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The International Student Experience: A Case Study at One American University

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Abstract

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The purpose of this case study was to elucidate the international student experience as it pertains to navigating cultural and educational differences between the home country and the United States and forming an identity within the new United States context. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six undergraduate international students from an elite southeastern university to collect data for this study. The participants came from China, India, and the Caribbean. International students interviewed in this study had distinct experiences of adjustment and identity formation that were influenced by various factors, including level of exposure to U.S. culture before arriving in the United States, support from friends, home culture and education, and future goals. Participants sought familiarity and engaged in extra-curricular activities to help with their adjustment. The cultural and educational challenges faced by the international students, along with the way in which international students were perceived by students who do not originate from their home country, affected participants' identities within the new environment as they made adjustments to themselves, their practices, and their beliefs. These findings highlight the need for greater support programs to assist international students with both general and individual needs. Additionally, institutions, faculty, and domestic students need to be made aware of the international students' experience, in order to better facilitate their adjustment.

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Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

People have been traversing the globe for many years. Boats facilitated the discovery of new frontiers, and the invention of the airplane and other technologies, such as phones and the internet, have shrunk our world by immeasurable amounts. In the pursuit of education, this has meant that persons could seek education in countries other than their own. This movement of students has historically been, and continues to be, predominantly from developing regions to more developed regions (Li, Findlay, Jowett & Skeldon, 1996). During the 1960s to 1980s, the top seven receiving countries were the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy and Japan, with more than half of all international students going to these countries (D'Arca, 1994). In 2011, the top seven destination countries for international students were the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, Germany, Australia, and Canada (IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research, 2013). The number of international students in the United States has been steadily rising since the Institute of International Education (2012) first recorded it in the academic year 1948-1949. In that year, the proportion of international students was 1.1% (25,464) and this increased to 3.9% (819,644) for the academic year 2012-2013 (Institute of International Education, 2012). This highlights that the international student population in the United States is growing substantially and warrants attention. In particular, international students face challenges that differ from those of local students.

Being an international student who has gone through the process of transitioning from life in my home country to life at an elite university in the United States, I am acutely aware of the idiosyncrasies of this experience. My decision to attend college in the United States was based solely on the belief that greater opportunities would be afforded to me at a U.S. university than in my home country, Trinidad and Tobago. Both of my parents had taken this journey in

their youth, and my older sister left for the United States two years before me. Although I was familiar with the idea, I was not prepared for some of the challenges that I faced as I transitioned from life in Trinidad and Tobago to life in the United States. As I recounted in a poem I wrote about three weeks after my arrival in the United States, I felt as though I had been “muted by an accent.” I was unable to figure out exactly where I belonged and was struggling to hold on to my “Trinbagonian” identity. Even though I felt alone in my new country, I soon learned that I was not alone, as many of my fellow international students were navigating the same transition.

Today, many of the elite universities in the United States readily provide statistics about the diverse backgrounds of their students on their websites and in their brochures. The percentages of non-White, Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP), non US-born students, have definitely increased over time and many universities use their diversity as a selling point to attract prospective students. International students belong to this diverse population and the story behind each international student goes further than his/her contribution to a college’s diversity numbers. International students leave their home countries, where they have been groomed as a member of society, adapting to cultural, social and educational norms, and relocate to foreign countries, such as the United States, France, Australia, and the United Kingdom, in search of the educational and social opportunities that these more powerful and wealthier nations have to offer.

International students who come to study in the United States have varying levels of knowledge about U.S. education and culture. Some know only what they gather from television shows and other media; others may have visited the United States previously as tourists. Regardless, living in a country that is culturally different to that of one’s home country requires adjustment. In order to be successful within the new educational and cultural context, an

international student has to make decisions as to how he/she is going to navigate the differences between home and host country. International students can choose to accept the host culture and reject their own, reject the host culture and hold fast to their own, or they can find a way to mix both home and host culture and form a new “bi-cultural identity” (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008). In addition to adapting to a new culture, international students also have to make decisions about how they navigate the educational differences between home and host country. Because of their circumstances, international students often have to redevelop their identity within the United States context.

Kim (2012) proposes the charting of the development of this new identity through six phases- pre-exposure, exposure, enclosure, emergence, integration, and internationalization- which together form Kim’s International Student Identity (ISI) model. At the integration phase, an international student considers the identity that he/she held while in his/her home country, the person that he/she has become in his/her U.S. university, and the person that he/she would like to become in the future. At this stage, an international student would be navigating the cultural differences that exist between his/her home country and the United States and making adjustments so that the two fit together cohesively.

Marambe, Vermunt, and Bushuizen (2012) acknowledged that it is not easy for international students to adapt to a new learning environment because the education that they received in their home country embedded in them specific learning and study styles. The researchers explored learning patterns across Sri Lankan, Dutch, and Indonesian cultures and found similarities and differences across these cultures in learning strategies, learning conceptions, and learning orientations. This suggests that when international students study in the United States they bring with them their own educational norms and learning styles. To be

successful, the international student has to figure out the ways in which educational cultures of the United States compare to those of his/her home country and decide how the two educational cultures can intermingle (Kim, 2012).

International students who do not use English as their first language often face some additional challenges that accompany the language acquisition process (Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992). Language is an element of culture, but the social and academic implications of a language barrier places international students who do not use English as their first language into a unique group that will be faced with additional challenges to those faced by international students who use English as their first language, or who have already mastered the use of English before coming to the United States. The added stressors faced by these students also need to be explored.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of a sample of international students as they transition from life in their home countries to attending an elite university in the United States. More specifically the study aims to elucidate how international students perceive, navigate, and ultimately adjust to the cultural and educational differences that they face between their home country and the United States. Additionally, the ways in which international students' identities are challenged and ultimately reshaped are explored. Through the use of a case study design, an in-depth understanding of the unique experiences of the international students included in the study is presented. This shows the ways in which the experiences of students from three diverse cultural groups are different from and similar to each other, and highlights how the experiences within cultures compare and contrast.

Research Questions

In order to understand how international students navigate the cultural and educational differences of their home country and that of the United States, while forming their identity, the following research questions were explored:

1. How do international students navigate the cultural differences between their home country and the United States?
2. How do international students navigate the educational differences between their home country and the United States?
3. How do international students construct an identity within the United States context?

Significance

In addition to wanting to report student diversity, universities also want to report that their student body consists of high achievers. As such, it would be in a university's best interest to create an environment that fosters the achievement of all students. Because international students face greater adjustment challenges than local students, understanding the experience of the international student can help universities develop programs that are tailored to the needs of international students in order to assist them in making a smooth transition. The faster an international student feels comfortable in and adjusted to his/her new environment, the faster he/she would be able to begin performing at his/her full potential. If universities can advertise successful programs that greatly improve the transition experience, they would then be able to attract even more international students to their schools.

This study will not only be informative to United States universities who are trying to develop better international student recruitment plans, but it will also be informative to international students who are trying to navigate the transition from their home country to the

United States. The ability to understand someone else's experience before one embarks on the experience himself/herself can better prepare international students for the transition process. The student would have a better grasp of the reality of attending school outside of his/her home country. International students can develop strategies to deal with the challenges that they may face before they enter the United States. Each international student's experience will differ as factors - such as personality, family support, and proposed length of stay within the host country (whether it is a permanent move or not) - will affect the experience that each individual student has and how he/she deals with the transition process (Zhou et al., 2008). The current study is an extension of previous research, as other researchers have not focused on the three populations that were the focus of this study. Furthermore, this study combined the three elements of cultural differences, educational differences, and identity formation to obtain a holistic view of the international student experience as seen through the eyes of particular individuals. No other study combines these three elements, but instead focused on each element in isolation or looked at a combination of just two.

This study utilized subjects who had gone through the transition process from home country to host country and took an in-depth look at the personal journey of the subjects involved in the study. Many of the people who develop international student programs within universities are not international students themselves and although the results of a survey, which some researchers use, can paint a general picture, they do not tell the whole story of the international student experience. University planning committees need to walk alongside international students on their journey to understand the complexity of the various elements that contribute to their experience. Furthermore, university professors who are made aware of the differences in educational culture experienced by international students can better accommodate students

within the classroom and may be able to utilize some of the educational techniques that are successful in other countries. Additionally, there are benefits for domestic students. Domestic students have to attend classes and interact with international students. A better understanding of someone's background can make this exchange between two different cultures much smoother. Further to the point, the ability to relate to and work with individuals of diverse backgrounds is a skill that should be learned by all persons who wish to be a part of the global world.

Definition of Terms

Four terms were central to this study -- international student, educational culture, identity, and culture shock. These terms, as they related to this study, are defined in this section.

International student. The United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines foreign students as “persons admitted by a country other than their own, usually under special permits or visas, for the specific purpose of following a particular course of study in an accredited institution of the receiving country” (United Nations, 1998, p.45). For the purpose of this study, an international student was defined in the same way that the UN defines a foreign student and the definition was extended to include students who may have U.S. citizenship, but who lived and attended school outside of the United States until returning for tertiary education.

Educational culture. This term is built upon Abhayawansa and Fonseca's (2010) belief that students have “culturally induced ways of knowing, learning and expressing knowledge” (p.528). For the purpose of the current study, educational culture referred to the familiar educational practices and beliefs about education and classroom environment that international students bring with them to the United States and those they later adopt while in the United States.

Identity. Identity is “accrued confidence, the ability to maintain inner sameness, and one's meaning to others, shaped by how individuals organize experiences within environments” (Erikson, 1959, as cited in Kim, 2012, p.100). For the purpose of this study, identity was a combination of all the characteristics of a person and the beliefs that he/she has about himself or herself within a changing environment.

Culture shock. Zhou et al's (2008) definition of culture shock, as the collective impact of dealing with novel social and educational organizations, behaviors and expectations in a different culture was used in this paper.

These terms appear in the following chapters and are essential to describing the international student experience. With international student numbers steadily increasing, I have focused my attention on gaining a better understanding of the challenges and idiosyncrasies of the international student journey. The following chapters outline the research that has already been done on this topic and delves into the findings and discussion of the current study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

I conducted a review of the literature using *PsycInfo*, *Education Full Text* (H.W. Wilson), *ERIC*, and *SocINDEX with Full Text* databases. The search terms used were “international student,” “migration,” “adjustment,” “identity formation,” “education culture,” “culture shock,” and “international sojourn” in many different combinations. I made the searches specific to China, India, the Caribbean and the United States when necessary. I only utilized articles that were written in English and the reference lists of these articles were scanned for further sources that may have been missed in the original literature search.

In this chapter, I review what previous authors have said about the increase in international student migration trend. I highlight reports that have been done on secondary education within the three areas of interest – China, India and the Caribbean -- and review work done on how international students adjust to life in the United States. Additionally, I highlight what previous literature has presented about international students forming identities within the United States.

Increasing numbers of international students within developed countries, such as the United States, warrant attention. A good way to begin addressing the increase in numbers of international students is by asking the question “why is the increase occurring?” Shields (2013) addresses this question in his network analysis of globalization and student mobility. He discusses three theoretical perspectives of international student mobility. For the first perspective, “Competition and Neoliberalisation,” he describes a situation where the need for intellectual human capital to compete within a global knowledge economy has become of utmost importance (Shields, 2013). As such, universities operating as independent entities compete with each other globally to attract students from around the world. Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013), in

keeping with this idea, note that international students offer intangible rewards of “multiple perspectives, intellectual contributions and innovative ideas” (p.550) to universities, making them attractive to universities. In Shields’ second perspective, “Critical Theories,” he describes globalization as a vehicle for the expansion of elite groups that exist within society (Shields, 2013). As such, elite groups are no longer competing within their own countries, but with groups throughout the world. Elite groups seek out the most prestigious universities and international student mobility ensures that the elite status is maintained on a global scale. Shields’ (2013) third perspective is “Institutionalism and World Culture,” which is based on the idea that the presence of common values that exist within all nation states of the world requires affiliation with international organizations. International student mobility supports the notion of being a citizen of the world and propagates the idea of cosmopolitanism (Shields, 2013). These three perspectives hold their own degrees of merit and highlight the role that increases in world connectivity and globalization play in international student mobility and underlie the research studies on international students.

Education in Home Country

One of the aims of the current study was to assess how international students from China, India, and the Caribbean navigate the educational differences between their home country and the United States. For that reason, this section is focused on a review of the literature about the educational practices within these three international populations. Hofstede (2001) has proposed five dimensions of culture (Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, and Long Term vs. Short Term Orientation) that predict the type of school environment that a given country would have. These dimensions were

developed using a retrospective review of the survey database of a large multinational company. The first four dimensions are relevant to this study.

Hofstede (2001) defines Power Distance (PD) as “a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between B [boss] and S [subordinate] as perceived by the less powerful of the two, S” (p.83). It is an inequality seen through the eyes of the lower ranked members of society within a hierarchy. Countries with a high index of PD -- meaning greater inequality-- create a school environment where teachers are highly respected, both inside and outside of the classroom, and the cultural hierarchy of the wider society permeates the school environment. The class structure is entirely directed by the teacher with the “teacher initiating all communication” (p.100) and never being challenged by students. In such a system, a student’s success is determined by the quality of the teacher (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, countries with a low PD index-- meaning less inequality-- create a situation where teachers treat students as equals and vice versa. Students are encouraged to ask questions and challenge the material that is presented by the teacher. The student’s success is a direct reflection of the student himself/herself and a willingness to challenge authority.

“Uncertainty Avoidance” is a measure of the extent to which members of a society tolerate the uncertainty that the future holds (Hofstede, 2001). A high index of uncertainty avoidance manifests as a very structured learning environment where deviations are frowned upon. Students tend to constantly seek one correct answer and look to the teacher for the answer to all questions. The standard formal version of the dominant language is valued and the use of a dialect is not valued. On the other hand, countries with a low index of uncertainty avoidance have more flexible classroom environments where “open-ended” (p.162) situations are praised

because they allow for originality. The use of dialect is tolerated within these classrooms (Hofstede, 2001).

“Individualism” vs. “Collectivism,” another one of Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions of culture, delineates the extent to which the individuals within a society are connected to or disconnected from each other. In societies that value collectivism, individualism is discouraged within the classroom because teachers focus on students as a group rather than individuals. Students do not voice their individual opinions in class. Furthermore, sub groups are formed within the classrooms that reflect societal groups existing outside of the school. In comparison, societies that are highly individualistic value independent thinking and contributions to the classroom. Teachers see each student as an individual.

The fourth dimension of culture that Hofstede (2001) discusses in relation to schooling is “Masculinity” vs. “Femininity.” Masculinity is paired with qualities associated with assertiveness, such as achievement and heroism, while femininity is paired with qualities associated with nurturance, such as cooperation and caring. In feminine societies, teachers are expected to be friendly while students’ social skills are highly valued. Boys and girls are treated equally within this setting. However, in more masculine societies, larger gender differences are seen with favorable treatment of boys. Failure is not accepted and the school curriculum is built on the careers that students are expected to pursue (Hofstede, 2001).

Using these dimensions, the Hofstede Centre classified the United States as being highly individualistic (Individualism Score = 91 out of a possible 120), having low PD (PD Index Score = 40), driven by masculine characteristics (Masculinity Score = 62), and moderately willing to accept uncertainty (Uncertainty Avoidance Index Score = 46) (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). Based on Hofstede’s (2001) description of the implication of these characteristics on schooling, the

ideal United States classroom would be made up of independent thinkers that openly challenge ideas. Students would be competitive in the quest for success and would be comfortable in a less structured school environment. Schooling in the United States differs from that in the other three regions from which my sample came, and in the following sections I highlight what some scholars report about secondary schools in the three regions within the context of Hofstede's (2001) four dimensions.

China. China, which is classified as a less technologically developed country (LTDC) by Gutek (2006), is a highly collectivist society (Individualism Score = 20) that has a high PD index (PD Index Score = 80) and degree of masculinity (Masculinity Score = 66), and a low level of uncertainty avoidance (Uncertainty Avoidance Index Score = 30), (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). In keeping with Hofstede's proposal that countries with high PD indices have classrooms in which teachers are highly respected, Gutek (2006) attributes this hierarchal construction to Confucian beliefs that still persist in some aspects of society, including education (Gutek, 2006). Other scholars note that "teaching style emphasizes the authority of the teacher" (Ni, 2001, p.238). In China, as in most countries, "policy is driven by ideology" (Gutek, 2006, p.373). Therefore, schooling acts as a reinforcing agent of social and moral ideologies held by the nation as a whole (Gutek, 2006). Gutek (2006) shares the findings of Martin Schoenals' (1993) ethnographic research as he notes that in China, unlike in the United States, students remain in one class room all day while teachers are the ones who move from classroom to classroom to teach their subjects. Schoenals (1993, as cited in Gutek, 2006) also notes that classroom size in China was larger than in the United States, with the average number of students in a Chinese classroom being 60. Schoenals' description highlights the orderly format of a Chinese classroom by describing the individual desk set-up, with each desk facing the front of the classroom. An

immediate sense of an orderly and structured environment is conveyed by the way in which the classroom is organized. He further describes the dominant use of lectures and the orderly fashion in which students responded to questions (Guttek, 2006). This is consistent with the collectivist society model put forward by Hofstede (2001).

The structure persists even within the curriculum, as students take required courses and do not have the elective option that is offered in high schools in the United States (Guttek, 2006). Ni (2001) reported gender discrepancies occurring at all levels of Chinese education, with females being seen as inferior and being discriminated against when it comes to being admitted to both secondary and tertiary education. This discrimination is more prominent in rural than urban areas according to Ni (2001) and Guttek (2006). Guttek (2006) reports that priority is given to education in urban areas and rapid economic growth has led to a wider gap between rural and urban populations (Guttek, 2006). Ni (2001) supports this idea in his article in the *World Education Encyclopedia (WEE)*. He attributes the high literacy rate of urban dwellers to greater funding and the prohibition of child labor. For the sake of the current study it is important to note these differences because school location – rural or urban- can influence the type of educational experience the university students would have had.

India. India, also classified as an LTDC by Guttek (2006), has a high PD index (PD Index Score = 77), is considered to be collectivist, even though it only scores around average on a measure of individualism (Individualism Score = 48), is a moderately masculine society (Masculinity Score = 56) and has a moderately low affinity to avoid uncertainty (Uncertainty Avoidance Index Score = 40) (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). Guttek (2006) describes India as “a nation of contrasts where urbanization and modernization coexist with ancient traditions” (p. 389), all of which have an impact on schooling. India has a history of the Hindu caste system

which sets up a hierarchal structure for society. Persons in rural areas, who are Hindus, and belong to a lower socioeconomic bracket, are most negatively affected by these caste classifications. The caste system is dissipating in urban areas and among higher socioeconomic groups (Gutek, 2006). This caste system contributes to the high PD index reported for India. Additionally, these rural/urban disparities are important to note as location affects one's schooling experience. Gutek (2006) describes India as a "patriarchal male-dominant society" (p.393), where females are under-represented in secondary and higher education. Secondary school curricula in India are determined by the content of university entrance exams. Teachers diligently follow the syllabi and movement away from the syllabi is frowned upon by students (Gutek, 2006). This rigidity is reflective of the qualities expected of a country with high uncertainty avoidance, as is explained by Hofstede (2001).

The Caribbean – Jamaica and the US Virgin Islands. Jamaica, once a colony of Britain, has an education system and administration that is modeled after the British system (Matthei & Matthei, 2001). Although still very influential, Jamaica, along with other ex-colonial Caribbean islands, has made a concerted effort to tailor the school environment to meet the unique needs of the West Indian student. Matthei and Matthei (2001) use the example of switching from the use of textbooks made in Great Britain and North America to using textbooks produced by The Ministry of Education in Jamaica. The non-local textbooks proved to be unreflective of Jamaican life and values (Matthei & Matthei, 2001). Furthermore, secondary school exams have been "Caribbeanized" (p.678). Jamaica, unlike India and China, has a relatively low PD index (PD Index Score= 45). It is a masculine society (Masculinity Score= 68) with low uncertainty avoidance (Uncertainty Avoidance Index Score= 13), and is categorized as collectivist, due to its low individualism score (Individualism Score= 39) (The Hofstede Centre).

As such, it is not surprising that reforms within the Jamaican education system-- such as renaming all secondary schools as high schools, rather than distinguishing between traditional high schools and the perceived inferior comprehensive schools -- are focused on creating greater equality (Matthei & Matthei, 2001). The Jamaican curriculum has been standardized for all high schools and is geared towards preparation for the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) examinations that are taken after grade 11 and the General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations that are taken at the end of grade 13 (Matthei & Matthei, 2001).

The U.S. Virgin Islands was not included among the countries investigated by Hofstede (2001) and The Hofstede Centre (n.d.). Very little research exists on schooling specific to the U.S. Virgin Islands, possibly because it is often overlooked as simply being a U.S. territory. The public education system of the U.S. Virgin Islands is modeled after that of the United States and follows U.S. accrediting procedures (Graves, 2001). However, its proximity to the rest of the Caribbean and some of the shared history in terms of its original inhabitants, and shared cultural values often cause the U.S. Virgin Islands to be grouped more with the Caribbean region than with the United States. Furthermore, students from these islands are often not classified as being “international.” For the purpose of the current study, however, students from the U.S. Virgin Islands are viewed as international students from the Caribbean.

Adjusting to the United States

According to Kim (2012), U.S. universities have to cater to the unique needs of the ever-increasing population of international students. This population of students faces unique challenges that differ from the adjustment issues faced by sojourners who are citizens of the United States but have left their home state to attend school in another state (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Kim, 2012; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping &

Todman, 2008). In their systematic review of theories surrounding culture shock and international students, Zhou (2008) and colleagues, in commenting on an acculturation model developed by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001, as cited in Zhou et al, 2008), highlight that there are both micro and macro level variables that affect an individual's experience of cultural transition. Among these, the authors list personality, language competence, and cultural distance as micro factors and the society of origin as a macro factor. It is important to note that not only does the international student experience differ from non-international sojourns, but each international student has a unique experience that is influenced by the aforementioned factors. Tseng and Newton (2002) discuss the adjustment problems encountered by international students under four major categories: general living adjustment, academic adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment, and personal psychological adjustment.

In their article, Tseng and Newton (2002) try to decipher what determines international student well-being and how international students go about attaining well-being. Their study is limited to interviews conducted with two international students attending a Midwestern public university. One student was from Africa and was an undergraduate senior, and the other was from Asia and was a graduate student. The authors summarize the ideas of well-being expressed by the participants into two categories, "overall satisfaction in life and positive affect" (p.594). In terms of attaining this well-being, the two participants mentioned things associated with achieving goals, such as "completing school work" (p.594). Tseng and Newton sum up the adjustment strategies used by their two participants into eight major headings. These were; (1) "know self and others," which included understanding the similarities and differences between the United States and one's home culture; (2) "Make friends and build friendships," which included making both international friends and American friends; (3) "Expand individual world

view,” (4) “Ask [for] help and handle problems,” (5) “Establish cultural and social contacts” through participation in community activities; (6) “Build relationships with advisors and instructors,” because one’s relationship with such personnel have an impact on student learning; (7) “Become proficient in the English Language,” which one respondent saw as “the way in;” and (8) “Use the tactic of letting go,” which entails knowing when to leave a problem alone. The small sample size of this study limits the findings’ generalizability. Furthermore, the adjustment strategies are generalized across undergraduate and graduate students, with no distinction being made as to how adjustment strategies may be different between the two. Additionally, one of the participants was identified as being male while the gender of the other was unreported, so whether or not a female participant was included is uncertain.

The current study used a larger sample size and limited all participants to the undergraduate level of study. Furthermore, three international populations were targeted, two of which were not included in the study conducted by Tseng and Newton (2002). Both male and female participants were included in the current study.

In another study, Hechanova– Alampay, Beehr, Christaiansen and Van Horn (2002) explored how the stress of adjusting to a new environment affected international students at a mid-western United States state university in comparison to domestic sojourns (students who traveled within the United States to attend college). Their sample consisted of 106 international students and 188 domestic sojourns. The international students came from 37 countries with the highest percent originating from the Asia-Pacific. The researchers conducted a longitudinal study, which consisted of an initial survey that was administered at the beginning of the semester, and then two follow up surveys that were administered three months and six months later. The first survey evaluated adjustment, strain and self-efficacy, the second, adjustment and

strain and the third, adjustment, strain, amount and type of social support, and cultural novelty (p.465). The authors said that by addressing these issues, universities can ensure greater success and easier transitions for their international student populations. In their research, Hechanova–Alampay et al. (2002) explored international students' perceived cultural novelty in relation to 15 different categories, including education system. They hypothesized that cultural novelty would be negatively correlated with adjustment and positively correlated with strain. They did not find statistically significant differences to support this hypothesis but this does not negate the fact that cultural and educational adjustments may be having significant effects on international student achievement.

Previous researchers highlighted that special consideration needs to be given to the adjustment of international students who speak English as their second language and go to college in the United States. Wan, Chapman and Biggs (1992) looked at the relationship between factors such as perceived English language ability and academic stress for international graduate students and found that perceived English Language ability was related to students' assessment of academic stress. The authors utilized a sample of 689 graduate students from three institutions. Language is also one of the 15 categories of cultural novelty highlighted by Hechanova–Alampay et al. (2002). The current study contains participants from China, who speak English as their second language and therefore may have additional challenges with which to contend.

Identity Formation within the United States

Kim (2012) argues that the reconstruction of one's identity is fundamental to the overall academic experience of a college student. Although much attention has been given to this

process as it pertains to students who are U.S. citizens, not as much research has focused on how this experience of identity reconstruction is unique to international students.

Kim (2012) utilized interviews and field notes to collect data from undergraduate international students at one mid-western public university. The field notes were recorded based on observations of international students at various locations around the university to obtain a first-hand look at social interactions. The sample consisted of 22 international students from Austria, China, France, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Singapore, Taiwan, and Turkey. From the analysis of these data, Kim (2012) proposed six phases of International Student Identity (ISI) development that should not be viewed in isolation from each other but where one phase builds upon the other with some overlap commonly occurring between phases. Phase One is termed, “pre-exposure” which is experienced during the process of preparation for study in the United States while the student is still in his/her home country. Feelings of isolation from peers within the home country may be felt as the students plan to embark on a different journey and do the necessary preparations, such as taking extra tests for entry into the U.S. system (Kim, 2012). The second phase is termed “exposure.” This phase is encountered upon arrival to the United States and the student is aware that the new environment differs from the cultural and educational one of his/her home environment. At this point the student holds firm to the academic and cultural practices of his/her home country. Additionally, at this point the international student is developing independence from his/her parents (Kim, 2012). The third phase, “enclosure,” is a period of withdrawal from the new community. The student shies away from students who do not have his/her same background and does not participate in many extracurricular activities. He/she is often consumed in the academic aspect of his/her experience and is less focused on the social aspect. At this point, the international student clings to family and peers from the home

country (Kim, 2012). During the fourth phase, “emergence,” international students begin to reach outside of their own cultural groups. Kim describes this phase as possibly being unstable as the student explores the unfamiliar and fights an internal battle of letting go of an old identity for a new one. At this point, the student still holds on to cultural values of home but begins to accept the cultural values of the community. The fifth phase, “internalizing self,” is the point at which the identity conflict ceases and an integration of the home identity with the new identity occurs to form a new identity. The sixth and final phase, “internationalization,” occurs when the student forms an identity within a multicultural context. At this point, the student develops an appreciation for all cultures. The student acknowledges and respects the differences that exist among various cultural groups and is able to navigate himself/herself within such an environment. None of the participants in Kim’s (2012) study was found to be in this last phase.

The current study utilized a population from a private university that may attract international students from a different socioeconomic bracket than that of a public university. Additionally, the Caribbean and Indian populations included in the current study were not included in the study conducted by Kim (2012).

The literature shows that the educational cultures in China, India, and the Caribbean differ from both that of the United States and each other, as educational structures are influenced by the ideologies and policies of each society. The cultural differences that exist between home and host country require adjustments to be made by international students. How, what type, and to what extent adjustments are made is dependent on characteristics of each individual international student as well as the culture from which they came. Scholars have also found that, the process that is undertaken to form a new identity within the United States context is unique to each student, but moves through phases before a solid identity can be made. However, whether or

not the international student experience is significantly different in a private university in the southeastern United States, like the one utilized in this study, is not known. Furthermore, there is a deficit in the research available on the international student experience as it relates specifically to Caribbean international students. The current study was designed to fill these gaps.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

In this chapter I describe my use of a qualitative case study design for conducting the research. I explain how I recruited participants, how I collected data using semi-structured interviews, and finally how I analyzed the data to answer the research questions.

Research Design

In this study I utilized a qualitative case study design to answer the research questions. Yin (1992) describes the case study design as an “empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p.123). The way in which I collected the data in this study, and later analyzed them, reflects an empirical approach. Additionally, Merriam (1998) says that the case study design is chosen when “researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (p. 28-29). Furthermore, a qualitative case study has particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic properties. This means that the study is focused on a particular phenomenon, it gives an all-encompassing description of the phenomenon, and it increases the audience’s understanding of the study respectively (Merriam, 1998). As the investigator, my personal experience as an international student influenced various aspects of both the research design and my consequent analysis.

In this study I aimed to answer specific research questions through the use of semi-structured interviews conducted with international students. Semi-structured interviews allow for a more open framework of discussion than structured interviews, allowing for two-way discourse between the interviewer and interviewee. In this way new ideas can be brought forward and developed within the discussion. It allows for a freedom to probe further into topics of interest

without a restriction on the questions that can be asked. The semi-structured interview also facilitates independent thought that is not influenced by the experiences of others.

Sample

I contacted the International Students and Scholar Services department to get a general idea of the distribution of international students at the university. I used this distribution to identify the countries sending the most students to the university and those upon which the study would be based. I also chose to focus on students from the Caribbean, due to my personal interest in the region. I used a purposeful sampling method to recruit participants. I approached Indian, Chinese, and Caribbean cultural groups on campus to which I gave a general overview of the study, along with a verbal request for anyone who was interested and who met the criteria to share their e-mail contact information. I sent emails that contained initial letters of contact (see Appendix A) to possible participants and I contacted those participants who responded indicating that they would participate to ensure that they met the criteria for the research. I set up a meeting place and time for conducting the semi-structured interview at each participant's convenience. All participants gave consent for participation in the study by signing a consent form (Appendix B). The final sample consisted of six individuals in total -- two international students from each of the three territories.

Six international students participated in the study. Four of them were female and two were male. Four were in their senior year of university and two were in their junior year (Table 1). Three of the participants attended public high schools and three attended private ones. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' real names throughout the report.

Table 1: Participant Profiles

| Name | Gender | Home Country | Secondary School Type | Year at University |
|-------------|---------------|---------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Janelle | Female | Jamaica | Traditional public school | Senior |
| Raychelle | Female | U.S. Virgin Islands | Private high school | Junior |
| Liu | Female | China | Public foreign language boarding school | Senior |
| Aadhya | Female | India | Private boarding school | Senior |
| Navin | Male | India | Private international high school | Senior |
| Han | Male | China | Public foreign language school | Junior |

Data Collection

All six students in the sample attended secondary school in their home country and came to the United States to attend university. All participants were juniors or seniors at the university. I collected data using semi-structured interviews, arranged at the participants' convenience. The participant and I had an informal introduction. After initial introductions, I turned on the voice recorder to record the entire interview. I also took notes during the interview.

The semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) contained questions adapted from several previous studies. Interview questions that focused on the students' navigation of cultural differences between their home country and the United States were developed in accordance with the 15 categories of "perceived cultural novelty" discussed in the research done by Hechanova– Alampay et al. (2002). Interview questions that focused on the student's navigation of differences in educational cultures between the home country and the United States were

formulated in accordance with the five dimensions of culture put forward by Hofstede (2001).

The interview questions that focused on how international students develop an identity within the United States context were developed based on the six-phase International Student Identity (ISI) model developed by Kim (2012).

Analysis

I transcribed all interviews verbatim and included affective cues such as laughter in the transcription. I used open coding to assign codes to each transcription. Codes were assigned to emerging themes. I evaluated all interviews for both common and uncommon themes and ideas. These themes and ideas were then evaluated within the context of the three research questions and are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and Ideas Identified in Interviews

| |
|--|
| Navigating Cultural Differences Ideas about the United States pre-entry Preparation for life in the United States Initial thoughts Comparing cultures University life and adjustment Future Plans Seeking familiarity and dealing with homesickness |
| Navigating Educational Differences Schooling in home country Classroom environment in home country Comparison of schooling |
| Constructing an Identity Perceptions and interactions Selectively adopting cultural practices Identity challenges |

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter I highlight the views expressed by the six participants during their semi-structured interviews and place their responses into the context of the three research questions: (1) How do international students navigate the cultural differences between their home country and the United States? (2) How do international students navigate the educational differences between their home country and the United States? (3) How do international students construct an identity within the United States context? Pseudonyms are used throughout the findings for all participants and for any names of friends and family to whom they may have referred. A pseudonym is also used when referring to the university from which the sample participants came.

Most of the participants repeated a similar refrain to explain why they came to the United States to study. “My parents said, ‘Better opportunities abroad’” (Janelle). “They are both called University of the Virgin Islands but one is in St. Thomas and one is in St. Croix. The one in St. Thomas is, I guess, the more booming one, but they both typically have a lot of faults, hence why a lot of kids go away” (Raychelle). “For better education” (Liu). “More people are starting to apply to universities abroad. Because [going to] the Indian education system after an international [secondary] education system is a bit of a setback” (Navin). “I really love my country but like you know.... You know there are not a lot of major scientific findings, [nor] Nobel Prize winners from China. That’s one of the major reasons why, even for the top tier colleges it’s not technically doing the fully devotion thing” (Han).

Some participants also reported a general trend to go abroad that occurred either in their school or the wider society. Janelle said, “Many people from my school apply to universities abroad.” “But essentially what they are doing [in the movie, *American Dreams in China*] is like

following the main trend of China of the generation, my generation, and the last generation essentially to come to the U.S. for education” (Han). “[Coming to the U.S.] It’s a huge thing in India. It’s really huge” (Aadhya). One participant, Raychelle, reported being surrounded by men and women who were educated, some of whom gained this education in United States colleges.

Aaydha and Navin reported the same push factor, which was the lack of choice that existed within Indian colleges. They both acknowledged that one has to know exactly what one was going to study before one enters an Indian college and there is not much room to change along the way. Even though Han mentioned a similar situation in China, he did not identify this as a reason for not choosing a Chinese university. “The thing with the UK system [which is utilized by Indian universities], is that you have to know exactly what you want to do before you get there... I look back on my three years at school here Zakiya and I look at the number of times I have changed my major and it’s just like thank goodness I didn’t pick the United Kingdom [system]” (Aadhya). “After the 12th grade in India you have to know what you want to do” (Navin).

Two of the participants acknowledged the need for financial resources in order to make the decision to come to the United States. “I think it is your financial standing that [puts you at a better place to come to U.S. universities]” (Navin).

In order for me to come here... like the [U.S.] college doesn’t offer us scholarships and you know money and stuff. So I have to be able to afford that cost of education. That’s a huge part. Like some families [in China] would simply avoid this kind of big cost, it could be, it means, you know it means a house to them, literally the cost of a house to them. (Han).

Navigating Cultural Differences

In this section I elucidate responses put forward by the participants which answer the first research question, “How do international students navigate the cultural differences between their home country and the United States?”

Ideas about the United States pre-entry. Janelle, Navin, and Han all developed some ideas about life in the United States based on things that they had seen on television. Janelle said that she wanted to go to college in Jamaica because she “was afraid of the cultural differences” that she would encounter in the United States:

Like coming here and being so alien. I thought I would be like the only person from the Caribbean at my school and I wasn't sure how I would fit in; because you know American TV...it's kinda hard to fit in as pictured there.

The high school environment was not as “cliquey” in Jamaica as was portrayed in U.S. television shows. On the other hand, television shows sparked Han's curiosity about coming to the United States. He said, “There is a lot of, you know, personal aspects to why I always wanted to be here [the United States], because I saw it in movies, I wanted to check it out, what it really is.” He recalled that American dramas are popular in China and the first one he had watched was *Prison Break*. Navin discussed that the image that is painted of the United States by television shows is “New York City pretty much, big buildings and fast paced life and all that” (Navin). Further to the point, “America is always portrayed to be this very rich country so I guess one assumes that the common man is pretty well off” (Navin).

A few of the participants also reported the presence of American fast food chains within their home countries. Liu recalled Pizza Hut being present in China and Janelle and Raychelle

both reported that Jamaica and the Virgin Islands (VI) respectively, had American fast food chains like Wendys and McDonalds.

Preparation for life in the United States. Participants reported different levels and types of preparation for life in the United States pre-entry. Some participants had visited the United States before beginning school there, while some had teachers from the United States who exposed them to things that they might expect once they arrive. One participant reported learning English within the American context, simultaneously learning about American culture. Some participants also took the SATs while still completing the required courses and exams for their high schools.

Initial thoughts. Some of the participants expressed immediate culture shock upon entry to the United States and to Adams University. Liu recounted:

I experienced culture shock the second I got here. I still remember the second I stepped off the plane, going into the airport, that everybody around me are white. Like [everybody around here] are American. I was like, oh my God, this is, oh my God. Really, that's like my first culture shock. And then it gets better.

Similarly, Janelle also observed the people who she was now surrounded by when she first got to Adams University. Her reaction was, "Oh My God, this place [Adams University] is huge! I am never going to remember where any of my classes are... and I don't see too many people who look like me or remind me of home."

Comparing cultures. The cultural differences highlighted by the participants between the United States and their home country differed for each participant, with each one expressing some very specific differences and experiences that came to mind.

Janelle noted that there was a difference in food. She described that she was previously exposed to “the basics, pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs,” because they have been imported to Jamaica, but coming to the United States exposed her “to many different kinds of cheese.” Her surprise at this was evident in her tone as she said, “Like people ask me what kind of cheese I wanted and I was like, cheese! There are kinds of cheese?” She described that “it was [like] a whole new world” when she visited the local grocery store. “I was like this store is so big...you have different types of toilet paper? It’s like what is the point?” “I didn’t even know what ply meant.” Another thing that she noted was that all buildings were air-conditioned, which was something that she was not used to in Jamaica. In terms of social culture, she recalled having to “adjust to people not being that friendly” and having “to make appointments with people now.” She found that people at Adams University did not hug each other and this was something that she was used to in Jamaica. “It is very awkward to touch people [in the United States],” but in Jamaica, “personal space is not a concern.” She recalls that, “Somebody told me she felt like a dog so I had to stop that [touching her hair].” Furthermore, persons in the United States did not greet you, they don’t say, “hi.” Another difference she highlighted was that in the United States, African Americans have negative stereotypes that are associated with them. However, being black in Jamaica is just seen as “normal.” “That’s the normal person in Jamaica, because we are the majority. It is a real difference between being a majority and being a minority.”

Raychelle, like Janelle, noted the absence of greetings in the United States. “I notice when you come here, the Americans... they don’t have the same level of respect that I feel like people from the islands/Caribbean have. So the whole acknowledging [people] ... ‘afternoon’, ‘excuse me’..., they don’t do that.” (Raychelle). She expressed confusion about the drinking culture in the United States. She acknowledged that the drinking age in the VI is 18 compared to

that of 21 in the United States and questioned, “like who in their right mind, goes into a frat party, sees a bucket with a garbage bag full of cool aid and God knows what else was thrown in there, go scoop up a cup and drink it?” She is puzzled by the alcohol consumption practices that occur at fraternity parties.

Greek life was something that was also novel to Han and Liu as they explained that it did not exist in China. In terms of social interaction, Liu highlighted that in her English class in high school she learned to ask the question, “how many siblings do you have?” in conversations with people from the United States. However, due to the one child policy in China, this would not normally be a topic of conversation. One thing that she noticed was that “Asians are not as open as Americans.” Liu also observed that, “The living condition here is definitely better, even the air is cleaner. In China there is so much construction and like going-on,... a lot of the cities are heavily, heavily polluted. It’s horrible.”

Aadhya and I laughed at her mention of “free refills [of drinks]” as being something that she found was different when she came to the United States. Both Aadhya and Navin mentioned that Diwali is celebrated differently at Adams University than it is in India. “So Diwali is sort of like, it’s done right, but it’s definitely a lot more family oriented where I am from, India that is” (Aadhya). “We celebrate Diwali here with a huge party; you know like ICE [Indian Cultural Exchange] throws a party... my household never did that. It was always festive but it was always sort of chill with friends you know” (Navin). Navin also expressed shock at the poor public transportation that he had seen in many cities in the United States because he expected a wealthy country like the United States to surpass the quality of public transportation that was found in a less wealthy country like India.

University life and adjustment. All of the participants reported that they participated in clubs at Adams University. Along with ACES [Association of Caribbean Educators and Students], Janelle joined a creative writing club, played club tennis, and participated in anime clubs. Liu was part of Alpha Phi Omega, a service fraternity; she participated in Karate, and volunteered with project SHINE [Students Helping in Naturalization and English]. Aadhya commented that “being really involved” helped her to settle into Adams University. “I tried to do as many things as I could my freshman and sophomore year” (Aadhya). She is a member of Model United Nations (MUN), she was a member of the Adams University political union, and she played soccer. Nazin was also a member of MUN, and took part in Volunteer Adams University, Adams University Global Health Organization, and young Democrats. He is currently co-chair of the health and development committee of Global HEED [Health Education and Economic Development]. Han was a member of the badminton club, and was on the executive board of the Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology (NBB) Honor Society.

Two of the six participants reflected on the instrumental role that their freshman roommates played in their adjustment to life at Adams University. Both participants had roommates who were from the United States. Liu reported, “It was definitely hard at the beginning, but because I had Jamila [her American roommate]... Jamila is like a huge help. She...gave me so much help during my first year, it’s like she cannot imagine.” Liu explained that her roommate’s “personality is so nice that you wouldn’t feel pushed, or you wouldn’t feel bad like when you made a mistake when you’re communicating or something,” and her roommate would kindly tell her where she made an error in communicating in English. “I credit having a really solid group of friends my freshman year. Those are the same people I am friends with today and I really think that they have been a great influence on the way things came

together” (Aadhya). Aadhya made special mention of her freshman roommate Dianne, who she also referred to as her best friend. “Dianne was my roommate; she made it great to be a freshman” (Aadhya).

The participants also spoke about adjusting in different ways. Liu said, “I mean the small things you really have to learn by watching... by observing.... By watching other people do it, I would do the same. So, it was, I realized the difference but it wasn’t a shock,” as she described how she learned to navigate restaurants in the United States. Aadhya began her college experience feeling overwhelmed. She said, “I do remember the first time that college started, it was just so much to take in and I technically left home at 15, so it was just like, why am I even further [away from home]?” However she thinks that “the more you get settled and the more you take advantage of the opportunities that are given to you it’s, I think things kind of come together.” Furthermore, she said:

I think there is just a moment in your college life Zakiya, where you just decide that you’re just gonna grow up and do it right. Maybe, maybe I’m the only one who thinks so but I’m just so convinced that if you really look hard enough at your life you see that there’s this one point where you just sort of got up and said, I’m gonna fix everything and I am going to do it on my own. And to me that was second semester sophomore year.

Aadhya participated in a study abroad program to Istanbul in the summer after her freshman year which required her to push herself to move out of her comfort zone, which she said was a step in the right direction towards adjusting.

Nazin said, “It was absolutely easy [adjusting to life in the United States]. Umm because, because I loved it, from the day I came I loved it. I just mixed with everyone and I loved my academics.” Han said, “You’ll be astounded if I say that, but there is no culture shock.” He

attributed this to the fact that China has become a lot more westernized than they were in the 1960s. However, as the interview unfolded he said, “I did feel some kind of culture shock when it gets to the really cultural thing,” like if someone were to mention a famous person in the United States, he may not know the person and would have to do some research on the person. Han described one experience during his freshman year that he thought was quite funny when he had challenges within the classroom. His professor had said, “Let’s take a detour off this and talk about blah blah blah.” He was confused about what “detour” meant in this context because even though he had learned the word in his English lessons, he was not familiar with its use in that context. Another challenge that he had to deal with was making presentations in class. “Don’t know about you, but for me, every time for the first two years of my college I gave a presentation, I wrote down each and every word.” He admired how some United States students could deviate to make a joke during their presentations and then return to the exact point where they left off. He said that this was something that he could not do while presenting in English, but would be able to do if he was presenting in Chinese.

Future plans. All participants expressed plans to stay in the United States after completion of their undergraduate education. However, some participants also expressed the desire to return to their home country after attaining a certain level of success in the United States. “Right now I plan to live in the U.S. Back home [VI] they have a lot of issues that it is going to take an army to fix and me starting a career back home is not likely” (Raychelle). “Yeah personally I think I would want to [stay in the U.S.]” (Liu). Her plan to stay in the United States increased her determination to interact with American students. Aadhya had a similar reaction:

So that’s what I have been grappling with. I really, I, so I would like to work for a while here and then, but I think when you, I think in a way when I associate what I want to do

with my life, because I wanna make India better you know so, and India will always be home. It will be the place that makes me feel the most alive. It'll be the place where I feel the most responsible for what happens and it's also the place that's home and I think that not a lot of places could ever take that spot.

Even though Aadhya wants to stay in the United States for a while, her ultimate goal was to go back to India.

Nazin said, "Well at some point I want to go to grad school [in the U.S.]," "I really don't know [if I want to live in the U.S.]." Han said that he definitely wants to go to graduate school in the United States and he thought that he would live in the United States as well. He described, "If I become a doctor, they have those really tense doctor/patient relationships in China...and their research, if I become a researcher, I don't think China would be a good place to start my own lab" and therefore he has decided that it would be best to remain in the United States.

Seeking familiarity and dealing with homesickness. All participants, at some point in their university career sought out familiarity. This was done in different ways which included joining clubs, requesting freshman roommates who were from their country or had similar backgrounds and cooking and eating food from home. However, not all participants reported experiencing homesickness.

Janelle reported that she chose her freshman roommate because she had Caribbean parents and she thought that the roommate would therefore be "a good match." Even though the two women had things in common, like being concerned about electricity and therefore turning the lights off, they were not as similar as Janelle expected they would be. Janelle joined the Association of Caribbean Educators and Students (ACES), because she was seeking out other Caribbean people at Adams University.

Raychelle described her search for familiarity even before she arrived at the university. She said that many students from the Virgin Islands select universities in Florida because there are large populations of VI persons who live there and the weather is closer to that of the VI. Raychelle found herself searching YouTube for the new music of the Caribbean when she first arrived because she was unfamiliar with local radio stations and did not hear the music to which she was accustomed. “I wasn’t...homesick [to the point where] I want to go home, I don’t want to be here anymore. I wasn’t like that. I had just missed ... the cultural aspect of it” (Raychelle). When Raychelle missed these cultural aspects it would suffice to listen to Caribbean music on her iPod and dance in her room, or go to her ACES dance practices. In describing the distribution of her friends, she noted that most of them, even though American born, had some cultural background from a country other than the United States. Raychelle said “It’s just that, I guess naturally you would be attracted to somebody ... [who] could understand your type of music or your food and you know stuff like that.”

Liu echoed this sentiment, “the different racial groups tend to stay together, within their own groups and I guess the reason why is because it’s just easier. And sometimes people just thrive in their own community....” She gave two specific reasons as to why Chinese students stick with their Chinese groups and these were the language barrier that exists with non-Chinese students and lack of a shared background with non-Chinese students. She also said that some of her Chinese friends are not interested or not motivated to interact with Americans. Liu reported that when she experienced feelings of homesickness she would talk to her parents, eat Chinese food, and hang out with her Chinese friends.

Han disclosed that he tended to associate more with Chinese students than other students because it was more comfortable to speak in his own language without having to “think about what to say.” He described an almost inevitable situation where:

It’s really hard to get to know new people in the first place, not to mention to me, a foreigner, and then, if you have that comfort zone, which we have, like some 200 students in... every year, so it’s kind of [like] you have a social network of your own.

Han’s freshman roommate was also Chinese. Han was not involved in all the Chinese organizations on campus like some of his friends were. Han described his feelings of homesickness as “not too bad” and he attributed this to being able to visit home frequently and having a busy schedule while at school.

Aadhya said that she didn’t experience homesickness; her experience at boarding school “stamped that out.” Furthermore, she said that knowing that she would be going home helped. She mentioned that when she looked at her Facebook page during her freshman year, the activity was mainly from high school friends. Aadhya also reflected on why she continued to attend Catholic masses at Adams University, she said, “I think here [at Adams University] it just became something that kind of kept me connected to home.”

Navin also had an Indian roommate for his freshman year. Navin reported never having feelings of homesickness. However, like Han he described his association with persons from his home as being “inevitable:”

Well I guess my closest friends are from the Indian community and ... it’s almost inevitable because when you go outside your country...you’re most likely to bond with people that you can relate with most. So that’s almost inevitable. You know however much I try to branch out, it’s inevitable. So that happened. I was closest to the Indian

people but I did branch out, I did speak a lot to others. I interacted a lot with my classmates and so on.

In summary, the participants' navigation of cultural differences consisted of various elements. The participants were exposed to some aspects of U.S. culture pre-entry. This exposure came via TV, visits to the United States and the presence of fast food franchises within home countries. Upon arrival to the United States two participants reported immediate observation of differences in race and ethnicity of the people who now surrounded them. Other, less immediate cultural differences highlighted by participants included those centered on food, personal space, respect, cultural celebrations, music, and language. All participants participated in extra-curricular activities once at Adams University. Seeking out familiarity was common among all participants as some chose roommates with similar cultural backgrounds and others stuck to friendship groups that consisted of persons from their home country.

Navigating Educational Differences

In this section, I organize the responses put forward by the participants to answer the second research question, "How do international students navigate the educational differences between their home country and the United States?"

Schooling in home country. The six participants all attended high schools within their countries that had good reputations. "[The traditional school is] considered to be better than other high schools" (Janelle), "I attended a public high school. But take into consideration that public schools in China does not necessarily mean they are worse schools. In most cases they are funded by government and are the best" (Han). Raychelle explained that most people who have the finances to attend the private schools in the VI are children whose parents have migrated from the United States to work on the island. Additionally, parents who believe that their

children have a “bright future” also try to send their children to the private schools. “In order to get into my high school [in China] you have to have really good grades” (Liu).

With that being said, the characteristics of each individual’s school differed. Janelle attended a “traditional,” co-ed public school in Jamaica. She described the demographic makeup as being “70 – 80% black” and “10% white” with “some Israeli kids” present. Raychelle attended a private high school on the Island of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands (VI). The school structure mirrored that of the United States. Although she described the VI population as being predominantly of African descent, she made the distinction that the people who attended her school were predominantly made up of people of Caucasian and Indian descent whose families migrated from the U.S. to work in the VI.

Liu attended a co-ed, foreign language boarding school in China; she hesitated to classify the school as either public or private because the national educational department, instead of the local government, funded the school. Liu described a typical school day as follows:

Technically our classes would end around 4 or 5pm and then we would have... a dinner break, and then we would have...three more hours of like self-study sessions, which normally the teacher would just come in and give classes [during this time].

Han attended a foreign language school in Shanghai, China that he described as being “pretty small compared to other Chinese high schools and “99% public”. He explained:

They set up those foreign language schools in China, like when they... started the new country and there is a prime minister who said...we need the foreign language to come in and they said...these kinds of schools would bring...the countries together.... So there is a bunch of foreign language schools in China. My school is one of them.

Aadhya attended a Christian, Scottish school in Bombay, India until 10th grade and then relocated to a boarding school in Bangalore for the 11th and 12th grade which followed the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. Also in India, Navin attended high school at an international school that followed the International General Certificate of Education (IGCSE) curriculum for the 9th and 10th grade and the IB curriculum for 11th and 12th grade.

Classroom environment in home country. The classroom environment experienced by each participant in his/her home country had distinct elements. Janelle described the teacher-student relationship within her Jamaican classroom as a “dictatorship” and the atmosphere as “formal:”

The teacher says what the answer is and that is all you are allowed to write. If you write anything else it’s considered wrong and you cannot question the teacher in Jamaica. If the teacher writes the wrong thing on the board that is just the answer. You never say that the teacher is wrong ... We had the stand up and say good morning, like the robotic ‘good morning Mr. Harris’ kinda thing, but it wasn’t informal at all. The teachers were very formal. Like you had to write your essays from an objective tense. You can’t say ‘I’. One of my teachers, he made you raise your hand in class. You had to stand up to answer a question and if he didn’t like your work he would crush it up and throw it away in front of you... I think... [the use of formal writing and the absence of the use of ‘I’] is partially from the more formal social culture, you know Miss and Mister, you [are] addressing someone higher than you so you have to use a higher standard than regular speech. .

Raychelle described her relationship with her teachers as being unique, “I felt, I was able to...connect with my teachers and they were the ones who were like... do this do that, you know good mentors. But that’s a select few.” “Back home there is a big thing about respect. If you are

from the islands you know that when you enter a room you say good morning, good afternoon... if you ... wanna learn something you have to show that in the classroom and maybe outside of the classroom. If you need help, go for help and teachers would see that” (Raychelle).

Commenting on how respect played out in the classroom, Raychelle relayed a situation where some teachers tended to favor students who “have potential” and are “very respectable” and “have manners.” Some teachers would be more accessible to these students. She said that this favoritism was seen even within the colleges. However, she acknowledged that there were also teachers who gave more help to students who were struggling. Drawing on both her public school and private school experience, Raychelle said that teachers tend to be addressed as Mr. and Miss, followed by their last name in both atmospheres. However, she has noticed a change within private schools where the title is now being followed by the first name instead of the last name. When asked about having to stand when a teacher enters the classroom or raising a hand to answer a question, Raychelle said that they did have to raise their hands, but they only really stood during the recital of the pledge of allegiance.

Liu described her classroom environment as being “very disciplined,” but less disciplined than most Chinese high schools. There was a teacher in charge of each class who she referred to as a “master.” “Basically he [the master] would be in charge of everything. Like if we do something wrong, if you break the school...regulation, or just anything like he would know.” Not obeying the master or a teacher would have consequences. All classes were held in the same classroom and the teachers would “come and go.” Liu said that students are allowed to question the teacher about something with which they don’t agree, however most students do not do it because “it’s really [a] hierarchy, so we are...really supposed to be subordinate to our teachers, instead of being on the equal ground, and teachers tend not to like when students defy or

question their authority I guess.” Classroom discussion consisted of students giving input only when the teacher asked a question and students were required to raise their hands in order to be selected to answer the question.

Han, echoing what Liu reported, gave the following description:

We [the students] always stay together [as a class at each successive grade level] and...there are 40 students to 50 in one particular class. And there is one like supervisor of the class, which is a teacher who like he/she could be teaching that class in some particular subject but mainly she's in charge of the class. In [charge of] our daily duties, how you organize discipline, stuff like that. Mainly what would happen is each and every day teachers just come into the class to teach. You know, not like this [at Adams University], we go to classes for teachers but it's the other way around [in his Chinese high school]. And we take six or seven classes every day.

Han also highlighted discipline as being a top priority within the Chinese classroom “in terms of do not speak as the teacher talks; stand up as the teacher goes into class. You know...all types of old Chinese traditional discipline thing.” Elaborating on the air of discipline and respect, Han said the following:

It's kind of different from the Western view. We really respect our teachers. Not like we can make jokes on them. We will be punished for that. That's one thing, and the other thing is... when the class starts, the teacher comes into... the classroom and everyone has to stand up at the same time, at the call of the class president. There is a class president, a student and he calls like you know, stand up and... we bow to the teacher and the teacher says..., ‘you can sit down’, you know and you sit down. That's pretty typical of what happens each and every day... [in] every high school in China.

Having good grades was also a top priority within the classroom. Han explained that “everybody talks about grades in China” and teachers go so far as to post grades and rankings of students on the bulletin board. He said that a grade/ranking could actually affect your social status as a student.

Aadhya described the interaction that she had with her teachers:

[In the Scottish school in India] you interacted with your teachers... in class and then... maybe at the end of the day you sort of saw them taking a bus home or if you had a question you would like go to them during the short break or long break. But in boarding school those teachers live where you live..., they live on campus, you see them like having normal lives with their families, you see them taking a walk in the morning, you know it's just like, what is this? But... I think there was a lot more interaction just by virtue of the nature... of my boarding school because, you just see people more, so you just interact with them on a larger scale.

Aadhya explained that there was a “culture of tuition classes,” which were essentially extra classes, that existed in Bombay Scottish while students prepared for the ICSE exams. This led to inattention in the regular classroom because students knew that the material would be covered in the “extra classes.” She believed that the tuition classes “took away from the work hard in the moment... attitude [of the class].” In spite of this she found that teachers “did a very good job of still being very present in the classroom.” Aadhya reported that stricter teachers were respected more and older, more experienced professors were respected more than newer teachers.

Navin described the relationship that students had with teachers as being friendly but still formal in his high school:

In an Indian school essentially, the teachers stamp their authority to students. You know very clearly who's the boss. And in that sense, most of our classes were not like conversations that you have. They were essentially lectures where they teach you the principles and you know you have to learn it, and you give an exam.

This description was specifically for Indian teachers as he said that the interaction with foreign teachers was more like the way he would relate to a professor at Adams University. Furthermore, Navin noted that the classroom environment in his international high school differed from that in other Indian schools. He said:

When I was studying in the Indian education system, they didn't like questions and if you ever happen to ask a question, many times you would be shut down, you know saying don't ask stupid questions. So in a sense for young children that is very intimidating and so your natural instinct to ask a question is curtailed. But it was a little better in the school that I went to for high school and I could ask questions freely, so that wasn't really a problem.

Navin also said that it could get competitive among students and in fact, it was all right to ask, "What grade did you get? What grade did she get?" in India.

Comparison of schooling. In their descriptions of their schooling experiences within their home countries, participants used phrases such as, "It's not like here" (Liu) and "so different from here" (Janelle), relying on the ideas that they had about schooling in the United States to highlight how their experience in their home country was different. Additionally, some participants relayed experiences that occurred while studying in the United States and reflected on how it would be different at home.

Janelle views the student-teacher relationship in Jamaica as being very different to that of the United States in that she said that teachers in the United States do not take on the “dictatorship” role that is adopted by Jamaican teachers. Additionally, she believed that there was more freedom within United States classrooms and she recounted:

When we had to write an essay in freshman year my essay was so formal and I was with one of my friends and we were reading each other’s essays and he was like ‘wow.’ Like ‘this is your essay for our freshman seminar and it sounds like you are writing you know an honors thesis like something really high level,’ and I read his and it was a lot more informal; he used ‘I.’

Her friend had chosen to write his essay on defenestration and her response was, “you can’t hand this in for a class, this is silly.” “Like he used a song, you know, ‘I’m jumping out the window with this one,’ and I was like, no, you cannot do that, she is going to fail you, and he got an A” (Janelle). In Janelle’s description of how she viewed grading criteria in the United States, she said the following:

[There is] so much more freedom [in the United States]. The teacher is actually interested in hearing your opinion. Like if they get a new perspective they feel educated, like you help them broaden their perspective and they like seeing that you really critically thought about it and brought up things that were not in the textbook. So I feel like here my books are more of a guide and the teachers are really looking for my insight into the text which is completely not what [it was like in] Jamaican culture.

She said that in Jamaica they seek textbook answers that have to adhere to a strict grading rubric.

Liu --based on her ideas of schooling within the United States --in her explanation of the classroom environment in China, said the following:

It's not like here. I know in America, high school students they can choose their own classes and they go to different classrooms for different classes and they don't have like a fixed teacher per se for their everyday operation, but we do.

One difference that she noted after coming to the United States was that "here [in the United States] students can raise their hand anytime and say anything, but in China, it's more like when the teacher presents a question, then you can raise your hand.

Another comparison that she made was that the trend of working harder in university than in high school in the United States is reversed in China. Liu said:

In China, students tend to work really hard throughout their elementary school all the way to high school.... And then their goal is to get into a good university and after they get in to university they don't care... they just don't care. A GPA, well it's important, but it is not as important I guess as the university's name. And here, it's the exact opposite because you get a relatively easy elementary, middle school and high school, compared to Chinese students, but then after you get into university you are supposed to work even harder to get a better GPA, so that you can... find a better job.... So it's like two different systems.

Han, in making a comparison of the classroom environment between U.S. college classrooms and Chinese college classrooms, said that he didn't think that there was much difference. He acknowledged that the Adams University environment was a little more relaxed than in China. Although he highlighted the ability to choose courses at Adams University, he also said that this same choice was available at Chinese colleges. In his opinion, the main difference between the structure of Adams University and Chinese universities is that your major is chosen before you enter the college in China.

Navin, like Janelle, recounted differences in writing styles between the United States and India. He said that the way he was taught to write, using British English, is considered to be the passive voice in the United States and is not preferred. Furthermore, “in India and I guess in Trinidad and Tobago as well, you are encouraged to write complex sentences. You know with two or three commas because it sounds richer. Here [in the United States], like [you can use] five words and it’s a sentence.”

In summary, most of the participants experienced a more formal classroom environment in their home country than they did at Adams University. Those participants who attended international schools saw elements of the international educational practices within their school, but still experienced some of the formality of their home country. Some of the participants reported continued use of some of the more formal practices of their home country after arriving at Adams University.

Constructing an Identity

In this section I utilize the statements made by the participants to answer the third research question, “How do international students construct an identity within the United States context?”

Perceptions and interactions. Janelle reported feeling like an “other.” “First of all being black is an ‘other,’ the way I wear my hair in braids is an ‘other.’ I get lots of comments on that actually” (Janelle). Janelle said that the comments towards her about her hair were negative, citing this example, “Doesn’t it hurt to keep your hair all knotted up like that? When are you going to straighten your hair?” Furthermore, she recounted the following experience, “I have been in the business school and there are I think 35 black people out of [about] 600... in the

business school and one day this Korean guy leaned over and said, ‘you are the only black person in this class’.”

Raychelle recalled how people were fascinated with her accent:

When I first came my accent was raw as raw could be. Right, and I would go into class and talk and all I know is everybody is just staring at me and I [would] watch them and they would be staring. And I would be like ‘what is wrong with y’all?’ you know, and because of my accent I would get a lot of attention.

Liu described how it was difficult for Chinese students and students from the United States to carry on conversations, if effort was not put in by both parties. She said that United States students “don’t have a great understanding and they don’t have the curiosity.” “At the beginning, you don’t have that much knowledge about the American culture, so by interacting with other people you are mostly talking about your own... culture. So if they are not interested you really don’t have that much to talk about.” Han echoed this sentiment of not having the same cultural references to talk about. He acknowledged that as he learned more about NBB, he could conduct a discussion with his classmates about that, but that is where the conversation would end as he was not familiar with a lot of the American “pop culture.”

Selectively adopting cultural practices. Two participants reported the adoption of small parts of the local speech and expressed the need to make a conscious effort not to use it. “I caught myself using ‘ain’t’ in a sentence once and that was shocking. I have been told that I will say ‘y’all’ but I have actively blocked it from my mind” (Janelle). “I say ‘like.’ I am trying to stamp that out though. ‘I felt like I was upset’ is wrong because [it should be] ‘I felt upset’ or, ‘I was upset.’ ‘I felt sad or I was upset,’ ‘I felt like’, no, cut that out” (Aadhya). Navin reported that he preferred to continue to use the British English writing style and spelling that he learned in

India, rather than change to the American English, “I try to stick to old school English because... I am from India and generally I like British English much more than American English. I guess... I try to make a concerted effort to adopt the best practices of every world that I am a part of” (Navin).

Both Raychelle and Janelle found that they stopped greeting people because it was something that they found was not done in the United States. “So when people like me come up here we would do it [greet people] but in certain situations you just don’t bother sometimes cus you know it’s like...” (Raychelle). “I [used to] go out of my way to say good morning and now I have found myself not saying it at all” (Janelle). Other participants embraced some United States cultural practices. Liu and Han mentioned pasta as the “American” food that they now cook. Aadhya expressed her excitement about an upcoming opportunity to participate in Black Friday shopping after Thanksgiving.

Some participants made changes to some of their cultural practices. Janelle said that she had to downplay her VI accent and speak slower so that people could understand her. Raychelle, who has grown up within the Jamaican homophobic culture, reported a change in her own views of the gay community as she has had to become more accepting of gays in the United States:

You see, with the drag show, it wasn’t even that I felt like I wasn’t exposed, I was like definitely prejudiced because I have been told all my life that being gay was wrong, that’s not natural, but now that I am here and I have been here for three and a half years I understand that it’s fine. They are just oriented that way and there is nothing wrong with that. So I understand it now that I am in a much freer society but the gay people in Jamaica are really forced to hide because they really could be killed just for being gay.

Aadhya made an interesting point as she acknowledged that she was not sure if the changes that she was identifying were “a function of [being in] America or a function of age.” Han didn’t necessarily think that he experienced “cultural changes.” He said, “I think that the lifestyle is still Chinese, but some kind of ideologies shifted. I don’t want to say shifted, it was kind of transitioned to fit here but it is still not changing that much if you ask me.”

Identity challenges. Four participants expressed identity challenges. Raychelle and Janelle, the two Caribbean students expressed the challenge of being perceived as an “American” or being told that they were “acting white” by their peers within their home country when they spoke in Standard English rather than the dialects of their islands. Furthermore, both participants had parents or grandparents who insisted on the use of “proper” English. Janelle recalled, “My parents always said that patois was bad talking and every time I said something in patois they wouldn’t respond or made me say it in Standard English. So I am very used to conversing in Standard English and my patois sounds different. It sounds just like [Standard] English as a result.” Janelle found that when she got to the United States people still did not think that she was Jamaican because her accent was not very strong. However, Raychelle reported a different experience, “when I come up here talking like a regular person, it’s like everybody just hears an accent. As opposed to back home... [people say], ‘you sound like a white girl’.”

Liu reported that she did not feel like she fit in with a lot of the Chinese clubs even though she is Chinese. She expressed that she thought it was because of her personality and the fact that her friends were not in many of the clubs. Han expressed that he was “still learning to incorporate ideas from both [the United States and China] and bring [them] into... [one].”

Challenging interactions with students other than those from the participant’s home country and how other students perceived a participant affected how a participant saw

himself/herself within his/her new environment. Participants reported the adoption of U.S. cultural practices, but were selective about which cultural practices they chose to accept. In this way the participants both consciously and unconsciously sculpted a new identity.

The participants had diverse schooling and cultural backgrounds to which they had become accustomed. The experience of coming to the United States challenged elements of this background and introduced the participants to novel cultural and educational experiences forcing them to develop coping strategies. These strategies and the situations that the participants had to navigate varied among participants. The participants and their identities have been transformed by the experience of coming to Adams University and the United States.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this Chapter, I utilize the findings to answer the three research questions: (1) How do international students navigate the cultural differences between their home country and the United States? (2) How do international students navigate the educational differences between their home country and the United States? (3) How do international students construct an identity within the American context?

Navigating Cultural Differences

Exposure to United States culture begins even before the international student steps foot inside the United States. Three of the participants reported specific aspects of the United States culture that they learned about from television shows and movies that they watched while in their home country. Before international students even begin thinking about coming to the United States, global media – films and television -- expose them to elements of the foreign culture. Furthermore, a few of the participants also reported the presence of American fast food chains within their countries. Globalization has led to worldwide franchising enabling the world's population to be exposed to foods from foreign countries. Also, some elements of potential culture shock are reduced when some aspects of the American culture are integrated into the student's home culture and therefore are familiar when the students arrive in the United States.

In addition to pre-exposure to United States cultural elements, some international students are also informally prepared for some aspects of life in the United States. Visits to the United States before travelling to attend school were common among some participants. However, as Raychelle mentioned, living in the United States can be a very different experience from just visiting for vacation or for a summer program. Regardless, some knowledge about the country is gained from the visit and can possibly contribute to a reduction in the amount of

culture shock experienced by an individual once he/she begins college. Drawing from my own personal experience, having visited the United States before moving for school was helpful. It eliminated the novelty of doing something like riding a train because there are no trains in Trinidad and Tobago. One student, Liu, received deliberate preparation for the transition. Her attendance at a foreign language school that is geared towards creating global citizens ensured that she learned American English and was taught about U.S. culture in her English lessons.

The two participants who expressed immediate culture shock upon entry to either the United States or Adams University highlighted the fact that the people who surrounded them did not look like them, in terms of their race. This may possibly be an effect of coming from a more racially homogeneous culture or a culture in which one's race was that of the majority.

The cultural differences I observed differed among the six international students I interviewed and therefore each individual may have had to develop his/her own unique strategies to address these differences. The participants highlighted different cultural differences even when they originated from the same country. Notably, Raychelle described the shock that she felt when she discovered that there was a large variety of goods in U.S. grocery stores. This reminded me of my first trip to a U.S. grocery store and the challenges that I faced while trying to navigate the many options. Raychelle marveled at the sheer size of the establishment. Another thing that she highlighted was the presence of air-conditioning in many buildings. The things that were most shocking to her can be viewed as characteristics of a wealthy nation. Given that she came from a small, less technologically developed country, the things that appear to be most culturally different to her may reflect global economic disparities.

Another theme that emerged from the findings was the importance of the way in which cultural differences are interpreted. Some differences caused the participants to have negative

feelings. Raychelle and Janelle, the two Caribbean international students, both highlighted the absence of the use of greetings in the United States as being culturally different to what they had experienced at home. Interestingly, both students initially interpreted the absence of these greetings as being either disrespectful or unfriendly. Social norms differ from country to country and even though an international student may expect differences when they arrive in the United States, experiencing something that is seen as negative in one's home culture can elicit negative feelings toward the host culture and/or toward local individuals.

Dealing with cultural differences between one's home country and the United States led international students in the current study to develop adjustment strategies. A common trend among the participants was to become involved in clubs at Adams University. The six participants were members of a wide variety of clubs, and one participant explicitly reported that being involved in many activities helped her to settle into life at Adams University. This finding reinforced previous research. Tseng and Newton (2002) listed "participation in community activities" among their recommended adjustment strategies.

Two of my participants recounted the instrumental role that their freshman, U.S. roommates played in their adjustment to life at Adams University. For Liu, her roommate acted in the capacity of a guide to helping her use the English language correctly and as a support system. Aadhya referred to her freshman roommate and her other American friends as being more of a support system than necessarily a guide. The idea that making friends helps with the adjustment process is consistent with the findings of Tseng and Newton (2002). Additionally, I found that the language capabilities of the participants influenced how they utilized their American roommates and friends. Native roommates and friends were used as language resources and/or as pathways to U.S. culture.

One participant reported that she learned about U.S. culture through observation. There are small idiosyncrasies that exist within cultures and sometimes the best way to learn them is to take a step back and observe. As Liu said, the “little things” cannot be taught. None of the previous researchers explicitly mentioned this, but the idea, although simple, is important. Much of the adjustment process occurs unconsciously and the ability to take a step back and identify the small aspects of a culture that make it work cohesively can be helpful when trying to adjust.

I would like to term another adjustment strategy that was utilized by one participant as, “going the extra distance.” Han described the need to rehearse class presentations repeatedly and to use note cards as props in order to be successful at making presentations. He and I also had a discussion about having to do additional research when peers and professors made reference to parts of U.S. culture and/or history that we did not know. Many international students may need to actively try to bridge the gap between their knowledge and the head start that domestic students have in knowing cultural references.

Adjustment is a personal journey that differs from person to person. As Aadhya noted in the current study, at some point the international student has “to decide that you are going to make your situation work for you in spite of the challenges.” This can happen for different individuals at different times because as, was reported by Zhou and colleagues (2008), there are micro and macro factors that affect adjustment. The variety seen in the adjustment strategies among the six international students is a reflection of this phenomenon.

The expectation of living in the United States after completion of undergraduate schooling and even after completion of graduate schooling was common among the participants in this study. Not surprisingly, the participants all reported having greater opportunities in their fields of interest in the United States than in their home country. One participant explicitly said

that her plan to stay in the United States increases her determination to interact with domestic students and to adjust to the culture. The way in which future plans may or may not affect the approach that international students take to adjusting was not discussed in previous literature, but should be considered. The type of guidance that international students need may differ depending on their future intentions. An international student who plans to return home soon after graduation from an undergraduate program may not require as much support as one who stays in the United States for a longer period of time.

All the participants sought familiarity either through friends, clubs, food, or music. Interestingly, even the Caribbean students who are among one of the smallest represented populations at Adams University, still found ways to find persons who had cultural backgrounds that were similar to their own. Navin and Han described their gravitation towards persons of a similar cultural background to theirs as being inevitable. International students living outside of their comfort zones naturally search for people with whom they can relate easily for support.

Three factors helped the participants avoid dealing with homesickness. The first factor was the knowledge that they would be going home to visit at some point; the second was keeping busy, and the third was connecting with elements of home in their new environment. Although not all international students are afforded the luxury of going home during breaks or having their parents visit, the six participants did have this opportunity.

Navigating Educational Differences

The participants in this study attended some of the best high schools in their home countries and some of the participants actively acknowledged that their experience differed from that of the majority population. This is reflective of the perspective of “Critical Theories” discussed by Shields (2013), where elite groups are no longer competing within their home

countries but with groups throughout the world. The international students moved from some of the best schools in their home countries to an elite university in the United States. The participants were able to give insightful descriptions of what they perceived some of the norms of schooling within their home country to be.

Janelle, the participant from Jamaica, gave a description of the typical classroom environment in Jamaica that did not fit with what would be expected based on Hofstede's (2001) predictions. With a relatively low power distance (PD) index, Jamaican teachers and students were expected to be on a more equal level than Janelle described for her public school. Janelle reported a dictatorship situation where the teacher was not questioned. This type of classroom atmosphere resembles that which would be expected of a country with a high PD index. Similarly, the low Uncertainty Avoidance index reported for Jamaica predicted a flexible classroom environment, but the Jamaican participant reported the exact opposite. However, the description of Jamaica as a collectivist society – one in which the group is valued more than the individual -- is more in line with the type of classroom environment that Janelle described where individual opinion was discouraged. Raychelle, the participant from the VI described a more relaxed classroom environment than the one described by Janelle for Jamaica. This may be due to the use of the U.S. schooling system in VI.

Liu and Han, the two Chinese students, provided descriptions of schooling in China that were very much aligned with Hofstede's (2001) predictions and Gutek's (2006) descriptions of schooling in China. Both participants described large classes with strict, formal environments where there was a head teacher who dealt with all classroom issues. Discipline and success were highly valued and the environment was very structured.

Navin's schooling experience presented an opportunity for direct comparison between the teaching styles of Indian teachers and those of international teachers who taught in India. His Indian teachers created a classroom environment like the one that would be predicted by Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of culture. Indian teachers were authoritative figures who were to be respected and not questioned. They presented materials in lecture format, sticking to the required teachings. In contrast, Navin expressed that his international teachers created a more relaxed environment where he felt he could ask questions freely. Although Aadhya, the other Indian student, did not describe her classroom environment with such specificity, she did say that she felt as though she had good interaction with her teachers.

In order to better assist the international student transition from schooling in his/her home country to schooling in the United States it is important to understand what types of differences in schooling actually exist and how these differences may challenge success. Three of the participants acknowledged the greater freedom that they experienced within the United States classroom. Coming from a very structured, formal environment, to a less formal one may appear to be an easy transition. However, consider that some classroom practices, such as not asking questions in class, having been engrained in students through elementary and secondary school, are no longer the norm. When international students are suddenly placed in classes where a percentage of their grade in a class is dependent on their active participation, which includes asking questions and challenging ideas put forward by the teacher, then their learned behavior will work against their success. For some individuals, their personality may make this switch an easy one, but for others, it may take several semesters to make the change, if they ever do.

Another difference between schooling in the United States and schooling in the home country that presented a challenge to the participants in this study was differing expectations

about speaking and writing styles. International students from the Caribbean and India have this to contend with as their colonial history has left them with very formal British English styles of writing and spelling of words. The literature has reported challenges being faced by students who have English as their second language (Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992; Hechanova– Alampay et al., 2002). However, no one considered the challenges that may be faced by students who utilize a different form of English. I am currently a college senior, and even as I write this research paper I have to consciously remind myself to use the active voice and to spell words using American English as opposed to British English. If a professor assigns points for writing, students who use the British writing style may very well be placed at a disadvantage.

Constructing an Identity

People often construct their identities based on the ways in which they believe that others perceive them; as such, it is important to understand how international students believe that their peers at Adams University view them. Janelle, who described herself as a member of the majority race while in Jamaica, became a minority within the United States and with it she gained all the stereotypes that are associated with African Americans in the United States. Her encounter with the Korean student – another international student who came from a racially homogeneous culture -- who informed her that she was the only black student in her business class, represents some of the expectations that are placed on people solely because of their race. Previous research did not shed light on the experience of going from a “majority” status, to a “minority” one and this is something that can have an effect on the way in which one thinks of herself/himself.

Raychelle introduced the idea of how international students are identified with her description of people’s reaction to hearing her accent. Given that the catalyst for this study was

the role that my own accent played in shaping my identity, it was interesting to hear her perception that her accent clearly demarcated her as foreign. Her accent sparked people's curiosity and helped to initiate the friendships that she currently has today. In contrast to Raychelle's positive experience, Liu perceived a lack of curiosity in her interactions with students from the United States.

At some point in this international student experience, most students adopt some aspects of American culture and make changes in their own cultural practices. This may occur at the stage of "emergence" – when international students begin to reach outside of their own cultural groups-- in Kim's (2012) ISI model. However, some of the participants seemed to be experiencing the stage of "enclosure" – when the international student withdraws from the new community (Kim, 2012) -- because Janelle, Aadhya, and Navin reported pushing back against the adoption of some United States practices. None of the participants explicitly relayed that they were trying to reject the host culture and Aadhya even expressed that she was trying not to say "like" simply because it was not "correct." However, Kim's (2012) stage of "enclosure" still holds some merit. Janelle and Raychelle reported abandoning the use of greetings while in the United States, and Janelle adjusted the way she spoke to be better understood by others. Aadhya was looking forward to black Friday and Liu and Han were making pasta. Janelle became more accepting of the gay community. All of these can be placed within the context of the "emergence" phase discussed by Kim (2012), and possibly within the "internalizing self" phase, where an integration of home identity and the new identity occurs. Whether or not participants experience pre-exposure and internationalization, the first and last phases of Kim's (2012) International Student Identity model respectively, is not evident from the participants' responses.

Limitations

The current study, like all studies, was subject to some limitations. In this case limitations relate to research design and the overall generalizability of the study.

The use of only one interview with juniors and seniors made the research heavily dependent on recall of situations that may have occurred more than a year previously. The use of a longitudinal study that utilizes interviews at the beginning of each year of university may be helpful in the future so that data are collected closer to the time that events may have occurred. Such a study could also elucidate changes that may occur over time in the international students' perceptions of their situations. Persons conducting future studies may also consider delving deeper into each research question as the current study approached the questions broadly.

This study utilized a case study design with a purposefully selected sample, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings of this study to the individual participants. Furthermore, this study is only applicable to students from one elite university in the southeast region of the United States at one point in time and all participants originated from highly ranked secondary schools. This further limits the generalizability of the study. Future researchers may want to utilize a larger sample at multiple sites, to better identify trends seen among international students who have the same country of origin and to increase generalizability.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study looked at international students in general and separated them based on their country of origin, and then further as individuals. Previous literature either looked at international students as a single unit or focused on one or two populations mainly when addressing challenges faced by international students who speak English as a second language. The findings of this study highlighted how unique each international student's experience could

be and this suggests that a closer look should be taken at the information upon which international student programs are developed.

The current study looked at the lives of six international students before coming to Adams University, life within Adams University, and plans for life after Adams University, to see how the three phases interconnected and contributed to the overall international student experience. The findings of this study elucidated the idea that preparation for life in the United States before coming to the United States can be helpful in reducing the amount of culture shock that is experienced. Universities may want to consider pre-introductory programs for international students. One possibility would be for the university to set up workshops in countries from where their largest populations of international students originate. This workshop would go beyond the usual visa and immigration information that is currently being presented to international students at their orientations. Discussions about coping with cultural differences, educational differences and identity challenges should be among the leading topics of such an orientation. Further research can be utilized to determine how effective such a program may be.

While within the U.S. university, international students, even those who speak English as their first language, are challenged by a novel classroom environment and educational expectations. Universities may consider special supports that focus on helping international students adjust to the classroom environment and be better prepared to deliver the type of work that is expected of them. For example, programs that give continued support throughout the international schooling experience can focus on practicing classroom involvement, presentation strategies, and writing styles. Such a program would hopefully make international students more comfortable within the U.S. classroom. Furthermore, professors need to be taught how to effectively conduct multicultural classes. Workshops that teach professors how to successfully

teach students of all cultural backgrounds would not only be helpful to international students, but to all students in general. Faculty who are sensitive to the needs of the international student and understand how to address them can build a stronger learning community.

This study also showed that an international student's intentions post-graduation might affect the way in which and the tenacity with which international students approach the journey of integrating into the United States culture. Further research is needed to determine how significant the effect of future intentions is on the undergraduate international student experience while in the undergraduate university.

There are still many aspects of the international student experience that need to be explored and researchers are encouraged to remove the umbrella term of "international student" and focus more on home countries and individuals. By generalizing characteristics to all international students, key areas in which some international students need support can be missed.

Conclusion

Increasing numbers of international students are leaving their home countries and coming to the United States in search of greater opportunities and better education. They bring with them the cultural and educational experiences of their home country and try to make sense of the education and culture of the United States. In some aspects, being from a small Caribbean island or from a large, highly populated nation does not change the type of experience that an international student has. However, in other aspects, the unique culture and education of the home country is the very thing that distinguishes one international student's experience from the other. As international students navigate the new situations that they encounter, they utilize the values and beliefs that have been instilled in them at home. These values and beliefs, along with

the student's culture and educational practices sometimes have to be adapted to better fit within the United States context and as such the student develops strategies that help him/her to cope with these challenges. At some point in this entire process the student's identity is reshaped to create an individual that to some extent has been altered by the United States experience.

However, the onus of international students having a successful transition from home country to university in the United States cannot be placed solely on the international student. Institutions, faculty, and domestic students all influence the international student experience and all benefit from the multicultural schooling experience that international students bring with them. If the essence of a global culture is embraced then professors can institute teaching strategies that sample from various cultures and are flexible enough to meet the needs of all students. Institutions should aim to create a small global society that is representative of the best characteristics of the wider world.

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Appendix A: Letter of Initial Contact

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Letter of Initial Contact

The International Student Experience: A Qualitative Case Study of the way in which International students navigate educational and cultural differences while developing an identity at one elite American university

I am writing to ask you to consider participating in research for my honors thesis focused on understanding the ways in which international students navigate the cultural and educational differences between their home country and the US. I am interested in how international students form identities in and across these contexts. I would like to interview you, as I have identified you as an international student studying here in the US. I am interested in the unique experience of each student.

The interview will be audio-recorded and last from 1-1.5 hours. The interview will be followed up by an optional focus group session that would last no more than 1.5 hours. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and, even if you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time. Your anonymity as well as the anonymity of other participants is protected. Your name will never be used and all names, such as the university and its location, will be changed. All information collected will be safeguarded to ensure confidentiality. As a study participant you may request copies of the interview transcript and final report of the study. There is no compensation for participating in the study.

My research has been reviewed for their adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Emory University's Institutional Review Board and Division of Educational Studies.

Please contact me by phone at 404-707-6908 or email: zkadams@emory.edu to request additional information and/or to arrange to participate in the research. Your time and interest in this study are much appreciated. My thesis is being supervised by Dr. Carole Hahn (e-mail: chahn@emory.edu) Please feel free to contact me or Dr. Hahn with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
Zakiya Adams

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Emory University Consent to be a Research Subject

Title:

The International Student Experience: A Qualitative Case Study of the way in which International students navigate educational and cultural differences while developing an Identity at one elite American University

Principal Investigator: Zakiya Adams

Department: Educational Studies, Emory Undergraduate

Thesis Advisor: Carole Hahn, Ed. D

Program Advisor: C. Aiden Downey, PhD

Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study. This form is designed to tell you everything you need to think about before you decide to consent (agree) to be in the study or not to be in the study. **It is entirely your choice. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later on and withdraw from the research study.**

Before making your decision:

- Please carefully read this form or have it read to you
- Please ask questions about anything that is not clear

You can take a copy of this consent form, to keep. Feel free to take your time thinking about whether you would like to participate. By signing this form you will not give up any legal rights.

Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to gain a clearer understanding of the ways in which international students address the cultural and educational differences that exist between their home country and the United States and to understand how they ultimately form an identity within the United States context.

Procedures

Data for this study will be collected using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. One interview will be conducted with each participant and interviews can be expected to last for 1-1.5 hours. Interviews will be voice recorded. Participants may later be asked to participate in a focus group for casual discussion about the topic.

Risks and Discomforts

If a loss of confidentiality occurs, some discomfort may be experienced due to the exposure of a participant's views on the research topic.

Benefits

This study is not designed to benefit you directly. This study is designed to learn more about the international student experience as they transition from their home country to schooling in the US. The study results may be used to help others in the future.

Compensation

You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Confidentiality

Certain offices and people other than the researchers may look at study records. Government agencies and Emory employees overseeing proper study conduct may look at your study records. These offices include the Emory Institutional Review Board and the Emory Office of Research Compliance. Emory will keep any research records we create private to the extent we are required to do so by law. A study number rather than your name will be used on study records wherever possible. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

Study records can be opened by court order. They may also be produced in response to a subpoena or a request for production of documents.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study

You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty. You may refuse to do any procedures you do not feel comfortable with, or answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you do choose to withdraw from a study you can request that your research information not be used.

Contact Information

Contact Zakiya Adams at 404-704-6908 or zkadams@emory.edu:

- if you have any questions about this study or your part in it, or
- if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research

Contact the Emory Institutional Review Board at 404-712-0720 or 877-503-9797 or irb@emory.edu:

- if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.
- You may also let the IRB know about your experience as a research participant through our Research Participant Survey at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6ZDMW75>.

Consent

Please print your name and sign below if you agree to be in this study. By signing this consent form, you will not give up any of your legal rights. We will give you a copy of the signed consent to keep.

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

Time

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion

Date

Time

Appendix C: Semi-structured Interview Guide

How do international students navigate the cultural differences between their home country and the United States?

- What are some of the major cultural differences that you have observed between your home country and the United States?

Probe Categories adapted from Hechanova– Alampay, Beehr, Christaiansen and Van Horn (2002):

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| - General living conditions | - Transportation |
| - Food | - Climate |
| - Housing Conditions | - Clothing |
| - Healthcare | - Recreation and entertainment |
| - Language | - Religion |
| - Family structure and life | |

- Are you able to maintain some of your cultural practices here at Emory? Which ones?
- If so, how and why have you maintained those that you have?
- Have you adopted any United States cultural practices?
- If so which ones and why?

How do international students navigate the education culture differences between their home country and the United States?

- What type of secondary school did you go to in your home country?
- What are some of the major educational differences that you have observed between your home country and the United States?

- Teacher/student relationships
- Study Habits
- The purpose of education
- Group vs independent work
- Gender differences in education
- Are you able to maintain some of your educational practices here at Emory? (i.e. study habits, interaction with professors, etc.)
- If so, how and why have you maintained those that you have?
- Have you adopted any United States educational practices?
- If so which ones and why?

How do international students construct an identity within the American context?

- Describe the process that you undertook in deciding to come to the United States for university. Your parents' inputs in the matter and the views of your friends.
- How do you remember feeling during the first few weeks that you were at Emory?
- Did you seek out any clubs during your first semester at Emory? If yes, which ones and why?
- What clubs/ groups did you get involved in after your freshman year?
- How do you see yourself now compared to how you saw yourself when you lived at home?