Learning contexts of *the others*: Identity building processes in southern Europe

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Abstract

The frontier between the south of Spain and Portugal is established by the river Guadiana. Lying next to the sea, the cities of Ayamonte (Spain) and Vila Real de Santo António (Portugal) face each other on opposite banks of the river. The research that feeds into this paper is focused on these two cities. We study specifically how identity is built in this cross-border area. To do this, in a first phase of this study we organized eight focus group interviews. In the second phase of this research we conducted biographical interviews to deepen some of the analytic categories we were dealing with.

These results lead us to state that the territory, and the views that people hold on this territory, are still very important in identity building. This includes both culture and identity as strategic elements in the construction of both development and educational processes. Additionally, one has to ask where people learn the elements that determine these processes. The images of ourselves and the images of the other – that make up stereotypes of both the Spanish and the Portuguese – are built in what kind of contexts and through what types of educational processes? We will try to answer these questions

and, finally, provide some idea of the importance of adult education in these processes of identity building, and of the attempt to construct more fluid relationships between the southern Portuguese and Spanish.

Identity, sense of belonging and cross-border territories

The frontier between the south of Spain and Portugal is established by the river Guadiana. Lying next to the sea, the cities of Ayamonte, Spain, and Vila Real de Santo António (VRSA), Portugal, occupy opposite banks of the river. The research supporting this paper focuses on these two municipalities. We want to study specifically how identity is built in this cross-border area.

When examining neighbouring areas along a frontier, questions arise concerning the elements that give an identity and a sense of belonging to the citizens of each area and whether this identity and sense of belonging are shared among the citizens. An additional question immediately follows regarding the roots of identity, that is, to the extent that these roots relate to history, politics, culture, geography and social networks, among other areas. In this sense, interventions such as those involving the Interreg or other measures articulated at the Spain-Portugal border (Epson, 2007; The Parliament Magazine, 2007) could have an impact on identity construction and could be key factors in the formation of identities, similar to social networks (Morén, 2005) or family socialisation (Umana-Taylor, Bhanot & Shin, 2006). Moreover, identities and identifications are rooted in many factors (e.g. family, friends, neighbours, workmates) that are present in everyday life and that contribute to the dialogue between a person and his/her environment, which is nurtured both by a person's sense of self and by how others see him/her (Ricucci, 2005; Rodríguez, 2006; Newby & Dowling, 2007).

Several factors may affect how identities are constructed at the Spain-Portugal border. The construction of identities and identifications is a subjective process in which context plays an important role (Gaudet & Clément, 2005; Tsai, 2006). In this regard, sustaining programs during a time of cross-border cooperation demands attention. Identities and identifications are mutable and vary over time, so it is possible to design programs to be applied in the border area that affect the construction and reconstruction of identity, to the extent that these programs could provide facilities, amenities, and opportunities for people of different areas to interact with each other and therefore influence the identification process. At the same time, one person may feel a sense of belonging and identify in more than one way. This feeling of belonging to 'imagined communities' or 'political communities' (Anderson, 2006; Schnapper, 1994) can be fostered by institutions such as the European Union's Erasmus Programmes (which admittedly could also be the result of cross-border cooperation in our area). Additionally, in a global context, the sources that affect the construction of identity could extend beyond specific local areas, and individuals could be influenced by multiple contexts. It is therefore important to assess whether local or global parameters are more important for the construction of identity in the border region separately from observing the influence of region, border, and other elements that influence the construction of identity.

Moreover, many researchers have studied the link between identity and sense of belonging and have stressed its complexity (Garland & Chakraborti, 2006; Murtuja, 2006; Tsolidis & Pollard, 2009; Lam & Smith, 2009). Researchers have analysed the relationship between identity, belonging, cosmopolitism (Bhimji, 2008) and even citizenship (Moreno, 2008). Some works, such as Bhimji (2008), emphasise that we live in a global era in which it is more common to have a flexible and porous understanding of the nation-state, which in turn has faded in significance. In the computer age, people can both build memberships rooted in the state and giving meaning to reconfiguring memberships in the local context where they live.

A part of the recent literature, particularly in the field of migrations, highlights the complexity of the study of social and cultural identities (Esser, 2009; Jackson, 2009; Ueno, 2009), particularly their multifaceted nature and the notion that identities are not static but fluidly changing in the context of specific situations. For example, the identities of the children of immigrants are evidence that they do not necessarily adopt one identity over another but instead continually adapt and readapt themselves, sometimes out of necessity (Bodenhausen, 2010; Cara, 2010; Jackson, 2009; Brettell & Nibbs, 2009; Vermeij, van Duijn & Baerveldt, 2009). This observation may be useful as a working hypothesis regarding the identity construction that operates on both sides of the border. Thus, it may be possible to find multiple identities or hybrid identities in citizens in the Ayamonte-VRSA border area, and these identities maybe creative and innovative in the realm of the construction of identities. The adaptability of identities has been observed in individuals that, though not residing in a physical border region, were socialised in a symbolic border that separated their immigrant parents from the native population (origin vs. destination country). Similarly, these second-generation immigrants, residing on the edge of the southern border separating Spain and Portugal can be understood, in terms of the reconstruction of identities, as existing between two sociocultural worlds and they may create individual meanings and multiple or hybrid identities (Brettell & Nibbs, 2009; Cara, 2010; Tsolidis & Pollard, 2009; Vermeij, van Duijn & Baerveldt, 2009).

Markers of identity and belonging are related to nationality, citizenship, national spaces and, above all, language (Butcher, 2008; Cara, 2010), religion, and even participation in and membership of social networks (Lubbers, Molina & McCarty, 2007). The construction of identity and a sense of belonging are often connected to ideas and cultural experiences that are shared with others. Regarding language, Butcher (2008) argues that this connection creates a tension between cultural continuity and cultural change in different societies, and it can be used to create connections between belonging and identity, drawing boundaries between people. This connection, therefore, may be important to the processes of integrating and constructing a Euro-region. Language is thus construed as a key element in forming identity, differentiating one's self from others, setting boundaries between us and them, and reinforcing similarities between the inhabitants of two areas (Cara, 2010).

Having raised these issues, our paper analyses the role that these factors play in the sense of belonging to the border area encompassing south-western Spain and Portugal.

Objectives

In the preceding section, we described the complexity involved in the study of identities and identifications. One reason for this complexity is that identities and identifications change over the course of a person's life. We are interested in knowing if people living

in Ayamonte, Spain, and Vila Real de Santo António, Portugal, express 'local, regional, cross-border (Andalucía and Algarve) or European identities and identifications'.

Specifically, we want to study how identities are built in these two border municipalities, which have maintained contact for centuries, initially through the River Guadiana and more recently through the International Guadiana Bridge, which was built in 1991. Sassenberg and Matschke (2010) and Bodenhausen (2010) argue that exchange and social relations appear to mediate the construction of identity. Does this mediation effect also happen in the border area, or are people maintaining local identities? To what extent are identities important for the construction of a Euro-region?

Moreover, we are also interested in answering other questions: What kind of information is important for constructing identity in populations living in a cross-border area? How do people learn about others? These important questions must be viewed in the contemporary context of the growth and renewal of the European Union and, as we present in this text, how these new experiences produce new understandings. The diagram below shows some of the analytical issues in our research:
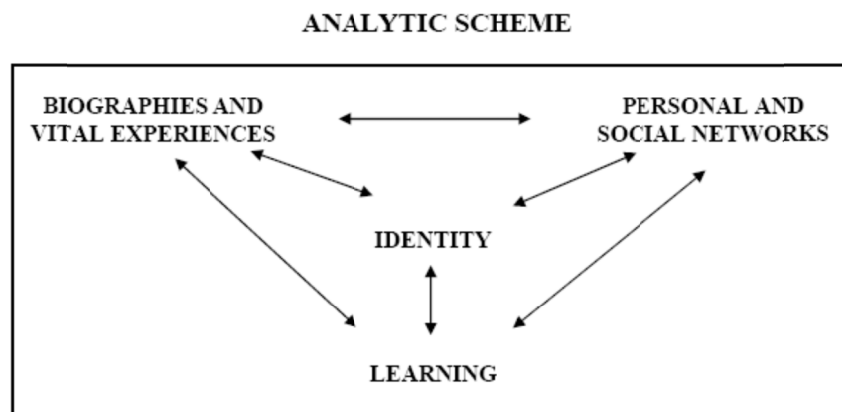

ANALYTIC SCHEME

Figure 1. Analytic scheme. Source: Authors.

Methodology and research techniques

This research was designed using a multi-method approach (Brewer & Hunter, 1989) and a triangulation of methods, techniques and results (Bryman, 1995; Pourtois & Desmet, 1992). The investigation utilised quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain primary data and to respond to the previously described research questions (i.e., identity, sense of belonging, and learning). In this section, we explain in some detail our methodological design and fieldwork procedures. To create a comparative analysis, the same methodological design was applied to both sides of the border, and the Portuguese and Spanish researchers simultaneously used differing methods in each country.

Focus groups
The focus groups were designed with the idea that the group dynamics represent more for research than individual contributions and can be designed with different levels of structure (Morgan, 2001). We ran four focus groups in VRSA and four focus groups in Ayamonte. The groups were composed of young adults from 13 to 24 years old, adults from 25 to 64 years old, and elderly inhabitants aged 65 years and older, as well as one group composed of experts in cross-border cooperation. These experts had accurate

knowledge of, and experiences in, cross-border cooperation issues from personal or professional experiences such as belonging to nongovernmental organisations that conduct cross-border projects, formal and informal cooperation with these organizations, or personal experiences in both areas. In these groups, the purpose was to elicit direct and spontaneous discourse about the border area, the biography of each participant, and border relations and identity. All participants were residents of the municipality being studied.

The selection processes for all participants were the 'snowball' technique and direct contact with different institutions (e.g., local governments, associations). The 'experts' focus group was the last selected. To recruit experts, we utilised our knowledge of cross-border projects in the area and secondary sources, as well as others factors. Additionally, in every focus group, each participant was asked to fill in a small, semi-structured questionnaire asking if he or she knew somebody who could fulfil the criteria of the 'experts' group. This questionnaire facilitated the later recruitment of some participants for the 'experts' focus groups on each side of the border and the recruitment for participants to contribute life stories in the second phase of the project. In this questionnaire, they also provided personal information about their socio-demographic profile and other issues such as education and work to complement what was reported in the group discussion. For the supervision of each group, the research members collected the contact data of each participant, and once the date and place was fixed, the participants were assembled for the meeting. Each group comprised between 5 and 10 participants for each municipality.

For the handling of the groups, an open outline was used in both countries that included questions regarding the initial presentation of each participant, his or her biography and experiences with the other country, and so forth. The discussion began with the question: 'If you had to introduce Ayamonte/VRSA to a person who comes from outside and has no information about this place, what would you say?' Next, while showing a satellite map of the area, the same question was posed but concerning the cross-border area: 'If you had to introduce this area to a person who is neither Spanish nor Portuguese, and who has no information about this place, what would you say?'

To conclude the session, we explicitly asked every participant, even if the topic was previously discussed in the session: 'To conclude, what do you identify with? What is your identity? To where do you feel you belong?'

Finally, all of the groups were conducted from May to October, 2009, and their sessions were recorded and transcribed to facilitate the content analysis carried out with the help of scientific qualitative software, specifically *Atlas.ti*.

Life stories

After the focus groups and the first analysis, a second phase was carried out focusing on biographical semi structured interviews of 'experts'. In fact, we performed ten biographical interviews in each country of citizens living in Ayamonte and VRSA with either proven work experience in cross-border activities or more informal expertise in the same area. Our aims here were mainly twofold. First, we wanted to know if, in these particular cases with a lot of history in cross-border experiences, the cross-border personal interchanges affected the construction of identities and sense of belonging to the cross-border area. Second, knowing the personal networks of the interviewees, we checked what countries people mentioned in every personal network. For this analysis, we used an open outline at the same time as a specific quantitative module in the questionnaire for social network analysis.

We interviewed people from old and new economic activities, including professional fields such as fishing, sailing, minor trade, public administration, and services, men and women, and different age groups. These people had different academic backgrounds and levels of education and were residents of the municipalities, both local natives and nonlocal natives that had lived in the area a long time. While some had formal or institutionalised cross-border experiences through participation in border projects, others had informal experiences or simply personal or family reasons for border contact. Once each informant was contacted, a fixed date and place was set between the researcher and respondent. The majority of the interviews were conducted at the workplace of each respondent (e.g. in offices, on ships), except those respondents who were pensioners in the old people's home or were interviewed at home on a free day from work. Throughout the following text, when we quote their opinions and experiences, we always give fictitious names or sociodemographic data to preserve their anonymity. This pattern was also followed in the focus group.

Other techniques
Along with the previous interviews and focus groups, we also benefitted from several guided and non-guided visits to both municipalities that followed the pattern of a participatory observation. The authors of this article have known these municipalities for several years and maintain continuous contact with the local citizens. We also used secondary statistical data and took advantage of a previous investigation carried out in 2007-2008 (Gualda, Lucio-Villegas, Fragoso, Figueira, Gualda, Barrera, Almeida, Ramalho & Maya, 2008), taken here as secondary source, wherein we studied social development in 18 administrative areas of the southern cross-border zone between Portugal and Spain.

Results

In the following sections, we discuss the processes of the construction of the identities of the people residing in VRSA and Ayamonte. Ultimately, we connect identity construction with the reciprocal understandings each individual gains of the other.

Identities in the border: Prevalence of local identities
In the theoretical dispute between what people clearly express as identity or identification and what they express in a more diffuse way about the feeling of belonging or sharing something with neighbours, what is emphasised is that the populations of both countries are manifesting mainly local identities. Local identity is usually directed towards the country of birth and residence, including the local identities of returned emigrants. Moreover, the few cases that identified with Europe or with the cross-border area seemed to have special family, educational or professional profiles.

In the case of Ayamonte, only six of the more than twenty people participating in the four focus groups expressed feelings of belonging simultaneously to Ayamonte and to other places (typically also in Spain). Only one woman of these six people identified with both Ayamonte and Portugal at the same time. This Hispanic-Portuguese 'dual identity' was understandable because she was born in Alentejo but married a Spanish man and lived most of her life in Ayamonte, where she migrated to work at the age of sixteen. Curiously, this woman identified dually—'locally' to Ayamonte, Spain, and 'regionally' to Alentejo, Portugal. In her words: 'I feel myself from here, but I also feel

good being in Portugal. And in Portugal I feel myself from the Alentejo region' (Ayamonte, woman, elders focus group, 2009).

Another woman also described her very complex identity as European, deriving from her experiences and family roots:

> My grandparents are Portuguese, I have Portuguese blood, my surname is Portuguese, I was born in Spain, I spent half of my life in Germany, my children were born in Germany,… with those backgrounds, I am from Europe, aren't I? (Ayamonte, woman, elders focus group, 2009).

We must also consider the three young people who, having lived in other provinces, claimed to have a sense of shared or dual identity between two locations in Spain, albeit with individual nuances and differences between them due to their different social lives:

> For example, I do not feel myself as from Ayamonte, because I came here at the age of six... if I had to decide anything, I would prefer to stay in Cordoba, but in winter, and I prefer Ayamonte in summer (Ayamonte, youths' focus group, woman, 2009).

And

> I like Ayamonte, I can go out and stay until the time I want to in the street, it is very different from Barcelona, where I had to be at home at 9:00 p.m., there it is impossible to go out (Ayamonte, woman, youths' focus group, 2009).

As for VRSA, though we predominantly found local identities based on place of birth and residence, we also found a greater diversity of declared identities. In seventeen cases, we found identities based in VRSA or other localities (e.g., Vila Nova de Cacela, Lisbon). In the rest, we found a prevalence (thirteen people) of a regional identity based in the Algarve or the Alentejo, a notable contrast to the predominant local identities found in Ayamonte. Nonetheless, all of the regional identities but three cases that participated in the experts' focus group were dual identities, many of them sharing their regional identity with their sense of belonging to a locality. We also found other dual identities in three cases, namely, one identification with two Portuguese municipalities, one with the place of birth and at the same time with Europe, and the last with the Portuguese Nation. Finally, only one person identified exclusively as Portuguese.

Biographical interviews conducted in 2010 with people specifically selected for their expertise in cross-border cooperation issues confirmed this local dominance. In the interviews, most people exhibited a local identity, and only two people showed an international identity. In cases of national identity, people identified with their country of origin and were open to working and living anywhere in that country, while in cases of international identity, people had no such feeling of belonging to one country or locality, but instead were open to working or living in any part of the world.

Local identities… but compatible with a sense of interdependence for economy and tourism
Very frequently people that have always lived in Vila Real do Santo António do not have senses of border identity. At the same time, they admit that the vicinity of Ayamonte has a significant role in their lives, and they also use to say that Ayamonte is a town of influence for them in terms of trade, gastronomy, and other respects. One woman said that it does not make sense to introduce Vila Real do Santo António to someone without introducing him or her to Ayamonte. Even they use to introduce the area to newcomers by crossing the Guadiana River by boat with them. The Guadiana is

also vital to the construction of identity in this region because of the Portuguese ports' important economic relationship with Spain (Bròguiera Dias & Fernandes Alves, 2010). As for the people interviewed in Ayamonte, most of them expressed a local identity, but two of them also admitted that the border area was an identifier for them in the same sense that other people described in Vila Real. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between a clear identification with a particular place (normally, the country of birth), and what people recognize as a referent for their personal identification (the other country). This happens because in the place where they develop their daily lives, they are aware of how both places influence their lives. We also found that two persons identified themselves as Spanish (national identity). These cases contrast with the unique person that declared an *international identity*: 'For me, there is no border; I am from those places and cultures that fulfill me' (Ayamonte, woman, 49 years old, interview, 2010). Last, the only person who declared a kind of *cross-border identity* was a Portuguese man who lives in VRSA and works in VRSA and Ayamonte: 'I feel that I am from the two places. I identify more with the people of this area than with people from Lisbon, for sure. I feel I am of this area, as a whole [from the cross-border zone]' (VRSA, man, 43 years old, interview, 2010).

There are also those who are fully aware of the influence that the border has on their lives. This influence is observed in border trade and tourism. For example, another interviewee said that, for Ayamonte, the border is a resource that encourages these economic activities. Similarly, other respondents claimed that the border is an identifiable element of both Ayamonte and VRSA:

> It's an attraction for locals and for those from abroad who come to see Ayamonte, but also VRSA. We sell the border as an extra incentive, as an added value, the River, the border... we live it as something positive, and this is how we tell it to others (Ayamonte, woman, 47 years old, interview, 2010).

Furthermore, though it is not explicitly stated in their responses, the awareness of the interdependence between the two municipalities in some areas becomes clear when the respondents spoke about the influence of trade and tourism as major sectors of the economy of these cross-border municipalities. For example, people from VRSA commented that VRSA's trade is focused on Spanish customers, and when people from Ayamonte refer to the orientation of their trade towards the Portuguese. 'In Ayamonte we sell more petrol than in other places in Spain. We sell to all the Algarve, VRSA, Monte Gordo... they come here to fill up, and it appeared even on the Television' (Ayamonte, man, 31 years old, interview, 2010). This interdependence is regarded both positively and negatively and therefore can become competitive, as one of the women interviewed commented:

> The better the two regions are developed; the better for Ayamonte... before Ayamonte had a good trade, but Portugal is improving their commerce. Then the Portuguese are not coming here... and what helps here is that trade does not become so strong there (Ayamonte, woman, 41 years old, interview, 2010).

Nevertheless, all of these discourses convey one basic idea, that it is difficult to understand Ayamonte without VRSA, and vice versa.

Neighbours but not brothers: We are different
One element that appears in the discourses of respondents on both sides of the border is the idea that, though commercial interdependence and tourism are good, there is a

reticence to go further. Some of the respondents argued that 'they consider themselves as neighbours, but not as brothers'. This type of nuanced outlook is found in Portuguese and Spanish people: 'Some Spanish people say that the Portuguese want to be a Spanish region, but they are the minority, anyway we are not going to allow this to happen' (Ayamonte, man, 37 years old, interview, 2010), and

> I think it is good to have cooperation on certain issues, but to oblige Portuguese and Spanish to be equal, that is outrageous. We cannot lose our bearings and get confused... then, identity is very important, everybody has their identity, and we cooperate in certain respects, but only this, more than this is mixing, and if we mix, we are lost. You have a sister, but you are not equal to her (Ayamonte, woman, 41 years old, interview, 2010).

This neighbourly relationship is associated with a neutral perception of the other. None of the respondents in Ayamonte consider their neighbour as having better or worse qualities; they are merely different. However, Spain and Portugal also share cultural traits and some common ideas of Iberia:

> Spanish and Portuguese have a common sense of Iberia, but creating now a feeling of the border... it makes things even more complicated. That [common] feeling would appear from smooth relations, but these things [the real scenario] arise from close relationships over time... (Ayamonte, man, 46 years old, interview, 2010).

Conversely, as was declared by a Portuguese woman:

> They are not [Spanish from Ayamonte] our brothers! They only are our neighbours! That's all! I think that attitudes and behaviours are the same; like us, they are cautious because they are stigmatised due to the thefts, because Spanish people from the working class came here, especially at the annual Festival, and they always tried to take something that didn't belong to them, and we did the same thing there. This is why when we enter a shop all eyes are opened, keeping their eyes on us, and they see things done by Portuguese that they don't see for the Spanish: Watch out! Careful! There, there's a Portuguese! And we do the same thing in Portugal! (VRSA, woman, 56 years old, interview, 2010).

These last quotes remind us of the importance of the past in the construction of the present and the future in this cross-border area and the existence of a reciprocal suspicion that sometimes appears when maintaining relationships.

Moreover, when asked about the feelings that Portuguese interviewees have when they go to Ayamonte, they claimed they felt good because they are well received. However, they still report that they feel like they are in a foreign country despite their proximity to home, because they see cultural differences between the two countries. The Spaniards responded similarly, mostly declaring they felt comfortable when they are in Portugal, and more so with the Algarve than with other northern areas of Portugal: 'I feel welcomed, but not at home', 'I miss Spain, but it would not be difficult for me to live in Portugal. But I feel I'm from Spain' (Ayamonte, woman, 47 years old, interview, 2010). Others made similar statements, except one respondent who identified both with Spain and Portugal and whose daily life takes place between the two countries. Finally, women who are not native to Ayamonte but have resided there for over 10 years believe that people from Ayamonte try to maintain a certain distance from, or reticence to interact with, their neighbours. These women's great interest towards Portugal contrasts with those respondents who were born in Ayamonte and expressed a clearly local identity.

Local identities, coherent to the predominance of local social networks

The open interviews included a structured module for analysing the social networks of our respondents that was applied during the biographical interviews of people with expertise in cross-border issues (formal and informal cooperation). We asked each of them to name up to 25 people with whom they regularly maintain relationships. They also indicated the place of origin and other personal traits of every cited person. The results are very detailed in this regard and should lead to the consideration and incorporation of new research questions. Despite being experts in cross-border issues, respondents mentioned few people from the other country when describing their personal networks. This observation can help to understand some arguments made by the interviewees. For instance, this was the case when some of them argued for the utility of cooperating on commercial and tourist issues but did not advocate being brothers. Do these attitudes differentiate between familiar and institutionalised relationships? This question could be studied in future research. Furthermore, is the creation of personal ties an integral part, in social terms, of the construction of a Euroregion, more important than institutional cooperation? Is it possible to construct a border identity without developing these relationships?

Discussion and conclusions

This research has identified aspects of an internal fragmentation in the process of construction identity in the cross-border area of Ayamonte-VRSA, whereby specific areas within each municipality are constructing different types of identity with strong local components. Age and personal experiences in particular are key indicators of identity. Crossing the border during the dictatorship (in Portugal until 1974, in Spain until 1975) was not the same experience as it is now, because the border can now be crossed by car. Moreover, the institutionalised context of numerous exchanges (e.g., sports; painting) that are taking place at the border today is a potentially important step in the construction of a Euroregion. In this sense, the young are growing up in the political context of Europe's construction and the development of cross-border institutional initiatives between Portugal and Spain, while in contrast, the elderly matured before the entry of Spain and Portugal in the European Community.

Throughout the cross-border area, there is a prevailing trend towards the construction of local identities, though there are also a significant number of experiences that construct dual identities at varying levels (i.e., 'local-local', 'local-regional' or 'local-national'). This pattern occurs on both sides of the border. Paradoxically, along with the extensive experience as neighbours, we also found the strong influence of stereotypes and images of the other in the process of identity construction.

The fieldwork uncovered one common idea: the border represented by the River Guadiana is real and separates two different countries that are two historically dissimilar empires that treasure different languages and, despite being neighbours, live largely back to back.

This common sense idea, now translated into research, shows that relationships between these people are ingrained in their respective cultures and that their degree of openness to each other in social networks is either non-existent or insignificant beyond trade or cultural influence. We would like to point out two or three synthetic ideas as the basis for reflections and future research:

- The number of projects that exist for cross-border cooperation between institutions, associations, schools or less formal groups of citizens is encouraging and represents a potential transforming factor that has not yet materialised in practice.
- The focus in this area is the need to move from the institutional side to the personal side. In other words, the aim is that people can establish relationships that enhance cooperation (*bottom-up*), leading to a sustainable future where the promise of social, economic and cultural change can be a reality.
- To achieve this purpose, it is important to look closely at factors affecting social networks. Formal and informal education, with its potential to change the various stereotypes that are an obstacle to cooperation, plays a fundamental role. Participating in the field of languages and promoting common knowledge on both sides of the border that extends beyond the superficiality of gastronomy, tourism or business is fundamental.

These results indicate that territory and the people's view of territory is still important in identity construction. Both culture and identity are strategic elements in building both developmental and educational processes. Additionally, one must ask where people have learned the determining elements in this process. What types of contexts and what types of educational processes help to create the images of us and the images of the other that create both Spanish and Portuguese stereotypes? Adult education in the process of identity construction is a key element in attempting the construction of more fluid relationships between the southern Portuguese and Spanish. A difference exists between 'us' and 'them,' and people establish their own identities from this difference. It is a natural difference, the regular order of things, and individuals assume it naturally. Ultimately, the other is always with us, perhaps in an unconscious way, whether we love them or hate them.

How can we learn about the context of the 'others'? The first way is by acknowledging that we are talking about the context and not about the others themselves. In doing so, we are working under the umbrella of the diverse meanings of culture and human understandings. As Hill points out, 'It flows from my living in a 'contact zone' [...] with Native Americans – a social space where cultures met and wrestle with each other' (Hill, 2010, p. 185). Hill is referring to his knowledge of the Native Americans through his own experience, contact and life in a specific social and cultural environment that is different from his own place of residence. From this point of view, he considers that we can learn the context of the others in three ways: first, learning through observation and doing (as we used to say, 'wherever you go, do what you see'); second, learning through experiences; and third, learning through enjoyment. For instance, we learn the context of the other when we hear their storytelling. In our case, one way of knowing the context of the 'others' has been sharing stories about the River Guadiana about smugglers, border guards, boats in the night, as well as stories of common experiences like cooperation for survival in the Franco period: 'we were the only village in the whole of Spain that did not experience hunger during the Civil War, through the smuggling we used to provide ourselves with food from Portugal… a long story of cooperation as neighbours' (Ayamonte, man, 70 years old, interview, 2009). These types of stories are fundamental to recovering the historical importance of the river in the past as something shared between the 'others' and us.

Almost a century ago, John Dewey (1938) drew on the importance of educating through experience. This kind of informal education allows people to know the 'others' and the 'others' context. Experience is shared and increases with the help of the

relationships maintained through our social networks, as our research stresses. The processes of Adult Education and Learning, far from the restrictive practices of Lifelong Learning, encourage people to transform social, cultural and productive experiences by participating in education, and by learning from other people's research and struggles (Gelpi, 1989). Fundamentally, learning about the context of the 'others' is a process of discovering and learning about ourselves and our own history, which is always contextual.

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