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## Graduate students identities in the intercultural practices on a U.S. campus: A Q inquiry



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## ABSTRACT

In this study with Q methodology, the researcher unites two strands of recent significant intercultural inquiry in higher education institution: students' experiences in the communities of intercultural practice on campus and student's identity constructed in the community of intercultural practice on campus. The study explores how international and American graduate students position themselves in their intercultural practices on campus. The researcher argues that international and American graduate students perceive their relations with "unstable othering" which has great impact on their discourse and affinity identities constructed in the intercultural practices on campus. The current study suggests using "small culture" approach to uncover the nuances of student's identity negotiation on a site of students' unstable othering within an institutional ethnocentric discourse of stabilized othering.

## Introduction

The U.S. remains the world's leading destination international students enrolled in higher education institutions in 2016–2017 (IIE, 2017). The U.S. public research universities are increasingly turning to international student recruitment to offset the state funding cuts in support of higher education. Keeping steady increase of international application and ensuring enrollment across graduate and undergraduate levels appears to be a constant goal of university presidents and boards of trustees in the United States. However, according to the Open Doors 2017 data, international student enrollment in the United States has slowed considerably for 2016 and 2017 academic year (IIE, 2017). Nearly 40 percent of U.S. higher education institutions reported a decline in their total number of international application across graduate and undergraduate programs (Redden, 2017).

High quality and diverse experiences in the universities in the United States are attractive to international students. It is critical for higher education institutions integrating international students into campus successfully. The low intercultural interaction rate between international and American students on campus is a consistent issue bothering intercultural educators and institutional administrators in the institutions (Trice, 2004; Williams & Johnson, 2011; Glass, Gomez, & Urzua, 2014).

The justifications for this study are twofold. The intercultural development models privilege intercultural experiences of the students studying abroad (Taylor, 1994, 1998; Park, 2002; Yeboah & Young, 2012). The facilitative and hindering factors identified include student's previous intercultural experience, host language proficiency, communication skills, academic socialization at host campus, etc. The current study embraces American graduate students' intercultural experiences at home campus, who have not had any study abroad experience. In addition, when looking at intercultural interaction between international and domestic students, the host institutions situate sojourners in ethnocentric discourses (Dervin & Layne, 2013). The host institutions signify international and American student relation nothing beyond "intercultural" or "sojourner-domestic". Given this scenario, it is necessary to know how

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international and American students enact intercultural practices on a U.S. campus and how they perceive their identity in intercultural practices with each other on campus.

The previous empirical research on intercultural experiences privileges those who study abroad. From international students' perspective, the researchers have flagged the challenges inducing intercultural interaction issues between international and domestic students, including international students' language proficiency; communication skills; different cultural backgrounds; in-group favoritism; no common interest; and time limitation; cultural distance; national identity and unequal power relation. These issues have been the focus of these extensive studies (Glass, 2012; Glass, Buss, & Braskamp, 2013; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Glass, Gomez, & Urzua, 2014). Also, the different academic demands between international and American students, the different pressure from society and family, financial stress, and the anxiety about future careers all challenge the quantity and the quality of the intercultural interactions between international and American students (Terzian & Osborne, 2011; Gareis, 2012). For the meaningful intercultural interaction, culture differences are not enough in explaining those intercultural interaction issues between international and domestic students at host institutions. It is not just about a lack of knowledge about other cultures. Researchers need to look at other aspects such as the issues in intersection of identities and the conceptualization of "intercultural".

The scholars point out that the perceived similarity and common in-group identity with their international peers, contribute to American student's intercultural relation formation and sustainability (Imamura, Zhang, & Harwood, 2011; Imamura & Zhang, 2014). Specifically, in relational identities such as colleagues, co-workers, mentor and mentee, or friends, they recognize their interactions as interpersonal even though their relation remains intercultural (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). In other words, students in intercultural practices are "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context (Gee, 2000, p.99). International students involve the continuous negotiations of multiple identities in their intercultural practices on the U.S. campus (Zhu, 2017). American students in intercultural practices might go through the continuous identity negotiation as well. In addition, taking American culture as a reference to claim the absence of a common cultural group identity between American students and international students falls into pit of ethnocentrism defining the group identity with 'big culture'. This unspoken favorite of one-way adaption approach in intercultural relation might be cutting off the chances to see how American students themselves would negotiate their identity in intercultural practice with their international peers at campus.

With Q methodology, the current study finds that, among international and American graduate students, interaction counted as "interpersonal" or "intercultural" depends on whom the students count as "cultural other" in that certain situation. They perceive their relations with this unstable othering that greatly impacts on their identities constructed in intercultural practice on campus. The big cultural view of intercultural interactions and relations among international and American student veils the nuances of student's identity negotiation on a site of students' unstable othering within institutional discourse of stabilized othering. Students have their own intercultural norms formed in intercultural practice to regulate their further intercultural interactions. The practical validation of the current study is identifying the nature and characteristics of intercultural practices among graduate students on campus. Correspondingly, U.S. colleges and universities might promote intercultural competency developments among students more efficiently by developing more effective intercultural education programs and events.

## Theoretical framework

Gee (2000) characterizes one's identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person, in a given context'" (p.99). There are four ways to examine one's identity: nature-identity, institution-identity, discourse-identity and affinity-identity (Gee, 2000). In simple words, a student's identities in intercultural practice are multiple, changing from time to time. According to Gee (2000), one's nature-identity is the unity of these four identities. One's natural identity is by one's physical characteristics, such as gender and race. In this study, an institution authorizes a student's institution-identity as a research or teaching assistant, and as an international or a domestic. One's discourse-identity is identified by/within discourse/dialogue of/with others, such as intercultural or interpersonal, hard-worker. One's affinity-identity is recognized in practicing membership in an affinity group, such as friendship, mentor-mentee, or team member.

## Methodology

"Q methodology is a combination of conceptual framework, technique of data collection, and method of analysis that collectively provides the basis for the scientific study of subjectivity" (Brown & Good, 2010, p.1149). The current study examined a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. The boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not evident. Intercultural interaction on a multicultural campus is a phenomenon, and it is a real-life context for an institution interested in internationalizing home campus (Root, 2014). In the current study, "My" intercultural experience is a matter of fact and a matter of subjectivity. Q methodology rooted in discourse theory of subjective communicability makes this subjective perceptions or consciousness observable (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In a finished Q-sort, the application of "my" personal agree and disagree ensures that the items are all related to "my" current viewpoint. Q methodology emphasizes this self-reference which is absent in R methodology (Baas & Brown, 1973; Brown, 1993; Watts & Stenner, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The current study focuses on the graduate students' intercultural experiences in a specific institution. The researcher conceptualizes and encapsulates their individual experiences within this campus case by case (Q-sorts) from their current viewpoint of intercultural practices on campus. Q methodology is equipped to analyze those single cases intensively and to assay the subjectivity of these single cases (Baas & Brown, 1973; Watts, 2011; Watts &

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