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Dynamic Process of International Student's Identity Development and Multiplicity of Linguistic Selves

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Abstract:

The current paper examines the concept and characteristics of human identity and how those have been historically discussed by theorists from diverse fields, focusing particularly on international students who study abroad. The aim of this report is to investigate how international students shape their multiple selves during their time overseas by drawing on social and cultural factors. Relevant empirical studies are reviewed from the standpoint of sociological, socio-cultural, and dialogical theories. Reviewing the literature allowed this study to arrive at some conclusions. First, international students construct their identity through complex, dynamic, and constant processes, and this identity is subject to continually change as per social interactions and circumstances rather than being acquired as biological determinants. Second, language is a crucial factor in the process of identity construction. Implications and limitations are discussed as well.

Keywords: Identity, international student, multiple selves, social interaction, language

1. Introduction

Many international students have come to the United States to further their education, hoping that they are going to be successful in academic life in this country. Many of them soon learn a number of dissimilarities in many aspects generated between two countries, though the degree of the dissimilarity one may feel may vary individually. Those dissimilarities may involve but are not limited to, different cultures, administrative laws, language, ethnicity, and religion. Some students become frustrated with finding great difficulty in language barriers, and some get shocked by the extreme differences in the cultures.

Although every individual's lived experience may vary, all international and migrant students struggle with identity crises during their study abroad (Ahmed, 2020). It may come from culture shock, stereotyping, lack of support, prejudice, homesickness, lack of social skills, or a combination of two or more of these factors (Jung et al., 2007). After arriving in the host country, they realize that the identity or self that they had lived within their home countries does not fit well into the host cultures. Such an identity conflict, seen as a core symptom of culture shock and cultural transitions, could exacerbate these students' physical and psychological well-being (Brown & Brown, 2013). In fact, anxiety and depression are the two most common mental conditions that manifest in international students (Rosenthal et al., 2006).

It is a general belief that the identities of international students are multiple, hybrid, and shifting as they experience new cultures, interact with new people, and adapt to new environments (Adewale et al., 2018; Sears, 2011). These students rely on multiple selves to adjust better and assimilate into the new social milieu, and simultaneously attempt to constantly navigate who they are among complex cultural identities. For instance, to fit into social trends and societal expectations in the host country, foreign students may dress up like the natives, eat what they eat, change their accents to sound like them, and attempt to understand and agree with their values and mindset. Such individual efforts turn into the creation of new and diverse identities. That is to say, it is difficult to live with, in a foreign land, one coherent image of what they previously believed they were.

The goal of the current report is to provide a basic framework for understanding various identities of international students in a foreign country based on the existing literature studied on the relevant topics and interpret and analyze them through the lens of sociological, socio-cultural, and dialogical phenomena. This manuscript delineates the nature of international student's identity by drawing upon empirical articles for each of the sociological, socio-cultural, and dialogical perspectives. Such three theories were particularly adopted as the development of international students' identity is largely driven by social and cultural forces, and positionality is given to the individual in the host country. Their identity formation can be compared to a canvas becoming a good quality of work (identity being constructed) by being filled up with all different colors (social and cultural factors). What should be noted here is that this work never ends.

Along with globalization, the number of international students entering U.S. postsecondary institutions has gradually grown over the past two decades (Xiong & Yang, 2021). Accordingly, there is a growing need to better cope with their cultural issues and assist them in making a smooth transition to America in personal and academic settings. It is hoped that the accounts of the identity construction of international students in this paper can be informative for school

staff who work with international students and an opportunity for them to learn more about a multiplicity of positions so they can help resolve their issues related to such multi-voiced cultural identities.

2. Theoretical Review of Empirical Studies

2.1. Sociological Theory

To live in a society, we are asked to generate as many social selves as necessary in order to fit ourselves into the individuals or groups that we are interacting with or to conform to the social norms created by them (Mead, 1934/2003). We may display one part of the self to one man and another part of the self to another. According to Mead (1934/2003), people realize that they carry such a variety of different relationships to different folks. William James (1892/2003) called it a discordant splitting as one is reluctant to let one of his acquaintances know him as he is elsewhere. James (1892/2003) provided some examples with regard to it: the youths who behave themselves when their parents or teachers are present but swagger like a pirate when hanging out with their friends, or parents who do not treat their children in the same way as they do their club companions. This aspect of the identity parallels Charles Cooley's point of view on the self-concept, especially his theory of the "looking-glass self" (1902/2003). Basically, this idea illustrates that the self-image is formed based on reflection of how other people view, respond, or evaluate oneself. To be more concrete, it is built by an interaction between how one sees him/herself and how others see him/her. That is to say, in this perspective, it is not possible to perceive the self "I" without thinking distinctly of someone else or relationships with them. "There is no sense of "I", as in pride or shame, without its correlative sense of you, or him, or them" (Cooley, 1902/2003, p. 124). Erving Goffman's theoretical framework on the presentation of self-shares a commonality with the arguments of these theorists above. According to his arguments, people tend to play different roles, depending on the social situations they take themselves in and adapt to what they are interacting with (Goffman, 1959/2003). He depicted a different set of selves as a performer playing on the stage, and this is well illustrated in his early works. He claimed that there are two different self-hoods played by individuals based on their interaction with people, *character* and *performance* (Goffman, 1959/2003). The character typically refers to the self that presents oneself on the stage according to the social order and usually represents a fine, clean, and impressive image of oneself. In contrast, the performance indicates the self-backstage, where there is no need to care about how society will view them. Taken together, all of these social theories conjointly suggest that self is a social structure constructed through social experience, activity, and interaction with others and that individual identities are multiple entities shaped by one's social positions and roles in social contexts.

Gomes et al. (2014) investigated how international students studying in Australia form social networks in the host country in relation to the role of identity while living away from their home country. In their study, they aimed to address and answer the research question, "How do social networks affect the formation of international students' identities?" The qualitative research method, especially a focus group methodology, was utilized in this project, targeting 35 international students, including both undergraduate and postgraduate, enrolled at universities and colleges in Melbourne, Australia. The participants were randomly divided into seven different focus groups and were asked to discuss and describe their social networks in Australia within each group for 70 to 120 minutes while being audio-recorded by the researchers. Based on the focus group data collected from the group discussions, the researchers classified students into four groupings, which are "SNHC", "SNIS", "SNAS", and "SNMS". The students in SNHC group are those whose Social Networks were predominantly made up of international students from their Home Country. SNIS indicates the students whose Social Networks were predominantly made up of International Students from various countries, and SNAS refers to the students whose Social Networks are predominantly made up of Australian Students. Lastly, the SNMS group consists of those whose social networks embrace a mixed group of students, including both Australian domestic and international students. The findings of this study indicated that international students proactively construct a variety of social networks on the basis of multiple individual cultural and social identities of each student as well as that those various common factors, including language, culture, housing, hobbies, workplace, and course of study, contribute to the formation of their identities. These findings led the researcher to the conclusion that identity is not static but complex and evolving.

Lam (2017) examined how international student's cultural identities have changed during the course of acculturation in the U.S. and how culture shock can influence such an identity transformation in the students. The focus group discussion and follow-up interview were conducted as a form of qualitative methodology for this study, and eight international students attending a community college in California were recruited as participants. Two focus groups were formed with five students and three students each, and all members in each group were instructed to share their thoughts and experiences concerning culture shock, self-identity, and acculturation. The results from the focus groups revealed that international students perceive notable changes in their daily lives after coming to live in the U.S. and varying levels of culture shock. The outcomes varied significantly depending on the participant's personality and social networks. The findings also suggested that the acculturative process leads the students to develop a new viewpoint on their national and ethnic identity and further strengthen their self-identity with regard to their own culture. For example, one participant from Malaysia in the study, Sunya, reported that her life in America provided her with an opportunity to study more about her country and to become clearer and stronger about her national identity, stating, "I'm a representative, an ambassador. I have to take care of my own identity properly, like a professional, because you're bringing your country's name to a foreign country, and you're representing them. And then that impacts you and your country and also the United States as well" (Lam, 2017, p. 50). According to Lam (2017), international student's identities are changed, developed, sustained, and transformed through the acculturative process and experience of culture shock.

The study by Wakana (2018) discussed a correlation between the development of international student's identity, willingness to communicate, and social interactions. In particular, she investigated how the willingness to communicate with Japanese international students is shaped by complex factors, including identity and social interactions. 10 Japanese students were recruited for this study who have chosen to attend a university in the Midwest of America for their study abroad. Three interviews were conducted with each participant at certain intervals, which the researcher transcribed into the digitally recorded narrative. Based on the analysis of participant narratives, the researcher found that when participants were preoccupied with native-like pronunciation and a perfect form of enunciation, they were less motivated to communicate in English, whereas when they saw English merely as a communicative tool, they felt psychologically less demanding to speak in English. This led her to conclude that how international students perceive the English they use and their English-speaking identities constructed judgments concerning who they would interact with and would not. In other words, impressions of themselves that the students wished to make (identity) and connections they wanted to make with particular people (social interaction) impacted their use of English (willingness to communicate).

From the three studies above, it was confirmed that international student's identities are *fluid* and prone to change under multiple factors such as language spoken in the host country, social interactions, people, experience, and social supports. That is to say, it may not be *possible* to conceive of the self-hood of international students arising outside of social interactions and experiences.

2.2. Socio-cultural Theory

From the socio-cultural perspective, identity is a continuous development and a dynamic and changing process influenced by everyday social situations (Vygotsky, 1978). The socio-cultural perspective of identity construction demonstrates how human cognition persistently changes and develops over time, considering the effect of interactions between a variety of social and cultural components and individuals. The works of Lev Vygotsky (1978) focused on showing how the human mind and mental functioning develop from infancy in social and cultural environments, paying extra attention to the role of speech and language as empowering tools for mind construction. Although the term identity has never been used in his works, Vygotsky stressed that social interactions and practices play a crucial role in developing cognitive ability or higher human mental functioning (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Namely, individual higher mental processes have their origin in social processes, and those processes are mediated by cultural artefacts such as language and signs. In his theory, language, tools, and other sign systems are vital not merely as representational systems but as resources in behavior (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Of the mediating tools, he was particularly concerned with the early speech of children or their self-directed dialogue, which he called *inner speech*. Inner speech, which usually occurs during early childhood, is the internalization of egocentric speech that allows children to plan their actions mentally and provides a foundation for forming their self-consciousness. For Vygotsky, identity is a derivative of ongoing social interaction and the mediation of speeches, communication, and signs. In the book of Holland et al. (1998), the chapter "The Woman Who Climbed up the House" illustrated a Hindu woman's socio-cultural identity, focusing on social positioning regarding cultural affiliation and religious membership. Holland narrated a caste system for Hindu Nepalese and collective identities derived from the system. In her writing, it is easy to notice distinct cultures and customs within each class. The Nepalese caste pyramid starts from the highest, which is *Bahun*, to the lowest, also known as untouchable, which includes *Damai* and *Sunar*. The members in the respective class are clearly aware of what is permissible or what is not for them. The story of "The Woman Who Climbed up the House" is about a woman of the Sunar named Gyanumaya who is coming for an interview invited by Holland for her ethnographic fieldwork. The place held for the interview was a room on the second floor of a Bahun's building. As soon as Gyanumaya realized the house was Bahun's, she literally climbed up the exterior wall of the building to arrive at the room instead of entering the house and walking upstairs. Her climbing results from a type of taboo where one is not supposed to enter the house of those who are higher than themselves. This story evidently demonstrates the social significance of the cultural caste identity imposed upon one woman.

In the study of Halic et al. (2009), there is a story about a Romanian international student studying in the U.S. Before she came to America, she had learned English as a foreign language for about nine years and also studied intensively and prepared for the TOEFL and GRE exams to apply for a graduate school in the country. By the time of admission to graduate school, the Romanian woman felt confident and proficient in English. However, after spending some time in America, she started to realize that her voice sounded softer in English than in Romanian. She also perceived that communication in English seemed artificial and dry while using English in her private conversations since her English lacked emotions. After her presentation required from one of her classes, she felt like an actress who badly performs based on a script, leading her to perceive that "she seemed to switch between her Romanian identity, which came naturally, and her English one, which continued to feel artificial" (Halic et al., 2009, p. 76). The Romanian student's story indicates that proficiency in language and cultural identity is essential to the academic experience of non-native speakers.

Similarly, the findings of Valdez (2015) investigated how English language proficiency of Chinese international students, different classroom practices in the U.S. educational settings, and their perception of them shape the communal identity of these students. 15 Chinese international students at a university in the U.S. were gathered for this study and participated in semi-structured interviews. The results suggested that one of the characteristics ascribed to the communal identity of Chinese international students in American educational settings is the fact that they are shy and quiet in a classroom setting compared to domestic students and other international students. A sense of insecurity regarding their English language skills was another attribute of the collective identity of Chinese students, which explains why they are quiet and not willing to participate in a class discussion. Their non-participatory behavior in the classroom setting may be partially due to their unfamiliarity with lively in-class discussion structure in America. Based on such outcomes, the

researcher claimed that the Chinese student's perception of their language proficiency and unfamiliar classroom discussion structure in America has an effect on their experiences and a sense of membership.

Pham and Saltmarsh (2013) conducted research on Vietnamese tertiary students studying in Australia, examining how international students construct and reconstruct their identities in the host country by drawing on social and cultural influences. Their research interest was centered on how these international students perceive a link with their schools, professors, instructors, domestic students, roommates, friends, families, and local communities and how such social networks contribute to production and reproduction of their identities as an individual and as a member of community. The researchers used an in-depth interview methodology on six Vietnamese international students recruited from universities in New South Wales, Australia. From the interviews with individual participants, it was found that the students have generated new perspectives of identity while living overseas, and those perspectives allowed them to act on particular roles and improve their heritage identity. Such newly generated perspectives also serve as a driving force of self-development for international students. For instance, these Vietnamese students have become more self-reliant, independent, and responsible when it comes to decision-making in daily life since they lived apart from their parents. One of the participants, Binh, mentioned, "I learned how to live independently by myself even though I am still very Eastern. Things changed day by day when I was studying and living away from home. I have to do everything on my own" (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013, p. 134). Pham and Saltmarsh (2013) drew the conclusion that a particular group of international students produce and reproduce their identities while studying overseas, and there is an ongoing negotiation between them and their social networks.

Overall, these three studies ascertained the fact that various social and cultural factors are highly involved in the process of shaping international students' identities and that *language*, particularly, takes up a big part in their construction. Furthermore, it seems that socio-cultural factors and how an individual student *reflects* and *perceives* them also significantly impact their perspectives and identity formation.

2.3. Dialogic Theory

According to the dialogical theories of self-hood, our self represents an internal exchange of ideas in response to the external world to which we are exposed, and the interaction between the internal and external goes across the planes of the inner and outer (Batory et al., 2010). The external world here may include particular cultures, societies, nations, or simply other people. In modern society, it is almost inevitable to live without relating to others and getting involved in society. No matter what society one lives in, one should engage in conversation with other individuals to live as a member of the community where one belongs. That being so, the dialogical self is regarded as a society of mind by many scholars (Hermans, 2002; Minsky, 1985). The society consists of diverse people, and each has different cultural background, life history, personality, preference, and mentality. As a result, it is natural for an individual to create a dynamic multiplicity of self-positions, building dialogical relationships with other people, which means we are always navigating ourselves in relation to others. Hermans (2001) claimed that "conceiving self and culture in terms of a multiplicity of positions with mutual dialogical relationships entails the possibility of studying self and culture as a composite of parts" (p. 243). In other words, it is difficult to think about the self without encompassing the cultural part of the person and the multiple positions in dialogical relationships with others. Such a view is against the accounts of self-hood that were depicted as core and essential characteristics by traditional psychologists such as Erik Erikson. One thing to notice is the fact that cultures and selves have the traits of constantly changing and mixing and of being responsive to travel (Hermans, 2001). Bhatia and Ram (2004) illustrated how second-generation South Asian-American women negotiate their hybrid sense of self in relation to the contexts of socio-cultural differences, racial politics, and issues of sexual and gender prejudice. They emphasized that a dialogical process is continuously moving back and forth between a variety of cultural voices and that the dialogical self is not static but can transfer from one position to another in response to changes in time and environments. In short, dialogical perspectives suggest that one's self-construction takes place between people engaged in dialogue and communication rather than within the mind of the individual person.

Prabhakar (2016) studied and showed how international students studying in the U.S. who are non-native English speakers shape their identities through discourse and how language obstructs international students' capability to communicate. This study employed a qualitative research design on seven international students who attended American universities at the time of conducting this study. Five students were Master's candidates, and two were in doctoral programs. They all had spent at least eight months or more in America. The researcher utilized several qualitative research tools, such as a personal interview and a Statement of Purpose (SoP), which each participant had written for their admission to American universities. The interview was conducted three times at intervals, where the first interview focused on the participant's demographic information and life background, the second on the details of the lived experiences, and the third on reflecting on the meaning. The SoP functioned as a connection in comprehending the subject's primary identity and lived experiences of identity formation through secondary discourse, which is created via interactions and socialization. Based on the data collected, the author concluded that international students developed a new discourse of being voiceless, separated, and non-participatory since they arrived in America. She also found that language can hinder their identity formation. As an example of this, the participants confessed that their voice was suppressed when they struggled to communicate in English. The participants also shared their experiences of being treated as insignificant and stereotyped. In sum, these international students have evolved into a new discourse that is non-participatory, silent and marginalized due to changes in cultures and circumstances. As they moved to the U.S., such new discourse emerged, and simultaneously, the old ones perished. For instance, one of the participants in the research, Khaled, depicted himself as a social person and leader of a group in his home country, Saudi Arabia, in his SoP. While he

was having an interview with the researcher, he stated that he no longer carried the same characteristics of those identities in America. Due to his language difficulty, he was reluctant to participate in group work in the classroom and was not willing to be actively involved with American fellow students during a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. He stated that he did not belong to any social group at the university or any academic group in the MBA program. Khaled's anecdote indicates that his old discourse of leading, outgoing, and social has vanished and instead been replaced by the new discourse as he came to the U.S., and that language hinders his ability to communicate and his identity construction. However, such views are contrary to the propositions of Hermans (2001) and Bhatia and Ram (2004) as they claim that the old dialogical self does not die but gets refigured and merges into new subjectivities. Thus, further investigations would be needed to clarify the characteristics of the old self.

Koehne (2005) discussed how international students build their storylines concerning who he/she is as an international student and, in the process, re-build storylines about self. She stated that "storylines are developed through (re)construction of self as a site of multiple subjectivities, as hybridity, or through resistance to subject positions made available" (Koehne, 2005, p. 106). Such multiple subjectivities are constructed through difference and sameness with regard to host culture, as she added. To further investigate this, 25 international students from a variety of countries studying at three universities in Victoria, Australia, were invited to a semi-structured interview, and some of them further participated in follow-up interviews later on. During the interview, one male participant from Sri Lanka mentioned, "I didn't realize it till I actually went home after three years, last Christmas, and, um, it was a complete change for me, and people around me, they all kept on saying, 'You are changed, you are changed.' But I didn't see any change in me ..." (Koehne, 2005, p. 108). The author related his statement to the fact that international students are in positions of constant movement between flows and closure in accordance with their subjectivity and local and national tensions. Based on the outcomes of the interviews, Koehne (2005) posited that hybrid subjectivity is formed when there is a probability of looking back at one's culture and of having a feeling of not belonging and being isolated and staying in another culture in which one emulates what one aspires, and that formation of hybrid subjectivity refers to resisting and refusing subject positions acquired in the discourses of different culture.

Lee (2015) conducted a pilot study on Korean undergraduates studying abroad to examine how English impacts them in terms of their identities and, specifically, how early study abroad experiences and English affect their authentic voices and positions. The participants in the study were 22 Korean undergraduate students in a major Midwestern university in America. While all participated in a semi-structured interview, four students were involved in focus-group interactions for further participation. The participants were questioned regarding two research questions: "How do they perceive English?" and "How does such a perception affect their ethnic identities?" When it comes to the first question, most participants disclosed their perception of English not just as a language but as a personal asset or value system. They associated English ability with positive and prestigious images and regarded acquiring English proficiency as an opportunity to enter the world with a high level of self-confidence. Concerning the second question, they considered themselves in-between two cultures or languages, which are the common attributes of identities of this population. Interestingly, their in-betweenness possesses two distinct facets. On the one hand, these students are in a position to be cosmopolitans who avail themselves of the in-between-ness as a transnational elite who can move back and forth across the border with a globalized identity; however, on the other hand, as they confessed, they do not belong to either society wholly. In that regard, they referred to themselves as *sandwiches* between the two countries. Overall, her study showed how language and early study abroad experiences impact the development of in-between identities or hybrid identities in multiple dialogical contexts.

Reflecting on the aforementioned empirical works, it seems that fluid, dynamic, and new *hybrid* selves emerge in relation to internal and external dialogic relationships with others while international students live in different cultures. Their identity is constructed through a *process* of constantly changing, navigating a multiplicity of subjectivities and perspectives on their roles and positions.

3. Conclusions

The present report scrutinized how overseas students construct their identities in different cultural contexts and what factors impact shaping them. The purpose of this literature review is to increase knowledge regarding the identity formation of international students by investigating preexisting findings that examined this topic from the perspectives of sociological, socio-cultural, and dialogical theories. In this review, two points were found, which seem to be common across all studies.

First, the identity construction of international students is an everlasting discursive process as socio-cultural composites, not as static coherent products, which are shaped by people, living environments, events, and his/her interpretation of them. This argument is consistent with Park's (2015) stance on identity - "Since humans construct their identity by interacting with external circumstances, identity is subject to change according to social and cultural factors" (p. 2). Second, learning and communicating in the language spoken in the host country play a large part in forming the self of this population, not simply as a communicative tool but also as a cultural asset.

There is a limitation to this current investigation concerning the selection of participants from the reviewed studies. The majority of subjects included in these studies were from Asia regions, ranging from China, Japan, and Korea to the Middle East. If European international students had been included in the research, their identity formation process might have differed from that of Asian international students when considering the similar cultural values between Europe and Western English-speaking countries.

Notwithstanding, it is hoped that this manuscript helps increase the understanding of individuals who work with international students and their parents about their in-between positions and circumstances so they can better support the students' acculturation process and further help them improve and maintain their psychological well-being while studying abroad.

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