

Exploring Students' Entrepreneurial Identity Matching through Cross-Cultural Learning

Elin Kubberød

Handelshøyskolen

Norges miljø- og biovitenskapelige universitet, NMBU

elin.kubberod@nmbu.no

Inger Beate Pettersen

Mohnsenteret for innovasjon og regional utvikling

Høgskulen på Vestlandet, HVL

inger.beate.pettersen@hvl.no

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship education programs have shown to be powerful identity workspaces, where students, through real-life practice, make sense of who they can be as entrepreneurs. Through identity matching, they personalize their observations, experiment with new entrepreneurial behaviors, and make judgements about concrete role model behaviors in the practice and whether or not these match with their own personal identity. This phenomenological in-depth study explores how students' identity matching process unfolds through an international internship in the United States. We conducted qualitative research using the focus group method on student cohorts from two university master's programmes. Our findings show that all students were confronted with new ways of doing entrepreneurial tasks. The cross-cultural learning experience contributed to developing a higher level of self-awareness. The cultural contrasts and comparative learning made their own values more explicit and additionally served to define and protect the students' own personal integrity and identity. Moreover, the cross-cultural learning experience added a richer repertoire of entrepreneurial behaviors that may be internalized in a future possible self. The study highlights the value of cross-cultural learning in entrepreneurship courses. We additionally develop a conceptual model of identity matching process through transformational cross-cultural learning.

Keywords

entrepreneurial identity, identity matching, cross-cultural learning, cultural awareness, self-awareness

SAMMENDRAG

Entreprenørskapsutdanningsprogram kan fungere som virkningsfulle identitetsbyggere for studenter. Det er spesielt gjennom praksisbasert læring på virkelige «entreprenørielle» arenaer at studenter kan få en forestilling av hvem de kan bli som fremtidige entreprenører. Gjennom en identitetsutforskning og -tilpasning (i teorien kalt «identity-matching»), vil studentene gjøre seg egne observasjoner og erfaringer og eksperimentere med ny entreprenøriell atferd. I en slik identitetsprosess vil de evaluere typiske rollemodellens atferd i praksis og vurdere hvorvidt disse passer til deres egne personlige identitet. Gjennom denne kvalitative studien utforsker vi entreprenørskapsstudenters identitetstilpasning gjennom et praksisopphold i USA over en lengre periode. Vi brukte fokusgruppemetoden på to studentpopulasjoner fra to masterprogram i Norge. Resultatene våre viste at studentene ble konfrontert med nye entreprenørielle arbeidsmåter i USA. Den tverrkulturelle læringen bidro til å utvikle et høyere nivå av selvforståelse. De kulturelle ulikhetene og den komparative læringen gjorde egne verdier mer tydelige og medvirket til å både identifisere og beskytte studentenes personlige integritet og identitet. Den tverrkulturelle læringen tilførte også et rikere repertoar av nye entreprenørielle arbeidsmåter og praksis som kan internaliseres i studentenes egne væremåter og personlige identitet. Studien synliggjør dermed verdien av tverrkulturell læring i entreprenørskapsprogrammer. Forfatterne utvikler også en konseptuell modell for identitetstilpasning gjennom transformativ tverrkulturell læring.

Nøkkelord

entreprenøriell identitet, identitetstilpasning, tverrkulturell læring, kulturell forståelse, selvforståelse

INTRODUCTION

The development of entrepreneurial identity has become a topic of interest in the field of entrepreneurship education (Donnellon et al., 2014; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013; Lundqvist et al., 2015; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012; Williams Middleton, 2013). The reason for this interest is the ability of education to develop students' entrepreneurial identities through transformational learning (Donnellon et al., 2014; Harmeling, 2011). Through the learning process, students are allowed to involve themselves in entrepreneurial action by adapting to the context and norms of the place of learning of real entrepreneurs (Kubberød & Pettersen, 2017).

This form of education *through* entrepreneurship (Hannon, 2006; Hytti & O'Gorman, 2004) inspires students to apply theoretical knowledge from the classroom as well as to construct new knowledge from social practice within a real business environment. In such a learning environment, they begin to question themselves in terms of who they want to become in the future and how this relates to their own personal identity (Hytti & Heinonen; 2013; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012). Harmeling (2011) therefore suggests entrepreneurship education programs to be powerful *identity workspaces*. *Through the theoretical lens of possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ibarra, 1999), and in particular, of how students' identity aspirations unfold in social entrepreneurial practice through what Ibarra (1999) refers to as *identity matching*, we explore how the possible entrepreneurial self is aligned to students' personal identity.

While the current research on entrepreneurial identity in entrepreneurship education has emphasized how an entrepreneurial identity is constructed and self-narrated (Donnellon et al., 2014; Lundqvist et al., 2015; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012; Williams Middleton, 2013), there is currently a lack of understanding of how the personal identity is protected during an identity construction process (see Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Inspired by the extant identity research in entrepreneurship education, this study employs the framework proposed by Harmeling (2011), where students can “re-story” themselves through realistic and authentic entrepreneurial experience.

We argue that in order to match a new identity, one has to become socially aware and self-reflective when aspiring and assuming the entrepreneurial role. This has not proven to be straightforward in an educational setting, where students are young, malleable and find themselves in a difficult situation, balancing a role as academic students in the university with a role as change agents in an entrepreneurial practice (Jones & Underwood, 2017). We infer that transformational cross-cultural learning can contribute to enhancing this process where learners, through cross-cultural learning, make sense of a possible entrepreneurial identity through cultural awareness and self-awareness (Adler, 1987).

In the research, we explore how students’ entrepreneurial identity matching process unfolds through an international internship practice in the United States. More specifically, we explore why a cross-cultural learning process experienced in a foreign entrepreneurship culture offers a window of opportunity to the identity matching process. We suggest this to be a special type of transformational learning experience (Mezirow, 1991), where individuals are exposed to conditions that trigger both protection and modification of their personal identities. During the sensitivity process of entering into the foreign culture, the students get the chance to contrast and match their own pre-understanding of themselves as well as their own cultural perception of entrepreneurship with the entrepreneurial roles they are engaging in (Pitts, 2009).

Through a phenomenological in-depth study, we explore contrasts in entrepreneurial identity matching, particularly in how students accept or reject entrepreneurial role characteristics in relation to their personal identities through transformational learning induced by the cross-cultural sensitivity process. We address the following research question:

RQ: How does cross-cultural learning influence students’ entrepreneurial identity matching process?

The research involves three student cohorts from two Norwegian entrepreneurship masters programmes participating in an international internship program in the USA.

THEORY

Entrepreneurial identity construction

Harmeling (2011) argues for the possibility for students to work alongside real entrepreneurs situated in the daily routines of a new venture, allowing for both vicarious observational learning and mastery experience to take place (Bandura, 1982). Entrepreneurial learning theory (Rae, 2000; 2005; 2006), inspired by social learning theory (Lave &

Wenger, 1991), emphasizes both the learning context and social practice as an “identity enabler” (Rigg & O’Dwyer, 2012). Several scholars therefore see entrepreneurial identity as a process of becoming (Alvesson et al. 2008; Hytti, 2003; Rae, 2000; 2005), where the entrepreneurial identity is dynamically constructed and negotiated in relation to the social context (Donnellon et al., 2014; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012; Rigg & O’Dwyer, 2012). Through this type of transformational learning, students become empowered to see themselves in relation to other comparable entrepreneurial actors and can either accept or reject behavioral components of a future possible self (Ibarra, 1999). Consequently, entrepreneurial classrooms serve as “identity workspaces” (Hytti & Heinonen, 2013; Harmeling, 2011), where entrepreneurial learning influences identity construction through the development of “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ibarra, 1999).

Possible selves serve as intermediaries of future identities, representing “*individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming.*” (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 954). Possible selves are behaviorally prototyped in the social context of the workplace (Ibarra, 1999), where learners experiment with typical tasks pertaining to the entrepreneurial role. Through the process of *identity matching*, learners internalize possible entrepreneurial selves. They do so by comparing and contrasting role models with themselves, and hence reflect the images of a possible self in a future role (Ibarra, 1999). They personalize their observations and make judgements about concrete role model behaviors and how these match or not with their own personal identity. Through the identity matching process, the learners match role models based upon feasibility evaluations—whether the modelled behavior is something that is manageable for the learner (“can do”)—and *attractiveness* evaluations, whether the modelled behavior is attractive to them in terms of a possible self (“will do”) (Ibarra, 1999).

It is the last *attractiveness* dimension of the identity matching process that is of particular interest in this study, since there is currently less knowledge about the contrasting behavioral features of an entrepreneurial identity that the students might fear or find hard to internalize, leading them to protect themselves, i.e. their own personal identity within a possible role as entrepreneur. A deeper understanding of this particular dimension of the identity matching process might ultimately contribute to new knowledge about why some students come to reject a role as entrepreneur and why young entrepreneurs might find themselves in a situation of being uncertain and insecure in constructing an entrepreneurial identity (Nielsen & Lassen, 2012).

Cross cultural learning—Characteristics and learning outcomes

Cross-cultural learning is, in parallel with entrepreneurial learning, found to be a powerful and highly personalized learning process that includes both experimental and learning-by-doing elements (Adler, 1987; Kim, 2001; 2008; Yamazaki, 2004). The cross-cultural learning experience is powerful and challenging as individuals encounter psychological, social and cultural situations that differ largely from their familiar cultural settings. Adler (1987) understands cross-cultural learning experience as a set of situations or incidents that involves intercultural communication in which the individual becomes aware of their own growth, learning and change due to their experiences. The cross-cultural learning experience (Adler 1987: 30), additionally, occurs when the individual encounters a different cul-

ture and, as a result: 1) examines the degree to which he is influenced by his own culture, and 2) understands the culturally derived values, attitudes and outlooks of other people.

The cross-cultural experience is *unique* as the individual goes through a highly personal experience of particular importance to him or her (Adler, 1987: 30–31). The experience *forces* or *pushes* the individual to *behavioral experimentation*, as he or she must try out new attitudes and behavior. This transformational learning process becomes an emotional trial and error process until suitable behavioral responses arise. Moreover, the individual must deal with the relationships and processes as an outsider, where the individual is pushed into some form of *introspection* and *self-examination*. In addition, the cross-cultural learning allows infinite opportunities for *contrast* and *comparison*. The cross-cultural experience leads the individual into new levels of consciousness and understanding, and two types of transformational learning may arise from the experience: *cultural awareness and self-awareness*.

Cultural awareness can be defined as knowledge of “...those common understandings held by groups that dictate the predominant values, attitudes and beliefs” (Adler, 1987: 31), whereas self-awareness, can be viewed as behaviorally internalized perceptions about one’s own identity, value structure, and communication patterns, and reflects therefore a more personalized learning about one’s own cultural underpinnings, attitudes and behavior.

The cross-cultural learning experience is, therefore, a very powerful and personal form of transformational learning, because individuals are forced into realizations about themselves and others (Adler, 1987), leading to reflections of own personal identity in relation to the possible entrepreneurial self.

Development of a conceptual research model

This research explores how students’ observations of and experiences with entrepreneurial actions in a foreign country may influence their entrepreneurial identity matching and perceptions of entrepreneurial possible selves. In accordance with the theory, we assume that the transformational cross-cultural learning process will reinforce the identity matching process, since it encompasses additional dimensions rarely found when the learner operates in the same culture (national culture)—enhancing breadth, scope and significance. These additional dimensions are the contrast and comparison effect of own and foreign culture, the experimentation of attitudes and behaviors, the emotions associated with cross-cultural learning. We therefore assume that enhanced cultural awareness and self-awareness that is the learning outcome of the cross-cultural learning will reinforce students’ perceptions of entrepreneurial identity matching and their entrepreneurial possible selves.

Inspired from Harmeling (2011), we propose the following conceptual research model, adapted to an educational entrepreneurship context. We describe *the entrepreneurial identity matching cycle through cross-cultural learning* below. Here, Norwegian students perform entrepreneurial actions/work tasks in an American start-up and observe the entrepreneurial actions of role models in an American setting (identity workspace). Further, the students go through a cross-cultural learning process where they try out new attitudes and behaviors, experimenting through an emotional trial and error process, and adapting to an American entrepreneurial context. This experimentation also involves self-examination, and a contrast and comparison of entrepreneurial role behaviors, leading to a higher con-

sciousness and understanding, developing cultural awareness and self-awareness through transformational learning. Furthermore, students enter an identity–matching process, where they judge modeled behaviors according to feasibility (“can do”) and attractiveness evaluations (“will do”) in terms of a possible self.

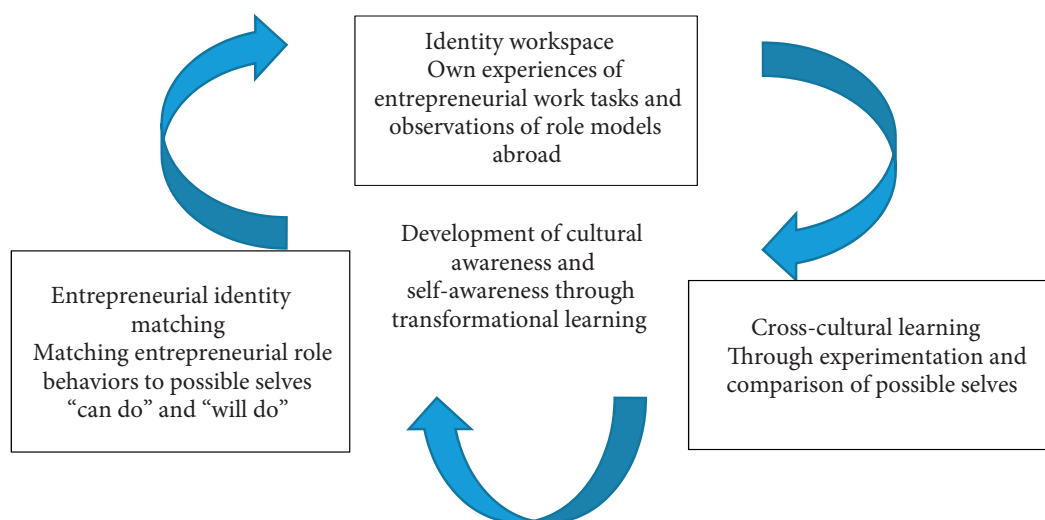


Figure 1. The entrepreneurial identity matching cycle through cross-cultural learning

The research therefore explores how cross-cultural learning may influence entrepreneurial identity matching, encompassing a more complex cultural realm of reality and action than normal in identity construction studies.

METHODOLOGY AND EDUCATION CONTEXT

The research context and the exchange programme

The Norwegian School of Entrepreneurship (‘Gründerskolen’ in Norwegian) is a nationally funded exchange programme in Norway, founded and administrated by the University of Oslo (UiO). Houston, USA was the destination for master students in this study. The students work in small American start-ups for three months and, besides observing role models, they perform concrete work tasks, such as market analysis and research, sales, communicating with customers and suppliers, investor pitching and networking in the business milieu; typical entrepreneurial tasks. They also interact with the entrepreneurial team and deal with numerous actors in the external business environment in Houston through sales shows, investor meetings, and so on. The students have intensive workdays, and take evening classes at Rice University. These classes include guest lectures with experienced entrepreneurs (role models) telling their stories and teaching the students about the American entrepreneurial business culture.

The American entrepreneurial culture differs somewhat from a Norwegian entrepreneurial culture, providing the students with contrasting and comparing elements. The culture is distinctively different from that of many other countries (Estay, 2004; Suzuki et al., 2002), including Norway (Hofstede, 2003). In the USA, the entrepreneur is a celebrated fig-

ure (Dougherty et al., 2013), and the “frontier or pioneer” mentality is, to a large degree, predominant in the spirit or value system in US society today (Suzuki et al., 2002; Watt, 2016).

Research methodology and the student sample

We conducted qualitative research using the focus group method to investigate students’ entrepreneurial learning, emphasizing students’ identity matching process. We selected three student cohorts participating in the international internship programme from 2013 and 2014. We included entrepreneurship master’s students from Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (two cohorts, sample HVL) and Norwegian University of Life Sciences (one cohort, sample NMBU). These institutions offer cross-disciplinary entrepreneurship masters programmes, including the same international internship programme in Houston.

We conducted three focus groups (six to eight students in each focus group) from the three student cohorts. The focus groups were conducted approximately eight months after completion of the internship, in the last semester of the educational programme. At this time, they could reflect back on their learning experience and competence on a meta-level and at the same time see themselves in a possible future role as entrepreneur.

The focus group interviewing was inspired by the critical incident technique, originating from Flanagan (1954). We focused on several themes: students’ perceptions of their experiences; roles and work tasks in the American start-ups; cultural differences between Norway and USA with respect to entrepreneurship culture; attitudes and behaviors; students’ learning experiences; how they felt about coping with the daily tasks, and further, whether the cross-cultural learning had any effect on themselves and how they perceived the entrepreneurial role and role behavior (role models).

Each interview lasted about 90–120 minutes and was audio-recorded and fully transcribed. A coding schema and content analysis was performed using the theoretical framework as a lens for interpretation. In the paper, the student names have been changed to ensure full anonymity of the respondents. In the analysis, we present students’ narratives/reflections through quotes, identified with fictive names.

ANALYSIS AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Our findings show that all students were confronted with new ways of performing entrepreneurial tasks during the internship period, through both observations of American entrepreneurs (role model observations) and through their own experiences performing work tasks in the startups. The students generally achieved *feasibility* (“can do”) as one dimension in the identity matching process (Ibarra, 1999). The American entrepreneurs tended to push students to perform entrepreneurial tasks far outside their comfort zones, in an American way of entrepreneurial action mode. Consequently, students’ therefore acquired their own experience in performing a number of entrepreneurial work tasks in an American way, and hence were pushed to experiment with new ways of performing these tasks, developing and challenging their competence, skills, attitudes and perceptions. In sum, the students experienced the American entrepreneurial culture as differing widely from the Norwegian entrepreneurial culture, and some students expressed strong emotions when confronted with these cultural differences.

In the further analysis, we emphasize the attractiveness dimension of the identity matching because this taps into the self-protection of the personal identity. With regard to the *attractiveness* dimension (“will do”) (Ibarra, 1999), students exhibited more variation (compared to the “can do” dimension), as students assigned negative values to some American entrepreneur mindsets and behaviors, and positive values to others. We also found some variation among students, showing that the cross-cultural learning process is unique.

The analysis revealed two central themes that seized the students’ interests and engagement in the focus group discussions, and we organize the further analysis according to these themes. The themes relate to American socio-cultural behavior prevailing in the entrepreneurship milieu. The first theme relates to the emphasis on networking, on showing off, the mentality of “talking big,” and the expectation to be extrovert. The second theme captures the American entrepreneurship culture allowing for risk taking, a trial and error mentality, and the drive for success.

Theme 1: Networking, showing off and the mentality of “talking big”

Since the students were placed in identity workspaces, they all gained their own experiences with networking and had been pushed to act in an American way, such as showing off and “talking big” and trying to be more extrovert, as is generally expected in the US. In addition, on various occasions the students had observed American entrepreneurs talking big. Thus, they all experienced new situations and made role model observations in the work environment that motivated them to try out new behaviors. In accordance with cross-cultural learning research, students were ‘forced’ into behavioral experimentation, trying out or prototyping different behaviors and roles, through trial and error learning, and through social encounters in the entrepreneurial milieu. We place the students’ perceptions of these behaviors on a continuum of the attractiveness of entrepreneurial modeled behaviors, from low to high (in terms of “will do”). We have selected three illustrative students/quotes to show differences in perceptions along this continuum.

Several students exhibited negative perceptions of the great emphasis on behaviors regarding networking and the showing off, talking big mentality. To illustrate, Kirsten perceived the emphasis on networking as exaggerated (resource demanding) without a clear purpose and rationale. The networking was seen as superficial, lacking true friendship and not based on personal relations, implying a more strategic and instrumental use of networks. Despite the negative feelings, Kirsten nevertheless expressed that, through being pushed, she learned how to behave in that kind of situation, to behave in a more instrumental way and, hence, experienced a “can do” in terms of the modeled behavior. Yet, this behavior was not internalized to fit in a possible entrepreneurial self, as she felt it was a low match with her personal identity, and did not reflect a “will do” behavior. We therefore see Kirsten as a student who rejects some American socio-behaviors and simultaneously protects her own identity:

To use contacts for all they’re worth. I sat through numerous lunches with my boss and all kinds of people to find investors, to gain that first contact and he pressured me to call people I really did not feel like calling. So you really learn a lot about how to behave—how to proceed in order to achieve your goals (Kirsten, HVL).

Anders expressed that he had to rehearse new ways of acting, and that at the beginning of the internship he was not yet ready to perform as an American. Yet, he saw it more as a challenge and a matter of training, and thought he could modify his way of acting to comply with American norms. Besides this, he did express negative emotions or perceptions to a lesser degree:

You had to get into a boastful mode. I was not ready for that at all. They expect you to be very extrovert; they expect you to be boastful. (Anders, NMBU)

Anders therefore exhibited a somewhat ambivalent attitude, hesitating on both “can do” and “will do” behaviors, as these seemed intrinsically linked.

Mathias experienced the internship as a trial and error learning process, experimenting with the American way of acting, showing off and talking big, which he eventually mastered. He deliberately tried to modify his behavior to cope with the entrepreneurial tasks, and acknowledged the transformational learning:

I read about American culture before I left—they are very confident; they have a “can do” mentality. Nothing is too big...etc. I found it was like that: I tried to exit my comfort zone and be a little tougher when I got there: Tell them my strengths, maybe boast a little by our standards. I tried to adapt a little and it seemed that it was appreciated (Mathias, NMBU)

This perception is prevalently positive, as Mathias found the entrepreneurial role behavior attractive in relation to his own identity and, therefore, more liable to be integrated as part of a possible entrepreneurial self. Mathias reflected both a “can do” and a “will do” behavior.

Even though it was not always expressed explicitly, all three students evaluated and perceived the American entrepreneurial culture through their own (national) cultural values and behaviors. The contrast and comparison effect is evident and seems natural in students’ introspection and self-examination during their cross-cultural experiences. Hence, the students developed a stronger self-awareness of their own culture, as they gradually learned about the ‘new’ American culture, raising their cultural awareness. Furthermore, the analysis portrays students’ cross-cultural learning and identity-matching processes as unique, in the sense that students exhibited differences in their perceptions of American entrepreneurial culture and behaviors (low to high attractiveness).

Theme 2: Culture of risk taking, a trial and error mentality and the drive for success

The students assigned positive values to American mindsets and behaviors that supported the trial and error mentality, the risk-taking attitude, the drive for success and high confidence in the self. These modeled behaviors fitted well into the “will do” entrepreneurial repertoire of students, appearing attractive to them in terms of a possible self (Ibarra, 1999). Students acquired perceptions of these entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors through observations of American role models during the internship, and hence were not personally exposed (for natural reasons) to undergo much experimentation regarding these traits. The mentioned entrepreneurial characteristics were to some extent familiar to the students, conveyed in previous lectures on entrepreneurship theory in the master’s pro-

grams. However, observing them through real American role models in action made the entrepreneurial traits even more salient and significant. When referring to these mindsets and behaviors, the students explicitly and implicitly compared with Norway, and hence demonstrated self-awareness of their own culture and cultural awareness of the “new” American culture. Regarding these themes, Norway was discussed in negative terms as students thought Norway had a restricted culture that inhibited entrepreneurs from thriving and succeeding, lacking both support and encouragement for entrepreneurial ambitions. In contrast, the American culture supported and encouraged entrepreneurs with ideas and vision. In the following, we illustrate these findings through three student perspectives.

Juliette emphasized the trial and error mentality, and a culture that allowed people to fail and then try again, lowering the personal (socially exposing) costs of failure. This culture contributed to a risk-taking orientation, making entrepreneurship appear less hazardous and uncomplicated:

I felt it lowered the barriers for entrepreneurship a lot. You try—and then if you fail, you try again. And people do it in different ways—some quit their studies to become entrepreneurs, while our lecturer started his first company in his 40s. So there are several ways: “If at first you don’t succeed, try again!” In Norway you may be deemed a failure if you don’t succeed with your first startup, while in USA it’s: “Good on you, at least you tried.” Failure is not a stigma. (Juliette, HVL)

Ole valued a culture that allowed people to be successful, and to be able to demonstrate their success without judgment, jealousy or negative comments from the surroundings. He made a comparison by referring to the Norwegian/Nordic ‘Law of Jante’ (‘Janteloven’), created by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose in 1933, describing a small society driven by jealousy and other negative norms that discourages people with new ideas and ambitions. In other words, the antithesis of entrepreneurship cultures, which may inhibit entrepreneurship from prospering in Norway:

Success is permitted in Houston. If your neighbor drives a Porsche, you don’t think “Wow, he must have a lot of money,” but: “Wonder what he did to be that successful.” The bosses at my work drove all the expensive cars; nobody gossiped about that; rather: “What has he done and what can I do?” Also—the bosses arrived six in the morning and left six in the evening: They arrived first and left last—maybe here “Janteloven” hinders us a little (Ole, HVL)

Mathias underscored the success drive and the entrepreneurs’ confidence in their business ideas. Everything is possible and achievable; it may just take some time to achieve the goals. During this journey, there will be a need for adjustment, but one’s own confidence will be the driving engine:

“The impossible just takes a little longer,” that is how I would sum up my experience from the USA. We learn, here, that things happen gradually and that everything is complicated. But there (USA), if you just have “faith”...—and I do—then: OK—what does it take? And then, if you manage to define that, well “Let’s go”—and you adjust as you go along. So I feel that there is more flexibility and that this is the key to success. This, I guess, is my main experience from the USA and what I feel we lack here at home—this openness, pride and “can do” mentality (Mathias, NMBU)

To sum up, the quotes illustrate positive perceptions of these American entrepreneurship mindsets and behaviors (“will do” behaviors). According to the students’ valuation of these qualities, American society encourages entrepreneurship, whereas Norwegian society inhibits and discourages entrepreneurship. Hence, it seems that in the process of enhancing cultural awareness (through a cross-cultural learning process), the students naturally used their national cultural references to compare and contrast. Moreover, since students learned mainly by observations of role models, cultural awareness came out as the major learning outcome here.

DISCUSSION

In the research, we explored how transformational cross-cultural learning may influence students’ identity matching process. We assumed, through our conceptual model, that cross-cultural learning would add dimensions rarely found when learners operate solely in their home country. These dimensions encompassed the contrast and comparison effect between their own culture and a foreign culture, the experimentation with attitudes and behaviors, and the resulting emotions. Our analysis revealed two main themes related to American socio-cultural attitudes and behaviors observed, experienced and evaluated by the students in terms of “can do” and “will do” modeled behaviors (Ibarra, 1999).

Through our analysis and interpretations, we made several discoveries. Foremost, the cross-cultural learning offered unique opportunities for students to contrast their own entrepreneurship culture back home with the American entrepreneurship culture. Our analysis shows that students found the risk-taking mentality and trial and error approach to entrepreneurship appealing. Through cross-cultural learning, these dimensions observed in the entrepreneurial role models were perceived as attractive, and therefore they were easily aligned to a possible self. Thus, when returning to their home country, students might experiment with the American types of behaviors in the future, pertaining possibly to a long lasting effect. This means that the cross-cultural learning experience had added a richer repertoire of entrepreneurial behaviors to these individuals, which may be internalized in a future possible self. Moreover, notably in this example, the learning experience could contribute in the future to lowering the barriers for exploring new entrepreneurial behaviors that contrast with established norms of their mother culture. Ultimately, these students and their successors might lead the way in re-storying the entrepreneurial culture in Norway.

By developing self-awareness and cultural awareness, the transformational cross-cultural learning experience contributed most importantly to developing a higher level of consciousness with respect to their own culture and personal identity. The cultural contrasts and comparative learning also made their home country’s cultural values more explicit and therefore served to define and protect the students’ own personal integrity, outlining “will do” behaviors in terms of a possible self. This finding is intriguing and noteworthy as we are talking about young students with personal identities “under construction”, and, as such, we would assume their “young” and “immature” identities to be more malleable and subject to change, compared to older individuals with presumably more stable, developed and “static” identities. Hence, the cross-cultural adaptation process does not

necessarily involve “giving up” or “discarding” the original personal identity—an idea cohering with our analysis showing that cross-cultural learning represented a “mirror” for self-understanding and protection of personal identity undergoing the identity matching process. Based on our research, we therefore suggest that insights from cross-cultural learning could inspire and contribute to the field of entrepreneurship identity construction and matching.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings highlight the value of cross-cultural learning in entrepreneurship courses, especially in showing how cross-cultural transformational learning may stimulate a clearer self-understanding in development of a possible entrepreneurial identity. The research adds new knowledge on how cross-cultural learning may influence an identity matching process among young learners, analysing students’ perceptions of significant entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors. We could interpret the empirical findings within our proposed model of identity matching through cross-cultural transformative learning, and argue that an international cross-cultural experience may facilitate entrepreneurial identity matching, where learners are modifying and protecting their own personal identity in a possible entrepreneurial role. Equally, our findings provide new insights on how educators can approach identity matching in students’ entrepreneurial learning. According to Hoang and Gimeno (2010), self-assessment and inward reflection is crucial for the early stages of entering into an entrepreneurial role. They theorize that the degree of perceived centrality of a role in defining the person inhabiting it may be important and may lower any negative impact that might arise from social role conflicts and hence aid in the persistence of adapting to an entrepreneurial role. Consequently, we propose similar practice-based educational designs comprising comparable elements as those presented in our conceptual model (Figure 1) to entrepreneurship education as well as to other related higher educations with practice-based learning elements. In such designs, students will perform tasks and/or observe role models in real settings (identity workspaces). These learning settings should encompass some foreignness or unfamiliarity to the students in terms of contrasts in cultures/subcultures or new industries/sectors, which will force them to experiment and explore new behaviors. This experimentation through comparison of possible selves will again stimulate students to self-assessment and inward reflection, aiding the assessment of possible roles and identities relevant for diverse professions and careers.

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