview of the individual is broken down into five scales, equivalent to the six stages of the DMIS (Engle & Engle, 2004, pp. 229–230):

1. DD scale: Combination of the denial and defenses stages
2. R scale: Indicates the reversal stage
3. M scale: Refers to the minimization stage
4. AA scale: Combination of the acceptance and adaption stages
5. EM scale: Relates to the measurement of encapsulated marginality

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\(^2\) The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity will be elaborated on in the further part of this chapter (see sub-chapter 2.2.1)
After an analysis of the IDI, Paige et al. (2003) conclude: “Hammer & Bennett’s Intercultural Development Inventory is a sound instrument, a satisfactory way of measuring intercultural sensitivity.” (p. 485). Moreover, it is seen to have strong content as well as construct validity (Hammer et al., 2003; Paige et al., 2003). Also, Engle & Engle (2004) provide a positive feedback upon the application of the IDI: “this assessment instrument is well-reputed, widely used, easily administered, and independently evaluated.” (p. 229). Nonetheless, Perry & Southwell (2011) argue “One possible critique of the DMIS is that it assumes that individuals develop intercultural sensitivity in a step wise fashion, omitting the possibility that individuals may move backwards as well as forwards in the six stages.” (pp. 454–455).

After a pre-study and exploratory factor analysis, the following five factors (formed of 24 items) where determined in the *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale* to measure intercultural sensitivity: Interaction engagement, respect of cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness (Chen & Starosta, 2000). These factors are based on the following six components of intercultural sensitivity, determined by Chen & Starosta (1997, p. 7): Self-esteem, self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement and suspending judgment. The concurrent validity of the ISS was evaluated against seven other instruments, related to the components of intercultural sensitivity. These were: Interaction Attentiveness Scale, Impression Rewarding Scale, Self-esteem Scale, Self-monitoring Scale, Perspective Taking Scale, Intercultural Effectiveness Scale and Intercultural Communication Attitude Scale. Fritz, Möllenberg, & Chen (2002) concluded that the evaluation of the concurrent validity of the ISS proofed to be satisfactory. Additionally, Graf & Harland (2005) stated that it is possible to predict intercultural decision quality from ISS results.

The *Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory* measures an individual’s ability to modify his or her behavior while moving from one culture to another in order to determine the individual’s intercultural sensitivity (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). This model differentiates from the other models discussed in this paper, as it is focuses on the evaluation of behavior, rather than attitudes or characteristics. More specifically it is concerned with behavior characteristic in individualist and collective societies. Collective societies are characterized as the group being the foundation of survival, rather than the individual. The personal goals of individuals are subordinated to the goals of the group (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). On the other hand, within
individualist societies, the individuals and their personal goals are central. At the core of the model lies the individual’s willingness to change his or her behavior when moving between cultures (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) argue “targeting the behaviors that might be modified as people move from one country to another is a good approach to conceptualizing sensitivity.” (p. 431). The instrument is divided into three parts: United States section, Japan section and Open/Flex section. In the first and second section, respondents are asked to reply to questions while imagining they are living in the United States respectively Japan. The third section has the purpose to measure abilities of open-mindedness and flexibility, characteristics considered essential for intercultural sensitivity (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). According to Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) The United States of America and Japan were chosen because they represent “two of the most familiar countries that differ on individualism and collectivism.” (p. 420). Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) conclude that “Individualism and collectivism can be used as constructs to measure intercultural sensitivity with respectable reliability and validity.” (p. 431). However, Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe (2007) criticize that Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) make no mentioning of language competence or developmental aspects of intercultural competence over time. The criticism about missing aspects of language competence can be debatable as its role in intercultural sensitivity research remains controversial among researchers, according to Deardorff (2006). While there is no concrete mentioning about developmental aspects of intercultural competences over time, Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) do argue that “it appears that people take three or more years of cross-cultural experience to become interculturally sophisticated.” (p. 432).

2.1.3 Study-Abroad

Studies have shown that intercultural sensitivity can be enhanced by study-abroad experience (Engle & Engle, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Shaftel, Shaftel, & Ahluwalia, 2007). Thereby, students’ goals (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001), duration of the study-abroad experience (Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001) and program design (Engle & Engle, 2004) have been taken under consideration. Kitsantas & Meyers (2001) concluded in their study on 24 students that “study abroad programs significantly contribute to the preparation of students to function in a multicultural world and promote international
understanding.” (p. 13). They also discovered significant differences in students’ attitudes and behaviors and argue that “these differences suggest that the study abroad students increased their ability to deal with the stresses of the cross-cultural experience, and developed more flexible role behavior, cultural empathy and respect for the host culture.” (p. 14). After completing a study with 52 faculty and professional staff at New Jersey City University, Olson & Kroeger (2001) found that “Substantive experience abroad increases the likelihood that someone will have more developed intercultural communications skills.” (p. 132). Also Medina-López-Portillo (2004) concludes that “duration of the programs does indeed significantly impact the development of student intercultural sensitivity.” (p. 184). While Rundstrom Williams (2005) also found that students who studied abroad increased their intercultural communication skills, it was also discovered that study-abroad only then supports intercultural competence development if students are interacting with the local community. According to Rundstrom Williams (2005) “exposure to various cultures is the best predictor of intercultural communication skills.” (p. 369).

Shaftel et al. (2007) found that students who studied abroad increased flexibility, open-mindedness, appreciation of diversity, tolerance and personal autonomy, characteristics which have earlier been identified as valuable for the development of intercultural sensitivity (see p. 14). While concluding that intercultural competences can be increased by study-abroad, Shaftel et al. (2007) also acknowledge that “A study abroad experience is more than a vehicle for learning about another culture and gaining international knowledge.” (p. 30). They also found study-abroad to enhance other personal characteristics, such as the ability to change and the capacity to deal with stressful situations. These characteristics are considered valuable to employers, regardless of whether they have been obtained through study-abroad experience or not. However, if study-abroad is known to positively influence these competences and skills employers are likely to consider international experiences in their assessment of job applicants (Shaftel et al., 2007). This is also concurrent with findings presented in a report on the professional value on ERASMUS mobility by Bracht et al. (2006). It was found that it is not only intercultural competences that are increased during study-abroad, but also soft skills, such as problem-solving ability, flexibility, innovativeness, motivation, endurance and team-working abilities (Bracht et al., 2006; European Commission, 2014).
Furthermore, Anderson et al. (2006) found that even short-term study-abroad experiences can have a positive impact on intercultural sensitivity. Anderson et al. (2006) conclude “At a time when most countries in the world are experiencing increasing cultural diversity and the world of business is becoming increasingly global, it is imperative that our schools prepare students to deal effectively with people having cultural orientations that differ from their own.” (p. 467)

2.2 Relevant Theories

The theories most promising for guiding the analysis within this study are: The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), Human Capital Theory and Intercultural Capital Theory. The DMIS is used in this study for the purpose of evaluating intercultural sensitivity of the interviewed students. Human Capital Theory and Intercultural Capital Theory are used as the foundation of the study. Both theories offer explanations for the importance of intercultural sensitivity as part of intercultural competences. Personality theories, such as the Five-Factor-Model of Personality, have after due consideration not been included in this thesis. Studying personality is concerned with the comparison of individuals, rather than groups (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). As this study aimed to compare three groups of students, personality theories have not been included.

2.2.1 Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) was created as a framework to rationalize experiences of individuals in intercultural situations (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004). J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett (2004) state: “The underlying assumption of the model is that as one’s experience of cultural difference becomes more sophisticated, one’s competence in intercultural relations increases.” (p. 152). Hence, the fundamental key concept to the development of intercultural sensitivity is difference. According to M. J. Bennett (1986) difference means “that cultures differ fundamentally in the way they create and maintain world views.” (p. 181). Individuals intercultural sensitivity and general intercultural competences seem to increase if they embrace and apply the concept of difference in intercultural encounters, according to M. J. Bennett (1986). However, the DMIS
does not aim to change attitudes or behaviors of individuals, but seeks to develop cognitive structures within individuals (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004).

The DMIS is based on an ethnocentric and an ethnorelative stage of development. Ethnocentric meaning “that one’s own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way.” (J. M. Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 152). Ethnorelative on the other hand means “that one’s own culture is experience in the context of other cultures.” (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004, pp. 152–153). Culture is thereby referred to as “the worldview of a society’s people” (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004, p. 150). The two stages of the DMIS are further divided into the following six experiences or orientations of development: Denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaption, integration. Thereby, the first three are ethnocentric and the latter are ethnorelative (M. J. Bennett, 1986). The following figure (Figure 2) illustrates the stages of the DMIS.

![Figure 2: Stages of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 153)]](image)

**Denial**, describes the first ethnocentric stage, at which an individual does not experience cultural differences or just to the point that the other culture is simply considered as something “other”, rather than different. An ignorance and avoidance towards differences in cultures is predominant. People from other cultures are then often referred to as “foreigners” or “immigrants.” (J. M. Bennett & Bennett, 2004). This means that the culture of the individual itself is considered to be the only real culture (M. J. Bennett, 1986). In order to overcome the denial phase, M. J. Bennett (1986) suggests to concentrate on techniques, which are designed to raise cultural-awareness. However, he advises to “avoid premature discussion of really significant cultural differences.” (M. J. Bennett, 1986, p. 188). A too
intensive discussion of cultural differences will either be ignored by the individual or could even lead the individual to stay in the comfort of the denial phase (M. J. Bennett, 1986). The second ethnocentric stage, Defense, is characterized by the consideration of one’s own culture as more complex and complicated than other cultures. Individuals defend the stereotyping of their own culture, while at the same time stereotyping other cultures (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004). In order for individuals to move to the next stage, M. J. Bennett (1986) proposes that individuals cultural self-esteem needs to increase. Thereby, the emphasis should be on the “good” of the own culture as well as other cultures (M. J. Bennett, 1986). Instead of moving to a stage of defense, individuals might also move to the stage of Reversal. This would mean that the “other” or “new” culture becomes superior to the “native” culture. Hence, the other culture is not considered a threat, but the individual still perceives cultures by a “us” and “them” kind of attitude, however reversed. The “new” culture is now “us” and the previous own culture is now “them” (M. J. Bennett, 2004). Minimization presents the final ethnocentric stage. The understanding of one’s own culture is considered to be universal to all cultures. While superficial differences (such as etiquette) are recognized between the own culture and other cultures, individuals suppose that “other” cultures are derived from their own culture and that basically everyone is the same (J. M. Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Therefore, cultural differences should be pointed out to individuals in the interpretation of behavior (M. J. Bennett, 1986). The first of the ethnorelative stages is Acceptance. Acceptance in this stage does not refer to the general acceptance of cultural differences, but to the acceptance that other cultures are equally complex as the own culture (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004). Hence, an individual can accept that other cultures are equally different, but he or she does not necessarily have to like or agree with values and beliefs integral to the other culture they experience (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004). When individuals then move to the second ethnorelative stage, Adaption, they are able to act and think in the perspective of another culture. This becomes necessary when working abroad or in a multicultural team and is often related to the ability to show empathy, open-mindedness and tolerance towards other cultures (M. J. Bennett, 2004). In the final ethnorelative stage, Integration, “one’s experience of self is expanded to include movement in and out of different cultural worldviews.” (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004, p. 153). In this stage, individuals deal with their cultural identity. People who have established multicultural or bicultural worldviews need to “reestablish
identity in a way that encompasses their broadened experience. In doing so their experience becomes “marginal to any one culture.”” (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004, p. 157). Cultural marginality can show itself in two different forms: encapsulated or constructed. Encapsulated marginality means, according to J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett (2004), that “one’s sense of self is stuck between cultures in a dysfunctional way.” (p. 157). Constructive marginality refers to the individual’s ability to simply move in and out of a cultural context (J. M. Bennett & M. J. Bennett, 2004).

As mentioned before, the acceptance of difference is the foundation to develop intercultural sensitivity, according to this model. In order to progress in the development, certain characteristics are supportive, such as empathy, open-mindedness, flexibility, tolerance and interest (M. J. Bennett, 1986). These are corresponding with the characteristics seen as essential to intercultural sensitivity development as provided by other researchers (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Chen & Starosta, 1997; Fantini, 2000; Olson & Kroeger, 2001).

The DMIS provides a rather linear model of development, in which individuals seem to move from one stage to the next without disturbance. This linearity is criticized by Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler (2003), who argue that “at a lower level of abstraction and over a shorter period of time, it appears unlikely that the development of intercultural competence is a linear, scalar phenomenon.” (p. 14). However, they acknowledge that at high levels of abstraction over a longer period of time the model is applicable (Liddicoat et al., 2003). Furthermore, Zafar, Sandhu, & Khan (2013) criticize the assumption, which is foregoing the DMIS, that all individuals begin the developmental process of intercultural sensitivity as monocultural learners. However, nowadays it is rather unlikely that people are not exposed to other cultures before they actively begin the learning process of intercultural sensitivity (Zafar et al., 2013). Moreover, Zafar et al. (2013) disagree with the categorization of individuals according to defined characteristics. They argue that “the human psyche and its reactions and adaptations to different phenomenon are as varied as there are human beings on the earth. Therefore, any effort at categorizing it would prove self-defeating.” (p. 569). On the other hand it is also a big advantage to have those defined characteristics at hand, as it would be difficult to measure progress in development without these and also to find the right methods to develop intercultural sensitivity within the individual (M. J. Bennett, 1986). At this point it is also necessary to stress, that M. J. Bennett (1986) never
attempted to provide concrete measures to develop intercultural sensitivity. His main goal with the DMIS is to provide a progress model for the development of intercultural sensitivity, on the basis of which teachers can develop concrete measures and techniques to foster the development of intercultural sensitivity (M. J. Bennett, 1986).

2.2.2 Human Capital Theory

“Capital...is what makes the games of society – not least, the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle.”

(Bourdieu, 2006, p. 105)

Sweetland (1996) states: “Human capital theory suggests that individuals and society derive economic benefits form investments in people.” (p. 341). Education is considered to be the primary source of human capital. Thereby, different forms and means of education need to be considered: formal and informal education, apprenticeships as well as specialized vocational education. While different types and means of education may have different impact on human capital, education is in one way or the other seen to increase or improve economic abilities of individuals (Sweetland, 1996).

According OECD (2001) “Human capital is embodied in individuals.” (p. 19). Human capital is defined by the OECD (2001) as “The knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being.” (p. 18). Thereby, communication (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and numeracy skills are as important as intra-personal (motivation, learning-to-learn, self-discipline, ability to make judgment) and inter-personal skills (leadership, teamwork) to the development of human capital (OECD, 2001). Studies have shown that individuals who study abroad are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards other cultures as well as stronger intercultural communication skills amongst other things (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). Both aspects contribute to human capital development (OECD, 2001).

2.2.3 Intercultural Capital Theory

Intercultural Capital is a relative new form of cultural capital, which, according to Pöllmann
(2013) “emerges as an increasingly significant type of cultural capital and marker of sociocultural distinction.” (p. 1). Pöllmann (2013) builds his conceptualization of intercultural capital on the notion of cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu (2006) cultural capital can exist in three forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. Thereby, embodied cultural capital refers to “people’s personal reservoir of cultural knowledge and know-how.” (Pöllmann, 2013, p. 1). Objectified cultural capital means cultural goods, for example in form of books, pictures and instruments. The institutionalized form refers to cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications (Bourdieu, 2006). Pöllmann (2013), however, argues that intercultural capital needs to be added as a form of cultural capital, saying that intercultural capital “functions as a potent marker of socio-cultural distinction within a wider range of contexts of (re) production and is likely to retain, or indeed enhance, its exchange value when “moved” across more distant fields.” (p. 2).

Compared to cultural capital, which according to Bourdieu (1984) constitutes “an energy which only exists and only produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced” (p. 113), Pöllmann (2013) further argues that the specific form of embodied intercultural capital includes intercultural skills, competencies and sensitivities. Intercultural capital is thereby not considered as a mere alternate term for intercultural competences or intercultural sensitivity (Pöllmann, 2013). Pöllmann (2013) continues by reasoning that intercultural capital not only enables successful competition in global markets, but also complements intercultural proficiencies, such as sensitivity. Thereby, it must be emphasized that no replacement of “old” skills will occur for the sake of “new” ones, but really an enlargement (Pöllmann, 2013). Pöllmann (2013) concludes: “And by doing so, it may lead people to appreciate cultural diversity and develop an understanding for previously unfamiliar and perhaps “strange” situations and contexts.” (p. 2).
3 Methodology

This chapter will elaborate on the research design, method and strategy as well as the sampling approach applied in this study. Furthermore, criteria of trustworthiness relevant to qualitative research and ethical considerations are presented.

3.1 Research Design

The research design provides the framework for collection and analysis of data. The research design intended for this study is a comparative one. According to Bryman (2012), a comparative research design “embodies the logic of comparison, in that it implies that we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations.” (p. 72). The reason for applying a comparative research design in this study is to seek similarities and differences and to gain deeper understanding of intercultural sensitivity of students at Stockholm University, thereby considering international experiences.

The comparative research design is often applied to examine different social phenomena in different countries. However, Bryman (2012) argues “Comparative research should not be treated as solely concerned with comparisons between nations. The logic of comparison can be applied to a variety of situations.” (p. 74). As this research pursues a comparative design it will be appropriate to operate on the basis of a research framework, which will lead the comparison. The framework used within this research is the Bray & Thomas Cube.

3.1.1 Research Framework

The Bray & Thomas Cube demonstrates a multilevel model for comparative education analysis. It thereby not only considers cross-national, but also intranational comparison (Bray, Adamson, & Mason 2014a). Bray, Adamson, & Mason (2014a) argue that the cube is a tool to “achieve multifaceted and holistic analyses of educational phenomena.” (p. 10). The cube presents a framework, which demonstrates units and levels of comparison on three dimension, thereby responding to the questions of where, who and what in comparative research (Manzon, 2014). Figure 3 illustrates the Bray & Thomas Cube.
The front of the cube presents the dimension for Geographic/Locational Levels of comparison. Within this research the geographic/locational level of comparison will be performed at the 7th level, individuals. The researcher will conduct interviews with individual students at Stockholm University. The second dimension, Nonlocational Demographic Groups, will focus both on Ethnic Groups and Other Groups. A comparison between Swedish and non-Swedish students will be included within this research. Additionally, the unit other groups refers to the comparison between Swedish students with international experience, Swedish students without international experience and non-Swedish students at Stockholm University. The third dimension, Aspects of Education and of Society will be categorized within Other Aspects, as this research focuses on the understanding of intercultural sensitivity within university students. Bray, Adamson, & Mason (2014b) emphasize on the usage of the cube as a concept, which can be adapted and expanded if necessary. Therefore, the researcher will label the third unit of comparison for the purpose of this research Higher Education and International Experiences.

3.2 Research Strategy

The goal of this study is the identification of intercultural sensitivity characteristics of
university students at Stockholm University. As explained by Bryman (2012) qualitative research is “a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data.” (p. 380). Social research is explored in relation to epistemological and ontological considerations. Epistemological issues on the one hand deal with the perception of knowledge and research practice. Ontological issues on the other hand are concerned with assumptions about the nature of social reality (Bryman, 2012). The interviewees of this study reflect upon culture by the expression of personal opinion. Using these opinions, the researcher seeks to analyze the data by an interpretivist position in order to evaluate intercultural sensitivity of university students. By considering culture as “an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction.” (Bryman, 2012, p. 34), the research takes a constructivist position, implying that intercultural sensitivity is an outcome of interaction between individuals. This research is based on the assumption that international experience increases intercultural sensitivity as has been shown by previous research in this field (Engle & Engle, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Shaftel et al., 2007). Therefore, this study takes a deductive approach, however attempting to investigate the topic by a qualitative approach. Characteristics of intercultural sensitivity should be understood from their underlying meaning and therefore not simply be quantified in numbers.

3.3 Research Method

The research method for this study will be semi-structured interviews. Bryman (2012) states: “it is the flexibility of the interview that makes it so attractive.” (p. 469). Intercultural sensitivity is a concept that is concerned with the individual and in order to evaluate intercultural sensitivity of university students by the means of qualitative research it is necessary to be flexible. Semi-structure interviews allow the respondents to express their views and beliefs on culture and cultural differences openly. This enhances the probability to obtain significant data. While the semi-structured interview follows an interview guide, it still leaves room for the interviewer to ask questions in a different order or some that have not been included from the beginning (Bryman, 2012).

The interview guide has been constructed under the consideration of aspects of the earlier
presented quantitative assessment methods of intercultural sensitivity. The IDI provided relevant aspects in terms of effectiveness and orientations of students in intercultural encounters. The ISS on the other hand provided valuable aspects on the characteristics, which are considered to foster intercultural sensitivity and the ICSI gave information on the individualist respectively collectivist consideration of culture and intercultural sensitivity. Naturally, the question on how these quantitative methods could have been applied to qualitative research arises at this point. The above described methods are all using the instrument of questionnaire to collect data. While the questions used in those questionnaires would not provide satisfying answers to analyze data from an interpretivist position, the content of the questions has been evaluated and transformed in a way to be applied in semi-structure interviews, applicable for qualitative research.

The interview guide for this study has been divided into seven key areas. Thereby, the researcher followed the classification of intercultural sensitivity provided by Chen & Starosta (2000) in their development of the ISS, due to the fact that these provided a clear grouping of characteristics essential to intercultural sensitivity. The interview guide has been structured into key areas in order to collect detailed data, which is linked to the characterization and therefore evaluation of intercultural sensitivity. The general model of the interview guide can be found in the appendix.

3.4 Sampling

The method of sampling applied in this study is that of snowball sampling with a purposive character. Snowball sampling is defined as the selection of a group of people, by the researcher, relevant to the research subject. The selected participants then suggest other persons who’s experiences and characteristics are relevant to the research (Bryman, 2012).

The researcher began by selecting a group of students, whom she had previous contact with. These students then suggested other students, based on their international experience, nationality and higher education institution. Purposive sampling is defined as the specific selection of participants relevant to answer the proposed research questions (Bryman 2012). The students in this study were selected on terms of their international experience, nationality and higher education institution. The first group of students has been
approached by the researcher on the basis of previous established connection to those. The researcher had direct contact to this group of students and asked for their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher than received contact information of this first group for other students, fitting the participant profile for this study. After receiving the contact information, the researcher contacted this second group of students and asked them for their willingness to participate in this study. All the students have been contacted via WhatsApp, a messenger application for mobile phones, or via e-mail. The researcher named the purpose and shortly described the overall topic of the study before conducting the interviews. Also, students where asked about their nationality and international experiences before conducting the interview, in order to find an equal number of interviewees for each of the groups (Swedish students with international experiences, Swedish students with no international experiences, non-Swedish students studying in Sweden).

Time and willingness of students to participate in the study can limit the sampling process. For this reason, the researcher chose only one university, namely Stockholm University as the place for investigation. As the researcher herself lives in Stockholm and studies at Stockholm University she is familiar with the university setting. Moreover, Stockholm University offers a multicultural environment, which was useful to find suitable study participants. As intercultural sensitivity, in the light of intercultural competences, is considered to be essential for global collaboration, higher education institutions need to make it one of their tasks to train students in this field. Students have therefore been considered relevant subjects for this study. A total amount of 15 interviews has been conducted. However, it needs to be mentioned that the results of this study cannot be generalized, as the sample size is too small and the study is only conducted within one university. Nonetheless, the findings of this study may offer valuable information for Stockholm University.

3.5 Criteria of Trustworthiness

LeCompte & Goetz (1982) state: “The value of scientific research is partially dependent on the ability of individual researchers to demonstrate the credibility of their findings.” (p. 31). In order to do so, it is often relied upon the criteria of reliability and validity. Guba & Lincoln
(1994, as cited in Bryman, 2012) suggest, that these criteria need to be adjusted or substituted in order to become relevant to qualitative research. They propose the criteria of trustworthiness for assessing qualitative studies. Trustworthiness is composed of the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. According to Bryman (2012), Guba & Lincoln proposed alternative criteria for the assessment of qualitative research because they argue that there can be more than one or several absolute truth about the social world, compared to quantitative research, which presupposes that there only exists one absolute truth of social reality. In order to ensure credibility, the researcher reached out to the interviewees of the study, after transcription of the recorded interviews, in order to receive feedback on her understanding of the interviewees’ answers to the interview questions. By collecting data from students with different nationalities, levels of study and international experiences the researcher gathered a “thick description” (Bryman, 2012, p. 392) of aspects of intercultural sensitivity in relation to international experience. Within this approach, the researcher attempted to compensate for the limited transferability of the findings to another context. In order to guarantee dependability, the researcher made sure to keep records of all phases of the research, including the selection of research participants, interviews and transcripts as well as the analytical framework for the study. At this point it is important to mention that the storage of data, that is the recordings of the interviews, the transcription of the interviews as well as any other information that could endanger the anonymity of the interviewee’s has been done with great sensitivity to security. All data files are saved on the researcher’s personal computer in a file that is password protected. In order to ensure confirmability, the researcher tried to limit the influence of personal values and theoretical inclinations that could bias the research findings, while recognizing that “complete objectivity is impossible in social research” (Bryman, 2012, p. 392). In order to avoid subjectivity, the researcher gathered and analyzed the data according to the theoretical framework presented in this thesis.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

When conducting social research one must also ensure the compliance of ethical principles. Diener and Crandall (1978 as cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 135) have classified ethical principles of social research in the following main areas: Harm to participants, lack of informed
consent, invasion of privacy, deception. These are also in line with the ethical guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). Moreover, the Swedish Research Council encourages researchers to follow the following general rules (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011, p. 12):

1. Tell the truth about your research.
2. Consciously review and account for the purpose(s) of your studies.
3. Openly account for your methods and results.
4. Openly account for commercial interests and other associations.
5. Not steal research results from others.
6. Keep your research organized, for instance through documentation and archiving.
7. Strive to conduct your research without harming people, animals or the environment.
8. Be fair in your judgment of others’ research.

To the knowledge of the researcher, the violation of ethical principles has not taken place in this research. The participation in the interviews was voluntarily and participants have been informed of the content of the study. Moreover, the interviews have only partaken and recorded with permission from the participants. Further, an invasion of privacy or deception has not occurred in this study. Throughout the interviews interviewees have been given the possibility to break off the interview or to refuse to answer individual questions and were informed about this possibility before the interview. The researcher, moreover, made sure to follow the rules provided by the Swedish Research Council.
4 Process of Data Collection and Analysis

This chapter will present the process of data collection and analysis. Thereby, the contextual background of Sweden and Stockholm university will be taken under consideration. As for the background of Sweden, this chapter is mainly concerned with the internationalization of higher education in Sweden. Stockholm University will be looked at according to their offer of exchange studies and outgoing exchange. A short presentation of interviewees will also be included at this point.

4.1 Data Collection Process

As mentioned before, the research method chosen for this study is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer the possibility to respondents to express their personal views on culture and cultural differences. The interviews have been conducted during the first two weeks of March 2016, most of them at the University of Stockholm. Upfront the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, the general topic of the research, approximate length of interviews, protection of anonymity and ethical considerations and voluntary participation in the interviews. An audio recording application on the researcher’s phone was used to record the interviews and before starting the interview, the interviewees where asked for their consent to participate in the interview as well as for the consent to the recording of the interview. The recording has been considered indispensable by the researcher in order to ensure detailed data analysis. All interviews have been conducted in English. Even though most participants, with the exception of two, speak English as a secondary language, they all felt comfortable using English in the interview. Language barriers did not occur as the level of English of all participants was fluent.

As for the interview guide, prepared by the researcher beforehand, it includes 17 questions. However, during the course of the interviews some questions were added in order to clarify answers or some left out as interviewees have already answered those. The same questions were asked to all the interviewees, however considering some additional or clarifying questions. This has been done in order to ensure the comparability between the three groups: Swedish students with international experience, Swedish-students with no international experience and international students studying at Stockholm University. In
order to ensure that the questions of the interview guide would deliver analyzable results as well as their appropriateness, the researcher conducted a small pilot study with two students. The results of those have not been included in the actual study.

4.2 Data Analysis Process

The data collected by the method of semi-structured interviews have been transcribed and evaluated by thematic analysis. According to Bryman (2012), there is no “distinctive cluster of techniques” (p. 578) to this approach and it only provides “one way of thinking about how to manage themes and data.” (p. 580). However, one can apply a framework to construct themes and subthemes of the collected data. Themes and subthemes are found by reading and rereading the transcripts of the conducted interviews, thereby paying attention to repetition as well as similarities and differences in the data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Before analyzing the data received by semi-structured interviews, the interviews have been transcribed by the researcher, using the transcription tool “transcribe”. This tool automatically replays the media files and pauses them in sections in order to allow the transcription to be more fluent. For the purpose of a more understandable reading, filler words such as, “umm, ah, you know, like, ok” have been intentionally left out, unless it would have changed the meaning of the interviewees’ answers. However, the original records have been kept in case of questioned reliability. After having completed the transcription of the interviews, the researcher began constructing themes and subthemes for the purpose of analyzing the data, by reading and rereading the transcribed interviews. During the reading and rereading of the interview transcriptions repetitions, similarities and differences in interviewees’ answers emerged. These repetitions, similarities and differences have then also been reconciled with the theories and concepts presented earlier. The results of this process will be presented in chapter five, “Presentation of Findings”.

4.3 Presentation of Interviewees

The interview participants were all students enrolled at Stockholm University at different levels and fields of studies. Swedish as well as foreign students have been interviewed. The
selection of interviewees in different fields and levels of studies served the purpose to create variation in order to compensate for the small sample size. In order to be able to collect valuable and evaluable data, the researcher planned a total of fifteen interviews. Five students are Swedish with international experience, five students are Swedish with no international experience and five students are of foreign nationality, currently studying in Sweden.

In order to ensure full anonymity and privacy of the participants, they will be referred to according to the scheme illustrated in Table 2 in the further course of this research. The gender of the interviewees has been disclosed, as the researcher saw no risk of compromising the individuals’ anonymity. The gender of the interviewees is indicated by the letter F for female, respectively by the letter M for male.

**Table 2: Interviewee indication for data analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee 1</th>
<th>Group A: Swedish students with international experience</th>
<th>Group B: Swedish students with no international experience</th>
<th>Group C: Non-Swedish students studying in Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1 (F)</td>
<td>B1 (F)</td>
<td>C1 (F)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2 (M)</td>
<td>B2 (F)</td>
<td>C2 (F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A3 (F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A4 (M)</td>
<td>B4 (M)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5 (F)</td>
<td>B5 (F)</td>
<td>C5 (M)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Group A - Swedish Students with International Experiences**

All students within this group are of Swedish nationality. They are aged between 22 and 35 and are distributed across education levels, reaching from Bachelor to PhD studies. Moreover, all of the students within this group have international experience, meaning they all have attended studies at a university outside of Sweden or have worked in a country other than Sweden. Two students have worked abroad while the other three students have studied at a foreign university. The international experiences of the individual students vary
from three months to one year.

**Group B – Swedish Students with no International Experiences**

The five students within this group are of Swedish nationality. They are aged between 23 and 33 and are distributed across education levels, reaching from Bachelor to PhD studies. Moreover, all of the students within this group have no international experiences in terms of studying or working in a country other than Sweden.

**Group C – Non-Swedish Students studying in Sweden**

Students within this group are of different nationalities, however none of which is Swedish. The nationalities of these students are Belgian, Spanish, American (US), Chinese and Austrian. They are aged between 22 and 30 and are distributed across education levels, reaching from Master to PhD studies. Moreover, all of the students within this group currently pursue an international education at Stockholm University. Their international experiences in Sweden will last between four months to four years.

4.4 Contextual Background

4.4.1 Sweden

In a report from the European Migration Network (EMN) Sweden it is stated:

“Deepening the internationalization of higher education is a political priority. From this perspective, the Government aims to have a high number of foreign students studying at Swedish higher education institutions.” (EMN Sweden, 2012, p. 9)

According to the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2015), 29.100 Swedish students studied abroad in the academic year 2014/15. This has been an increase of 5100 students from 2005/06. Moreover, the number of non-Swedish students coming to study in Sweden has been increasing every year, until 2010/11, when tuition fees have been introduced. This led to a reduction of foreign students. The number of foreign students studying in Sweden decreased from 46.700 in the academic year 2010/11 to 33.200 in the academic year
2014/15. The numbers show that there are more foreign students coming to study in Sweden, than Swedish students going to study abroad (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2015). As for the length of the study abroad experience, a differentiation between exchange students and free-movers can be made. Exchange students are referred to as the students who participate in an exchange program, while free-movers arrange their studies abroad by themselves. According to the Swedish Higher Education Authority (2015), free-movers enroll more often in a degree program, while exchange students rather participate in freestanding courses. Of the free-movers, who enrolled in a degree program, 80% took part in a master program. On the other hand, most of the Swedish students who studied abroad stayed there for one or two terms (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2015). Furthermore, the number of students from countries outside the European Union (EU)/European Economic Area (EEA) studying in Sweden has increased, while the number of students coming from countries within the EU/EEA has decreased in the academic year 2014/15. In the academic year 2010/11, most foreign students studying in Sweden came from China (9.3%), followed by Germany (6.9%) and Pakistan (6.3%) (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2011). Swedish students on the other hand studied mainly in the United Kingdom (18.7%), United States (17.8%) and Denmark (7.9%) in the academic year of 2010/11 (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2011).

According to the Swedish Parliament, the development of global education can strengthen the quality of Swedish universities and higher education institutions (EMN, 2012). The Parliament further believes that “knowledge and understanding of other countries and cultures grows through internationalization and international contacts can benefit the individual and society.” (EMN Sweden, 2012, p. 14)

4.4.2 Stockholm University

Stockholm University was founded in 1878 and is currently the largest university in Sweden and has previously been ranked among the one hundred best universities in the world (Stockholms Universitetet, 2014). Currently, almost 70,000 Bachelor and Master students and 1,800 doctoral students are enrolled in Stockholm University. Moreover, 1,400 international exchange students study at Stockholm University.
Stockholm University offers several possibilities for students, who are enrolled, to gain international experience. Two possible levels of exchange are offered to students: departmental and central. Exchange programs such as Erasmus+ (Europe), Nordplus (Nordic countries), North2North (University of Arctic), bilateral departmental agreements, Linneaus-Palme (developing countries) and Minor Field study (developing countries) are on department level. At the central level, Stockholm University has university-wide exchange agreements with more than fifty universities (International Office (Stockholm University), 2015). Additionally, students at Stockholm University have the possibility to participate in internships abroad, offered by following programs: Erasmus+ placement (Europe) and Nordplus placement (Nordic countries) (International Office (Stockholm University), n.d.).

Students who would like to study at Stockholm University can do so by the Erasmus+ exchange program or as so-called Freelancers. As for the Erasmus+ program, it is the home-university of the student who applies on behalf of the student for the exchange. Erasmus+ includes universities and colleges within the European Union and European Economic Area. Participation in the Erasmus+ program usually involves one to two semesters in individual courses. Freelancers on the other hand plan their studies individually and can therefore also participate in degree programs (International Office (Stockholm University), 2012).

Stockholm University also offers a special orientation week to international students, which is filled with a variety of activities, such as welcome parties and tours around the city and campus (Stockholm University, 2016). Additionally, the Student Union organizes the “Buddy Program” by which different cultures are brought together. The main purpose is to introduce international students to Swedish students (Stockholms Universitets Studentkår, 2016).
5 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

In this chapter the analysis of the collected data as well as emerging results will be presented. The presentation of the findings will be conducted under the consideration of the following themes, which have emerged during the careful reading and rereading of the interview transcripts: Respect of cultural differences, open-mindedness, interaction involvement and suspending judgment, confidence, empathy and conversation focus.

5.1 Respect of cultural differences

From the interviews it becomes clear that respect of cultural differences is not natural to all students, especially seen in a context where the differences oppose personal liking. Some students respect cultural differences no matter if those contradict with their personal perception, for others respect of cultural differences is more dependent on particular aspects, than on differences in general. And a third group does not show respect of cultural differences that contradict with their personal opinions.

Unconditionally respectful students

The students who show unconditional respect to cultural differences that contradict with their personal likings all recognize the fact that respect is very important for interaction and communication.

I am respectful. As you said I don’t have to agree with it, but I think it is important to be respectful and different ways of looking at it. – Student A3

However, their respect is not on the same level as their acceptance of certain differences. One can respect, but does not have to agree with cultural differences.

I understand that there are differences and there are things that you might not agree with or something you might not do, but I mean every person has their way of being and also there is reason behind it. – Student C1

I can respect their right to have those believes, even if I don’t like them. I don’t really like believes. I am a huge atheist. But you know it is ok if people like to believe. – Student C5
Also students who show unconditional respect to cultural differences that contradict with their personal conceptions are expecting respect in return.

*You know for me it is like: I try to understand someone else as good as possible and I hope that the other person is trying to understand me.* – Student C4

**Conditionally respectful students**

The conditionally respectful students make their respect of cultural differences, which contradict their personal attitude, dependent on certain conditions. Some students make their respect dependent on how the differences would affect themselves.

*It depends on how it affects me and if it has consequences for me and my life style.* – Student A5

Others differentiate between the respect for the person and actual respect of cultural differences. Respect to the person is given, while respect to the culture would be denied. However, respect of the person is also depended on the fact that the other person returns that respect.

*I have to respect the person but I don’t have to respect that aspect of the culture. But I still have to respect the person as long as they don’t disrespect me.* – Student A1

Another dependency that emerged is that of respect to certain but not to all aspects of a culture, often in relation to how certain aspects contradict the students’ personal values and beliefs.

*It depends, because respect is how you meet those opinions. It really depends on what it is. So if it crosses the line from when I think it is actually wrong, then no I can’t respect that, however I don’t have to act upon it.* – Student B2

*It depends on what it is. But if it is something that goes against my values, then I wouldn’t think that acceptable.* – Student B1

Another student can respect cultural differences as long as those do not cause physical or psychological harm to others.

*As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else I agree with or I can respect the... but if it causes harm to someone, either psychological or physical harm, then I would not respect it.* – Student B4

The majority of students who expressed respect of cultural differences dependent on certain
aspects also do not treat cultures as one coherent concept, but view culture as a concept that has individual parts and aspects to it. They are willing to show respect to those aspects that align with their personal attitudes, however not to those differences that go against their personal attitudes. An example that is repetitively mentioned is the environment for women in certain parts of the world.

Let’s say for example, how women are treated in Saudi Arabia. That is a cultural thing to some extent, but I don’t respect that at all. It depends on how it conflicts with my moral values. – Student C3

I am really struggling with this oppression of women and this view of women as a second citizen and those kind of things. So that is actually against my whole value of people. – Student A5

I value different cultures differently. But it is not based on ethnicity or anything else. I take each topic separately. Another culture may have some very positive things and some very negative things. – Student B3

Hostile students

The third group represents students who do not have respect of cultural differences when those contradict with their personal attitudes.

Well if it doesn’t follow my principal, of course I don’t respect it. I mean I wouldn’t do it. If someone has opinions that I don’t agree with I don’t respect that and that could be more likely if someone is from a different culture but it goes for Swedes as well. – Student B5

While student B5 has a very strong opinion of her own principals, other students are seeking for understanding while not being able to respect cultural differences.

Respect is a difficult question; I would say more trying to understand then perhaps respect. I mean you can come across someone who maybe has a very old or bad view on for example women and I wouldn’t respect that. I would try to understand why is this person like this? – Student A2

Another student distinguishes between acknowledgement, agreement and respect.

I would say I could acknowledge it, but not always respect it. I think respect is a word that is thrown around to easily these days. When people say you have to respect other people’s believes systems and I don’t agree. – Student A4

Summary of findings on respect of cultural differences
As for the comparison between the pre-defined groups of Swedish students with international experiences (Group A), Swedish students with no international experiences (Group B) and international students studying in Sweden (Group C) it can be ascertained that the majority of Group C shows unconditional respect to cultural differences, regardless of those contradicting their personal attitudes. Two Swedish students who have international experience do not seem to show respect of cultural differences when those differences contradict their personal principals. The majority of Group B makes their respect of cultural differences dependent on particular aspects, while Group A is spread across all three themes, one showing unconditional respect, two conditioning their respect on particular aspects and two showing no respect to cultural differences that contradict personal conceptions. Thereby, the length of international experiences does not appear significant. Specific findings cannot be allocated to gender. With 27 being the average age of all study participants, unconditionally respectful students are among the older participants, with one exception. Conditionally respectful students are of all ages in the parameter of 22-35 years, while two students considered to be non-respectful are below the average age and one above the average age.

5.2 Open-mindedness

While all participants of the study describe themselves as open-minded in general, other aspects that have emerged during the course of the coding process led the researcher to the division of students according to the following groups: open-minded students, reserved students, deliberative students.

Open-minded students

These students demonstrate an open mind to any culture, making no difference of weather some cultures are more similar to theirs than others. They acknowledge that culture is built upon different aspects and characteristics.

*Most cultures are a mix so it is difficult to say that one culture is this and within each culture you also have a lot of individualism. I would view each individual different then make bold strokes about the same culture.* – Student B3
Thereby, they do pay attention to individuals and to the individual aspects within one culture instead of generalizing cultures.

*I would say that things that I don’t agree on, the view on the gender roles those things, but nothing that I can like say that I am more open towards certain cultures then others. Different cultures and their different ways of looking at things on group level on individual level, so no.* – Student A3

Complexity of cultures is also an issue when it comes to different cultures. Some may be more interesting than others, but in general there is no distinction between cultures in terms of open-mindedness.

*I love learning about people, new cultures, experience new cultures, new ideas. I try not to judge anyone before I truly know them.* – Student A4

The students justify their open-mindedness by having a genuine interest in other cultures, which they express by wanting to learn more about different cultures by the means of travel and work.

*I work with international students and that’s a reason [for being open-minded, because I enjoy meeting people from different cultures. – Student A3

The knowledge about and comprehension of different philosophies of life is considered to be a future asset. The world shouldn’t be viewed as black and white.

*You should always be able to understand that there are other views on the world then yours and I think it is really important to get this concept. Because when you don’t get this concept then you will never be able to get different views on different topics and then you just see the world in black and white.* – Student C4

Open-mindedness can also be seen as a belief system, which has developed by personal experiences.

*That is my believe system. So just based on the person I have become and my experiences of like having people around me, it just becomes a natural thing [being open-minded]. – Student B2

One student explains his open-mindedness from a more scientific point of view, saying that diversity should be valued as it is good for humanities health.

*I think diversity is part of biology and therefore good for humanity and it makes us robust and healthy. So I value it.* – Student C5
Reserved students

Students in this group are rather careful when assessing themselves on their open-mindedness to specific cultures. Some don’t want to make up their mind as they feel they do not know enough about different cultures in order to say whether they are open-minded to all cultures.

I don’t know if I have enough experience to differ between cultures. I am trying to think of some culture that I don’t like. – Student B5

I think there are more cultures I don’t know as much about. But I think, I am curious about most of them, I mean I have so many friends with different backgrounds. All the world religious, background ways, I think it is just very mixed. – Student B2

However, also making clear that certain aspects of certain cultures might affect their open-mindedness.

If someone has very strict opinions about, I don’t know, gay marriage or something then that feels very far from mine. – Student B5

Others base their open-mindedness on similarities of other cultures to their own culture. Feeling more familiar and open to the culture that is similar.

If I meet someone that’s from Norway or a European country that’s perhaps a Scandinavian country that’s very similar and the differences are very small; so the smaller differences are the more open you are to those [countries]. – Student A2

So for example here in Sweden we adopt a lot from the US, so I do feel like I am a little bit more connected to those from the US, even though it also involves drugs and things and knives and guns and all these things I am not open too. But I feel like we are more similar. – Student A5

One student is aware of prejudice and how it can affect her open-mindedness to other cultures. In her opinion open-mindedness is based on personal experience, which can cause prejudice.

When you have personal experiences with people from a certain country then you have a prejudice and you say "Ok this is not going to work" or "there is too many differences" or the character of people, then it is harder to actually interpret also something that they say and you might think it is not so nice. – Student C1

This particular student also says that it is easier for her to meet people from cultures, which
she is completely unfamiliar with, with more open-mindedness than people from cultures
she has had unpleasant experiences with. Having no knowledge about a culture offers the
possibility of being open without having prejudices.

So I am much more open to discovering a new culture then when I become close cultures, when I have
had a negative experience from before. – Student C1

One student seems to be rather insecure about her open-mindedness to specific cultures as
the reason that she has just come to a point where she discovered a newly found interest in
other cultures and started to become aware of differences around them.

I moved to Stockholm and I get to know a lot of different people, I went on my exchange, I took this
master and all of this is now increasing my interest for other cultures. – Student A5

**Deliberative Students**

Students admit that they are more open-minded to some cultures than to others. Thereby,
knowledge as well as agreement of certain cultural practices to their own personal values
play a role.

There are defiantly cultures with very strict religious believes, which I go against, that have tendencies
which I don’t like one bit, such as, basically, slave child labor, the usage of children, the indoctrination
of people and so on and so forth. So yes absolutely, there are cultures which values I respect more
than others, no doubt. – Student A4

Also a differentiation between open-mindedness and tolerance towards certain aspects of
culture is mentioned. Religion is seen to be a sensitive topic and therefore deserves more
tolerance, but not necessarily open-mindedness.

 Maybe I would be more open-minded, not open-minded…would give more tolerance to those
religious people, because they might be more sensitive about the culture. – Student C2

Another student refers to the familiarity to certain cultures, which is not present with other
cultures, making her more open-minded to the familiar one.

Yes, with the Hebrew part and the Jewish part, because I am that as well so I am very familiar with
that one. – Student B1

While these students acknowledge that they are more open to specific cultures than others
they describe themselves as generally open-minded to other cultures, reasoning their open-mindedness by being interested in learning and trying to be non-judgmental about other cultures.

_I have always been interested in other cultures. I think it’s boring to be the same. And I have lived in different countries and got a better understanding of what it is like to be a foreigner yourself._ – Student A1

**Is a smile a smile everywhere we go?**

Although a distinction between students’ open-mindedness regarding specific cultures could be found, another interesting finding that emerged during the coding of the interview transcripts was the predominantly clear answers about whether a smile is a smile everywhere in the world. Half of the study participants think a smile is a smile everywhere we go, while the other half does not agree with this statement or is uncertain about it. However, the reasons why some agree and others disagree with the statement vary.

**Reasons for agreement**

The students who agree with the question whether a smile is a smile everywhere you go name humanity as their reason for agreement. According to those students, a smile seems to be a fundamental principal of mankind. Neither gender nor age seem to be relevant in comparison between the students.

_We talked about the similar base for everyone and even though we say hi in a lot of different ways and a yes means a no in some cultures or some countries, which is confusing, I still think that we are in one way all similar and the same and that we are just raised in different ways._ – Student A5

Another student explains her agreement to the statement by the existence of certain facial expressions, which are impossible to avoid. At the same time, it is acknowledged that a smile can be provocative if it is used in the wrong situation.

_Yes, I think that the face has certain expressions that you just can’t cave, so fear and disgust and all of that stuff and happiness actually does mean the same in all cultures and I know that research has shown that those basic expressions are the same internationally._ – Student B2
Others justify their agreement with the statement by saying that a smile is simply universal.

**Reasons for disagreement or uncertainty**

Other students do not agree with a smile being a smile everywhere they go, especially not the meaning of the smile.

*The meaning behind a smile might not always be the same.* – Student A3

Also the context, the person and the surrounding can have an effect on the meaning of the smile.

*It most likely means different things wherever you go. I mean it differs on person to person I would say. It depends. It truly depends on context and everything surrounding.* – Student A4

*It depends on the smile. I think around the world it can mean a lot of different things, also in which context; if the other person made a joke and you are laughing, I think that might not be an insult...yes but I think you should be careful, because I said before also, as further the distance between different cultures, the more differences there could be. So a smile might not be a smile, no.* – Student C4

Then also the intensity of the smile is questioned by one student with regard to the smile being a smile everywhere you go.

*No I think it is very different. I mean in some countries people are always smiling, but a real smile could be like super happy and in other countries, it is just like it could be huge smile, so it is also the intensity of the smile.* – Student C2

One student considers the smile as part of language and it being related to history.

*No, all languages are all very different in different cultures. The smile for some animals is very aggressive behavior and humans that have completely different history so you should always know that people have different ways of expressing their minds.* – Student B3

**Summary of findings on open-mindedness**

The majority of international students seems to show open-mindedness regardless of cultures, while the students of Group A and Group B are more uncertain about their open-mindedness of specific cultures. Only few students admit that they base their open-mindedness on specific characteristics and aspects of cultures, representing participants
from Group A and B. Thereby, the length of international experiences of Group A participants does not appear significant. Gender does not seem to play a significant role in the findings. Open-minded students are aged above average, with one exception. Reserved students are of all ages within the defined group of 22 years to 35 years of age. Deliberative students are younger than average, with one exception.

The majority of all participants of Group A, Group B and Group C find that a smile is a smile everywhere we go. In all groups, two participants disagree or are uncertain about the statement. Thereby, the length of international experiences of Group A participants does not appear significant. Neither gender nor age seem to play a role.

5.3 Interaction Involvement and Suspending Judgment

Some students show a positive attitude when it comes to their interaction involvement and suspending judgment abilities in their own conversation behavior in relation to conflict situations, while others are more skeptical about their ability to detect inappropriate behavior for their part.

Positive Students

The students with a positive self-assessment of their behavior are aware of their behavior and think they are able to recognize situations in which they behave inappropriately by considering the other person’s response or attitude as well as their own behavior.

*I think in most situations I would be able to guess what the cause is, from just my own behavior.* – Student C3

Some students are very confident about their own behavior, believing that a conflict usually results from the conversation topic, rather than their own behavior because they regard themselves as sensitive and apt in reading people. Even without having had the actual experience the students are positive about their ability to sense the cause of the conflict, differentiating between topic and behavior.

*Usually it would be the conversation topic [causing the conflict], because I try to be sensitive and try to read people.* – Student A1
Maybe I think about the contents, the different opinions, why this is my perspective, but you have your own, maybe there is some kind of conflicts. – Student C2

One student states that it is usually the topic that causes the conflict, arguing that there are some topics which are more sensitive than others, while behavior is more secondary and that emotions are the result of conflicts which have been caused by conflicting topics.

No so, it is usually the topic. We had a view like sensitivity issues in our group. It is more some topics are more sensitive than others. – Student B3

Skeptical Students

The majority of the students is more skeptical about their ability to detect their own inappropriate behavior. While there is certainty about the capability to detect if a conflict has occurred during a conversation, it is more difficult to detect what caused the conflict.

I am very good at reading people, words and body language. I would probably figure out if something was wrong in about 2 seconds. But then, to figure out what it was that could be tricky if it was a culture that I am not familiar with, then it would probably a problem. – Student A4

If you end up in a situation like that and you upset someone because he or she perceives something as bad, but you don't because you have differences in your cultures then clearly you don't have the knowledge about that person's culture to know that you upset them. – Student A2

One student states that she could detect if the conflict results from the conversation topic, as it is more obvious when people express their different points of view while it is complicated to detect if one’s own behavior was the cause of the conflict, because behavior is something natural to us.

Sometimes if you are talking about a specific topic where people have different views, then you can tell it is because of the topic, but I don’t know, of something you do, that is much more complicated. I mean you do a lot of things and you can't tell if this person all of a sudden is acting awkward and reluctant to you. Then I can’t tell what I did wrong, unless that person says something. Because for me something that is a natural behavior, I don’t think about when you are having a conversation. – Student C1

One student evaluated it from the other person’s perspective, saying that familiarity with a culture could make it possible to perceive if you insulted the person based on his culture or
his personality, while unfamiliarity makes it impossible to sense on what level you affronted the person.

*I would say if you are familiar with the culture then you could say yes. But if the person is coming from a totally different culture then, no, I mean there is no way to say if you insulted based on the culture or you insulted him because of his personal behavior.* – Student C4

Then also the differentiation of “what” and “how” you say it and your own attentiveness plays a role in conversation. Being aware of possible misinterpretations by yourself and others is part of conversation behavior.

*I think many confusions and misunderstandings are based on the fact that we understand but we don’t understand each other. We speak same the language but we don’t interpret it the same way because we have different cultures. And you have to have that in mind. Maybe you get angry with someone, it’s because they read other things into it.* – Student A2

**General sensitivity**

Though some students are positive and others are skeptical about their own behavior in conflict situations it can be clearly stated that all students in general show sensitivity regarding the approach and the conversation topic in intercultural encounters. Some students mentioned the avoidance of cultural topics in general until they get to know the individual person better.

*I try to treat them [people from other cultures] like any other person and not focus on their ethnicity or any other feature. It’s like they are individuals. So I usually don’t ask about cultural stuff until I get to know them [people from other cultures] a bit more.* – Student B3

*I think that the person comes first, like getting to know that specific person and then go into the culture – Student A1*

Some students base their behavior on their familiarity with certain cultures and sensitivity issues within those cultures. If a culture is rather unknown to them, they approach the situation more careful, trying to avoid things and topics that could insult the other person.

*I think if there is a culture that’s very associated with a prejudice or a bad thing you would probably avoid that. I would avoid that. I know you wouldn’t go and play on typical anti-Semitism things when you meet a Jewish person or you wouldn’t speak about... I don’t know genocide in Rwanda, if you
meet someone from Rwanda. – Student A2

Moreover, having a good understanding about a culture involves meeting a lot of people from that culture in order to get a real picture of it.

If I had a lot of contact with a lot of different people from one country having the same culture then I know what to do, then I know where you have to be careful and you can go all in right away and make jokes about…yes whatever. But if it is a culture I am not so familiar with, then it is getting hard, but yes one should be careful to not insult someone right away, that wouldn’t be so good. – Student C4

Summary of findings on interaction involvement and suspending judgement

The majority of Group B (Swedish students with no international experiences) is positive about their interaction involvement and suspending judgment abilities, while the majority of Group A (Swedish students with international experiences) and Group C (Foreign student studying in Sweden) is rather critical about their ability to monitor and be aware of their behavior in intercultural situations. Neither gender nor age seem to play a role in comparison.

5.4 Confidence

During the analysis of the interview transcripts it became clear that confidence of students during intercultural encounters varies. Some students are confident and feel comfortable interacting with people from other cultures, while for others confidence in intercultural situations is context-dependent. There was only one student who describes herself as insecure.

Confident Students

Different motives with regard to students’ confidence in intercultural situations emerged during the study of the interview transcripts. One student relates her confidence in intercultural encounters to her having several identities.

I don’t think it is all about how much confidence you feel in your own identity and I am very
confident in the fact that I have several owns. And I think people who did not get that kind of self-insurance from either their parents or teachers or society, I think they can become very insecure – Student B2

Others relate their confidence to their knowledge about different cultures, which they have obtained through study, work and travel.

I know quite a lot of different cultures; it is a topic I am interested in. I used to study the history of religions, so when I meet for instance our Indian colleges, I usually ask them on a topic about the Indian religion, because that is something that I have studied. So it is always interesting to learn more about how they view specific points. – Student B3

This is based on my whole experience from living abroad and travelling a lot and also working with people from different cultures and also studying with people from other cultures. I don’t think I have trouble with getting along with people from...no matter where they are from. – Student A3

Some students describe themselves as being confident by referring to their interest in learning and getting to know people from other cultures.

I contact other people very easily and I am accustomed to the way to respond to everything that people ask me and find interesting topics. I want to know why you think in that way and we can communicate with these contents. – Student C2

Further proficiency of language and the general ability to express oneself gives students a feeling of confidence in interaction with people from other cultures.

I guess speaking English I have no problem with. It’s almost the same as speaking Swedish for me now. I am pretty confident anyway, but when you can express yourself properly then you are confident in that as well. – Student A1

Moreover, confidence is expressed by the ability of observing a situation in order to make the right judgment about it and act in an appropriate manner. Observation is seen as a tool to increase confidence by better understanding the conversational partner, especially if those are from another culture in order to be able to “handle the situation”.

I think that I usually reflect often on why people do as they do and I think that helps me in understanding more foreign people and people from other cultures a bit better. – Student A2

Last but not least confidence is also seen to be present if you are able to continually have a conversation with another person and show interest and inquisitiveness for their culture and
aspects of their culture.

*I want to understand it [culture] so I keep on talking to them to get more ideas about the person, about where they are coming from, how different things are where they are coming from compared to our places or other places on the earth.* – Student C4

The majority of the participants seems to be confident in interaction with culturally different people. No pattern regarding the motives for confidence emerged, which could make it possible to compare the students of Group A, Group B and Group C.

**Reserved Students**

Reserved students are rather uncertain about their own confidence in intercultural encounters. Several reasons have been named by students, which might affect their confidence. One effect on confidence might be the knowledge of a culture. A student’s confidence is dependent on the knowledge of the culture of the conversation partner.

*I feel sometimes that I don’t have the knowledge enough for other cultures, so sometimes I don’t understand why they are doing things like they do or what they are expressing.* – Student A5

Moreover, cultural differences are considered to be relevant to confidence by the same student. The greater the difference the greater might be the influence on confidence in interaction with different cultures.

*It depends on the person and as well and how far we are on this kind of scale of cultural difference.* – Student A5

Another student mentions her being confident is related to the conversation approach of the other person, however not necessarily in connection to that person’s culture. Her privacy is very important when it comes to meeting someone for the first time and confidence is connected to her privacy being maintained and respected by the other person.

*Sometimes people are very prone of asking a lot of questions of which you might think “Why are you asking this, I barely know you”, which might be very personal information, which you don’t feel like telling that person at that moment.* – Student C1

Further, confidence comes more easily if you share the same social behavior, meaning if you come from the same culture.
I think you are always more open to your own culture, because it is also the social behavior is known to you. – Student C1

Also the place and the situation of interaction can play a role in a student’s confidence when interacting with people from different cultures. Confidence is more likely when you and the other person have a common ground to communicate on.

It is much more possibility that you are having something in common or a friend in common or something that you can, a factor that gives you a bit more confidence, then you would from a person from another culture. – Student C1

Last but not least it is to mention that only one student described herself as insecure when interacting with people from other cultures. However, making clear that it is not the difference of cultures that gives her insecurity, but she describes herself as insecure in general. Another student mentioned that his confidence in a conversation with a person from another culture is dependent on that person’s behavior.

Summary of findings on confidence

The overall majority of participants regards themselves as confident in intercultural encounters, while one student of each group is more insecure. Thereby, knowledge about another culture, the conversation approach as well as similarity play a role. Students who see themselves as more insecure are all female. Age does not appear to be significant.

5.5 Empathy

An interesting finding that emerged from the coding of the transcripts is that the participants of the study predominantly show empathy in intercultural situations towards individuals rather than cultures in general. Empathy thereby relates to feeling sorry for, superior to, comfortable with or useless compared to other cultures.

I feel all of those things [comfortable, sorry, superior, useless]. Depending on who you speak with and that has nothing to do I think with different cultures. – Student A2

However, how you feel can be dependent on the cultural background of the individuals.

I think it very much depends on the culture. I try to never feel better then someone, because we all
have different backgrounds, different values, different upbringings, different baselines on which to base our lives and one is not more correct than the other one I suppose. So I try not to judge or place them in a box because they originate from a different culture. – Student A2

One student mentioned that being less proficient in a language can affect how you feel compared to your conversation partner. Thereby, judgment is made about the other person’s opinion.

Well I guess if you speak with someone that knows the language better, if you speak to Americans then it is maybe a bit...the opposite of superior. Then that person feels superior, a bit, because you know you can’t really speak in the same way and there is some imbalance. – Student B5

Compared to the student above, another student also mentions the aspect of language in connection to the feelings in an intercultural situation. Speaking the same language can make intercultural encounters more comfortable, connected and confident.

For example, Spanish, we have the advantage...I mean I can meet Spanish people, but you can also meet Mexicans, Chileans, Argentinians and... that simple factor knowing the same languages makes you feel much more connected or have something in common and feel more confident. – Student C1

Some students mention that feeling apologetic towards other cultures is a result of ignorance and incomprehensiveness towards those. Feeling sorry for another culture expresses that the own culture is better in comparison and that it is the people within the culture one can feel sorry for, for example children who grow up in poverty. Cultures are seen as systems which can develop and be changed over time.

There is so many people, you have to feel sorry for but you always have to differentiate if it is their culture you feel sorry for or are there other circumstances, can they change something, are they changing something already? It is a really complex system. – Student C4

People from the western countries where we think we are so developed, we are so well-spoken and well-read and we know so much about the world I think it is very arrogant of us to feel that we are superior, because they [people from countries where gender equality is low] don’t have a choice. – Student B2

5.6 Conversation Focus

This theme is related to the focus students take to a conversation with a person from a
different culture. All participants, with the exception of two say that similarities as well as differences are important and both are aspects of our world. It is not only the similarities we should focus on, but we should also accept and go along with the differences. The two students who make the exception did not give a clear statement about what they think is important in the context of focusing on similarities or going along with difference.

While all students, with the exception of the two mentioned, are acknowledging both similarities and differences in a conversational approach, a distinction can be made between those who appeal on our humanity in a sense of that we are all more or less the same and those who regard similarities as a common ground from which to begin a conversation with, before exploring the differences.

**Similarities based on humanity**

Both similarities and differences are considered to be important, however similarities are seen in the light of our humanity. Starting off from the point of humanity and learning to appreciate differences helps to establish relationships, while the other way around it might cause conflicts.

*I think initially it is easy to see someone as a human if you look at the similarities and then you can learn to appreciate the differences after you realized that we are similar. If you start the other way around it is harder to establish a relationship.* – Student C5

Acknowledging but not paying too much attention to differences makes it easier to get along with each other. Humanity should be the center of attention when it comes to intercultural encounters.

*I think the best thing is to focus on the similarities, because we are all humans of this earth to start with. And you don’t have to get along with everyone either, which is good. But I think as long as you feel "We are all people here and we do have some similarities in general, hopefully we believe in humans as their best and love and hope and kind of those things" and then it doesn’t really matter, we can get along with some differences but not focus.* – Student A5

*If you ask if we should focus on similarities or differences, maybe we should have both, but to not exaggerate the differences, because obviously we have a lot of things in common even more then we think.* – Student A3
Appreciation of differences is important but it is not only a matter of exploring differences but also similarities, thereby focusing on the fact that we are all humans and have a lot of similarities if we look for them.

*I think we should see the differences and appreciate them, but also we are people and we have a lot of similarities, which I think is also fun to explore and to discuss what people and the stuff we have in common.* – Student B1

**Similarities as a means for common ground**

Other students do not appeal on humanity, but more on the possibility to create a common ground when you focus on similarities in order to build a connection between different cultures in intercultural situations.

*I think we should do both if that is possible; appreciate the differences that exist and still try to focus on similarities and bridge some kind of culture.* – Student B4

Whereas similarities can be a headstone for building friendships and understanding, also the value of being different plays a role when it comes to the approach of a conversation.

*I think similarities create a common ground that you have something in common and whatever you know creates friendship and just kind of understanding but I think you should also definitely see the value in being different. I think it would be really weird to try to put everyone in the same model or shape or whatever. So I think we should focus on both.* – Student B2

While similarities are acknowledged as something that can provide common ground in order to get to know someone or to start a conversation, differences are seen as something that we can learn from. Thereby, it is referred to learning from different histories and cultures as well as learning to understand different points of views and backgrounds.

*So there is a lot of knowledge that you can gain from every person that you meet, because they come from different backgrounds and they have different point of views and you get to know, in general, history or something about that person’s culture.* – Student C1

Seeing similarities as a good starting point and a possible safe ground can provide the basis for a conversation, while differences can lead to conflicts and misunderstandings. However, differences are considered to be interesting, but one must be willing to understand and accept those in order to decrease their importance in terms of getting along with one
another.

You really need to try to understand the other person and if you understand the other person then the differences are not that big of a deal anymore. – Student C4

Focusing on similarities can aid in sort of producing a harmony in between people so they can understand each other better and then they can talk about differences and what sets them apart. But to go along with the differences as long as they don’t collide with each other and make mutual understanding impossible, then absolutely and if they don’t they need to be discussed as well. – Student A4

Another student refers to the purpose of the conversation and how it affects the conversational approach when focusing on either. However, the understanding of possible differences is important in order to avoid conflict.

It depends on the purpose, because sometimes we can focus on one of them or the other. But it is always important to understand other people when you have to discuss differences. – Student B3

Differences and similarities can also be considered to be important in order to equilibrate the balance. While similarities are a way to establish a new connection, differences should be kept in mind to avoid conflicts.

I think it is a good an idea to find similarities, because it makes a connection and it is also a good idea to well to keep the differences in mind to avoid conflicts so I think it is a bit of a balance between both. – Student C3

Other students

Two students could not be grouped in either of the above mentioned clusters. While all students seemed to give some reason why to consider, both similarities and differences, one student emphasized the importance of personality contrary to nationality.

After I came to Stockholm I do realize actually almost all of the people are the same in this world. There is not very different between western people or eastern people, actually. The difference maybe just because of the different personalities, it is not about the nationalities. – Student C2

The other student neither stresses focus on similarities or differences, but the importance of expressing one’s own opinion. However, not necessarily to the person with whom you might be in disagreement about something. Basically, everyone can be the way they want as long
as it doesn’t interfere with other peoples’ businesses.

*I think it is important to say if you don’t agree with something, not just like keep it inside of you, you talk about it to your Swedish friends and not say it straight to the person instead maybe. Try to discuss things if there are things. In general, I guess I think people can behave more or less as they want to. Except if it hinders other people.* – Student B5

**Summary of findings on conversation focus**

The majority of participants focuses on similarities in terms of creating a common ground, while fewer see similarities as part of humanity. More students of Group B and Group C focus on the common ground that similarities can create. More female then male students focus on the aspect of humanity. The two students who could not be clustered in either group are both female. The majority of students who see similarities as a means to create common ground are above the average age of 27. More students below the average age put humanity in focus. The length of international experience of Group A participants does not seem to play a significant role in the conversation focus regarding similarities or differences.

The research findings will be summarized and analyzed further in the next chapter. The analysis of the findings will be conducted in relation to the research questions and the reviewed literature.
6 ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

This chapter will provide a further analysis of the research findings thereby, firstly considering those under the light of the initial research questions and secondly under the presented theoretical and conceptual framework.

6.1 Analysis of the findings based on the research questions

Research Question 1: Do international experiences influence intercultural sensitivity characteristics of students at Stockholm University?

The analysis of the empirical data indicated that there are no meaningful differences between the Swedish students who have international experiences and the Swedish students who do not have international experiences. Also no meaningful differences between all the Swedish students, regardless of their international experience, and international students have been found. With regard to respect of cultural differences and open-mindedness it is the majority of Group C students that show more respect to cultural differences respectively open-mindedness than their Swedish peers in Group A and Group B. Group A and Group C students are more critical of their interaction involvement abilities than Group B participants. Overall, it is the international students who show strongest characteristics of intercultural sensitivity. This will further be elaborated in the discussion of the findings based on the literature review.

Research Question 2: Do students at Stockholm University show characteristics that promote intercultural sensitivity?

Within all participants of the study characteristics which promote intercultural sensitivity are present. These, however, vary distinctively. While there are, as mentioned above, no actual differences between the pre-defined groups, there are differences among the different participants of the groups. By coding the interview transcripts, it emerged that individual students show differences in respect of cultural differences. Thereby, the majority of students bases their respect of cultural differences on certain conditions. This could be what effect the differences have on themselves including their personal values, culture is seen as a
changeable concept, the individual is more important than the culture and also if the
differences could actually cause physical or psychological harm to somebody. The second
biggest number of students does not base their respect of cultural differences on any
conditions, however making it clear that respect does not necessarily go in hand with
acceptance of differences. Hostile students show no respect to cultural differences that
contradict with their personal conception.

Moreover, all students are somewhat open-minded to other cultures, however differences
in their level of open-mindedness have been identified. Generally, open-minded students
acknowledge the complexity of culture and that culture is not one concept, but consists of
different aspects and characteristics. Nevertheless, the majority of study participants is
rather reserved in their open-mindedness towards other cultures. Their reservation results
from ignorance of other cultures, personal experiences, the believe that familiarity and
similarity make oneself more open to some cultures than to others and the tentativeness
that certain aspects of certain cultures might affect their open-mindedness. A third group
that emerged in the analysis of the data is that of deliberative students. They openly
acknowledge that they are more open to some cultures than others, for reason such as
greater familiarity with some cultures than others, contradiction of some cultural values with
their personal values and tolerance vs. open-mindedness. An interesting finding that
emerged in the further course of the analysis is that the students who are rather reserved in
their open-mindedness tended to consider a smile being part of humanity and therefore
universal in all parts of the world, while earlier their ignorance of cultures has been
identified as one cause for their reserved open-mindedness.

Further, the characteristics of interaction involvement and suspending judgment have been
identified throughout the analysis of the interview data. In general, all participants show to
some degree the ability to monitor their own behavior in international situations. However,
the majority of students is more skeptical in that sense, saying they would be able to identify
conflicts, but could not detect the cause of the conflict without further inquiry. Behavior is
seen as something natural and therefore there is not too much attention payed to it.
However, they show the ability to appropriately monitor their behavior in terms of
conversation topic as they all state, that they would avoid sensitive topics in intercultural
situations, especially if the conversation partner is a stranger to them. A few students,
mainly the Swedish students who have no international experience, are very positive in their opinion about monitoring their own behavior. According to them, conflicts in intercultural situations are mostly the result of conflicting opinions about a certain topic, rather than behavioral issues.

Besides respect of cultural differences, open-mindedness and interaction involvement, also confidence emerged as a theme throughout the analysis of the interview data. With the exception of three students, all participants consider themselves as confident in intercultural encounters. Confidence is justified by interest in and knowledge about other cultures, proficiency in the common language with the conversation partner, the ability to continuously maintain a conversation, the ability to have several identities and to understand and appreciate other world views. The students who described themselves as rather insecure do not relate their lack of confidence in intercultural situations to the differences of the other culture, but rather their own personality.

A fifth theme that emerged is that of empathy. All study participants show the characteristics of empathy, however to varying degrees. While all students state that they try not to feel better than anyone else they show signs of having difficulties not to feel sorry for, for example women who come from countries where gender equality is not given to them. Two students acknowledge that by feeling apologetic for groups of people we do not suspend our judgment as we neglect the whole system around the culture and the individual within the culture.

The last and sixth theme that emerge is that of conversation focus. Thereby, the research was able to detect that all students, with the exception of two, recognize the importance of focusing both on similarities and differences when interacting with people from other cultures. Nonetheless, two groups of students could be distinguished. The students who see similarities as part of our humanity and therefore unavoidable and the students who see similarities as means to create common ground in which case similarities first need to be detected in the course of the conversation. From the two students who could not be classified in either group, one states that we should not focus to much on nationality, but on personality and the other student does not give a clear statement whether to focus on similarities or differences.
6.2 Discussion of findings based on literature review

In this second part of the chapter the identified themes of the analysis of the interview data will be discussed in accordance with the provided theoretical and conceptual framework. Thereby, it is to note that the identified themes can be overlapping in their accordance to literature. Before going in a detailed discussion of the research findings based on the literature review, it can be said that the identified themes are in accordance to characteristics which have been determined as valuable for intercultural sensitivity development.

6.2.1 Characteristics of intercultural sensitivity

Firstly, it is to mention that the researcher cannot clearly confirm that students with international experiences show more intercultural sensitivity than those without international experiences, as has been suggested by previous research in this field. As mentioned earlier, study-abroad experiences have shown to increase intercultural understanding, ability to deal with pressure in intercultural situations, flexibility in behavior, empathy and respect of cultural differences (Engle & Engle, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Shaftel et al., 2007). While certainly differences could be identified within the different themes of intercultural sensitivity, no pattern emerged which would allow the researcher to clearly state that students with international experiences, who have participated in this study, are more sensitive than their peers. However, it is to note that the international students studying in Sweden at the moment seem to show most and unconditional respect to other cultures. This could be related to the fact that they were exposed to one or more different cultures during the time of the interview, which according to Rundstrom Williams (2005) is the best predictor of intercultural communication skills. The international students were, at the time of the interview, in the international experience, which might make them more sensitive to cultural differences. Compared to this the international experiences of Group A lays in the past and they have returned to their familiar cultural setting. While the majority of Group C students was identified to be unconditionally respectful, the same could not be found for their open-mindedness. According to Chen & Starosta (1997) an open-minded
person is willing to recognize, accept and appreciate cultural differences. In this study, some students are rather reserved or even deliberative in their open-mindedness. Also, when asked if a smile is a smile everywhere in the world, half of the students clearly answered that they do think so, hence minimizing themselves in their open-mindedness, as they assume that their own understanding of culture can be applied to all cultures. Moreover, the majority of students describes themselves as confident thereby indicating high self-esteem, another characteristic that is considered important to develop intercultural sensitivity (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Chen & Starosta, 1997). A high level of confidence can lead to a greater sense of respect of cultural differences. As mentioned before, Group A and Group C students are more critical in their interaction involvement abilities than Group B students. Interaction involvement refers to an individual’s responsiveness, perception and attentiveness in intercultural situations. Group B students were really quick in their answers that it is usually the conversation topic that causes conflicts rather than behavior. Therefore, they show less ability of perception and attentiveness in intercultural situations than their fellow students. This is also to some extent overlapping with the characteristics of empathy and suspending judgment. Group B students then show less ability to suspend judgment than Group A or C students as they quickly jump to the conclusion that it could only be the conversation topic that could cause a conflict. Being able to understand another person’s thoughts and feelings describes the characteristics of empathy. While all students show empathy in the sense that they are sensitive in their choice of conversation topics, some students are judgmental in their empathy by feeling sorry for people from certain cultures without having actual knowledge about the person themselves, therefore not putting themselves in the other person’s pairs of shoes.

6.2.2 The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

When considering the intercultural sensitivity of the study participants from the point of view of the DMIS, the researcher suggest that the individual study participants are between the ethnocentric stages of defense and minimization to the ethnorelative stages of acceptance and adaption with regard to the individual identified themes. Unconditionally respectful students can be positioned in the ethnorelative stage of acceptance. Those students accept that other cultures are equally complex as their own, while at the same time
not having to like or agree with certain cultural differences. Conditionally respectful students are in accordance with the defense and minimization stage. Those students perceive culture from a point of view that compares “us” with “them”. They minimize their respect in a sense that they do not consider all aspects of culture and compare the “good” of their own culture to other cultures. Should this “good” aspect of the own culture not be available or is different in a sense in the other culture, then respect of cultural differences is denied. Hostile students are at the stage of denial. Cultural differences are not respected if they contradict personal values and are therefore denied in their weight.

Open-minded students can be placed in the stage of adaption as they are equally open-minded to all cultures and show tolerance to differences. Reserved students are to be put in the stage of acceptance. These students acknowledge that other cultures are equally complex, however are reserved in their open-mindedness due to limited knowledge from their part. Even though some students say that they are more open to cultures which are familiar to theirs, they can be put in the stage of acceptance as they still acknowledge the complexity and differences of other cultures. Deliberative students are in the stage of minimization as they are not equally open-minded to all cultures, as they cannot show open-mindedness to aspects of cultures, which contradict their personal values. Moreover, when considering open-mindedness from the question, whether a smile is a smile everywhere in the world, the students who agreed with the statement are minimizing cultural differences. They understand a smile to be the same everywhere in the world, because it is the same everywhere in their culture. On the other hand, the students who were more careful in their answers can be put in the stage of adaption as they were thinking out of the box and considering the different aspects, such as intensity, meaning and context, that a smile brings with it.

As for the theme of interaction involvement and suspending judgment it is the positive students who are to be put in the stage of minimization as they seem to think that they can understand other cultures by understanding their own culture. Their apparent appropriate behavior and their ability to detect conflicts derives from the ability to do so in situations in which they encounter people from their own culture, therefore theses students feel confident that they can also do so in situations in which they encounter other cultures. Skeptical students on the other hand are aware of cultural differences and the complexity of
other cultures and therefore are more reserved in their judgment about their own behavioral abilities. Skeptical students are hence considered to be between the stages of acceptance and adaption. Adaption, as some students are purposely trying to act and think in the perspective of other cultures as they try to avoid sensitive topics and/or behaviors. This theme of confidence does not offer the possibility to categorize students according to the stages of DMIS as students’ responses are too lose.

But for the theme of empathy it can be said that some students show signs of minimization while others are more in the acceptance and adaptation phase. Some students minimize as they only consider the “bad” of some cultures and express their emotions according to those aspects, but do not tend to see the “good” aspects. Others are rather in the phase of acceptance as they acknowledge different aspects, including the “bad” of other cultures while at the same time they do not agree with certain aspects. Further, two students can be considered adaptive, as they act and think in the perspective of the other culture. Without putting oneself in the perspective of the other culture one cannot understand how people within these cultures feel, think or act.

As for the last theme, it is the students who focus on the similarities based on humanity that are in accordance with the characteristics of the minimization. Differences are acknowledged, but they are on a more superficial level, because according to those students, in the end we are all the same, we are all humans. The other students, those whose focus is on similarities as a means to create common ground, are in the phase of adaption. Similarities are important, but differences are part of life and unavoidable.

As mentioned before, no major differences between the Swedish students with international experiences and the Swedish students with no international experiences in terms of intercultural sensitivity emerged. However, international students showed a somewhat stronger characteristics of intercultural sensitivity compared to their peers. This could be explained by the point of time during which the study was conducted. For Group A students the study has been conducted after their stay abroad, while Group B student haven’t had any kind of international experience before the study or during the time of the study. Group C students were in the middle of experiencing their international stay abroad. Since Group C students were in the middle of their study-abroad experience it made them more exposed to cultural differences than their Swedish peers, which might make intercultural sensitivity
more predictable. The better predictability of intercultural sensitivity during the time of exposure of cultural differences has also been underlined by Rundstrom Williams (2005), who conducted a study on the impact of study-abroad on students intercultural communication skills.

The point of time could also offer also an explanation of why there is no major differences between Group A and Group B students. It is possible that Group A students have, so to say, fallen back into old habits once they have returned from their stay abroad. This is a possibility, which is not clearly addressed by the DMIS. Group A students, after returning home, possibly, have moved backwards in the six stages of the DMIS. Perry & Southwell (2011) also mention the ignorance of the possible moving back and forth between stages as a critique on the DMIS. Group A students who have returned from their stay abroad are no longer as exposed to cultural differences as they have been at the point of time of their stay abroad and therefore might have moved back in the stages of DMIS. Rundstrom Williams (2005) found that “the experience of being abroad in and of itself is not enough – students must interact in the culture to receive the gain of increased intercultural communication skills.” (pp. 369–370).

6.2.3 The Hofstede Model of Culture

Some of the students’ characteristics, especially those of the Swedish ones can be related to the cultural model according to Hofstede. The following figure (Figure 4) illustrates Sweden’s scores according to the model.
Figure 4: Sweden’s scores on the cultural model according to Hofstede (The Hofstede Centre, 2016b)

The scale reaches from 0 – 100, whereby 50 is the middle merit. Any culture that scores below 50 on one of the indexes, is considered to be low, while merits above 50 are considered high. An exception applies to the index of individualism vs. collectivism. Cultures with a merit above 50 are considered individualistic, while below a merit of 50 are considered collectivistic (The Hofstede Centre, 2016a). However, the scores of one country have to be regarded relatively to other countries (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010).

In case of Sweden, the relatively low score of 31 in the power distance index indicates a decentralized system of power and high independency. Moreover, equal rights are valued as well as direct and participative communication (Hofstede, 2011). The equality of all people as well as equal rights to all people is strongly expressed by Swedish students, which is consistent with a low power culture.

In the second index, individualism, Sweden reaches a score of 71, meaning that Sweden is an individualistic society. This is characterized by the right of privacy, taking care of yourself and your family is most important and personal opinions matter (Hofstede, 2011). Especially, with respect to cultural differences and open-mindedness students focused in their answers on either their own person or on the individual person. Instead of focusing on the aspect of culture, their open-mindedness and respect, but also behavior are dependent on and directed towards the individual.
Sweden has a score of 5 in the masculinity index, indicating that Sweden is a feminine society. A feminine society is defined by the dominant values of taking care of others and the quality of life. It is characteristic for feminine societies to include everyone, while focusing on the person and not on the cultural background he or she brings with him or her (Hofstede, 2011). Again, Swedish students are very open to the idea of difference and the inclusion of everyone, thereby focusing more on the individual than on the cultural background.

Sweden’s score in uncertainty avoidance is 29. This shows that Sweden has a low preference for avoiding uncertainty. Difference is something to be curious about and there is a higher level of self-control and lower level of anxiety (Hofstede, 2011). The curiosity for difference supports the general open-mindedness and confidence of the majority of the Swedish students.

The aspects of the Hofstede Model discussed above offer a possible explanation why no major differences in terms of intercultural sensitivity between Swedish students with international experiences and Swedish students with no international experiences emerged. In general, the Swedish culture seems to be characterized by features relevant to the development of intercultural sensitivity. As Sweden, according to the Hofstede Model, in general shows a culture more sensitive towards cultural differences one should consider the time spent abroad by the Group A students. The longest stay abroad, in a country other than Sweden, by the Group A students has been one year. A one year stay abroad might not be enough to develop higher intercultural sensitivity, if one’s cultural background is already characterized by sensitivity to cultural differences. This finding is also in accordance to Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) who state that it takes three or more years of international experience to develop advanced intercultural competences. The cultures of the international students have not been reviewed, as only one student of each culture has been interviewed, and therefore is not representative to an entire culture.

6.3 The Learning Experience

Previous studies have shown that international experiences increase intercultural competences, including intercultural sensitivity (Engle & Engle, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rundstrom Williams, 2005). The
development of intercultural communication skills and a positive attitude towards other cultures also contribute to human capital development (OECD, 2001; Salisbury et al., 2009). Moreover, some studies showed that international experiences do not only increase intercultural competences, but also intra-personal (e.g. motivation, self-discipline, flexibility, ability to make judgement) and inter-personal skills (e.g. teamwork, leadership) (OECD, 2001; Bracht et al., 2006; Shaftel et al., 2007), which are also considered important to the development of human capital and intercultural capital. These intra-personal and inter-personal skills are partially overlapping with the characteristics essential to intercultural sensitivity development (see chapter 2.1.2). The international students showed more respect to cultural differences, than their Swedish peers, which might be an indication for better developed inter-personal skills. Being respectful to all people might increase the ability to work together in a team or to be a fair-minded leader. Furthermore, it was the Swedish students with international experiences and the international students who showed greater attentiveness towards their abilities of interaction involvement and suspending judgment. Both are considered as intra-personal skills, which are seen to contribute to the development of human capital, according to the OECD (2001).

Intercultural Capital comprises of intercultural skills, competencies and sensitivities and is attained by enlarging these skills, competencies and sensitivities, rather than by replacing “old” skills (Pöllmann, 2013). The characteristics of intercultural sensitivity found in the students within this study compose one part of intercultural capital. Showing greater abilities in terms of interaction involvement and suspending judgment by the international students and the Swedish students with international experiences might indicate slightly higher intercultural capital or rather better qualifications to develop intercultural capital. However, as intercultural sensitivities determine only one part of intercultural capital, it cannot be determined with certainty that the students with international experiences in this study have developed higher intercultural capital than their peers without international experiences.

Both human capital and intercultural capital contribute to successful competition in the global market (OECD, 2001) and therefore need to be considered in the educational planning of universities. Both forms of capital recognize the importance of intercultural skills and competencies, such as intercultural sensitivity (OECD, 2001; Salisbury et al., 2009). Even
though this study only revealed slight indications that human capital and intercultural capital can be developed by international experiences, other studies have shown that study-abroad increases intercultural communication skills (Engle & Engle, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Shaftel et al., 2007).

While the results of this particular study do not show a significant difference in intercultural sensitivity between students with international experiences and students without international experiences, it doesn’t mean that the students who have undergone international experiences have not learned any new skills or obtained new knowledge. Whether they have learned something about intercultural sensitivity is difficult to determine. The findings of the study did show that the Swedish students with international experiences as well as the international students studying in Sweden are more careful when evaluating their own ability concerning interaction involvement and suspending judgment. This could indicate that they have learned, during their stay abroad or while being abroad at the moment, to be more sensitive concerning their own behavior in intercultural situations. Negative as well as positive experiences might have led to better abilities in judging one’s own behavior. If students experienced negative responses to their behavior in a situation with culturally different counterparts, they might have reflected on their own behavior and as a result became more aware of their behavior and the consequences following that behavior. The same applies to positive behavior. If the conversation partner reacted positively to one’s behavior, it might give a signal to the student that it is okay the way he or she acts and the student might then continue to apply similar behavior in similar situations. As being able to behave appropriately is part of being intercultural sensitive, this indicates some learning development in terms of intercultural sensitivity.
7 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Intercultural competences, including intercultural sensitivity have been subject to a variety of research. Previous research in the field of intercultural competences with regards to study-abroad has been predominantly quantitative. Nevertheless, this research explored intercultural sensitivity by a qualitative approach. Intercultural sensitivity is regarded to be an outcome of interaction between individuals, thus, characteristics of intercultural sensitivity should be understood from their underlying meaning and not simply be quantified in numbers. Qualitative data analysis offered the possibilities of understanding these underlying meanings.

In this study the concepts of culture, intercultural sensitivity as well as study-abroad have been taken under consideration for the analysis of the collected data. The concept of intercultural sensitivity provided a framework for interpretation of data with regard to the characteristics fundamental to intercultural sensitivity. The Hofstede Model of Culture provided a background for analysis of data, which allowed the consideration of cultural specific characteristics. The concept of study-abroad has been reviewed to support the findings in this study with evidence from previous research. Human capital theory and intercultural capital theory provided a foundation for the study, offering explanations for the importance of intercultural sensitivity as part of intercultural competences. The DMIS has been used as a framework to evaluate intercultural sensitivity of the interviewed students.

Regardless of the nature of the research, intercultural sensitivity is an area that is continuously and maybe even increasingly important in our globalized world. While the fact that we constantly are in contact with people from cultures that are different from our own is no longer a peculiarity, it should still be considered notable to meet new people from all around the world. In order to do so and in order to build relationships, regardless of their purpose, it is important to be interculturally competent, which includes the ability to be sensitive to other cultures. It is the duty of schools and universities to equip the young generation with these competences in order to prepare them for the ever more connected world. Certain characteristics are supportive in the development of intercultural sensitivity, which were also identified in this qualitative study. This research was based on the assumption that students who had undergone international experiences, that is studying
abroad or working abroad, show stronger characteristics of intercultural sensitivity. This assumption could not be confirmed in general, however, within the theme of respect of cultural differences this could be confirmed for the international students. The international students revealed the biggest respect of cultural differences as they show respect without having conditions for doing so. Moreover, it is the Swedish students with no international experiences that show the least ability in interaction involvement and suspending judgment, indicating less intercultural sensitivity.

In conclusion it can be said, that in the case of the interviewed students studying at Stockholm University, no meaningful differences in intercultural sensitivity can be identified with regard to international experiences. Nonetheless, the interviewed students, studying at Stockholm University, both Swedish and international, certainly show characteristics of intercultural sensitivity. As for the Swedish students this can be partly explained by the characteristics of the Swedish culture itself. Moreover, Stockholm University does offer its students a variety of choices to increase their international competences through international experience as part of their university study. Even though this study could not substantiate that international experiences increase intercultural sensitivity, previous, quantitative studies have done so (Engle & Engle, 2004; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Shaftel et al., 2007) and Stockholm University should certainly continue to improve and increase their offers on international experiences. The fact that it was the students who have had no international experiences were less able in their ability to judge their own behavior concerning interaction involvement and suspending judgment indicates that international experiences do have an effect on intercultural sensitivity to some extent, indicating that students who have studied abroad have become more aware of their own behavior and its effects on culturally different dialog partners. The ability to control and adapt behavior accordingly is part of being intercultural sensitive. International experiences, therefore, offer learning experiences in terms of getting to know oneself better and also to enhance and develop the so-called soft skills. But, it is not only international experiences that can support students in their development of characteristics essential for intercultural sensitivity. Other activities, programs or courses with the intention to increase intercultural understanding and sensitivity could be developed. Although the Student Union does offer certain activities for
international students, it is not the university itself that does so and not every student does join the Student Union or if so, participates in the activities. Therefore, it is the university’s task to engage itself more in the development of intercultural sensitivity, not only by promoting international experiences abroad, but also by offering development possibilities within the “home” environment.

In order to develop the right set of activities, courses and programs it is important to determine what competences are missing. Therefore, the researcher suggests a large scale study, with both qualitative and quantitative methods, to determine the level of intercultural sensitivity of students at Stockholm University more precisely. The three assessment methods presented offer possibilities to measure intercultural sensitivity, each having shown implications on this study. Quantitative data is important to capture actual input of development measures, while qualitative data will help to understand individual meanings.

To initiate comparative investigations in intercultural sensitivity at university level could be beneficial in the future. The comparison of students with international experiences to those without international experiences could provide valuable information on the development and the formation of intercultural competence oriented study-abroad programs, which in the long run can equip students with skills essential for the competition in the globalized job market.


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APPENDIX

Interview guide

Dear student,

this study serves the purpose of studying the intercultural sensitivity level of students at Stockholm University. Thereby, international experiences as well as nationality will be taken into account. The collected data will be analyzed and compared by the researcher in order to complete a Master Degree at the Institute of International Education at Stockholm University. During the course of the interviews, all participants will remain anonymous and privacy will be maintained. Please be aware that the interview will be recorded, for the purpose of reliability. However, if you do not give your consent to recording the interview, the interview will not take place. Also, you can break off the interview at any given time and in that case all data collected will be deleted. Please answer the questions truthfully and accurately.

Thank you for your participation,

Elisabeth

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<th>Area</th>
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<td>Introductory Questions</td>
<td>• How old are you?&lt;br&gt;• Can you tell me from which country you are?&lt;br&gt;• What is your current level of studies? (Master or PhD?) and what are you studying?&lt;br&gt;• Have you any international experiences and if so, how long and where? Or: How long in total will your study-abroad experience be at Stockholm University?&lt;br&gt;• What is your mother tongue and what other languages do you speak?</td>
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<td>Interaction Engagement</td>
<td>• When you meet someone the first time from another culture, how is your behavior in that situation? (outgoing or reserved)&lt;br&gt;• Would you describe yourself as open-minded</td>
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towards people from other cultures? How would you justify that?
• Do you think we should focus on similarities or go along with difference when we meet people from other cultures?

### Respect of Cultural Differences

- Do you respect the ways people from other cultures behave? Even if it something you do not personally agree with?
- Are you more open or reluctant to specific cultures? Explain!
- If you talk to someone from another culture and that person gets upset, do you think you could tell whether it was because of the conversation topic or your behavior?
- Do you think a smile is a smile everywhere you go?

### Interaction Confidence

- Would you describe yourself as confident or insecure when talking to people from other cultures? How do you show that?

### Interaction Enjoyment

- How do you feel when you interact with people from other cultures? (superior, comfortable, sorry, useless?)

### Interaction Attentiveness

- When you are interacting with people from different cultures, is there anything special you do? For example, try to observe their behavior or ask specific questions or avoid certain topics?

### Other Aspects

- What other aspects that you haven’t mentioned are important to you when interacting with people from other cultures?
- Is there anything that you think influences us in how we perceive culture and cultural differences?