

Perceptions of Multicultural College Students: Case-Studies of European, American and Australian Universities

Alen Delić
University of Zagreb,
Faculty of Organization and
Informatics
Pavlinska 2, 42 000 Varaždin,
Croatia
alen.delic@foi.hr

Violeta Vidaček-Hainš
University of Zagreb,
Faculty of Organization and
Informatics
Pavlinska 2, 42 000 Varaždin,
Croatia
vvidacek@foi.hr

Laura Adarve
University of Central Florida
Department of Sociology
4000 Central Florida Blvd.
Orlando, FL 32816
USA
ladarve@knights.ucf.edu

Abstract. *Mobility among university students is increasingly becoming an integral part of a typical student's life. As a result of this rise, it is of particular importance to examine how different cultures affect societies.*

The purpose of this research study was to observe which factors, if any, have an impact on the perceptions of those students who are multicultural and those who are not multicultural.

In order to execute the research project, a questionnaire was designed and administrated among students around the world. Students from three countries (Croatia, Australia and USA) were included in the study.

This research study aimed to examine how three factors affected students' perceptions. The first factor was whether the student was multicultural or not. The second was to examine the difference in perceptions depending the student's cultural background. The last factor dealt with the student's current country of living.

Keywords. multiculturalism, perceptions, college students, attitudes

1 Introduction

The process of globalization includes a high level of migration and mobility of university students. One of the possible consequences of migrations is the process of acculturation, "through which an individual acquires new approaches, beliefs and values by coming into contact with other cultures" [4]. Acculturation could be helpful in avoiding ethnocentrism, the

tendency of one's own race or ethnic group to become the most important and believes that someone's culture is superior to those of other groups [4]. The process of acculturation is very important among young generation, particularly students. Student exchange programs can help in developing intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate successfully and efficiently with people of other cultures. The term "intercultural competence" encompasses the elements of regional expertise, language proficiency and cross-cultural competence. These are an important part of cultural diversity[1]. Students with study abroad experience develop better intercultural communication skills and have a better social support network [14].

For the purposes of this research the following definition of multiculturalism has been used: "The individual had reflective ethnic and national identification and the skills, attitudes, and commitment needed to function within a range of ethnic and cultural groups within his or her nation" [3].

The acquisition of cultural values is of great importance especially among students that have experienced student exchange programs compared with the students that have never lived abroad. Students with international experience have a better understanding of multiculturalism, cultural values and acceptance of the collectivism [13].

Process of socialization for students from different cultures could be enhanced through some of the student sport activities [2] and cultural events [7].

1.1 Examples of Previous Research on Cultural Diversity in USA and Australia

There are some communication differences among various cultures. For example, North American culture is a “low context culture”. Some of the low context culture characteristics include direct communication, values that are based on competition and risk-taking and recognition through individual achievement [10].

The student’s experience of working in multicultural environment can help to better understand the processes of meta-cognition and communication [6]. American domestic students with more contact with international students have less stereotypic beliefs and stereotyped attitudes towards foreign students. Negative attitudes and stereotypic beliefs are related to the social interaction of international students [15].

[5] reported that communication with professors and parents is also a very important process that affords young people with a better understanding and acceptance of the cultural values in their own culture. Students from different cultural backgrounds also have different perception of teachers and communication with teachers and colleagues; international students from non US culture experienced teachers as more dominant than domestic US students did [9]. Students with more developed communicative competence and language self-confidence find less socio-cultural difficulties in foreign countries (as seen in the Canadian sample) compared with foreign students without well-developed communication and language skills [11]. Similar factors have an impact on the academic performance of international students in the UK: academic internet sources, English language skills and group or individual assessment [8].

There is also research that reveals that international students still have some problems with communication. For example, the study conducted by [17] shows that the process of acculturation among multicultural students in North America can cause anxiety in communication and socially related problems,

particularly because of language difficulties. The impacts of intercultural communication barriers and communication apprehension are lessened by the acquisition of positive global attitudes among international multicultural students as compared to international multicultural students with negative global attitudes [16].

Some comparative studies are conducted at the core sample of international students in Australia. There are positive effects on the development of social skills, cultural orientation and psychological adjustment among international students who were specifically participating in the multicultural intervention program in Australia. Multicultural international students that participate in multicultural intervention programs show an increased interest for the local Australian culture and have more Australian friends [12].

1.2 Examples of Previous Research on Cultural Diversity in Croatia

There are some previous studies conducted at the core sample of students in Croatia and there are some data from students from FOI. This multi-national comparative research began as a bilateral case study on a sample of American and Croatian students. The similarities in perception of effective learning environment components were explored and the similar factor structure of the effective learning environmental factors in both samples of students is founded [18]. Croatian students also presented statistically lower estimates than USA students in regards to the self-estimate of personal efficacy and factors of effective learning environments in higher education [20].

Further studies were conducted at core samples of students from Croatia, USA and some other countries. Results from those studies [19] showed that students from six different countries (Croatia, USA, Albania, Austria, China and Japan) reported that development of oral and written communication skills, access to the ICT and library resources are all related to their successful learning.

Based on the conclusions from previous studies on this topic, the main objective of this study was to examine the differences in perceptions of multiculturalism

among students in higher education during their studies. This study held three objectives. The first was to determine whether being multicultural or not affected a students' views on successful social functioning. The second was to determine if the country a student is originally from affected students' views on proper social functioning. The final objective was to determine if a student's cultural background and experiences affected their views on successful social functioning.

2 Methodology

2.1 Measurement

An online questionnaire was designed for the purpose of the study and was divided into four parts with 30 items altogether. A secured online questionnaire was sent out with a direct link via email to as many contacts known in each country. The first question divided respondents into two groups depending on whether they identified as multicultural or not. The next part of the survey consisted of six items regarding students personal experiences related to multiculturalism and was designed differently depending on the response to the first question (whether or not a student identifies him or herself as "multicultural"). The second part was connected to the educational system (three items) and the third part to general perceptions about multiculturalism and education (12 items). Part four consisted of demographic questions (8 items). Items related to minorities from the third part were based on [21]. A Likert-type scale was used in parts two and three. Estimates are from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree". The alpha coefficient of reliability (α) is 0.53 for 15 Likert-type items of the survey.

2.2 Respondents

The target population consisted of university students between the ages of 18 to 25. The sampling method used was snowball sampling. The questionnaire was sent out to 600 university students or recent university graduates (within a year of graduation). Of those, 377 responded (62.83%). Students from Australia (N=124), Croatia (N=108) and USA (N=145) responded to the survey (N=377).

Forty-five percent of respondents from Croatia were male and 55.00 % were female. In the US, thirty-eight percent of respondents were male while sixty-two percent were female. Lastly, in Australia, thirty-four percent of respondents were male and sixty-six percent were female. The respondents are mainly 18-25 years old (with average \approx 21 between all countries). Most of the student respondents are in their undergraduate level of study (79.60 % in Croatia, 73.80 % in USA and 88.70 % in Australia), while the others are in the graduate level (20.40 % in Croatia, 26.20 % in USA and 11.30 % in Australia). Most of the respondents in Croatia (99.00%) and in Australia (96.00%) are White/European Americans, while great mixture of racial/ethnic backgrounds can be seen in the USA respondents (67.60% White/European Americans, 13.80 % Latino/as, 12.40 % Blacks/African Americans, 1.40 % (Asian-American) and 4.8 % multiracial.

3 Results and Interpretation

3.1. Perception of multiculturalism

This study attempted to answer the question of whether there are differences in attitudes towards multiculturalism depending on whether students perceive themselves to be multicultural or not and also based on the country they come from. Students were asked to answer a question on whether they see themselves as multicultural or not multicultural based on a definition provided by Banks: "The individual had reflective ethnic and national identification and the skills, attitudes, and commitment needed to function within a range of ethnic and cultural groups within his or her nation." [3]

The following results have been obtained: 37.96% of respondents from Croatia, 31.03% of respondents from USA and 22.58% of respondents from Australia considered themselves to be multicultural. The reported high percentage in self-assessment of multiculturalism in a sample from Croatia may be due to the experience with multiculturalism based on the regional diversity and not just necessary on the ethnicity. For example, many students who study at the University of Zagreb come from different parts of Croatia—thus implying that they are all Croats—yet some of

them consider themselves to belong to a minority group.

One interesting finding that came about from this study is how much perceptions differed: non-multicultural students assumed that multicultural students faced a lot more difficulties than multicultural students tended to perceive for themselves. Specifically, non-multicultural students assumed that multicultural students would have more problems in their everyday life due to their multiculturalism. This perception of problems was mainly associated with their pre-college education, actual college education and also their expectations for the future. Non-multicultural students perceived more problems of those students who are multicultural during their pre-college education than multicultural students really experienced (M (non-multicultural) = 1.639, $sd=0.534$), (M (multicultural) = 1.368, $sd=0.485$), $t=4.640$, $p<0.05$, $df=375$).

Similar to the previous, t-tests show that non-multicultural students perceived the same when evaluating the college education experience. (M (non-multicultural) = 1.422, $sd=0.553$), (M (multicultural) = 1.140, $sd=0.349$), $t=5.020$, $p<0.05$, $df=375$).

Similarly, when assessing the possible problems multicultural students might experience in the future (for example, when searching for employment), students who consider themselves to be non-multicultural expected more problems for those students who are multicultural than those students who consider them self to be multicultural expected for themselves (M (non-multicultural) = 1.529, $sd=0.551$), (M (multicultural) = 1.246, $sd=0.472$), $t=4.776$, $p<0.05$, $df=375$).

These results were consistent with the results of similar studies showing that students who have more social interaction with multicultural students retain fewer negative attitudes and prejudice [15] and they have a better understanding of other people's cultural values [13].

As corroboration of these results we can add some students' comments that were acquired through open-ended questions. One student from Croatia stated the following: "Difficulties came mainly from the lack of knowledge and the misinformation that came from the media creating various stereotypes. My low self-confidence didn't help". One of the American students' comments was: "There are still

many 'American' concepts that I don't readily understand, so that is always a challenge. I've also adapted other cultures as a part of my own and when those cultures are not present or are insulted by someone I take it personally." One Australian student said "... Sometimes their own culture will determine certain things that they cannot involve themselves in that a job may require. Also, there are still many people who won't hire someone based on their cultural background which limits opportunity."

3.2. Attitudes toward races and ethnic minorities

One of the aims of this research was to determine whether there were differences in perception of students' multiculturalism and sensitivity of issues connected to the racial differences among students within higher education institutions in Croatia, USA and Australia.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was administered. It showed that there was a statistically significant difference in attitudes toward on the issue of whether race should be a consideration or a factor in employment decisions ($F=26.434$, $p<0.05$, $df=2$). Students from Croatia mostly thought that it should not be taken into consideration ($M=1.34$, $sd=0.54$), while students from USA believed race should be taken into consideration while making employment decisions, and to a statistically significant degree ($M=2.13$, $sd=1.25$). Students from Australia were between those two figures ($M=1.52$, $sd=0.69$).

Results can be commented in a way that an attitude toward the fact that race should be a consideration or a factor in employment decisions does not mean a negative discrimination but awareness of a need to make a positive discrimination and awareness that underrepresented minority groups should have priority while employing, which is for instance the case with American students.

Respondents were also asked how much minority students' opinions are valued in class. It is interesting that Australian students ($M=4.358$, $sd=0.568$) thought that minority students' opinions are more valued in class as compared to USA students ($M=3.759$, $sd=0.775$) and Croatian students ($M=3.565$, $sd=0.789$). The values for ANOVA Analyses of variance are $F=18.993$, $df=3$, $p<0.001$. The finding of a high understanding of other

cultures and minorities in Australia could have been a result of participation in local cultural events and social networks with local students in Australia [12].

3.3 The comparison of the assessment of social functioning of the respondents from three countries

A comparison of the assessment of social functioning of students among respondents

from all three countries (Croatia, USA and Australia) showed a low, but statistically significant coherence between countries while both multicultural and non-multicultural students were taken into consideration. ($r=0.199$, $p<0.001$, $N=377$). The evaluation results for 12 items from the survey are shown on the graph in Fig 1.

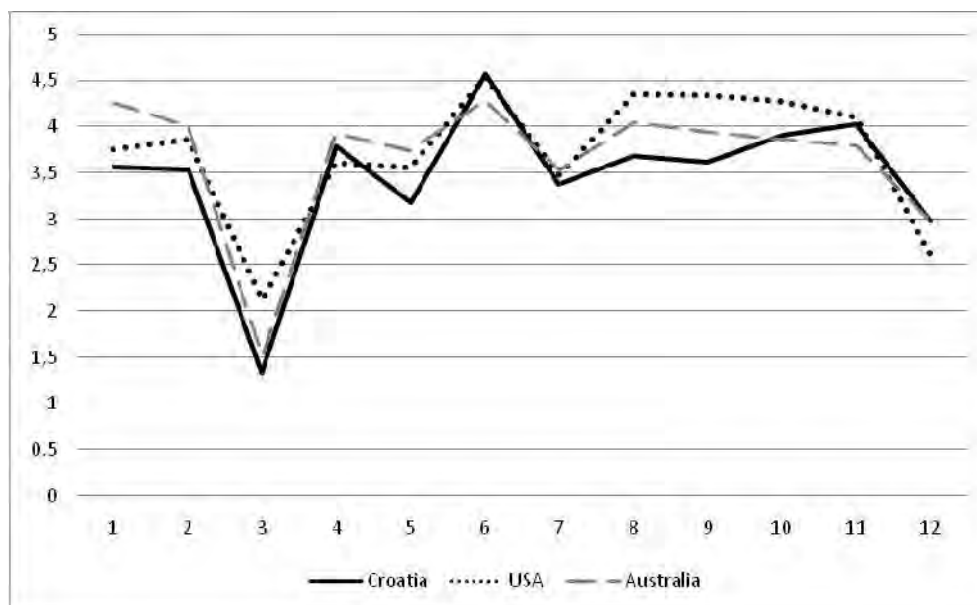


Figure 1. The assessment of social functioning of students between respondents from different countries (Croatia, USA and Australia)

Legend: X-Axis presents ordinal numbers of items from the survey (perceptions of multiculturalism and social functioning), while Y-Axis presents arithmetic means (Likert type scale, 1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree).

Generally speaking, results showed differences between perceptions of social functioning by students depending on whether they are multicultural or non-multicultural and, more specifically, based on the country from which respondents come from.

Students from USA agreed at a slightly higher rate with all statements regarding the social functioning of multicultural students as compared to the Croatian students. This result confirmed the previous research done by [17] in which students from the USA considered the factors of communication, social functioning and effective learning environments as more important than did the Croatian students.

4 Conclusions

Taking into consideration that we face more frequent mobility of students than ever before, there is a need to conduct research about the social functioning and adaptation of students from different cultures.

This study attempted to provide possible explanations as to how multiculturalism affects perceptions of social functioning of college students. The results from this study can provide a fertile ground for further researches.

Students' perceptions about the social functioning of multicultural students changed depending on the self-perception of themselves as being multicultural or not. Non-multicultural students perceive more problems of those students who are multicultural during their pre-college education, college education and in their

future endeavours than multicultural students actually perceive for themselves.

Despite these differences, a correlation existed between the responses from all three countries.

Belonging to a particular race was cited as a possible factor to take into consideration for purposes of employment. This is one issue where responses differed from one country to another (e.g. USA). This is probably due to their history of race-related issues. Another difference found was that in Australia, as early as the pre-college years; it was perceived that minority students' opinions are more valued in class.

Further researches are planned in terms of changing the methodology and defining a new sample within a narrow geographical area (countries of Balkan Peninsula). Results from this research can also be used to prepare instructional seminars and workshops for international students to help the process of their adaptation and assimilation to new cultures.

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