

# ADVISOR-ADVISEE RELATIONSHIP IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN THE U.S.

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses the advisor-advisee relationship in doctoral education and how international doctoral students in the United States experience this relationship. International doctoral students make significant contributions to U.S. campuses, communities, and research enterprises. Higher education stakeholders should attempt to understand these students' experiences in the socially and culturally constructed "*figured world*" of academia (Holland et al., 1998). The figured world of advising, considered as a branch of the figured world of academia, is explored in this qualitative study informed by hermeneutic phenomenology. Twenty-five international doctoral students at a Midwestern university participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Out of this sample, nineteen students also participated in four heterogeneous focus groups and twenty-three shared photographs that best represented their experiences as international doctoral students. Five central themes emerged from the analysis of interviews and focus groups, and they all fall under the overarching theme of advising as an intercultural and inter-educational experience: advising as mentorship, advising as support, advising as caring, advising as employment, and advising as a dysfunctional relationship. Nonetheless, collision of the advisor's different approaches is possible. This study focuses on the figured world of advising that draws on the concept of figured worlds proposed by Holland et al. (1998).

**Keywords:** international students, advising, doctoral education, cultural diversity

Higher education stakeholders should demonstrate a commitment to creating an equitable and positive environment in which all students succeed; they should nurture safe educational contexts for all students and assist them in the successful completion of their degrees. The expansion of resources and cultural patterns across national borders have influenced the educational contexts in which United States (U.S.) universities operate (Taylor & Cantwell, 2015). The most recent Open Doors Report released in 2022 by the Institute of International Education indicates that 948,519 international students studied at U.S. higher education institutions in the 2021-2022 academic year.

International students contribute to the growing body of scientific research in the U.S. as they prepare to be part of a globally competent workforce (Galama & Hosek, 2009; Maskus et al., 2013). Accordingly, stakeholders in education such as faculty, staff, and policymakers should pay attention to these students' educational journeys and the factors that might impact their academic success because they bring important contributions to the U.S. economy, scientific and technical research, and to U.S. classrooms and communities. Multiple studies noted that a major issue impacting international students' successful completion of their degrees is the socio-cultural adjustment (Erichsen, 2009; Kim, 2006; Lee, 2011; Ogbonaya, 2010). It is important for hosting universities to understand how they can support these students because they add great value both to the university and the community through their diverse perspectives, new knowledge creation, financial support, and work performance (Maskus et al., 2013).

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International doctoral students are adult learners aiming to develop both professionally and personally. Because the doctorate is a terminal degree, their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and their academic trajectories are more complex than for international undergraduate students. International doctoral students are educated adults with specific educational goals; special attention should be given to these students as their integration into doctoral programs may be slower or more difficult because of the diversity in their previous educational experiences. In comparison to their U.S.-born peers, international doctoral students “must often spend a great deal of time outside of class processing course content covered in class because of language and cultural issues” (Jang et al., 2014, p. 569). To better support these emerging scholars, stakeholders in education should be aware of and willing to understand their experiences and meaning-making processes. This kind of knowledge can lay the foundation for international doctoral student integration onto U.S. campuses and provide a more supportive and nurturing learning environment toward the completion of their programs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examines how international doctoral students build systems of meaning and perform in the “figured world” of academia and what they experience as they develop relationships with their advisors. The overarching research question is: How do international doctoral students experience relationships with their advisors?

For the purpose of this study, international students are defined as individuals who enter in the U. S. on a student or exchange visitor non-immigrant visa and who usually face various kinds of legal restrictions (Lee, 2011). In this study, research subjects are considered those students who entered the U.S. on an F-1 or J-1 visa, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) classification of non-immigrant status. International doctoral students are considered students pursuing a terminal degree.

Doctoral advisors are defined in this study as faculty who guide doctoral students in their programs; they are also called dissertation chairs or doctoral supervisors. Barnes and Austin (2009) indicated that doctoral advisors are a source of reliable information, advocates, role models, departmental and occupational socializers.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study adds critical perspectives to the existent body of literature focused on international students in the U.S. because it provides in-depth understanding about the experiences of a particular group of students whose academic journeys are not highly explored in the literature: international doctoral students in the U.S. Doctoral education plays an essential part in higher education and high attrition rates are extremely damaging to these institutions. Hence, there is a call to further explore the issues doctoral students might face throughout their academic journeys; this study seeks to reveal how stakeholders in higher education could provide a more supportive environment. In addition, while participating in this study, international doctoral students had the opportunity to reflect on their academic and cultural journeys. Students reflected and then

engaged in substantial conversations about their learning experiences and identity self-perception.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research study is informed by a developing body of literature focused on the concept of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1991; 2000), and various research studies exploring international students' experiences in the U.S. academic setting. In addition, the researcher's own personal experience as an international doctoral student in the U.S. informs this conceptual framework. The researcher's personal journey cultivated her interest in studying issues related to international doctoral students' experiences. Research on this topic reveals how various groups in academe can help students who deal with multiple layers of cultural novelty and who experience personal transformations during their studies. While these experiences are particularly salient and compelling for many international students, the conceptual framework is also applicable to the experiences of doctoral students across the board.

#### **Figured Worlds Concept**

The concept of figured worlds, developed by Holland et al. (1998), is a theory of self and identity that can be strongly connected to the lived experiences of international doctoral students. This concept outlines that individuals are considered subjects of constructed worlds, and these worlds are sites where identities are developed (Urrieta, 2007). Thus, figured worlds are seen as socially constructed settings in which students' identities are forming; relationships play an essential role in this ongoing process. Also, it is important to pay attention to the figured worlds in which international students perform as these worlds are organized by cultural means or meaning systems (Holland et al., 1998), where people are introduced to prescribed roles that might not be very familiar to international students. As a result, international students encounter challenges when seeking answers or mentorship within the academic environment. Accordingly, this study focuses on the figured world of advising.

#### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning theory can be used as a lens to examine international doctoral students' cultural expectations and adjustment in figured worlds. Introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978, transformative learning theory is generally understood as the process of learning and integrating new frames of reference (Mezirow 1978; 1991; 2000; Taylor, 1997). It thus provides a powerful framework that can be used to explore how international students' adjustment to the culture of the host country can catalyze personal transformations (Erichsen, 2009).

According to Mezirow (1991), the transformational process begins with a disorienting dilemma, an event that for international students might be interpreted as living in an unknown setting, and all that implies from a cultural, academic, and social standpoint

(Ritz, 2010). Students realize that their cultural context and things that were taken for granted are being replaced by a foreign context, and they face a series of difficulties such as language barriers, cultural and social adjustment, homesickness, and other adjustment issues (Lee, 2011). For this reason, it may be useful that people surrounding them are aware of the struggles international students are facing, and the transformations that occur throughout this process of learning to adjust to living in a foreign setting. In this context, international students are comparing socio-cultural worlds and educational systems, merging their identities (Erichsen, 2009) and constructing meaning through their personal experiences, while cultivating cultural competencies. The new academic and social worlds in which they function can be thought of as what Holland et al., (1998) call figured worlds. Thus, transformative learning can occur in these socially and culturally constructed settings in which international doctoral students are developing relationships with their faculty advisors.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study investigated the study abroad experience of international doctoral students and their transformative learning in the figured world of academia, with focus on the figured world of advising. The purpose of the research was to examine how international doctoral students make sense of their experiences and how they develop relationships with their advisors. The overarching research question is “How do international doctoral students experience relationships with their advisors?”

Twenty-five international doctoral students at a Midwestern university participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Out of this sample, nineteen students also participated in four heterogeneous focus groups and twenty-three shared photographs that best represented their experiences as international doctoral students. This was helpful given that most international students’ first language is not English, so they might face language barriers when it comes to oral communication.

Participants in this study were from 15 different countries: Algeria, Bangladesh, Chile, China (3), Germany, India (5), Iran (4), Japan, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan (2), Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Zimbabwe. They represented 14 different doctoral programs across six colleges: College of Human Development and Education; College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; College of Science and Mathematics; College of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Natural Resources; College of Engineering; and College of Business. The majority of participants were from STEM disciplines. Nine participants were females and 16 were males. Participants ranged from 27 to 41 years of age. Students were at various stages in their programs, from first semester to final semester (very close to graduation); eight had completed their master’s degree in the U.S. Each participant chose a pseudonym that was used for data analysis purposes.

The approach for this study was informed by hermeneutic phenomenology. Accordingly, the methodological interpretation of this study was informed by the hermeneutic circle. Schwandt (2015) defined the hermeneutic circle as a methodological process in which “construing the meaning of the whole meant making sense of the parts and grasping the

meaning of the parts depended on having some sense of the whole” (p. 135). Hence, while aiming to explore international doctoral students’ experiences with their advisors, the researcher considered various pieces of their overall experience as international students in the U.S. The interview and focus group questions included prompts about different aspects of their experience; these questions were also informed by the researcher’s background as an international doctoral student.

After verbatim transcription of the interviews and focus groups, data were organized and analyzed using the NVivo software package (version 11) for qualitative data analysis. The researcher went through the photos sent by participants and the notes taken while collecting data. Annotations and memos were added, data pertaining to participants was added under cases for each of them, then nodes were created for each main theme based on the types of questions. For the first coding cycle a deductive analysis approach was used. The second coding cycle used an inductive approach as the researcher identified general patterns that were categorized in themes.

Consequently, data was analyzed, and meaning was assigned while considering the various parts of their academic and cultural experience. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this was a study looking solely at international students’ experiences at a Midwestern university. The results of this inquiry may be transferrable, but they may not be generalizable.

## **Findings**

Five central themes emerged from the analysis of interviews and focus groups, and they fall under the overarching theme of advising as intercultural and inter-educational experience (see Table 1): advising was experienced as mentorship leading to personal and professional development; as support in terms of motivation and sponsorship, leading to students feeling valued; as employment or a managerial relationship in which the advisor took the role of a boss who sometimes intimidated students; as a dysfunctional relationship in which students were controlled and experienced frustration, isolation, and anxiety; and as a caring and humanistic relationship in which students felt nurtured and respected.

In turn, the findings generated some advice for other international doctoral students and advisors. Study participants shared suggestions for new international doctoral students: making sure they will highly perform, as that was expected from advisors; being thoughtful when selecting and switching advisors; and communicating directly with their advisors to receive proper guidance while making sure they were tactful. Also, study participants would suggest their advisors spend more time with their advisees, be stricter in setting deadlines, know basic immigration rules that apply to international students, be aware of cultural differences and how those impact international students, and provide mentoring for careers after graduation.

The dynamics of the mentoring relationships varied because some students had one main advisor, while others had one main advisor and a co-advisor. Some students could choose

their advisors, while for others the advisor was assigned by the program. Some advisors were foreign-born and had the experience of being international students in the U.S., while others were domestic. Some students studied in the U.S. or other countries before starting their doctoral degrees; thus, they were somewhat familiar with navigating various education systems. Other students came to the U.S. with the sole purpose of pursuing a doctoral degree; hence the learning environment was totally new to them. Advising as an intercultural and inter-educational experience meant that students performed in a new culture of respect received from their advisors in the U.S., compared to the academic relationships that they experienced in their home countries.

A large number of students indicated that in their home countries advisors were “strict and hard” (John). On a similar note, White disclosed that she appreciated the fact that in the U.S. advisors did not shout at their students like they used to do in her home country, where the professors were authority figures. Mary stated that in her home country, advisors were “like Godly beings” and students were terrified by them. She shared that in the U.S., on the contrary, advisors “are professional and really simple [...] they’re really approaching, that’s really different.” In a similar fashion, Dacky, who is from a different country, shared that “back home if you look at teacher you are treating them like God, you know, you can’t talk, you can’t speak, you can’t eat.” Rose also mentioned that in her home country “there was some kind of wall between students and professors, but here we don’t have such thing. The relationship here is still respectful, but somewhat closer.” Strongly related to the issue of asking questions, Jeffrey indicated: “what I like most is that here it really makes it a free environment to ask questions, and to learn, and to know your mentors well, something I think I didn’t see much of back at home.”

As part of the intercultural and inter-educational advising experience, the vast majority of study participants discussed that in the U.S. the advisor-advisee relationship was less hierarchical; it was surprising that they could address their advisors by their first name, and it was a bit difficult for them to do that because in their home countries that was unusual. One exception regarding less hierarchical relationships was Sky’s situation, who declared that his advisor was elder, came from a different country but with a cultural background similar with his, thus he did not accept to be called by his first name.

Table 1

*Advising as an Intercultural and Inter-Educational Experience*

Central theme	Subtheme
Advising as mentorship	Advisor as a role model
	Advisor as guide
	Advising as professional development
	Advising as personal development
Advising as support	Advisor as motivator
	Advisor as sponsor
	Availability
	Freedom
Advising as employment	Advisor as boss
Advising as dysfunctional relationship	Mismatching background
	Micromanagement
	Lack of openness
	Anxiety to switch
Advising as caring	Caring advisors
	Culturally sensitive advisors

*Note.* This table shows the five central themes and the subthemes emerged from data analysis; they fall under the overarching theme of advising as intercultural and inter-educational experience.

### Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study revealed that advising relationships are crucial in doctoral education and have multi-layered implications; advising relationships not only influence the successful completion of the doctoral degree, but they can also impact students' job prospects after graduation. The findings reiterate the important role that advisors have in modeling behavior for international doctoral students. The themes described in this study

are comprehensive, yet they are not exhaustive; they can be considered as separate or complementary aspects in doctoral education, as experienced and perceived by international doctoral students in this study.

The findings reinforce the idea that international doctoral students across disciplines experience many layers of cultural novelty as they navigate the figured world of academia. In the figured world of advising, international doctoral students get to sense an intercultural and inter-educational experience. This ability to sense this figured world and understand how to perform becomes embodied in their mental structures over time (Holland et al., 1998), that is, students understand the happenings in that figured world and what they are expected to do or not do, and “learn to author their own and make them available to other participants. By means of such appropriation, objectification, and communication, the world itself is also reproduced, forming and reforming in the practices of its participants” (p. 53). In other words, it means trying new roles and integrating them into their perspective, which leads to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Participants’ advice to advisors and other students is an indicator of students’ ability to reproduce this figured world of advising in their own way. For example, some students recommend others to switch their advisors if needed, even if that certain act might not always be considered acceptable in certain programs. Indeed, students mentioned that in some programs that was not acceptable, but in others the main issue was the fear of being stigmatized. In this context, study participants encouraged students to reform their practices of participation in the figured world of advising and to take a more active role in deciding their paths.

The overall recommendation emerging from this study’s findings is a critical need for training advisors and acknowledging their work as cultural resources. When this study was conducted, the university that served as the research site for this study did not offer a formal training program for doctoral advisors working with international students. Moreover, advising is often given peripheral importance as part of the faculty load that includes research, teaching, and service.

### **Limitations**

One of the main limitations of this study was that its findings were limited to these particular international doctoral students, from these particular countries, at this particular time in one state, at a Midwestern, land-grant university. The institutional culture and geographic area may have an impact on international doctoral students’ experiences, and this study was limited to these students’ stories. Thus, this sample did not necessarily represent the variety of international doctoral students’ experiences in the U.S. A further limitation of this study was the low number of participants from Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Out of 25 participants, only seven were from these disciplines. While this representation mirrored to a certain extent the number of international doctoral students in these fields at the university and national level, a high number of students from these disciplines would have strengthened the findings of this study. Future research in other parts of the country, at different universities, is needed to explore the diversity of



these students' doctoral journeys and how they navigate advising relationships across disciplines.

## Conclusion

This paper does not attempt to propose a one-size-fits-all interculturally-proactive advising model. On the contrary, it argues that international doctoral students should be considered for their unique personhoods; no advising model works equally for all students. There is no general checklist that faculty advisors could and should use. Similar to domestic doctoral students, international students have different backgrounds, needs and aspirations that do not fit a certain model. Hence, the core attribute of an interculturally-proactive advising process is aimed at fostering familiarity with each student's world and, as a cultural resource, to facilitate their performance in the figured world of academia.

International doctoral students do not navigate advising relationships as a separate layer of their overall academic experience. There are a variety of aspects influencing their learning journeys and academic interactions that construct a holistic view of their experience. Accordingly, this study's findings also provide insight on how administrators and graduate enrollment management professionals can assist students. Administrators such as department chairs and associate deans should work collaboratively with advisors to support international doctoral students. An avenue to ensure that support is organizing professional development workshops for advisors and exposing them to the various challenges faced by this segment of the underrepresented student population. As Walker et al. (2008) argued, "being a good mentor is not an innate talent, or a function solely of 'chemistry'. It also involves techniques that can be learned, recognized, and rewarded" (p. 99).

The findings of this study inform various actors in higher education: faculty and staff, policy makers, current U.S. and international students, and prospective international students. The study raises awareness about how international doctoral students experience advising relationships and aims to initiate changes to university policies and the implementation of mentorship training for faculty advisors working with international students. The participation of all stakeholders in higher education is critical for supporting international doctoral students.

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