"Hi, and where do you come from?"

An auto-ethnography on social relations within an Erasmus setting

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Introduction

In 1988 the Erasmus-program was launched by the European Commission, enabling over 9 million students to have spent one or two semesters of their university years in a foreign institution since then. 'Erasmus' has become a meaningful term that came to signify many experiences, many friendships and many love relations that, according to rumours EC President Jean-Claude Juncker has quoted, have led to the birth of some million babies[1]. Erasmus-experiences are probably unique for all individuals that lived through one. As an organized setting, however, Erasmus does have some elements that constitute a common core to these experiences. By definition, Erasmus-exchanges are temporal. Students go on an exchange for one or two semester. Typically they arrive in a new and unknown environment, sometimes not speaking the local language. Consequently they have no initial social network to rely on. Often there is, however, a big community of students in the same situation, leading to what is often spoken about as the '*Erasmus-bubble*'. Krakow, for example, received some 2.000 Erasmus-students in the summer semester of 2018 alone. Being released of the obligations and commitments in their home town and often taking an – academically speaking – 'easy' semester, Erasmus-students generally have a relatively large amount of free time. All these characteristics have a profound impact on how social relations are formed within the Erasmus-setting. It should be noted that durable social relations are mainly formed with other Erasmus-students. Some Erasmus-students do seek to integrate in local friend groups, some with more success than others. In genera this seems to be rather the exception, certainly when students don't speak the local language.

As an Erasmus-student spending a semester at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, I carried out an auto-ethnographic account on how social relations are formed within the organized setting of an Erasmus-exchange.

Research question

Social relations are everywhere. As soon as you enter in a social interaction with another person, one could speak of a social relation being formed. Greeting your neighbour on the stairs, buying a bread in the bakery, smiling or even choosing not to smile to the old lady in the tram all lead to the formation of some kind of social relation. Studying all the social relations I engage in during my Erasmus-experience would lead me to an array of information way beyond the scope of this research. Some narrowed-down conceptualisation is needed. This research is going to look into social relations with a durable, chosen and personal character. With 'durable' I mean to say, extending to a longer term, transcending a one-time contact. The social relation I form with a person I engage in a one-time conversation with in a bar thus falls out of scope. A chosen social relation is one I voluntarily engage in. The social relation with my neighbour or my teacher does not qualify to such a criterium, as long as it does not surpass the sole dimension of being neighbours or having a teacher-student dynamic. Personal, finally, means that the person I engage with in a social relation is not substitutable and that our relation is defined by our

personalities. If I go to buy a bread in a bakery, it makes no difference to me who I'm being served by. The person behind the cash desk can be this person one time and another person another time. To avoid long phrasing and simplify the use of terms, 'durable, chosen and personal relations' can be said to be contained by the term of 'friendships' – a term that is greatly subjective and has no universal meaning really, but that is apt to cover the subject of this study.

When starting to contemplate about this study, I mapped out the network of friendships I had developed in my Erasmus-semester. The first question that came up my mind was: how are my friendships in Erasmus like? Answering this question seemed to presuppose the question what these friendships are based upon? This question, in turn, led me to the questions: (1) how did these friendships come to be? and (2) how did these friendships evolve over the semester? One can notice that the question of interest quickly evolved from a synchronic picture, looking to a cross-section of my friend network at a certain point of time, to a diachronic one, looking at the origin and dynamics of friendships over time. Out of these subquestions arises the research question: *how are friendship relations formed within the setting of Erasmus?*

Methodology

This study provides an auto-ethnographic account on social relations formed within an Erasmus-setting. 'Auto' meaning 'self' and 'ethno' meaning 'culture', Sparkes (2000) defines auto-ethnography as *"highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending the sociological understanding"*[2]. Hence, I will attempt to draw on my personal accounts and reflections to explore my experiences in order to reach a certain understanding of the formation of social relations in Erasmus.

Auto-ethnography is a relatively recent and still marginal form of ethnographic methodology. Both its unique potential and its shortcomings arise from the extreme form of subjectivity it implies. At the onset of this study, this method was quite novel to me as well and it took me some contemplation to realize its potentiality. The use of personalized accounts to learn about a social setting is something that is widely used, however, in areas beyond the academic. When Tupac Shakur, for example, rapped about himself in his revealingly-titled album *All eyez on me*, the meaning transcends the individual of Tupac and gives a unique account upon the social setting in which the rapper found himself, the gangsta-lifestyle in which he engaged and the particularized meanings he attributed to his surroundings. Likewise auto-ethnography, being based on first-hand and self-reflexive accounts, is able to provide unique and deep insights into a social setting which other methodologies such as participant-observation or interviews can only touch upon.

In order for auto-ethnography to reach its full potential and perhaps even for it to be of any use, such accounts must embrace a far-reaching reflexivity on the subjective position of the researcher. Meanings,

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whether attributed by a researcher or a participant of a study, are always constructed and social, as they are rooted in the social framework of reference of the person attributing them. Reflexivity is always needed to take in account the influence of the researcher's subjectivity on the analysis she or he produces. When researcher and participant are separate persons, the researcher is in the ability to bring in account the subjectivity of the participants narrative and lay it out on a theoretical framework. When researcher and participant are one and the same, and when the study depends exactly on the researcher extracting information out of his role as participant, this ability is complicated and depends on the researcher being able to otherize himself and to deconstruct his own subjectivity by tracing back its social embeddedness. Reflexivity, then, enables the researcher to problematize his taken-for-granteds and put the meanings he attributes in her or his personalized accounts in perspective. In producing the forthcoming analysis, I should take in account my social embeddedness as a 20-year old, male cisgender sociology student, raised in a Belgian middle-class family. More directly relevant in the present study is the fact I have had a study-abroad experience of two years in the past, where I arrived in an unknown social environment without speaking the language and while dealing with similar challenges in the attempt to establish friendships.

As every methodology, auto-ethnography implies some specific ethical issues. Foremost important is that auto-ethnography necessitates the self-exposure of the researcher. The researcher is required to reveal his innermost thoughts and private reflections upon his experiences. To put these in an analytical framework can be confronting to researcher himself. Exposing his inner-thoughts can also have an impact on how the researcher is looked upon and his relation with members of his audience. In the case of this study, I felt a certain unease and embarrassment exposing my reflections on something as seemingly trivial and often taken-for-granted as establishing friendships. How will my classmates look upon me talking about how I found friends, I wondered. Coupling back to reflexivity, the consideration of how the audience will look upon the researcher is another issue that should be taken into account, as it may lead the researcher to carry out impression management. Even if the researcher consciously tries to neutralize this disposition to frame her or his appearance, her of his concern about the image conveyed to the audience might, largely unconsciously, distort the account she or he presents. Furthermore, as has been stipulated before, auto-ethnography transcends the individual and gives an insight to the social setting of the researcher, thereby exposing her or his social environment which may not even be aware of the research. In the specific case of this study, some people might very much not like what I write, without their consent, about our social relation here and, if they were to read it, it might have a negative impact on our relation. This ethical issue already became apparent when I was talking to a friend about doing this ethnographic study and when she asked, in a combination of curiosity and what seemed a certain unease, what it is I discuss about my relation with her. Anonymizing members of my social environment is an indispensable, but perhaps unsatisfactory step in dealing with this ethical challenge.

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Moving beyond the reflexivity and ethical issues of the method used, auto-ethnography has several potential sources at its disposal to collect data. In this study, a combination of memory, digital archives and self-observation was used. Because of its depth, its easy availability and its almost endless volume, I rely predominantly on my memory to extract information. Using existing friendship ties as starting point, I have tried to recall episodes that I deemed significant for the formation of these ties. It should be noted that memories do not only reflect on past episodes. A memory implies a re-*construction* of a past episode and as such it is not only rooted in the past but also in a current state of mind. Consequently, there is no guarantee that a memory depicts the reflections one had at the time of the past episode, let alone the social reality of that episode. That is not to say that memory does not have its own merits as method of data-collection. How a past episode is anecdotically reconstructed at a certain point of time is influenced by some, often unconscious, intuitions and feelings that the author of that memory has towards that episode. Using memory as a method of data-collection thus allows me as a researcher to comprise certain affectionate and emotional processes that are part of the formation of friendship ties and the reflection thereupon. The distorted reliability of memory as a means to grasp a past social reality does call for complementary methods of data-collection, however. This complementary method was found in the use of digital archives: mainly messages sent to friends and family outside my Erasmus-experience commenting on my social life in Erasmus, but also pictures and my online calendar. Messages allow me to draw on personal first-hand and real-time reflections on my social life. Here it should be noted that a certain distortion also finds place, because of the inevitable impression management vis à vis the recipient of the message. The most systematic method of data-collection used in this study is self-observation: real-time observation notes and reflections in the form of an ethnographic diary. I unfortunately only kept such self-observational notes in the last weeks of data-collection, however, which can be seen as a limitation of the study.

Data + analysis

The data-collection has resulted in an array of anecdotical reconstructions of episodes of, and some real-time and retrospective reflections on the formation of friendships ties. As an illustration, the extract bellow is a copy of the notes I drew upon recalling the formation of friendship ties during the first days of my Erasmus-semester.

> *"Before arriving to Krakow, I anticipated the effort it would take me to establish my first social contacts and laid out some possible scenarios in my mind. I had heard from friends back home of the events organized for Erasmus-students by ESN [Erasmus Student Network]. These events did not appeal to me at first. [...] My first days in Krakow were rather lonely. As I did not feel like attending the ESN events, I tried out several other ways of getting in touch with people. As such, I tried to get closer to my flatmate. After unsuccessfully having invited him to have dinner together or go for beers, it soon became apparent that he was not really interested in having a close relation. I wandered around in the city, went to coffeeshops and attended a concert, all with a silent hope of meeting people to hang out. Although I did enjoy the time on my own, these activities did not turn out to be successful in finding friends. On my third day here, I went to the*

university office for registration. This is where I first got to know someone. Waiting in the queue we started chatting and exchanged phone-numbers so we could go out together at night. Later that day I decided to give in to the ESN-events. A city game was being organized that afternoon. I skipped the city game but did go to the pub meeting organized after that. The pub was completely full when I arrived. It was hard to make my way to the bar. People were mostly sitting and talking in little groups on the couches. I felt pretty uneasy as it seemed that most people had already gotten to know each other and it felt awkward to just join one of the little groups. I went to grab a beer at the bar as I did not really know how to behave. Gulping my beer, I noticed that there was a smoking room. Smoking has always been my favourite resort when not knowing how to behave in social situations. Rolling and smoking my cigarette, I eventually got to talk a guy who also seemed a bit lost. He introduced me to some other people he had been in a group for the city game with. [...] Later at night I met up with these people and the guy I had met in the university in a potluck organized by ESN, and had a great and a bit of a crazy night out. They are still amongst my closest friends here." (23.05)

Several dimension of the formation of social relations already emerge out of this little extract. First of all, there are several possible settings where social relations can be established: at a coffeehouse, concerts, ESN-events, the street, a flat… As is apparent in the extract, my presence in such settings often ha a strategical aspect. I went to a certain place as a means to come in contact with others. Meeting people can also be more coincidental, however. Some of my closer friends I have randomly met on the street. Strategies can also include behaviour beyond the presence at a certain setting. Moreover, they can be at a more or lesser extent conscious or unconscious. My move to go smoke a cigarette was probably not something that resulted directly from a consideration that that would smoothen social interaction, but did partially arise as a way of coping with the social awkwardness I felt. *Table 1.* lists a non-exhaustive series of occasions of encounter which were important for the formation and development of friendship ties throughout the semester.

Table 1: Occasions of encounter: strategies and settings

- Sharing a house
- Externally organized events
  - Directed to Erasmus or expat population (ESN events)
  - Explicitly open for expats
  - Not explicitly directed to foreigners
- Classes
- Self-organized activities such as houseparties, evenings in a pub, museum visits, trips…
- Encounters in public space
- Common consumption of food, alcohol, cigarettes…

What also emerges out of this extract is a particular motivational mindset that incited me to engage in certain occasions of encounter. As written in the extract, "*my first days in Krakow were rather lonely*". Loneliness, of course, is a subjective feeling that comes up when one is or feels alone against his or her preference. The fact that I felt lonely these days thus indicates the need I felt to have social contact. As is apparent in the extract, a profound element of my first days in Krakow was the concern to establish social relations as a goal in itself. This motivational mindset can be seen in comparison to other motivations I claim to discern throughout the semester. Although the need for social contact has been a

leitmotif throughout the semester, it eventually diminished in importance and was joined by other interests I sought to achieve through the pursuit social relations such as the desire to do activities I enjoy. *Table 2.* shows different motives for engaging in social relations throughout the semester. Naturally these motivations always co-existed and it is even likely that they were all present at all times, although in different and changing intensities.

Table 2: Motivations

• Need for social contact • To do activities together and pursue common interests • To learn from each other • As a means to network • To sustain contact after-Erasmus

The motivations and occasions of encounter listed above evolve over time throughout the semester in such way that certain patterns can be discerned. These patterns can be visualized by the formulation of different phases in the formation of social relations during my Erasmus-term. One has to keep in mind, of course, that these phases are *idealtypes* in the sense that Weber has explained them. They are theoretical constructions which are formed through the subjective abstraction of social reality in order to enable the researcher to talk about that reality in analytical terms. The phases described below come to being by discerning the most essential characteristics of categorically different part of the formation of social relations. In contrast to what the numbering might misleadingly suggest, the social realities that these idealtypes attempt to illustrate have always exist in mixed form and are manifest at different, not always consecutive points in time. *Table 3.* provides an overview of these idealtypical phases, which are clarified below.

Table 3: Idealtypical phases

Phase	Setting	Motivation	Content	Context
Phase 1	Organized events	Need of social contact As a means to 'network'	Superficial talk	Lack of social network
Phase 2	Organized events Self-organized activities	Need for friendship Doing activities together	More personal and deeper relations	Initial friend group
Phase 3	Increasingly self-organized activities 'Networking events' Trips Interest-based activities	Pursuit of genuine friendships Pursuing common interests	In depth friendships: based on and in pursuit of common interests	Differentiation + integration of friend groups
Phase 4	Self-organized activities Trips Interest-based activities + 'last'/'goodbye' events	Moving on Keeping in touch	Sense of 'a death foretold' Projection of friendship to after-Erasmus	Approaching end of semester

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Phase 1: Superficial talk

As the extract presented earlier illustrated, my first days in Krakow were characterised by the concern of making *any* social contacts. This concern originated from a lack of social network and the need for social contact. The need of social contact expressed itself in the pursuit of social relations, both as a goal in itself, i.e. in order not to be alone, and as way of 'networking'. During this phase, encounters predominantly took place in organized events such as the parties organized by the student network. As the message I sent to a friend back home shows, these settings are an obvious space of encounter and greatly apt for the purpose of making initial social contacts, gathering a large amount of people finding themselves in the situation of lacking a social network.

> -*"Quite a hang-over. I'm good, things are rolling well. **Cool people,** nice places"*
> -*"Going out already? With people from your university or what?"*
> -*"That's **what orientation week is for** right. Yep, **Erasmus students"***
> (Message to friend, 20/2)

Initial contacts consist mainly of superficial talk and conversation-starters. At one of the ESN-parties in the first week, someone I had been talking with jokingly suggested that I should carry out a sociological study on the almost standardized set of questions people were asking each other on these occasions. Indeed, most of my initial contacts with people didn't surpass basic questions as "What is your name?", "Where do you come from?", "What do you study?", "When did you arrive?", etc. Besides these 'standard' questions, conversations generally cover obvious topics, springing from easily deducible and attributed characteristics. Looking back, it is remarkable how many of the conversations I had in the first weeks were about the bike I had bought the first day and was riding around the city with. The disproportional occurrence of these 'bike-conversations' is explainable by the inclination of people to seek easy cues that could serve as conversation-starter. Besides superficial talks and perhaps notorious for the reputation of Erasmus studies, the common consumption of alcohol constitutes a large and significant element in the formation of first social relations. Although this phase was predominant in the beginning of my semester, it remained present – it be less manifestly – at other points of time in the semester as well.

Phase 2: Consolidation of friend groups

A phase that generally followed episodes of superficial talk and initial contact is the consolidation of friend groups. Here contacts start losing their superficial layer and approach some depth and personal dimensions. Organized events, but no longer limited to those organized by ESN or exclusively aimed at expats, still form a good part of the settings of encounter. However, increasingly self-organized activities take over the great bulk of occasions of encounter, including evenings in pubs, cinema and museum visits, daytrips in or near Krakow, travels to nearby cities, etc. Motivations behind investments in this kind of friendship formation include still a need for social contact. The kind of social contact that is longed for goes beyond the contact in the first phase, however. Superficial contact no longer suffices.

What is looked for is a more durable and personal social relation – a friendship we might say. The distinctness of this phase in contrast with the former was illustrated by a misunderstanding and minor dispute that arose around who was joining to a trip. One of my friends took offense in not being explicitly invited to join and had the feeling of being left-out. As friend groups start to consolidate, it becomes important to feel part of such groups and claims are made on specific friendships. Nevertheless, although friendships reach a personal level, they are still fragile and some seem to lack a deeper base, as the message below illustrates.

> *"Went to Wroclaw, not Warsaw. Cute town, bit smaller than Krakow, with **some friends from university here. Not necessarily all my type of people, but real fun anyway**"*
> (Message to brother, 14/03)

The notion that I was spending time with *"not necessarily all my type of people"* is something that a friend visiting me in the first month remarked as well. Having 'atypical' friendships seems characteristic of both phase 1 and 2.

Phase 3: Differentiation and broadening of friend networks

The area between phase 2 and phase 3 can be illustrated by this message I sent to a friend:

> *"I did find some **nice friends to hang around with, but I don't want to limit myself to them so early in the semester**."*
> (Message to friend, 21/03)

Where in phase 2 a temporary consolidation of friend groups finds place, in phase 3 friend networks extend and differentiate. Mutually necessitating and being consecutive to each other, these two phases existed in interplay throughout most of the semester. The differentiation of friend networks partially arises out of the concern to have 'genuine' friendships in which I could stay true to myself. It thus can be seen in opposition to the 'atypical' friendships in earlier phases, which I associated with a feeling of phoniness and playing out an insincere role. The differentiation of friend groups in this phase means that priorly consolidated friend groups partially grow apart and some friendships thin out, while at the same time new friendships are made and others enhanced. This results in a sometimes seemingly compartmentalized social life consisting of hanging out in different 'clusters' of friends, as apparent in this message I sent to my brother.

> *"I'm **zigzagging between different friend groups, but happy to have found some new peeps**"*
> (Message to brother, 18/04)

Spending time with friends mainly takes place in self-organized activities, which were more directly based on my interests and preferences than in phase 2. At the same time, however, the newly consolidating clusters of friends do at times integrate with one another, largely on the basis of ties of the 'original' and loosening friend group and in settings which can be seen as 'networking' events: activities organized by one person or a small group of people and with 'open invitation. Examples are houseparties, potluck and picnics.

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Phase 4: 'Chronicle of a death foretold' + projection to the after-Erasmus

Phase 4 can be seen as a continuation of phase 3 with the singly difference that the end of the Erasmus-semester and thus of friendships ties as they have been, overshadows social hang-outs. I noticed two, seemingly contradictory inclinations in my way of dealing with this approaching end. On one hand, the approaching end seemed as a "*death foretold*", a metaphor borrowed from the theme of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novella[3]. That novella tells the story of the murder on Santiago Nasar by two brothers for insulting their family honour by having slept with their sister. The narrator explores the seeming contradiction of how, as the news of the brothers' plan quickly spreads around town, the murder is foreseen, yet not prevented. Several reasons appear for the fact that people do not warn the victim. They assume he has been warned already, don't take the plan seriously, have their mind stuck onto other things, believe the murder is inevitable, don't think it is any of their business or believe the killing to be legitimate or desirable. The story presents a mixture of urgency, as the day proceeds and less time is left to prevent the murder, and fatality, the predicted murder approaching steadily. Partially my attitude towards the end of the semester and consequently of my friendships in their current form resembles the attitude of the villagers towards the murder. The 'foretold' end of many of my friendships seems inevitable, not absolutely objectionable and as a logical outcome of how things unfold. Even if I'd maybe rather have had it otherwise, I accept it, behave passively towards and watch it coming. So far the fatality aspect. The air of urgency hanging around, combined with the embracing of the end of the semester, shows in the many 'last-time' and goodbye events such as a "picnic n cry", a "farewell, Krakow" party and a "rooftop farewell gala". Illustrative is this extract from a Facebook event description:

> "Hello, guys! This is the week of saying goodbye to this beautiful city, so I am also throwing a little party to see everyone at least one more time." (15/05)

On the other hand are some attempts to project friendships onto the after-Erasmus life. These efforts include ways of trying to 'extend the semester' by planning trips with friends right after leaving Krakow, and the making of (mostly vague) plans to meet up after the semester or keep in contact. The seemingly contradictory inclinations to on the one hand extend friendships beyond the end of the semester and on the other embrace the end of the semester as the end of the friendships spring from the complementary motivations to move on and at the same time keep in touch.

Conclusion

Based on my experiences during my Erasmus-semester in Krakow, I have attempted to formulate some dimensions of the friendship formation within an Erasmus setting. As has been shown in this study, different motivations and occasions of encounter for the formation of friendship ties manifested throughout my Erasmus-semester. I argued that these had a pattern-like dynamic and have proposed idealtypical phases in order to provide an analytical grasp of the development of friendship ties in this particular setting. I hope that these idealtypical phases can lend themselves to comparison with

friendship formation in other settings or in a similar setting but from other perspectives. Furthermore this study might have succeeded in giving some insights into an Erasmus setting and providing some understanding on the impacts of its specificity on social relations. Finally this study has been largely an exploration of the auto-ethnographical method, which it tried to exploit to its limits in answering its research question.

In evaluating this study, it must be taken into account that the study has focused on a diachronic picture of friendship formation rather than on a synchronic picture and the content of friendship ties. By concentrating on development and change over time, the richness of a synchronic picture might have been overlooked. A further challenge this study might not have been able to fully overcome is the issue of the (over)rationalisation of friendship formation, leading to some affectionate and emotional reductionism. Lastly this study has based itself mainly on memory and to a lesser extent on messages as a method of data-collection. Although memory certainly has its virtues as a way of collecting data, it does not have the same systematicity that self-observation has and allows a degree of selectivity-bias, by mainly looking into those social relations that seem relevant at the time of recalling memories.

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[1] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-students-babies/a-million-euro-babies-eu-fetes-30-years-of-student-exchanges-idUSKBN1941PX, retrieved on 8th June 2018.

[2] Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action. *Sociology of sport journal*, *17*(1), p. 21.

[3] Márquez, G. G. (2014). *Chronicle of a death foretold*. Penguin UK.