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Transposed Identity Negotiation: A New Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

International students negotiate various intersecting identities while studying abroad. When an international student moves into the new spatial context of their host country, the student's intersectional identity is perceived with degrees of marginalization or privilege by host country nationals that conflict with the student's understanding of their identities in their home context. Existing frameworks from various theoretical traditions describe how students experience identity negotiation and construction, yet there is no synthesized conceptualization of how students negotiate identity when intersectional identities are relocated, or transposed, into a new spatial context. In this manuscript, I propose a new conceptual framework, which I call transposed identity negotiation, that weaves together identity negotiation (Swann, 1987), intersectional reflexivity (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2010), and the theory of social and spatial contexts (Lindemann, 2007; Logan, 2012; Vital & Yao, 2021) to improve our understanding of how international students negotiate identities in the host country context.

Keywords: identity conflict, international students, study abroad, transposed identity negotiation

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021) reported that in 2019, just over six million tertiary students had crossed an international border to pursue an education. While the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the growth of student mobility worldwide, the re-imagining of student mobility post-pandemic has brought even greater attention to international student wellbeing. Literature on cultural adjustment among degree-seeking international students (e.g. George Mwangi, 2016; Sung, 2022) reveals that international students experience identity conflicts while negotiating identities in a new spatial context that impacts their educational experience. Researchers have employed various

theories and conceptual frameworks to understand this phenomenon—such as negotiation of difference (Block, 2007), communication theory of identity (Haugh, 2008), and a poststructuralist view of dialogical self (Sung, 2022)—yet there is no synthesized conceptualization of how students negotiate identity when transposed in a social and spatial context. My proposed conceptual framework, transposed identity negotiation, weaves together identity negotiation (Swann, 1987), intersectional reflexivity (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2010), and the theory of social and spatial contexts (Lindemann, 2007; Logan, 2012; Vital & Yao, 2021) to understand how international students negotiate identities when they are perceived with degrees of marginalization or privilege by host country nationals that conflict with the students’ understanding of their identities in their home context.

CONCEPTUAL ROOTS

The concepts from transposed identity negotiation appear in literature on international students, study abroad, and international scholars, although none of the literature appears to synthesize the conceptual building blocks of transposed identity negotiation into a single framework. Block (2007) reviews literature on poststructuralist identity, including a framework related to identity negotiation, negotiation of difference, which involves an individual’s struggle with a destabilization of identity caused by crossing a border. Haugh (2008) examines international student identity construction through social interaction, highlighting the role the interviewer plays in constructing international students’ identities through discourse during qualitative research interviews. Sung (2022) applies a poststructuralist view of identity to understand identity construction as a process within social constraints and unequal power relations in which students must negotiate difference through the dialogical self. These extant conceptualizations suggest the need to understand how mobility and social contexts shape identity negotiation.

Torres-Olave and Lee (2019) seem to come the closest to meeting this need in their work on shifting positionalities for internationally mobile scholars. They describe four time-geography moments in which their own identities were perceived with different degrees of marginalization or privilege due to different spatial contexts. One of the reasons their identities were perceived differently is that “social identities that are marginalized in one country or region may be marginalized differently in others, or not at all” (p. 137). This statement is nearly identical to the conceptualization of transposed identity negotiation: that social identities that are marginalized or privileged in one spatial context are perceived with different degrees of marginalization or privilege in another spatial context. While Torres-Olave and Lee (2019) utilize the conceptual building blocks of transposed identity negotiation, they do not propose a single synthesized conceptual framework of identity negotiation.

CREATING THE FRAMEWORK: TRANSPOSED IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

Transposed identity negotiation is a synthesis of identity negotiation (Swann, 1987) and intersectional reflexivity (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2010) situated within the theory of social and spatial contexts (Lindemann, 2007; Logan, 2012; Vital & Yao, 2021). This new framework conceptualizes how an individual's identities are negotiated when they are perceived with different degrees of marginalization or privilege depending on the spatial context.

Identity Negotiation

In Swann's (1987) identity negotiation framework, there are two roles in an identity negotiation interaction: the target, who possesses a self-perception of their identity, and the perceiver, who interprets the target's identity through their own lens. The framework centers on how targets strive to validate their self-views, and how the perceivers strive to validate their expectancies. Targets signal their identity through visual cues or interactions and focus on increasing or amplifying self-confirmatory feedback while minimizing or rejecting self-disconfirmatory feedback. The framework acknowledges that personal characteristics and social structures such as norms and social convention influence how identities are understood and perceived. Swann (1987) also describes the phenomenon of crisis self-verification, in which the target receives discrepant feedback that does not match their self-concept. During crisis self-verification, targets respond in two ways. They may "focus attention on the self-conception that has been threatened" (p. 1042) or they may try to learn more about themselves by "acquiring information that will be highly informative and diagnostic" (p. 1042). In other words, targets may try to confirm their self-concept or open themselves up to a new understanding of themselves and how others perceive them.

Intersectional Reflexivity

I apply Jones's (2010) concept of intersectional reflexivity, which relies on Crenshaw's (1991) definition of intersectionality, to Swann's (1987) framework of identity negotiation to create a more nuanced understanding of the identity negotiation process. Identity negotiation as described by Swann does not address how differences in the power or privilege of the various identities held by the target and receiver impact the identity negotiation process. Jones's (2010) work addresses this gap in Swann's framework. Jones (2010) describes intersectional reflexivity as the process by which an individual constantly reflects on how their privileged and marginalized identities intersect to be an advocate for social change and personal accountability. Applying Jones' intersectional reflexivity to Swann's identity negotiation framework, the target in an identity negotiation interaction possesses intersectional identities which are perceived as either marginalized or privileged by the perceiver. Intersectional identity negotiation provides a lens for understanding how an internationally mobile student, the target, reacts when they receive self-disconfirmatory feedback from a host national, the perceiver. The student, or target, holds intersecting privileged and marginalized identities that

may be perceived by the host national to hold degrees of privilege or marginalization that confirm or disconfirm the student's self-concept.

Theory of Social and Spatial Contexts

In their conceptualization of social and spatial positioning, Vital and Yao (2021) "recognize that *how* we are perceived is subjective and is often informed by *where* we are located" (p. 71). The spatial component of their conceptualization is based on Logan's (2012) description of spatial thinking that considers the location of social phenomena and locational patterns of social phenomena. Because social position is subjective (Lindemann, 2007), an individual's social position is perceived differently depending on their spatial position. Social and spatial positioning explains why the intersectional identity negotiation process is different for students in the context of their host country than in their home country.

Transposed Identity Negotiation

Transposed identity negotiation (see Figure 1) synthesizes identity negotiation, intersectional reflexivity, and the theory of social and spatial contexts to conceptualize how an international student negotiates their intersectional identities in different spatial contexts. In Figure 1, the positions of the circles on the arrows linking the perceivers to the target indicate the perceivers' disparate perceptions of the degree of marginalization or privilege of the target's identities. When the target relocates from the home spatial context to the host spatial context, the self-disconfirmatory perception of the target's identities provokes identity renegotiation.

Applying transposed identity negotiation to examples of international identity negotiation suggests that international students' identities are perceived differently by host nationals when they are transposed into the host country spatial context. For example, Sung (2022) describes how a Bangladeshi international student's national identity was perceived as Indian or Pakistani by host nationals in Hong Kong. This self-disconfirmatory feedback carried a degree of marginalization the student had not experienced in Bangladesh. As a result, the student monitored her behavior to be a model Bangladeshi, but she also experienced a new and enriching identity expansion as she embraced sharing her Bangladeshi culture with her classmates. For this student, crisis self-verification was emotionally challenging, but it also gave her an opportunity to positively deepen her connection to her national identity.

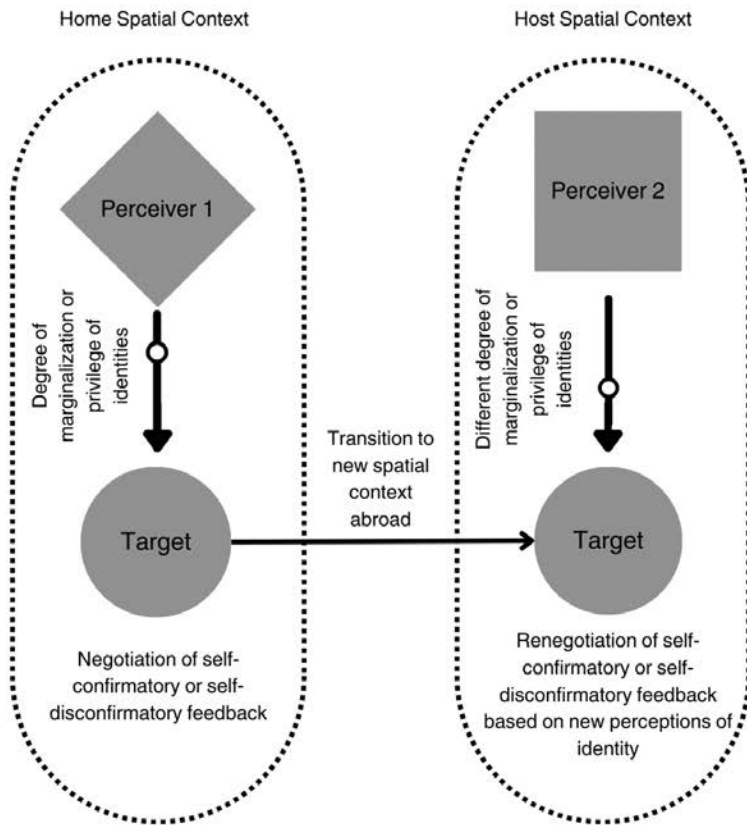


Figure 1: Transposed Identity Negotiation

TRANSPosed IDENTITY NEGOTIATION APPLIED TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the literature on degree-seeking international student identity negotiation appears to focus almost exclusively on national and cultural identity, with little attention to how students negotiate intersectional racial, gender, class, or linguistic identities in their new spatial context. One exception is George Mwangi's (2016) research on Black international student experiences of belonging at an American HBCU. Examined through the framework of transposed identity negotiation, the Black international students (targets) and Black American students (perceivers) give different degrees of salience to intersectional national and racial identities, thereby disconfirming each other's self-concepts and negatively impacting the Black international students' sense of belonging on the campus.

The literature on non-degree seeking international students' experiences abroad does address students' negotiation of racial, ethnic, class, and gender

identities. For example, Goldoni (2017) explores how during ‘Albert’s’ semester in Spain, Spanish locals perceived Albert, a Black man from a working-class background, with a higher degree of marginalization than Albert was accustomed to in the United States, his home country. Albert negotiated this self-disconfirmatory feedback, which likely stems from Spanish associations of Black men with negative perceptions of immigrants from Africa, by simultaneously rejecting Spain and Spanish culture and affirming his identities by volunteering at a community service center that served local families who shared his racial, ethnic, and class identities.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Transposed identity negotiation is a novel conceptual framework that synthesizes existing frameworks and concepts in international student literature to help us understand how international students experience and react to their intersectional identities being perceived with different degrees of marginalization or privilege in the host country context. Transposed identity negotiation could guide future research directions for scholars who study international student identity development, identity negotiation, or identity conflict. The framework could also prove useful in fields such as international migration and mobility, counseling, and psychology; if participants are moving from one spatial context to another, transposed identity negotiation could help explain affect and actions in their new location. In addition, practitioners in international education could use transposed identity negotiation to design exercises to help students respond to crisis self-verification using adaptive strategies such as reflection and reflexivity. Finally, transposed identity negotiation could be applied to scholarship that examines the student experience in fragile contexts such as tertiary education for refugees or vulnerable populations who cross borders to access education. This manuscript is a starting point for scholars and practitioners to clarify and expand transposed identity negotiation across a broad range of context within the field of international education.

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