

## **The Lived Experience of Internationally Mobile Students: A Longitudinal Study**

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### **Abstract**

*In response to calls for more individualized research on international student mobility (ISM), this article reports on a hermeneutic phenomenological study into the lived experience of two participants, one from Inner Mongolia, China and one from Ecuador, who migrated internationally for higher education. Within a constructivist epistemological framework, this study reveals how these participants describe and interpret their international mobility experience across four semi-structured interviews over a ten-year period. Four key themes were identified through interpretive data analysis: (1) study abroad as self-initiated and self-fulfilling; (2) characterizations of key moments shaping the ISM experience (10-year lens); (3) construction of self through international student mobility; and (4) complex perceptions relating to “home.” A key contribution of this research is substantiating how individuals display agency within the context of ISM, both in their practical responses to circumstances and in their growing sense of self-actualization.*

Keywords: hermeneutic phenomenology, international student mobility, U.S. higher education

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### **Introduction**

In line with this special issue’s aim to humanize individuals within the context of internationalization by providing micro-level perspectives, this research article elevates the voices of individuals who have migrated globally for higher education. Literature on international student mobility (ISM) is often focused on mobility trends (Bista, Sharma, & Gaulee, 2018; Choudaha, 2017; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007), internationalization rationales and practices (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit & Altbach, 2021), international students’ migration decisions (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), and challenges around acculturation (Andrade, 2006; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Such research, though valuable, may fail to consider the importance of micro-level perspectives (Fakunle, 2021) and “oversimplify a highly complex and dynamic experience and overlook the concept of ‘self’ in the context of transnational student mobility” (Siczek, 2018, p. 7).

To provide a more in-depth narrative account of this complex phenomenon, this article traces the international student mobility experience of two individuals (one East Asian and one South American) over a ten-year period. This longitudinal study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (van Manen, 2016), an approach rooted in the “lifeworld of lived experience” that invites individuals to describe and intentionally interpret—or make sense of—an experience. Through this study, I sought to understand how these individuals constructed and revealed their international

student migration experiences at four points in time: twice during their first year of study at a private university in Washington, DC, United States (2014); during their final year of university study (2016-2017); and approximately five years after they graduated (2023). These narratives of self over a decade of time help answer my core research question: How do globally mobile individuals describe and interpret their experience with international student mobility over a ten-year life trajectory?

## Literature Review

### Motivation to Pursue Higher Education Abroad: Push-pull Orientations

In research on what motivates students to migrate internationally for higher education, the push-pull model is frequently applied. Mazzarol and Souter's (2002) often-cited research identifies push factors such as seeking a better education or opportunities compared with one's home country as well as pull factors such as the characteristics of the host country and institution. A more recent summary of research themes by Shkoler and Rabenu (2023) builds on this framework with an interesting emphasis on the "push" factor of psychological capital (e.g., hope, optimism, efficacy); they also elaborate a series of conditions that moderate decisions to study abroad, including legal considerations, financial resources, and social networks. Gutema, Pant, and Nikou (2023) conducted a systematic literature review of 43 scholarly works published between 2010 and 2022 that further develop the push-pull model by identifying emergent themes in the literature such as betterment of life, return to home country, and the role of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and individual factors. Applying a push-pull framework to ISM decisions, however, has been critiqued as limited because it establishes an incentive/disincentive binary to motivations to migrate for higher education and "frames students and their families as strategic calculating actors" (Lipura & Collins, 2020, p. 354) rather than taking the holistic and nuanced view that can be derived from longitudinal qualitative inquiry into individuals' experiences. A more nuanced view of motivations is reflected in the foundational research for the current study, in which Siczek (2018) drew on data from a series of in-depth interviews with ten international students at a U.S. university and identified three themes common to their decision to study abroad: family influences and interconnectivity, perception of leaving a constrained system, and the pursuit of opportunities. Notably, in their consideration of opportunity, participants ascribed their decision to pursue higher education abroad as a form of "self-actualization and moving beyond the borders of their previous lives" (p. 48).

### Agentive Motivations

The present study is similarly informed by recent scholarly work challenging neoliberal rationales for international student mobility and instead centering identity and self-development in the context of ISM. Fakunle (2021) and Lo (2019) critique the literature's focus on economic and instrumentalist rationales for study abroad, drawing on a capability approach that takes into account student well-being, experience, and capacity to develop in a way that embodies their values and aspirations. Tran's research (2016) characterizes international student mobility as a form of becoming, an "investment in the self" (p. 1269), a construct later theorized as "agency in mobility" (Tran & Vu, 2018). Marginson's work (2014, 2023) has emphasized international students' autonomy and agency as they pursue self-formation. Marginson (2014) notes that when students migrate internationally, they "deliberately alter the conditions of their own self-formation" (p. 6). In calling for more agency-based investigations into ISM, Oldac (2023) emphasizes the importance of positioning international students as individuals who engage in self formation *through* their own agency when they decide to pursue higher education abroad. In line with the premise of the current study, I aim to explore how the sense of self determination that influences the decision to study abroad shapes individuals' larger experiences, actions, and understandings of their mobility over time.

### Approaches to Understanding International Students' Experiences in Higher Education

Despite a growing emphasis on individualized motivations and actions, the literature on the experiences of international students in U.S. higher education tends to focus broadly on challenges and struggles international students face as they acculturate, such as social isolation, stress, language proficiency, and academic adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Brunsting, Zachry, & Takeuchi, 2018; Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). A key flaw in the acculturation literature is its seeming assumption that international students prefer to assimilate to the status quo environment of the host country and institution, which devalues the role of the individual and the ways in which they might demonstrate agency in navigating this new socio-academic terrain and in articulating their own identities (Tulloch, 2018). The theme of agency is echoed in recent editorials calling for research that develops more holistic understandings of international students' self-formation and agency (Oldac, 2023; Page & Chahboun, 2019). To this end, a recent literature review found a growing interest in research on international student agency over the

past 20 years (Inouye, Lee, & Oldac, 2023), emphasizing the importance of foregrounding students' voices in examinations of study mobility with a particular call for more longitudinal studies. Deuchar (2022) similarly calls for a "reanimating" of research into not only international students' experiences but also their practices, allowing scholars to explore the "ethical stances and values that their practices reveal" and recognize "the strength and resilience of the international student body" (p. 514). The present article answers these calls by honoring and examining the lived experiences of study participants over a ten-year period, drawing on qualitative data to deepen and humanize our understanding of international students' migration experience.

## **Methodology**

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Because this qualitative study centers the experiences and perspectives of globally mobile individuals, I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to illuminate what participants share in common as they experience the phenomenon of international student mobility. This research tradition is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and uses interviews to elicit participants' construction of meaning as they describe and interpret their own experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Through this research, I am interested in not only revealing the "essence" of ISM as experienced by participants but also how their "evolving senses of self relate to the communities to which they belong or desire to belong as well as how [they] exercise human agency to construct and negotiate identities across time and space" (Tulloch, 2018, p. 263). This journey of the self is captured in the longitudinal nature of this study and in participants' rich description and interpretation of their ISM experiences over time.

### **Participants**

The phenomenon under consideration for this study was international student mobility, and a direct and sustained experience with this phenomenon was the key criterion for the selection of participants; as Seidman (1998) noted, in in-depth phenomenological research, there can be "enormous power [in] the stories of a relatively few participants" (p. 48). The two participants for the current study, one from Inner Mongolia, China and one from Ecuador, were initially recruited as part of a qualitative study into the lived experience of ten degree-seeking international students in a first-year writing course in a private U.S. university in Washington, DC in 2014. For that study, they participated in a series of semi-structured interviews over the course of an academic semester. They were then re-interviewed at two additional points in time: their final year of study at the U.S. university and approximately five years after they had graduated. When they consented to be a part of the study, both participants selected pseudonyms, Lora and John, which are used to refer to them throughout this article.

### **Researcher Positionality**

In-depth qualitative research necessitates consideration of researcher positionality. My work with international students and my observations of how these culturally and linguistically diverse students navigate higher education certainly influences my understanding of this phenomenon and my stake in this research. In addition, when recruited for the original study, both participants had taken a class in my university program, and one (Lora) had been taught by me, so my position as a U.S. university faculty member—in particular a teacher of English to international students—should be acknowledged. Despite an early power asymmetry, the relationship between me and the participants grew more reciprocal over time, and I believe my stake in the issue came to be viewed a source of trust. More broadly, my approach to this research aligned with van Manen's (2016) claim that subjectivity involves being "*strong* in our orientation to the object of study in a unique or personal way ... avoiding being carried away by our unreflected preconceptions" (p. 20). For me this meant asking open-ended questions without losing focus on the core phenomenon of inquiry, allowing participants to tell their own story of ISM and co-construct knowledge with me, and relying heavily on their own words in categorizing themes and representing key findings.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

As is common practice in hermeneutic phenomenological research, the primary source of data for this study derived from interviews with these participants; through "in-depth and multiple interviews" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79), we can gain deeper insights into what it means to experience a phenomenon such as international student mobility. The first three interviews took place in person during an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved study while participants were pursuing

their undergraduate degrees at the U.S. university. The fourth interview took place on Zoom approximately five years after participants had earned their undergraduate degree and were living in different U.S. cities. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was recorded with the participants' permission. Recordings were then transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. In addition to interview transcripts, complementary sources of data included researcher generated-memos and interview notes as well as participant-written reflections of excerpts from transcripts of their earlier interviews. A summary description of the context for each data source can be found in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:**

*Data Sources and Key Foci*

Data source	Timing	Main aspect(s) of international student mobility targeted
Interview 1	January 2014 (first year of university)	Background, decision to study abroad, initial experiences in U.S. higher education
Interview 2	May 2014 (end of first year of university)	Reflection on decision to study abroad
Interview 3	Winter 2016-17 (final year of university)	Reflection on decision to study abroad
Interview 4	Winter 2023 (approximately five years after graduation)	Reflection on decision to study abroad; description and interpretation of participants' path as it relates to ISM
Reflective participant memo	Winter 2023	Review of ISM related transcripts from interviews 1, 2, and 3 to provide written reflection on any points that strike participants as significant or that they would like to reflect on

Data analysis began with a reexamination of interview data from the previous study (interviews 1, 2, and 3), isolating excerpts of the text that focused on how participants constructed and revealed their international student mobility experience. These transcripts, along with new interview data collected in December 2023 (interview 4) and my notes from all interviews, were then inductively analyzed to identify key themes that embodied participants' experience of ISM as well as "statements or phrases that seem particularly revealing" in shaping our understanding of this phenomenon (van Manen, 2016, p. 93). Through this inductive analysis, four broad themes emerged, which then became my tentative coding structure. For example, theme 1 related to participants' description of the decision to study abroad and how they reflected on it; theme 2 related to information they chose to focus on when describing what shaped their experiences; theme 3 related to how they thought they had grown and changed through ISM; and theme 4 related to what they said about "home."

With this structure in mind, I reviewed interview transcripts multiple times to identify and number (1-4) passages and illustrative quotes that reflected each theme, eventually refining my description of each of the themes. Phenomenological research aims to illuminate the essence of an experience as lived, so it was important that the final description of the four themes reflected key aspects of *both* participants' ISM experiences but were still inclusive enough to incorporate each participant's unique experience/interpretation within each thematic category. Finally, with the four finalized themes in mind, I inductively analyzed the reflective memos generated by participants after interview 4, which enabled me to strengthen my data interpretation and further embed the perspective of participants in this research. Because the voices of participants are key to our understanding of the phenomenon of ISM, the representation of findings contains a number of the direct quotes that were identified in the thematic analysis of data.

## Findings

### Participant Vignettes

This study is premised on humanizing and giving voice to the experiences and perspectives of individuals within the internationalization sphere, so it is important to provide a brief portrait of each of the participants.

#### *Lora*

Lora is originally from Baotou, a city in the Inner Mongolia region of China, and grew up speaking Mandarin. At the time of her first interview in early 2014, she was 19 years old. She is an only child and described her family as "quite normal ... not super rich or super poor," with her mother working as a medical doctor and her father managing a steel company. Lora attended a traditional public high school in her hometown and matriculated in the arts and sciences college of a private university in Washington, DC in 2013—it was her first time in the United States. In 2017, she graduated with a

degree in interior architecture and design and was then accepted to a master's program in architecture. During that degree program, Lora remembers "a lot of late nights staying up until 3:00AM building models" but also notes that that "in the end, it paid off" because she was offered work as an architectural designer. Unfortunately, the year of her graduation coincided with the COVID pandemic, and she ended up moving back to China to be closer to her family—working and living in Shanghai—for several years. At the time of interview 4 in December 2023, Lora was back in the United States on another non-immigrant student (F-1) visa, pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree in New York City because after working in the field of architecture, she was interested in "learning about the business side" of the industry. Her hope is to secure a non-immigrant work (H1B) visa or a permanent resident card, which would enable her to legally work and reside in the United States, and possibly start her own business in the future.

### **John**

John's hometown is Guayaquil, Ecuador, and he grew up speaking Spanish exclusively at home. Like Lora, John was 19 years at the time of interview 1. He is the eldest of three brothers and has an extremely close relationship with extended family. John's family, which he described as being in the "upper class" in Ecuador, was well-traveled, even spending many summers in Miami. They worked in a family-owned shrimp export business that his grandfather had started; John said he "idolized" his grandfather because he only had a third-grade education and started "from the bottom" to "buil[d] an empire" over the course of his life. John also admired his father, who spoke five languages and had lived in a several different European countries. John attended the same school from kindergarten through high school in Guayaquil, an international school offering a Cambridge diploma. After graduating from high school, he matriculated in the business school at the U.S. university with an interest in sports management. John ended up earning his degree in international business marketing in 2017 and worked at a boutique digital agency for the maximum term of one year under the Optional Practical Training (OPT) provision of his student visa. Similar to Lora, John also sought a master's degree, his in project management in New York City. He finished his master's in late 2021 and took a job at an energy management startup. John also got married during 2023 to a woman that he had gone to high school with in Ecuador; they had "reconnected in college" because she was also studying at a nearby university in the United States. They currently live in Boston while his wife is in law school, but he is open to various possibilities in his future. Because John's field is project management, which he describes as "industry agnostic," he sees a lot of opportunities either in the U.S., Europe, or even back in Ecuador.

These profiles reveal the uniqueness of each participant and their contexts, but in consideration of the phenomenological intent of this study, my goal is that the findings of this study illuminate commonly-held experiences and interpretations that relate to participants' decision to pursue higher education in the United States. Through an inductive analysis of transcripts and researcher memos and notes, four key themes emerged: (1) study abroad as self-initiated and self-fulfilling; (2) characterizations of key moments shaping the ISM experience (10-year lens); (3) construction of self through international student mobility; and (4) complex perceptions relating to "home." The final section of the findings section highlights trends in the participant-written memos that were generated at the end of interview 4.

### **Theme 1: Study Abroad as Self-initiated and Self-fulfilling**

An early question from interview 1 during their first year of university study in the United States was what motivated their decision to study abroad. Both participants commented that the decision was self-initiated. Although Lora's parents had never been to the United States, Lora remembered being 16 when family friends, who were U.S. citizens, came to dinner at their home one evening; she was "inspired" by what she learned about their experiences abroad and it reinforced her view that China's colleges were "more like kindergarten." She described the decision to study abroad as her own idea. Although her mother had some hesitancy, her father wanted her to "get a better education and experience more and feel the world" and supported her plan. Once the decision was made that Lora would go to university in the United States, she moved on her own to Beijing and Shanghai, where she studied in preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) for admission to a U.S. university because there were limited opportunities for this kind of preparation in her hometown; in fact, Lora said that "in my hometown, it's not a common thing to go abroad to study." John also indicated his certainty about studying in the U.S. at a young age, in interview 1 commenting that "When I was 14 years old, I told my dad when I grow up, I'm going to go out." When the time came, his parents were highly supportive, recognizing that "in Ecuador, the higher education system is not so good" and that John should expand his horizons. Like Lora, he spent significant time preparing for the SAT and TOEFL, although he had a stronger support system for this from his parents than Lora did. John had some hesitancy about leaving his comfortable life with his family, but in the end, he decided "I have to go...it's the best for me."

Participants were also asked to reflect on this decision in subsequent interviews, and they described what motivated the decision in remarkably similar terms despite the time that had gone by. When asked during interview 2 about the decision to study in the U.S., Lora emphatically had "no regrets." In interview 3 during her final year of university study, she said "I

think it's the best decision I made in my life...I feel like I belong here because people are more open and acceptable, and I can have my own voice here." And even five years after finishing her undergraduate degree, there are echoes of the same: "the best decision I ever made in my life because I wouldn't have grown into the person I am right now...I wouldn't be as brave or be able to take on a lot of challenges if I stayed back home and just listened to what my parents tell me." John characterized his decision in similar terms. In interview 2, when reflecting on the decision to study in the U.S., John said "there couldn't be any better decision." In interview 3 during his final undergraduate year, he was similarly firm about the decision, saying "The best decision I ever made was to convince myself that I need to go out...to go experience something new." By the time of the final interview, which took place ten years after interview 1, John reflected "I think it's the best decision I've made, especially just getting out of my shell from back home ... being able to get everything that I have based on my effort and on what I bring to the table." The consistency of these comments from both participants highlights not only the level of individual initiative that motivated the decision to migrate internationally for higher education but also the sense of personal fulfillment that resulted from this decision.

## Theme 2: Characterizations of Key Moments Shaping the ISM Experience (10-year Lens)

In interview 4, participants were asked to describe three key moments that shaped their international mobility experience. This open-ended question was asked to elicit what stood out in participants' minds as significant or transformative in their overall experience. Table 2 below summarizes their responses, accompanied by illustrative quotes from interview transcripts.

**Table 2:**

### *Characterizations of Key Moments Shaping the ISM Experience (10-year Lens)*

Sub-theme	Lora	John
Developing relationships with diverse international peers	Getting to the university; developing friendships within an Asian American sorority ("I have a lot of friends supporting me and starting to let me be confident.")	Getting to know my friend group ("They helped me detach from my home community.")
Realizations based on challenges	Applying to graduate school in 2016; studying for the GRE and compiling an application portfolio ("I did everything all by myself ... that's honestly one of my greatest achievements.")	Wake-up call before senior year/job pressure; identifying project management career interest ("Nothing is handed to you.")
The effect of external circumstances	Decision to return to China during the pandemic ("It was a very difficult decision to move back to China, and I'm glad that I was able to put myself back together again [afterwards].")	Visa rejection ("I don't belong here unless I earn my way in ... if I want to stay here, I need to put in the work.")

As Table 2 above shows, both Lora and John's responses identified key moments along similar thematic lines, although the specific details were different. For example, each mentioned how pivotal their friend group was to their international student mobility experience, with Lora emphasizing the diverse network of Asian American students she connected with when she joined a sorority and John emphasizing his transition from having a random group of friends during his early university years to developing a tight-knit group of friends from the larger South American community. In both cases, their core social group did not comprise friends from their hometown or even necessarily their home country; John and Lora both grew comfortable and confident as a result of this community support.

Both participants also similarly faced a significant challenge around the end of their undergraduate studies, and the realization gained through this challenge shaped their sense of self and their future trajectory. Lora undertook a very stressful and complicated application procedure for graduate studies in architecture, handling the entire enterprise entirely on her own. Similar to how she prepared for the SAT and TOEFL on her own in China, she managed this challenge independently, feeling a strong sense of accomplishment as a result. John faced a "wake-up call" in his senior year when his friends were getting jobs and he felt he was falling behind. He ended up hustling to get an internship that later turned into a full-time job;

although John was initially a sales marketing intern, through the course of this work, he became intrigued about the role of project managers in the company and thought “I think I will be better there...I like how they are involved, how they plan everything out.” He advocated for a shift in his work responsibilities, which set him on the path for his graduate degree in project management and current career in Boston.

The third pivotal moment participants recounted also shared a common theme: how the effect of an external circumstance—for Lora the COVID-19 pandemic and for John the rejection of his work visa—shaped their ISM experiences. Lora described the decision to return home during COVID as incredibly difficult. Although she wanted to be closer to her family, she ended up being locked down in Shanghai: “I was basically just locked in my home for two whole months and not allowed to step out of my apartment for that entire time.” Lora characterized her feelings after this as similar to “PTSD,” later saying “I’m glad I was able to put myself together again [and] apply for another program here.” She is currently pursuing an MBA degree in the United States. John, after two years of working as an intern and then a full-time employee at a U.S. company, learned that his work visa had been rejected; he said: “Getting that rejection and having to stop work the day after that was such a disappointment and kind of a reality check...I don’t belong here unless I earn my way into it.” The visa rejection prompted John to go back to school for a graduate degree in project management, which led to his current job with the energy management start-up. For both participants, the external setback was met with a pivot that created a new opportunity and extended their paths in the United States.

### **Theme 3: Construction of Self through International Student Mobility**

The third key theme that emerged from data analysis was participants’ growing sense of self through ISM. Although, as can be seen in themes 1 and 2 above, both John and Lora had a clear sense of vision and purpose when it came to ISM—as well as a persistence in working through challenges—both described themselves as shy when they were in high school and indicated that they gained confidence and a stronger sense of self through the experience of ISM. For example, in interview 3 at the end of her final year of university study in the U.S., Lora said she “grew a lot in every aspect... I have become a better person because I have more friends now and I know how to treat other people better and not discriminating [against] other people...opening up to new things...more comfortable with the group I am in right now.” In interview 4, she clearly attributes her growth to her international student mobility experience, noting “being alone in a foreign country at a very early age helped me with my independence and just solving a lot of problems on my own.” For John, the college experience in the U.S. was similarly transformative: “the development that you have as a person in college is tremendous and I’ve seen it in myself...I know how to differentiate myself from the rest of the people...to find what my interests are...what’s my moral compass...how I’ve been able to handle myself in a mature way” (interview 3).

When asked how they had changed as a result of their international student mobility in interview 4, similarly defining features were revealed in the interview data. John described himself as “a completely different person to the kid who came to DC.” Being a planner and having to do things independently—without the help of his parents—enabled him to grow more self-sufficient. John also noted that the experience of migrating internationally for higher education “really, really changes your life and your perspective, your outlook for yourself or where you are in the world as opposed to the bubble where you grew up.” According to Lora, “I have grown tougher...more open-minded...know all kinds of people (diversity)... a completely different person to the kid who came to DC.” While relaying various anecdotes, it was clear that Lora had also become a strong self-advocate, not afraid to speak up; for example, when she went back to China during COVID, Lora said she was able to stand up to her employer on a legal issue, which was something she “learned in America.”

Interviews also reflect a sense of integrity and coherence in participants’ self-perception, one they maintained throughout all of their international mobility experiences. John talked about how important it is to “get your moral compass or rules, your inner rules, set in stone,” and Lora mentioned the importance of “keeping a line in the back of your head” and knowing how to do the right thing. Both seemed to exercise this moral clarity not only as a means of self-actualization but also of self-preservation in the shifting and often challenging context of life outside of their home environment.

### **Theme 4: Complex Perceptions Relating to “Home”**

Another key theme that emerged from data analysis was how each participant characterized “home.” During their first year of study at the U.S. university, both John and Lora talked about trips home, with Lora saying she was “excited” to go home for the summer after her first year and John taking two trips to Ecuador during the school year, for his brother’s first communion and his mom’s birthday. For Lora, however, her views of home became more complex over time. By interview 3 during her last year of undergraduate study, she talked about being “bored and unhappy” while she was in China for that first summer and noted that she had stayed in the U.S. in subsequent summers. Lora said she did not want to stay too long at home because of the pressure to conform in Chinese society and the fact that her family did not seem to understand her anymore, even claiming she was “too Americanized.” Lora’s response to this was “Why would I change

myself only because of other's opinions?" Over time, she grew more resolute in her determination to live in the U.S. permanently, noting "I can't fit in the Chinese society anymore... I'm just not the person who would stay there." John also underwent an evolution in his thinking by the time of his final year of undergraduate study. Like Lora, he saw constraints and pressures within his hometown: "You're restricted to the way society is...you're limited by it, in a good or bad way." And in interview 3 he also observed a growing "cultural difference" between life back home and in Washington, DC, "like you're in no man's land." Unlike Lora, however, for John, Guayaquil was still "home," and he did not want to lose the connection to his culture, so he seemed equally open to a life in the U.S. or a life in Ecuador.

In the final interview ten years after the first one, both participants were asked to describe how their lives would have been different if they had stayed in their home country and not gone to the U.S. for university. In both cases, they narrated details of an imagined life that was routine and boring. John said he would probably have married because "there's nothing to do and [people] just want to get out of their parents' house"; he would also likely be working at his family's company and following the "same routine...eating at the same three restaurants, going around with the same group of people." Lora's imagined life was similar: "I would have married an average guy...working at a government job that I don't like and stuck there, wondering why my life had become like this." They also each brought up—unsolicited—how they would not have developed into the people they became had they not gone abroad for higher education. John commented that if he had simply ended up working for his family's company, he would have a different type of feeling than the one he had now: "a feeling where I would not earn what I had based on my merits, based on my achievement, based on my sacrifice." John felt he would have had "less self-awareness" and "would not have tested himself." Lora similarly emphasized that if she was stuck in that boring job and depressing life in China, she wouldn't be able to "assert" for herself or "be an independent woman."

When it comes to prospects for return, Lora was also adamant that she would not move back to China again. By the time of interview 4 in 2023, Lora asserted that she was "not moving back to China anymore" because she was more accustomed to U.S. culture, had her friend group in the U.S., and had developed her own professional identity and path. John, on the other hand, had married a woman from his hometown in Ecuador and had a sense of obligation toward his family business, so he would consider living in his hometown again but only "on his own merits" and not facilitated by his family name.

### **Looking Back: Participant Reflections on Interview Transcripts**

As a final element of data collection, I invited each participant to review transcripts from interviews 1-3 and share additional reflections on anything that struck them as significant on their ten-year journey with ISM. Interestingly, although language was not the focus of this study, both participants opened their memo by noting that they picked up on improvements in their use of language or ability to express themselves in English over time. It was also evident that their previous responses to interview questions still rang true, even if they would contextualize them differently from a distance. For example, throughout the interviews, both John and Lora commented on their decision to study abroad being self-initiated, but in his reflective memo, John acknowledged the role his father played in realizing his dream: "As much as I was sure I wanted to go, my dad could have just dismissed the idea, and my life would be radically different."

Participants' reflective memos also captured what stood out in the longer-term trajectory of their ISM experience and what was forgotten or seen as funny or a minor blip. Lora said reading the transcripts of the earlier interviews felt like "living through the moments of my college life again, seeing the clips of the situation I described I was in at each time. I feel I can see myself growing and changing a lot throughout the years." John noted that "Some of these day-to-day struggles are fun anecdotes now but back then I was annoyed." They also viewed the interview transcripts as a lens for understanding their current lives, for example by emphasizing missed opportunities—or turning points—that they did not necessarily notice while they were happening but that shaped the trajectory of their lives in significant ways. For Lora, these examples included her independent management of graduate school applications and her return to China—and the subsequent lockdown—during COVID, which led her to realize "I can only thrive in America." Despite this realization, upon returning to the United States in 2023, she felt "everything is harder this time around." For John, he noted that changing his major from sports management to marketing represented a "reality check" that later helped him settle into what he called a "more stable career path." Both participants also emphasized the legal challenge of seeking work in the United States post-graduation and what they wished they had known about visa-related work opportunities earlier in their undergraduate studies. For both participants, the obstacle of getting a work visa was met with determination and resilience, as reflected in Lora's comment that even though U.S. citizens have a clear advantage in being hired, "my education and professional experience did prepare me to deal with tough situations, so I am not lost and afraid as when I just started college ten years ago."

Some of the tension around "home" that I elucidated in theme 4 of my findings was also prominent in these reflective memos. When reflecting on interview 1 from January 2014, John mentioned "It's funny how excited I was to go back



[home] for the first time and see my friends, but as the years started to pass, I started to go less and less and the time I spend there is mostly with my family now.” The locus of his life also shifted once John married, and his decisions about where to live—and why—are now considered through this lens. As evidenced in the interview transcripts, John’s main struggle with identity, in fact, seemed related to distinguishing himself from his family on his own terms. Lora, on the other hand spent more time reflecting on her identity and acknowledged it as an ongoing struggle in the interviews as well as her reflective memo:

I think over the years I had a lot of struggle about my identity as a Chinese person being an international student in America. I like American culture, but apparently, I am not a U.S. citizen, so I face a lot of struggles as a lot of international students face. Some think I am not American enough and some think I am not Chinese enough. Sometimes I feel rejected by both worlds. But I somehow just have some blind optimism and confidence coming out of nowhere that support me through these struggles. I think I will be able to get what I want and find my place and my own identity in America one day as long as I don’t give up and just keep working towards it.

I include this long quote as the final point of my findings section because it not only captures who Lora *is* but also powerfully captures hermeneutic phenomenology’s balance of description and interpretation of an experience as lived.

## Discussion

This study explored how globally mobile individuals described and interpreted their experience with international student mobility over a ten-year period. Because it applied a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach, the findings articulate commonly- shared experiences and understandings with the aim of characterizing the ISM phenomenon more broadly. Four thematic findings were identified through interpretive data analysis: (1) study abroad as self-initiated and self-fulfilling; (2) characterizations of key moments shaping the ISM experience (10-year lens); (3) construction of self through international student mobility; and (4) complex perceptions relating to “home.” The qualitative and longitudinal nature of this research enabled me to trace these themes over time, with participants making deeper meaning of the experiences—and their self-understandings—at various stages in their lives.

The findings of this study generally align with a push-pull motivation for pursuing higher education abroad (Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, 2023; Shkoler & Rabenu, 2022; Mazzarol & Souter, 2002) as both participants and their families saw constraints and limitations in their respective home country’s higher education system as well as better academic and professional opportunities in the United States. However, a key finding of this research was that the decision to study abroad emerged from an individual desire to broaden their horizons, experience something different, and expand their own capacities in ways that were meaningful to them, which is reflected in recent research conceptualizing a “capability approach” as opposed to a market-driven one in considering rationales for international student mobility (Fakunle, 2021; Lo, 2019); a capability approach takes into account multiple and overlapping influences on ISM, including “educational, experiential, aspirational, and economic” (Fakunle, 2021, p. 683) with a focus on individual well-being.

This individual-level research also reveals the extent to which deeply personal motivations drove the decision to study abroad. Both Lora and John describe the idea as self-initiated, one they carried to their parents who—despite some initial hesitation—supported and helped facilitate the decision. In neither case was there a sense of familial pressure or even peer pressure, and the sense of agency participants applied to the decision-making and preparation for going to university in the United States became a driving force that shaped their entire ISM experience. Data analysis for this study also conveys the self-awareness and agency these individuals demonstrated in navigating their transnational experiences in transformative ways, as illustrated in how participants overcame challenges, displayed resilience, made independent decisions, and negotiated their identity across time and space (Tulloch, 2018). This aligns with recent research emphasizing self-actualization (Siczek, 2018), becoming (Tran, 2016), agency in mobility (Tran & Vu, 2018), and self-formation (Marginson, 2014, 2023) among international students. Reflecting Marginson’s (2014) point, in the context of ISM, Lora and John acted as “self-forming agents [who] choose their agendas from the menus of the possible” (p. 11).

In a ten-year journey like this, it is natural that stresses related to adjustment would be evident in participants’ characterization of the experience, but a key benefit of longitudinal studies like this is that we can see the extent to which these stressors endure over time. One point of difference from some of the acculturation literature in which international students report feeling socially isolated or having negative cross-cultural interactions (Andrade, 2006; Brunsting, Zachry, & Takeuchi, 2018; Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015) is that participants recalled finding a home with a set of peers that was neither from the dominant domestic student population nor from their home country as a key factor that shaped their experience—even five years after completing their undergraduate studies. They indicated that this gave them a stable support network of peers who had a comparable understanding of how it feels to be in-between as an international student. This is an area of inquiry I would encourage future longitudinal

qualitative research in, for example considering shifting patterns of peer interconnectivities during international students' term of study and the extent to which peer networks are sustained over time.

Another sustaining factor in both participants' ISM experience was a highly grounded sense of self, in other words the manner in which both participants were guided by their "moral compass." This was evident in their determination to study in the U.S. as teenagers and the numerous ways they demonstrated self-sufficiency and agency across multiple points in time and experiences. This links to Deuchar's (2022) caution not to consider international students' a "vulnerable group" but instead to recognize the myriad ways these diverse students demonstrate agency in the "ethical stances and values that their practices reveal and articulate [and] the strengths and resilience of the international student body" (p. 514). The findings of this study also affirm calls for centering international students' voices and actions in research on ISM (Deuchar, 2022; Inouye, Lee, & Oldac, 2023; Oldac, 2023; Page & Chaboun, 2019).

One particularly interesting finding was the extent to which external factors shaped participants' international mobility experience. Research on international students' motivations has discussed legal considerations (Shkoler & Rabenu, 2023), and visa-related issues have been found to mediate individuals' ISM experience (Crumley-Effinger, 2023). The findings of this study substantiate these impacts; visa issues were invoked across multiple interviews, and for both Lora and John legal requirements were the source of challenge and disappointment. Yet at the same time, the legal setbacks John and Lora encountered were converted to opportunities, demonstrating their commitment to realizing their academic and professional goals in the United States and the agency they demonstrated as they navigated these challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on Lora's ISM trajectory and is starting to become a generative area of inquiry (e.g., Bista, Allen, & Chan, 2022) and a worthy phenomenological pursuit. In the context of this study, however, it is important to note that—despite the geographical and emotional dislocation of moving back to China during the pandemic—Lora was persistent in finding her way back to herself and to the life she aspired to in the United States. And although both participants independently and proactively managed these and other challenges to chart their own path, it should be noted that they were undergirded by familial and financial support that other international students may not have access to.

Although some of previous research emphasizes how earning a degree abroad improves one's capacity and prospects upon return home (Gutema, Pant, & Nikou, 2023), the findings of this study revealed how complex that homecoming can be. For Lora in particular, the distance between who she had become and the expectations of her home country had become insurmountable. Although John traveled home significantly less often as time went by, his strong ties to family and the fact that he had married a woman from his hometown, made him open to the prospect of return some time in the future. Having said that, John was determined that his return would be in his own terms, earned through his own efforts, rather than facilitated through his family name. We see in these individuals' descriptions and interpretations the complex interplay of factors that shaped their consideration of return to their home country, including their sense of identity vis-à-vis their home communities

### **Implications and Conclusion**

With the goal of humanizing and giving voice to individuals' experiences with internationalization, this research elevates the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have pursued higher education in the United States to answer the research question: How do globally mobile individuals describe and interpret their experience with international student mobility over a ten-year trajectory? The overarching finding is that these participants demonstrate self-awareness and agency in navigating their international student mobility across multiple points in time and experiences. This sense of agency is embodied both in their practical responses to circumstances as well as in their growing self-actualization. Because I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the research, I was able to isolate key themes that characterized the experience for both participants, adding to our understandings of ISM and providing a framework for future research that further explores the themes that were identified in this study. The present research study also expands the research base on ISM because of the scope of time and experience it covers as well as the significant input of study participants in constructing and revealing their international mobility experiences. Encapsulating a key contribution of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, van Manen (2016) notes "The essence and nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows is the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner" (p. 10). It is my hope that because participants' voices and interpretations are so deeply embedded in this article, it will fulfill this key goal of phenomenological research and illuminate readers' understanding of what it means to "live" the experience of international student mobility.

Within the larger context of internationalization at national and institutional levels, international students are often regarded generically, for example as data points or subjects of acculturation. Motivations for pursuing higher education abroad also tend to be represented generically, for example with a focus on instrumentalist or economic rationales. This research helps us consider internationalization at the individual level, with participants' motivations to study abroad described as highly personalized as well as consistently rendered across multiple points in time. Both participants also

demonstrated a clear commitment to *remaining* in the United States after their graduation and persisted in this goal despite the challenges they faced. Seeing their experience through this longer-term lens provides insights that would be lost had the research only focused on a narrower period of time during their undergraduate studies in the United States.

These narratives capture what these individuals have gained through a ten-year trajectory of their ISM experiences: confidence, self-awareness, agency, and resilience. At the same time, this research reveals complicated understandings of what was left behind, especially regarding participants' changing perception of home. For John, his life no longer centered on his family and home community in Ecuador, but marrying a woman from his hometown opened back up a path for him to live there again. Lora's ties to home—with the exception of her relationship with her parents—became increasingly tenuous, so much so that she never wanted to return to live in China. In both cases, however, participants made decisions on their own terms as they navigated their ISM and post-graduation experiences and identities over time. In line with the purpose of this special issue, these micro-level perspectives reinforce the transformative potential for self-development through international student mobility.

In terms of limitations, although both participants came from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds—Lora from a region of China in which few students pursue education abroad and John from South America—both had the financial and familial support to matriculate in a private university, pursue graduate-level education in the United States, and weather a number of challenges. Also, despite the fact that the interviews allowed for a deep and substantive phenomenological exploration of their lived experience with ISM, this study only involved two participants. Future qualitative research would benefit from drawing on a broader range of participants from a variety of diverse backgrounds and in a variety of study abroad settings to further conceptualize the phenomenon of international student mobility. I also recommend continuing to explore the important role identity, agency, and understandings of self play in individual experiences, in particular by focusing on in-depth longitudinal research as opposed to point-in-time studies of what it means to be an international student. Finally, I'd like to conclude by honoring the input of my participants. Their willingness to participate in interviews with me across a ten-year time span and the perspectives and insights they shared elucidate this experience and add to our collective understanding of the phenomenon of international student mobility, and this research would not have been possible without them.

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