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Scholastics, Pabulum, Clans, Transformation: A Journey into Otherness

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ABSTRACT

International students' identities are complex and so are their needs. Semi-structured interviews with 13 of the lead researcher's former students from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, who are multi-national, multi-lingual and pursuing degrees in law, business, economics, medicine, education, art and media, in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia elucidated this reality. Their experiences demonstrated scholastic and pabulum frustrations that were offset in part by constant communication with their clans in person and through various technologies. Though the current model of higher education often seeks to identify and categorize international students as a group, this study shows that international students are unique individuals. Recognizing their individuality, higher education institutions and policymakers can more appropriately respond to international students' needs.

Keywords: international students, satisfaction, identity, transformation, higher education, otherness

"**M**r. D, how do you say this (holding a pen) in English?" It was my first day back to school in Dubai. As I looked at my seventh grade student whom I knew I was going to be teaching history and geography to, exclusively in English, I realized I was in for a long semester. But, I empathized. "It's a pen," I said patiently. She nodded with understanding. Eight months later,

my socially acclimatized student was conversing fluently in English with her peers. And, she had become one of my top students.

Dubai is an international metropolis for K–12 schools. Its education system (Knight, 2014) represents 186 nationalities, 255,208 students and 16 international curriculums (KHDA, 2015). As a former K–12 teacher who taught in Dubai, the lead researcher wondered how his multi-national, multi-lingual former students were doing as they were now first year students, sophomores and juniors studying law, business, economics, medicine, education, art and media in the U.S., U.K. and Australia.

We knew from literature that many international students are dissatisfied with their experiences in U.S., U.K. and Australian western higher education. Universities may not be providing international students with a supportive campus environment that offers high quality of service delivery (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012). As a researcher typically starts with a real-life issue that needs to be addressed, a problem that needs to be solved, or a question that needs to be answered (Crotty, 1998), we wondered,

- Were the lead researcher's former students experiencing similar feelings of angst, depression, as other international students?
- Were the lead researcher's former students thriving and assimilating in their new environments?
- What were the causes for these students' success, or failings?

Through semi-structured interviews with 13 of the lead researcher's students who are Indian, Australian, Egyptian, Swiss, American and British, we listened. We realized the lead researcher's story was linked to his former students, their transitions similar, and their transformations unique. The following study is narrative with auto ethnographic tales (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The discourse presented stems from ethnographic observations that both the students and the lead researcher made through their journeys. As such, the lead researcher's story was positioned alongside his former students' stories, as their lives occupied an interstitial space of time, setting, and context leading to transitions and transformations in their identities.

The purpose of this study is to illustrate the unique identities and individuality of international students seen through their stories. Doing so may encourage a shift in western universities' classification of international students. Unlike many studies of international students, the international students for this study came from one locale, Dubai. The participants are also unique as they attended the same K–12 international private school for

their middle and high school education. Due to these factors, universities may be tempted to wrongly identify these students as a homogenous group. However, their experiences (transition and transformation) in western higher education institutions are shown to be unique, and dissimilar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International education worldwide is expected to be worth \$6.3 trillion in 2017 (BIS, 2013). More than 4.1 million higher education students traverse the globe to pursue university studies (UNESCO, 2016). Their direct investment through tuition, rent, food, transportation and other areas to the top three receiving nations U.S., U.K. and Australia has been substantial (IIE, 2015; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010) recorded as \$30.5 billion, \$19.6 billion, and \$17.5 billion (Australian Education International, 2011; BIS, 2012; IIE, 2015). A majority of these international students are arriving from China, India and South Korea (Haynie, 2014).

Yet, while western higher education institutions are benefiting enormously from this global trade, transitioning to higher education in the U.S., U.K. and Australia has not been a seamless experience for all international students. Researchers have acknowledged this for decades: Burns (1991) determined that stress was found at a higher level among international students than domestic students, the demands of these new environments for international students can create stressors that may strain interpersonal relationships, undermine self-esteem (Murff, 2005) and jeopardize academic performance (Clinard & Golden, 1973). Kilmann, Saxton, and Serpa (1986) suggested, that culture might be an important factor in determining how well an individual fits an organizational context. Gilbert (2000) argued that academic culture shock is a subset of culture shock and "is a case of incongruent schemata about higher education in the student's home country and in the host country" (p. 14). Such demands are often more complex for the international students, who have to adapt to a new culture, language, academic, and social environment (Mori, 2000). Previous findings from extant literature detailed below expound on the increased difficulties that international students experience and how they affect their overall experience.

Stressful Experiences

This dynamism, or friction, as defined by Anna Tsing (2005) includes, "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of

interconnection across difference" (p. 6). The result is that many international students are reporting high levels of dissatisfaction. They are suffering socially, culturally, academically (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000) and as a result, experiencing high levels of loneliness, discrimination and anxiety (Karuppan & Barari, 2010; 2011; Saygin, Demirdas, Korucu & Yorgancigil, 2015; Sümer, Poyrazli & Grahame, 2008).

Stress can also result from significant cultural differences between students and the faculty members, staff, and others they must work within their host country. Li, Chen and Duanmu (2010) indicate this to be true as the dynamic relationships between the individual and their professor, as well as administration is exacerbated by a new learning environment, academic institution, education system, lecture style, form of assessment and the relationships between students and lecturers. According to O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991), this divergence between an individual's values and those of an organization can cause a problematic fit in terms of shared values and identity. The symbols and myths most deeply valued by individuals and groups in an institution may not be those most valued by the institution itself (Silver, 2003).

Inadequate Supports

Recognizing their valuable economic contribution, many universities have created varying systems of support. However, studies have shown their quality and delivery is questionable and thus, may not be providing international students with a supportive campus environment (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012). As they are not sharing in the supports that are offered to domestic students, it is understandable that international students are expressing a lack of contentment resulting in their social disconnectedness and homesickness (Alzamel, 2014; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Mark, Bodycott & Ramburuth, 2015; Padlee & Reimers, 2015). As a result of international students' lower levels of social support, higher mismatched expectations and greater use of dysfunctional coping strategies, they are placed in more vulnerable situations than the domestic students (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). Deprivation of supportive structures may attenuate international students' ability to deal with other stressors (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992) having a profound effect on their ability to cope with day-to-day difficulties (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008).

Homogenized Categorization

One of the key reasons why universities may not be meeting international students' needs is due to university classification of incoming students; they identify international students as a collective body and use the term *international student* to oversimplify a diverse group of people from many different races, nationalities, and linguistic backgrounds (Andrade & Evans, 2009). O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991), note that individuals are described with one language, one set of characteristics, and situations are described with a totally different language. Many studies of international students do not attempt to show differentiation amongst a university's international student body (Anand, 2015; Burdett & Crossman, 2012; Lee & Rice, 2007; Metwally & Perera, 2006; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). They (universities and literature) often identify incoming students solely as domestic or international. This international classification for students coming from other countries may not be accurate as it obscures their individual identities, unique traits, stories and needs (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Gieve & Clark, 2005; Kumi-Yeboah, 2014; Medina-Sanchez, Torres-Jimenez, Romero-Carrillo & Dorado-Vicente, 2014). As the relationship between individuals' senses of their organizational identity and image and their own sense of who they are and what they stand for suggests a very personal connection between organizational action and individual motion (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), their perceptions of their organization's identity may have a direct effect on their perceptions of their own social identities (Elsbach, & Kramer, 1996).

As Hall (1996) argued, identities are shaped by historical experiences and culture: the process is one of becoming rather than being. On the one hand, international students try hard to be accepted by the host culture; on the other hand, they try to cut off their cultural roots (Pan & Keung Wong, 2011), which ultimately leads to them lingering between two cultures (Pang & Keung Wong, 2011). A cultural example of othering is when individuals that identify closely with their own ethnic or religious beliefs begin to gain the mentality that those who are different from them are problematic (Huntington, 1993). A representation of the other occurs on a geographic, linguistic, cultural and ethnic scale (Said, 1979). Thus, international students conditioned as others, non-conforming to and with the social norms of society and to the condition of disenfranchisement, are alienated from the center of their universities and are placed at the societal margin (Otherness, 1999). As a result, it is very difficult for them to get social support from either side, which has been shown in literature to be

important in cross-cultural adaptation (Pan & Keung Wong, 2011). This can lead to extreme separation, alienation, and exclusion of the person or of people that is seen as different or unusual to the typical lens of one's societal views (Mountz, 2009). *Othering* can be described as discrimination of people or a population that is different than the collective social norm; since they are different they are also seen as deviant or in need of being cultured by the group that is *othering* them (Mountz, 2009).

Shared Transformation

Our shared norms, attitudes and beliefs were and are seen to be reflective of our multiple social networks and consequent interactions (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013), such as those relationships formed with friends and family members. As many institutions, including educational ones are becoming more business-like (Albert & Whetten, 1985), taking business like approaches to accomplish changes as appropriate and necessary (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Miliken, 1990). But most importantly, it would allow for a greater person-organization or person-society fit (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) and limit feelings of otherness (McNess, Arthur, & Crossley, 2015; 2013). Lofquist and Dawes (1969) wrote that satisfaction results from a "harmonious relationship between the individual and his environment, suitability of the individual to the environment and vice versa" (p. 4).

The gap in literature indicates that little research has delved into the variation of international students from different nations and cultures (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Hanassab, 2006; Hartnett et al., 2004). Through understanding the background stories of international higher education students from Dubai, western higher education institutions may be able to better understand the need to account for their international students' unique and complex identities. Doing so may enable western higher education institutions to develop better systems of support that meet their international students' needs prior to their arrival in western higher education. This may enable international students to transition with greater ease resulting in their increased satisfaction, graduation and retention rates.

METHOD

Narrative Identities

Interstitial spaces that the researcher and participants inhabit provide us with truth and meaning (Crotty, 1998). In this interstitial space, two

things may happen. A narrative may be told and identities formed. In our narrative, we tell stories to make meaning of our interactions. This understanding is not static, but ever evolving, changing, and as such, when a story is told, it should be understood that it is lived over time (Clandinin, 2013). In this way, our storytelling can be quite diverse revealing our individual identities (Riessman, 2008).

Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. The lead researcher's identity and the identities of his former students were negotiated through their interactions with one another (Sexton, 2008) both as a teacher and mentor in Dubai, but also overtime as they shared their lives with one another via Facebook, texts and Skype. Their shared norms, attitudes and beliefs were seen to be reflective of our multiple social networks and interactions (Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013), such as those relationships formed with friends and family members.

Auto-ethnographic Approach

When making sense of identities and stories, it is appropriate to take an ethnographic approach to make meaning of our storytelling. Wolf (1992) said, it is "our willingness to speak and write about that experience results from our serious engagement in discovering what we can have how life is lived in another social-cultural setting" (p. 354). But, engaging ethnographically with identities and stories requires a structure, a framework. According to Creswell (2013), this structure or framework comes through the use of standard categories such as family life, communication networks, world life, social networks, and status systems. These categories can be shown through various means.

Ethical Considerations

Major issues in ethnography, according to Creswell (2013), included respect, reciprocity, and data ownership. As identity can be understood through a story, the lead researcher was careful to be watchful and attend to what he imagined might create tensions when conducting interviews with his former students (Clandinin, 2013). The lead researcher made sure to inform his former students that their names and identities would not be shared, and that at any time, they could cease with the interview. He also sent them the links to their audio recordings so that they could determine if what they said matched what they meant when answering his questions. Most importantly, we worked to blend their stories.

We believe that the richness in storytelling comports with the reality that stories naturally "blend" many voices, perspectives, and/or points of view. And, as the lead researcher's story links with theirs, as their relationships were interwoven, we believe the lead researcher's story was important for providing context and understanding to the reader. We also attempted to show through their stories that a metamorphosis took shape in the changing of their identities, shown in their ultimate transformations. Thus, not only was it ethical to blend their stories, but crucial in making meaning from their stories through connecting their observations, their thoughts, and interpretations (Harris, 2007).

Positionality

For this study, we placed the lead researcher's story alongside his former students, intentionally trying to assuage the power differential that existed between them. Issues of power that can be addressed in reflexive ethnographies we did not address (O'Reilly, 2015), mainly because this study was not intended for an ethnographic audience. Rather, adopting a constructivist stance, we wished to influence change. We argue that the best way to inform change is to tell stories that perhaps do not conform to what is purported by literature, to expose the underbelly of the marginalized of society, the others. And, most importantly, to tell the stories in a raw form, so that the storytellers' voices are clearly heard, not manipulated or made sense of by the researcher, thus making the true stories incomplete. Though we approached the analysis of their stories thematically, we used "chunking" within the themes-scholastics, pabulum, clans, and transformation-to ensure their stories were complete, but also understood (Jones, 2012). Once completed, we ensured the blended narrative was accurate, credible and valid, by member checking with the lead researcher's former students (Creswell, 1994).

Procedure

The lead researcher initially contacted his participants on Facebook to determine if they would like to participate in the study. Thirteen of the 22 participants then agreed to be interviewed using Skype. They chose the date and time that worked best for them. The time that elapsed between the initial point of contact and the actual interviews was one month. Half of the participants typed out answers to the questions prior to their oral interview. However, the interviews were semi-structured. Though every participant

was asked the same set of questions, related topics emerged and were discussed throughout the interview. The shortest interview lasted 45 minutes while the longest interview lasted for 180 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participants

For this study, we chose participants based on their relationship with the lead researcher, their former teacher. We also chose the participants based on their K–12 school located in Dubai UAE. Of the 22 former students the lead researcher initially contacted, 13 participants, six men and seven women, took part in the study. Ranging in age from 18 to 20 years old, the participants were studying law, business, economics, medicine, education, art and media, at university in the U.S., U.K. or Australia. All participants were former seventh, eighth, or ninth grade students of the lead researcher. Although more than half of the participants held American, Australia, or British passports, only one student's traditional heritage was of western origin: Australia. All other participants identified their countries of heritage as India, Egypt, or Switzerland. Notably however, all 13 participants identified Dubai as their home.

RESULTS

Scholastics

The Teacher

The papers on my desk were strewn about. It was a seemingly normal, hot, muggy day in the UAE and I had cranked up our air-conditioning. Sometimes, when it started up, it would provide a gust of wind that would ruffle papers on students' desks, but never my own, my desk was too far away. Quickly re-organizing the papers, I recognized something more was amiss. It was the blank tests. Someone had shuffled through them. My heart skipped a beat.

Who could have done this? I scanned my students' records and soon came up with a list of names of those who would stand to substantially benefit from their academic dastardly deed. The following day, I gave the same test, albeit, a slightly different version, as I had changed the order of some of the questions and choice of words in their descriptors. As my students took their test, like a hawk, I scanned the rows hovering over them, quickly fluttering between student desks hoping to catch the culprits. My

main prey, I thought, were my two lowest performing students. I stalked them from behind, but to my indignant surprise, I couldn't catch either.

Later on that day, as I sat down to grade my students' tests, I felt a knot in my stomach develop. Not one, but three tests stood out to me, each easily identifiable as all had been cleverly substituted for the new test I had quickly printed with one less question. I went and got the student dean and walked with him to the principal's office. I explained what had happened, expecting their wrath to be taken out on the students. Instead, they questioned my integrity, asking "why did you leave the tests out in the open, you were asking for it."

When I asked them about the punishment for the students, they hemmed and hawed and said, "Well, it is just a bit of academic malfeasance." I couldn't believe it, politics...they were scared of the students' parents, scared to lose the profit they would not receive if the students left the school.

The Student

University here in Australia is easy. I think the academic program in the UAE prepared me really well as it was so hard. I was up till 1 or 2 A.M. every weekday studying for tests, preparing for papers, getting ready to head to the model UN, it was crazy. Even on Saturdays, I studied. Here, I only go to class a couple of hours a few days a week. The classes here are long and they're all lectures. But, I can sleep in till 9 A.M. every day and some days I don't even have class. I use those days to complete all of my work, for the upcoming week. Then I party on Friday nights, it is different here then in the UAE because our Fridays and Saturdays there are our weekends, here it is Saturday and Sunday. Weird.

The one thing I would change about the university though, academically, is the communication between the administration and us. I had a big problem last semester. I got really ill and had to miss 10 days. My mom flew in from Dubai because she hadn't heard from me in a couple of hours. The last thing she heard from me on the phone was that I was going into the hospital. She stayed for five days. But, when I got out, I went to my department and told the person in charge why I had been out. I applied for a medical option to opt out of my courses for the semester without an academic penalty, but I didn't hear from that office until three days before exams. Only then did they tell me they had excused me from exams. Can you believe it?

In another class, this just happened last semester; a professor gave me a bad grade on my exam. I couldn't understand why, I had read all of the

texts for the class, studied all of the notes. So, I went through the process of asking for clarification. I knew the grade wouldn't change, but I still wanted to know what I had done wrong. I was angry I am a top student. All of my grades in high school and in university are very high. Anyway, I went to talk to him and he took out my paper and scanned through it in front of me. He hadn't read it... I mean, I'm in a law program, why is communication, exams, papers so different for each class? I don't get it.

Pabulum

The Teacher

Another bowl of curry, I just couldn't take it anymore. Every lunch at our school, pretty much, consisted of rice, curry, and meat broiled in Indian spices. When I had first arrived in Dubai, I had noticed quite a few Indians, Indian signs, Indian shops and Indian food stalls. But, upon closer examination, as the months ticked by and summer became winter, and winter summer (notice the lack of fall and spring mentioned), I realized that Dubai's economy really ran off the backs of Indian laborers. Mostly male Indian men were responsible for building Dubai's network of skyscrapers, roads, plants, while many Indian women were found in expat and local homes performing various housekeeping chores alongside other women laborers, mostly Filipino.

Yet, Indians were not found in the lowest of positions, but also in the highest owning car dealerships, thriving malls, various investment firms and much more. Accordingly, Indian cultural norms were the predominant status quo, which unfortunately for me, also bled into everyone's food, even the cafeteria at my school. We were racially, ethnically, religiously, nationally mixed I complained aloud to no one in particular, why this one food group was predominating over all others. Unfair I yelled aloud, causing many a student head to swivel and look in bewilderment toward my direction as I stomped out of the room…straight to the bathroom.

The Student

My mom cooked breakfast for me every morning. Usually I had Indian food, or a bowl of cereal, or an egg and toast. We had lunch in the cafeteria. It was also Indian food. But, I know this sounds strange, I also had lunch, about 4 P.M., when I got home from school. Sometimes it was soup, or a piece of chicken and always a cup of tea. I can't stress that enough, always a cup of tea. At 9 P.M., dad came home from work and we had

dinner, all of us together. It's funny that in other cultures I've noticed, most people work till 5 or 6 P.M., but in the UAE, everyone worked late. On the weekends, Friday was family day. We'd hang out with our extended family, pretty much all day. We'd usually go out to a nice restaurant in one of the malls.

Now, here in the UK, the food I'm eating at university is horrible! Every day they serve the same thing, sausage, bacon, eggs, potatoes and beans. But, I'm Muslim, so I can't even eat half of the options! It's disgusting! Lunch, is usually good, because I go to a local restaurant. But dinner, it is just Chinese food. So many of the students here are Chinese that they cater to them. Did you know that in my class of 40 students, 10 of us aren't Chinese, 10! I hate it! The food I mean…I lost 5 kilograms in the first month.

Clans

The Teacher

My sister and soon to be brother-in-law were over for another game of Ticket to Ride. We had already been to Jumeirah Beach Residence (JBR), snowboarded and watched the new Iron Man film in the mall of the Emirates, and enjoyed a couple of tasty burgers at Fuddruckers (an American hamburger chain). Sitting back, a beer in hand, we discussed our teaching weeks. My sister and brother-in-law, who taught local students, and brought up some of the homosexual tendencies they were noticing their students openly exhibited and talked about were listening to my wife and I's similar stories and encounters with local students we knew to practice homosexuality in Kuwait. It was the unknown, a topic of taboo in public to be sure, "haram," but also, an area of interest we were all fascinated by. Would or could we have shared this with anyone else I thought to myself, absolutely not.

Though we all had colleagues that were dear friends, having family members (or an almost family member in the case of my brother-in-law) to lean on for that type of intimate discussion was crucial to having a truly open discussion. And, we knew each other well, my sister and I were only four years apart and had kept in regular touch ever since we had attended the same undergraduate university in California, and my future brother-in-law, my wife and I had taught with one another in Japan. Our intimate connection allowed us to transition weekly, back and forth, from a strange land with a unique language, social norms and international colleagues, to a

purely American environment and provided us with reflection and understanding.

We would all Skype with our parents and friends at different times, they kept us in touch with what was going on back home. It was a breath of fresh air. But, also a sad time as we realized the world back home, was evolving, transforming without us. We were connected, but we weren't.

The Student

Socially, every weekend we got together with family, Aunts, Uncles, cousins, they all lived in the UAE. I didn't think it was special, as lots of families did it. Weddings, birthdays, engagements, we all celebrated together. There was definitely a social expectation, but I didn't mind, it was fun. And, I didn't have social or behavioral expectations put on me on the weekdays, my parents were pretty lax. Maybe if I hadn't done well academically, I would have, but they always told me as long as I did as good as I could for myself, that's all they desired. I didn't abuse their trust though, yeah I went to parties on the weekend, and especially when I turned 18 and got my license. I had a sweet car, an Aston Martin.

My family is privileged. I knew that back then in the UAE, I saw that we were fortunate, but here in the U.S., it is shocking to me that some students cry over every dollar. I was at the grocery store the other day, and this Chinese girl wouldn't move out of the line because she thought the cashier owed her a dollar. They fought about it for like, 20 minutes. I couldn't believe it. I just wanted to say "shut up," and hand her the dollar. But, I know that she's not alone. My dad flew with me over here. He stayed for three weeks. We stayed in a hotel at first, and then flew down to see my aunts and uncles in Georgia. I have family here in the U.S.; did I mention that to you?

I started my induction week, which was really great, we got into groups and that was how I met some of my friends. But, anyway, yeah my family is really involved with my life. In fact, I text my dad every day, just to let him know where I am and I Skype with my mom and sister like, two or three times every week. I got home sick after the first month, so my dad flew me home for a week. It was a great week hanging out with my friends who were waiting to attend university in Australia. When I came back, I felt different; I knew that my family and friends weren't all that far away.

Transformation

The Teacher

I spoke a different language. When I arrived in Dubai, I spoke American English knowing a slight amount of Italian, Japanese, Spanish, German and Arabic from my overseas travels and work. By the time I left, I realized I spoke a different language than I did with my friends and family back home; it was infused with an understanding of internationalism. My language was affected by my interactions with people from all over the world, people who bowed, people who held back their hand or people who kissed me on both sides of the face when greeting me. My language was affected by my conversations with people who were eastern Ukrainians demanding to be reunited with Russia, Bulgarians who longed for the good old communist days, Chinese who shared their immense enthusiasm for getting to enjoy new opportunities, Indians who enjoyed their morning, mid-morning, afternoon, mid afternoon and evening tea, Australians who couldn't wait for the weekends to get out and enjoy nature enmeshed with physical activities.

My language was affected, as I had to hold my tongue when I saw the economic depravity of the many who were slaving to build the modern luxuries enjoyed by the few. And my language was affected by the new economic independence my wife and I gained through higher salaries, savings and real estate investment knowing that our future children and we would never truly want for anything ever again. A transformation occurred in me. I become an adult. I spoke a different language.

The Student

I can do my own laundry now. My mom or our maid used to do our laundry. But, now I do it. It is actually pretty easy. I am also starting to learn how to cook, I cook a lot of pasta, it's cheap and easy to make, but oh…it has a lot of carbs. I used to drive in the UAE, but I don't have a car now in the U.K. But, I can use public transportation and it is pretty easy to get around. I'm independent now and I realize that. I still need my parents for financial reasons (lol!), and I still stay in touch with them, my dad makes me text him every day where I'm at, but I'm on my own. I think what prepared me most was having an open mind and being able to get along with lots of different people. Language isn't an issue for me either.

Maybe because I lived in Dubai and it is so international…yeah, that is probably why. I see some of the other international students on

campus, like the Chinese, and they have big problems. They all stay together in one group, and I notice they have academic and social problems because of that. They can't ask their professors' questions and they study together, so I don't think they understand what is going on. On our first day of orientation, all of the international students were in groups according to their nationalities or culture. I was the only person who moved between groups. I made lots of friends and I have lots of friends. I can ask the professors questions, or my fellow students. I do really well academically; I understand all of the lectures and my textbooks.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The making of meaning was created from the stories of the students and the lead researcher, the lead researcher's story of academic maleficence and his students' struggle with academics because of their health. Though these stories are seemingly insignificant, Crites (1971) declared these stories are among the most important means by which people articulate and clarify their sense of the world. In fact, both my student and myself told these stories because they represented struggles and frustrations for us; they represented specific moments in time that were meaningful. Durrance (1997) claimed that these stories can "[carry] the shared culture, beliefs, and history of a group. It is how we can and do experience our lives" (p. 26).

Themes were determined from the verbatim interview transcriptions from the former students stories and the lead researcher's reflections detailed in emails he sent to family and friends over the years. Reissman (2008) acknowledged this appropriateness stating, "Thematic analysis can be applied to stories that develop in interview conversations and group meetings, and those found in written documents" (p. 54). Data were grouped according to emergent themes determined from interviews: scholastics, pabulum, clan and transformation. The content in these categories elucidated the identities and stories told by both the former students and the lead researcher identifying that, which was important and relevant to each of them. Having analyzed their transcripts for significant statements, and coded them thematically, their content was then used to inform our analysis (Creswell, 2013). The analysis disclosed that their identity was determined through a lens as "foreigner," as their backgrounds, experiences and concerns were in response to a foreign setting. It was in this context where the lead researcher placed himself, where he took a stand toward the

individuals being analyzed—his former students (Van Maanen, 1988). It is where they sought understanding and where they made meaning.

Gilbert (2000) argued that academic culture shock is a subset of culture shock and "is a case of incongruent schemata about higher education in the student's home country and in the host country" (pp. 14-15). As seen in the former students' stories, this was clearly shown to be true. Transitioning to higher education is already stressful for students, but as Burns (1991) notes, it is found to be at a higher level among international students than among domestic students. But, the dynamic relationships between the individual and their professor, as well as administration is exacerbated by a new learning environment, academic institution, education system, lecture style, form of assessment and the relationships between students and lecturers (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010). However, an institutional approach towards academics, or an international student's background is not the crux of the problem. Rather educational values, or value norms are: how to approach a problem and the expected reply that one should receive.

Pabulum's double meaning as defined by Merriam Webster (2011) speaks to both practical and intellectual nourishment. As many institutions, including educational ones are becoming more business-like (Albert & Whetten, 1985), and taking business like approaches to accomplish changes (Miliken, 1990) in university settings, it would seem natural then, knowing that their institutional body is quite diverse, or international, to offer a variety of pabulum options. Gioia & Thomas (1996) expressed that such a dynamic environment in fact calls for institutions to change to meet these new conditions. Yet, as shown in both the lead researcher's story and his former students' stories, there is a dearth of pabulum, or food (Edwards, Hartwell & Brown, 2010). A surface diagnostic analysis would conclude a wider breadth of options is needed for satisfaction. Doing so would allow students to maintain their cultural identity (Amos & Lordly, 2014). It would allow for a greater person-organization, or person-society fit (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) and limit feelings of otherness (McNess, Arthur, & Crossley, 2015; 2013). Thus, not receiving enough, or the right kind of pabulum nourishment can affect identity and consequently satisfaction. Deprivation of this type of supportive structure may attenuate international students' capacity to deal with other stressors (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

A social unit's members share values; they can form the basis for social expectations or norms. Values provide the starting point, with the

joint processes of selection and socialization acting as complementary means to insure person-organization fit (Chatman, 1988). Should these values be even more widely shared throughout a larger social grouping, an organizational culture or value system may exist (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). However, in the lead researcher's story, as he struggled to make meaning of the perspective of his leadership, and in his former student's story as the individual could not comprehend the professor's position, a lack of congruence in terms of values was shown. According to O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell (1991), this divergence between an individual's values and those of an organization can cause a problematic fit in terms of shared values and identity.

Accordingly, it was the culture of family, or clan that was interwoven in our experiences. Kilmann, Saxton and Serpa (1986) noted that culture might be an important factor in determining how well an individual fits an organizational context. Their shared cultures gave them satisfaction in their environments providing them with joy and support; the lead researcher's interaction with family members through games and sports and his formers students interactions with their family and friends via text, internet chats and in-person interactions meeting their medical, personal and social needs. Lofquist and Dawes (1969) wrote that satisfaction results from a "harmonious relationship between the individual and his environment, suitability of the individual to the environment and vice versa" (p. 45). It is understandable then that international students who are not expressing lack of contentment from social disconnectedness and homesickness are doing so because they do not share in the supports that both my former students and myself had, mainly that of constant family or clan accessibility (Alzamel, 2014; Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011; Mark, Bodycott & Ramburuth, 2015; Padlee & Reimers, 2015).

Perhaps the problem with the former students and the lead researcher's own values, however as may be the case with many international students studying in the U.S., U.K. and Australia, was that they shifted over time. Their identities transformed in response to the dynamic environments, people, languages and culture we encountered. This dynamism, or friction, as defined by Anna Tsing (2005) includes, "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (p. 4). Transformation for individuals can be difficult (Seabi, Khoza-Shangase & Sullivan, 2014). As in the case of my former students, and myself it can lead to realization and feelings of otherness (Jarvis Kwadzo Bokor, 2011). However, Yina Wang (2012) found transformation

could be beneficial for students. When studying a group of Chinese university students, Wang found the students readapted to their environments by learning new skills, re-shaped their attitudes and made sense of their new selves through new thinking (Wang, 2012). Through their environments, they transformed. The former students became adults; they learned how to take care of themselves and became independent. The lead researcher became aware of the world around him and learned to value differences amongst people, culture and places. Through their transformations, their identities changed. They not only became the other, they embraced their otherness.

IMPLICATIONS

Currently, many universities classify students coming from other countries as though they are a homogenous group, i.e., "international". The results of this study show through the lead researcher's story and those of his former students, that even when coming from the same locale, Dubai UAE and K–12 international private school, every individual was unique. Their backgrounds, their experiences, their heritage all suggest that their stories were distinct and though at certain points in time did overlap resulting in a shared narrative, they were not the same. The one trait they all did hold in common however, was that sense of otherness upon their arrival in a foreign country.

University classification, identification, labeling amplify this feeling of otherness complicating individuals' transition in western countries and their higher education institutions. Thus, any transformation that occurs, personally, socially, culturally, academically, is unlike that of domestic students. It is not natural. They, as outsiders, experienced these things through being as the other and therefore never fully realized their potential, or their place in society. In a foreign land, they were treated as foreigners. To ease their transition, universities must actively seek to understand all of their students' unique identities. This can be accomplished through universities understanding their students' individual stories. Zaner (2004) stated it is the stories that we place in each other's minds that ultimately lead to the change they require and we need.

We learned, through some of the former students' stories, that yes, though they had attempted to transition to their new academic settings participating in various university sponsored events, the former students were experiencing hardships and frustrations. This caught us by surprise as

we knew the lead researcher's former students were trilingual, had lived in an international setting for most of their lives, studied in English for their K–12 schooling, and were well traveled. If anyone could overcome a sense of otherness, surely they would. But, simple things such as food underscored their failed expectations and feelings of under value. A participant commented for instance, "I can't believe they serve us every breakfast with pork, and it touches the rest of your food!" Clearly, no one at the university he attended understood his dietary needs, which also meant they did not consider his religious beliefs as important. In that one example, repeated daily, a feeling of otherness was experienced by my former student.

Outside of the system, uncared for, to navigate these new, complex, and foreign environments, they did not turn to the university system for support, but rather their clans, their families and friends from abroad calling, texting and Face-Booking quite often. They utilized their multi-national and multilingual identities to overcome dynamic situations. The reality they faced was exemplified in the story of one of the former female students who had to navigate the country's medical system in order to receive emergency medical care, and then as a result, also overcome university restrictions in order to complete her classes for the semester. In the process, their identities transformed, they became independent young adults. But they did so not as participants in the system, rather as others, as outsiders who did not belong. Unfortunately, many universities and institutions may be unknowingly promoting the division of students into specific clans by advertising and pushing individual campus groups rather than encouraging students to form multicultural groups that invite a variety of people with diverse backgrounds (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Sherry et al., 2010). Though many of the former students did regale the lead researcher with joyous tales of adventures to local museums, beach trips and making new friends, it was clear that they longed to reconnect, to belong, to a people and place.

The master narrative of international students being told must be reconstructed in light of this study (Leavy, 2014). International student identities are complex, varied, and unique and as such, so are their experiences, positive and negative, and contextually dependent on a variety of variables. Their stories shown in this study have illuminated the reality with which higher education must come to terms, individuals coming from any international setting, each and every one, is unique. Hence, support structures must be created to react to individual international student needs. To understand and care for all of their students, especially those coming from international destinations, universities should consider learning the

stories of all of their students prior to their arrival. In doing so, they may be able to make minor adjustments to their systems that would better meet the needs of each student making the student feel as part of the system leading to their retention and graduation. Additionally, programs already in place such as counseling and mental health services should be proactively advertised and tailored to fit the needs of international students, especially considering that only 2-4% of students currently use such programs (Dietsche, 2012; Hwang, Bennett & Beauchemin, 2014).

Future research is needed to determine: 1) how stories may be gathered from students and what particular information from these stories would find most helpful to universities; 2) Informal and formal support structures that international students self-identify as useful; and 3) the feasibility of frontloading support services offered to international students prior to their arrival in western higher education institutions. Stories could inform universities of their incoming international students initial and anticipated needs. Informal and formal support structures developed to meet need could then be evaluated through international students' surveys over the duration of their academic study. Initial needs may be met and support structures created through university's provision of technology to international students. Participants in this study indicated they used various technologies such as cell phones and laptops to connect with various members in their clans for support. Universities may also benefit from future research that shows how they can connect with and provide appropriate content (academic and non-academic) to their incoming international students through these technologies prior to their arrival.

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