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Inside the International Student World: Challenges, Opportunities, and Imagined Communities

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ABSTRACT

Substantial research emphasizes recruitment and retention of international students over their lived experiences. This qualitative study employed a sociocultural lens to explore five international graduate students' lived experiences in the United States and their postgraduation plans. Findings suggest that international graduate students navigate a World that encompasses individual worlds that revolve around challenges, opportunities, and imagined communities. I draw on Gee's (2014) notion of capitalizing a word normally written in lower case to make clear two differing connotations of the word "world." I discuss implications for higher education host institutions and their offices of international education.

Keywords: challenges, identities, imagined communities, international student, opportunities

INTRODUCTION

> Jean, I don't know about you, but I feel like I have no time to do everything that I'm supposed to do. […] I have my own world and people cannot understand that because people think there is this nice one world that all international students live in. No. Each international student has a world; not even one world but different individual small worlds that you have to navigate. —*Cyr*

Although the number of international students in the United States from 2017–2018 to 2018–2019 increased by only 0.05% (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019), the United States continues to host more international students than any other

country globally (IIE, 2019; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). IIE (2018) reported that 1,094,792 international students studied in the United States in 2017–2018. Such significant numbers have been the result of many U.S. educational institutions efforts "to attract quality [international] students" (Srivastava et al., 2010, p. 1561), but navigation of the new world is often the responsibility that each international student has to take individually since "far less attention is paid to the experiences of international students once they arrive at the host institution" (Lee, 2006, p. 3). Following the epigraph above, "world" appears to have different meanings when referring to experiences of international students. Gee (2014) explained two core meanings for the term "discourse" by capitalizing or lowercasing the "d." Drawing on Gee's (2014) letter manipulation practice, I capitalize World when referring to the imaginary or conceptual World.

World, with a capital W—or the Big World, refers to the general World in which people, other than international students themselves, may provide meaning. This is a World imagined or perceived by students' home country circles (e.g., family, friends, colleagues) with all the assumptions they may have. It is the vague, collective, and wonderful World perceived about the host country; one that does not include individual lived experiences. This ideal World is not the focus of this study, however. This study explores the lowercase world: a personal, contextual, and experiential world that includes the "inner world" of the international student where "fears and unreasoning joyousness, fantasies, and intuition move and speak" (Igoa, 2014, p. 46). This world is unimaginable or inconceivable to anyone other than the international student.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International education program management (e.g., recruitment, retention) has received much attention in the literature (e.g., Bista & Foster, 2011; McFadden et al., 2012) when compared to studies of the lived experiences of international students. Studies that have examined international students' experiences (e.g., Mak et al., 2015; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Zhang & Zhou, 2010) have addressed international students' (dis)satisfaction with their lives and/or learning in host countries.

To gain a deeper understanding of international students' worlds and how their worlds impact their identities, this study analyzes the reported experiences of five international graduate students. International students as participants in this study were nonnative speakers of English who traveled to the United States for the purpose of pursuing higher education. Unpacking their worlds can benefit prospective international students regarding ways to navigate their stay in the United States. This may also benefit host institutions that aspire to improve their international education programs and services.

Researchers such as Andrade (2006) and Knight (1997) have emphasized the rationales for studying in different countries, whereas other research has pointed to the assumptions and benefits of international education (see Ryan, 2012; Williams, 2009) or the challenges that international students have to overcome (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Norris and Dwyer (2005) noticed that people have long held many

untested assumptions regarding international students' experiences. It is often assumed, for instance, that international students have exposure to the natural language of native speakers in the host country, an exposure that is believed to help them enhance the new language apace (Kaya, 2014; see also Altbach & Knight, 2007) and develop intercultural competence ("the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations," Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–248). Pedersen (2010), however, reminded us that simply being abroad for academic study "is not sufficient toward facilitating the larger goal of creating effective global citizenship" (p. 71).

International students often face challenges. They experience communication issues (Windle, Hamilton, Weng, & Yang, 2008), failure in socialization (Suspitsyna, 2013), loneliness and difficulty in making friends (Arthur, 1997; Williams & Johnson, 2011), and culture shock (Althen & Bennett, 2011). Khanal and Gaulee's (2019) review suggested that international students suffer psychological strain and express feelings of rejection, isolation, loneliness, tiredness, and stress. Relatedly, Arthur (1997) stated that "the experience of many international students is that developing friendships with local students is a difficult and often disappointing experience" (p. 266). In spite of potential challenges, international students develop leadership and global citizenship abilities. With reference to their competence, the Institute of International Education (2014) maintained that international students often become diplomatic and peace leaders.

The U.S. National Survey of Student Engagement (2016) identified studying overseas as a high-impact practice characterized by "enriching educational experiences that can be life-changing" (p. 15). International student experience can be associated with cultural immersion and second language acquisition (Ryan, 2012), multicultural encounters, intercultural competence development, learning, independence (Williams, 2009), and personal growth (Marginson, 2014). Paige et al. (2009) found that studying in a different country had the strongest impact on the academic experiences of alumni, and it impacted their engagement in international issues. Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) drew on Rimer (2004) to stress the importance of international education, emphasizing that Harvard University made a point of having more students study in different countries in order for students to become more informed and effective global citizens.

Both international students and host countries can "benefit from the enriched learning and social environment that results from intercultural interaction" (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007, p. 91). International students often become sources of the kind of linguistic, cultural, and educational diversity sought by higher education institutions (Bista & Foster, 2011; Trice, 2001). Studying abroad, what Hopkins (1999) called "a healthy dose of experiential learning" (p. 36), can involve an experience of conscious or unconscious construction of identities. While pursuing their education, international students change. They acquire intercultural competence (Paige et al., 2009), gain knowledge (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Andrade, 2006), create or join new circles (Trice, 2001), face and solve diverse issues (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007; Andrade, 2006), and mature. As they navigate different worlds and such changes occur, they construct identities.

The construction of identity comprises "what we call ourselves and what others call us" (Marginson, 2014, p. 10). It encompasses how we see ourselves and others and how others see us and themselves. According to Gee (2001), identity refers to "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context" (p. 99). Identities are unstable and ambiguous (Gee, 2001), socially and continually constructed (Lave & Wenger, 1991), shifting (Adewale et al., 2018) and conflicted (Bacon & Kaya, 2018). Hence, as Gee (2001) illuminated, all people have multiple identities. The concept of positioning as explored by Davies and Harré (2001) is crucial in examining the notion of identity. From Davies and Harré's (2001) view, positioning is an expression of a discursive production of selves and others. Thus, Kraus (2006) suggested that we look at an individual as "a person with many selves, constantly trying to reorganize him- or herself into a provisional unity" (p. 106).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural approach, which values social interactions and culturally constructed artifacts as vital means of learning and psychological development. Along with practice, social interactions allow individuals to belong to new discursive spaces (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). In Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, as well as Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning, learning takes place in social and cultural contexts as communities of practice in which the novice benefits from the environment, the expert, interactions, and practice (Wenger, 1998). The sociocultural perspective values support from more knowledgeable others (e.g., peers, teachers, native speakers of a language) and maintains that such support is essential in the learning process. Duranti (2004) described this process as one that foregrounds the notion of agency. During this process, individuals' actions influence others and sometimes themselves (Duranti, 2004), which explains why agency is unstable and constantly constructed in relation to environments and processes (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001).

As people learn or engage in new practices, they develop a sense of belonging (or distance) and identity within their new communities (Holland et al., 1998). Hence, identity is viewed as socially constructed, and it can shift since it is dependent upon relationships and settings (e.g., social, linguistic, cultural). In addressing the concept of identity and explaining how society shapes our "self," Cooley (1922) likened society to a mirror through which we see ourselves and then take a reactive approach to our reflected image. He argued that "as social beings we live with our eyes upon our reflection, but have no assurance of the tranquility of the waters in which we see it" (p. 217). According to Cooley (1922), identity is the result of an ongoing appropriation process; it is a depiction of what we imagine and feel that other people think about us. As such, "one's self" becomes "any idea that he [sic] appropriates" (p. 152). Cooley's (1922) notion of "the reflected or looking-glass self" (p. 152) describes how we form our self-image through interactions with others. From this perspective, "the means of socialization are therefore simultaneously the means of individualization" since "one's social identity develops itself through symbolically mediated interaction with one's surroundings" (Schubert, 1998, p. 22).

This study also draws on Che et al.'s (2009) concept of *constructive disequilibrium*, which addresses cognitive and emotional development through dissonant experiences in destinations that are less familiar to international students. Exploring the concept of constructive disequilibrium, Che et al. (2009) argued that while studying in less familiar locales can add to the challenges of pursuing higher education, it is not suggested that international applicants target only more familiar destinations. I elaborate that regardless of the (un)familiarity level, any destination can provide a sociolinguistic and sociocultural context in which international students may continually construct their identities.

For this study, I emphasize the concept of identity to interpret how each of the five international students made sense of the "many worlds" (Rizvi & Horn, 2010, p. 186) they navigated in the World of studying in a different country. Figure 1 conceptualizes many worlds inside one big World. Onuf (2013) expounded on the concept of worlds, making clear that while "all of us live together in the same [W]orld … each of us lives in a world of our own" (p. 21).
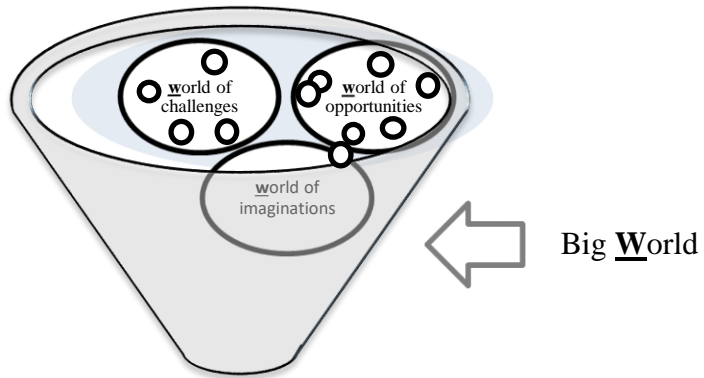
Figure 1: Small worlds within a Big World

METHODS

This study used purposeful sampling, an approach in which the researcher deliberately proceeds with selection of information-rich cases "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 230). For the purpose of this study, I established three main criteria for recruitment. First, participants had to be international students, following the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (2017) definition that "international students are those students who left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study" (p. 70). Second, the international students had to be nonnative speakers of English since improving English is often considered

as one of the goals of studying in English-speaking countries such as the United States (Kaya, 2014; Ryan, 2012). To investigate the lived experiences of participants with quasisimilar to similar academic requirements, the study was limited to international graduate students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Upon obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, I contacted two department chairs—one from the College of Education and Human Services and one from the College of Liberal Arts of a Midwestern university—requesting that they distribute my recruitment invitation email to their graduate listservs. The university is described as one of the U.S. higher education institutions having reached excellence in diversity. In 2016, the university's total enrollment exceeded 15,000 students, 1,300 of whom were international students.

International graduate students who expressed willingness to participate in the study contacted me directly via email and we agreed on convenient dates, times, and venues to meet. Five graduate students, constituting a representative sample of the typical international student, volunteered to participate in the study. I met with each potential participant to review the consent form, respond to questions, and stress the voluntary participation aspect of the study. Five international graduate students consented to participate in the study. After each potential participant signed the consent form, we scheduled an interview.

The interview protocol consisted of three sections: (a) what influenced participants' decisions to pursue higher education in a different country and specifically in the United States, (b) how cultural differences affected—or did not affect—their learning, and (c) how studying in a different culture and a second language shaped—or did not shape—their vision of their future. The first section started with questions related to their backgrounds because such questions are generally easier to respond to and can lead to more natural narratives. In the second section, participants shared their experiences of socializing and reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English in the United States. The last section emphasized what students perceived as advantages or disadvantages of studying in the United States and how the overall experience impacted their future plans. The interviews were audio-recorded.

Data consisted of verbatim transcripts of recorded interviews. Table 1 briefly describes participants.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Native language	Status	Occupation in home country
Suzie	Female	Spanish	3rd year doctoral student	Instructor of English for 10 years and coordinator of an EFL program.

Name	Gender	Native language	Status	Occupation in home country
Markus	Male	Spanish	3rd year doctoral student	Instructor of English for 15 years and secretary of the Association of Teachers of English.
Alex	Female	Portuguese	1st year doctoral student	Instructor of English for 10 years.
Brown	Male	Arabic	2nd year doctoral student	Instructor of English for 5 years.
Cyr	Male	French	2nd year master's student	Secondary school teacher of English for 10 years.

Note. EFL = English as a foreign language. All names are participants' self-chosen pseudonyms. Other pseudonyms (e.g., names of professors) were chosen by the researcher.

I drew on Saldaña's (2016) methods of transforming data from codes to themes through two cycles of analysis. Keeping in mind the sociocultural and situated nature of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), I began my analysis with reading interview transcripts and coding units of data (Saldaña, 2016) that suggested similarities and/or differences in the worlds international students navigated. For the first cycle coding, I used "In vivo coding to keep the data rooted in the participant's own language" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 8). I noted, for example, how Suzie and Alex both talked about making friends in the United States, paying attention to how Alex succeeded, and Suzie failed. I also noted what Markus and Brown thought people from their home countries might be thinking about them while they are still in the United States and what people might expect of them when they go back to their countries.

For the second cycle of coding, I identified patterns in the codes that I later reduced to four main themes (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016): challenges, opportunities, identities, and imagined communities. In reference to friendship as experienced by Suzie and Alex, for example, I categorized Suzie's experience under challenges while Alex's fell under opportunities. In a similar vein, pattern codes related to how students thought they would be positioned by people from their home countries and what they thought about their post-graduation life were categorized under imagined communities.

RESULTS

The five participants in this study were international students pursuing a graduate degree in the United States. The data showed that each student navigated multiple

worlds that I categorized as worlds of opportunities, challenges, and imagined communities.

The Worlds of Opportunities

International students in this study identified various opportunities as a result of studying in the United States. Among such opportunities were friendship, diversity, resources, education quality, and networking. Alex found it easy to make friends with both U.S. and international students. Her friendships went beyond academic settings. She stated:

> The second year I moved in with one of my American friends. I was accepted into this group of American girls from different places; one from New York, one from Indiana, one from Iowa, and one from South Carolina […]. They just embraced me.

Cyr, a Fulbright-sponsored student, spoke in terms of opportunities to socialize. Cyr stated, "The first semester I understood that friends here means something different … so I don't look for friends. I look for opportunities to socialize. […] I go to many events."

Markus valued the diversity at his host institution. He said, "The best I have lived in the United States as a graduate student is studying with American students and international students from different parts of the world." He explained that being able to interact with many people from different countries changed his "vision of the world and of people" and helped him understand that stereotypes can be false. Brown too liked the diversity in the United States. He elaborated:

> In my country we are homogeneous although we have our family differences. But in the US, you find people from many different cultural backgrounds. I can see the world as a united nation … which I wouldn't have if I were only in my country.

Markus and Brown viewed diversity in the United States as an asset that contributed to building their global citizenship effectiveness. They also spoke of the library as a resource that made the difference between studying in their home countries and studying in the United States. Additional advantages international students mentioned are high quality education, graduate assistantships, and education practices such as faculty holding office hours.

> Studying in the United States means going to a highly prestigious school and being taught by famous well qualified professors, to have many resources such as the kind of library that I don't have in my country. —*Brown*

> Here there are more resources. —*Markus*

> This university has everything you need. The library, you don't have to bring your own laptop. They have laptops they have big screen computers. Books. And you can request books from other universities, free. —*Cyr*

Besides not being a native speaker … everything is a plus. Everything is positive you know. You're learning you're having a better education you meet so many knowledgeable people. […] My professors here are great. Yeah, I think they give you an opportunity you know to talk to them to go to their office hours to ask questions. —*Suzie*

My professors! Oh my gosh! These are like we're talking about Edouard who's one of the biggest names in English for academic purposes. We're talking about Bruno who's one of the biggest names in CALL and you know technology in the classroom. We're talking about Dr. Thomas who was in ETS you know a consultant in iBT TOEFL. And, Peter who's like the God of corpus linguistics. […] For such big names, they were so accessible, so helpful, so supportive, amazingly approachable. —*Alex*

Alex emphasized the assistance and caring attribute of professors in the United States. Reflecting on her experiences with her professors for her master's degree, Alex concluded, "I couldn't have asked more." Alex likened the opportunity to be taught by well-known professors to attending educational conferences. Conferences, for Brown, constituted an opportunity to network and "meet famous and well-known people and you can actually work with them on some project or publication."

The data show that these graduate international students recognize many opportunities afforded to them by studying in the United States. Navigating the new culture to take advantage of these opportunities, however, can be challenging.

The Worlds of Challenges

Challenges for participants in this study included language and culture, academic workload, socialization, friendship, management of time, and effects of issues in their home countries. Suzie's expectations for herself regarding language mastery remained unmet. Disappointed, Suzie expressed, "I thought oh in two years I'm going to be speaking like a native speaker. Urgh wrong! I've been here five years and I feel so disappointed […]. My English is not what I want." Language and culture also impacted Cyr's and Markus's worlds in the classroom.

In class you talk about so many things superficially and Americans speak so fast. It's not like I need an interpreter but ... you just need to think more and read more than natives to survive. —*Cyr*

I was afraid of my speaking. I did not participate as much as I do now because I was afraid of making mistakes in front of American students, and maybe in front of other good international students, those whose English sounded very well to me. —*Markus*

The excerpts above exemplify how studying in a second language and a new culture can impact classroom experiences. The first example above particularly illustrates how studying in a second language can increase academic workload. Similar to Cyr, Suzie expressed how studying in English as second language added to her academic challenges:

I feel so proud but also it's a lot of effort, a lot of sacrifice. Like I work the double that [sic] any American person here. Why? It's not my native language. So, for me it takes more time to write my papers. It takes more time to read. And also I think that I put a lot of effort. Most of my time I'm going to be working doing assignments and I'm not exaggerating or it's not overreacting but it's like for me it takes more time. If I were a native speaker probably I would do an assignment in two hours. But I'm not a native speaker so it takes me six hours to do it.

While language was not mentioned as a challenge for Alex, she experienced challenges related to academic workload. Alex stated, "Oh man! So when I said earlier that I wanted to be intellectually challenged and I was, I really was." In Alex's words, professors "expect a lot. I mean for every single class it was a 20-page research paper every semester, quizzes every other week, reflection papers every week […]. Oh Lord! […] Uh-m group projects, individual presentations, midterms, final exams." She added, "At the end of the first day of my classes, I went home and I was crying because I was like I can't do this. I think I'm gonna go back home because I think I just bit more than I can chew." Alex remembered explaining to her U.S. friends that the readings were beyond her expectations: "I can't read all of this. I'm just going nuts." In addition to her assigned readings and assignments, Alex—like Suzie, Markus, and Brown—was filling a graduate teaching assistant position. With such academic workload, Alex would not allow herself to take any breaks, "even on Sundays." By the end of the first semester, she was "physically, mentally, emotionally, and psychologically exhausted." Unlike Alex, Cyr barely did any academic work on weekends. A Fulbright-funded student, Cyr attended church and different events as other discursive spaces where he socialized more. Yet, academic workload appeared to be a common concern as excerpted below.

We could have only a book or two, read those and prepare for the exams. Since I came to the US it's a new experience. The reading load is higher, expectations are higher … in the US. It's completely different, textbooks and a lot of articles. —*Brown*

You know like here in the United States you have articles and books at the same time […]. You know I keep reading and reading and trying. I don't have time to watch TV. I'm always writing I'm always reading. —*Suzie*

The projects that you have to finish almost do not give you time to do other things. —*Cyr*

"Other things" mentioned above include socialization: "You really have to know how to manage your time, if not you cannot find time to socialize" (Cyr). Suzie too explained how academic work prevented her from socializing or doing things, saying "Sometimes I want to go out, sometimes I want to do things, but it's like no I have to do this this and this and I have a deadline." For Suzie, not only was finding time to socialize an issue, but also making friends with native speakers of English was a challenge: "Well, basically my friends are non-native speakers of English. I can say I don't have native speaker friends." Perhaps Brown's perspective could provide an

understanding of types of friends: "I have many international friends, I have many U.S. friends and I have good relationships with everyone, even if it's not a formal one [friendship], it's only for classes."

Markus explained that belongingness seemed to be an additional challenge despite one's efforts or attempts to socialize and immerse in a new culture. He wondered, "I don't know if it is the same for everybody, but I feel like you cannot, I mean, you feel like you don't belong here. Yeah. It's something that you always feel. Maybe that's one disadvantage." From Markus's perspective, however, in spite of the undeniable busyness and the constant need to belong, one needs to try to create time for different dimensions of their worlds: "In my case, I've learned to study hard, but I also learned to balance for entertainment."

A father of three, Markus thought that social situations such as having family as an international student added to challenges. In a coda, Markus stated, "Studying here as an international student with your family is a different story"; so is studying as an international student while one's family remains in the home country. In Cyr's words, "It's a completely different story. You become a single man again but at the same time it's like you are married to two wives." Cyr regularly sent money to his wife and daughter who constituted an additional household, which added to his household in the United States, he likened the collective expenses to having two wives. From Cyr's view, an international student can never have enough time to accomplish initial plans and explore opportunities while facing challenges. Cyr, additionally, likened personal experiences to individual small worlds:

> Jean, I don't know about you, but I feel like I have no time to do everything that I'm supposed to do. […] I have my own world and people cannot understand that because people think there is this nice one world that all international students live in. No. Each international student has a world; not even one world but different individual small worlds that you have to navigate.

Cyr shared about his friendship attempts, his culture shock, his challenges with technology and transportation, and the troubling situation in his home country. While studying abroad, in addition to balancing time between academic requirements and other life constraints, international students have to include people from their countries of origin in their busy schedules. Obviously, events and situations in their home countries impact their lives abroad. Citizens from Cyr's country tried to fight an established dictatorship, an event that caused many losses. Brown's country had been in a critical political instability: "In my case now I'm super concerned about my family's safety. […] Many people have been killed." Since Markus had been in the United States, his biological parents had been very sick and the family had lost two members. While facing challenges and trying to explore opportunities in their worlds, international students construct new identities and imagine new selves and communities.

Identities and Imagined Communities

Our identities are unstable and constantly constructed (Duranti, 2004; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Data from this study provide evidence of international students' construction and reconstruction of their identities. Their new selves are clearly separated from their old selves. Their old selves refer to their home country selves or their U.S. remote past in which they saw themselves as ignorant or less capable, whereas their new selves refer to their recent past in the United States or their present where they describe themselves as more capable and knowledgeable as evidenced in the following excerpts:

> The first semester I was overwhelmed because I thought this is too much, the workload is too much but I have adjusted to the system. […] I think now I know how to handle things better. —*Suzie*

> I think faster now. It's like I was a snail before coming and now I have become a cheetah in thinking and reading and writing. Well maybe not a cheetah [laughing] but seriously I have changed a lot in how I do things. —*Cyr*

> The first semester I used to come to the library, reading from the morning to like late evening. […] In these days, no. I learned how to read an article. I acquired academic skills. —*Brown*

> In my first semester I was reading everything, taking notes on everything, outlining everything. —*Alex*

> I feel more confident because at the beginning I was also afraid. —*Markus*

In addition to positioning themselves as far as changes in their own abilities and knowledge were concerned, participants also positioned themselves vis-a-vis others. For example, Suzie positioned herself as sociable but also distant, which she thought was appropriate with the U.S. culture: "I'm a sociable person, I'm open to everybody but I'm not going to be like behind a person just because he's native or non-native, no. […] I keep my distance. I think I'm Americanized." Suzie added, "I don't want to invade people's space [...]. I learned here in the United States to respect people's time. It's not that I'm not a friendly person. It's like I respect people's time a lot." By describing herself as a sociable and friendly person who does not want to invade people's spaces, Suzie imagines what she thinks other people may think about her. This mindset is also present in Markus's and Cyr's narratives: "I was like will I be accepted? Will they think what I say when I participate is foolish?" (Markus); "I feel like American students think that I don't know much because I don't speak fast like they do, and I have an accent (Cyr). Clearly, this finding supports how identity includes what we think other people think about us.

Furthermore, by stating "I think I am Americanized" to justify why she keeps her distance, Suzie positioned Americans as being distant. As evidenced by the use of words such as "people," "they," and "American students," the discourses of international students showed how otherness is a component of positioning. Marginson (2014) reminded us that positioning includes not only how we see

ourselves but also how we see others. Others, as referred to by international students in this study, include host institutions (i.e., students, professors), home institutions and people, and people who have never studied in the United States. Referring to host institutions, participants stated:

> Sometimes with American native speakers, they are not very friendly. Like they see you in class, they talk to you, but outside the classroom they don't. —*Markus*)

> They [professors] were amazing, oh my gosh […]. For such big names, they were so accessible, so helpful, so supportive [and] amazingly approachable. —*Alex*

> They [professors] are so kind, so helpful, so you don't feel that hierarchy. —*Brown*

> I came here you know early thirties and people are busy. People have responsibilities. They have children. —*Suzie*

> People have everything timed here. Even at church, they have to respect time … When they ask how are you, it doesn't really mean they want to know how you are doing. —Cyr

Cyr additionally disapproved of how U.S. natives and other internationals used specific names of countries except for countries in Africa. Instead, they referred to the continent of Africa as a country:

> I don't know if it is ignorance or lack of respect. Listen! People talk about China or Japan or I don't know Colombia but they look at you and you are black and they say you are from Africa. They will never say you are from Congo. I tell people to stick with names of continents for everyone or they have to learn names of countries.

The excerpt above is an illustration of how international students may resist certain identities. Identities, as Bacon and Kaya (2018; see also Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) discussed, can be ascribed and accepted, negotiated, or resisted. International students in this study ascribed identities to people from their countries or people who have never studied in the United States. Unlike their own present, which refers to their new, more informed, and more knowledgeable selves, other people's present refers to a present of currently ignorant people lacking authentic information about the realities and individual small worlds of international students who are studying in the United States.

> This is what people think when they are in their home countries, oh I'm going to the US. I'm going to hang out with all native speakers. My English is going to be awesome when I get there. No, it's not like that. You see people here at the university and then you go home and you're by yourself. —*Suzie*

Some people might think that we are on vacation here because we are in the US, but no. […] Study everyday if you wanna be here […]. [In my country] people do very little reading. —*Suzie*

I was supervised, for ten years, the wrong way […]. They see supervision in my country as evaluation. —*Markus*

People think money falls from trees here. They want you to send them iPhones. […] They think you are partying every day. I haven't been to a night club here. —*Cyr*

With their new selves, participants additionally appropriated themselves the power to provide advice that might benefit future international students. Through a moral imperative, international students suggested the following for prospective international students: "Visit your department! Form study groups! Share ideas! Participate in class! Read more, beyond what the teacher teaches you! Do research! Balance your study with entertainment!" (Markus); "It requires a lot of commitment, responsibility, and definitely you have to study. Study everyday if you wanna be here! Yes, grad school is not a joke" (Suzie). For prospective international students, Alex used a unique style that I describe as question-imperative-advice discourse:

Are you absolutely sure you want to do this? And why do you want to do it? Have a great time! Enjoy it! It's gonna be an amazing experience that is gonna literally change your world […]. Just make sure that you open yourself up and allow yourself to experience it fully.

The interviews concluded with how international students imagined their futures. According to Norton (2013), our imagined futures are often our desired communities. Suzie and Cyr still had their teaching positions in their home countries. Cyr imagined either a promotion at his secondary school or a new teaching position at the university level. Suzie imagined a postdoctoral fellowship: "After I finish the doctoral program, I want to go back home. I wanna teach [for] four years, at least four years. Then I want to apply for a postdoctoral program in Europe."

Markus and Nurius (1986) defined "possible selves" as "the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming" (p. 954). They elucidated that imagined selves and communities include both hoped or admired and hated or feared possible futures. Brown's and Markus's imagined selves and imagined communities seemed ambivalent. They saw themselves as respectable professionals with much capital, but also with a big sense of responsibility. They imagined their busyness with embassies and other institutions that would invite them for different purposes. They described how they thought their communities might perceive them and what they might expect from them: "People see you as if you are a person who knows it all. That's reality. They think you know it all because you studied in the United States. […] They expect me to train teachers and to propose projects" (Markus). Markus, however, feared that in his own field of study, teachers might resist change.

Brown imagined first finding a faculty position in the United States before returning home and becoming a department chair. Yet, he also had concerns:

When I go back home, if I get like a faculty position at any university, people there will assume that since I came from the United States I should have all of those books which I read memorized in my mind. … No… People will assume that you came from the United States so you know everything.

Imagined communities and selves, as these findings suggest, encompass both our feared and desired futures.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The body of research on international education tends to focus on the challenges that international students face when studying in the United States (see Yan & Pei, 2018). This study has demonstrated that international students' experiences can be understood by paying attention to their individual small worlds which comprise not only challenges but also opportunities and imagined communities. Opportunities suggested by this study include friendship and networking. Previous research (e.g., Adewale et al., 2018; Trice, 2001) has found similar results. Participants from this study also referred to diversity and high-quality education and resources as opportunities.

Friendship and socialization experiences are worthy of note as they fit under worlds of challenges and worlds of opportunities. International students' successes and failures with friendship and socialization have been documented by previous studies (see Arthur, 1997; Suspitsyna, 2013; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Zhang and Zhou (2010) reported that when international students lack opportunities to socialize in host countries, they spend extensive time online communicating with family and friends in their home countries as a way to overcome homesickness. The results of this study do not corroborate these findings since participants did not indicate communication with people in their countries as a solution. These students, rather, stressed how issues in their home countries affected their well-being in the United States. Participants also brought up the topic of academic workload as a challenge that was, to some extent, related to other challenges: time management and studying in a new education system in a second language. Andrade (2006) discussed that proficiency in the second language often impacts international students' academic performance.

As previously discussed, friendship and socialization were categorized under worlds of opportunities for some participants and under worlds of challenges for others. This exemplifies the differences (while similarities also exist) in individual small worlds that international students navigate. It also provides grounds for international educators and researchers to understand that the actual experience of an international student cannot be generalized since it is contextual and multifaceted. Findings demonstrate how Suzie failed to make U.S. friends until Year 5 but Alex moved in with a U.S. friend in Year 2 of her stay in the United States; and how Alex, as teaching assistant, took no breaks even on Sundays while Cyr, as Fulbright student, rarely did any curricular work on weekends.

While one could quickly predict that challenges that international students face might result in poor academic performance or resignation from academic programs,

the participants in this study reported that the challenges strengthened them. This perspective posits that challenges can make us stronger. The disequilibrium that challenges create is a tool for multifaceted development (Vygotsky, 1978). Che et al. (2009) argued that constructive disequilibrium occurs after dissonant experiences such as those international students face in less familiar destinations.

Challenges and opportunities impact our identity. When exploring opportunities and facing challenges, these students positioned themselves in relation to their past, present, and future. Their past selves reminded them of their ignorant, less capable, and less skillful selves whereas they described their present selves as more knowledgeable and capable. Adewale et al. (2018) stated that, "international students' identities are not static. Rather, they are dynamic and shifting as students adopt new cultural, linguistic, academic and social strategies for survival in new environments" (p. 863). The study participants also positioned themselves in complex and conflicted ways (e.g., sociable and friendly but distant), which illuminates how the same individual can have many selves (Kraus, 2006). The shifting and dynamic nature of their identities is in line with previous research (e.g., Adewale et al., 2018; Gee, 2001; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). As evidenced by this study, identities can also be accepted or resisted (Bacon & Kaya, 2018; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

As we navigate our small worlds, we constantly imagine how such worlds are perceived in our society. Participants in this study expressed what they felt other people might be thinking about them. As such, our small worlds and our "selves" undergo the influence of society as we constantly focus on reflections that bring us into rivalry with other people (Cooley, 1922). Through his looking-glass metaphor, Cooley (1922) made clear how our actual self is put on the back burner as we concentrate on the self-image that we appropriate based on what we think other people probably think about us. Appropriation can result in our enacting of various identities as a strategy to seek acceptance or try to fit in new spaces. International students obviously use such a strategy to navigate various spaces in host countries. Because domestic peers, instructors, and officers of international education inevitably learn or work in the spaces that international students navigate, the former should create environments where international students can share their small worlds and possibly invite them into their worlds.

As we navigate our small worlds, we often make choices about whose world we wish to access or who we wish to invite into our worlds. Davies and Harré (2001) illuminated that our "development of our own sense and of how the world is to be interpreted from the perspective of who we take ourselves to be involves … learning of the categories which include some people and exclude others" (p. 263). One way to know who is included (or not) in our journeys and our small worlds is to pay attention to how we position others. International students in this study positioned their countries of origin and host institutions in various ways. They assigned varied identities (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) to U.S. professors and students, positioning them as supportive, kind, caring, approachable, and knowledgeable but also as unfriendly, individualistic, ignorant, distant, and uncaring. They also positioned their home country citizens as ignorant about the realities of life abroad.

Prior to traveling to the United States, Suzie, Markus, and Brown imagined communities in which they would extensively socialize with U.S. citizens to enhance

their English language speaking abilities. It appears that they did not have full access to such communities. Kanno and Norton (2003) discussed how people can be denied opportunities to gain access to their imagined communities, and how people's imagined communities may "not accord well with the realities encountered in their daily lives" (p. 243). International students envisioned promotions, staff and faculty positions, international jobs, and further education. Their possible selves included both feared and aspirational futures (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The participants in this study were graduate students who were nonnative speakers of English and who had similar backgrounds. Future studies should consider university-wide recruitment of international students and include undergraduates and international native speakers of English to see what such inclusion criteria may add to the literature.

To conclude, the analysis of international students' worlds in this study suggests that international education is irrefutably valuable for global citizenship. Therefore, efforts to create more opportunities to assist individuals in studying in countries of their choices should be encouraged. Prospective international students should, however, be aware that some of their goals in their destinations may remain unmet. Friendship with host country nationals, for instance, continues to unfortunately be a challenge for many international students. As important as it is for immersion in a new culture, second language enhancement, and psychological well-being, prospective international students must be aware that, as in any community, country nationals already belong to different circles. It is the international student's task, as a newcomer, to negotiate access into those existing circles in order to enrich his or her experiences. And, while navigating a new culture is an experience that generates feelings of joy, personal growth, pride, courage, and achievement, it is also an experience of uncertainties, sadness, isolation, and disappointments. By giving attention to the small worlds of international students, higher education institutions and their offices of international education can acquire valuable information that can be used to enhance the likelihood of a satisfying and successful study abroad experience for their inbound international experience.

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