

Editorial

After working for most of the past year as part of the Kaleidoscope Project Team, my time here is coming to an end. During the past months, I have been collaborating with the team on different tasks, such as answering participants queries over email, drawing the winners of our bimonthly prize lotteries, and creating materials to enhance the appeal of the project. I have also had the opportunity to learn more about this interesting project. As a university student in a foreign country myself, I have had quite a successful adaptation – although this is not to say I feel fully integrated. Each case and situation is different. In my case, I am part of a wide international student community, which prevents me from interacting too much with locals but, at the same time, contributes to make it a happy and positive experience. AFS exchange students must go through similar adaptation processes as international students: some will make the most of their experience, some will find it harder. In any case, it can be very useful to understand why this happens. This understanding – to know which elements make a foreign exchange something positive (or negative) – is, in my opinion, what makes this project worthwhile and interesting for us all.



Belén Gaspar-García

Prize winners

In recent months we have had four new prize winners! Two AFS winners were Muhammad (NZL to MAS) and Sarah (GER to USA). Two AFS-friend winners were Veronica (ITA) and Tobias (GER). The next two winners will be drawn in November!

Important notice: Early Return

Some of the participants to the study may include AFS participants who at some point return home early from their exchange. It is really important that we are made aware when this happens.

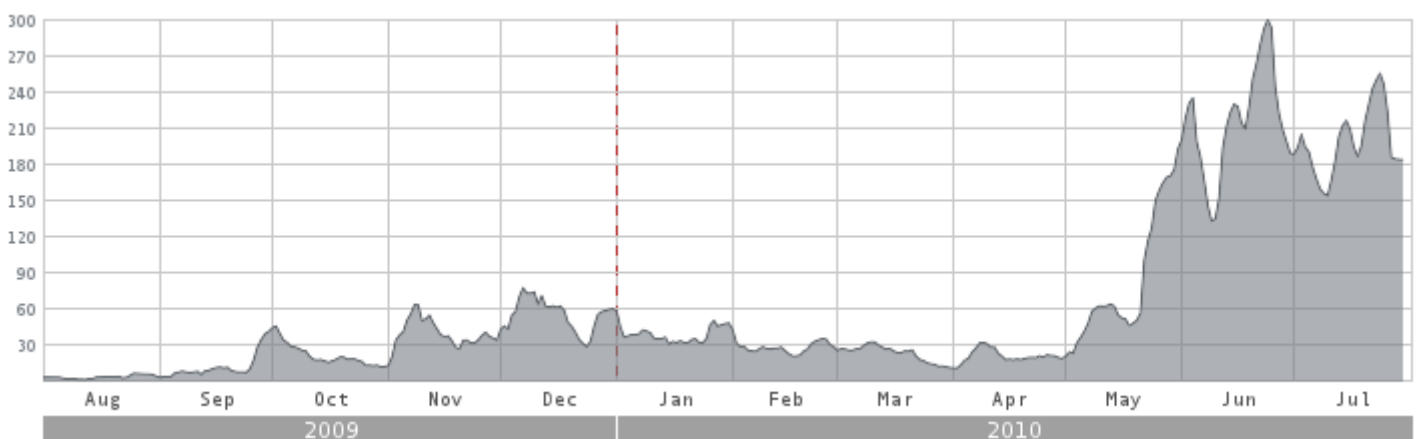
When an applicant status becomes 'closed' in Global Link we are notified of this on a daily basis. This gives us a record of who is early return or program release, and allows us to stop communicating with certain applicants. Clearly, we do not want to invite participants to complete questionnaires about their exchange when they have left it early!

Please update Global Link when a participant is ER or PR. Do this by changing the status in Global Link, but do NOT uncheck the world study permission field.

Status

One of the ways in which we monitor participant activity is through a web counter. This allows us to see things such as number of visitors, geographical location of visitors, and so on.

The graph below shows daily activity on the website in the form of unique visitors. One can clearly see the start of surveys for the southern hemisphere in October 2009 and surveys for the northern hemisphere in May 2010.



Special feature: Cultural distance

Cultural distance is a theoretical construct representing the extent of difference or distance between any two cultures. Cultures that bear relatively strong resemblance (e.g. France & Belgium) will be lower in cultural distance than cultures that are more dissimilar (e.g. Mexico & Hungary). Cultural distance is not to be confused with geographical distance, although they may be somewhat related (e.g. Germany and China would be distant both in a cultural and geographical sense).

The concept of cultural distance can be measured in a variety of ways (see below), which may seem to make it somewhat vague and difficult to visualize. Yet, this notion of distance has shown to be useful in social sciences.

In terms of intercultural contact, it is believed to have an important influence on acculturation and adaptation. For instance, a Canadian exchange student travelling to a country that is somewhat culturally close (e.g. USA) would likely find it easier than travelling to a country that is more culturally distant (e.g. Japan). More specifically, the larger the cultural distance between one's home culture and host culture, the more there is to learn and adjust to.

Cultural distance in action

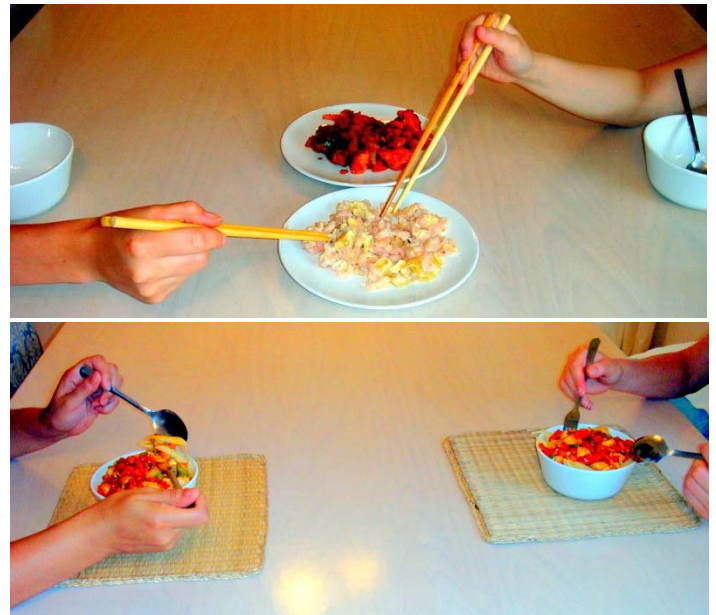
What is normal or routine in one culture might confuse or cause misunderstanding to someone from another culture. For instance, there are cultural differences in the way that family meals are eaten. In some countries (e.g. East Asian countries) the food is laid out in the middle of the table and family members would share from these dishes, taking what they like. In other countries (e.g. most Western countries) family members would be served food on individual dishes.

This seemingly simple demonstration of cultural difference could be an indicator of something more deeply rooted in



the cultural value system. In this case, the cultural values of independence (i.e. individualism) and interdependence (i.e. collectivism) could be underlying this difference in the way food is shared.

Values associated with individualism emphasise an independence of attitudes and values from those of others. Values associated with collectivism stress an interdependent outlook with emphasis on group rather than individual goals. These values could be underlying many of the cultural differences that we observe between cultures. Other examples might include differences between family living situations, financial behaviour, behaviours in social situations and at work etc.



Differences in eating style may be an indication of more profound cultural difference

Measuring cultural distance

It is easy to observe cultural distance with our own eyes, and there will likely have been many situations where you will have noticed these differences.

In terms of research however, there is a need to go beyond anecdotal observation, and measure the extent of difference between two or more cultures in a more systematic way. There are a number of ways in which this can be accomplished.

Countries can be compared at a socio-economic level on statistical information such as average wealth, education, etc. While this approach has some strengths, it is not clear to what extent this really is a measure of culture. Alternatively, countries can be compared on the basis of large scale value surveys (e.g. Geert Hofstede; Shalom Schwartz). Both these approaches are relatively objective measurements.

A more subjective approach to cultural distance would be to ask a number of sojourners to rate the distance between their home and host culture on a number of dimensions (e.g. social environment, ways of communicating), and then average this into a single score.

Research spotlight

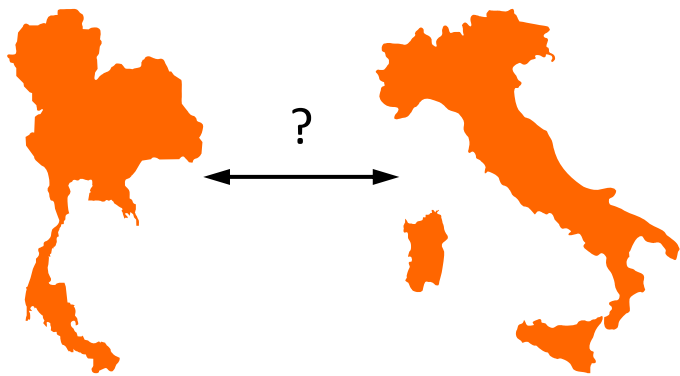
Is there a difference between objective and subjective cultural distance? What is the effect of each type?

Cultural distance can be measured both objectively and subjectively (see figure below). Previous research has shown that subjective cultural distance is negatively related to adaptation. Such that greater distance is associated with poorer and/or slower adaptation. However, no previous research has examined the role of objective cultural distance in addition to the subjective rating.

In the Kaleidoscope Project participants are asked to rate how different or similar their home and host culture are on a number of different aspects, such as family life, social norms, making friends, etc. This will make it possible to create a subjective index of cultural distance.

The following research questions will be examined:

- 1) To what extent are objective and subjective distance correlated? It is anticipated that both types of cultural distance will correlate but only moderately so.
- 2) How well does each type of cultural distance predict adaptation?



Cultural distance can be measured in two ways. Asking a person how they perceive two cultures to be different is an example of subjective cultural distance. Comparison of national and global statistics would be an example of more objective cultural distance.



Past research: Cultural fit

A concept, similar to that of cultural distance, is the cultural fit proposition (Ward & Chang, 1997). Whereas cultural distance is the degree of difference between two cultures, the cultural fit proposition relates to the difference between the personality of an individual and the norms of the host culture. This idea arose from research showing mixed findings about whether certain personality types are better able to adapt to a new culture.

One study found that people with higher scores on the personality trait extraversion showed better adjustment to New Zealand than those with lower scores (Searle & Ward, 1990). However, another study showed that extraversion was linked to poorer adjustment of expatriates in Singapore (Armes & Ward, 1989). This research suggested that there is something important about the relationship between a sojourner's personality and the particular country in which they are hosted such that a fit between the personality of the sojourner and the norms of the host society may be more important in adjustment.

Indeed some support for this proposition has been found. Ward & Chang (1997) for example measured the extraversion scores of Americans living in Singapore and found that smaller discrepancies between the Americans scores and the Singaporean norm of extraversion were related to lower levels of depression. A different study, by Lu (2006) found evidence to suggest that discrepancies between individuals values and beliefs and the individuals perception of where the host culture stands on these values may also be a predictor of well-being. Still, relatively little research has been conducted in this area and with mixed findings, so there is still much more that can be learned about this.

In the Kaleidoscope project we ask a number of different personality questions and therefore have the opportunity to test the cultural fit proposition as well.

Goodbye to interns

A year ago, 3 Essex students joined the research team as interns. They worked on a number of projects, including the Newsletter, the website logos, facebook group, participant communication and prize draws. We would like to thank Wan Li (left), Verena Barroso-Bastos (middle), and Belén Gaspar-Garcia (right) for their enthusiasm in the project.



Feel free to contact either Kali or Nicolas with any questions about the Kaleidoscope project or this newsletter. Email to: yp2010@essex.ac.uk

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