

“AMERICA IS THE DREAM OF SO MANY THINGS”

Images and experiences of German speaking au pairs in the United States

Abstract

The United States has long been an attractive destination for travellers, as well as long- and short-term migrants, such as students, seasonal workers, or au pairs. In a qualitative longitudinal study of German and Austrian au pairs, I have tried to analyse the image they have of the receiving country, how these images change over time and what they have in common. Using Moscovici's concept of figurative kernel, I suggest that all images share the 'grandness' as an underlying, historically stable, higher-order unit of thought. Positive aspects of this grandness are manifested in the American landmarks of 'big shape' and negative aspects concern assertions like America's 'great power claims'.

Keywords

au pair • the United States • cultural norms • short-term migration • qualitative study

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'I always wanted to see America'¹. This sentence is used often when future au pairs from Germany and Austria are asked why they participated in the United States' au pair programme. Almost all of the 24 young people who took part in my qualitative longitudinal study, which started in 2006, stated the cultural experience to be their primary motivation to take part in the American au pair programme (Geserick 2012). They were rather precise in describing the images they have of the United States, most of them stemming from the American TV shows and movies. They wanted to experience what they had seen in these images, or test if they proved true in reality: Luci² 'always wanted to once see America' because 'it is simply the dream of so many things'. Emma wanted to 'discover this vastness of land', and Carmen wanted to know 'whether there really is a prototype of "the American"' (person). As the interviewees described their expectations rather extensively and emotionally, it seemed promising to take a closer analytical look. I set out to identify and name the elements that construct the images the au pairs have of the United States before they migrate and how these images will transform into experiences while they are living there.

The questions guiding the research were:

- How do the images relate to each other content-wise? What do they have in common?
- In the biographical perspective, do they change during the stay?
- How do these images fit into the historical context?

As the study was of qualitative-explorative design, it followed the understanding of Grounded theory, as described by Glaser & Strauss

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in 1967. Accordingly, the images and the connected assumptions I am going to present are those that emerged during the fieldwork. Later, I will link them to previous research in other disciplines that have investigated images of the American culture.

Au pairing in the United States

In the United States, the law defines an au pair as a foreign national aged between 18 and 26 years who will take care of the host family's children aged between 3 months and 12 years and carry out light housework. The au pairs are granted a visa for one year; an extension for 6, 9 or 12 months is possible. There is a maximum of 45 working hours per week and 10 hours per day, a workload noticeably longer than in European au pair hosting countries. Also, unlike many other countries (e.g., the UK or Australia), the only legal way to become an au pair in the United States is to participate in the official au pair programme, which is strictly regulated.

The applicants are required to be secondary school graduates, and while in the U.S., they are legally required 'to pursue not less than six semester hours of academic credit or its equivalent, during their year of programme participation' (Code of Federal Regulations CFR 22, § 62.31a). This requirement makes them 'exchange students'. By defining the au pair as a participant of a cultural exchange who lives in a host family, and not as a migrant worker or nanny, the U.S. law follows a political strategy to provide low cost childcare to American families (Yodanis and Lauer 2005). In stressing the cultural exchange component of au pairing, the U.S. government also implicitly suggests

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that the host families – who often belong to the well-educated and economic elite – do not live with an ‘ordinary’ childcarer, but with an assumingly well-educated ‘exchange student’, i.e. the au pair appears to be a social peer, somebody whose sociodemographic background is similar to theirs (Geserick 2015: 222). However, the USA attracts both ‘traditional’ au pairs who have come from Western Europe for decades now, and since a legal modification in 1997, the so-called ‘new’ au pairs. They come from the Global South, and might use the au pair scheme to pursue migration strategies (Aguilar Pérez 2015: 205; Orthofer 2009: 156f.). The legal status of au pairs entering the USA is that of ‘non-immigrant’ foreigners. Yet, as other authors have suggested, their experience resembles that of ‘migrant domestic workers, situated in an immigrant context’ (Aguilar Pérez 2015: 207). They are not just visiting but actively take part, i.e. work for U.S. American families.

Traditional au pairs, traditional migration dreams?

The traditional au pairs are those whose intercultural stay resembles that of the so-called ‘Welschlandjahr’ of au pairs in the 19th century, when daughters from wealthy families in the German-speaking part of Switzerland went to live with French-speaking families in order to gather intercultural knowledge and skills (Orthofer 2009). The present-day German-speaking au pairs belong to such a group of traditional au pairs; as well-educated young people from the Global North, they set out to spend a limited time abroad, the so-called ‘gap year’ (Arnett 2007). Accordingly, their dreams of America, that is, their hopes of what they wish to achieve in the receiving country are of a different fabric than those of au pairs from post-socialist countries (Sekeráková Búriková 2016, Rohde-Abuba 2016, and Tkach 2016). The so-called ‘new au pairs’ from the Global South, especially the Philippines (Dalgas 2016), strive for better economic status, class improvement and often follow long-term migration goals (e.g., Rohde 2014; Tkach 2014). While these so-called ‘Global Women’ (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003) often leave their own families behind and care ‘for other people’s children’ (Wright 1995) in order to send money back home, the pull factors for Western au pairs are areas of skills and identity; they interpret their temporary migration as a biographic episode, as a *rite de passage*, along which they see the chance for personal growth (Miller & Búriková 2010; Geserick 2012). The Western au pairs are typically very recent school graduates; they often leave home for the first time. They find themselves in a crucial phase of identity building and the developmental tasks of becoming self-determined and peer- and partner-oriented (Hurrelmann & Quenzel 2012). In an earlier study of the same group that I am going to present here, I found that it was not actually to work as an au pair, which is to care of children, but other factors, such as collecting language skills, venturing ‘into the foreign’ (pull factors) or temporarily leaving their familiar settings (push factor), that had been the decisive elements for the German and Austrian au pairs to choose that programme (Geserick 2012). Different from the Work & Travel Australia program, which has also become popular in recent years, au pairs still live in a protected environment (i.e. in a family), have their own permanent room (instead of backpacking) and don’t have to search for new jobs every once in a while. One might say they are the ‘bourgeois’ kind of temporary migrants, but this does *not* mean that they are less adventurous or safe from difficult situations. It should in fact be stressed that due to the ambiguous au pair regulations worldwide,

every au pair, regardless of their class, gender and ethnicity, is likely to struggle with power negotiations and exploitation in their daily work (Cox 2015: 235f.). Also, as young people, *all* of them (and not just the ‘traditional’ au pairs) are dealing with identity work, as Dalgas (2015) has shown.

Background: America, the beautiful?

The United States has long been an attractive destination for travellers, short- and long-term migrants. Especially after World War II, the Western Europeans have established a generally positive image of the American culture (Snow 1998; Pells 1997). The Europeans had come to respect and adapt America’s striving for freedom and prosperity, and the main ideas of the ‘American dream’. The idea of American leaders who, in times of the cold war, had aimed to influence the reshaping of post-war Europe, found fertile soil (Lundestad 2005, Pells 1997, Snow 1998). Political institutions and media, such as *Radio Free Europe* or the *United States Information Agency (USIA)*, had been set up for that specific reason, as Snow describes in her book, tellingly entitled ‘*Propaganda Inc., Selling America’s Culture to the World*’ (1998). Similarly, Pells describes how the American pop culture, with its huge American cars, Hollywood movies and Coca Cola, had landed in Europe, together with American soldiers (Pells 1997: 199ff.). Lagerkvist (2008: 344f.) speaks of a true magnetism that resulted in plentiful trips undertaken by European journalists and writers in the post-war years. One of them, Simone de Beauvoir, describes in her famous diary, *America day by day* (1952), how she experiences the ‘magic’ of New York City, while at the same time, she is suspicious of American capitalism and its ‘smell of money’ (Beauvoir 1999: 9f.). Even when the so-called cultural imperialism seems to have lost some of its moral grounds (as the cold war ended) and some institutions have been discontinued, America’s influence on European culture is still big (Lundestad 2005). In my data analysis, I set out to show that this ambiguity between glorification and resentment against the Americanisation of the Old World is still visible in the images European au pairs have today. Interestingly, the au pairs themselves did not so much speak of Germany and Austria as their reference countries for cultural differences, but rather referred to ‘Europe’ (‘I think we Germans are, well, better, we Europeans in general...’). They somewhat adapt a supranational identity of being ‘European’, probably a consequence from them changing continents.

It should also be noted that my data collection in 2006/07 was carried out during a distinctive time: There had been emerging new criticism of the American (political) culture, also from within the United States. Some examples are the widely acknowledged books and films by Michael Moore, who, in *Stupid White Men* (2002), satirically and forcefully criticizes the then active administration of George W. Bush.

Data and Method

The 24 au pairs under study were German and Austrian citizens who became au pairs in the United States in the summer of 2006. Their destinations included towns in California, Greater New York, and the Washington DC area. In a longitudinal field study, I interviewed each of them three times: first a short time before their departure; then I visited them in the United States, approximately 8 to 12 weeks after their arrival; and they were interviewed a third time when they had left the United States – either after 12 months, or

earlier, when problematic circumstances ended their stay earlier than planned. The interviews had a qualitative, semi-structured design, and lasted between one and three hours. Participants were recruited via a posting on a big online forum for German-speaking au pairs and via invitation letters sent out by different au pair agencies. They were selected from a large pool of interested au pairs, so that the study included experiences from diverse host parent settings (e.g., double income households, single dads, young or elder children) and from different geographical areas in both the home and destination country. Hence, they represent a variety of settings, which added to the quality of data. The German and Austrian au pairs were chosen because these groups has almost never been looked at, except in a pilot study prepared by Puckhaber, which is mentioned in a joint work but not presented with results (Hess & Puckhaber 2004). Also, I have lived in all three countries and had good access to the field.

Among the 24 au pairs interviewed, 23 were female. They were aged between 18 and 23 years. Only two of them had been to the United States before, in both cases for a short visit. Most of them were recent school graduates (secondary level, ISCED 3), two of them were university students, and the others already held qualified jobs. Before they left, most of them had concrete plans about what they would do after they returned back home, that is return to their jobs or get enrolled in a university programme. By 2007, only three of the 24 au pairs under study remained in the United States and two of them were about to get married.

Following a qualitative-explorative design, the cultural images and experiences of the au pairs under study stemmed from a qualitative theme analysis over all three interviews. These have been described along seven dimensions (see table 1) that emerged during the fieldwork. Relevant quotes were taken from narratives when, for example, during the first interview, the future au pairs elaborated on why they had chosen the United States as the destination country, or how, in the second and third interview, they elaborated on their experience of this culture as immigrants. Also, the context of 'American culture' emerged in other topics throughout the interviews, for example, when the interviewees used cultural differences as an explanation for problems they had with their host family. All the interviews were analysed using a theme-based content analysis that combines both interpersonal (horizontal) comparisons and case-oriented (vertical) hermeneutic analysis (Schorn 2000). The analytical assembling of codes was done by open coding as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967).

The above mentioned images are rooted in different contexts of the young peoples' biographies:

- a) **Non-au pair-related images:** Representations stemming from past experiences were collected during the interviewees' early teen years in the 1990s until 2006. English classes at school, American movies and sitcoms had a great impact.
- b) **Au pair-related images:** Short-term images were gathered in the context of planning the year abroad. These originated from information given by the au pair organisations (brochures, workshops), oral reports of former au pairs and online forums. Also, first contacts with the future host families were used by interviewees to describe their impressions and anticipations.

1 American landmarks

One category that emerged was that of famous landmarks, mostly in the shape of big cities, such as New York City, San Francisco, or other famous attractions, for example, the National parks. Images

Table 1. Dimensions and examples of codes

| Dimensions | Images |
|----------------------------|--|
| (1) American landmarks | Big cities and famous attractions |
| (2) American shapes | 'The vastness of land'; geographical and cultural diversity; 'oversized' lifestyle |
| (3) Food and eating habits | Unhealthy fast food; poor table manners; absence of family meals |
| (4) Interaction | 'Friendly', yet 'not honest' (politeness versus authenticity) |
| (5) Parenting | 'Spoiling of children'; 'exaggerated care'; parents too protective and controlling |
| (6) American society | Prude and religious America; arrogance/ignorance towards other cultures |
| (7) Images and reality | 'Dreamland America' becomes normal, profane, and a second home |

of this category had mostly been gathered through visual media such as movies, travel guides, and school books. The future au pairs wished to visit those places that seemed to comprise a strong emotional component and individual significance. One young woman said that she still remembers the cover of her English book displaying the World Trade Center. Since then, she had nurtured the wish to visit the place herself. She also mentioned the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree and her longing to see 'that tree' since watching the movie *Home alone* (1990):

Cathy: 'I simply have to go see New York during Christmas. To be in front of that tree! Since (seeing) Kevin (in) Home Alone (the movie), I do want to go there! Every time I see that on TV, I have to cry (laughs).' (1. Int. 02: 104)³

While the emotional appeal to visit those places was mostly driven by the individual 'longing', also, a socially imposed imperative to visit those famous landmarks became visible. For example, when the au pairs said there are 'big cities and stuff that one has to see', or when they mention the (ultimately imperative) book title 'Thousand places to see before you die'.

The dimension of American landmarks was also present in the follow-up interviews, while they were in America. Many au pairs said they felt overwhelmed by living near famous attractions, and this seemed to be a factor that could balance out a strenuous au pair job. Even those who quit and returned home early said that they were happy that at least their wish to 'once see America' has come true. When Luci left the United States after only three months, she said 'the best thing' about her stay 'was San Diego'. She described a Californian beach scene with 'Baywatch-guy', 'palm trees' and 'skimpy bikinis'. To her, this scene was 'typical American' and a 'cliché' that she 'really liked'.

It is notable that these symbols of American culture seemed rather stable, in both the perspective of the au pairs and in a historical sense. The landmarks that the au pairs longed to see beforehand were those that later impressed them the most. And they also matched those that have attracted generations of tourists and migrants to the United States. The au pairs felt contented after having seen the famous symbols; the imperative to travel there had been fulfilled – even when they were disappointed that their au pair experience ended early. On

her way back home, in the shuttle to the airport, Cathy saw the Statue of Liberty one last time and said to herself: 'Now I have seen this again, I am ready to fly home.' We may have even heard a slight bitterness or irony in her tone, but Cathy's statement illustrated what is true for most of the interviewees; even for those who left early, the dimensions of American landmarks lived up to the au pairs' expectations and was the one with the most positive content.

2 American shapes

'In America, everything is bigger!' The United States is famous for being referred to in superlatives. This was also how the au pairs describe their expectations and experiences. Very often, interviewees used the words 'big', 'huge' or 'rich in variety' to describe: (1) the variety of geographical areas within the country, (2) the plurality of ethnic groups, and (3) other American icons, such as 'big cars' and 'huge American wooden houses', which served as images.

Before the au pairs left for the United States, the connotation of American shapes was always positive. Also, once in the USA, they were fascinated by the 'extremes of nature' and enjoyed the cultural diversity. However, sometimes things were experienced as being *too* big, oversized. In her retrospective interview, Lana referred to large shopping malls with endless opening hours, and Luci gave the example of her host's daughter's party for her fifth birthday, with invited clowns and a huge tent. For her taste, that was planned in too big a manner ('for me, these dimensions were just over the top'). Some criticized the American lifestyle as being consumption-oriented, ostentatious and wasteful:

Toni: 'I have seen this in many American families. They go to McDonald's, and then the children get a hamburger, Chik'n Nuggets and two ice creams. They cannot eat all this, but it doesn't matter because they only like it like this, as they eat a little bit from everything. Such a waste of money!' (2. Int. 14: 306)

Even when quoted, Toni's criticism can be understood as a general dislike for wasting resources and a lack of 'green thinking' and something like a well-mannered modesty. Altogether, the examples show that, during the stay, the perception shifted from big dimensions of the country (including geography and cultural diversity) to an oversized, and hence, a criticized dimension of 'the' American lifestyle of an 'affluent society'.

3 Food and eating habits

Not surprisingly, as food is a very crucial part of one's daily life and culture, this topic was very prominent throughout the whole study period. This concerned both the daily diet and social aspects, such as eating habits and table manners. This topic was often raised when the soon-to-be au pairs are asked what changes they expected in their new American setting, or if they had any fears ('What do you believe to be the biggest change for you?' to which one au pair answered, 'To eat without a knife.'). Most food related images were negative expectations, most of all the fear of gaining weight because of American fast food.

The food topic was also significant once the au pairs arrived in the United States. How drastic the change of one's daily diet can be experienced becomes clear from Laura's quote. When asked if she was missing something from Germany, she listed food right after

her friends ('I am missing my friends of course and else only the German food. All tastes awful here'). The phrase 'Typical American' was referred to in quotes like 'every evening just pizza' and 'eating so much fast food'. Some truly suffered from the change in their usual diet. They lost weight (seldom!) or gained weight (more often!). Some of them tried to find strategies to escape their host family's meal plans by cooking for themselves. Also, the social aspect of eating habits was a topic discussed in the follow-up interviews. Three aspects were criticized the most: the American table manners ('we eat much more civilized in Germany'), the absence of family meals, and a non-ecological consumer behaviour ('we eat from paper plates most of the time. Such a waste! This is totally American!'). Taken together, the quotations from different points of time suggested that their experiences had met their expectations. This result can be illustrated through Toni's quote when she, after her return to Germany, says that, concerning food, 'The prejudices we Germans have about the Americans are true'.

4. Interaction

The category of interaction included statements that focussed on their communication and interaction with Americans, and communication and interaction between various Americans. The au pairs under study portrayed their impressions of a communication style that can best be described as 'friendly', yet 'not honest'. During the first interview series, they expressed expecting eagerness ('this immediate openness'), which some also used to describe their first telephone conversation with the American host families. On the other hand, the American 'how are you' politeness was often directly contrasted with their estimate that 'real friendships with Americans' would probably be 'hard to knit', and that seemingly open conversations would lack directness, and hence honesty – ingredients that would be necessary for closer relationships.

These images didn't change when the young people were in the country, and the polarity between authenticity and politeness was a constant theme. Differences only existed at an individual level, that is, in the accentuation of poles. In their later interviews, some au pairs focussed on phoniness and superficiality, whereas others referred to positive aspects like openness or willingness to help others. They said that 'the American mentality' was respectful in its communication style ('I feel appreciated as a person'). Others were disturbed by the flowery phrases of politeness or familiarity ('it is totally disturbing that everybody in America calls me honey. When I enter a store to buy a pair of pants, I don't need the salesperson, whom I am meeting for the first time in my life, to call me honey!').

5. Parenting

The topic of parenting was seldom referred to during the first interview series, but it gained in significance over time. Also, images and experiences that were narrated in the second and third interviews were mostly negative. Their choice of words showed that the young people were sometimes truly indignant about the 'typical American parenting style'. Words like 'cruel', 'awful' and 'incredible' indicated this. One aspect of the critique was the so-called 'spoiling of children'. This refers to both emotional reassurance (they can do everything) and materialistic attention (they have everything). Anna criticized that her host's 9-year-old daughter was always rewarded with a present after she completed her private teaching-session ('she

can choose a toy, no matter how much it costs'). Another aspect of spoiling referred to by the au pairs was when they said that the parents showed 'exaggerated care', which was rooted in the fear that something might happen to their children. They would show too big a 'protective instinct'. One example of parental 'overprotection' (as interpreted by the au pairs) was the practice of dropping and picking up the children by car in such a thought-out system, so that they don't walk even one metre alone by themselves without being watched and don't run into any risk of child abduction or other dangers. 'It is like a drive-through' or 'picking them up at McDrive', the interviewees said, slightly amused but also annoyed, as they were the ones driving them to school. Especially for hosts with older children, parental control was criticized. Finja found it strange that the 16-year-old son of her host parents was not allowed to have friends over. And Julia wondered why her host mother controlled her 8-year-old daughter's playlist on the MP3-player and observed a 'difference of mentality' between German and American parents, the latter showing a 'protective instinct', which was a little too big, compared to what she was used to.

6 American Society

Before they left for their short-term migration, the au pairs shared many thoughts about the American society as a community of values and norms, as it had been discussed specifically in the media during the early years of the new millennium. Many referred to Michael Moore as the central figure of this new criticism. Au pair Carmen said that she wanted to see by herself whether his books and documentaries were true and if 'there really is this prototype of an American', whom she described as 'apolitical and patriotic'. Almost all statements in this category had a slight or explicit negative connotation. The most critical statements in the first interview series included the image of an American foreign policy 'acting up' towards other nations, or a 'lack of general knowledge' among the Americans. Also, the 'lack of ecological thinking' is mentioned by a few, often combined with the image of 'waste'. Somewhat less negatively connoted are the images of a 'prude and religious America'. Also, the Americans were perceived as showing a form of patriotism that is not known in Germany or Austria. Obviously amused, but also a bit concerned, one interviewee shared her observation of an American girlfriend living in Germany. She owned a card game displaying the portraits of the Bush administration, governing at that time. Referring to the obvious cultural differences, she said, 'I mean, we would never use a card game displaying Angela Merkel'.

The interviews during and after their stay in the United States showed that the discussed topics were identical to the ones addressed before migration. In short illustrations, and sometimes garnished with ironic remarks, the au pairs said that their expectations of the American society seemed to have proven true, for example the lack of ecological thinking ('the Americans (would) rather go to war than that they (would) turn off the light switch'). Also, once in the United States, the au pairs needed to adjust themselves to these American values and norms that now shaped their daily lives. Disappointments and problems were caused, especially by what they called the 'prude America'. As the legal age is 21 in the United States, most au pairs were still minors by law. The 19 and 20 year olds who had already been allowed to consume alcohol in their home countries were now forbidden to do so, and could not enter clubs that served alcohol, a frustrating situation for most of them, even though they had been prepared for these different rules during an orientation week for au

pairs. Other age-related norms concerned sexuality, especially the commandment to not be sexually active before marriage. This norm was mostly a problem for those who had a partner overseas, who came to visit them, as they were often not allowed to sleep in the same room. Also, some au pairs had to follow a so-called curfew. Their host parents asked them to be back at a certain time when out at night, usually between 10 pm and 12 am during the week and later on the weekends. When comparing age-related norms, the au pairs detected a cultural difference of taboos. They made fun of the laws that allowed a young person to drive and own weapons at an early age, while alcohol and sexuality were considered to necessarily cause them harm.

Another challenge to the au pairs, concerning the general composure of the American society, was the 'lack of general knowledge'. While before their migration, the au pairs used neutral words to describe that expectation ('(the) Americans are certainly not famous for having good general knowledge'), they now felt personally affected when the people they met seemed to have only little knowledge about their home country, that is Germany and Austria. They spoke of a 'typical American ignorance' and 'arrogance' towards other cultures. Ben, for example, was annoyed by the question 'whether Hitler is still alive', and Cathy had been asked 'whether Germany is a city or a country'. Katharina concluded: 'The big-headed Americans – this prejudice has proven to be true somehow'.

7 Images and Reality

This last dimension of images and reality united the aspects of the previous ones and allowed for a broader analytical view. It collected the statements of au pairs who themselves had chosen to reflect their images on a meta-level and long-term perspective. During the first interview, they talked about their own expectations and tried to forecast how images could be fulfilled or destroyed when coming face-to-face with reality, that is when they would participate in the American culture only a few weeks later. The words 'dream' or 'American dream' and 'reality' were often used in this context. The 'American dream' had two meanings: first, there was the strong personal wish ('one's dream') to spend a good time in that country. Second, and more prominent was the collective meaning that united superlatives specific to that country, 'America, the beautiful', 'America, the superpower', and such, which the au pairs set out to test in reality. Some were, however, sceptic. One young woman believed that 'America to everyone is a little bit the land of dreams', but feared that this 'little dream bubble' might burst because 'reality is not like that what you would expect'.

Later, during or after their stay, some au pairs were disappointed. After only a few weeks in the United States, Ben said, it was 'not the dream country which (he) had always imagined'. His 'euphoria' had worn off by week two. This was connected to the au pair work, which, to him, was tougher than expected:

Ben: 'Now that I am here, it is simply America. Just an ordinary country, which happens to be situated on the other side of the world, with its own rules and culture. It is completely different than I had imagined it. It is less of this easygoing American lifestyle. But it is really tough work what I am doing here now.' (2. Int. 23: 232)

Ben's quote shows what was true for others too. The image of 'dreamland America' could not bear up against the normal and the mundane everyday life. 'When you see America on TV, you don't see the road holes', Ben further illustrated his thoughts.

There were also au pairs who made up for the fading of the 'land of dreams' with a new, positive, dimension. They found it endearing that America, ultimately, was 'just one country among many others'. Similar to a person you would have once fancied and fallen in love with, and who ultimately turns out to be just 'normal'. Also, America becomes mundane, but is still being loved – including its unpleasant characteristics. Laura, for example, praises the friendliness of the Americans, but adds with a smile that they would 'be a bit mean after all'. Also, Mara admitted that she used to rail about 'this American superficiality', but was saying this in an amused tone. One loves, one forgives. Connected to this was the feeling that America had become 'like a second home', a phrase used by many. Toni was one of them. Her quote illustrated how her biographic experiences had pushed her general hesitations about that country into the second place.

Int.: 'How about your image of the USA?

Toni: Oh, that has definitely changed a great deal. (...) It is not just a country anymore that I want to visit some time. But it has become something like my second home, I would definitely say. Because I have lived there for one year. I have laughed and cried there for one year. And I have made friends there. I have learnt a lot there. And I got a completely different view of things. It is more like a sense of home. Before, I have seen the USA to be a country that suppresses all other countries a bit. But now, this is somehow not so important anymore.' (3. Int. 14: 54ff.)

Some au pairs also said that they were not willing anymore to discuss the American culture with their German friends, who make fun of 'the crazy Americans', as Carmen put it. Carmen now defends that country where she had spent a meaningful year of her life. These examples showed that the cognitive representations about the American culture were superimposed by emotions of belonging there, that is, feeling like being a part of it. To some au pairs, the term 'America' had even become *synonymous* with their very own biographical migration experience. It had lost its abstract component of a collective term. In her interview, upon her returning to Germany, Carmen said: 'America definitely was one of the best decisions I have ever made'. In this regard, the 'American dream' had come true for those au pairs whose short-time migration had met the expectation of spending a rewarding time in that country.

“Grandness” as the figurative kernel

In order to synthesize the seven dimensions, we may ask what they all have in common. Here, Serge Moscovici's concept of the *figurative kernel* (1961) seems to be a valuable approach. It can also be described as the “central code” or the “central image” (Orfali 2002: 413). Moscovici (1961, 2011) defined social representations (or images) as a “network of concepts and symbols”, which also contained an imaginative element (2011: 454).

“(…) Everything in a social representation is ordered around a figurative kernel that in a sense ‘underlies’ all the images, notions or judgments that a group or society has generated over time.” (Moscovici 2011: 454)

For my research context of the American culture, I would assume that the figurative kernel is the *grandness* of the country. This theme recurs in the seven images, and it is also historically robust as it connects both the ambiguous images of post-war travellers such as Beauvoir in the 1950s and the images used in the critical documentaries of the early 2000s. The term *grandness* refers to a (per se neutral) 'grand nature' that is evaluated differently, according to the circumstances: 'The huge American landmarks are of great shape, the vastness of land is impressive, and the extensive roads of travel must not end.' In this, the au pairs' excitement matches the one of Beauvoir: 'What disconcerts me is that those movie sets I'd never really believed in are suddenly real' (1999: 12). But there is also a critique: 'They are great, the landmarks. But too cocky the American lifestyle appears sometimes', which means that, on an interaction level, the 'grandness' experienced may be inept. Especially the U.S. foreign policy and its values of freedom and prosperity, symbols of expansion, create negative images. America should 'cut the show-off', this was where the statements of the au pairs match with the political statements of the 'new' movies from Hollywood. Companies should adopt sustainable production methods (matching movie: *Food, Inc.*, 2008), they should accept the limitations of natural resources (*Gasland*, 2010), and realize that 'more' is not always 'better', such as when it comes to food (*Supersize Me*, 2004). We have seen the waste of food and uncontrolled consumption of fast food to be the dominant themes in the au pair interviews.

These results supported the previous research results from other disciplines. Like the au pairs have used the label 'superpower USA', and they had heard the Americans use it also – sometimes in an unpleasant way – the German media has been found to repeatedly portray the United States as the big global player 'number one' (Pettersson 2011: 40). However, Nolan (2005) has pointed out that anti-American tendencies in Germany are primarily linked to the American Foreign Policy and not to the culture as a whole. Also, he suggests that anti-American tendencies had 'never been more visible' than in the years between 2001 and 2003, when different convictions about a possible war in Iraq would provoke some open hostility between the German and American politicians (Nolan 2005: 115; Szabo 2004:43, Pettersson 2011). Presumably, this 'frosty atmosphere' can explain the extensive criticism of U.S. foreign policy by the young people under study, who were interviewed in the years following the Iraq war (2006–2007). Their opinions reflected the zeitgeist.

What changes over time?

The au pair's perspective changed over time. First, they described the culture of the destination country from a distance, then as participants, and finally in retrospect. For this mingling of stereotypes, expectations and experiences, Lagerkvist (2004, 2008) introduces the term *third space suspense*: The traveller, or short-term migrant, would suffer disappointments and dissonances, as media transmitted images might contradict with individual experiences. A mitigation process within the individual would then lift the knowledge onto a higher level (Lagerkvist 2008: 343). For the au pairs under study, I suggest that their mitigation process takes place in the verification and specification of what they have called 'the dreams of so many things'.

One dream that obviously came true was to visit or even live in places that were symbolic of the United States. Even for those who left early, the excitement to have lived in Manhattan or near a

Californian beach provided a great deal of satisfaction, the social imperative 'to have been there' had been fulfilled. This accords with the observations of Cox & Busch who found that the 'thrill of living in such an iconic space' (here: London) 'can hide the drudgery of au pairing' (Cox & Busch 2016). A possible explanation for the particular significance of cities, landmarks and landscapes might be the dominant role played by the visuals over other senses, when it comes to experiencing a culture (Lagerkvist 2008; Macnaghten & Urry 1998: 105; Lefebvre 1991). 'Although the journey obviously involved the whole body and the spectrum of senses (...), there is a primacy of the visual in sensing places', writes Lagerkvist (2008: 351).

But the data also showed that the process of establishing of cultural images involved more than just verifying visual cognitions. Once the au pair is actually living in the destination country, the social component gained in significance. As the young people spent their daily life in the most intimate social group of the society – the family, the au pair experience was one that fine-tuned ordinary prejudices and created new cultural images on the interaction level: America's 'Great Power claims' emerged in the communication with 'ignorant Americans' who had little knowledge of European countries, and as a childcare, the au pairs realized that there were differences between the American parenting style and that of their home country. But most of all, the image and experience of a 'prude America' caused an actual problem for the au pairs who, at this age, are especially peer- and partner-oriented, and strive to achieve independence. Hence they struggled with the age-related social norms that they had already overcome in their home countries. For example, not having the right to have male friends or boyfriends staying overnight, to have a 'curfew' and to be legally forbidden to consume alcohol are norms that put them in childlike role while, at the same time, they were expected to be responsible, grown-up childcare.

Also, as I have elaborated earlier, some au pairs witnessed the fading of the 'land of dreams', especially as it collides with a strenuous au pair job, and the profanity of everyday life. 'America' became 'normal', and was yet being loved – but not fancied anymore. Many au pairs used the expression for the USA to have become 'like a second home' to them. In saying so, they articulated a strong form of belonging to the new cultural context, as the term 'home' was usually limited to just one place. In this context, and also since I have compared their images with those of travellers in the 1950s, I should stress that the au pairs should *not* be seen as just tourists. Rather, they shared and shaped the everyday life of the American host families, especially as they were actively involved in the upbringing of children, an area where cultural norms were enacted and negotiated on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusion

The analysis provided has shed light on the images that young people from Germany and Austria had of the American culture and how these images changed once these au pairs started living there as short-term migrants. Seven dimensions emerged from the qualitative analysis. Often, their content was negative, especially concerning the topics of food and parenting, and also regarding the communication patterns (politeness versus honesty) or the concept of 'waste' which was referred to in the contexts, such as waste of energy, a consumption-oriented lifestyle, and a materialistic-oriented

parenting style. Positive statements were given mostly in reference to the typical landmarks, both prior and after the migration period in the United States. Using Moscovici's concept of figurative kernel, I have suggested that the contents of the images are connected by the term *grandness*, in both positive and negative connotations – the latter when it comes to the U.S. foreign policy and symbols of expansion.

From a longitudinal perspective, we saw that the au pairs' 'dreams of so many things' had come true especially for those who interpreted it in the sense of a meaningful biographical episode. Also, seeing or living near famous American landmarks had a big and positive influence on their personal judgment about whether their 'American dream' could be fulfilled. Finally, the fading of glamorous images ('now, it is just one country among many others') could often be compensated with strong emotional feelings towards 'America' which is now loved – but not fancied anymore. Negative images (similar to the unpleasant traits of character) were forgiven, and the au pairs defended 'America' against critical remarks made by friends back home. Some used 'America' as a synonym for their very own biographical experiences ('America was great'), and they didn't allow the negative images destroy that meaningful experience.

In reference to the question regarding how these images related with those of the famous post-war travellers, I have suggested that the contrast between fascination by landmarks and critical viewpoints towards American politics and Americanisation of the Old World to some degree replicates the ambiguity that has been described in the literature and research since long ago. As the related images seem historically quite robust, I suggest that the findings are still valid today, ten years after the data collection, and that they can be generalized for other European au pairs. Whether they are also true for other au pairs or domestic workers from the Global South needs to be further investigated. The findings contributed to the knowledge on which differences in cultural norms may provoke conflicts between the au pairs and their host family, and might help sensitising future au pairs in this regard.

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Notes

1. When the term 'America' (German: "Amerika") is used, the interviewees refer to the United States of America. Despite the geographical inadequateness, I will stick with the literal translation of their quotes.
2. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the interviewees themselves.
3. Original quotes are in German and have been translated into English for this paper.

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