A narrative inquiry into the cultural identity construction of a Chinese student in New Zealand

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Abstract: In this global world, the number of international students who study in a country different from his or her country of origin has witnessed a rapid increase in the recent years , which creates emerging practical opportunities and challenges and thus arouses great interest among educational researchers[1]. The pull and push factors of studying abroad have been investigated particularly in comparative research on the unsatisfactory learning, working and living conditions of home countries and desirable conditions of host countries[2]. During international education, students (re)construct their national and cultural identities . Apart from their intercultural awareness and identity, international students also achieve different levels of learning outcomes in specific aspects. Some acquire global academic knowledge and identities during studying abroad[3]. As an international student myself, I took the opportunity of this assignment and reviewed my international study experience.

Keywords: International students;Cultural Identity; Acculturation theory

1. Introduction

This assignment starts with my own experience in relation to study abroad at Massey University in New Zealand. Over sustained periods of time in my life, I have almost always been intrigued in diverse cultures and educational practices. Out of my curiosity and passion, I went for an undergraduate programme in Business that intersected with Education at Massey University in New Zealand. During my undergraduate's studies, I kept a reflective journal about what I learned and how I felt, which was a valuable source of data for this essay. I found that I had went through the stage that I thought highly of host cultures and thought their cultures were superior to my own original culture. Then I came across the culture shock phase when I felt frustrated about cultural differences and missed my own culture [4]. What came next was the stage where I developed a non-hierarchical balanced attitude towards both the original and host cultures. I adopted adaption and acculturation strategy to integrate myself into international communities. During the ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaption, integration) , I negotiated and reconstructed my cultural identity as a more open-minded Chinese student and a prospective teacher with intercultural competence. Thus, this assignment focuses on my cultural identity construction and negotiation in this international learning context [5]. I aim to explore how my international learning processes contribute to my cultural competency and cultural identity construction through the lens of acculturation theory.

In this assignment, literature about cultural identity, acculturation theory will be reviewed first. Berry's framework of acculturation theory including four possible acculturation strategies (assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization), and Bennett's theory of ethnorelativism will be reviewed and applied in my case study analysis because of their relevance. Then I chose my visit to a local primary school as my case to closely look at because during my visit I went through the ethnorelative stages and developed my intercultural identity. Three examples will be provided and analyzed using thematic analysis. Each example shows my use of assimilation acculturation strategy in the honeymoon phase, culture-shock stage, and the integration-oriented ethnorelative stage [6], respectively. At last in the conclusion part, I will summarize my responses to my research topic (i.e. how my international learning processes contribute to my cultural competency and cultural identity construction through the lens of acculturation theory). Limitations of this study will also be explained in the last section.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Cultural Identity

Identity is seen as a complex construct about how a person sees himself or herself in different communities, his or her relationship with the world and possibilities for the future [7]. It can change across time and space. In terms of cultural identity, it can be influenced by cultural representations such as religion, rites of passage, language, dietary habits and leisure activities [8]. Much research has found that one's cultural identity is reconstructed during his or her stay abroad. Malaysian and Indonesian ethnic Chinese students, for instance, pursued higher education in Hong Kong as an investment of cross-broader identities. Because they faced ethnic struggles and national protection of highly skilled jobs for Malaysians, they crossed the borders to somehow move away from their state-defined identities and create new ones [9]. Their economic investment and cultural investment in their master's programme turned out to facilitate their academic skills in specific fields, building up their global academic and professional identity.

While the push factors of the home country and home cultures motivate students to study abroad as shown in the case in Choi's study, the pull factors of the host country and international culture also contribute to students' study-abroad programme and their cultural identity negotiation. During this learning process, some of these students went through culture shock and became more tolerant with cultural differences while being mindful of the western hegemonic view. Findings from this study showed that students went for a study-abroad programme due to push and pull factors, going through various acculturation stages and thereby negotiating their cultural identities and improving intercultural sensitivity [10].

2.2. Acculturation Theory

Although international students mentioned above develop their intercultural identities during their study-abroad processes, the construction of cultural identity varies from one person to another, and also from one context to another. They go through a process of cultural and psychological changes when they encounter and interact with different groups of people in a multicultural society. In this process called acculturation, immigrants interact with members of the host country and multi-national people. This process can be regarded as intergroup contact. Their frequent and active intergroup contact is more likely to bring about intercultural knowledge, a higher proficiency level of their additional language in use, and greater development in global skills and attitudes, all of which shape their intercultural identity. In the meantime, some may go back to their comfort zone and connect more with members of their home culture and nation, which is considered as outgroup contact.

Whether students have more intergroup contact or outgroup contact to some extent depends on their attitudes towards their home culture and host culture. If they demonstrate a high level of motivation to maintain their own culture while integrating themselves in the host culture, they have both intergroup and outgroup contact. In this process, they adopt integration strategy and shape their ethnorelative intercultural identity. If they regard their host culture superior to their home culture, they are more likely to have more intergroup contact than outgroup contact and reject their own culture and original cultural identity. Adopting separation strategy, people separate the home culture and host culture and tend to avoid the host culture. Using marginalization strategy, people marginalize themselves from majority culture and their own culture, resulting in less intergroup contact and outgroup contact. Much research has investigated the relations between intergroup contact and attitudes towards diverse cultures, with little analyzing the relations among intergroup contact, attitudes towards diverse culture and culture diversity. This study tries to explore such relations and in some way compensate for this research gap.

The attitudes of local people in the host country towards various cultures also have an effect on students' participation in intergroup contact and outgroup contact. A culturally diverse environment that welcomes people from around the world provides international students a safe place to share their own opinions and cultures, allows them to have in-depth intercultural interactions and shape positive attitudes towards various cultures, which is beneficial for their mental well-being. International students' preference for integration acculturation strategy, in which people integrate themselves in the multicultural contexts while maintaining their home culture, has been shown in the cases in tolerant cultural contexts where cultural diversity is highly valued.

During the contact with people from diverse cultures, four acculturation strategies can be adopted. The first stage, honeymoon stage, suggests that immigrants strongly appreciate the host culture when

everything is new to them and possibly place higher value on it over their original culture, which is similar to the nature of assimilation strategy [11]. They then come across culture shock when they feel frustrated about different cultures and miss their own culture. In this stage, they may use separation strategy or marginalization strategy. Some finally adopt integration acculturation strategy, understanding and embracing cultural differences, developing critical attitudes towards diverse cultures; others, however, do not necessarily reach this stage. In addition, it should be noticed that internationally mobilized people, including international students, may use different strategies at different stages of acculturation [12].

Notably, Bennett's model of developmental intercultural sensitivity is influential and has proved to be an effective theoretical framework (e.g. as tested in the experiment of Paige et al.). Bennett also put forward with two main concepts of perceptions of one's own culture (i.e. ethnocentrism, ethnorelativism) and six stages of intercultural sensitivity (i.e. Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, Integration). This complete model has been visualized in Figure 1 as below. With the perspective of ethnocentrism, people put central role in their own cultures, during which they go through the denial of difference, defense against difference and minimization of difference. In the first stage, an ethnocentric person may deny the existence of cultural diversity through physical isolation or separation that builds up physical or social barriers among religious, economic, political and other types of groups or communities. In the second stage of defense, ethnocentric people have negative stereotype of other cultures, evaluate differences negatively while considering their own culture superior to others. In the third phase of minimization of cultural differences, ethnocentric people see the cultural differences less important than cultural similarities and maintain the central role of one's own cultures.
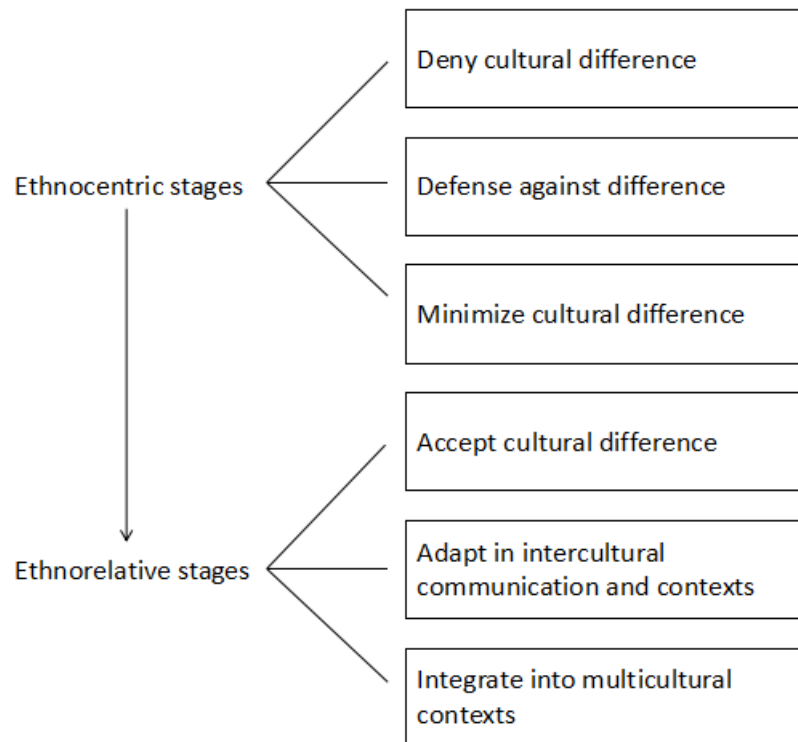
Figure 1: Intercultural Sensitivity Developmental Processes based on Bennett

Compared with ethnocentrism, ethnorelativism, however, recognizes cultural differences. People going through ethnorelative stages experience various cultures and identify their own culture in this diverse world while gaining intercultural awareness. They accept differences at the first stage of acceptance. Behavioral differences such as languages, nonverbal behavioral differences and value differences are respected, which as a whole tends to contribute to the increase of one's intercultural sensitivity. In the second phase of adaptation, people put their acceptance into practice by developing intercultural communication skills. With a positive attitude towards cultural differences, they show empathy for cultural diversity and contexts, and internalize plural cultural frames of reference. At last, people negotiate and construct their own unique intercultural identities by evaluating intercultural contexts and conducting professional intercultural activities within the ethnorelative phase of integration. For those who feel marginalized by the majority, they may construct their identity initially based on their

original culture and then gradually expand networks in the host culture.

Despite the fact that Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity has been a seminal work in the field of acculturation and received much empirical support, this framework is not immune to criticisms. The factor analyses of intercultural sensitivity in the study of Paige et al. For instance, suggest that the stages of Bennett's model are not stated explicitly enough but are rather represented implicitly. For example, the concept of marginalization needs more elaboration and support. While Bennett believed that marginalization can be constructive integration in certain contexts, he did not explain what these contexts can be in greater detail as well as the differences between successful acculturation and unsuccessful acculturation.

International students as an increasingly popular group have been investigated from the perspective of their acculturation. Their perceptions of ethnocentrism or ethnorelativism influence their use of acculturation strategies. US-based study abroad students' narratives, for instance, showed more use of separation and marginalization acculturation strategies than Erasmus Mundus students (who attended European Union student exchange program), which demonstrated their ethnocentric experiences . Their narratives showed that US study abroad students were more likely to possess minimization perception and denial perception of cultural differences while Erasmus Mundus students showed acceptance of cultural differences and ethnorelative orientation. This example confirms that ethnocentric people are more likely to adopt marginalization and separation acculturation strategies while people with an ethnorelative orientation are inclined to use integration acculturation strategies. Taken these reviews altogether, as an international student myself, I am eager to explore my cultural identity and my use of acculturation strategies.

3. The Case Study

Reflecting on my personal intercultural experience, I found that my practicum a local primary school in New Zealand made a great contribution to my cultural identity construction. During my practicum, I went through the three stages of acculturation, namely the honeymoon stage, culture shock stage and integration stage, where I used assimilation acculturation strategy, marginalization strategy and integration strategy respectively. Thus, in this section, I used three examples to demonstrate these three stages that echo the stages of Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity.

3.1. The Honeymoon Stage

At the very beginning of my visit to the local primary school, I was very curious about what was going on everyday and everywhere. Surprisingly, I saw students sitting on the floor in groups discussing two mathematics questions and helping each other to solve the puzzles while their teachers offered some support. One astonishing point is that students were allowed to sit on the floor in whichever gestures that they were comfortable with. In China, most primary school students have to sit on the chair stiffly with hands crossed before their chest. The flexible learning gestures in New Zealand left me a deep and eye-opening impression. I admired this pedagogical flexibility in a heartfelt way. The other part I fell in love with was the slow pace of teaching and learning. Learners in the primary school in New Zealand can take their time to gain knowledge without fear for time pressure and punishment, in contrast to their counterparts' heavy learning burden in China. The new environment and teaching methods were greatly appealing to me. I felt excited about the host culture and thought that such new teaching methods in New Zealand were to some extent more superior than what I experienced and observed in China.

3.2. The Culture Shock Stage

Although I admired the flexible teaching modes, free and open-mined learning environment in the local primary school, I came across culture shock later on in the same mathematics classroom. Five out of twenty two students were lagged far behind partly because of their prior learning experience, ability or intellectual skills. As a result, the majority of the students waited for teachers to help with those who did not acquire the knowledge comprehensively. They spent around 40 minutes to solve two puzzles that could have been solved using much less time in Chinese contexts. In China, for the sake of the majority of the students, under the pressure of examination, my teachers often chose to guide the majority of the students to solve the puzzles and cannot adequately attend to those falling behind; these teachers may provide private support for those minority students who fail to solve the puzzles after class instead of wasting precious in-class time on waiting for them. In this sense, teaching effectiveness for the majority

can be maximized and the efficiency of the lesson can be ensured. What happened to the mathematical lesson shocked me and I felt powerless in front of such situations because I personally questioned the idea of waiting for every student to catch up in class. Much criticism as our Chinese educational system faces, I do regard it as an effective way to ensure that the majority can receive their best education possible. I started to feel in a dilemma where I disagreed about the teaching method in the host primary school and missed my efficient Chinese educational system and cultural styles. I then adopted marginalization strategy, participating in such teaching activities passively and reluctant to offer comprehensive support for every student including those who had poorer academic performance.

My English language proficiency also influenced my use of marginalization strategy as I believed that I was not proficient in using English and that only native speakers were proficient and legitimate speakers. As a result, language competency posed a barrier for me to have intergroup contact and improve my intercultural competence, and I felt frustrated and marginalized by myself and the host country.

3.3. The Integration Phase

As I had less intergroup contact and began to question my aims to study abroad because of culture shock and language barrier, I tried to find ways for intercultural adaptation and integration. I intended to build up an international viewpoint and gain intercultural competence by making some international friends and learning different things from New Zealand or other countries in the world. My aims ushered me to be open-minded about cultural differences especially about the concept of individualism in the class. I started to embrace such differences, interpret them in certain sociocultural contexts, reconstruct definitions of teaching or other concepts with local people, international students and also my Chinese friends. Gradually I realized that, to local teachers in New Zealand, all students' needs matter and they do not have huge pressure of examination. It partly concerns with its colonial history by Europeans that freedom, individualism and welfare are significant. To Chinese teachers, however, the concept of collectivism is highly valued. Within limited time, we tend to educate the majority of students under the pressure of the examination.

After ongoing observation and communication, including intergroup and outgroup contact, I developed my intercultural sensitivity and integrated myself into the intercultural contexts. I finally came to this conclusion that individuals' needs and class teaching efficiency should be equally important in teaching. This belief motivated me to adopt student-centered teaching approach in my teaching, made me aware of integrating international viewpoints into my teaching in China at the moment. One example is that I conduct needs analysis to listen to every student's needs before lesson implementation and keep a learning journal for them about what they have already acquired, what they need, and what I should consider when teaching them. In this way, I can take good care of every student either in the class or after the class while at the same time paying attention to the overall efficiency in the class to meet the entire class's need for test preparation.

4. Analysis of My Intercultural Experience and Identity

My case study presents great similarity to Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity although my examples did not cover all the stages of acculturation as described in Bennett's model. The case study also shows my use of acculturation strategies based on Berry's model at different stages of acculturation. I built up my intercultural identity throughout my practicum during my study abroad. Therefore, in this section, I tried to analyze my intercultural experiences based on the three examples I gave in the last section and the acculturation theory. I organized my analysis based on three themes in parallel to how I reconstructed my cultural identity in the three stages mentioned above.

4.1. My Cultural Identity That Comes before Ethnocentric Stages

The honeymoon stage in my case does not exactly correspond to any stage of Bennett's model while I consider my cultural identity in this stage as the opposite version of ethnocentric cultural identity. I put higher value on the host culture than my own culture. Somehow I had negative opinions about Chinese educational systems and did not evaluate cultural differences in certain sociocultural contexts. This is opposite to the second stage of defense when ethnocentric people consider their own culture superior to others and defense against cultural diversity. From my example, it can be seen that I was not confident about my own culture and failed to discover the pros and cons of each teaching methods from both China and New Zealand. I adopted assimilation strategy at that primary school in New Zealand. In this sense, I

largely ignored my own Chinese cultural identity and picked up an opposite version of ethnocentric cultural identity, assimilating myself to the local culture.

4.2. Awareness of Chinese Cultural Identity

At the culture shock stage, in contrast to the honeymoon stage and negative opinions towards Chinese culture, I defended for my own Chinese culture and evaluated cultural differences negatively. This stage is similar to the ethnocentric stages (defense against difference and minimize cultural difference). I firmly held the belief that high efficiency within limited time ensures the welfare of the majority of the students in China although the learning opportunity of the minority is sacrificed in the class. All students in New Zealand, however, are treated fairly equally, with every individual's rights best protected in the class. I did not agree with the latter approach and defended against such cultural difference. My inner Chinese cultural identity became salient and was strengthened when faced with this culture shock. In this case, I questioned the western view of teaching as the four international students in Ding's study. This was how I minimized the cultural difference and maintained my own cultures and cultural identity.

Language barrier in this stage also contributed to my construction of Chinese cultural identity as Norton's claimed that language, intertwined with the notion of culture, is interrelated with language speakers' cultural identity. My stereotype about native speakers of English or those who achieve high proficiency in English in the host country influenced my use of separation and marginalization acculturation strategies. I saw those who spoke poor English with features (e.g. accent) from his or her home country including myself unwelcome and powerless in the host country. The unfriendly environment influenced intergroup contact as shown in Brown and Hanna's study, which runs parallel to my less intergroup contact and more outgroup contact at this stage. The unequal power relation that I unconsciously imagined and accepted influenced my cultural identity as an inferior Chinese international student, which is similar to the finding of Baratta's study that "deficient" language users are marginalized within the native speaker community. Although I contested the western hegemonic perceptions during teaching as the four Chinese international students in Ding's study, I unconsciously gave in to such unequal power relations and failed to reconstruct my cultural identity with a positive orientation.

To summarize, the practicum example and the language barrier demonstrate my contradictory cultural identity. One raised my awareness of my own Chinese culture while the other saw myself inferior to those native speakers of English. However, both examples show my use of separation and marginalization acculturation strategies, and my increasing awareness of my local Chinese cultural identity compared with lack of my own cultural identity at the honeymoon stage.

4.3. Integrated International Cultural Identity

At the third stage of integration, I went through three stages of ethnorelativism. I tried to interpret different perceptions and relevant educational practices within its sociocultural contexts. I treated my own culture as equal to other cultures but different from other cultures, which is one of the ethnorelative stage, namely acceptance, as claimed in the study of Tarchi et al. I was capable of understanding that all cultures are equally complex construction of reality as one of a variety of worldviews. In the meantime, I recognized my own culture and appreciated the positive components of the Chinese culture. After the acceptance stage I experienced the adaptation stage where I restarted my intergroup contact in the intercultural context and internalized other cultures and perceptions of teaching. Maintaining original perceptions of education, I understood my colleagues' pedagogical approach, in similar ways as suggested in Kelly's study, and extended my understanding of education: both individual student's need and efficiency play key roles in teaching. Finally, I integrated this perception of teaching in my educational practices later on. The teaching example I briefly mentioned showed my care for all individual students and also the efficiency for while-class test preparation. In these three stages of ethnorelativism, I reconstructed my cultural identity in overall similar ways according to Bennett's study. This entire process can also be interpreted as "increased maturation" as suggested in Washington-Miller's identity development trajectory model. I increased my intercultural sensitivity while experiencing diverse worldviews and negotiating my intercultural identity as an open-minded Chinese international student and cosmopolitan citizen with comprehensive knowledge of diverse educational situations and global values.

5. Conclusion

After thematic analysis of my case study in a primary school in New Zealand, I realized that my cultural identity is a complicated construct which can be negotiated across time and space, which resonates with previous poststructuralists' study of identity. From a poststructuralist approach, identity serves as a site of struggle. It is multiple and subject to change in different contexts. In my practicum during study abroad, I went through three stages, the honeymoon stage, the culture shock stage and the integration stage while using assimilation, separation/marginalization and integration acculturation strategy respectively. My case study provides empirical support for Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity, especially the ethnorelative phases (i.e. acceptance, adaptation, integration). During these stages, my self identities changed, as a person admiring western cultures much more than Chinese cultures, a Chinese who is proud of the Chinese culture, and a cosmopolitan/global citizen with international viewpoints and openness to diverse cultures.

At the honeymoon stage, I adopted assimilation acculturation strategy because I witnessed and admired flexible and free classroom management in the primary school in New Zealand. I began to criticize the long-existing rigid classroom management in China and failed to realize the contexts of different management methods. The western hegemonic view unconsciously influenced me. Somehow I deprived myself of opportunity to evaluate both cultures objectively and tried to discard my own culture. I thought lowly of my own culture and educational practices. Thus, I made an effort to pick up a cultural identity with western cultures but with unrealistic and prejudiced viewpoints about cultural diversity. With time, I came across culture shock and felt frustrated about cultural diversity. Instead of over-praising the western culture, I missed my own Chinese culture and somehow believed that my own Chinese culture was superior to others, which showed my inclination to ethnocentrism. The differences of teaching in terms of individualism and collectivism as shown in my example plus my lack of language competence left me in a dilemma where I resolved to adopt separation and marginalization acculturation strategy. As a result, I had less intergroup contact than outgroup contact, contributing more to my Chinese cultural identity construction with ethnocentric inclination.

At the last stage of integration, I realized my aim to be a global citizen during study abroad, so I tried my best to interpret others' perceptions and behavior from their contexts. Soon, I was aware that our cultures are equally important and relative to one another as claimed in Bennett's study. I was able to accept these cultural differences and recognize the equal status of each culture including my Chinese culture. I began to share my own values and practices, gaining a sense of security and legitimacy in the host community. At the ethnorelative phase of adaptation, I adapted myself to the intercultural contexts and collaborated well with others from diverse cultural backgrounds after clarifying our cultural differences about the concept of education and its practices. This positive adaptation also helped me to integrate into the host country and international communities in a positive way. Towards ethnorelativism, I developed my intercultural knowledge and competence, reconstructing my intercultural identity as an open-minded Chinese international student and teacher in the future with advanced knowledge and international communication skills.

6. Limitations of This Study

This study mainly reviewed my practicum experience as a Chinese international student in New Zealand. It focused on how I developed my intercultural sensitivity and negotiated my intercultural identity in such an environment. I spent efforts in analyzing and organizing my narratives in a trustworthy manner drawing on Berry's model of acculturation and Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. My personal biases and lived experiences influenced this study and cannot be removed from my narratives and analysis. Further research on narratives of international students can be done in a more thorough and triangulated way. Moreover, it was hard to identify definite results and/or conclusions within this study. As identity is not a fixed construct, my findings of my cultural identity could be updated over time and across different spaces.

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