

Qualitative Interview Study of International Students' Ethnic Identity Development Based on Phinney's (1990, 1993) Model of Ethnic Identity Development Theory

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Abstract: International students is a high-risk group facing psychological problem due to the stress they experience during the adjustment in a foreign country, and ethnic identity has been shown as a key point associated with international students' psychological well-being and psychosocial adjustment. This study shares results of a qualitative interview study with four international undergraduate students studying in US. by using Phinney's (1990, 1993) Model of Ethnic Identity Development to identify themes about how international student's experience in host country influence their transition of ethnic identity development. In order to enhance international student ethnic identity development and help them address psychological problem, this study explores the factors that influence international students' ethnic identity development. This study draws on study findings to generate discussion and recommendations for counselors and student affairs practitioners who provide support to international students with acculturative stress, and intend to create healthy, diverse campus environments to enhance student identity development.

1. Introduction

A stronger ethnic identity is associated with a greater psychological well-being, a higher self-esteem, coping, and optimism, and a better academic achievement [14]. For students who identify with minoritized ethnic groups, addressing this question is more complicated and perhaps more urgent than it is for members of majority groups, as they may face some form of stereotyping and discrimination on campus [15]. As a minoritized group in college campus, growing numbers of international students are making the decision to study abroad. International students who understand the role of ethnic identity for themselves and showed commitment to learning more about their background tended to report better psychosocial adjustment [7].

In order to enhance international student ethnic identity development and help them address psychological problem, I propose to explore the factors that influence international students' ethnic identity. The purpose of this study was to explore the ethnic identity formation and development of four college international students, what identity challenges they encounter, and what factors influence their ethnic identity development. In this report I tell the stories of the students I interviewed, analyze and give meaning to the students' stories by using the profession's knowledge base. Then, I evaluate the theory and share how the findings fit the stories of students.

2. Method

2.1. Participant

The participants in this study were four undergraduate students who ranged in age from 18-23 years old. I wanted to represent both males and females, both freshmen and junior or senior student, and students came from different countries. I selected one student was a female freshman from China (Ming) majoring in pre-nursing; one was a male junior from Korea (Dave) majoring in hospitality; one was a female freshman from the republic of Congo (Mandy) majoring in economic; and one was

a male senior (Yu) from China majoring in horticulture. All participants were international students with F1 visa in a University of the USA and speak English as second language. Pseudonyms are used in this report to protect their confidentiality.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were selected through convenience sampling [1]. In this approach, the sample is collected on the basis of convenience. The participants were informed that pseudonyms would protect their confidentiality in this report. I conducted the interviews and met with each student once to discuss their ethnic identity development. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and was kept detailed notes.

I used the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney,1992) and a semi-structured interview together. The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney,1992) was administered and scored according to recent studies of adolescents from diverse backgrounds [16]. The revised MEIM consists of 12 items rated on a 4-point scale (1 =strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). 5 items test the ethnic identity search (or exploration); and 7 items test the ethnic identity commitment. The first part of the interview was a demographic inquiry, asking for age, gender, home culture, major and how long the respondent had been living and studying abroad. The second part of the interview inquired the participants' ethnic identity and ask them to indicate how their identity is different now as compared to prior to coming to the US. These questions were open ended questions, storytelling interview style which allowed the participants to share any experiences they desired to share in a storytelling form. This gave the participants a chance to reflect on their past identity and what has changed.

3. Data Analysis

I had to be careful when analyzing the data because of my own subjectivity. As I read the notes and analysis the participants' stories, I intentionally avoided relying on my own interpretations based my studying abroad experience. I filtered data into themes according to my theoretical framework, which consisted of Phinney's (1990, 1993) model of ethnic identity development theory, and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure [3]. The professional literature helped me interpret and give meaning to their stories as well as identify the major themes.

4. Result

4.1. Ethnic identity formation took place in the host country

During this interview, all of the participants were struck by the same question "What did your ethnic identity mean to you before you came to the U.S.?" and then they answered "nothing special" or "I haven't thought about this issue before I came to here." When they were requested to recall how they identify themselves before studying abroad, none of them have explored the feelings and attitudes regarding to their own ethnic identity, ethnicity has been seen as a nonissue before they study abroad.

All of the participants have lived in their home country before coming to the US. For most of them, it was their first time living abroad. As these 3countries they came from are all not diverse countries as the US. is, people surrounded them are all from their home country, have same ethnic identity and share same culture, according to Roysirea Sodowsky & Maestas (2000), ethnic identity formation is possible only in the context of both the dominant and non-dominant societies [2]. In other words, the process of ethnic identity formation can only take place in a bi-cultural or multi-cultural society. People give ethnicity little to no meaning in their lives and are not likely to feel motivated to explore it unless they are in social contexts that identify them as a minoritized group.

They become increasingly aware of ethnic identity issues as they were studying abroad. When we talked about the hardships have encountered in academic and social life, the junior Chinese male participant Yu referred to his awareness of ethnic identity during the transition:

In China, I belong to a majority group, most people in China are Chinese, especially in my hometown (small city), only a few people from other countries. As you know in China, studying to the US is not an easy thing for common families and general students. Chinese students who can come to the US to study must be part of the privileged group, not only have good academic achievement but also their family can afford the high tuition and life expense (wealthy family). I am the only one male offspring in my family, my parents have very high expectation and gave me all support to studying abroad, I did well in school and I was popular among my friends. When I just came to SDSU, in a sudden, all of my advantages disappeared, I started to realize the majority is white people, as a Chinese, I became a minority. It was very hard to deal with this change.

4.2. Negative perception of ethnic identity

Individuals might have positive or negative perceptions of their ethnic group depending on the images that they have been exposed to. The feelings of identification and belonging associated with membership in an ethnic group tend to lead to increased welfare and improved self-concept in persons of color [8]. However, if the dominant European American society holds negative evaluations of people of color, those targeted people of color may develop negative feelings towards being associated with their ethnic group. People of color who attempt to overcome this negative evaluation by identifying with the dominant European American society at the expense of ethnic group identification.

Ming is a female freshman participant from China. As we talk about influence of Chinese identity to her academic and social life, she reported:

I prefer the teaching style in the US, the professor always ask some questions related to our own experience which is not hard to answer, even though you're not smart and don't know the theory, you have something to share. Whatever you shared, others like to encourage you. But in China, most questions asked in class are very hard and deep or have a correct answer, no one feels confident to answer and we have to consider to avoid being judged by the professor and classmates. As same as in academic, in China, people like to judge others' behavior even dress. But in US, I can feel more free to dress like "crop top" without thinking I don't have a good shape.

Ming believed that her identity in an educational setting impacted her in a negative way when she tried to adjust to American academic evaluation. She recalled her studying experience in China, and said students rarely speak in class unless you are asked a question, therefore, Chinese students are very obedient in class and she viewed her studying behavior as being very passive which has a negative impact on her present studying in the US. She was struggling with initiative, divergent and critical thinking. She seems have experienced little pride of her own ethnic identity during the process of acculturation so far.

Mandy is another female participant, she is a freshman from the republic of Congo. From Mandy's answers of my question, I found she has little to no pride of her own identity. She hated the excessive judgment of women's appearance in her culture, such as, women who are wearing shorts will be regarded as dissolute, but she also can't stand intimate behaviors she saw American couple did in public place. And she also reported the teachers and classmates in her country like to judge others' opinion which let her feel afraid to express her view or answer the questions. In addition, she attributed some of the difficulties she encountered to international student status (can't work off campus due to visa status issue), such like hard to find a part-time job to afford her life expense. After she graduates she is going to live with her parents in the US. or Canada rather than going back to the home country as she wants to give her offspring good education without paying much for the tuition. And her parents agree with her plan and support her, but they haven't had ideal about changing nationality. Interestingly, when I try to let her think about any positive influence of her ethnic identity as African on her current academic and social life, she had no ideal about it. Even I told her I feel African friends I have are outgoing and helpful, she still reported that she feels nothing about her ethnic identity helped her with adjustment in the US.

Students become increasingly aware of ethnic identity issues and tend to examine the significance of their ethnic background as their ethnicity is perceived as "less than" by the dominant cultural group.

Positive ethnic identity is important for healthy psychological functioning and enhanced self-esteem [18]. But I found international students especially people of color who is struggling with the hardships of adaptation to the dominant culture rarely experience pride of their own identity, thus it is hard for them to have positive ethnic identity.

4.3. Ethnic identity and acculturation

The degree to which individuals adopt Whiteness (acculturation) and the strength with which individuals retain their culture of origin reveal ethnic identity as a bidirectional system [17]. The processes of ethnic identity formation and acculturation develop simultaneously in which the person of color. The relationship between processes of acculturation and ethnic identity formation can be described as a push-and-pull psychological phenomenon. One feels both the push to acculturate to the dominant society and the pull toward one's own ethnic group. People of color undergo a dual socialization process involving pressure to learn and unlearn two opposing cultural systems [17].

Yu was one of the participants of this study. He is 22 years old from China. Yu has been living and studying in the U.S for close to 4 years. He is completing his Bachelor 's degree next year. After 4 years of living here in the U.S, he still feels more comfortable to get along with Chinese friends, even though, Yu has some American friends and friends from other countries. As I inquired about his relationship with American friends, he replied he can play well with American students, but he didn't want to do something with them like drinking, smoking and using drugs, because he always considered what should do according to Chinese morals and value. He was open-minded to American culture and other cultures, such like, he always tried to learn some slang and jokes his American friends talked together, but he emphasized he used the Chinese moral and value to evaluate which culture is good for him, if it was evaluated as good for him he will learn. When viewing acculturation from a linear, bipolar perspective, sojourners sacrifice home cultural values and ethnic identity for the gain of adopting host society behaviors. Contrasting with this perspective of acculturation, Duan and Vu (2000) elaborated that sojourners acculturated at a functional level but still retained their cultural-ethnic identity. This modality of acculturation was successful when the sojourner had close links with their own ethnic group. Yu is a good example to have successfully acculturation and remain close link and pride of his own ethnic identity. Interestingly enough, Yu has been in charged of some international cultural activities such as China night, he felt proud of Chinese culture and eager to show the Chinese culture to others.

4.4. Self-identity and identity from others

Dubow, Pargament, Boxer and Tarakeshwar (2000) noted that ethnic identity was guided by self-perceptions and the perceptions of others towards us [11]. Melucci (1996) argued that both auto-recognition (the way people define themselves) and hetero-recognition (the way others define them) influence the stability of identity. As I mentioned before Ming is a freshman, but it is not her first time living in the US, she has studied in a high school in Denver and has lived in a home-stay American family for almost one year before studying in SDSU. She identified herself as Chinese, but she felt it has been changed a little by the influence of the identity from others to her. She said her home-stay American family parents identified her as a typical teenager same as American teenagers, some Japanese friends identified her as a Japanese, some Korean friends identify her as Korean, and her Chinese friends thought she was not a typical Chinese girl. She said she started to think about her identity as Asian or multicultural.

Except Ming, other three participants have much more friends from same country. The Korean male participant Dave has studied in here for 3 years. Nevertheless, this did not affect how he identifies himself. He believed that though he lived here for 3 years, he still felt strongly about his Korean identity. He concluded that it might be because fellow Korean friends always surround him, his close friends are all Korean, and his Korean friends would also identify him as a Korean man.

4.5. Transnational social interactions and ethnic exploration

Ethnic identity development should be primarily understood as a multidimensional process [5],

largely influenced by the social context [12]. Ethnic identity does not develop in isolation or result from internal processes, but as part of an adolescent's reaction and resulting interaction with the social environment. The previous studies emphasized the parental influence on ethnic identity exploration for people of color. But for international students, most of them go abroad alone without parents' accompany, the social network have much more influence than parental influence so it become the key factor of ethnic identity development for international student.

From the MEIME engagement in some form of exploration includes an interest in learning more about one's culture and actively involving oneself in activities such as talking with others about ethnicity, thinking about both the current and future effects of one's ethnicity. The students with the highest rates of interaction with locals are significantly correlated with ethnic exploration suggesting a link between students' transnational social interactions and their ethnic identifications.

Ming is living with an American girl now in the student resident hall, she reported that her roommate has learned Chinese for several months by herself for the plan to study in China some day and she is so interested in Chinese culture, Ming reported that in order to explain Chinese culture to her roommate, she had learned more about her ethnic background which provided her an opportunity to explore her ethnic identity and gave her chance to reconsider the multiple interpretations of her ethnicity. Student interviews point to institutional factors that lead to more or to less interaction with local populations. host family, student dormitory, or co-national rentals were reported to be essential in a students' ability to make local contacts. Transnational relationships in student dormitory offer rich opportunities to explore ideological shifts regarding ethnic identity.

Yu, Dave and Grace both reported that they had American roommates, but they didn't have close friendship, their roommates didn't have any interests about other culture, and they already had their American friends. All of the 4 participants have more transnational relationships with other international students rather than local ones. Korean students Dave reported:

My English wasn't too good, but it was enough to talk with some Chinese and Indian students. They were so friendly because we all were kind of lost together in the beginning... the American students already had their friends, and it is so hard for me to build friendship with a group of American they had already known each other. My American roommate is so friendly to me, but he seems to prefer to hang out with his American friend and he also lived outside of resident hall with his girlfriend.

In terms of being friend with locals, some research outlines social orientation toward interdependence that can accentuate cultural differences thus influencing students' preferences for operating among co-nationals with similar social codes. International students found themselves in the similar context of being outsiders together, whereas the local students seemed to rely on their pre-established social ties. Faced with the challenges of preserving ethnic identity within their original culture, international students have to come to terms with hetero-recognition resulting from their interactions with the host society [13]. This adjustment is a difficult process, leading to their search for safe social interaction with other international students.

As I mentioned before, Yu has in Charged of China night, it is also a good chance for him to explore his ethnic background, he said he wants to show the Chinese modern culture instead of old impression people had about China, this kind of opportunity made he feel proud of Chinese culture and eager to show the Chinese culture to others by learning more. Engagement on campus activities with a multicultural group may increase ethnic exploration.

5. Discussion

Grace's MEIM result is much different from other participants. She selected neutral to the following items: (1) I have strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group (2) I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me. (3) I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group. (4)I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background and she selected disagree to the item that "I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group." These 5 items are all used to test the ethnic identity commitment. Grace's situation might fit into the Moratorium stage of Phinney's ethnic identity

model. Ming and Yu showed similar results in the MEIM with both high levels of commitment and exploration of ethnic identity. According to Phinney's ethnic identity mole, I discovered that they were moving toward or already in the ethnic identity Achievement stage. For Dave's result, He selected neutral for the item "I have a clear sense of my ethnic back ground and what it means for me" and the item "I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me." In addition, he showed lower agree for most ethnic identity search (or exploration) items.

While applying Phinney's three-stage model of ethnic identity, the first stage: unexamined ethnic identity (Diffusion -Foreclosure) fit well with all of the four international students' ethnic identity stage before came to the US. They have not explored feelings and attitudes regarding their own ethnicity. Ethnicity may be seen as a nonissue, which leads them to neither explore identity nor commit to one (diffusion), Students become increasingly aware of ethnic identity issues as they face situations moving them to exploration. The experience may be harsh, such as an encounter with overt discrimination or harassment, or it may be more indirect, such as gradual recognition that their ethnicity is perceived as "less than" by the dominant cultural group. Phinney's model also fit well with the stage of Mandy's ethnic identity, as a people of color, her ethnicity is perceived as "less than" by the dominant cultural, as a result of this awakening, she began an ethnic identity search, but are not yet committed to her identity group. Ethnic Identity Achievement: the last stage of Phinney's ethnic mode fit well with Yu's ethnic identity, He achieved a healthy bicultural identity. He resolved identity conflicts and come to terms with ethnicity in the sociocultural and historical context in which he live. He gain a sense of ethnic identification while being open to other cultures. In addition, Combined Ming's MEIM result with her story I listened, I put her also in the Moratorium stage of Phinney's ethnic identity model and she is moving closely to the ethnic identity achievement stage. Although Ming is a freshman, she is the only one participant who has stayed in the US before college, compared with other first-year international students, she has had more experience contact with local people and had close relationship with local people, she has sought more information about her ethnic group while attempting to understand the personal significance of ethnic identity. I can't find a stage from Phinney's ethnic model to describe Dave's ethnic identity stage with commitment but no or less exploration. Dave suspects local students in class avoid being in a group with him because the instant they see that he is an Asian, they assume that there will be language barrier. Therefore, he often times struggles with finding a group mate, and worries about the misunderstanding during teamwork. I think the reason for his lack of exploration of his ethnic identity is because he somehow avoids interacting with local people, including American classmates as he felt the misunderstanding would happen and he would be isolated or hurt.

6. Conclusion

Using the profession's knowledge base helped me better understand students' ethnic identity development. The application of ethnic identity development research is important for me and other student affairs practitioners and educators who want to foster meaningful experiences to help students form healthy identities. Knowing how these identities develop while international students studying abroad, the impact it has on international students' development and factors influencing ethnic identity development among international students could be very useful in providing services to international students, and creating healthy, diverse campus environments to enhance their identity development.

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