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One Family, Different Experiences of Identity Formation: International Graduate Students and Their Spouses

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we use the communication theory of identity (CTI) to analyze the disparate experiences of International Graduate Students (IGS) and their accompanying partners. In CTI, four layers constitute the concept of identity: (a) The way individuals see themselves (*personal*), (b) their communicative interaction through social roles (*relational*), (c) their construction of messages (*enactment*), and (d) their role within a group or social network (*communal*). Thus, CTI views identity as a communicative and relational phenomenon. We analyze the layers of identity of IGS and their spouses living in the United States and find that although there are some coincidences, individuals within the student-dependent dyad mostly do not follow a common path of re-construction of their identity frames. Each narrative reflects individual and dyads' struggles as they work to define their new identities. For this phenomenological study, we conduct individual in-depth interviews with 16 couples from 12 different countries.

Keywords: different experiences of identity formation, one family

Universities in the United States receive international students from all over the world. For International Graduate Students (IGS) and their families, this is perceived often as a path to raise their economic and social status, or even to flee violence in their home countries. Relocating can represent an opportunity not only for themselves but also for their families as well. Families

tend to be the student, their spouse, and children if they have any. Those individuals who travel with the student may also be referred to as dependents (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2020). Moving to another country with dependents constitutes a more challenging task than relocating by themselves (Brooks, 2018).

Graduate international students and their spouses experience different processes of identity formation as they navigate their new context. Even when they share a living space and numerous experiences (Thompson et al., 2020), students and their accompanying spouses find dissimilar obstacles to overcome. Therefore, both individuals navigate through particular situations when they try to figure out their identity in the new context (Ting-Toomey, 2005). The disparity comes from sources such as the immigration laws in the host country, different social norms, or access to university resources.

As they adapt to the new culture, both students and dependents encounter the challenge of affirming or reinventing their identities. Identity formation is important for individual's mental health and well-being (Evans et al., 2018). As individuals enter a new context, identity is transformed, built, and sustained through communication. Numerous identity and communication studies have considered the international student population (Liu et al., 2017; Tran, 2009; Wadsworth, 2008; Zimmermann, 1995); however, few studies include accompanying family members (De Verthelyi, 1995; Doyle et al., 2016; Elfeel & Bailey, 2018). Thus, the focus of this study is the inequality in the experiences of IGS and their spouses in their processes of identity transformation.

AN EXAMINATION OF INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS, THEIR SPOUSES, AND IDENTITY FORMATION

To analyze identity, we examined the conditions of IGS in the United States. Every year, individuals from countries all over the world choose to enroll in higher education in this country (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). In particular, international students enroll in postgraduate education programs. As Krsmanovic (2021) noted, graduate students tend to have different characteristics than undergraduate students; they tend to be older and are more likely to travel with their families. In the 2018/2019 academic year, there were over 350,000 new international students enrolled in a graduate program in the United States (IIE, 2019); and the most recent data accounted for over 135,000 dependents (Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE], 2014). *Dependent* is a term used by the Department of Homeland Security to refer to spouses and children of international students. It is a term that refers to the dependence of family members' immigration status on the students' immigration status.

More than language barriers and acculturation which have been widely studied by Krsmanovic (2021), becoming a student or a dependent has implications on individual's perception of themselves and their relationships, given that identity is a life-long developmental process and is constantly changing (Hopkins, & Blackwood, 2011; Marcia, 1980). When identity development takes place continuously in a particular context, few life-altering events could lead to

an in-depth exploration of the self that requires a person to reinvent their core notions of identity (Tajfel, 2010). This means that when individuals follow the status quo, there are fewer possibilities of catalytic events that provoke deep identity transformation. Thus, few people could foresee that acculturation involves a process of redefinition of their identity (De Araujo, 2011). Students and dependents enter a culture different from their own. This is one event that inherently prompts the re-evaluation of a previously established identity (Wee, 2019). Often, dependents are less prepared than students for the changes that will lead to that identity transformation (Elfeel & Bailey, 2018). Imposed limitations, such as immigration laws for dependents of international students in the United States, present major disruption to their established sense of self and their place in society. Dependents are not allowed to work or study, they are not eligible for social security numbers, and their own legal immigration status depends completely on their partners (DHS, 2019).

There is existing literature about the identity formation of international students (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Wee, 2019). Although there tends to be a focus on language difficulties and cultural differences in international students' identity formation (Andrade, 2006; Wee, 2019). However, there are multiple factors that contribute to this process. Although there are variations of the meaning of identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004), researchers have found that identity formation of international students is inevitably related to their student activities (Kamara, 2017). International students' new identities are inevitably related to their process of navigating, living, and learning in host universities (Kamara, 2017), and interacting with peers, faculty, and staff, which leads the process of identity construction of international students to identity inconsistencies or identity gaps (Jung & Hecht, 2004) between their self-concept, and how Americans see them.

However, a student's function as part of a family unit has been scarcely studied. Existing research that considers the experience of identity formation of dependents is even rarer (De Verthelyi, 1995; Doyle et al., 2016; Elfeel & Bailey, 2018). In these studies, dependents are recognized as a vulnerable population due to their constraints in mobility and lack of social capital (Elfeel & Bailey, 2018). Doyle et al. (2016) opted to look at dependents and students as a family and make the family the unit of analysis. In this study, we compare the experiences of the students and their spouses, because both go through the process of identity formation in a new context.

IGS, THEIR SPOUSES, AND THE COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

International student identity is complex. This is a result of students' belonging to different communities in their home and host countries (Wee, 2019). Identity is a concept that is widely used in diverse areas of research; however, it is often difficult to define. Even within the study of communication, there are diverse conceptualizations of identity (Bardhan & Orbe, 2012). Earlier views of identity emphasized the Western notion of "self" as a single, unified identity. Views that

are more recent recognize that identity is a layered structure comprising values, drives, abilities, and life history (Marcia, 1980).

Communication scholars have found identity to be inevitably related to communication processes. All of these communication scholars have in common the idea that people are inherently social beings; their lives revolve around communication, relationships, and communities (Kim, 2005; Tajfel, 2010; Ting-Toomey et al., 1999). Therefore, people operate from multiple and shifting identities that adapt to the different contexts (Hecht et al., 2004). Communication plays a central role in the negotiation of relationships and group membership. It allows us to find connections with others, independently of our location (Metro-Roland, 2018). As Anderson (2000) said, "The self is possible only in the web of connected lives" (p. 2). Along these lines, Hecht (1993) proposed the communication theory of identity (CTI). He considered identity to be situated within the individual, but also in spheres between and among people (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Hecht and his colleagues (2005) envisioned identity as a multilayered construct. In this study, this layering allowed us to analyze identity transformation in a more focused manner. This view of identity includes four layers: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. This breakdown of identity in layers allowed us to compare the experience of international students and their spouses in a precise manner. The *personal identity layer* refers to a person's self-concept, it reflects how individuals define themselves. The personal layer includes how individuals see themselves, in general, as well as how they see themselves in particular situations (Hecht & Choi, 2012). The *enacted identity layer* resides in a person's messages that express identity. The communicative process of message construction is the main focus of enacted identity. The way people enact their identity can have implications for international students and their spouses. For example, Bergquist et al. (2019) found that for refugees, discursive assimilation was important. As such, many emphasized enacting their identity as a member of the new host culture by speaking English.

The *relational identity layer* is jointly negotiated with others through social roles and interactions (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Here, identity is a product of how others perceive that individual. For instance, a student may form a relational identity as a good student when their professors or other students describe them as such. A marital relationship can be a unit of identity itself (Hecht & Choi, 2012). When a dependent describes themselves as a patient parent, they are referring to relational identity.

Lastly, the *communal identity layer* is performed at the collective level. Communal identity places identity in group membership. The individual shares characteristics with other group members, which provides a sense of inclusion. Place identity (Ching, 2001), when a person identifies as an international student, is one example. This signifies that the person, in this case the student, shares common characteristics with other foreign students. This can be the social norms, ways of learning, or culture.

When a person relocates to a new country that has a different culture, all of the layers defined by CTI are affected. Students and dependents are bound by new

roles, new social norms, amongst other changes. A new context also requires adjustments to the couple's relationship. These adjustments are negotiated through communication including message construction. As individuals redefine their self-perception, they also redefine their group membership. The in-groups and out-groups reflect the individual and couple's new roles.

The four layers of identity are not always consistent with each other (Hecht, 1993). Layers can be contradictory and still form a part of identity as a whole. For example, a dependent may view him or herself as a supportive individual, and at the same time, they may demand more time and attention from their partner. This dynamic is defined as an identity gap. When people interact and communicate, gaps are unavoidable. The interaction between the layers is a communicative act and therefore a convenient framework in the study of identity.

Communication researchers have used CTI to guide studies in diverse areas. CTI, for example, has been used in the study of ethnic and racial differences, and in relation to face and politeness. In comparison, fewer studies based on CTI have focused on family relationships (Colaner et. al, 2014). Existing research on CTI includes grandparents and grandchildren (Kam & Hecht, 2009), adoptive and birthparent relationships with the adopted child (Colaner et al., 2014), and close relationships including friends and family (Guerrero et al., 2017). Our study adds to the existing research of the relationship between spouses, as we compare the layers of identity of students and dependents.

METHOD

Our main goal was to understand the inequality in the experiences of IGS and their spouses in their processes of identity transformation. Thus, we chose a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for this study. Phenomenology fits a project when the research problem requires an in-depth understanding of human experiences common to a group of people (Creswell, 1998). Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology analyzes the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories. This school of phenomenology follows the principle that interpretations are all we have, and description itself is an interpretive process (Caputo, 1984). This allowed us to study our participants' experiences and to interpret the meanings of the phenomena that they experienced (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Participants

We used purposive sampling for this study because we required participants to have specific characteristics. The sample for this study ($N = 32$) was composed of 16 student-dependent dyads. The dyads included married couples in which only one person is an international student currently enrolled in a university or college. All student participants were enrolled in the same large, mid-western university. The other person in the dyad was accompanying the student as a dependent. It is important that one person of the dyad was a dependent and not a student themselves, so that we could compare the different experiences. Participants were

required to be able to speak English, Spanish, Chinese, or Arabic. We included these languages because the majority of the international students at the university where we collected the data are proficient in one of these languages (ISSS, ND) (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Data

	Countries of origin	Gender
Students	Albania (1)	M = 12 (75%)
	Chile (1)	F = 4 (25%)
	China (3)	
	Colombia (2)	
	Czech Republic (1)	
	Honduras (1)	
	India (2)	
	Iraq (2)	
	Mexico (1)	
	Russia (1)	
	Turkey (1)	
Dependents	Albania (1)	M = 4 (25%)
	Chile (1)	F = 12 (75%)
	China (3)	
	Colombia (2)	
	Czech Republic (1)	
	Honduras (1)	
	India (2)	
	Iraq (2)	
	Japan (1)	
	Russia (1)	
	Turkey (1)	

Participants ranged in age from 27 to 50 years with an average of 33.6 years (*SD* = 5.8). All couples were married, the range of time married varied from 3 to 25 years with an average of 7.3 years (*SD* = 5.5). Couples had been living in the United States from one to eight years, with an average of 3.6 years (*SD* = 1.8). Only two couples did not have children. All student participants were enrolled in a postgraduate program. Dependents had different education levels ranging from high school to doctoral.

Procedure

After approval from the institutional review board, the P.I. and a research assistant recruited participants via messages sent through the graduate and family housing office listserv, as well as the International Center listserv. Both listservs allow us to send messages that reach the international students directly. The second set of interviews came from snowball sampling. After each interview, participants were given printed information about the study in the case they knew of other couples interested in participating.

The dyads consisting of one enrolled international student and their accompanying spouse were each interviewed as close in time as possible and independently. One participant was interviewed after the other one so that they would not have the opportunity to comment on their responses before their participation. Eisikovits and Koren (2010) pointed out that one of the benefits of dyadic analysis is that interviewing each participant in a couple relationship separately, the similarity or overlap in answers can be identified, as well as the difference and contrast.

Before the interview, one participant required translation to Mandarin Chinese, therefore an interpreter was provided. Ten individual interviews were conducted in Spanish. The role of the interpreter was to translate the questions and answers during the interview. Interviews took place in a convenient location that afforded enough privacy for the interviewees to express their experiences freely (e.g., a meeting room, office). Before the beginning of any interview, participants were provided with the IRB-approved informed consent form (in English, Spanish, Chinese, or Arabic). We asked respondents to share their accounts through narrative elicitation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) (e.g., Please tell me a story that describes who you were before you came to the United States); Please tell me about a time when you felt you had changed from the person you were before you came to the United States). Interviews lasted between 35 and 65 mins. All interviews were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Data were transcribed by a professional service once it was collected and verified for accuracy by a research assistant. We then read the transcriptions to ensure accuracy. We divided the transcripts into dependent and student interviews. Next, we chose to analyze each group separately. We met after coding four interviews (two couples) to compare the coding results and resolve any differences. For the initial analysis, we used descriptive coding. We used descriptive codes (i.e., Personal identity layer, relational identity layer) not only to help categorize but also to index the data contents for further analytic work (Saldana, 2011). For the second round of analysis, we used versus coding. Versus coding uses binary terms to describe groups and processes, in this case students and dependents.

Table 2: Versus Coding Example

Quote	Versus codes
"So, the first year I was F-2 visa holder, means I do nothing. Just cleaning the house and doing other housewife stuff. That's not me, because I'm not a traditional woman type. I don't stick in the room and do all this kind of things. I did an awful job at being a wife. We fought a lot because I don't feel happy. I feel like I sacrificed too much."	Original vs. new occupational identity

The goal of versus coding is to see which processes are in conflict with each other throughout the document. We chose this analytic method because we wanted to compare how students and dependents experienced the layers of identity.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the inequality in the processes of identity formation of IGS and their spouses. In this section, we present our findings, which are organized by the four layers of identity described in the theory. We use quotes from participants to illustrate and use pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

The Personal Layer of Identity

There are numerous reasons for a family's decision to relocate to a new country. This decision was a catalyst that initiated a gradual process into who am I *now*? We identified this early action as the beginning of the personal layer transformation because it was at that point individuals had a new goal. One person would become the international student, and the other would provide support. This is reflected in most couple's narratives of that moment. For example, Ivan, a Family Studies PhD candidate from Russia envisioned his new role

> It is my story before coming here, that I left a socioeconomic level that was not even middle, it was a little bit up, and coming to the United States, my role is to be a student again, so it's two levels down. OK, I got it, I know how to be a student.

Ivan's message first described the sacrifice of status as a necessary loss that would materialize his new desired role. The 'student' label was adopted as a favorable identity characteristic. Before departure, 'student' symbolized growth and progress.

In comparison, spouses' narratives characterized the decision as initiated by their partners. They found their role to be of support. This was reflected in the way they described their preparation to come to a new country. As Xi, a 27-year-old dependent from China said:

> Mostly because he wanted to do his Ph.D., I was working in Beijing at that time. I said, actually he can come here alone, and I will stay in China, but he doesn't agree. He wanted to me to come together with him. So, I said OK, because I'm pretty flexible, I adapt to the environment pretty good. So, he was a student and I was F-2 visa holder.

Xi's description reflected the way most dependents envisioned themselves in their new role. Spouse messages reflected less involvement in decision-making, including emigrating, which is a life-altering event. Reduced input in this decision can be a result of spouses' self-perception. It also reflects the view that they are willing to adapt their self-concept if needed.

Although self-perception transformation started with a decision, the arrival at the host country presented a radical disruption. Student's first contact with their new context was a significant life experience. This moment represented the introduction of the labels "international" and "foreign" to students' self-perception. For dependents, the new label was: *dependent*. This is a word used by The U.S. Department of Homeland Security to describe spouses or children of international students. However, the use of 'dependent' in a different way denotes that a person is defenseless, vulnerable, or reliant. Although the label of 'dependent' was introduced by an immigration institution, it illustrates a deeper sense of the role of spouses who accompany international students. It became a part of spouses' self-perception as they arrived in the United States. Spouses, in general, do not perceive themselves as dependents although their actions reflect a reliance on the student. Linda, a 35-year-old from Chile expressed her opposition:

> The term dependent does not correspond, because we are not dependent of the person who is studying, we accompany them, even if we are not studying we are contributing by watching the children, working, I don't know. We do the other part because otherwise you cannot get ahead. Dependent is not the correct term for me.

Once in the new country, IGS usually devote the majority of their time to the completion of their degree. A person's occupation is often the most common referent when defining self-perception. However, although occupation was central for students, they defined themselves through values first. Values included honesty, family orientation, and respect. For example, Ron, a 27-year-old student from China, explained that he thought of himself as a researcher but more importantly, a person who always put his family first.

When dependent participants had to describe their new personal identity, their responses were much more detailed and complex than their spouses.' Through their narratives, dependents described a void in their self-perception; they found it difficult to describe themselves. The ways that they had envisioned themselves were stripped away when they became a dependent. Aisha, a 30-year-old from Iraq described challenges similar to other dependents: "I lost myself, I think because I lost my job, I just stayed at home with my kids. My husband is not with me. I don't know who I am now."

The personal layer of identity was deeply affected for dependents. Even when they rejected the term "dependent," their self-perception was mostly influenced by their limitations. In an attempt to describe her new self-concept, Anka, a 45-year-old from Russia described herself as an inanimate random object

> I am getting older, and I am on visa status, and I am not allowed to work or study or…I am suitcase! I think I would like to do something else with my life, but I don't know how or when.

Gender also has an important role in the personal layer. Male dependents dealt with their sense of loss of purpose and added their dissatisfaction with the reversed gender roles. Adjit, a 30-year-old from India, had such a difficult time transforming his personal identity that after a short time he returned to his country, leaving his student-wife not only to her academic endeavors but also to care for their young child. He described this difficult decision as a result of Adjit's dissonance with the role of a dependent. He refused to adapt to this new and different personal identity layer.

Enacted Layer of Identity

The IGS that participated in our study felt they had to perform exceedingly well in their academic endeavors in order to fulfil the 'student' enacted layer of their identity. In general, this meant that they continuously devoted most of their time to their academic activities. These activities included teaching undergraduate classes, conducting research, working with peers and advisors, and covering all class requirements. Ivan referred to his enacted layer of identity as a student when he said that it was impossible for him to fail as a student after his whole family had sacrificed so much for him.

Gender was again an influence of how students built their identity. For Deepti, whose husband had gone back to India, it was especially difficult to enact her identity as a student.

> When we came to the U.S. I left my place thinking that I would be able to study. I never thought that my husband would have to go back to our place to work. How can I be a great student when I also have to care for R*[her child]? This is not what a good student is supposed to be. Now I am lucky to complete my work and sometimes it is not the best.

While Deepti's spouse moved back to India to continue working, the other dependents found a way to enact their identity as supportive spouses. Dependents provided emotional and enacted support to their partners. This is reflected in their narratives, Anka, for example, said:

> Right now, I am just around the house and I am driving him, and my daughter, so I am taxi driver. Sometimes I will be in negative mood, and I would try to [grrr] with him. I realize that it's not just about him, and he would like to change it also, but I guess the Lord is teaching me to be more patient.

In this particular example, Anka talks about providing enacted support by driving her husband and daughter to where they needed to go. Anka also talks about emotional support. This is expressed through her conflict avoidance. Conflict avoidance also became an enacted layer of identity when dependents chose not to communicate problems or challenges to their partners. This part of the enacted identity of dependents can be identified in the actions of Lenka, a 29-year-old from the Czech Republic:

> It is difficult to keep the troubles to myself, but *P has so many other things to think about in school. Like, one time I was desperate, I didn't know what to do with the baby that wouldn't stop crying. I'm telling you this was a crisis. But I didn't call *P, I called my mother even though it was a bad time for her back home. My mother talked me through everything I had to do and finally *B fell asleep. But why would I tell *P all of this things when he is coming home all tired. He works so hard. I am his biggest fan! No. I keep to myself.

(*Pseudonyms used to protect the identity of the participant's partner and child.)

Although they were very different, in this case the enacted identities of students and spouses complemented each other: Good students and supportive partners.

Relational Layer of Identity

Students and dependents constantly communicate to negotiate their roles. Dependents considered their most important role to provide their partners with the appropriate conditions so that they could succeed in their academic work. Although they already had a defined relationship in their country, their new context required that they adapt the way they saw themselves in the relationship. The relational layer was negotiated between the couple, and it is reflected in narratives like Aisha's:

> We speak all the time about hospitals, when we take D* we say: Oh! You see? It's like this. So sometimes he says no, you can't go. I say I can, now I'm strong. I'm different, I'm not like last times. If I'm in Iraq I can't go shopping alone, or I can't take D* alone, I should need him with me. But now, no. I am stronger. I am changing. Like, in my country if my husband stays in another city, I can't stay alone. But here I can. It's hard for me, but I can do it. I should do it.

Aisha and her husband Mahmoud found themselves often in unfamiliar situations. They described their lives in Iraq as more restricted than their lives in the United States and often of their conversations reflected those changes in their relational identity. Her new identity in the relationship was that of a more independent woman. This allowed Aisha to feel able to perform tasks that she would not have performed in her original country. In her new relational identity, she had different responsibilities.

Generally, the negotiation of the relational identity itself had to adapt to the new place. In this example, June, a 26-year-old from China was forced to find new ways to work out conflict:

> Sometimes I complain a lot and I run away from the house, I just don't want to stay in the house, I go outside…how to say it…If I was in China, I can go to some night places and just have a drink or sing songs in the karaoke or find a friend, go to their place, talk to them. But here if I run out, the only place I can go is Kroger. You don't want to just go to a friend's house because that might surprise them and it's not OK, not good. I don't really want to go to the bars because I'm not used to the atmosphere there, and I've been told don't go outside after 10 p.m. because it's not safe. So, all I can do is take a break and talk to him, even if he is stubborn.

Participants in this study found that with their new personal and enacted identity layers came a new way of understanding themselves as individuals in a relationship and understanding themselves as a couple.

Communal Layer of Identity

International students and their spouses incorporate into diverse communities in their new context. Their membership in these groups shapes their identity layers because a community delineates social norms, and with that, the shared visions of group identity. IGS belong to a larger group of students that serve as examples of how to perform in an academic setting. For example, for Jan, a 33-year-old from Czech Republic, it was important to follow the recommendations of other students who had more experience. Jan described a moment when he did not know how to address an issue with a professor, so he asked other students for advice. It was important for him to follow the social norms of the new place. Although students in the study gave priority to their academic endeavors, they were part of other groups or communities. These were groups of co-nationals or spiritual groups, for example. For Miguel, an engineering student from Honduras, it was very important to belong to a Catholic church:

> As soon as I arrived, I had to find my place of worship. My religion is very important for me and my family. When we first went to the church, the people were very welcoming and helped us with things for our apartment. Everyone was very nice, and we felt like we were back home for a little bit.

We found from our participants' narratives that there were significantly more opportunities for group membership for students than for dependents. In their original countries, dependents had family, friends, jobs, and other groups that they belonged to. They spoke the same language and understood the social norms. In the new country, they did not have the same opportunities. This often resulted in feelings of isolation and at times anxiety or depression.

> Here, it happens often, for example, that I have to go buy something to the supermarket, and if E* is not here, I have to go with all the kids and not

> having anyone here, like when I am sick, there is no one who will say I will come over and help you cook, or watch the kids, or if you have a problem and need somebody to talk to, you can't just be like I will go to your house and talk about my problem because I think I don't want to impose.

Communal identity represents a sense of belonging for both students and dependents. It creates a sense of comfort and support. Dependents had significantly less opportunities to enrich this layer of identity than their spouses did.

DISCUSSION

As Bergquist and colleagues (2019) noted, CTI represents a useful framework for assessing self-concept during times of change. Through this framework, we found that participants' narratives of their experiences through identity formation as international students or dependents were divergent. CTI allowed us to identify obstacles in identity formation in a new context.

We found that students had more resources than their spouses did when they re-defined their identity. This was reflected in the way participants described their different layers of identity. Students had mostly made the decision to study in a foreign country, as suggested by Tran (2009). This provided them with more agency than their spouses. Spouses started to identify their personal identity layer as supportive. Often, support meant the decision to sacrifice jobs, family, friends, or economic status. Once they arrived to the United States, Students' personal identity layer became inevitably linked to their occupation. Studies of occupational identity highlight that it gives meaning and direction to one's career, but it also increases coping abilities in the face of stress and challenges; and allows an individual to find work that reflects their personal strengths, interests, preferences, and goals (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). However, for spouses that link was not there. They described this important shift in their occupation, as a void in their personal identity layer. They could not describe themselves using their occupation, and this was aggravated by the limitations they encountered in the new country. They sacrificed so much that in extreme cases, dependents went back to their home country.

In the enactment of identity, again, students found their occupation to be of outermost importance. They dedicated their time to their studies. Spouses again found that their enacted layer of identity was linked to support for their partners. This led to a re-negotiation of roles in their relational identity; in the literature (Bergquist et al., 2019; Faulkner & Hecht, 2011) we can see how people in romantic relationships who have deep discrepancies between partner's personal layers need to negotiate their roles. Students and their spouses used new communication strategies that better fit the relational identity. For example, keeping problems from their spouse so that they could focus on school. They also learned new ways to manage conflict in accordance with their new context. In this new context, spouses had limited opportunities to define their communal layer of identity. While students were part of an academic community, it was up to spouses to actively seek opportunities to join a community. Similar to the study of layers

of identity of refugees (Bergquist et al., 2019), for most spouses there were barriers like language, location, and social norms that made them feel isolated and sometimes anxious or depressed.

We can see how the struggles of dependents have been widely ignored, even in the lack of literature about that population. While colleges and institutions provide a range of services and accommodations for incoming students, their families do not receive the same support, if any at all (Brooks, 2018). This study provides insight into the experiences of international students, but also of their dependents. Institutions of higher education would benefit from the well-being of both.

Limitations and Future Directions

International students bring diverse viewpoints that enrich not only their academic program but also their communities both in their host and home countries (Bender et al., 2019). When international students experience reduced stress levels, they have the conditions to produce better outcomes (Lee, 2010). Therefore, institutions that are hosts to IGS would benefit from recognizing the common difficulties that their students encounter. In addition, these same institutions should recognize the relevance of dependents. When dependent experiences are overlooked, there may be detrimental outcomes for the dependent themselves (Evans et al., 2018), and for their family unit and the community. The barriers to identity formation, in particular, can be addressed with programs that promote the inclusion and provide resources for the dependents through the institution.

This study was limited to graduate students, because they are more likely to bring their dependents to the United States than undergraduate students are. It is an example of barriers that are specific to this educational group. There is a need for future research to continue to account for international students as graduate and undergraduate instead of looking at them as a homogeneous group. As Krsmanovic (2021) reported, "the future direction of the research on international students' needs to (a) clearly account for students' academic level and (b) limit the investigation and generalizability of findings to either undergraduate or graduate students" (p. 15).

Additionally, this study included participants from only one institution. It would be important to replicate it in different locations and identify other barriers. The way institutions attract and support IGS and their families varies greatly. For example, it would be useful to replicate the study in institutions that do provide resources to dependents and evaluate the success of those resources. When more information becomes available to colleges and universities, they will be able to adopt or discontinue their practices based on actual evidence. The result will benefit all of the involved stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined the lived experiences of international students and their spouses. We found through the different layers of identity that there are common

experiences for a majority of students and some common experiences for the group of dependents, even when participants came from very diverse cultures. The comparison between student and dependent groups presented differences in most aspects of identity re-construction. As students gain new aspects for their personal identity, dependents lose the ones that made them who they were in their original cultures. In the enacted layer of identity, we found that although dependents have a difficult time defining themselves, their enacted identity is one of support for their partners. In the relational layer of identity, students and dependents negotiate their new roles and have conversations that allow their relationships to function. In the communal layer, we found that it is important for both groups to belong to a community, whether social, academic, or spiritual. However, it is a challenge for dependents to find the opportunities to enter such groups.

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