

**Erasmus Students at the
University of Duesto**
--Interaction and group formation

A qualitative study in Sociology
Lund University, Department of Sociology.
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Abstract

Title: Erasmus Students at the University of Duesto

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The study: This is a qualitative study done at the University of Duesto in Spain; the focus is on the Erasmus students in the spring of 2004. The purpose of the study had arisen from a personal interest and experience and was to find out if the Erasmus students' distinguish themselves from Spanish students at the University of Duesto. Why do they distinguish themselves and do they want to? The study is based on the theories of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. Goffman's concepts of alienation from interaction and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field have played a major role in the theoretical part. The empirical material is based on four semi-structured interviews and the author's own experience and observations at the University and at an Irish bar. The focus is on how the Erasmus students view their groups, group formations and how they interact within the groups and with the Spanish students. The conclusion is that most of the Erasmus students went out together in big groups, mostly national groups. They went to different bars and did not mix socially with Spanish students at the University. Seems to be a dialectic relationship between the two groups where they both constrained the rules. Some of the Erasmus students wanted to break loose and some did not, but it was clear that breaking loose included a big effort.

1. Introduction

In the European Union, there exists an exchange program called the Erasmus. This program allows people from all over Europe to go to universities in different countries to study for one year. The program is part of a vision of an international Europe; the vision of the European Union, where you can go everywhere inside Europe to work or to study.

For a person, going to a different country to study often means leaving his or her secure life¹ behind, the secure life that is derived from the coexistence with his or her friends and family. In one's own country, one is familiar with the culture and the social rules of that society. When faced with a different reality abroad, all these things change. The social rules you have been familiar with in your daily life change. Everybody needs a social life and to feel comfortable within it, how do you manage and what do you do when you no longer feel secure within the social context? How does one gain a new group of friends and how does one replace a family? Whereas a family in most cases will not be found in a new country, friends will. This is a study about how the Erasmus students find friends and how they form groups, with what people they form groups and the reasons why. Related to this is a broader question: What are the difficulties going abroad for a year or a semester?

It is a qualitative study from the perspective of the Erasmus students. How do they form groups and how do they interact within the groups and with Spanish students. I will examine their subjective reality, their fears and prejudices about how the Spanish people view them and how they view themselves and each other. I have chosen the University of Duesto in the north of Spain for my studies. I will answer the above questions with the help of interviews, my own experiences and other documents about and for Erasmus students. The Erasmus students have been the natural respondents to the questions as they are the experts of the experience and of the area. I also made four interviews with Spanish students to get a broader perspective, but only one Spanish interview is included, because the focus is on the Erasmus students. I have based my study on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman.

Personal interest and experience lie as a basis for the study, since I myself was an Erasmus student at the University of Duesto in Bilbao. The questions in this study have arisen from personal experience and observations in the environment. As the study's width was pre-determined and the time was limited, there was no time to go out on the field with questions and then change them during the process. It was important having the right questions from the beginning. My involvement has helped me with this and I see it as my strength.

¹ With secure life, I refer to a person's physiological security rather than the physical one.

1.1. What This Study is not about

This is a study about the Erasmus students' personal perspectives. The Erasmus students own perspective on their life at the University of Duesto as students. It does not include, because of the limited space and time, different perspectives of the same situation of other foreign students or the Basque students' view of their life. A short description of the University and the Spanish view will be included as introduction and explanation of the field, but this will not be the main focus of the study. I will not discuss the problem of the Basque nationality and the Spanish nationality in the region of the Basque country although I am well aware of these perspectives. Nor the gender differences between the respondents and what it means for the study. I will not discuss the concept of integration separately although it comes along with my focus and questions.

1.2. Questions

I want to study if the Erasmus students distinguish² themselves from the Spanish students at the University from three different angles. I will discuss all the angles from the Erasmus students' perspective: First how the Erasmus students form groups and the interactions within the groups. Second the interaction between the Spanish students and the Erasmus students at the school and at leisure. Last, how the Erasmus students experience that each group view one another from an internal perspective. Specific questions include:

- Do the Erasmus students distinguish themselves from the Spanish students?
- Why do they distinguish themselves?
- Do they want to distinguish themselves and why?
- How do they distinguish themselves and are they aware of it?
- What does it mean to them as individuals?

1.3. Disposition

I will start with a short introduction of earlier studies in the area in chapter two, and then go on to the theories of Goffman and interaction and Bourdieu and group formation. I will start with my methods, focused interviews and observations, and the discussion about them in chapter three. In chapter four, I will start with an introduction to the field based on my own experience and a view from one Spanish student. Then I will discuss the life of the Erasmus students from different perspectives based on the interviews and the theories. At the end of chapter four I will have a section where I intend to answer

² By the concept "distinguish", I refer to how the Erasmus students make a distinction between themselves and the Spanish students. It includes both physical distinctions such as place and time and psychological such as personal prejudices and emotions.

my questions and sum up my analysis. In chapter five, I will put forward my conclusion.

2. THEORIES

In this chapter, I will start with a short look at earlier studies and perspectives in the area. Then I am going to preview the theories that I will use for my analysis later. I have chosen to start with Goffman, as his approach to interaction is useful for the understanding of the Erasmus students interaction with Spanish students and vice versa. I will then go over to Bourdieu and his Habitus and Field to get a better understanding of how travelling and living in a different country can affect the Erasmus student. The Erasmus students carry along a different kind of experience and cultural baggage to the new country and here the theories of Bourdieu are interesting.

2.1. Earlier Studies on the Area

When I started to look for literature on the subject, I found that there was almost no literature on foreign students and their experiences that matched with my study. There exist statistics about foreign students but because this is a qualitative study, I will not include the statistics about foreign students. I do not think statistics will answer my questions; though the statistics are about where the Erasmus students live, study etc. There is almost nothing about their group formation, interaction and integration in society in the literature. The literature I did find was about immigrants and their experiences in new countries, mostly political and quantitative studies. Many articles were about travelling and the identity develops when meeting a new culture. The literature is mostly about different immigrants and ethnic groups within the countries. I will apply some of the explanations in the books, although they do not consider exact by the same situation as the Erasmus students are in. I will only include the parts of the books that are relevant and can give a different perspective on this study.

Anna Triandafyllidou writes in her book *Immigrants and National Identity in Europe* about how the national identity sometimes is defined by the Other, in this case the different immigrant groups. She analyses the public discourse and how it constructs in-group/nation and out-group/immigrants. Triandafyllidou uses the concept Significant Others as an analytic tool, for her study of the double-edge character of national identity.³

The coexistence of different nations or ethnic groups on the same territory requires the identity of each group to be constantly negotiated and reaffirmed in the sense of belonging to the group is to survive. It requires a constant redefinition of the ingroup that must be distinguished from Others who might be geographically, an also culturally, close.⁴

This book is interesting for my studies because it takes up Spain and its national consciousness as an empirical source and because it talks about how the Others sometimes redefine the identity of

³ Triandafyllidou Anna (2001) *Immigrants and National Identity in Europe*.

⁴ Triandafyllidou (2001) Pg 3.

the in-group. It gives a different perspective of identity and groups because she uses a different theoretical perspective: Smith's typology of nationalist movements and internal and external Significant Others.⁵ This study differs from mine because it is a quantitative study. The perspective of the "others" would however have been interesting to apply on my study but due to lack of space and time, this was not possible.

Another interesting book that reflects a different perspective of my study is Paul Pederson's *The five stages of cultural shock*.⁶ Cultural shock emerges, when the individuals are uncertain of what is expected of them or what they can expect from people around them. The book covers the grief and loss of back-home relations, friends and family.⁷ This is a qualitative study done with different students that have gone abroad, travelling to many different countries in a short period. Pederson bases his study on five different stages of cultural shock: The honeymoon stage, the disintegration stage, the reintegration stage, the autonomy stage and the interdependence stage.⁸ The concept of cultural shock could have been included in my study, by looking at how long time my respondents have been in the country. With this, I might have gained a wider understanding of their interaction and group forming based on which stage of cultural shock they were in.

Margareta Popoola writes about the concept of integration in Sweden, with focus on how the immigrants live and where they live.⁹ She explores the concept of integration based on the theories of Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies and George Simmel. She concludes in her book that the concept of integration in Sweden only includes the immigrants and that the concept is not focused on the natives or society. The focus is on how the immigrants can improve their integration and not vice versa.¹⁰ She also writes about the ambition to create a multicultural society with heterogeneity at the same time as homogeneity is loved and kept alive. Moreover, she discusses how this conflict becomes a challenge to the concept of solidarity and gemenskap that the concept of integration is based on.¹¹ This book gives an interesting perspective of the concept of integration that could have been used in my study, as a broader understanding of interaction and group formation at Duesto.

2.2. Erving Goffman

Erving Goffman used the opposite to a specific situation to describe a situation, for example by

⁵ Triandafyllidou (2001) Pg 25-35.

⁶ Pederson Paul (1995) *The five stages of culture shock*.

⁷ Pederson P. (1995).

⁸ Pederson P. (1995).

⁹ Popoola Margareta (2002) *Integration, en samtidsspeglning*, Pg 7.

¹⁰ Popoola M. (2002) Pg 71.

¹¹ Popoola M. (2002) Pg 72.

looking at a mental hospital to show how normal people interact by investigating what they don't do because it is not accepted. He used this to see what kind of rules human beings use when they interact. Goffman saw the self as being in conflict between what it wants to do spontaneously and what it does because of the expectations from others, group pressure.¹² The self is construed in the interaction, you are what other see in you, and to retain a stable self image humans tend to follow the rules and perform what is expected of them.

Goffman wrote about how people interact with the help of obligations and expectations, which derive from the fear of being embarrassed by breaking the rules or the will to save one's face in front of others. Goffman gave the example of a nurse: He has *obligations* from the doctor to treat the patients and *expects* the patients to cooperate. On the other hand, you can say that the patient has an *obligation* to let the nurse treat him. In this sense, one person's *obligation* is often another one's *expectation*. People do not often notice the obligations and expectations; they may say that they acted that way because they felt like it or for no reasons at all. It is when people fail to act in the "correct" way that they notice the rules.¹³

Goffman talked about different ways that individuals can be alienated from conversation. One of the ways he calls *Self-consciousness* alienation.

"Self-consciousness for the individual does not, it seems, result from his deep interest in the topic of conversation, which may happen to be himself, but rather from his giving attention to himself as an interactant at a time when he ought to be free to involve himself in the content of the conversation."¹⁴

When feeling that the self-image is not presented the way the individual is used to, self-consciousness alienation can also occur. The individual then withdraws to correct the image and puts all the focus on himself. It is a way of protecting yourself by focusing on yourself and as Goffman said; we are all familiar with the concept of embarrassment.¹⁵ Further Goffman wrote about "*Other-consciousness*" alienation, here the distraction from the conversation lies in the other person. When we interact in small groups, we are more or less obliged to look at the other persons and listen to their voices. If a person has a defect as a lisp, a different accent etc., the focus can become this defect or difference from the normal (for us) instead of the actual topic.

Goffman viewed persons as actors and because of that he writes about front stage and back stage. On the front stage, the persons perform for an audience. Here the actors want to present themselves in the best possible way and because of that they follow the rules of conversation and sometimes they even feel that they have to hide things. On the back stage, the persons can relax and here they do not feel that they have to present themselves in a role for the public. Goffman

¹² Ritzer (2000) *Modern Sociological theory*, 5th Ed, Pg 226.

¹³ Goffman (1967) *Interaction Ritual*, Pg 49.

¹⁴ Goffman (1967) Pg 118.

divided the personal front in to manner and appearance. People expect certain items for different roles in society, for example clothes. These items are the appearance. The manner is the way an actor acts that tells the other members of the group how they are going to view this person. Normally manner and appearance cooperate. Goffman argued that these roles, manner and appearance, exist in society and that the individuals do not choose how to act, they choose what role to take. Further, the rules of these two aspects tend to be a collective thing, like common sense.¹⁶ Few people go totally in to their social role; actually, it is common for actors to show their “role distance” in different situations. The role distance is different for people in high positions and in low positions; for example, the cleaners can clean in a way that shows that they are uninterested in the cleaning. It is a way of telling us that they are too good for the job, by using a role distance.¹⁷

2.3. Pierre Bourdieu

The theories of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu are an intent of overcoming the opposition between individuals and societies, and he is most famous for his concepts: Habitus and field.¹⁸

Habitus is the way people deal with their social world; it differs from person to person. People that come from similar circumstances tend to have a similar habitus but it is not necessarily the same. Habitus is an inner schedule incorporated in the individual that comes from a long time occupying a position in the social world. This inner schedule helps a person to accomplish any kind of goal; it helps him to manage the necessary operations and to restrain him without being rules or laws. The habitus helps a person to function in a certain position and time in the social world. It decides the person’s habits and practices, for example, what kind of music, clothes, art etc. he likes. It constrains thoughts and choice of actions. The habitus also reflects the structure in society, like class, gender, ethnicity etc.¹⁹. In a sense it is possible for a person to have an inappropriate habitus in a certain field. An example of this is if you are brought up in the countryside you may not have the appropriate habitus for Wall Street, you may not be familiar with the music people listen to or their way of dressing. It can come down to the smallest thing, as how you eat or how you blow your nose. A person can change their habitus by being around people with different habitus, but it is not easy.²⁰ “The habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered

¹⁵ Goffman (1967) Pg 119.

¹⁶ Ritzer (2000) Pg 227.

¹⁷ Ritzer(2000) Pg 231.

¹⁸ Ritzer (2000) Pg 397.

¹⁹ Kerbo Harald R. (2003) quinta edición, *Estratificación social y desigualdad* Pg 136.

by history”.²¹ Habitus is dialectic, it both produces the social world and at the same time it is a product of the social world.²² However, according to Bourdieu, the habitus does not determine an individual or society.²³

The habitus is also strongly connected with Bourdieu's concept of capital, every one of us has a habitus but it is the market that decides which one of them can function as a capital.²⁴ The capital refers to what habitus is attractive on a specific market. The same behaviour can have a different meaning and function in different groups. Bourdieu examined four different kinds of capitals: Economic capitals, social capitals, culture capitals and symbolic capitals. Where the symbolic capital is one's honour and prestige, culture capital is knowledge of the field's culture. Social capital is knowledge of social relations and economic capital stems from money.²⁵

Connected with the habitus and capital is Bourdieu's concept of field. The Field is the relations that exist in a certain occupation or area but these relations are independent of the individual's will and consciousness. “The occupants of a position may be either agents or institutions, and they are constrained by the structure of the field.”²⁶ Bourdieu saw the field as a battlefield, where everybody struggles to get to a higher position inside the field. The position of an individual in the field is how well his capital fits with the field, in other words, what habitus the field appreciates and needs. If a person's habitus is not compatible with the field, and the field is stronger, the person can either run away or stay and his habitus will after a while modify itself to the fields.²⁷ There are many different fields in our society: Big fields that determine the whole society, for example politics or economics. Then small fields determine a certain area. To examine a field one should look at three different angles, the first is where the field belongs in the bigger perspective, what other field determines the field. The second is to analyse the relations inside the field. The third is to analyse the individuals that occupy the field, for example what habitus the individuals in certain occupations inside the field have. As mentioned before, Bourdieu was interested in the relationship between habitus and field and tried to eliminate the differentiation between the two. “He sees this as operating in two main ways. On one hand, the field conditions the habitus; on the other, the habitus constitutes the field as something that is meaningful, that has sense and value, and that is worth the investment of energy”.²⁸

²⁰ Broady Donald (1997) *Sociologi och epistemologi*, Pg 231.

²¹ Bourdieu (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice* Pg 82.

²² Ritzer (2000) Pg 400.

²³ Ritzer (2000) Pg 400.

²⁴ Broady Donald (1997) Pg 226.

²⁵ Ritzer (2000) Pg 402.

²⁶ Ritzer (2000) Pg 401.

²⁷ Broady (1997) Pg 231.

²⁸ Ritzer(2000) Pg 403.

Cultural taste was very important for Bourdieu. Individuals have a need to classify things and other persons and with that themselves. Culture helps individuals to classify different tastes in movies, music, and food etc.²⁹. For example, people in higher classes use their specific habitus and cultural capital to fit in and, at the same time, define the taste/habitus in the field. Bourdieu thought that for a person to occupy a space in a field it is important to *be* somebody, to be different from the rest. Because of this, people tend to define different tastes to be able to distinguish themselves from the rest but still inhabit the social rules of the field.³⁰

2.5. Why These Theories?

In this study, I want to ask if the Erasmus students distinguish themselves from the Spanish students at the University, by studying their group formation and their interaction. The two theories I have chosen complement my different angles of the questions. Bourdieu is useful when I look at the group formations with his concept of habitus and field. I will also use him in some sense when I look at the interaction, since habitus and capital can be useful concepts for the understanding of interaction at the University of Duesto. Finally, I have chosen Goffman and his theories of interaction to complement the theories of Bourdieu with his dramaturgy.

These theories are of course a selection and there are both advantages and disadvantages when I analyse the empirical material. For example; if I go too deeply into the theories of Bourdieu I may analyse and explain everything as a capital, or in the case of Goffman: Everything as a presentation of self in the frontstage. I could have applied other studies by which I probably would have reached a different result. I have used my chapter of earlier studies to show the reader different ways of looking at the subject, but because of space limits, they will not make up a big part of this study. When I started my study, I was also considering Max Weber and his different types of “solidary social relationship” and Emile Durkheim thoughts on integration. These two theories and perspectives are also highly relevant but a selection has to be made in every study and in this case, I found that the theories that I have chosen complement each other better. The theories distinguish my study from others done on similar areas (see chapter 2.1).

²⁹ Ritzer (2000) Pg 403.

³⁰ Ritzer (2000) Pg 405.

3. Methods

In this chapter, I will present, examine and discuss the methods used. I start with a short discussion about the study itself and then go on to my interviews, what kind of methods I have chosen and the problems I faced during my interviews. I also have a part where I describe my thoughts about the interview guide. In the last part of this chapter, I will discuss my observations and describe why they turned out differently.

3.1. The Study

This is a qualitative study, done at the University of Duesto in Spain. Interviews and observations is the base of the study. I wrote some of the parts of the study in Spain and other parts in Sweden. Sometimes the terms and concepts can be confusing to translate because of the three different languages, English, Spanish and Swedish. I formulated the questions before I entered the field based on the theories and my experiences, because of my own involvement.

3.1. Semi-Structured Interview

I have chosen to do a Semi-structured³¹ interview with the students, with open questions and little or no structure in the answers. This interview form I have chosen for several reasons, first I was interested in how the students view their world and their interaction. I wanted to get examples of the Erasmus world and be able to understand their feelings and perspectives. José Ruiz Olabuénaga writes in his book *Metodología de la investigación cualitativa* about four different qualities that the Semi-structured interview with little structure has. It intends to understand more than it explains. It tries to maximize the significance, the answers honesty is more important than its objectivity and lastly it often contains answers that are emotional.³² This way you focus more on the person's own world. Not what is true for everybody, but what is important and true for the respondent.³³ This way of doing an interview suited my purpose because I wanted to examine the difficulties of being integrated in the Basque society for an Erasmus student. I was interested in how the Erasmus students view their world, and views are not objective. I wanted to take a person's subjective experience and examine how it affects his surroundings.

At the same time, I wanted to integrate my theories with the interviews and therefore I had prepared questions. The best way of doing this was a semi-structured interview. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer does not expect the respondent to be objective or neutral,

³¹ The book of Olabuénaga (1996) called this interview in direct translation from Spanish for "focused interview" but because of the language in the paper I changed it to semi-structured interviews.

³² Olabuénaga Ruiz José Ignacio (1996) *Metodología de la investigación cualitativa*, segunda ed. Pg 170.

rather the contrary.³⁴ This interview form also allows the interviewer to change the interview guide and the questions during the interview.³⁵ The aim of the interviews is not to compare them statistically but rather to understand and get each person's individual view. During my interviews, I changed several questions and followed up interesting answers with more questions. In a totally structured interview this could not have been done.³⁶

The first interview with a French girl I did was carried out, 2004-03-26, in a café near the University. Because it was my first interview, I was a little bit nervous. I used the interview method course at the University of Duesto and therefore it was carried out in Spanish. The second interview I did was with a British girl (2004-04-28); the interview was carried out in English. The last Erasmus interview I did was with a German girl (2004-04-29) and it was carried out in English. The respondents were easy to find. I asked around in the cafeteria if anybody wanted to do an interview, and almost everybody I asked said yes. I wanted people from different countries, who studied different things. I have numbered my interviews in a chronological order based on the interview dates.

3.1.2. The Interviews; a Discussion

One of the problems I encountered was how to get my theories down to questions that would be understandable. Another thing I felt about doing the interview was that it was hard to formulate open questions without giving the respondent a hint of how to answer. In one of the Erasmus interviews, I asked for example, if the respondent felt that there was a difference in how people interacted in her country and in Spain. She did not understand me and I felt the need to give her examples of interaction. At that time I felt that, she would not have answered me in the same way if she had understood the question from the beginning. I was not leaving space for an open answer.

My own involvement made me form strong opinions about how the situations were for the other Erasmus student and I can never be sure about how this affected the interviews. An interview is an exchange between two persons, where the interviewer transmits feelings, interests, guarantees etc. and in exchange gets descriptions and personal information from the respondent. The interviewer can transmit a certain position without saying a word because just as in a normal conversation the respondent almost always tries to find out what the interviewer wants to hear.³⁷

The respondents knew that I also was an Erasmus student. From my point of view, this had both

³³ May Tim (2001) *Samhällsvetenskaplig forskning*, Pg 174.

³⁴ Olabuénaga (1996) Pg 173.

³⁵ Olabuénaga (1996) Pg 170.

³⁶ May T. (2001) Pg 151.

³⁷ Olabuénaga (1996) Pg 174.

negative and positive sides. When it came to the other Erasmus students that I interviewed, I was afraid that they would be afraid of telling me “bad” things about Erasmus. This turned out to be quite the opposite; because of our connection, the Erasmus students were very open towards me. Most importantly, I felt that I could relate and was able to ask the right questions at the right time. Which I do not think I would have been able to do without my experience. However, an interview is never the same as when a person talks to her close friend or parents. Regardless how much you try the interview always exists in a certain context, with an interviewer and a respondent; you can never know how much this affects the answers. A person responds differently in different situations; in a court, with friends, with parents with work colleagues etc.³⁸. The fact that I am an Erasmus student can in another way have damaged my objectivity by only seeing it from the inside. Nevertheless, by choosing a semi-structured interview I hope that the damage is of less significance.

The interviews were carried out in both Spanish and English. In the case when neither of us was native speakers, I felt that we understood each other better. When only one of us was a native speaker, it could sometimes happen that this person spoke too fast for the other person to understand properly. Alternatively; the person that was not a native speaker felt embarrassed to ask repeatedly what the other person said. When you cannot speak the language fluently, you often have to describe things in a different way when you cannot find the words. This could be an advantage in a sociological study, because the person describes things, situations and feelings more by using examples, instead of just putting in the correct words. Of course, you need to have a basic level of Spanish and English in order to get an interview to work, but in these cases, we had. In my interviews with some students, I also felt that I had an advantage of not being a native speaker. I decided before the interview to play dumb, and let them explain to me things very basic and by examples. This worked out most of the time.

3.1.3. The Structure of the Interview

For my interview with the Erasmus students, I did a semi-structured interview with a series of prepared open questions. I have chosen to divide the questions in to three major categories; before coming to Spain, life in Spain and at last interaction. I have chosen this order of categories because I wanted to build up a trust between the respondent and me. By starting with more abstract and less personal questions and slowly, go over to the more profound questions about their life and interaction. In the first part of the interview, I chose to ask the respondent casual questions, and

38 Olabuénaga (1996) Pg 173.

this way I hoped to get over the nervousness of both parties and make the conversation flow naturally. In this part, I did not want to ask anything too personal. This part also had as its intent to get a background perspective of the respondent. In the second part of the interview, I asked a little bit more personal and current questions about the student's life in Bilbao and at the University. The largest part in the interview was the part concerning interaction. In this part, I wanted to integrate questions about as well the life of Erasmus students as their interaction with Spanish students. Here I asked questions about their thoughts and emotions.

3.2. Observations

My first intention was to do a strict sociological observation with a notebook and the theories of the field. The observations were to take place in the bar where the Erasmus students hung out every Thursday night and at the Internet rooms where the Erasmus students met almost every day. Because of my own involvement as an Erasmus student, I knew the places well and was able to do a profound observation guide based on my own experience and the theories. However, when I came out to the fields it turned out that because of my own involvement I was not able to fulfil all my observations. People knew me, what I was doing and I found myself unable to use a notebook and other students constantly disrupted me. When I went out, I went out with my other Erasmus friends and they started to look suspiciously at me when I did not drink and was walking around looking at people. Sometimes I also got the feeling that they were acting differently around me. As my study went along, I found out that there was a lot of interesting information from different directions that I felt was as important for my study's background as my own observations. The information came from other students, events and sometimes written material. These two perspectives made me decide to turn my observation into a history of introduction instead of a strict sociological observation. It will include my own and others experiences and observations. This introduction also feels right, because of its ability to describe the whole field, with the University and the people's interaction in a more descriptive way. It will also include an interview with a Spanish student who gave me a different perspective of the situation.

4. ANALYSING: Approaches to the Situation

In this chapter, I will present empirical material that is based on observations and semi-structured interviews. I will start by describing the field I have been studying, so that the reader gets an idea of the Erasmus students' lives. Then I will go on to my interviews, analysing them from different angles with the help of the theories.

4.1. The University and Parties, an Introduction

The University of Duesto is an old Jesuit University in Bilbao, in the Basque part of Spain. It is considered one of the oldest in Spain and one of the best. At the same time, many of the Spanish students that I spoke to considered it too conservative and narrow-minded. Many teachers, they told me, are old and unwilling to change from old traditional teaching. When the Erasmus students arrived at the University, many of them chose to take an intensive course in Spanish, provided by the University. This course started a few weeks before the "real" courses of the University started.³⁹ The intensive course was for many Erasmus students their first meeting with the University and the new country. In connection with the course, the University arranged meetings and parties for the Erasmus students so that they could get to know each other. It should be mentioned that there were no Spanish people at these arrangements. When I came, the Erasmus students were provided with a map, a guide to the University and a book with all the activities that could be found at the University. The first friend I met was a young French guy, who thought he was going to study in San Sebastian, this turned out to be wrong and he ended up in Bilbao. He complained about not liking Bilbao; he wanted to be in a smaller town where he said people were nicer. One night he had parked his car on the campus and it was broken in to. I called him later that night and he told me that he was on his way home. He had had enough. He did not like Bilbao or the people there. He told me he did not feel welcome and there was no one there to take care of him. Only a short welcoming meeting where they handed out some sheets of information. After that, we never heard from him again. His behaviour was discussed in the Erasmus group and explained by the fact that he was too young, 20 years old, and had never lived alone from his parents or been abroad before.

In the intensive course, there were two different classes. However already the first day people from the same countries found each other and exchanged phone numbers regardless of their class. In my class, we had one group of people from Scandinavia, one group of English speaking people and one group of German speaking people, two Dutch persons that were friends and sometimes

39 The Home page of The University of Duesto (2003-06-16): <http://www.inter.uadm.uu.se/duesto.html>, last

joined the Scandinavian group. There was also an older woman from the Philippines but she was mostly by herself. I could not tell if it was her age or her nationality that made the difference. There was also a whole Erasmus group feeling, which I think came from the fact that people from the same countries knew each other, despite the different classes or time of arrival. Then the different groups were introduced to each other in the classrooms and at the parties.

The first thing the co-ordinator told the new Erasmus students, at the welcoming meeting, was that there are always parties at the “Irish” pub every Thursday. In addition, some of the students had met other students, who had given them information about this Irish bar. “Regular” nightlife in Bilbao was mostly in the old parts of the city, and the Irish bar was in the other end of the city. When I first came to the bar, it felt as if I was in an Irish bar, the same Irish bars that we have in Sweden. The interior decoration consisted of dark wooden chairs and tables, the same as the bar, where they only served Irish and English beer. To enter the bar you had to walk up a stair and there was a big sign that said “Erasmus night”. You then had to open a big wooden door with no signs on it. You could barely see the place from the street, and there was almost no noise coming out from it because of the big door. The bar played typical “MTV” music from western countries mixed with many classical hits, like ABBA, The Beatles etc. The Erasmus people did not arrive until around one o’clock. Before then there were only a few people there. Around two o’clock, the bar was totally crowded, and you could not move. The tables were put in the corners by the guests themselves, and everyone was dancing, sometimes on the tables, because of the lack of space. As the semester went along, there were increasingly Spanish people coming to the bar and the place went even more crowded. The rumour went that the police had been there because of complaints from the neighbours that were not used to the noise. The week after, the owner of the bar decided that these were “Erasmus nights” and that only Erasmus students were allowed in the bar. He decided to hand out invitations to the Erasmus students that he knew and to let them invite people by giving them a couple of invitations. Therefore, at the end of the semester, only the people with invitations could come in, and that was just Erasmus students. Other bars tried to announce Erasmus parties at the school, they put up posters and handed out invitations but none of them was as successful as the Irish bar.

4.1.2. A Spanish View

To get a better understanding of the field, I did interviews with Spanish students who told me about the University and the situation of the Erasmus students. I have chosen one interview that I think reflects the situation the best, because the purpose of this chapter is a short introduction. The

Spanish student could not answer why he thought that the Erasmus students came to the University but he told me that if there was a reason it would probably be the parties and the will to learn Spanish. He also told me that the University lives on its fame, and that it is very traditional. The students never talk during the lectures. One time he was alone in the class but the teacher continued the class as if it was full. He compared the teachers view of the students, with their view of furniture. From this perspective, he told me it is not strange that the Erasmus students do not integrate, because no one talks to each other during the lectures, and there is no group work. The Spanish students already have their groups, and are not interested in talking to Erasmus students that only are going to stay for a few months. Also important is that the students only had one twenty minutes' break a day, and then they talk about school or do photocopies. The students in his class already have their friends from before the University and do not meet fellow students in their spare time. They have been together for three years and have had around ten Erasmus students in their class. He had never heard about an Erasmus student that had gone out with someone in his class after school. He told me that he is the one in his class that speaks the most with the Erasmus students, that the others are not interested because they are already in their groups.⁴⁰ That there are not many prejudices surrounding the Erasmus because no one cares about them and in the end it is as if they were never there.⁴¹ He told me that the only thing the Erasmus can do is to try to come in to the group, and talk to them even if of that no one takes notice of them.⁴² Another thing that we discussed was that the University could change. For example, that integration would be easier, for Erasmus students, in a class that is based on discussions and group work. He had been to an Erasmus party by accident once. I asked him if he thought that there were any differences between the ways students party. He told me that the Erasmus students invite the whole world to their parties and that the Spanish students are more selective. They only invite the ones they know, and the Spanish students feel that it is too big effort to invite the Erasmus students, because you have to give them directions etc.⁴³

4.2. The View of the Erasmus Student

The three respondents had come to Bilbao without knowing very much about the city or the Basque region of Spain. They all explained their choice of Bilbao by their Universities only having agreements with the University of Duesto. Two of the respondents had older sisters that had been an Erasmus student before them, and because of that, they knew more or less, what they could

⁴⁰ Interview 4, see appendix 2, quotation 3.

⁴¹ Interview 4, see appendix 2, quotation 4.

⁴² Interview 4, see appendix 2, quotation 2.

⁴³ Interview 4, see appendix 2 quotation 1.

expect. Respondent 2 did not have any connection with the Erasmus life before she went abroad and did not know what to expect. I asked the respondents, what their sisters had told them about the life of Erasmus before they went. Respondent 3 answered me:

“Well a lot of party, but also that it is difficult to get to know people...like from... like that the Erasmus is with the Erasmus and that it is difficult to get to know people from the place your are at ...that also what they told me, and what I have seen and that... yeah and that many people live like a big holiday.”⁴⁴

When asked what a typical Erasmus student was like, the respondent’s descriptions were similar to their expectations. “O my God the typical Erasmus...so the typical Erasmus parties a lot, doesn’t do really much work, and pretends like, when it suits them, that they aren’t terribly good at Spanish haha...”⁴⁵ At the end, I asked respondent 1, why she thought that people go abroad for an Erasmus year: Is it because they want to learn about other countries or is it because they want to go to parties? She said: “I think that the principal reason is the parties and after a while you notice that there are people in the country and you have to get to know them more”⁴⁶ This shows that the respondents were aware of the existence of an Erasmus group. Further, that they had an idea of how it was distinctive from the Spanish group and that an “Erasmus character” in the minds of the Erasmus students existed. Some of them even knew it before they came.

4.3. The Erasmus Groups

It is clear that many of the Erasmus students felt lonely when they first arrived. As my respondents told me, they were all looking for friends. These friends were more likely to be other Erasmus students. As mentioned before (see chapter 4), the sociologist Bourdieu talks about habitus and field. You could see the University of Duesto as a field and the habitus most fit would probably be the one that the Spanish student from the Basque country had. If you see it in this way, the majority of the Erasmus students probably had an “inappropriate habitus” to fit in to the field of Duesto. The Erasmus students may not all have had the same habitus but because they did not have the fields, they stuck together. The three respondents agreed to the fact that it was easier to get to know other Erasmus students and that you need others when you go abroad. “Ohh yeah yeah yeah, I think because we are all sharing an experience, I mean we are all foreigners and that totally unites us I think.”⁴⁷

“It is easier here, I don’t know, but all our “real” friends are in our countries and we are all here by ourselves I think this makes you form relationships more easy with people, I don’t know if it is real relations...I think they are shallow but you need people when you are abroad.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Interview 3, 2004-04-29.

⁴⁵ Interview 2, 2004-04-28.

⁴⁶ Interview 1, my translation se appendix 1 quotation 6.

⁴⁷ Interview 2, 2004-04-28.

⁴⁸ Interview 1, my translation, see appendix 1, quotation 4.

Here we get the idea that the Erasmus students distinguished themselves from the Spanish students because they needed friends more. Moreover, because all the Erasmus students were in the same situation, they formed groups. Respondent 3 also reflected on how the University and the environment was a part of the Erasmus group formations:

“Yes, and I think it is also planned they make you meet, and it is good that they make you meet. Because in the first place you will be alone. So they make you meet in the beginning and off course, they facilitate to meet Erasmus because they create this space where you can meet them. It is institutionalised a little bit you could say. Because it is part of the Erasmus program that you meet Erasmus people but nobody makes an appointment to meet local people. You have to go and get, it depends more on yourself. (I: How do they make you meet Erasmus people?) Well with the reunions in the Spanish classes for one month before the Spanish people starts. You have like these official beginnings they try to organise group activities, you are all connected through email. Things like that and also bars, where they have these Erasmus parties it has also this image of the wild parties and people drink a lot and have a lot of money no so...”⁴⁹

All the respondents had reflected on the fact that there exists a strong Erasmus group, which means that the phenomenon was familiar to the students. The common ground was the similar situation that Erasmus students were in together and the differences between the Spanish students and them. The question is if they wanted to distinguish themselves.

The respondents told me that the Erasmus group was big, and after a while, you had to choose what people to go out with. “If you live the Erasmus life and go to all parties you have like forty numbers to different people in your phone after a week, but after two or three months there is a selection and you know less people but you know these people better”.⁵⁰ They all told me that although there was a “big Erasmus group” at the parties and at the University this group was divided in to small groups, mostly by countries and languages.

“Yes I think there are strong language groups, I wouldn’t say national groups because, because the French are not only the French but all the French speaking countries and then the Italians and the English” (I: Why do you think this is?) “I don’t understand it, really I think about it a lot I don’t understand it, maybe it gives them security but in the end those groups are so strong that they didn’t even knew one person from here. It is like security to a certain degree, yes but there is something missed. Maybe it gives you more the holiday feeling...”⁵¹

Respondent 1 told me about how she tried to not hang out with the other French Erasmus. One time a French guy had invited her to a party. When she got there, everybody was French and only French was spoken. She told me that she was here because she wanted to speak Spanish and learn about the Spanish culture, not to be on a vacation with friends. Respondent 3 also told me that she tried to break loose from the German group. Both of them told me that they had chosen to live with Spanish people because of this. That they preferred to go out with Spanish people, but they also expressed the view that it was not easy and that you had to make an active choice to break

⁴⁹ Interview 3, 2004-04-29.

⁵⁰ Interview 1, my translation, se appendix 1, quotation 8.

⁵¹ Interview 3, 2004-04-29.

loose. Respondent 2 however did not have the same perspective. She told me that she almost only went out with her other British friend because they shared the same experience and could talk about that.

“I live a really different life to them (*the Spanish*)⁵², like completely different ... you can talk to them (*the other British*)⁵³ I can't do that with (I: the Spanish!) Exactly, because they do not understand, you know obviously they are not shock or whatever. I mean I am so over talking about problem with living with my parents because I do not do that anymore. When they all live with their parents and have to be home for dinner and have to run around like seeing their boyfriends in the parks and things like that because you know their parents don't allow it and that's just not...I cant share that because that is not what I experience at all.”⁵⁴

Even though they had different perspectives on the national group, they all told me that it existed, and admitted that it was easier to belong to a national Erasmus group. I interpret these group formations from two perspectives. First that the Erasmus students did not feel that they had the same culture (*habitus*) as the Spanish students and second that they felt that they shared the same *habitus* or a more similar one inside the Erasmus group and even more so inside the national group. They had to make the choice of breaking loose and to learn new ways, and this included an effort. We could analyse it from the perspective that the field (*Duesto*) was strong and that the person had the choice of running away or to stay and slowly change their *habitus* (Bourdieu, see page 7). “It is not like the Spanish people ask you if you want to be their friend, I have done efforts to find people and I don't think it is so easy”⁵⁵

4.4. How to Party

The respondents told me that the parties of the Erasmus were a big part of the Erasmus life and that it in many cases distinguished them from the Spanish students. The Spanish students thought that Erasmus students did nothing but go to parties. This for the Spanish students was impossible.

“(...) like I have had Spanish friends in the class that really wanted to go to an Erasmus night. And I have seen them there and had such a great time with them. But like for them it is they can't do that every week, because they aren't Erasmus. Like for them it is a really fun experience they do like once or twice a semester. But like to do it, all the time would be weird. (I: why) Because they are not Erasmus (I: they don't know people there or?). It's different because if you like put a category on it and say like this is like an Erasmus night, then it is an Erasmus night ... (I: okay)”⁵⁶

Respondent 1 told me that when she visited her sister in Salamanca all the Erasmus parties were also in an Irish pub. At her home university in France, all the Erasmus students also went to an Irish pub. I asked the respondents if they felt that there were any differences, between how the Erasmus parties and how the Spanish people party. They all agreed that the bar in itself

⁵² My input as an explanation to the quote.

⁵³ My input as an explanation to the quote.

⁵⁴ Interview 3, 2004-04-29.

⁵⁵ Interview 1, my translation, se appendix 1, quotation 9.

⁵⁶ Interview 2, 2004-04-28.

distinguished the parties the most. This shows another significant way of how the Erasmus students distinguished themselves from the Spanish students. Then they had a different perspective on how other things were different. Respondent 2 told me about how she had gone out with Spanish people once.

“Hmm... I have and it was really different, I personally I would say that I didn't really like it, not that I mean that Spanish people don't come out with us when we go out, and that sort of thing but it was just, it was different, it was a lot less fun. I would say we spend a lot of time standing around talking, which was like fine but then you know arguments started to happen, and you know people got really in to it, it was like arguments about the bask country and can't joining in there because I don't know anything about that at all. And it was not like it was a bad time at all, it was just different and it was just less fun. It just felt slower... (I: okay, they don't drink as much or...?) No they drink a lot but there are not like so crazy, it's like when I go out with a group of my friends, Erasmus, and we started up with drinking with them and then you go out and you just met tons of other people, who you know, and it is really fun, and you talk to them all, and you just randomly run around I don't know its just really different and it wasn't really like that with them”⁵⁷

To understand why the Erasmus students distinguished themselves we can apply the theories. Bourdieu gives importance to culture as determined by habitus and field. It is a way of showing what group you belong to. In my case, the Erasmus student and the Spanish student went to different bars. Respondent 1 told me, that small things distinguished the two groups. It was about the music and the bars she said. Bourdieu said that subgroups tend to form lines around the group that differentiate them from the dominant group and the dominant group does the same. Culture and lines is a way of showing where you belong and to differentiate yourself from others. In order to be “someone” you have to be different from the rest.⁵⁸ In the case of respondent 2, it could also be that she felt that she could not represent herself in a group of Spanish people, the way she was used to. In this case, Goffmans alienation from interaction and role distant concepts could be applied (See the chapter about Goffman page 5). She told me that she did not know what they were talking about. That it was no fun to go out with them and that she preferred the Erasmus students. These two views of the situation might explain why the Erasmus students felt more comfortable with other Erasmus students.

4.5. Feeling Alone in Class

All the respondents had felt alone in their classes. Respondent 1 told me; “It is like there is a distance...they speak to you as...for them you are an Erasmus and live in your own world”.⁵⁹ One time she went to the school cafeteria with her Spanish classmates and one guy asked her: “Well today is Thursday. Are you going out to the Irish pub?” She told me that the Spanish students talked to her as if she already had a lot of friends and many things to do. When she answered him

⁵⁷ Interview 2, 2004-04-28.

⁵⁸ Kerbo (2003) 136.

⁵⁹ Interview 1, my translation se appendix 1 quotation 7.

that she probably was not going out, he was surprised. She told me that it did not matter if not all Erasmus students go out all the time. All the Spanish students thought they did anyway. With this situation, it was not strange that they did not ask you, if you wanted to go out with them. Further, she told me that the Spanish students thought it was very strange when you told them that you were at home studying. Bourdieu sees the habitus and the field as being dialectic, that no one determines the other more than the other does. The habitus reflects society, for example, gender, classes etc. If we continue looking at the Erasmus students, you could see that they had a different habitus when they arrived which made them form groups that differed from the Spanish students. Because of the existence of Erasmus groups, the Erasmus students could maintain their habitus that differed from the fields (Duesto). Reflecting the habitus of the Erasmus groups in eyes of the Spanish students. Respondent 1, told me that the Spanish students talked to her as if she already had many friends and that it was all about parties. Different habitus was reflected in the social structure of Duesto.

The respondents had different explanations of the fact that in most classes the Spanish students and Erasmus student did not mix.

“-No I think for a very long time it was very separated. The Erasmus and the other people but I think I can understand it. This I can understand very well for the special situation of the studies here. Which is, there are seven people in my year and one time there was more Erasmus and then the other people. So I think it is very difficult, if you know that this person will only stay for six months and you have to relate with everyone because yeah it cost too much I think. They have to stick together a lot to contrast that if you are a big group and it is only one or two persons I think it is easier.”⁶⁰

Respondent 2 told me about the differences between her class in England and at Duesto, where she described the one in England as small with a friendly atmosphere.

“(…) whereas here it’s kind of like you know it is not the same...I mean I find it to be quite clicky (I: clicky?) So like a click is like a little group and obviously these people have been studying with each other since the all know each other and that’s fine but like I had one class last semester, where I hated it because I basically...no one really said hi to each other and it was really like clicky within the class, there was a big group over here and a small group over there and they really never said hi to each other or talked outside of the groups you know and you know and I was like coming in and say hi and maybe get like one or two hi’s and then I thought you know I am not just going to bother haha...I mean I don’t care that much so you know...haha”⁶¹

The respondents told me that nobody speaks in class, and that to ask questions during lectures was not an option. They also told me that they sometimes wanted to ask questions but because nobody else did, they would have felt strange, as the only Erasmus student, to open their mouth during lectures. Goffman talks about *other consciousness* alienation in conversations (see Goffman chapter 2.2). If you do not speak the language you sometimes use words and sentences in a funny way, or your accent can be very different. In this case, the Erasmus student could have had fear of

⁶⁰ Interview 3, 2004-04-29.

⁶¹ Interview 2, 2004-04-28.

talking in class and being the person who distracted the others. You could also see the classroom as a front stage where mistakes were noticed more and everybody was aware of what you were doing. In this case, it is not surprising that the Erasmus student did not ask questions during lectures and maybe they felt uncomfortable there because they did not know the rules.

4.6. Trying to break loose from the Group and Adapting

The respondents had different opinions and wills about staying inside the “Erasmus group”. Respondent 2 expressed the opinion that she did not mind staying in the Erasmus group. She felt that she did not have anything in common with the Spanish students. She also thought that the Erasmus night was only for the Erasmus students (see how to party chapter 4.5). In this case, she seems to be saying that she wanted to distinguish herself from the Spanish students or that she did not mind doing so. The other two respondents however did not have the same opinion. They did not understand why all the Erasmus students went out together and they made it clear that they did not want to distinguish themselves by being a part of the Erasmus group. They had one or two friends from their own country but did not want more and tried to get to know more people from Spain

According to Bourdieu, the habitus is not something that is determined, it can change and people can adapt to the field. Interview person 1 told me that when she first arrived in Bilbao she only went out with other Erasmus students. However, after a while she started to get to know Spanish people, at first the ones in her apartment and then their friends and so on. I interpret this as her habitus slowly adapting to her environment. In this case, it was not surprising that the Erasmus students went out together at first. However, the respondents also told me that there were many activities, organised by the University, for the Erasmus student when they arrived so that they could meet friends. Maybe just because the first ones you met when you came as an Erasmus student were other Erasmus students it was more difficult to get to know Spanish students. The question I ask is: Would the Erasmus student have had more Spanish friends if there were no organisations for them as a group or if the activities were organised for both Spanish and foreign students?

Goffman talks about roles that people tend to take in conversation and when they present themselves. These roles are not created, but chosen by the persons. Respondent 1 told me that she felt that the Spanish students talked to her as if they already knew what she was going to do; they already determined her role as a typical Erasmus student. She also told me that after a while she decided to make an effort to get to know Spanish people. This I interpret as if she chose to take a different role, because it was clear that she did not like the fact that people put her in the Erasmus

role and everything that came with it. Goffman also talks about role distant, where people chose to make it clear that they do not really belong to the group. In this case, you could see the Erasmus students as being a subordinated group. If you did not want to be inside the Erasmus box, you had to show everybody that you really did not belong there. You had to make an effort.

4.7. Feeling Misunderstood

A factor to the fact that the Erasmus students stuck together could be that they felt that they could not represent themselves in front of the Spanish students. It was not always comfortable and you did not have any secure role as yourself. Respondent 1 told me that she sometimes felt that people looked at her as if she was stupid because she did not understand the language or the culture very well.

“In these situations I don’t know but you become angry it is not because you don’t speak it because you don’t speak perfect the language because I’m not Spanish.... (Tape end)...I don’t know were we where...Okay, yes there are situations when you want to say something important and you can’t because you don’t have the vocabulary or the proper forms, like when a went to the doctor last week...”⁶²

Respondent 1 told me that she sometimes did not find the right words in the classroom when the teacher asked her something, and that this made her frustrated. Goffman talks about front stage and backstage, on the front stage, certain things are expected and in order to not lose face everybody tries to follow these rules. I interpret the classroom in front of all other Spanish students and especially the professor as a front stage. If you do not find the correct words on the front stage, you cannot live up to the expectations of the social rules and you feel embarrassed. This could be another reason why the Erasmus students withdrew emotionally from the Spanish students. All the respondents told me that they thought that if they had made an effort they probably could have got to know the Spanish students better. In this case, I interpret making an effort as not caring about losing face, or to be able to put yourself in the position where you might lose face. Respondent 1 told me that she never felt embarrassed when she went out to the bars because the music was too loud anyway and the Spanish students could not hear her. This might explain why the Erasmus students always went out to different parties. The parties create an alternative environment for people. When people go out to bars body language is the most important thing because you cannot hear what people say. In this case, you could interpret the University to be the front stage and parties and bars as being back stage for the Erasmus students, in the sense, that at those parties the Erasmus students went out with their own friends and could speak their own languages. On the backstage Goffman said, you are not in the spotlight, and you do not have to worry about losing

⁶² Interview 1, my translation, se appendix 1, quotation 10.

face and follow the social rules. You could divide the University in to front stage and back stage. If you were the only Erasmus student in a classroom, you were more obliged to follow the rules but when you went down to the cafeteria to meet the other Erasmus students you could relax on the backstage.

You could also apply Goffman's concept of "self consciousness" here. If you come to a foreign country where you have never been before, you do not know the rules of conversation and sometimes you do not know the language very well. When you do not speak a language or you are beginning to learn a language you focus on yourself in a conversation. Because you have to make sure that you speak correctly, all your energy is spent focusing your attention on the language. Respondent 1 told me that she thought it was difficult to find the correct words and to answer quickly in Spanish. Another thing that could cause self-consciousness alienation in this case is that if you do not speak the language it is hard to present yourself in a satisfying way. People can present themselves in many ways and the lines that determine their presentation are thin and differ from culture and language. Goffman said that if you feel that the image you have of yourself is not presented in a correct way in conversation people tend to withdraw the attention from the conversation to themselves to correct the image.

Another thing is that all the respondents felt that the Spanish students had prejudices about the Erasmus people. Some of the prejudices, they admitted, were more or less true, but they all told me about the importance of recognising the fact that not all Erasmus are alike.

"Yes, I have heard a lot from the friends of my roommate that we don't do nothing at the uni, and at the end we will get good marks, and that all the teachers makes specials for us. That we are having parties all the time and that everybody gets on to everyone and that we are very easy. That's all the things I have heard more than one time."⁶³

This could also be an explanation of why some of the Erasmus students felt misunderstood. Moreover, this could be the reason for why some of them wanted to make it clear that they did not belong to the Erasmus group.

4.8. Trying to Answer My Questions

It seems to me that both the Erasmus students and the Spanish students were aware of the two different groups. Every time I told an Erasmus or Spanish person about my thesis, they always agreed with me that a strong Erasmus group that distinguished itself from the Spanish students existed. Mostly people just talked about how the Erasmus group was different from the Spanish students' group. However, the Spanish student told me that the Spanish students were not

⁶³ Interview 3, 2004-04-29.

interested in the Erasmus. It took too much energy. The general opinion was that there existed a strong Erasmus group and that it distinguished itself from the Spanish students. Along with my studies, I became convinced that this was the case in general. The Erasmus people went to different bars and they hung around in big groups with only other Erasmus students at the cafeteria and schoolyard. Some of them never left the security of the Erasmus group, some of them had both worlds and some of them tried to break loose. However, they all acknowledged the fact that there existed a strong Erasmus group. They all met at the University the first few weeks in arrangements for the Erasmus students. Then some of them made a choice: not to continue in the group. Here comes a new series of questions: who made this choice and why? Was it because their habitus slowly adapted to the field during the period they stayed? Maybe because they had the option to live with Spanish people and meet them on their level. Alternatively, was it because they finally learned the language and the culture so well that they were no longer afraid of losing face in the interaction? Or is it as simple as one respondent described it; after a while you notice that there are real people in the country and then you make a choice whether you want to get to know them or not? Although respondents 1 and 3 told me that they tried to break loose, they still had a couple of friends from their countries that they met at the beginning of the year. They explained this by saying that they did not feel that they could get Spanish friends at the University. They tried to break loose by showing their distance to the other Erasmus. Even in the interviews, they referred to the Erasmus student as a third person; they were not sharing the same thoughts and ways of interacting.

Then we have the question of **why** they distinguished themselves. You could explain this by the security that derives from being with people who have the same culture as you and speak the same language or have the same level of Spanish as you. I could also see it as a game of power, because the Erasmus students did not feel that they fitted in at the University with the other students so they formed their own groups where they did not feel alienated. They had even more reason to do so if it was true that the Spanish students did not take any notice of them. It was a way of showing their distance from the Spanish students; “well we don’t want to be with you anyway!” In this group, there only existed the rules of the Erasmus students and you did not have to face the fear of losing face. This did not necessarily mean that they **wanted** to distinguish themselves. If you do not feel that you can fit in you form groups of friends to protect yourself. Then you distinguish yourself from the others, and because you do that, the others do not feel that you need or want to be a part of their group. It goes both ways and it is difficult to see where it started. It may have begun with the activities organised by the University exclusively for the Erasmus students. When you do not know anybody, you happily accept all friendship. Because the first ones you meet are

other Erasmus students, they naturally become your group. Moreover, when you are in your group the Spanish students see that and then they take it for granted that you already have your life and your friends and because of that, they do not invite you to do things. Moreover, because the Spanish students did not invite you to do things you felt alienated from them and you kept to your groups stronger than ever. This meant that the Erasmus students did not have a choice, if they were not willing to put themselves totally out there in the unknown from the beginning. It could also be the fact that the Erasmus did not feel that they had anything in common with the Spanish students, as respondent 2 told us.

So how did the Erasmus students distinguish themselves? The Erasmus students thought that the common prejudices from the Spanish students about the Erasmus students were that they did not do anything in school, they did not speak Spanish between themselves and they partied all the time. Both the Spanish students and the Erasmus students partied; it is a common thing to do if you are a student. Therefore, this is probably not determining the differentiation between the groups. The Spanish students told me that the Erasmus invited everybody to their parties. The bars are also different; the Erasmus people went to a more “international” bar as described earlier. Were the Spanish students offended that the Erasmus students did not seem interested in their country and their bars? Alternatively, the Spanish students offended the Erasmus students by not taking any notice of them. On the other hand, maybe the Spanish students did not like the fact that the teachers made it easier for the Erasmus students in school. Alternatively, the Erasmus felt uncomfortable with the fact that they got special treatment. However, it was a fact that the Erasmus student did not go all together in one class, as the Erasmus student could choose what courses they liked at the University. This meant that they might go to seven different classes with different people in each. Maybe it was not so strange that the Spanish students did not know a person that only showed up one hour every week as well as their other classmates with whom they went from nine to five everyday. This made the Erasmus students different and that complicated the integration of the students. We should also have in mind that Bilbao was not the typical University Town where people from all over the country come to study. This meant that the Spanish students came from the city and normally lived with their parents, which did not make them look for new friends or bars in the area. At the same time, the respondent’s sisters had been abroad to bigger university towns, Copenhagen and Salamanca, and there they experienced that the situation of the Erasmus students was the same.

What it all comes down to is that it is not very likely that a person that goes abroad for a semester as an Erasmus will be integrated. The Spanish students think this person already has a group and because of that, they are not interested. This transmits to the Erasmus student and it is

probably true that the person belongs to a group formed the first days he or she arrived, at the Erasmus meetings. So, should we stop the Erasmus meeting at the beginning? No, this is maybe not a good idea if you do not put something else there to fill the gap. The Erasmus students arrive in Bilbao alone, they need friends and to feel that they belong. An alternative is to live with Spanish people, because this forces you to interact with your roommates. However, even a roommate is not enough, since integration in to Spanish culture will be dependent on how well you get along. To go to a class every day is another alternative, but this has other implications. All the European universities have different demands on their students and to be able to choose your courses freely is one of the most important items of the program.

7. Conclusion

Most of the Erasmus students hung out together in big, mostly national groups. They went to different bars and did not integrate themselves with the Spanish students at the school. Both sides knew this fact, the Spanish and the Erasmus. Although the reason **why** was more complicated, there seemed to be a dialectic relationship between the two groups where they both constrained the rules. On the question, whether they Erasmus students **wanted** to distinguish themselves I would answer that it differed from person to person. If an Erasmus student wanted to break loose, she or he had to make an effort. The Erasmus group gave the students security and breaking loose from that was not always easy.

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Interviews

Interview 1: (2004-03-26) Interview with Erasmus student in Spanish, female, nationality French, the interview was done in a cafeteria in Deusto, Bilbao, Spain, tape and transcription of the interview exist in the hand of the author.

Interview 2: (2004-04-28) Interview with Erasmus student in English, female, Nationality British, the interview was done in a classroom at the University of Duesto, Bilbao, Spain, tape and transcription of the interview exist in the hand of the author.

Interview 3: (2004-04-29) Interview with Erasmus student in English, female, Nationality Austrian, the interview was done in a classroom at the University of Duesto, Bilbao, Spain, tape and transcription of the interview exist in the hand of the author.

Interview 4: (2004-05-04) Interview with a Spanish student in Spanish, male, the interview was done in a classroom at the University of Duesto, Bilbao, Spain, tape and transcription of the interview exist in the hand of the author.

Observations

Observations have been done at the University of Duestos intensive courses in Spanish and in the city of Bilbao, between 22-01-2004 and 30-05-2004, in Spain. For more information about the University of Duesto and the intensive courses see “International Relations” at webpage: <http://www.relint.duesto.es/rel/ingles/index.asp>.

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