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Becoming an Intercultural Doctoral Student: Negotiating Cultural Dichotomies

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ABSTRACT

International students experience both challenges and possibilities when they situate themselves in new sociocultural environments. The process of intercultural learning affects their self-formation and construction of their multiple identities. This self-reflective paper examines my experience as an international doctoral student transitioning from a Vietnamese cultural background to Canadian culture. By using concentric storying to deconstruct my journal entries, I found recurrent themes of conflicts and tensions emerging through different dialectical processes in my journey of becoming an intercultural doctoral student. My intercultural learning exposed my vulnerable selves while I searched for my core values and beliefs. This journey has brought profound changes in making meaning of my adventure in transnational space. My story may shed light on the understanding of life in transition and provide direction for other international doctoral students seeking to enhance their intercultural competence in a similar educational landscape.

Keywords: concentric storying, intercultural competence, intercultural learning experience, international doctoral students, self-reflexivity

"We do not learn from our experience. We learn from reflecting on experience." (Dewey, 1933, p. 78).

From East to West

Coming from the East
Going to the West
Looking for a bright future
Everything is new to me here
Leaving home with purpose and mission
But sometimes still wondering why I am here
How can I fit in?
How can I be recognized?
Where do I belong?
Life in between cultures
Is not easy
Encountering tensions and conflicts
My community of selves is exposed
Seeing different parts of me
Exploring my core values and beliefs
Continuing to be
Keeping reflections
To make meaning of my life
The life in transnational space
The life with different on-going intercultural experiences.
(Bui, journal entry, October 2019)

This poetic fragment is the frequent personal dialogue I have had with myself since my husband and I landed in Canada for my doctoral study in 2016. I dreamed of experiencing a different language environment in an advanced, internationally recognized educational system that could help me create a better future. Fortunately, all my hard work paid off when I got a chance to further my education in Canada. Three months after getting married, with excitement and four suitcases my husband and I took a nearly 20-hour flight from Vietnam to Canada. Our whole new journey began (Bui, journal entry, June 10, 2016). My personal goals and expectations for my career and family created a situation of intercultural learning readiness when I entered the host culture in Ontario, Canada. In this reflective paper, I focus on the intercultural learning process as a profound personal change involving perspective transformation.

Some studies indicate intercultural experience is a transformational learning process, leading sojourners to embark on a journey of personal growth and development (Morgan, 2010; Savicki, 2008; Taylor, 1994). Intercultural adaptation is the process of intercultural learning in transforming international students' knowledge of self and awareness of others (Gill, 2007). With constant reflection on the new reality and lived experience, new knowledge is scaffolded

and co-constructed. This self-reflective process can be regarded as a way of being and a process of personal development to obtain insights into one's own learning experience in different cultural and academic practices (Mezirow, 1991).

Furthering my academic study in Canada was a turning point in my life; this was the first time I set foot in the 'Western world.' I position myself as a person learning about Western paradigms and the multicultural values of other cultures in the host country through the lens of a female Vietnamese doctoral student. While I understand that my way of knowing about the host country might not thoroughly reflect the experiences of other international students, my experiences may help other international graduate students in their self-exploration process to make meaning of their cross-border journeys.

I have learned that the journey of becoming interculturally competent is also a journey of becoming more mature and more independent in self-development and personal growth (Bui, 2019). Sojourners like me need to acquire new skills to understand the culture in the host country, to overcome intercultural stress, and to develop psychological well-being (Kim, 1988; OECD, 2019, 2020). My intercultural learning has also exposed my vulnerable selves through different tensions in my search for my core values and beliefs to make meaning of my adventure in Canada (Drake, 2010).

Clandinin and Connelly (2006) taught me that

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others
are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story ...
is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which his
or her experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.
(p. 477)

In this context, I learned that one way to understand my intercultural learning experience in Canada was to inquire into my experiences in constructing multiple identities as a newcomer, a doctoral student, an emerging researcher, and a new bride. In this piece, I reflect on my intercultural learning experience and how I have negotiated cultural differences through different dichotomies.

I have employed concentric storying (Drake & Elliot, 1999) to analyze my journal entries of my experiences since arriving in Canada; this enables me to tell and retell stories with a structured path to meaning-making and transformational learning. Through this process of deconstructing stories and story parts, I have discovered recurrent themes, conflicts, and tensions (Drake & Elliot, 1999; Gibbs, 2018). I asked myself whether the parts suggest a similar theme. Was there a recurrent conflict? Did I play a similar character in each story? I identified and examined my basic beliefs and values. Implicit core values became explicit. This resolution led to the first steps in transformation and ways of being in the world. When revisiting all the stories I wrote down, I recognized the recurrent themes of my stories associated with my new life in Canada. They are about tensions I have encountered as I have adapted to a new social and academic environment.

I used different platforms to journal. I have physical notebooks and electronic journals in Word, OneNote, and apps on my phone. Some of my entries were in

the form of short paragraphs; some were in the form of stories with a title, beginning, body, and ending; and some entries combined poetry and photos to express my way of being. These ways of journaling paved the way for me to learn more about my inner selves and others. Chronicling my experiences in a cross-border circumstance has widened my understanding of the tensions and dichotomies I have encountered (Chang, 2008).

NEGOTIATION OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES THROUGH DIFFERENT DICHOTOMIES

Traditional Methods Versus Modern Methods: A Passive Learner Versus an Active Learner

One of the emerging tensions that challenged me was the difference between the traditional methods of education in my home country and the new ones in the host country. As a person growing up in a teacher-centered educational system in Vietnam (a Confucian heritage country), I learned that teachers had the power to decide what and how students should learn. The role of each student in class was as a receiver passively obtaining the information of the lesson, mainly through teachers. I was always mindful of my role: I felt I had to accept without question the information I received from teachers and other authoritative people. The passive learning approach was more familiar to me than the more active approach of asking, discussing, and providing feedback to instructors. Vietnamese cultural norms were embedded in all my endeavour, helping to maintain harmony in relationships and avoiding conflicts in my inquiry for knowledge. But they also prevented me from expressing my views openly (Hofstede, 2003; Stole, 1998; Subramaniam, 2008; N. T. Tran, 1999; Nguyen, 1989). In my first doctoral course in Canada, I twice skipped writing exit cards commenting on my instructors' teaching because I did not know what to write. When I tried to put words on the card, I was apprehensive about writing something that might make them unhappy or that might put me in a vulnerable position (Bui, journal entry, July, 2016).

Acceptance Versus Rejection: Approval Versus Disapproval

Acceptance and rejection are other conflicts that I encountered. In my journal entries, I recorded my discomfort at not obtaining employment like other graduate students who spoke English as their first language. To make ends meet, I looked unsuccessfully for a job in a local outlet mall. This was a challenging time for me because I felt marginalized. I felt that my social and academic achievements in Vietnam were undervalued, and I was questioning why I was here on this challenging journey. It was the feeling of not belonging and not being accepted in the new academic environment. What I had achieved in Vietnam was juxtaposed with how Canada seemed to reject my accomplishments. Embarking on my doctoral journey in transnational education led me to experience a change in my professional identity. Dang and Tran's work (2017) resonated with me because of

this. They shared that leaving the country of origin meant leaving all of the familiarity behind, in my case, my home institution, my teaching position, and my connectedness with beloved colleagues and students. Transitioning from being known and recognized by many others to "being no one and [being] known by nobody" (Dang & Tran, 2017, p. 80) was a challenge for me since I always felt homesick, lonely, and powerless. My experience correlates with Leung's (2017) research, which points out that professionals often encounter significant obstacles in practicing their profession. Migrants' qualifications and competencies are often not recognized or accredited.

Dependence Versus Independence and Distance Versus Intimacy: A Doctoral Student and a New Bride

A turning point in my academic journey is my story as a young married woman encountering the dilemma between distance and intimacy with my husband and my doctoral study. My husband could not find any employment opportunities suitable for him to further his profession in St. Catharines where my university is located. He searched for other opportunities in different cities across Canada and finally found a position in another province that aligned with his experience in Vietnam. This meant I was standing in the dichotomies of whether I should move there to support his career or stay in St. Catharines for my doctoral study. As a doctoral student, I needed to be close to my university campus. As a married woman, it was necessary to be with my husband to support him in his career in a new province. The only one who I could think of to ask for advice was my "supervisor at the time". I asked him whether I could move to a new place with my husband and simultaneously commit to progressing with my doctoral work. My supervisor, however, did not agree and chose to drop me as a mentee when I most needed supervisory support. I chose to go to a new province with my husband for a few months and support him set up a new life there. Then, to maintain my commitment to my studies, I decided to go back to St. Catharines alone.

Reflecting on this story, loneliness was my experience when my husband and I lived far away from each other. I became a caretaker of my soul to make my husband and parents feel that I was fine to be alone. I started to empower myself to create positivity in my life through meditation and involvement in voluntary work. Taking my experience as the foundation of this paper has made me understand life in transition "as a process; composed over time, in place, and in different relationships" (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 220).

Integration Versus Assimilation: East Meets West

I could see the conflict within me when I was struggling to find my way to integrate into a new environment. Some inner dialogues explicitly showed my feeling of being an outsider in a new culture. As I began to improve my language and build reliable relationships with my professors and cohort, I recognized some

cultural differences among us. I constantly asked myself these questions: How could I understand them better? How could I have a sense of belonging to this new culture? I also asked myself whether I was integrating or assimilating into this new culture. I began to appreciate the differences among us and nurture a sense of diversity. I found that I could keep my own distinctive cultural values while accepting cultural differences and saw myself as a tessera in the Canadian cultural mosaic. In other words, I felt more confident that with my own cultural heritage I could contribute to its diversity, allowing me to embrace more than one identity.

I believe that my intercultural identity is evolving, but I still want to maintain my national identity and feel proud of it. Interestingly, what I have experienced in Canada has helped me understand more about myself and my cultural values (Cranton, 2008; Pusch, 2009). I recognize that whatever I do will reflect my identity as a Vietnamese person. Whatever I say not only reflects my characteristics but also my cultural heritage. I consider my pride in my heritage as the major driving force in all of my efforts. The more I become interculturally competent, the more I recognize my own national identity. People might not remember my name, but they will refer to me by saying "she is from Vietnam" or "she is Vietnamese." That is also one of my motivations to strive for excellence— to shape a positive impression about Vietnamese people. I also have a desire to reconnect with my homeland and contribute to my country as well as the host country's Vietnamese community.

CONCLUSION

Becoming an intercultural doctoral student has enabled me to engage in self-reconstruction, self-formation, and identity redefinition (L. T. Tran, 2012). This reflexive process has given me the opportunity to explore my core values, beliefs, and the factors contributing to my thoughts from my past to my future. I have learned to navigate my personal, academic, and professional selves from a familiar culture to a new one by reviewing my own experiences and shaping multiple identities of becoming more competent in adapting to the new culture. Navigating my doctoral work is related to my self-negotiation of being Vietnamese, being a sojourner, and being an intercultural doctoral student in a North American university. My multiple identities as an autonomous learner, a new bride, a caretaker of my own soul, and an intercultural doctoral student have become the core aspects underlying my personal and professional growth. I feel thankful for the hardships that I have experienced during my doctoral study and my magic helpers (Drake, 1991) who supported me to achieve my goals. This journey has allowed me to gather my courage and enhance my grit, perseverance, and determination. These values will always be part of my package, for every new adventure to wherever this life takes me.

My story might help students understand more about their intercultural experience and be aware of this learning process. Intercultural learning is a recursive process repeated continuously as students transfer to a higher level of

intercultural competence. Cultural disequilibrium in this learning process tends to happen continually throughout the time international students spend in the host culture, even though it could be lessened in intensity over a period of time as they become more interculturally competent (Taylor, 1994; Kim, 2000). They could also play different roles in this intercultural experience and engage themselves in critical reflection to explore their own values and beliefs to make meaning of their adventure; for example, they could learn to be an observer, a participant, and a friend to build up authentic intercultural relationships when adapting to a new cross-border life (Taylor, 1994; Deardorff 2009, 2020). By understanding students' tensions, relationships between international graduate students and their faculty advisors or course instructors may be improved (Soong et al., 2015) and "a dialogical pedagogic model for mutual adaptation can be developed between international students and academics" (Tran, 2011, p. 79). Perhaps colleges and universities in the host countries need to create intervention strategies to show empathy and support for international doctoral students.

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