



12-2022

## The Acculturation Process of International Students in CACREP Counseling Programs: A Grounded Theory Approach

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THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CACREP  
COUNSELING PROGRAMS: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

Hanny T. Wuysang, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2022

International students bring diverse, multicultural perspectives to the U.S. postsecondary education system through their participation in higher education. However, in their adjustment to U.S. higher education, international students in counseling programs face barriers and challenges such as language differences, lack of support, microaggressions and discrimination, culture shock, and different perspectives on mental health treatment as compared to their home cultures. These factors can interfere with their daily personal and academic lives, yet there is often minimal support from their academic programs and host institutions. The growing number of international students in counseling programs increases the importance of understanding their acculturation process in U.S. higher education institutions. This study aims to generate a theory of international counseling students' acculturation process using a grounded theory approach that analyzed data collected from 20 (twenty) study participants. Five major themes emerged, including: (1) *Life Before the U.S.*, (2) *Motivation for Studying in the U.S.*, (3) *Burst Out of the Bubble*, (4) *Bridging*, and (5) *Bridged Cultural Identity*. Bridging, which constitutes the focus of the model, is highlighted as a process of transition that encompasses changes, crisis: identity reflections, challenges, cultural differences, context: racial issues in the U.S., and coping mechanisms. The study's implications for counselor training programs, counselors, and other international students are discussed.

THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CACREP  
COUNSELING PROGRAMS: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

by

Hanny T. Wuysang

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology  
Western Michigan University  
December 2022

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To God be the glory! I made it! The last few years have been a mix of seasons of storms and also rainbows. This dissertation would not be done without God's love, providence, strength, and grace. ABBA, Father, you promised me at the beginning of this journey that You started this good work and You would bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6). I praise You for who You are. You are my Rock, my Salvation, my Strength, and my everything! Thank you for the passion you instill in my heart to do this important work. This doctoral and dissertation journey has brought me closer to You and strengthened my faith.

To my greatest supporters, my parents, Hans Wuysang and Suprapti Sekarmadidjaja, thank you for your encouragement, prayers, advice, patience, and love. You both are my role model in pursuing God's calling. To my one and only sister, Sophia H. Wuysang Hartopo, I cherished the last 4 years of our schooling journey. Your determination and persistence in pursuing your dream as a medical doctor inspired me to pursue my dream. You are the best!

Big thank you to all my Kalamazoo family and friends: the Link family (Rob, Kristy, Zeke, Reesah, and Elyse) and The River church folks! Thank you for the relentless reminders that God is good throughout this process. Specially, Liz, thank you for sticking with me in the last couple of weeks during the final writeups. To CECP folks, thank you for the cheers and for being my fellow cohort-mates when I did not have an actual cohort. ☺ To my Wheaton family, thank you for your continuous support and support. To my good friends back in Indonesia: Erike, Cynthia, and all of the others, thank you for your prayers, cheers, and *tenaga dalam* (superpower) you sent across the ocean. Greatest shout out to Marti, my editor! You're amazing. Truly, I appreciate you!

### Acknowledgements - Continued

To my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Jennifer Foster, thank you for always believing in me and for being the greatest cheerleader in this journey. I appreciate the conversations and laughter we have had. Your guidance, mentorship, praise, and feedback meant a lot in my journey to becoming a better counselor educator. To Dr. Sojeong Nam and Dr. June Gothberg, thank you very much for your guidance and encouragement as I grow as a researcher and an educator. To Drs. Stephen Craig, Glinda Rawls, and the late Dr. Chris Coryn, thank you for the mentoring and support you provided.

Lastly, to all of my participants. Thank you for your time and willingness to share your stories. Your voices are valuable and have inspired me. I learned a lot from you. Through your contributions, this study was made possible.

This dissertation is for my fellow international counseling students, educators, and practitioners. Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV) “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us. Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, a world without end.” Amen!

Hanny T. Wuysang

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

As history shows, journeying to higher education in a different country has become common (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2021; “International Students,” 2020; Wehrly, 1986). The number of international students (IS) at higher education institutions in Western countries has steadily increased since the 1940s (IIE, 2021; UNESCO 2015). By definition, an international student is someone who was born and grew up in one country, leaves their home country, is enrolled at a higher education institution in a different country, and holds a student visa (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2014; "International Students," 2020; OECD, 2016). In addition, IS are considered sojourners: individuals who relocate to a new country with a specific purpose, such as time-limited education, intending to return to their countries of origin after that period is over (Berry 1997; Bochner, 2006; Safdar & Berno, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2015). This definition does not include third culture persons: students whose parents are born in one country but spend a significant part of their developmental years outside the parents’ culture (Pollock et al., 2017).

The United States is the top host of IS globally (IIE, 2018; OECD, 2016; Safdar & Berno, 2016). In the academic year of 2019/20, the 1,075,496 IS comprised about 5.5 % of the total U.S. higher education student population (IIE, 2020). Non-Western countries have contributed to the most significant IS number in the U.S. (IIE, 2021; OECD, 2016). However, the American Council on Education (ACE; Glass et al., 2021) reported a stagnant IS enrollment at U.S. academic institutions since 2014/15 and a slow decline since 2016/17. Fall 2020 saw a significant decrease in IS number for the first time in many years (Schwartz, 2020). The latest data showed that in the academic year of 2020/21, there were 914,095 (4.6%), compared to 15%

in the academic year before (IIE, 2021). While there were several reasons, restrictions for both IS and work visa holders proposed by the Trump presidential administration meant some people had to return to their home countries. This new restriction created uncertainties, confusion, and uneven policy responses among U.S. higher education leaders (Glass et al., 2021). These restrictions have changed the climate and further discouraged IS from coming to the U.S. (Schwartz, 2020; ACE, 2020; Quinton, 2018; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Additionally, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has greatly limited international travel and entrance from and into some countries.

More specific to counseling-related programs, Goodrich et al. (2011) surveyed 53 doctoral-level programs accredited under the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), in which 16 (30%) program administrators responded. Goodrich et al. (2011) found 12 (4.4%) IS in 16 programs. According to the CACREP statistical report (2017), 46,489 students were enrolled in accredited master's and doctoral programs combined; 1.4% ( $n = 650,846$ ) were IS (CACREP, 2017).

Even though the number of IS is relatively small, their contributions to their institutions are extensive. IS make a significant financial impact on the U.S. economy (IIE, 2018; 2019) and bring an essential component of diversity and multicultural competence into the education system through their active participation in the learning environment (Hegarty, 2014; McDowell et al., 2012). By sharing knowledge about their home cultures and their experiences navigating multiple cultures and languages, IS promote a global competence level that often exceeds that of many U.S. students and faculty (McDowell et al., 2012). Therefore, academic institutions that support these students help maximize their unique contributions.

IS who leave their country to study in the U.S. experience acculturation uniquely compared to their domestic peers. Acculturation implies a complex interaction and balancing of two or more cultures, typically IS' home culture and host culture (Berry, 2005). This complex interaction may produce acculturative stress, depending on how significant the difference is between home and host cultures (Berry, 2005). Acculturative stress is a response to unlearning aspects of the home culture that are no longer relevant in the new environment and learning new behaviors that will fit the new environment. To cope with this acculturative stress, non-Western IS develop acculturative strategies to improve their experience of the new culture. The strategy they choose will depend on the degree to which IS want to retain their cultural background and attain the host culture (Berry & Sam, 2016a). The host culture's receptivity towards the incoming IS also influences which acculturative strategy they would choose (Schwartz et al., 2010). Overall, this process is complicated because their stay in the host country is temporary, and they may eventually leave the host country (Berry, 2019).

During the acculturation process, IS face challenges in their academic and daily lives. Many researchers have highlighted these barriers that include language, culture shock, difficulty building new support systems, and feeling unsafe because of racial discrimination (Behl et al., 2017; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hegarty, 2014; Jang et al., 2014; McDowell et al., 2012; Ng, 2012; Pollock et al., 2017; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Sato & Hodge, 2015; Sherri et al., 2010). In addition to these barriers, IS experience grief for the loss of their familiar environment and culture which allowed them to freely express their ethnic identity (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Hayes & Lin, 1994). The loss could lead to difficulties in maintaining a positive sense of self and psychological well-being and increase feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Hsieh, 2006; Meza & Gazzoli, 2013; Pollock et al., 2017; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

Language barriers are found to be the most challenging obstacle to IS' transition process, interfering in and outside the classroom (Mori, 2011; Lee, 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Sato & Hodge, 2015; Sherri et al., 2010; Reid & Dixon, 2012). Studying in a different language, IS feel that they cannot grasp the materials and concepts as readily as their domestic classmates. Thus, they tend to feel lost in class (Jang et al., 2014) and need extra time to complete their assignments (Lee, 2013; Moon et al., 2020; Mori, 2011).

Additionally, with IS' non-American accents, they may be perceived to be less intelligent and less educated (Behl et al., 2017; Lee, 2013). They frequently experience microaggressions in the form of invalidations of their needs, verbal insults, and discrimination related to their race and culture (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2015; Sue et al., 2019). Furthermore, the IS population also tends to be lumped into one category, and their diversity of countries of origin and unique within-group cultures have been overlooked (Meza & Gazzoli, 2013; Wearing et al., 2015).

On top of the challenges that IS experience, the recent immigration restrictions that the Trump administration enforced have led to an escalation in prejudice and discrimination. The discrimination has contributed to IS' anxiety and safety concerns (Johnson, 2018; Laws, 2020; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Quinton, 2018). Discriminatory remarks perpetuate experiences of being other (Schwartz et al., 2010), outsiders (Kim-Appel et al., 2019), foreigners (Meza & Gazzoli, 2013;), and unwelcomed (ACE, 2020; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Quinton, 2018; Schwartz, 2020;).

Unfortunately, IS feel the onus of the transition is on them (Woo et al., 2015). Many IS think they have to learn to assimilate to the U.S. culture by staying informed with the literature, reading, and self-reflection (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Mori, 2011; Woo et al., 2015). Furthermore, many IS feel the pressure to meet American standards in academia and daily life, and their

unique cultural backgrounds are ignored (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kim, 2020). This situation puts an additional burden on IS who are still in the acculturation process.

Specifically, IS pursuing careers in counseling may be challenged when contextualizing the different approaches to mental health issues in the U.S. compared with those in their home countries (McDowell et al., 2012). Even though counseling programs have emphasized multicultural competencies, their approach still mainly comes from Western, white, male, and English-speaking frameworks (Wah, 2014). Many IS feel there is a lack of contextualization of the counseling approach to their own culture (McDowell et al., 2012; Ng, 2006a) and cultural sensitivity to their unique perspective (Jang et al. 2014; Reid & Dixon, 2012). Moreover, much multicultural competencies literature focuses only on American racial/ethnic minorities and lacks integration on IS unique characteristics and temporary status (Mori 2011; Ng, 2012; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012; Reid & Dixon, 2012). This traditional perspective does not fully capture the perceptions and behaviors of IS and their unique discrimination/racism experiences (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Koo et al., 2021).

The challenges and discrimination experiences influence how IS find balance in maintaining their heritage culture and engaging and participating in the host culture. Finding the balance is complicated, especially with a lack of support from the host society (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Meaningful social support from the host society (e.g., domestic peers, faculty members/mentors, and supervisors) was found to be associated with lower acculturative stress and was found to be helpful in personal and professional growth (Behl et al., 2017; Hegarty, 2014; Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kuo et al., 2018; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). A welcoming and hospitable host culture has been found to boost IS' self-confidence to thrive in the new culture (Le et al., 2016). The openness of faculty members,



supervisors, and mentors to have a multicultural discussion, in such validating IS' multicultural experience, has been shown to contribute to a positive acculturation process (Akkurt et al., 2018; Nilsson & Anderson, 2004). Moreover, Behl et al. (2017) highlighted that when faculty members show an interest in getting to know the IS inside and outside the classroom, it permits them to be themselves and feel validated and supported.

In conclusion, IS' challenges in counseling programs encompass multiple domains, including academic, personal, and relational. While the transition process is complex, IS need to find ways to help them cope as students and individuals outside of the academic setting. IS benefit from a supportive environment to succeed in their academic life and personal life (Behl et al., 2017; Hegarty, 2014; Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kuo et al., 2018; Le et al., 2016; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

Counseling is a unique profession. Counseling programs are expected to emphasize multicultural competencies in their training (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2016). CACREP standards (2016) require CACREP accredited programs to include a multicultural course in their curriculum to provide adequate multicultural training. Even though counseling programs are required to accentuate multicultural competencies in their training, they might not have been successful in embracing comprehensive multicultural issues. While there is a growing focus on the work of social justice and advocacy, counseling theories and approaches, in general, these approaches were developed in a predominantly white and Western framework (Singh et al., 2020; Wah, 2014). In addition, much of the multicultural literature has focused on addressing American racial/ethnic minorities who have a permanent status compared to IS (Mori 2011; Ng, 2012; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012; Reid & Dixon, 2012). There is a need to focus on IS because

of their unique status, significant contributions to U.S. educational institutions and counseling profession, and special needs that are different from other racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, many studies have lumped IS into one category and have dismissed within-group diversity of IS (Meza & Gazzoli, 2013; Wearing et al., 2015). It is crucial to understand the diversity among IS as they represent different countries worldwide. Using this lens will avoid stereotyping and provide the adequate support they need to adjust to the new culture.

Additionally, previous research has focused on the experiences and challenges of IS. Yet, IS' process of reaching a balance between their culture of heritage and the host culture is still unknown. Moreover, most literature around IS' experiences emphasizes a deficit narrative of the challenges they face and overlooks their strengths and positive contributions, therefore lacking a holistic conceptualization of their unique experiences in academia and daily life. While it is true that IS struggle living in the new country, they also demonstrate strengths in overcoming challenges and thriving in the new environment.

This current study is built upon the pilot study conducted to provide an initial exploration of the acculturation process of 10 international counseling students (Wuysang et al., 2021). The pilot study was limited to the experiences of students who primarily resided in the Midwest. Thus, the current study seeks to understand the acculturation process more deeply and across a larger, geographically diverse sample.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the acculturation process of international students' (IS) experiences in U.S. counseling programs. Due to IS unique status, they face challenges that are different from domestic students, which may impede their

professional and personal development. This study aims to provide a holistic perspective of IS' acculturation experience while also acknowledging IS diversity that is represented in the sample. This study will highlight the challenges that international counseling students experience and identify IS resources and strengths.

### **Research Questions**

To increase a holistic understanding of the acculturation process, a grounded design was utilized. The following questions guided this study:

1. What is the process of acculturation that international counseling students experience?
2. How do international students overcome their challenges in academic settings and daily lives?
3. What helps or hinders the acculturation process?

### **Significance of Study**

Even though there was a decline in the number of IS in the U.S. (Glass et al., 2021; IIE, 2021), the presence of IS has connected and brought together diverse cultural groups and also built bridges between the U.S. and other nations (Glass et al., 2021). Their contributions are significant. Thus, academic programs need to support their IS for retention. Besides that, a transition is always challenging, especially coming to an unfamiliar culture. IS are separated from their support system in their home culture. Since IS' sole purpose is to study, educational institutions become their primary resource (Le et al., 2016). They would need to build new social support to grow as professionals (Kuo et al., 2018). Professors, mentors, supervisors, and peers in counseling programs may benefit from a deeper understanding of the acculturation that IS experience in order to empower and support IS to succeed in their academic endeavors and daily life (Mori, 2011; Sato & Hodge, 2009).

## Definition of Terms

Significant terms used throughout this dissertation are defined below.

**Acculturation:** The complex process of maintaining a balance between two cultures – the heritage culture and the host culture (Berry, 1997; Berry 2005)

**International Student:** Individual who was born and grew up in one country, leaves their home country, is enrolled at a higher education institution in a different country, holds a student visa, and has an intention to return to their country after the study in their program is over (OECD, 2016; Farrugia & Bhandari, 2014; "International Students," 2020; Safdar & Berno, 2016; UNESCO, 2015).

**Acculturative Stress:** Stress reaction associated with the process of unlearning aspects of the home culture and relearning aspects of a culture other than their own, and perceived challenges that exceed their ability to cope (Berry 2005; Van De Vijver et al., 2016).

**Acculturation Strategy - Assimilation:** Adopting the host culture and rejecting the home culture (Berry, 1997)

**Acculturation Strategy - Separation:** rejecting the host culture and retaining the home culture (Berry, 1997)

**Acculturation Strategy - Integration or bicultural:** adopting the host culture and retaining the home culture

**Acculturation strategy - Marginalization:** rejecting both the home and host cultures (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2010)

**Culture shock:** “feelings of disorientation, anxiety, and confusion that unfamiliar cultural environments arouse” (Bochner, 2006, p. 189)

**Home culture or culture of heritage:** Country/culture of origin (Quintanilha et al., 2016)

**Host culture:** Country/culture of migration (Quintanilha et al., 2016)

**Microaggression:** microaggressions are the everyday slights, put-downs, invalidations, and insults directed to a specific group of people, usually people of minorities (Sue et al., 2019).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the acculturation process of international students (IS) who are studying in U.S. counseling programs. The study is built upon the initial exploration of 10 master's level international counseling students' acculturation processes (Wuysang et al., 2021). Participants in the pilot included six males and four females, all but one of whom resided and went to a counseling program in the Midwest. The students were from 10 countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Participants were between 24 and 40 years old, and the range of length of stay in the U.S. was between 1.5 and 7 years at the time of the interview.

The qualitative analysis resulted in four major themes: life before the U.S., motivation for studying in the U.S., bridging period, and bridged cultural identity (Wuysang et al., 2021). Life before the move and motivation to study in the U.S. gave information on the extent of the differences in their lives before and while living in the U.S., which influenced their transition and the challenges they experienced. The bridging period was highlighted as the transition process that IS experienced. This bridging encompassed challenges, cultural changes and differences, racial issues, finding new realities, and support. Bridged cultural identity resulted from navigating the transition and the subsequent development of *dual citizenship*. The current study expanded upon this pilot study.

A comprehensive literature review was conducted before conducting the pilot and this subsequent study. This chapter begins with an overview of acculturation followed by an exploration of the peer-reviewed literature on the general IS experience in the U.S. educational system, and finally examines the experiences of IS in counseling programs. While many

publications have focused on IS experiences and needs, there is still a scarcity of empirical literature that explains the process of IS counseling students as they transition to U.S. graduate programs. Thus, this study is essential to gain an understanding of these experiences and how they influence the acculturation process.

### **Acculturation**

Some psychologists working in the acculturation psychology field are interested in understanding the question: “How do people born and raised in one society manage to live in another society that is culturally different from the one they are used to?” (Berry & Sam, 2016a, p.4). IS who leave their country to study in the U.S. experience unique challenges in their adjustment to graduate studies that differ from domestic students. Acculturation was initially coined by anthropologists Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits in 1936. They defined acculturation as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p.149). Acculturation also refers to the dual process of cultural and psychological changes that occur due to contact with people, groups, or social influences of a different culture (Gibson, 2001; Berry, 2005). For this study, the definition of acculturation uses the seminal definition by John Berry as the complex process of maintaining a balance between two cultures – the heritage culture and the host culture (Berry, 1997; 2005).

Acculturation is a complex experience. Berry & Sam (2016b) identified three building blocks in the acculturation process. First is culture contact. For acculturation to happen, contact needs to happen between at least two cultural groups or members. The second is mutual influence, which is the reciprocal influence of the immigrant on the host culture. In theory, the

result should be equal; however, due to power differences, one group, typically the dominant or host culture, may exert more influence than the other.

Additionally, Berry & Sabatier (2011) highlighted cultural maintenance as part of the process. Cultural maintenance is how important individuals perceive their cultural identity and origin characteristics. The last building block is the dynamic process of change, which is elaborated on in the section below.

Berry and Sam (2016b) highlighted that acculturation is a phenomenon of change involving contact between cultural groups and their members. The contact will not only lead to cultural change (language, values) but also impacts the physical (location), political (immigration policies), social (ethnic discrimination), and behavioral (way of speaking, dressing, or eating) aspects of the individuals. Berry and Sam also argued that there could be deeper changes, such as changes in cultural identity and personality. Moreover, in this process, individuals will develop expectations of how they want to be involved in their home and host cultures.

Berry (1997) also stated a culture-behavioral relationship, which means that individuals generally will change their behavior to correspond with the cultural expectations in the host country. In other words, culture could be a powerful shaper of individuals' behavior. Thus, Berry (1997) asked this critical question in the context of acculturation: Do individuals continue to act in a new setting as they did in a previous one or change to fit into the new environment more appropriately? Furthermore, is there a complex behavioral change and maintenance pattern in how people live in the new society?

Changes occur when IS move to a different country. To survive in the new culture, individuals will identify strategies to go about their acculturation which depend on the characteristics of the two cultures in contact, the nature of the contact, and the changes that



happen (Berry & Sam, 2016b). Berry & Sabatier (2011) added that the extent to which individuals want to retain their home culture and intake the host culture is crucial in this process. These factors, in turn, affect the degree to which they reach satisfaction in their adaptation (Berry, 2005). These strategies and factors that influence acculturation will be discussed below. In addition, acculturative stress, coping strategies, and sojourners' adaptation experiences will also be addressed to give a holistic context to the acculturation process of IS.

### **Acculturative Stress**

When immigrants are in contact with both their home culture and a host culture that differs from their own, a stress phenomenon may arise. The difference between home and host cultures is called cultural distance. Cultural distance becomes an indicator of the individual's acculturation success. Individuals may experience acculturative stress, which is the stress reaction to the unlearning and relearning experiences of living in a country other than their own (Berry, 2005). Acculturative stress is also a result of challenges perceived as their ability to cope effectively (Van De Vijver et al., 2016).

Acculturative stress is a process that encompasses three sub-processes: cultural shedding, cultural learning, and cultural conflict (Berry, 2005). Cultural shedding describes the process of unlearning aspects of an individual's cultural heritage that are not relevant in the host culture (Berry, 1997). Cultural shedding is not a stand-alone process (Berry, 2005). There is a loss of behaviors that are replaced with behaviors that are believed to fit better in the host society. The bigger the differences between the cultures, the greater the need for cultural shedding and cultural learning (Berry, 1997). Berry suggested that with greater differences, the probability of negative intergroup attitudes between the two cultures might induce cultural conflict. Cultural conflict could occur within individuals, depending on how much unlearning and relearning has

happened. It is also possible that the greater the need to adapt, the less favorable the acculturation experience is (Berry, 2005).

Therefore, it is essential to be mindful of the multilayered contexts of the host society. Typically, cultural conflict is resolved by assimilating to the norms of the host culture (Ferguson & Birman, 2016). However, Berry (2019) hypothesized that individuals would experience less acculturative stress when they adopt the integration strategy, with the caveat that the host society is receptive to the incoming culture. Individuals who adopt the integration strategies would also experience fewer difficulties related to their adjustment (Dow, 2011). Berry (2019) added that individuals who adopt the marginalization strategy would experience more stress. Individuals who choose assimilation and separation strategies may fall in the middle of the stress continuum.

Furthermore, Schwartz et al. (2010) stated that acculturative stress is multidimensional depending on the context of the culture of heritage the individual brings and the host society's receptivity. For example, when the host society members are less receptive toward incoming individuals, acculturative stress is more significant (Schwartz et al., 2010). Individuals' perceptions of the receptivity of the host society may also influence the level of acculturative stress. When individuals cannot tolerate acculturative stress, they may unintentionally adopt separation (much cultural shedding, much cultural learning) or acculturative marginalization strategies (much cultural shedding without cultural learning; Berry, 1997). The result of acculturative stress could be experiences of anxiety, alienation, and depression (Dow, 2011). Individuals may become nostalgic, homesick, and depressed due to the loss of familiar culture, society, and way of living (Van De Vijver et al., 2016).

Since IS are also considered immigrants, they go through similar experiences. IS go through cultural shedding since some aspects of their cultural heritage are unsuitable in the host

country. They also experience much learning in the new country, such as communication style, customs, relationship building, pedagogy approach, and other aspects considered normal in the host country (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Meza & Gazzoli, 2013; Mori, 2011). The pressure to learn sets IS apart from other immigrants; thus, they are prone to experience more acculturative stress.

### **Acculturative Strategies**

The nature of the interaction between the original culture (culture of heritage) and the host culture influences the acculturation process (Berry, 2005). To completely understand the process of acculturation, one needs to understand the societal context and characteristics of both the host culture and the culture of origin that accompany the individual in the process of transition into the host culture process. The combination of political, demographic, and economic conditions in both cultures can be a basis for understanding the nature of the struggle that individuals experience in their acculturation (Berry, 2005). In addition, it is natural for an individual to compare their heritage culture and the host culture.

Acculturative strategies are also referred to as the “how of acculturation” (Berry & Sam, 2016b, p. 21). Individuals will develop acculturative strategies to fit better in the new culture. According to Berry and Sam (2016b), the strategies consist of two components: attitudes, the individual’s preference for acculturating, and behavior, the observed actions or activities that the individual develops. There can be a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior resulting from social constraints on behaviors (i.e., societal norms, opportunities) and power differences between the two groups in contact.

There are four acculturation strategies from the perspectives of IS: assimilation (adopts the host culture and discards the home culture), separation (rejects the host culture and retains the home culture), integration (embraces the host culture and retains the home culture), and

marginalization (rejects both the home and host cultures; Berry, 1997; 2005; Schwartz et al., 2010). Studies have found that separation and marginalization strategies have been associated with more acculturative stress and limit individuals' ability to succeed in the host culture (Berry, 2005; Sullivan-Kashubeck et al., 2015). On the contrary, IS who adopt an integration strategy have less psychological stress and find more support from the host, home, and other IS (Berry & Sabatier, 2011; Sullivan-Kashubeck et al., 2015; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Finding these supports is associated with successfully balancing home and host culture.

The assimilation strategy is utilized when individuals do not wish to retain their cultural identity and seek deep interaction with the host culture (Berry, 2019; Berry & Sam, 2016b). Individuals who choose this strategy may shed their heritage culture and allow themselves to be absorbed into the dominant or host culture. Next, the separation strategy involves individuals holding onto their heritage culture and avoiding interaction with the host culture. Moreover, integration is achieved when individuals are interested in maintaining the heritage culture while being open to exchange with the host culture. In this sense, individuals will seek to integrate the host culture into their heritage culture. On the other extreme, when individuals lose entirely their ability to maintain their heritage culture and have little interest in relationships with the host culture, they adopt the marginalization strategy.

Which strategy to use will depend on various factors, including cultural background and how one processes or perceives the host and home cultures (Berry, 2005; Berry & Sam, 2016a). Each acculturation strategy has various consequences. Besides that, the availability of these acculturative strategies is based on the assumption that individuals have the freedom to choose how they want to acculturate to the new culture (Berry, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2010). For the ideal integration to happen, the dominant society of the host culture should be open and inclusive

of cultural diversity (Berry, 2005; 1997). Berry (1997) acknowledged that the integration strategy could only be pursued with pre-conditions in the host culture. These pre-conditions include accepting the value of a society of diversity, low levels of prejudice, positive mutual attitudes among cultural groups, and a sense of identification with or attachment to the larger society by all groups. In other words, the host society has to be “explicitly multicultural” (Berry, 1997, p. 11) or accept all groups’ rights to live with cultural sensitivity to different people. However, this is not always the case.

Since acculturation is multidimensional, the perspective of host culture members needs to be considered. The host society's receptivity towards immigrants may influence the freedom of individuals to choose the best strategy for acculturation (Berry, 1997; 2005; Berry & Sam, 2016b; Schwartz et al., 2010). There are four dimensions parallel with the four acculturation strategies mentioned above. Segregation is the state where the host society forces individuals who immigrate to hold on to their own culture and rejects it firmly; in other words, the host culture rejects the incoming diverse culture. The *melting pot* describes the pressure that the immigrants experience to ‘melt’ into the host culture. When forced, it becomes a *pressure cooker*, forcing immigrants to assimilate.

Similarly, exclusion is a term used when the host society forces immigrants to reject both the host culture and the culture of heritage, parallel with marginalization. Multiculturalism is when a larger society provides the condition for immigrants to accept both the host culture and the culture of origin (Berry, 1997; 2005). Berry & Sam (2016b) added that these four categories above could be referred to as acculturation strategies, when the host culture is willing to acculturate themselves, or acculturation expectations when the host culture thinks the incoming culture *should* acculturate.

For IS, finding the acculturative strategy that fits each individual is complicated by their temporary status (Berry, 2019; Safdar & Berno, 2016). IS are aware that they will eventually leave the host country after completing their studies. Thus, IS may need to decide how much they want to take in a new culture (Berry, 2019).

Schwartz & Zamboanga (2008) suggest that a possible way to resolve acculturative stress is to become bicultural or balanced. This involves endorsing both the culture of heritage and the host culture. Bicultural or balanced is the desired process of acculturation because by engaging in two cultures, IS may have dual competencies and systems for social support during the challenging process of transition (Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

In addition, Berry (2019) proposed that individuals who are “doubly engaged” (p. 25) in both their home and host cultures would be successful in their lives, have a sense of well-being, and have positive intercultural relationships. To be “doubly engaged” in both cultures, individuals need to feel secure in their home culture memberships” and their ethnic identity; it will provide a psychological basis for a more positive intercultural relationship. Furthermore, IS who can build meaningful connections with their home and host cultures may have a better chance of overcoming the acculturation stress.

### **Factors Influencing Acculturation**

To better understand the acculturation experience, understanding the factors influencing acculturation is essential. Ward and Geeraet (2016) mentioned that more than just individual or internal factors influence an IS's acculturation process. These individual factors operate within the ecological context. The subsections below will discuss the influences of motivation for migration, ethnic identity, and discrimination experiences as factors in acculturation.

### *Motivation for Migration*

The reasons or motivations for moving to the host culture can be a factor in understanding the acculturation process (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). The factors of voluntariness, mobility, and permanence of the move will nuance of an acculturation process for migrants (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). There are four categories of migrants: voluntary immigrants and ethnocultural groups, refugees or forced migrants (including asylum seekers), indigenous people, and sojourners (Sam & Berry, 2006). Voluntary immigrants leave their home countries by choice for opportunities such as employment, economic opportunities, marriage, or joining family members who have immigrated previously. Refugees or displaced people are individuals who must involuntarily leave their home country due to fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group. They seek to protect their lives by moving to a new country. Indigenous people have unique acculturation experiences due to colonization over centuries, which was involuntary (Kvernmo, 2006). Their acculturation or forced assimilation led to the loss or extensive change of traditional practices, norms, and beliefs, relocation, and loss of lands. Acculturative stress and psychosocial disaster are concepts often associated with this process. The acculturation for indigenous people is unique because the new culture was brought to them instead of them entering the new culture. Lastly, sojourners are individuals who relocate to a new country with a specific purpose (Bochner, 2006). This purpose could include a time-limited education to return to their countries of origin (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010). IS frequently fall under this sojourner category. The length of stay, the emotional involvement with the host culture, the cultural gap between the host culture and the culture of heritage, and the cultural attitudes of the host society towards the sojourners all influence their acculturation process.

### *Ethnic Identity*

Both the ethnic identity of the migrants and that of the host influence acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2010). Ethnic identity refers to collective identity based on how individuals identify their shared heritage with a particular racial group, make meaning, and subscribe to the group's values (Helms, 1993; Liebkind et al., 2016; Robinson-Wood, 2017). This identification is not only the social position of the individual's membership in a particular group. It also includes a sense of belonging to the group, the meaning of being in a group, attitudes about group membership, ethnic involvement in social participation, cultural practices, and perspectives. In most cases, international migration has prompted individuals to evaluate their membership in a particular group. Typically, they compare their membership to their culture of heritage (in-group) and to the host culture (out-group). This process depends on the characteristics of immigrant groups and the places where they resettled. A strong in-group identification provides the individual with a sense of security that helps the individual evaluate other groups more positively (Liebkind et al., 2016).

A host society's identity includes the cultural practices of language use, cultural traditions, media preferences, social affiliations, and the cultural values or beliefs of the system (Schwartz et al., 2010). These cultural practices will inform how a new person in the host culture is valued and establishes cultural identification or attachments to the host group (Schwartz et al., 2010). In the context of this study, the host culture is the American culture of the United States. In other words, within the United States, host culture acquisition may refer to an overall tendency to (a) speak English, eat American foods, associate with Americanized friends and romantic partners, and read American media such as newspapers, magazines, and websites; (b) attend to one's own needs (individualistic orientation) and strive to achieve and to compete with



others; and (c) feel an attachment to and solidarity with the United States (Schildkraut, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2010).

It is fundamental to understand how IS perceive the differences between the home culture and the characteristics of the host culture (Ward & Geeraet, 2016). The greater the dissimilarities, the greater the acculturative stress that IS might experience. Acculturative stress is explained in a later section.

### ***Discrimination Experience***

At a societal level, the host culture's receptivity towards the incoming groups influences the adaptive outcomes of IS (Schwartz et al., 2010; Ward & Geeraet, 2016). Prejudice and discrimination also become significant sources of stress in the lives of migrants (Ward & Geeraet, 2016). Schwartz et al. (2010) hypothesized that migrants from ethnic, religious, or national groups perceived as unfavorable by the host society might experience more discrimination. For example, immigrants' status in the home country, or so-called *departure status*, is frequently devalued when entering a new country because of different standards, ignorance, prejudice, and stereotype, leading to loss of status and/or stress (Berry, 1997). When there is segregation, Schwartz hypothesized that discrimination might encourage ethnic minority migrants to choose a separation strategy (Schwartz et al., 2010). The various acculturation strategies will be elaborated in a later section.

Berry and Huo (2017) studied over 3000 immigrants aged 15-44 in Canada. They found that 41.8% of their respondents reported that they experienced discrimination, which negatively impacted the immigrants' well-being, life satisfaction, and mental health. They further found that for immigrants who adopted the integration strategy, 40% of them reported experiencing discrimination, people who assumed the assimilation strategy, 44.2%, and for people who

adopted marginalization, 46% said discrimination. In comparison, people utilizing the separation strategy experienced the highest percentage of discrimination, 54%. Berry & Huo (2017) reported a significant difference between the separation strategy and the other three groups ( $p < .005$  and  $p < .0001$ ). This finding is consistent with Schwartz et al.'s hypothesis that the experience of discrimination discourages a sense of belonging to the host country.

Typically, IS from non-European or Western countries were part of the majority ethnic groups in their country of origin. They must come to terms with their new status in the new country as they become part of the minority group (Schwartz et al., 2010; Ferguson & Birman, 2016), leading to discrimination experiences. This experience will create feelings of being unwanted, inferior, or othered, which results in some choosing the assimilation strategy (Schwartz et al., 2010). This presents a challenge as immigrants are expected to integrate into a society that may never fully accept them. Another factor that influences the discrimination experience is the language barriers that the migrants experience. For example, foreign accents in English may invite discrimination from the host culture.

Like many other migrants, IS may perceive certain things that do not go along with their perception as an act of discrimination or rejection towards them. Ideally, for IS to be successfully integrate into the host culture, they have to perceive help, encouragement, and tangible support from the host individuals. This supports may help counter the discrimination's negative effect or feeling unwanted or othered in the new society (Schwartz et al., 2010).

### **Sojourners' Adaptation Experiences**

Several studies have highlighted sojourners' acculturation experiences in countries other than their own. Ward and Kennedy (1994) studied IS in New Zealand, finding that strong identification with heritage culture supports psychological well-being in a cross-cultural setting.

Specifically, in this study, the IS reported having fewer depressive symptoms when they identified strongly with their heritage culture. The researchers posited that identification with the home culture could be a secure foundation promoting psychological well-being. On the other hand, they also suggested that strong identification with the host culture aids social adaptation. This identification acts as a buffer to psychological distress because they are at ease in relating to the host culture. These findings are consistent with the previous studies that highlighted that adopting an integration strategy or becoming bicultural appeared to be the most effective strategy in acculturation. This strategy balances the two cultures and can provide a strong sense of self and a relational aspect with the host culture to help adjust well to the new culture.

In a later study, Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) studied international workers in Nepal and found an association between a strong heritage identity and a decrement in psychological distress. In other words, individuals who strongly associate with their heritage culture have fewer psychological difficulties or mental health concerns. Moreover, international workers who adopted the integration strategy experience less psychological distress than individuals who adopted other acculturative strategies. Interestingly, the researchers found that individuals who used the assimilation strategy reported less social difficulty, as they were prompted to learn the new way of living and norms in the host culture. Thus, individuals who can imitate the host culture are better adapted.

Stuart and Ward (2011), who studied young Muslim IS in New Zealand, found that the youths in their study developed a sense of being in balance. That means they could find ways to fit into the new culture while not compromising. They learned to discern how much cultural shedding and cultural learning needed to take place. Reaching balance, or integration, is a dynamic process, which comprises negotiating the multiple social worlds and meeting each

culture's expectations with minimal risk. This also includes managing multiple identities, roles, and orientations (Stuart & Ward, 2011).

These three results are consistent with more recent scholarship by Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015), who studied 104 IS at a medium-sized public, urban university in the Midwest. They found that the adjustment experience was less stressful for IS who adopted the integration and assimilation strategies. Additionally, social support from the host culture was associated with a lower level of acculturative stress. IS' meaningful social support differed among the students' acculturative strategies. Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) found that students with assimilation strategies identified their social support from the host culture.

In contrast, IS who adopted a separation strategy, identified people from their home country as their social support. IS who used an integration strategy, identified people in the host culture, other IS, and their home country. At the same time, IS who adopted the marginalized strategy identified with none (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

In conclusion, since assimilation and integration strategies are associated with lower acculturative stress, support from people in the host culture is essential (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). The higher the support from the host culture, the lower the stress level. In addition, Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) highlighted the importance of adopting an integration strategy in aiding the acculturation process. Maintaining a balance between the two cultures, host and home, or being bicultural, is associated with better acculturation and lower acculturative stress (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Ward & Deuba, 1999; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). This means connecting and identifying with the home culture and its society, as well as being open and exploring the positive connection with the host culture, helps the positive acculturation process (Ferguson & Birman, 2016). Again, these findings highlight the importance of the host

society being open to the incoming culture and providing a sense of home and support for the migrants.

### **International Students' Experiences**

As mentioned above, international students (IS) frequently fall under the category of sojourners. As IS leave home and learn a new culture, they encounter unique challenges and difficulties. It is essential to see these challenges and difficulties through the lens of the within-group differences of IS as they represent many different countries around the world.

Research on IS has uncovered seven themes: (1) language barriers, (2) cultural distance or cultural gaps, (3) sense of identity, (4) social support, (5) U.S. education system, (6) visa restrictions, and (7) discrimination experience. Each of these themes as they relate to IS is explored in the following sections.

#### **Language Barriers**

Language is a form of communication. For IS students, language differences might create difficulties, especially those who come to the U.S. from a non-English-speaking country. The struggle to fluently communicate in the host language is a primary inhibitor to becoming socially involved in the host society and can interfere with academic success (Sato & Hodge, 2009). Not surprising, language barriers are the most difficult challenge that IS from non-English-speaking countries experience (Mori, 2011).

To be accepted into the U.S. education institution, IS have to reach a specific score on the Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL). Mori (2011) highlighted that passing the TOEFL or getting a specific score does not accurately represent how IS can succeed in U.S. colleges and universities. IS have overcome more difficulties compared to domestic students in their usage of English. To acquire this foreign language, they have completed a relatively long study and

require solid linguistic ability and extensive knowledge of the adopted culture. Unfortunately, the common assumption in the U.S. is that everybody has to readily understand English (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Mori, 2011). This assumption is not always valid for IS. They may have limitations in understanding lectures, taking notes, completing reading and writing exams, and expressing their opinions or questions in class (Moon et al., 2020; Mori, 2011). For international graduate students, language may become a challenge or barrier to their academic and teaching performance (Lee, 2013; Moon et al., 2020).

Lee (2013) explained that IS might need more time to read and write because of the language barrier. Many are going through translating the materials and their communication in class. IS tend to think in their language first and then translate their thoughts into English; thus, they may need extra time to process. Lee (2013) highlighted that academic writing in English tends to be more direct in claims, avoids passive language, and uses examples to illustrate ideas that might differ from other languages. These factors tend to be new to IS, and they may need some time to adjust.

Consistent with Mori (2011), Reid & Dixon (2012) found that even though graduate students have met the required level of proficiency as indicated through TOEFL scores and have been admitted to graduate programs in the U.S., they still struggle with English. One of the reasons is that TOEFL only provides information about English proficiency in a formal context, such as writing, and does not account for English proficiency used in daily conversation. Sherri et al. (2010) reported that their study respondents expressed language barriers in spoken everyday language compared to written language. Daily conversational English is less formal and encompasses terminologies and slang that remain difficult for non-native English speakers (Lee, 2013; Sherri et al., 2010). This difficulty might hinder IS' communication and social lives.

Sherri et al. (2010) suggested that institutions offer training or workshops to learn American idioms or slang for better social interaction/communication.

Regarding social life and communication, Sato & Hodge (2015) found that many IS came to the U.S. expecting to improve their English proficiency through their interactions and relationships with domestic students. However, in their experience, they were frustrated. They could not meet the expectations because they felt unprepared to master the content and knowledge of their courses. With their limited English, they could not interact with people they knew (Sato & Hodge, 2015). Sato & Hodge (2015) described that some IS in their study were asked to withdraw from class because they lacked English proficiency and comprehension of class material.

Moreover, Behl et al. (2017) found a significant positive relationship between acculturation stress and language barriers. This finding means that IS have difficulty acculturating due to their relatively low English language ability. Language and academic needs have a strong relationship as IS might not feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions, affecting their ability to comprehend classroom lectures. Language barriers can also affect IS' grades (Behl et al., 2017). Due to a lack of diversity awareness and inclusion in the host society and a lack of confidence in English ability, IS often feel unaccepted, ignored, and left out (Sherri et al., 2010).

### **Cultural Distance or Cultural Gaps**

International students who are grieving the loss of freedom to express themselves as cultural beings often experience culture shock. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines culture shock as "a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation." It has

also been described as “feelings of disorientation, anxiety, and confusion that unfamiliar cultural environments arouse.” (Bochner, 2006, p. 189). In other words, the cultural differences between the home culture and host culture may create a sense of confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety in IS. Typically, the more significant the differences (the gap) in cultures, the greater the culture shock (Berry, 1997; Meza & Gazzoli, 2013). Cultural differences are another challenge in IS adapting and acculturating successfully to the new environment (Jang et al., 2014).

IS from Panama who studied in Switzerland experienced social-cultural stress due to cultural distance or the cultural gap between home and host cultures (Meza & Gazzoli, 2013). They expressed that they felt ignored and seen as foreigners, which led to feelings of rejection. For example, they expressed that their within-group diversity, such as Panama’s diverse ethnic groups, was ignored. These experiences led to a challenge in their cross-cultural relationships with the domestic students, making it harder for IS to adjust to the new environment. Additional barriers to building friendships with domestic students are cultural orientation such as individualism and collectivism (Karaman et al., 2018; Sato & Hodge, 2015). Because of this cultural gap, IS perceived that the individualistic orientation creates a less permanent and lasting relationship than most other cultures (Mori, 2011). Many IS experienced disappointment when building relationships with domestic students. These relationships may be further hindered by the prejudice and discrimination that IS experience with some domestic students (Sato & Hodge, 2015; Mori, 2011). These experiences made it harder to transition to a new culture.

Going through a transition and losing part of their shared identity, IS were aware that they were culturally different from the host country. However, IS felt that many people in the host country lacked awareness of different nations and diverse customs (Mittal & Weiling, 2006; Moon, 2020). Thus, it perpetuated acculturative stress for IS students.



## **Sense of Identity**

IS who leave their homes are faced with adjustment processes. As previously mentioned, one factor that influences the acculturation process is ethnic identity (Schwartz et al., 2010). A person's identity is embedded in the culture they grew up in (Pollock et al., 2017). However, IS find it hard to express themselves freely as culturally diverse individuals (Interiano & Lim, 2018). When they travel to their new educational setting, IS are separated from their home support systems and are thrust into new situations and environments. They need to create a sense of cultural balance between their home and host cultures to allow cultural freedom (Pollock et al., 2017; Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008; Stuard & Ward, 2011; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

The acculturation process involves grieving the loss of IS' familiar cultural environment and the freedom to express themselves as culturally diverse beings (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Hayes & Lin, 1994). The loss may lead to difficulties maintaining a positive sense of self or identity, which causes psychological stress (Hsieh, 2006; Meza & Gazzoli, 2013; Pollock et al., 2017; Vertovec, 1999). Meza & Gazzoli (2013) reported that their participants experienced feelings of loneliness, anxiety, uncertainty, and signs of depression associated with being away from their families and culture. These factors contribute to the struggle of acculturation.

Unfortunately, many students who participated in the above research felt their programs did not provide a space for them to go through acculturation (Interiano & Lim, 2018). Thus, they felt pressured to find their way into the new culture without support from the host country. To promote an exchange of culture, some IS chose to wear their native clothing and share multicultural issues from their homeland. These actions helped the IS display their heritage, cultural values, and identity.

Despite struggles, some studies have illuminated positive personal growth in IS students (Interiano & Lim, 2018). The female participants in their research expressed gratitude for the opportunity to take on the responsibility of their own choices, which was not customary for women in their cultures. The participants felt that they have the freedom to re-invent their identity as females without the strict influence of their home culture society. In other words, the new environment helped them to overcome some of the pressure of being female in their particular culture. Another positive experience was that being able to overcome the difficulties they faced created a positive sense of self and identity despite the hardship. They found a balance between the cultures and roles and thus developed third-place identities aligned with their values and experiences.

### **Social Support**

IS who profoundly experience a loss may experience academic, personal, and social problems. This loss includes their shared identity with their family and peers in their home country (Heyes & Lin, 1994). IS need a new support system in the new environment and a safe place for their acculturation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Professors, especially major advisors, are essential sources of support for international graduate students who spend most of their time within the academic department (Le et al., 2016). In one study, IS were able to rely on their advisors not only on academic matters but also in other aspects of their lives (Le et al., 2016). This connection was instrumental in alleviating common challenges such as homesickness and loneliness. Furthermore, IS need social support to help them grow as professionals (Kuo et al., 2018). They need both support from family for their personal growth and support from faculty members and peers for their professional development. IS expressed that when faculty show interest in their experiences in and outside the classroom,

they feel validated and supported, which lowers their acculturation stress (Interiano & Lim, 2018).

Furthermore, many in the U.S. think they are expected to behave like Americans and meet the American standard (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kim, 2020). Faculty may have this expectation as well. Western supervisors may not fully understand the unique dynamics of cross-cultural supervisory relationships, influenced by cultural competence and language (Park et al., 2017; Woo et al., 2015). Thus, IS may struggle to build positive relationships with their faculty supervisors, mainly when some IS experience their faculty supervisors as unsupportive and lacking cultural sensitivity (Moon, 2020; Sato & Hodge, 2015; Woo et al., 2015).

Besides faculty members, the source of support for IS also encompasses peers. For example, conational friends, who come from a similar cultural background, have been highlighted as helpful during the initial adjustment (Le et al., 2016). IS also feel more connected with peers who are fellow IS (Le et al., 2016; Woo et al., 2015). Anandavalli (2021) explained that friendships among IS were essential source of support. In addition, Woo et al. (2015) found that IS support system could come from mentors in students' home countries. This support system becomes an essential element for IS in their growth. However, supports from their home may not understand and relate to IS experiences (Sherri et al., 2010). Having few sources who understand their experience can result in loneliness for IS.

Le et al. (2018) found that domestic students were another source of support for IS. However, many IS perceived domestic students as just *good friends*, not *close friends*. They perceived domestic students are helpful with practical issues such as transportation, banking, temporary housing, and adjustment to the host culture. In the U.S., many IS perceived Americans

as friendly yet superficial, which created relationships only with their national groups or other IS who share similar experiences (Mori, 2011; Sherri et al., 2010).

Social connectedness and social support from the host society play a vital role in IS professional and academic growth. Further, it reduces acculturative stress, enhances well-being, and improves adjustment (Cao et al., 2018; Meza & Gazzoli, 2013; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Cao et al. (2018) studied Chinese IS in France and found that participants formed more positive relationships with domestic students and enhanced cross-cultural relationships when they adopted more of the host culture. This cultural proximity helped the host make favorable judgments, thus facilitating social connectedness and contributing to less prejudice.

Cultural knowledge of the host society is also a good predictor of social-cultural adaptation (Meza & Gazzoli, 2013). This knowledge helps IS overcome challenges they encounter while in a foreign country. Their intercultural experience can be a transformative learning process for growth. They have an opportunity to develop new knowledge and improve their awareness, attitudes, and skills to function effectively within their new environment. Even though IS may find a way to be *okay* with who they are, intentional support from professors, advisors, and friends help foster positive changes in their self-image and ability to overcome barriers (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Le et al., 2016). A welcoming and hospitable local culture aids IS in succeeding academically. This environment could boost IS confidence to adjust and thrive in the new environment (Le et al., 2016).

### **U.S. Education System**

Mori (2011) highlighted that unfamiliarity with the American educational system might also become a barrier to academic performance. Like other programs, counseling programs' teaching-learning process in the U.S. highly emphasizes class participation. Many IS come from

countries emphasizing a professor-providing and student-receiving model (Moon, 2020; Reid & Dixon, 2012). Thus, IS may feel confused when professors expect the involvement of students in a class discussion.

Another source of stress is the delivery of the course materials in class. Many IS struggle with the fast pace of courses and experience difficulty grasping the materials and concepts (Jang et al., 2014). IS often feel lost in class.

Another difference is that the U.S. educational system emphasizes an independent learning style, in which students are expected to have critical thinking and voice individual opinions (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In contrast, IS may come from cultures that emphasize harmony. Thus, they tend not to participate in class discussions to maintain balance (Reid & Dixon, 2012). However, Moon (2020) found that East Asian IS preferred student-centered learning experiences in U.S. schools compared to studying in their home culture.

### **Visa Restrictions**

IS who come to the U.S. hold a specific student visa (i.e., F-1 or J-1; USCIS, n.d.). As student visa holders, IS have to meet particular requirements to stay in the U.S. legally. IS must enroll in classes as full-time students (Homeland Security, n.d.). There is an assumption that IS are wealthy and can afford to study overseas, yet many lack sufficient financial aid, support, or loans (Lee, 2013; Mori, 2011). Many graduate students use department funding such as graduate assistantships (GA) as a primary source of income to study in the U.S. However, most GA positions do not pay enough to cover all expenses. IS are also limited in getting a job off-campus. Therefore, financial issues became a salient stressor (Lee, 2013; Sherri et al., 2010), especially daily expenses and high health insurance costs (Sherri et al., 2010).

IS have limitations in finding alternatives to support their financial needs (USCIS, n.d). For example, IS who hold F-1 are only allowed to work on campus and not exceed 20 hours/week. Unfortunately, many IS have found that there are still limited on-campus job options (Gagosz, 2015). Many available on-campus jobs are federal work-study, which IS are not eligible to apply for. Additionally, IS are only allowed to find employment off-campus after the first year of their study with a special work authorization with certain restricting criteria. IS are limited to only two options for work authorization: Curricular Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT; USCIS, 2017). CPT is a form of work/study related to the IS's established curriculum or program and is limited to only part-time work (i.e., 20 hours/week). OPT, on the other hand, is an authorized 12-month full-time practical training after graduation. OPT cannot be extended unless IS are in science, technology, engineering, or math fields. With these restrictions, IS might experience additional stress in pursuing their studies and future careers.

### **Discrimination Experience**

Substantial research has shown that IS experience discrimination in the U.S. (i.e., Le et al., 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee, 2013; Sato & Hodge, 2015). Lee and Rice (2007) addressed IS' perception of discrimination in a range of U.S. contexts, both in and outside the classroom, by peers, faculty, and local community members. From in-depth interviews with 24 students from 15 countries in the U.S., they found that IS encountered numerous difficulties, including being ignored, unfairness, inhospitality, cultural intolerance, verbal insult, and confrontation due to their foreign national status. Specifically, students from Asia, India, Latin America, and the Middle East reported considerable discrimination related to their race and culture compared to students from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand.

With these experiences, many IS found that domestic Americans tended to lack the desire to understand another culture, thus contributing to IS' feelings of cultural alienation (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2015). Further, IS experienced discrimination in actions or attitudes such as verbal or physical harassment or other forms of mistreatment (Le et al., 2016; Lee, 2013). For example, IS reported receiving negative comments or advice from their professors, along with the belief that their academic needs were being ignored (Sato & Hodge, 2015).

IS may be perceived as less intelligent and less educated because of their non-native accent (Behl et al., 2017; Lee, 2013). This experience could be categorized as a microaggression. Sue et al. (2019) explained that microaggressions are the everyday slights, put-downs, invalidations, and insults directed at a specific group of people, usually people of minorities. IS can experience microaggression in three forms. (1) Microassault is an apparent verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack on IS remarks. Ee (2013) wrote about an IS who is mocked when speaking their native language. (2) Microinsult is unintentional comments or behaviors that are insensitive towards IS identity. As was mentioned previously, many IS were expected to behave like their fellow domestic students and follow the American norm (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kim, 2020). (3) Microinvalidation is comments or behaviors that are dismissive towards IS experiences. IS tend to be lumped as one group, dismissing that IS are diverse and come from different countries (Meza & Gazzoli, 2013; Wearing et al., 2015).

Although those seemingly harmless, microaggressions are considered covert racism or discrimination. This discrimination has historically led and continues to lead to internal power struggles between IS and domestic students, supervisors, and teachers in the academic setting (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Jang et al., 2014). Kim (2021) explained that IS need to work twice as hard

to be treated equally as their domestic counterparts. These struggles may create acculturative stress on IS' adjustment to the U.S. education system (Chiu & Na, 2019).

In speaking contexts, IS' non-native accents could lead to stereotyping and discrimination. Listeners tend to evaluate the speaker's competence, social status, attractiveness, personality, and similarity based on their non-native accent. Thus, listeners may perceive IS with a non-native accent as less intelligent and less educated, thus influencing IS' confidence in speaking in class settings (Lee, 2013).

Graduate IS sometimes also hold different roles as teaching assistants and doctoral supervisors. These two roles represent a position of authority. However, Mori (2011) reported that IS, who spoke with non-native accents, may experience less respect, trust, and acceptance from their U.S. students. Additionally, IS felt power dynamics in a supervision dyad with their supervisees (Jang et al., 2014). Thus, IS may feel afraid to interact freely with their students or supervisees.

Aside from the issues mentioned above, an IS who arrives in the U.S. is put into the same category as American racial/ethnic minorities (Loo, 2019). American racial/ethnic minority classifications are unique to American conceptions about race/ethnic issues unique to historical American conceptions about race and may not be understood by IS. IS mainly have a specific perspective on race and cultural orientation based on their country of origin that is different from the issues of racism in the U.S. (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Besides that, being in the U.S. could be an IS's first time exposed to racial diversity. For IS who come from a homogenous country, race may not have been an essential factor of identity and therefore might have little meaning for them (Loo, 2019; Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Many IS also could be a part of the majority group in their home countries, and coming to the US might be their first time being part of the minority



group. Even though many IS feel they have learned to understand U.S. racial issues, they still feel disconnected from these issues. Thus, even though IS might experience microaggressions, they cannot wholly understand or are unaware that they have experienced microaggression.

Unfortunately, when IS arrived in the U.S., they were confronted with U.S. racism/discrimination issues that were unfamiliar and could confuse them (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). This experience could also be jarring and alienating because they did not understand what they experience. In addition, due to IS diversity, they have multiple marginalized intersecting identities, such as their citizenship status and racial/ethnic identity, that exposed them to discrimination in the host country despite their previous status in their home country (Anandavalli, 2021). This was more apparent to IS of color who come from non-Western and non-English-speaking countries (Anandavalli, 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007). It could be deemed unfair just to understand IS' discrimination experiences through the lens of American racial/ethnic minorities and dismiss their unique cultural/ethnic identity.

### **Recent Cultural Context in the U.S.**

More recently, the immigration restrictions during the Trump administration, prejudice and violence, immigration policies, and COVID-19 have caused anxiety, fear, concerns about safety, and uncertainty for IS (Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Quinton, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Laws, 2020). Quinton (2018) reported that there is an association between the endorsement of President Trump and the potential of “not only prejudice against IS, but of the sanctioning of discrimination against them as well” (p. 167).

Besides that, the immigration restrictions during the Trump administration and early COVID time have left higher-education leaders confused and scrambling to respond to the

exemptions of IS taking online classes (Glass et al., 2021). There were uncertainties and uneven policies that had diminished internationalization.

Furthermore, IS fear that they are trapped in the U.S. without the ability to travel to visit family or attend academic conferences and feel emotional stress due to the current situation. (Johnson, 2018; Laws, 2020; Rose-Wood & Rose-Wood, 2017). Many Middle Eastern IS have reported even greater fear and distress, especially those who came from the countries affected by the Trump travel ban (Quinton, 2018; Van De Walker & Slate, 2019). IS who were already aware of their international status and experienced the subtle and obvious discriminatory remarks perpetuate their "hyper realization" (Johnson, 2018, p. 435).

The COVID-19 pandemic became another stressor for IS. They were not only concerned about the infection for themselves but also about their families back home. They also worried about family and friends' deaths caused by COVID (Glass et al., 2021). Furthermore, a hostile political climate towards immigrants has been perpetuated even more by the past president's label China virus. The recent rise in anti-Asian racism and hate crimes associated with COVID-19 increased the anxiety and safety concerns in IS of Asian descent, especially those who appear Chinese (Koo et al., 2021; Perz et al., 2022; Zhai & Du, 2020).

Asian IS study participants (Koo et al., 2021) reported that they have received verbal attacks and threats related to China virus both on- and off-campus. This experience has increased their desire to return to their home countries because they felt unwelcomed, unprotected, and unsafe. Besides that, IS who were in quarantine expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation that impacted their adjustment. Even so, some IS in this study reported that the quarantine was beneficial in avoiding racism and discriminatory experiences.

The literature mentioned above highlights IS experiences during their studies in the U.S.: language barriers, cultural distance or cultural gaps, sense of identity, social support, education system, visa restrictions, and discrimination experience. These unique experiences are not mutually exclusive; instead, one might influence another.

### **International Students in Counseling Programs**

The section above focuses on the experience of IS in general. Since counseling is a unique profession, as mentioned before, IS in counseling programs have unique experiences that differ from the general IS population. This section will highlight the unique challenges that international counseling students experience.

#### **Language Barriers**

The previously cited studies highlighted how language barriers influence IS' academic and social lives. As counseling programs are conveyed using language, either in oral or written form, in the learning-teaching environment, clinical work, and supervision, IS may navigate additional language adjustments. Many non-western IS whose first language is not English face barriers in communication with their peers and faculty members (Sato & Hodge, 2009). Further, many IS fear that they will not provide effective counseling for clients (Park et al., 2017).

Besides the fear of communicating with clients, IS also fear building relationships with faculty supervisors, practicum supervisors, and coworkers. IS whose English ability is limited may struggle with effective communication in their relationships (Jang et al., 2014; Park et al., 2017). This fear may limit IS from building close relationships and even seeking help when needed.

IS taking supervision courses often fear their lack of language fluency will cause communication issues (Jang et al., 2014). International student supervisors experienced

challenges providing feedback to their supervisees (Woo et al., 2015). The most significant language barrier was finding words to express their thoughts and giving direct feedback.

Furthermore, language barriers impact their confidence in an academic and clinical work setting (Lee, 2013). Lack of confidence in English can become a source of cultural stress, whereas confidence in communication positively relates to social and cultural adjustment while reducing stress (Meza & Gazoli, 2013). Thus, language barriers could create significant acculturative pressure and influence other aspects of adjustment.

### **Adjusting to Education System in Counseling Programs**

Reid & Dixon (2012) highlighted the importance of understanding and contextualizing training and counseling programs to the unique needs of IS due to their increasing number and their contribution to the counseling profession worldwide. They also highlighted how counselor educators and supervisors have focused on American racial/ethnic minorities and neglected IS who come to the U.S. for graduate education in counseling (Mori 2011; Reid & Dixon, 2012). It takes time and effort for IS to learn and become comfortable in a different cultural setting. However, IS reported not having enough time for an in-depth discussion about cultural differences during cross-cultural supervision, either with their supervisors or with their supervisees (Woo et al., 2015). This situation may create additional stress around learning in the new culture.

Similarly, Ng (2012) found a lack of knowledge and understanding of IS's issues and experiences in counseling training programs. With the growth of globalization and internationalization in higher education, there is an increased need to develop effective training for IS (Ng, 2012; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). Many IS felt that their programs did not provide a space for them to go through acculturation. They were often expected to find their way into the

new culture with minimal support from their programs and universities in the host country (Interiano & Lim, 2018). IS often felt misunderstood (Kim & Nam, 2019). IS who perceived that their classmates and faculty members lacked an understanding of and appreciation for their acculturation struggle, lacked opportunities for enough in-depth discussion about cultural differences, and reported a more challenging time in adjusting to the U.S. educational system and environment (Jang et al., 2014; Mittal & Weiling, 2006; Sabbadini et al., 2013; Woo et al., 2015).

### **Cultural understanding**

Successful acculturation involves gaining a cultural understanding of the host country. For international counseling students, the transition process in their programs and a new culture includes meeting the program's demands and sometimes discounting their own needs (Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). Adding to that process, they must understand Western perspectives on mental health, which may be unfamiliar to non-Western IS (Interiano & Lim, 2018; Ng, 2006a). This knowledge is essential in providing counseling services and supervision in a Western setting. Some approaches may contradict the IS's cultural background (Ng, 2006b). One international student in Interiano and Lim's study (2018) reported, "The counseling perspective is a Western-concept, a mindset . . . I have had to adjust myself, stretch a lot of myself to meet whatever the core requirements are" (p.318). Thus, IS needed assistance to gain cross-cultural understanding to function competently as counselors in the host culture (Ng, 2006b).

Similarly, Wah (2014) reported that although counseling programs emphasize multicultural competencies, their perspectives are still predominately from a monocultural perspective, which centers around EuroAmerican, white, male, Christian, heterosexual, English-speaking, and middle- or upper-class perspectives (Wah, 2014). IS from non-Western countries

feel that they have to learn to counsel from Western perspectives (McDowell et al., 2012; Ng, 2006a).

Furthermore, the Eurocentric nature of the counseling materials might contradict IS' experiences in their cultural backgrounds (Ng, 2006b; Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). The ability to comprehend classroom lectures is also influenced by IS' heritage culture (Karaman et al., 2018). For example, international counseling students found that culture of origin may impact their perception of ethics and ethics education in the U.S. They discovered that IS's cultural collectivism orientation influences their understanding of just and unjust in providing ethical clinical work. This example showed how differences in IS cultural values and U.S. counseling values could cause conflict in students' professional development, especially if they will practice back in their home country or seek other career opportunities outside of the U.S. (Park-Saltzman et al., 2012). Many IS are not certain whether they would like to stay in the U.S., return to their home country, or move to a new country after their study, and the counseling curriculum and program do not cover the discussion of an international application (Koyama, 2010; Lértora & Croffie). Thus, it is crucial to assist IS in contextualizing their learning, especially for career planning.

Regarding supervision, IS also reported a lack of integration of multicultural competence, knowledge, awareness, and skills (Jang et al., 2014). Mori et al. (2009) found that IS expressed higher levels of supervision satisfaction when they engaged in a discussion of culture. IS felt supported and understood when the supervisor initiated cultural discussion early in supervision. This cultural responsiveness and support provided students with a more successful learning experience and increased confidence in their cultural differences (Mori et al., 2009).

## **Support**

Similar to IS in general, a strong and secure support system is an essential element for international counseling students in their growth. Unfortunately, this sense of a support system is severely hampered when instructors and mentors neglect to support and guidance (Interiano & Lim, 2018). One student reported, “I had to re-learn the ... things they [professors] assume to be basic, IS don’t know how to navigate” (Interiano & Lim, 2018, p. 318). The transition becomes more overwhelming and frustrating for many students (Interiano & Lim, 2018). For example, Woo et al. (2015) reported a lack of support and guidance from professors during courses that cause nervousness, and a feeling of being lost when IS enter the counseling practicum setting.

IS also wish that their supervisors and instructors would be sensitive to the cultural differences they bring (Jang et al., 2014; Reid & Dixon, 2012). Many continue to feel like outsiders and are treated as such, even after years in the host country (Kim-Appel et al., 2019). This highlights the multi-layered concerns of IS that need to be acknowledged and addressed (Woo et al., 2015). Thus, they may need support inside and outside the graduate program (Kuo et al., 2018).

## **Visa Restriction**

As previously mentioned, as student visa holders, IS have certain restrictions that might cause financial stress and concerns related to their ability to stay legally in the U.S. before and after graduation (Lértora & Croffie, 2020). As IS in counseling programs need a specific work authorization, the curricular practical training (CPT), to work off-campus, those who are moving to their practicum and internship face challenges finding these sites (USCIS, 2017). Due to the nature of the length of work, IS must carefully plan their studies and internship experience not to

violate any immigration regulations, one of which is deportation (Mori, 2011). This limitation may cause additional stress to IS in completing their studies.

Furthermore, IS who desire to stay in the U.S., pursue a counseling career, and complete their counseling licensure process may face challenges finding places to find work even though they are eligible for a 12-month optional practical training (OPT). However, due to the restrictive nature of employment regulations for IS, there is much government paperwork required (USCIS, 2017). Thus, many employers are more willing to hire domestic students. Lértora & Croffie (2020) also highlighted that the CPT/OPT restrictions and difficulty finding sponsorship for a work visa create the issue that IS might not be able to complete their licensure when they are allowed to stay and work in the field.

In conclusion, IS' experiences are complex. In addition to their acculturation process, IS in counseling programs also experience unique challenges. Many of these challenges remain unacknowledged by their academic programs, and also have not been explored much in the literature.

Strong support is vital as international counseling students study Western counseling approaches through predominately oral and written communication in the classroom and clinical experiences as well as navigate the U.S. education system (Behl et al., 2017; Hegarty, 2014; Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kuo et al., 2018; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Wah, 2014). This means not only attending to IS needs, providing guidance and adequate support, but also acknowledging IS' unique perspectives, addressing experiences of discrimination, and contextualizing their learning to IS home culture (Berry, 2005; McDowell et al., 2012; Ng, 2006b; Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008; Stuart & Ward, 2011). IS experiences need special attention to improve retention and foster their growth as professionals.



## Summary

This chapter has highlighted general acculturation, general IS experience in U.S. educational institutions, and IS experience specifically in counseling programs. It is essential to emphasize the uniqueness and complexity of international counseling students' experiences. One challenge may contribute to other difficulties. For example, English proficiency facilitates better adaptation to new learning and social environments among non-Western IS (Ng, 2006a). Besides that, the unfamiliarity and lack of contextualization of the multicultural issues in the U.S. contribute to the struggle to learn about counseling materials. In addition, IS' discrimination experiences influence the sense of belonging and acceptance of the host culture. The lack of a sense of belonging in the host culture may be heightened by the lack of cultural understanding and the grieving process of leaving one's home country, thus influencing the acculturative stress and selection of acculturative strategy. While there is extensive literature addressing IS experiences and needs, there is still a dearth of literature that specifically addresses the process international counseling students undergo in adjusting to the new culture. Thus, this study is important to understand better how all of these experiences influence the IS acculturation process.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a research method that uses an inductive process to develop a theory that is grounded in data (Pulla, 2016; Charmaz, 2014). This methodology helped address questions about the process through the participants' perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study explored the acculturation process experienced by international students (IS) in counseling programs. Grounded theory's inductive approach of data analysis illuminated the process of acculturation and identified factors that support the acculturation process. The resulting theory provided a framework and had implications for counselor educators and supervisors working with IS counseling students (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

I used the constructivist lens of grounded theory for this study as it allowed the explorations of multiple realities and uncovering participants' meanings (Charmaz, 2014). Through the constructivist lens, the data collection and analysis were interactive and happened simultaneously. Constructivist approach helped to develop theory grounded in the data and took account my perspective as the researcher to interpret the data. Because of the shared status and experiences with my participants, I am not value-free, which served as a strength to build rapport with my participants and understand the data better.

#### **Participants**

Since this study built upon the pilot study (Wuysang et al., 2021), there were 20 participants in total (see table 1). Participants in this study were master's- and doctoral-level IS who are currently enrolled in or graduated in the last three years from Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited

counseling programs. All participants held non-immigrant visa (F-1, J-1, M-1, etc.) and were born and raised in a country other than the U.S. There were 10 participants in the pilot study; however, one participant did not meet the current criteria, thus was removed from the participant list. There were 11 participants in the current study. Hence, the total number of participants used for the data analysis in this study was 20. Purposeful sampling was used to select a sample that best fit my assumption to discover, understand, and gain insight (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, theoretical sampling was used to develop and enhance the categories of theory through collecting, coding, analyzing the data, and deciding the next data to collect (Bryant, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To address the diversity of IS, the researcher identified IS' countries of origin in the demographic. This helped the researcher keep in mind the contextual factors influencing IS' acculturation process.

## **Data Collection**

### **Recruitment Procedures**

The recruitment process utilized a snowballing method. Initial recruitment emails (see Appendix A) were sent to IS in counseling programs through counseling listservs, including Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) – Listserv and the Association of Counselor Education Supervision International Students and Faculty Interest Network (ACESISFIN) – Listserv. Recruitment flyers were distributed to CACREP program liaisons, colleagues/faculty members in counseling programs, and social media platforms, including Facebook and ResearchGate. Then, the investigator asked for the recruitment information to be forwarded to other potential participants that would meet the criteria.

IS who expressed interest in participating in the study were provided with a link to consent and demographic survey through Qualtrics Survey Software (see appendix C). The

consent discussed benefits and risks. The benefit of the study included providing a place where IS' experiences were heard, informing counseling programs on how to better support IS in their programs, and enriching the literature on IS' experiences. Risks included sharing sensitive experiences. Procedures were in place for any participants who experienced distress during the interview process. This included allowing the participant to change the topic to less impactful material, terminating the interview, with or without a later rescheduling, or discontinuing the study at any time, for any reason, and without penalty.

Table 1  
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Gender	Age	Length of Stay	Consider Home	Master/PhD
Boxexas	Angola	M	39	2.5	Angola	Master
Fish	Swaziland	M	32	2	Swaziland	Master
Mario	Croatia	M	40	4	USA	Master
Manuel	Czech Republic	M	28	2.5	Czech Republic	Master
Miles	South Africa	M	27	1.5	South Africa	Master
Preeti	India	F	34	2	"I don't know"	Master
Sara	Egypt	F	42	2	Egypt	Master
Tiny	China	F	24	5	China	Master
Yana	Iran	F	30	7	Iran/USA	Master
Leti	The Bahamas	F	31	9	The Bahamas	Masters
Alice	Brazil	F	28	9	Brazil and USA	PhD
Shine	China	F	28	6	China	PhD
Diya	India	F	40	10	India	PhD
Lili	China	F	27	8.5	China	PhD
Deku	UK, but raised in HK	M	29	7	Hong Kong and USA	PhD
Ana	Colombia	F	24	5.5	Colombia	Masters
Holly	China	F	23	1.5	"?"	Masters
Sua	South Korea	F	33	3	No response	PhD
Tika	Indonesia	F	39	9 mo.	Indonesia	Masters
Hannah	South Korea	F	29	4.5	Korea	Masters

After the participants consented to the study, interviews were scheduled. Participants were interviewed individually. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed before interviewing the next participant. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached (Bryant,

2013). All data, including transcripts and field notes, were stored securely on a password-protected computer in encrypted cloud storage. To protect privacy, participants were de-identified before data analysis and given an opportunity to select their pseudonyms.

### **Individual Interviews**

This grounded theory study utilized semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which took place through WebEx, a virtual platform that allowed for recording and secure cloud storage. The semi-structured interviews followed an interview protocol (see Appendix B (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences as IS in counseling programs. Interviews lasted 60 -75 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. Memoing, which included sets of notes on topics and observations, was utilized to keep the researcher grounded in the data and promote ongoing inquiry (Bryant, 2013; Montgomery & Bailey, 2007)

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for grounded theory consists of three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Glasser & Strauss, 2006). During the open coding phase, I examined data for information supported by the transcribed data, notes, and memos. I categorized the information obtained and reduced it into subcategories. This initial coding was done without recourse to specific frameworks, hypotheses, or other precise or formally preconceived concepts (Bryant, 2013).

Once an initial set of categories was developed, I used axial coding to identify a single category from the open coding list as the central phenomenon of interest. After selecting the central phenomenon, I returned to collect additional data to understand the categories that relate to this central phenomenon. The database was reviewed to provide insight into specific coding

categories related to or explaining the central phenomenon. This included casual conditions that influenced the central phenomenon, strategies addressing the phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions that shape the strategy, and the consequences of undertaking the strategy. Information gathered in this coding phase was organized into a figure that presented a theoretical model of the process under study.

From this theory, I generated statements that interrelated the categories in the coding paradigm (selective coding). I created a matrix that helped visualize the wide range of conditions and consequences related to the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017). To complete this step, I used NVivo software to assist me in coding.

I kept memos and observation notes for verification strategies during the interview process. This methodological coherence helped me complete the data I received from the interview. I also utilized sample appropriateness by interviewing participants who best represented the inclusion criteria. Then, I conducted constant comparison to maintain a constant iteration between data gathering and analysis (Bryant, 2013). The constant comparison from one interviewee to another was a source of triangulation. The constant comparison also maintained a close connection between data and data, data and categories, category and category, and category and the concept to allow a theoretical elaboration to emerge (Bryant, 2013; Gibbs, 2010; Randall, 2019). The process of constant comparison is: to compare codes, make meaning of the codes, define the boundary for a theory relevant to the main theoretical categories, and write the theory (Randall, 2019).

During the coding and analysis process, I kept the research questions, “What is the process of acculturation that international counseling students experience?” “How do IS overcome the challenges they face in academic settings and daily lives?” and “What helps or

hinders the acculturation process?” at the forefront. This helped me ensure that the data analysis answered the research question. Moreover, in-vivo coding, which relies on direct quotes from the participants, ensured the data was represented accurately. This data analysis process allowed the more prominent themes to emerge from the categories (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Findings of themes were synthesized and compared to current research to identify consistencies or inconsistencies. The tables and graphics, included in Chapter IV, provide an overview of the findings.

### **Researcher’s Position and Trustworthiness**

I am a female IS from Indonesia enrolled in a counselor education and supervision doctoral program. I have lived in the U.S. since 2016 and have received a master’s degree in counseling in the U.S. I have also experienced the transition process throughout my studies. When I first moved to the U.S., I expected that the transition would not be easy. For example, I struggled with using English to study, speak, read, write, and interact with others. It was draining. I felt lost in class because my professors and classmates spoke English very fast, and the class pace was fast. I also was afraid to build new relationships as I was very self-conscious about my English ability and familiarity with American culture. I was not accustomed to the social norms, general day-to-day, and the education system. I felt lost, frustrated, and lonely. I felt pressured to be American because I felt out of place when I just was being myself. I unlearned some of my cultural values that are no longer relevant and learned some new ways of life in the U.S. However, I still retained some other cultural values that have shaped me and made me who I am. Throughout the process, I was supported by some domestic friends and professors who showed interest in knowing who I am and were patient to help me navigate through my transition. I also received personal counseling.

My experience was beneficial for this study because I could understand how the acculturation process would not be easy for the participants. Thus, I had a better understanding of the data that I gathered. Because of my background and the nature of this study, there was the possibility of prior relationships between me and some participants. The preceding relationship might include being involved in the same interest network. A prior relationship would be beneficial to accelerate rapport building for the interview (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010). Participants I knew personally were asked about their comfort continuing in the research given our prior relationship and reminded of confidentiality. In addition, to avoid any potential role conflict, I also explicitly clarified my role as a researcher and explained that my primary goal was data generation. Regarding likely preexisting knowledge about the participant, I kept checking myself not to make any assumptions and acknowledged the potential presuppositions to the participant.

I recognized that my own experience shaped how I understood the data. I used reflective journaling to explore my perspectives as the researcher. I bracketed my reactions and kept a log trail to reflect on my own position actively. After every interview and during the analysis process, I also memoed and journaled to reflect on my impressions. I resonated with all of my participants in many ways. I realized that listening and engaging in conversations with my participants helped me to put language and identify my journey as an IS. Through the reflection, I was also able to connect my personal journey with the participants' for the purpose of conceptualizing the bridging process. I was also very self-aware to not generalize IS' experiences but use my experiences to understand the nuance of my participants' acculturation journey.

Additionally, to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the data, I conducted three member-checking focus groups (see appendix D & E; Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).



The purpose of the focus groups was to clarify and expand on themes that were previously mentioned in the individual interviews. Focus groups have been recognized to explore the beliefs and opinions of a group of people and enable participants to respond and interact. It is believed that it provided richer data.

### **The Benefit of the Study**

This study allowed me to hear the voices of the research participants that may otherwise be unheard, marginalized, or dismissed. The study also informed the counselor education programs about IS' experiences and uncovered strategies to support IS in acculturation. This study added to the dearth of literature on IS' experiences.

In conclusion, this study utilized a grounded theory approach to help generate a theory derived from the data. This was an inductive process to help understand the acculturation process of international counseling students. The in-vivo coding and constant comparison were used to analyze the data. Memoing and journaling were used to ensure credibility. In addition, a member-check focus group to ensure trustworthiness.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to fill the dearth of literature on the acculturation process of international students (IS) in U.S. counseling programs. The findings aimed to inform counselor education programs to better support IS for recruitment and retention purposes. This chapter provides a description of data analysis, the theory development process, and the findings. The data analysis section summarizes the process that resulted in a theory. Lastly, the findings are presented and include the categories, theory, theory description, and quotes that correspond to the theory.

#### **Data Analysis Process**

Data analysis was completed as planned. The data analysis and theory building was an ongoing process from the start of the interviews. During the interview, I made memos and wrote down notes from the interview. I asked clarifying questions to the participants to confirm my interpretation of what I heard. After each interview, I wrote down personal reflections and impressions of the interview.

All interviews were transcribed with the help of transcription services. As each transcription was done, I started the coding process. I used MaxQDA software to aid in coding. As I detailed in chapter three, I utilized the constant comparison method for my data analysis. The first phase of coding was open coding (Charmaz, 2014). I made notes in a separate document about the emerging categories while comparing the current codes with the findings from the pilot study. Then, with constant comparison, I compared codes to codes, codes to categories, and categories to categories, and repeated the same process for all the transcripts. New categories emerged. I deleted irrelevant categories that were not supported by new data.

After open coding, I moved to the second coding phase, selective coding (Charmaz, 2014). During this process, I narrowed down the codes and categories that were found during the first phase. I continued the constant comparison process again until broader themes emerged. Next, I used Nelson's Conceptual Depth Criteria (2017) to evaluate whether my data had reached saturation. The criteria include a comprehensive data range, rich and complex connections between the concepts and themes, meaningful data that has some resonance with existing literature, and applicability to individuals with similar social contexts as the participants. After the data had reached saturation, I developed the theoretical framework. I wrote logs, personal reflections, and emerging thoughts throughout the process.

### **The Development of the Theory**

Grounded theory is different and unique compared to other qualitative research methods. The grounded theory requires the researcher to engage in the data and ongoing data analysis. In this study, this methodology focused on addressing questions about the process of acculturation through the participants' perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This current grounded theory study was built upon the initial findings from the pilot study by Wuysang et al. (2021). The pilot study had 10 participants. However, one participant did not meet the criteria of the current study, so I removed that participant from the data. I have a total of 20 participants - nine from the pilot study and 11 from the current study.

The pilot study resulted in a tentative theory. Based on the interviews in the current study and the coding process, the new data confirmed and added to the previous findings, providing a richer and more in-depth conceptualization of the theory. During the second coding phase, I moved around categories that would make more sense to explain the acculturation process, thus making the theory more robust.

## **Findings**

Five themes emerged from the interviews: (1) *Life Before the U.S.*, (2) *Intention and Motivation for Studying in the U.S.*, (3) *Burst Out of the Bubble*, (4) *Bridging*, and (5) *Bridged Cultural Identity*. The first and second themes described the foundational experiences of participants related to their experiences in their native cultures and their motivations for studying in the U.S. The third, fourth, and fifth themes contained rich features and provided the main components of the grounded theory model for this study. From the original four themes that emerged in the pilot study, I added a new theme: *Burst Out of the Bubble*. This new theme explained step zero of the acculturation process as a critical period that the participants stepped into when they arrived in the U.S. The remaining themes were the same, yet some categories changed slightly. I believe the current result provided a deeper description of the acculturation process of IS in counseling programs.

### **Life Before the U.S.**

This theme consists of understanding what life in the home country was like for participants before coming to the U.S. Subthemes in this area include identity, sense of community, home culture and values, and prior knowledge and perceptions of the U.S. As indicated in Chapter 3, pseudonyms were created by participants and were used to capture their voices while protecting their identities.

#### ***Identity***

All 20 participants identified themselves as individuals with their nationality. Four participants mentioned that they had experienced living in different countries that had shaped their cultural identity. Five participants also added that their religious beliefs informed their cultural identity. Mario explained, “My faith was a big part of my cultural identity. I’m a

Christian...” Five participants described the career that they had before coming to the U.S. also shaped who they are. Preeti’s quote explained it well: “I think my [work] as a social [worker], that also impacts who I am.”

### ***Home Culture and Values***

Most participants came from a collectivist culture emphasizing the importance of relationships, interpersonal harmony, and family responsibilities. For example, Boxexas stated that “We were taught since childhood that whenever we are choosing something. We should not only think about ourselves...but we should consider other people’s rights, and make sure [we] are not causing harm...” Some participants also received pressure to think about their family’s status. Sua stated, “So, what I figured out is that in my culture or family ... avoiding loss of face, those pieces are very important... we rarely talk about bad or difficult issues regarding our family.”

Several participants also shared a strong sense of hierarchy in their home culture. Yana said, “People who are senior...[are] more educated...[have] higher socio-economic status...they are more respected.” Tiny also explained, “... we should the listen what ... older [people] say, like my parents...” This sense of hierarchy is very different from that in the U.S. Sua shared her experience of being surprised that her advisor offered himself to take meeting notes instead of asking her as the person with less power. Sua said, “There was a very big culture shock. In my culture, I should be the one who needs to take the meeting minutes, but [in this case] the professor did it for us.”

Additionally, many participants’ home cultures have certain gender role expectations. Fish reported, “... The social expectations like that as a firstborn male, I am expected to make sure that my father's household lives on, ... that I lead the family, especially my siblings, to

make sure they are taken care of.” As a female, Yana reported experiencing disadvantages due to gender expectations. “As a woman in that culture ... I could not express myself ... I knew that I have to be submissive.” She compared this experience to her perceptions of U.S. culture, where she received more opportunities to express herself.

Another aspect that seven participants emphasized is the academic pressure and education value that they received. Lili reported, “In China, I would say ... I feel ... a little pressure to ... get through my education at once ... I think in general, I would say just kind of following what the norm is.” Lili explained that her experience is different compared to the U.S., where she witnessed students who take gap years.

As for Tiny, she shared the academic pressure that she had experienced since she was young. “After school, I still need to learn math...learn English...when I was in junior high school, I wake up at 6 a.m. and finished ... school [at] 3:30 p.m. and to do my homework until midnight.”

### ***Sense of Community***

When asked about communities or support systems before coming to the U.S., all 20 participants identified that they had multiple community groups with strong connections among the members. All participants identified multiple support systems. Examples of these supports included family, coworkers, friends, and religious communities. Boxexas explained, “Support from family, from friends, from brothers and sisters from church, ... and the people where I was teaching there also, I've called it my support. Yeah, a strong system of support.” What made those relationships meaningful were the depth of the relationships they have built. Tika remembered, “Because of the nature of my work, friendship is very deep, because we share hardship and all the deep things in life. So, my support system were my coworkers and we

became friends.” Hannah also reported that “My church community back in Korea, they also like support. They try to support me...financially and they always like trying to cheer me up...like family ...”

### ***Prior Knowledge and Perceptions of the U.S.***

All participants reported that they had some level of knowledge and perception of the U.S. prior to coming. Six participants reported some exposure to U.S. culture through the media. Mario stated, “I grew up watching...[and] listening to American singers and bands... It was kind of a big part of my childhood.” Tiny also articulated that she knew of some U.S. culture “... [from] some books, some movies, we watch a lot like Spiderman or some Disney, some comedy like that.”

Nine participants mentioned that they had known people “that were from or had lived in the U.S. before. For example, Manuel reported, “I was in contact with Californian missionaries, and several other missionaries in our town. So I get glimpses of what it means to be American, but the thing is, those who stayed fit well within our culture.” Five participants had the opportunity to visit the U.S. as part of a holiday, short-term student exchange, or visiting family. Deku said, “I visited with family before...I have an uncle in Texas.”

Some participants reported that they know of the U.S. as having the American dream and being the land of freedom. Some participants even were excited to come to the U.S. because of their prior knowledge. Tika stated, “The U.S. culture was always portrayed as, like, the culture desired like...it's like the shiny, glittery, popular culture ... Like, it seemed very appealing, um, to do, when I was growing up.”

## **Intention and Motivation for Studying in the U.S.**

This theme summarizes the reasons participants pursued graduate study in counseling in the U.S. This theme has three subthemes that were important aspects of their decisions, including: (1) *Opportunity*, (2) *Financial Assistance*, and (3) *Exposure to the U.S.* The intention and motivation of IS who decided to study in the U.S. are important to understand as it precedes the move and acculturation process.

### ***Opportunity***

Participants explained that there are more educational resources and opportunities compared to their home countries, especially in the counseling field. Mario shared, “I realized that...counseling as a field and as a profession is much more developed and much less stigmatized and much more accessible in the United States than in Croatia.” Fish also related that being able to study in a different country is prestigious and thus will create more opportunities when he goes back to his home country.

### ***Financial Assistance***

Half of the participants reported that one of the reasons they decided to study in the U.S. was because they received financial assistance. These participants received scholarships or graduate assistantships to study counseling, and without funding, they would not have had that opportunity to study abroad. Preeti shared, “...I would not have been here studying unless I have a scholarship because it is so expensive...”

### ***Exposure to the U.S.***

Some of the participants acknowledged that the reason they came to study in the U.S. was because of some sort of exposure to the culture so they felt more comfortable pursuing graduate study in the U.S. Two of the participants received their undergraduate degree from the U.S. Lili



stated, “I did my undergrad in the U.S. also, so when I decided I would do a grad program, U.S. is definitely [a good option]. I wouldn't say the only option, but that is a very obvious option, since I'm here already.”

### **Burst Out of the Bubble**

This third theme, Burst out of the Bubble, is the period when IS stepped into the U.S. culture/country. During this period, individuals had initial reactions and realizations of stepping into a different country with different social norms, political climate, and worldviews. This theme encompasses the subthemes: (1) *International Status*, (2) *Realization of Cultural Differences*, (3) *Culture Shock*, (4) *Holding on to Culture of Heritage*, and (5) *Trying to Fit In*. Combined, the subthemes capture aspects of this period of significant transition.

#### ***International Status***

This subtheme characterizes the reality of having a new status as IS in the U.S. Lili explained, “And also at the beginning, I think even now, my international student status is definitely, very salient.” Half of the participants reported that this new status put them in the minority group. Ana remembered, “Because back home ... I'm just Colombian, I am part of the majority group, but like here, um, ... I was the Latina Hispanic minority, and I was also the international student minority.”

With this status also comes the realization of a marginalized identity in the U.S. Shine reported, “I guess I'm just more and more aware of my multiple marginalized identities and, a huge part is, [pause] some of the not-so-pleasant experiences.” Additionally, participants realized that their international student status also meant that others viewed them as foreigners, and they felt that categorization. In addition, participants also voiced feelings of temporariness. “It comes

down to that temporary status and not knowing what's next and hoping for the best, and all of that... You know, like, always living in a temporary state,” Leti said.

Furthermore, their status led to feelings of vulnerability. Alice quoted, “Within the acculturation process, my self was more fragile.” Hannah experienced something similar and said, “It feels like, oh, this is the program that, learn as a minority, learned how to get involved in United States... make me... [feel] a lot of vulnerability, like, a lot of insecure...”

### ***Realization of Cultural Differences***

Many participants said that when they were in their home country, race was not a factor that was on their minds. However, when they came to the U.S., they stated that they involuntarily had to think about their racial and cultural identity due to the racial and political climate. Lili shared, “When I'm in China, I don't actively think I'm Chinese... because everyone is Chinese, right? But here I have to, and that's something that people would see ... I'm Asian . . .”

Participants communicated that understanding the racial issues in the U.S. is challenging because they did not grow up in the U.S. racial context. Alice remembered, “I would say ... it was hard for me to understand the racial tensions in the U.S. itself.”

The participants also struggle with multicultural topics in their classes. Ana said,

Coming in here... hearing about stuff and just kinda like being confused, cause I, like, didn't really understand... what the root issues were... was a very big shock for me to be able to ... bring up these conversations to someone and be like, “Hey, I just, I don't understand”... [because] I didn't grow up with any of this.

Additionally, four participants thought there is black-and-white thinking about racial issues in the U.S. Alice even remembered that it hampered the process of her acculturation,

“Everything is black and white, which did not help in my integration process, and it did not help in my acculturation process that everything in America is black and white.”

### ***Culture Shock***

Participants voiced that they also had some culture shock when they got to the U.S. due to the differences in social norms, emphasis on independence and individualism, speaking English, and more freedoms. Participants identified that people in the U.S. tend to be friendly. In Diya’s words, “They were all called to be hospitable...friendly and engaging...” Deku reported that one of the things he realized was that people in the U.S tend to use pleasantries in daily interaction. “... [There’re] pleasantries... like ‘Hey, how are you?’ and then [I think] well, do you really care? Um, so [I] expected that kind of small talk interaction...” Diya also identified,

About the U.S. culture, it's good education, people are more open, and there is good communication in this system, and people are more liberal, independent... You can do whatever you want. There is no one to restrict you... unless you are doing something unethical or immoral, you just do whatever.

### ***Holding on to Culture of Heritage***

Some of the participants also stated that initially they were trying to hold on to their cultural heritage to cope with the stress of living in a new culture. Leti said it clearly, “Instead of conforming to the American way... very early on when I moved here, I think in the first year, I didn't want to ... sell out... my culture.” Similarly, Sua shared, “I think for my first year...[since the] United States is a multicultural society, and people need to get used to it. So, I will become just a Korean.”

### ***Trying to Fit in***

On the other hand, some participants tried to fit in with the U.S. culture out of fear and a perception that Americans would not understand their experiences. Alice mentioned,

Well, I had to rethink a lot of that when I moved to the U.S., and I still do it every day.

So, sometimes I feel like I cannot be myself because I'm not sure if Americans can handle it.

This fear becomes a struggle to be themselves. Holly stated,

Maybe a part of some Americans are just going to hate me for being who I am. But, the big group of Americans don't think that way. So, trying to juggle between that and decide who I want to put myself into.

### **Bridging**

For the fourth theme, the term bridging is chosen because it illustrates the process of crossing a bridge between cultures. This finding is central to this study as it highlights the process of acculturation experienced by study participants and speaks directly to the research question guiding this study. The bridging process, as described by the participants in this study, illustrates how participants were forced to find ways to balance aspects of their identities as individuals navigating two cultures: their heritage culture and the host culture. This theme includes the subthemes referred to as the six C's : (1) *Changes*, (2) *Crisis: A Reflection of Identity*, (3) *Challenges*, (4) *Cultural Differences*, (5) *Context: Racial Issues*, and (6) *Coping Mechanisms*.

### ***Changes***

Changes were described by participants as being practical and personal shifts that occurred during the study-abroad process. Practical changes were noted as shifts in daily life,

such as role changes from professional to student, going from using a car to taking public transportation, having limited resources such as finances, having more Internet access, and habit shifts in things such as grocery shopping and cooking routines. Mario commented, "...I quickly became aware that my social status changed dramatically....[I] had limited resources because I wasn't working, I was a student...that's one of the changes that I felt very quickly and very intense." In addition, Fish commented, "We can use the Internet much more. You are able to access much more videos that associate with the thing that you learn...I don't think a strong coverage of Internet could cover that in my country."

Personal changes were also described as a part of the adjustment experience and resulted in many positive changes in the lives of participants, which included learning about themselves. Boxexas said, "I become more and more empathetic person, more flexible." They also learned about others in the process of adjustment. Mario expressed, "I feel I grew...in my culture awareness and sense of being in a different culture...my world view expanded...compared to...who I was...before coming to the U.S."

### ***Crisis: Reflection of Identity***

In addition, participants also engaged in reflection on their own identity during the process of bridging. Participants realized that living in a new culture forced them to adapt in a myriad of ways. This included changing behaviors and patterns they had previously been used to, and it was brought up that they could not hold on to old ways of being. This experience was described by Manuel as like being a "fish out of the water." He further explained that the study abroad experience impacted him culturally and shared, "At certain points it felt like ... I was thrown on the ground just, like, flopping trying to get air."

Some participants also voiced that they “feel like a baby” because they had to re-learn some basic things. Some referred to this as an identity crisis. Preeti illustrates this phenomenon: “I feel like a baby in this culture where...[it is] difficult for people...when they come here and...don't know...almost identity crisis.” According to Sarah, “...It feels sometimes like that when you go to a new place like you're a baby, you don't even know how to do basic things.”

These experiences led the participants to learn different identities. Ana described, “...I used to think of myself as Colombian... back home, we never have... race, ethnicity... I didn't think much of it until I got here, I became a minority and that's when it hit me.... I started... figuring...[my] identities...” All of this leads to an existential question that individuals have to face. Miles’ quote: “How much do I want to adapt? How much do I want to hold on to who I was, before being open for a change?”

Some participants mentioned that they needed to adopt the U.S. society's way of living to be able to survive. Sua stated, “...So gradually, uh, by, uh, having more interactions with others in a professional setting, and, like, in a casual setting, I think I learned more about how to talk and behave.” Other participants had experienced that staying open and flexible helped them learn to be shaped by the new community while also holding to the self-identity that the individual had formed before coming to the U.S. Tika quoted the process of dancing between the two cultures, “Like, how I can learn to dance differently, you know, like, live differently and still be okay for them, you know.” Manuel also noted that

...The adjustment is about, can I work with who I am within this different set of rules and connections and people and see and be aware who I am and hold on to that identity, but still be flexible enough to fit and work with where I am.

## *Challenges*

Language barriers were highlighted as a major challenge by participants, as language is central in communication during the counseling experience. Participants' struggles with language led them to difficulties expressing their thoughts in academic settings and demonstrating empathy with a client's emotional experience in practicum and internship. Boxexas explained his language struggle by saying, "...especially in this academic environment, where you can't express yourself clearly in English, sometimes people tend to look at you as a stupid person."

Academic challenges were another struggle that participants had to go through. They acknowledged differences in the education system that impacted their academic performance. Hannah shared, "I don't have any knowledge about the United States education system... of course, I couldn't understand what they're saying, especially like history... zero understanding, I was sitting there, zoned out. I didn't know what was going on in that classroom."

Some participants needed to learn to navigate student-teacher relationships and class participation expectations that differed from those in their home countries. One participant remembered being asked to share her thoughts in class, which was different from her home country, where learning is driven more by reading textbooks and listening to professors' lectures.

As counseling students, participants stated the challenge of grasping material because of their language barriers and/or a lack of cultural context for the material being discussed. Almost all the materials are tailored to the context of the host culture; specifically, they mentioned that the multicultural class is challenging. Lili articulated,

... Just because I was not familiar with the history. Probably common sense [for] people who grow up here... so it was difficult for me to participate because I didn't want to say

something... sometimes I'm not sure if my perspectives would fit, again, without understanding everything fully.

As a White male from a European country, Manuel believed he was not prepared to deal with the emotional components of multicultural discussions. He stated,

I feel like the multicultural class was not culturally situated... The American history [that] is so specific; that not having [that being] introduced and explained... caused a lot of unnecessary hurt that I was able to pierce through, like two or three months later.

Another challenge that participants experienced was dealing with losses, isolation, and the need to be visible. These participants acknowledged that living in a new culture required them to create a new community. However, they struggled to feel connected because of cultural differences. Tiny commented, "So I'm like... I cannot get inside and I still kind of like... I'm just watching... like people play in the inside and I'm still on the outside to look how they play like that."

Since one of the important aspects of bridging reported by participants was community, many of them found it challenging to build relationships, especially with domestic students. They explained that their relationships with domestic students were superficial. As Yana put it, "I found it difficult to make strong bond, like a really deep bond with Americans." Hannah acknowledged that Americans are friendly and kind, however, there are barriers to building the deeper relationships that she and other participants desired. She quoted, "They usually like, be nice and be really kind, when, we just talk... but... I feel like... there will be kind of [a] wall between us. We're friends, but not really like, close, close friends."

Besides that, language barriers become reasons why building relationships with domestic students is challenging and tough. Ana quoted,



...I just feel, you know, they all know it's my second language, but sometimes I just feel dumb like stopping the conversation and being, "You said, what? What is that? What does that mean?" And just having those, like, two extra minutes of someone explaining something to me. I think I get very self-conscious about that still.

Manuel, Miles, Alice, and Mario experienced lack of acknowledgment of their international status, because their racial and physical attributes resemble White individuals. Manuel called it the experience of 'the invisible immigrants.' Even though they acknowledged that it could be an advantage for them, it mostly served as a challenge. Mario explained, "...I [was not] perceived as [an] immigrant and as a person from a different culture. So, all of a sudden, all these tensions and cross-cultural issues became much more real to me." These experiences were painful. Miles said,

I'm different from you. I'm not American...but I look the same and sound the same. So, how much of what I say will you listen to because you think I'm American? And how much would you listen if you knew that I wasn't?

Manuel also added, "It has been confusing and to a certain extent, painful, especially like, not being seen as an international student."

For six participants, finances became a challenge. Tika, Manuel, and Boxexas, as master's students, felt that the living expenses and education are very expensive because IS have to pay out-of-state tuition. Manuel explained, "And I wasn't really expecting how expensive it is here, especially in the [city name] area. That was quite a shock coming from a relatively poor part of Europe." Moreover, doctoral students relied more on graduate assistantships (G.A.). The G.A. was not meant to support their living expenses, let alone the demand for doctoral students to publish, attend, and present at conferences. Alice, a doctoral student, openly vocalized,

I would say that as much as it is important for...doctoral [students] to value conferences and publishing, know that your IS cannot afford to go to a conference unless you pay for them to. So, they're not going, not because they don't want to... [but] because they don't have the money to, and they're just coming up with excuses... They didn't submit it, because they didn't have the funds to go. Otherwise, of course, they would! There's no reason for an international student to say, "Yeah, I don't want to get involved in the profession." That's not it. It's just the reality that paying for tuition is already too much.

Some participants reported stress related to visa restrictions. These restrictions hampered their ability to live a "normal life" as articulated by Mario. Participants also experienced struggles to find a job off campus to support them financially during their study. Alice explained, "Because I had a lot of constraints, I couldn't just get a job. Americans thought it was weird that... I cannot just walk inside Target and ask for a job." It also added stress to career pursuits after graduation. Diya shared, "It was hard. To get a job, find a job and, to move on with the career. It was surely very, very difficult, very stress-provoking."

Additionally, as counseling students who must complete mandatory practicum and internship hours, they have to consider how it will impact their visa. Hannah shared her experience navigating this issue with the help of her professor, who is also a Korean. She shared, "When I get accepted [for an internship], I have to do 1,000 hours [of] commitment... later we figure out, there'll be some visa problem, because, like, we graduate in next year May, but [the] 1,000 commitment process finishes next July something." International students are expected to keep up with immigration law and regulations. Leti explained, "Um, I think the most challenging is... [the] immigration and all of the laws. I'm trying to like, be in compliance while I'm in school... That's been the most challenging."

The last part of the challenges that participants shared was the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides fearing for their health, the worldwide pandemic has influenced their transition process as IS. Holly shared her journey of getting a student visa to be able to attend her program in person. “Because of pandemic, the U.S. embassies in China were closed. I couldn't get a visa. Then...I traveled... to Cambodia, attempting to get a U.S. visa, but I was rejected there. So, it was a whole journey.”

Participants reported that their social life became really limited. Not only that, doctoral students articulated the impact of COVID-19 towards the budget cuts to their G.A. Lili described, “Right in the pandemic, universities [experienced] budget cuts. We were facing a potential cut of graduate assistantship... If I didn't get G.A., then I would have to pay for the tuition and my living expenses. So, that was very stressful.”

Due to the socio-political climate in the U.S., participants experienced a lot of fear, especially with the sudden change in immigration regulation during the Trump administration era. Alice shared, “When Trump told us to go home. Well, that rocked my world...it was horrible. I couldn't even describe [how I felt]. I cried for like, two whole days, and I had social support around this.” Ana felt on edge as well, “...What do I do? Like, do I leave? Do I stay? What's gonna happen? ... [The] visa process became so complicated. The... restrictions are weird... everything is on the edge.”

Participants who come from Eastern countries shared their experiences with racism and anti-Asian hate crimes. The experience ranges from being avoided in public spaces to being accused of carrying the COVID-19 virus. Sua described, “I was walking on the street, suddenly the street got cleared because everyone avoided me. Um, yeah, so I experienced shunning... [and] my friends experienced more severe, like, harsh things.” Holly experienced rejections by

her American friends and college professor in China because her hometown was near Wuhan, China, where COVID-19 started. She said,

I can't think of a word, like inhumane, even, judgment and requirement for me at a time... my American friends [in China] said you can't come here, so please just leave. So, they were afraid of the virus I might be carrying, and my Chinese advisor was so scared to even allow me into the city. And then a friend of mine, a Chinese friend of mine was in France at the time. She hasn't been in China for a year at that point. So there's no way that she has COVID. Her French classmates would spit on her because she carries the virus.

Some participants also felt stuck in the U.S. or in their home countries due to travel restrictions. Shine shared, "It makes my life kind of harder for international travel between U.S. and China. It's more about Chinese, like crazy policies. Not necessarily crazy, but strict policies, that's a nicer way to say it. Make things super difficult." Deku added, "I think the first thing is, being worried about leaving here, America, because not knowing [if] they [will] let me back in. It's scary." Despite the restrictions, some participants acknowledged the benefits of virtual class and conferences. Shine said, "I recognize that there are more virtual conference which are much more affordable."

### ***Cultural Differences***

Most participants highlighted cultural experiences that differed from the culture in their home countries. These differences included values, social norms, and way of life. Most participants identified that the individualistic culture of the U.S. stood out since most of the participants came from a collectivistic culture. That individualistic culture also includes the concept of freedom, autonomy, and independence. Preeti explained the differences compared to the collectivistic values in her home.

[There's] a certain way of doing life in India. The whole concept of accountability to your community before anything else... has changed after coming to a very individualistic culture in the U.S. It's up to you what you want to do, and your freedom is something you hold very high.

Most participants reported that U.S. culture honors respect for one another's boundaries, and is less judgmental, more friendly, and less hierarchical. This experience made participants feel less pressured in making connections or voicing their thoughts in or outside class. Ana shared, "I think socially speaking, the way I made or maintained friendships was kind of like, different in terms of, like, values and, like, expectations, um, things like that." Even so, Alice struggled with building relationships because of cultural differences. She shared, "Because for me, relationship [is] flexible and... happen through intuition. I will talk to you if you're by yourself. Well, Americans don't see it that way. If you are by yourself... you just want to be by yourself." These cultural differences also influenced them emotionally. Tiny stated, "I feel scared, you see. I feel scared because I know nothing."

***Context: Racial Issues/Discrimination***

Participants also talked about how racial issues and discrimination in the U.S. impacted them personally and professionally. As individuals who tend to look and sound different from their domestic peers, they often felt unwelcome, unsafe, and othered. Manuel said, "There was a distinct sense of otherness, especially to people who spoke a different language or people who look different." Boxexas, Sua, and Tika shared their experiences of how people avoided them or got angry when they tried to interact with their kids. The sense of otherness speaks a lot to the idea from participants that U.S. society puts people into boxes. Five participants identified that they were treated according to stereotypes. Ana shared,

I think when it came to talking to people about where I was from, it was a big shock. I'm from Colombia. I know there's like, this stigmatized idea like drugs and whatever people see on Netflix shows like, Narco's and stuff like that ... it was shocking for me, meeting professors who are... [making] random comments, "Oh, my god it's so good that you made it to the U.S." or like "did you guys have WiFi?" or "what is it like down there? How do you do escape?"

Racial discrimination towards Black people was experienced by Boxexas, Fish, and Leti, and Islamophobia was experienced by Yana. Leti shared, "I faced a lot of discrimination, because I had a thicker accent, um, dark skin...I went to a PWI [predominantly white institution], so a lot of people did not look like me. And, so, I experienced a lot of discrimination, microaggressions there." Boxexas also shared that he became very self-conscious and that the first thing people noticed was his Blackness, which made him feel unsafe. He asked, "If a citizen doesn't feel safe because they are Black, how about me?" For Yana, the experience of Islamophobia was also real. As a person who identifies as Muslim, she was shocked and scared when someone came to her house and made derogatory remarks about Islam.

Discrimination also happened inside the academic programs. Two participants, in particular, experienced microaggression from faculty and staff members because they came from different countries. They reported that there are extra steps or extra barriers that they had to go through to finish their degrees. Diya shared,

The administrative assistant just made things difficult. Every semester, there was some issue... [for example] she would just make things difficult for the grant money to come in or she wouldn't make this so simple or possible. Another white student, getting the grant

is so simple. For me, they would make the process challenge. “Oh, she didn't submit this paperwork” or “she should be here by 11” blah, blah, blah. And ... they just find flaws.

Another experience was that they were being graded unfairly and treated differently than their peers. Diya expressed, “So that's what I felt, constant, constant bullying.”

Some participants recognized that the Trump presidential era had heightened the racial tension and discrimination experiences for IS. Yana associated that with the feeling of being rejected by this country. “I feel like...this country is not appreciating immigrants or the diversity that IS bring to this country as much as they used to do so in the past.”

In the context of COVID-19 and the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, participants from Asian backgrounds were impacted severely. The experience is not a single layer, and it is intertwined in other areas as well. For example, Tika shared, “In 2020 when it was heightened my reaction was all lives matter not just black lives... I experienced discrimination myself...the pandemic, there's Asian hate everywhere. Asians getting called names, simply because it was assumed it started by the Chinese.”

### ***Coping Mechanisms***

There are two distinct types of coping employed by participants to navigate cultural differences, including extrinsic and intrinsic coping. When participants utilized extrinsic coping mechanisms, they relied on external sources to help them deal with stressful situations. While if participants utilized intrinsic coping mechanisms, they developed personal strategies that focused on internal sources.

External coping mechanisms include reminders of home cultures and social support. Participants found ways to have reminders of their home cultures, including engaging in activities that have a taste of home, such as through media, connecting with people at home or

people who come from the same country or region, and eating or cooking food from home.

Those activities helped them through the transition process. Lili said,

I watch a lot of Chinese TV shows...listen to Chinese songs...speak Chinese... in my apartment. My roommate is also Chinese. [I] make Chinese food. And also, play Chinese games, right? In terms of cards and board games...[then] I feel...personally ...comfortable...when it comes to embracing American culture.

Social support was fostered through connections with individuals from the host country, home country, and other IS. Participants identified receiving support from individuals in host cultures such as from their cohort, domestic friends, family or friends who live in the U.S., other individuals of color, personal counseling, and faculty, mentors, or supervisors. Having trusted people to verbally process participants' experiences was critical as they felt heard and understood. Culturally sensitive faculty members were believed to be an important support for participants during their academic endeavors. "Faculty [members] in my program, which was kind and also culturally sensitive and help me in my cross-cultural experience," Mario reported. Having faculty whom they could trust helped them in the transition process. Lili also shared, "I could cry in my advisor's office; that has been really helpful."

Another important external component was the involvement with other IS. Ana said,

We are on the same boat. Like, we're all here, as internationals, like, you know I'm struggling. I know you're struggling. Um, so, I think we just connect in a different way that I can't connect with someone who's being here.

One other significant extrinsic factor identified by some study participants was the counseling center. Mario benefitted greatly from his experiences there: "College Counseling Center!...I was able to share some of my emotional experiences with a counselor. That was a huge help."



Intrinsic factors also aided their coping as they bridged the different cultures. Participants identified intrinsic factors such as being proactive, engaging in self-care practices, taking time to self-reflect, reaching out for help, and focusing on self-improvement. “I think my biggest like coping mechanism when I get stressed... [is] talking about it. I feel like the moment I talk to people, at the same time [I] reflect on it myself,” Ana mentioned. In addition, being proactive to understand and become more familiar with their status as IS has helped ease some of the burdens of the unknown. Leti, as a person who loves planning, said,

Doing a lot of research into immigration in order to stay abreast on that. To make sure that I am doing what I'm supposed to be doing... ensuring that I have a contingency plan all the time, because of that temporary status, [inaudible] what is happening or what will happen. So, having like a backup plan and not thinking that this, end-all-be-all.

Preeti and Sarah said having a humble and open posture helps them to become more flexible with the change. Preeti shared, “And knowing and being aware and having an open posture to how those two cultures [influence] you and allowing that to change you as well.”

### **Bridged Cultural Identity**

This theme describes the bridged cultural identity that participants formed as they sought a balance between their home and host cultures. Subthemes include (1) *Adding a New Layer*, (2) *Transformation*, and (3) *Advocacy*.

#### ***Adding a New Layer***

This subtheme explained that instead of being integrated and blending two or more cultures, participants added a new layer of identity while living in the U.S. In other words, instead of losing parts of themselves, they gained a new identity. Miles, Sarah, and Alice described this process as an active process. “And I still strongly identify with my family culture

back in South Africa and some of the cultural experiences there. But then being here, I think just adds an extra layer to it, rather than it changing,” Miles said.

In this added new layer of self, participants discussed the appreciation of the two cultures and thus they developed an enhanced cultural self that emerged because of their bridging experience. Alice, for example, said,

I see myself as being both and having an allegiance to both cultures and being grateful for both cultures at the same time. So, I feel like a 100% American and a 100% Brazilian. I don't feel, half and half. I feel like I am both at the same time ... I will never be just American...will never be just Brazilian. So, today when I do anything, I never think is this appropriate for the American culture? I just do it. I just behave in that sense of, it feels natural for me, to just be, and at the same time, not being, like, bothered if somebody just doesn't like that aspect, because they might be Brazilian.

Participants also described learning to retain their home culture while also attaining the host culture, mentioning being “balanced” and a “dual citizen.” This seemed to foster a sense of normalcy for participants and a way for them to understand how they fit into their host environment. Fish commented, “...Even though it’s a new environment, it’s not too new that you can’t adjust, but you can still have those meaningful connections in ways that almost resemble your own culture.”

For some participants who come from collectivistic cultures, this bridged cultural identity means also that they have a differentiated self. Boxexas, for example, said, “I think I’ve been able to ponder more...to adjust in a way that I don’t...lose my identity...becoming more tolerant...and less rigid about some elements regarding my world view.” He also commented on the cultural impact of his time abroad, saying, “I didn’t say that I became a person with an

individualistic culture, no... I think I [am] becoming less collectivistic in some aspects of my life.”

### ***Transformation***

Participants described that the whole process of living in the U.S. is a transformative experience. This transformation is also a continual process and not a destination itself. Participants acknowledged positive gains personally and professionally, such as gaining awareness and a better understanding of themselves and the profession. All participants discussed their experience of continual learning on a personal level, saying that they are interested in seeking out new experiences, asking others for help, and learning how to be more independent and solve issues on their own. Fish remembered, “It has been a big learning curve to be exposed to this opportunity to, for me, personally, to just grow as a professional, but to also grow as a person.” Alice added, “Today... I feel more confident in who I am, because I know who I am. Like, I know, the reality that I am American, and I am Brazilian.”

Professionally, seven participants discussed various additions to their counseling knowledge. Manuel said, “In counseling, especially working with people of different backgrounds, different race, different nationality, that also pushes and broadens my understanding of [the counseling field].” Other participants echoed this, noting that the cross-cultural opportunity presented by studying abroad was very helpful, impactful, and positive. Sarah commented, “...It’s funny, I feel actually more professional, more equipped, more able.” Preeti specifically mentioned,

I really appreciate that over here and to have that structure and to look at this what I'm working with this is my boundary, et cetera as a mental health counselor...which actually

gave me rich experiences...I had already learned a lot of things, but I just didn't have a name to it.

Eight participants recognized gaining confidence throughout their international studies, resulting in the ability to function more efficiently in daily life. Specifically, participants reported greater comfort in going about their identity and daily business, improving their ability to perform professional tasks, and improving their ability to participate in school and social settings more frequently. Participants reported feeling good about this improvement and having a greater sense of professionalism. Sua voiced, "I think I became more confident about myself, my competency as an educator, and as a researcher, and as presenter, as a supervisor, as a counselor."

Participants described the change initiated by studying abroad as satisfying, worthwhile, good, and positive. Tiny emphasized, "I...will never regretted going abroad." Yana mentioned, "I'm not sure if I could feel the same [in] (my home country) or in any other countries." Similar sentiments were expressed by other participants, with many emphasizing their personal growth. Some described becoming a person who would not have developed without the experience of studying abroad, particularly being a student in the counseling field. Miles said,

...especially, like, in a counseling program, where it's a lot more self-reflective, it's a lot of like, thinking about be who you are, being more self-aware. [The program] has accelerated that process for me a lot. So, it's been good. It's been really good.

### ***Advocacy***

Due to their experiences during the bridging, participants indicated that they developed more awareness of their marginalized identity. Their awareness made them able to intentionally choose how to act and respond to situations that tend not to go in their favor because of their

international status. Diya reported, “I’ll be more vigilant now... I [see] something wrong, I would call them out. That’s all. I don’t have to feel nervous or I don’t have to be ashamed. Just call them out, that’s all.”

In addition, 13 participants mentioned that the awareness also helped shape their professional identity and their responsibilities to social justice. Participants felt that they have the responsibility to learn more. For example, Manuel said that the awareness forced him to look and examine his perception of the situations.

I do carry responsibility... it is my job to learn...listen... act or not act, depending on the situation...what I perceive to be justice...it forces me to look and examine myself... inward and outward ... forces me to look into the present and forward.

Furthermore, participants also indicate that their responsibilities include advocating for their clients, students, and peers who are other IS and people of minority. For example, Lili mentioned,

“...I feel more responsibility. As a counselor, I have the responsibility. I want to make sure that my clients are well and all that, right? But as a counselor educator in training, I feel that responsibility more. I want to make sure that I could create space in the classroom and just kind of see how my faculty instructor when I’m co-teaching with them, how they would do it, and also in supervision, all that. I definitely feel a lot more responsibility.

### **Summary of the Theory**

Based on the findings, I developed a grounded theory of international counseling graduate students' acculturation process while studying in the U.S. (see Figure 1). This theory was grouped into three major parts, starting with an individual’s life before the U.S. and motivations for studying abroad, which then moved into the circular bridging process. The bridging process

started when IS stepped into the host culture and began their studies and ended in the transformation of their identity.

In the first major group, the participants acknowledged that opportunities to pursue studies in the U.S. were based on their interest in counseling and available funding. Once they entered the U.S., a theme that came out from the data was the “burst out of the bubble” experience. This was the stage where participants experienced their first impression or realization or awareness about living in the new culture. They realized their international status, experienced culture shock, and developed initial coping mechanisms to survive. Then, participants moved to the bridging process, which constitutes the focus of the model, and is highlighted as a process of transition that includes the reflection on identity, changes, challenges that they face, and the cultural differences that they have to navigate. In addition, the racial and political climate in the U.S. played into some of their experiences living as foreigners in the U.S. A complex relationship between the international student status that the participants held, the political climate, and the COVID pandemic intensified their experiences living abroad. Additionally, the amount and type of coping mechanisms that they employed were shown to influence how smoothly the process of bridging went.

The model concludes with a bridged cultural identity as a result of transformation through the six C’s of bridging. Participants identified they developed a new layer of identity, instead of changing/losing parts of themselves, which helped them to thrive in their daily and academic lives. Due to the continuous process of learning and adapting, the bridged cultural identity is not a destination; rather, it is an identity reached when individuals feel well-acclimated to their host environment. At any time, an individual can return to the bridging

process due to experiences with any of the six elements. This then results in an updated bridged identity for the individual.

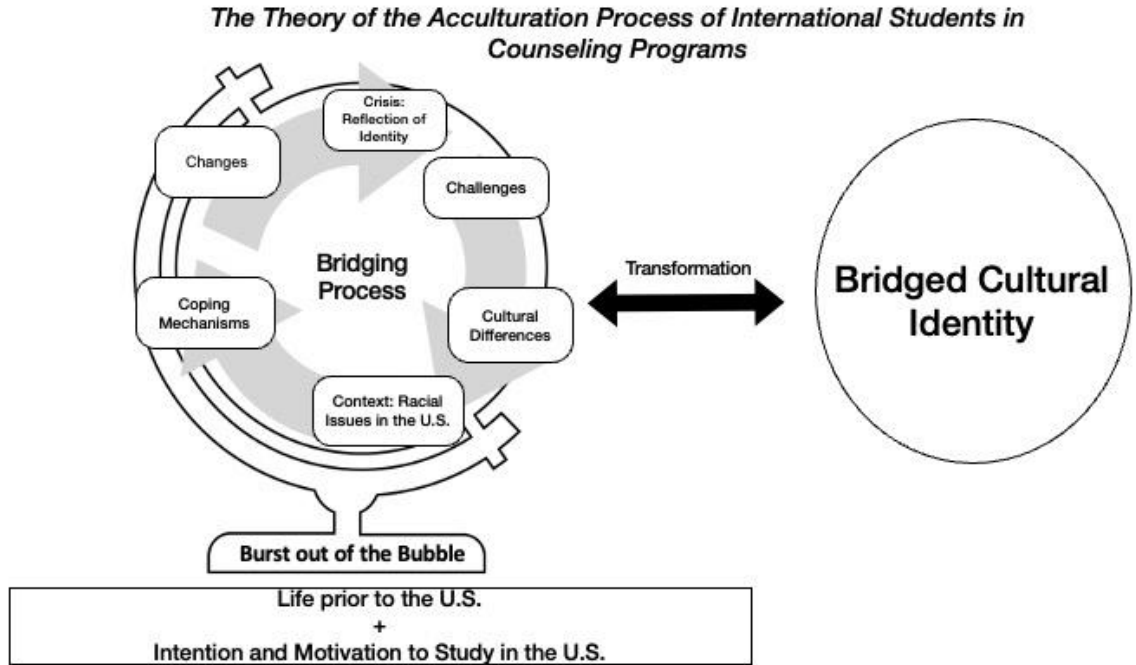


Figure 1. *The theory of the acculturation process of international students in counseling programs*

### Advice

This theme does not fit the theoretical framework thematically; however, participants shared some advice in hopes of making a better acculturation experience for IS. This advice section is divided into two parts: advice for other IS who are entering or are currently in the acculturation process and advice for domestic individuals, which includes personnel in academic programs and other domestic students.

#### **For International Students**

The participants in this study shared that to acculturate well, IS are advised to proactively seek out connections, immerse themselves in the U.S. culture, and reach out for help. While it is

comfortable for IS to stick together for support, it is also important for them to engage with the local community and try something different to challenge themselves. This is one way that a support system can be built. Leti suggested, “Make sure [to] connect yourself with local people to build a support system because it can be lonely and you want to make sure that you know people who are [also] physically there for you while you're here.”

Other participants also highlight that even though the purpose of IS in the U.S. is to study, it would be a good balance to also engage with other activities and enjoy their time in the U.S.. Deku specified, “Go out and do different things, experience new things, try different things, try different foods. You know, different people, do different activities. Maybe join some clubs or something.” Additionally, knowing that the transition process is hard, participants encouraged IS to keep trusting the process and be gracious towards themselves. Tika added, “Be patient. Like, that, be okay that it is different, and it is a little bit difficult.” Sua shared from her experience, “I struggled [with] imposter syndrome. So, I want to tell them [to] be confident. You can be confident. It's okay to be yourself; you will get there. You can be gracious to yourself.”

Ana summarized the advice for other IS well. She mentioned,

I think my biggest advice would be to be kind. Take it easy. Get involved, emerge yourself... yes academics are important, but, you can only go do all these little things so many times while you're here. So, enjoy yourself... meet people. Don't be afraid of putting yourself out there, even if it's... hard and complicated sometimes with that whole cultural piece.

### **For Faculty**

Participants mentioned that acknowledgment and awareness of IS is an important component. Knowing IS includes the awareness of immigration regulation and laws, and



awareness of different upbringings and backgrounds that lead to unique needs compared to their domestic peers. Ana specified that she would like to see faculty members' awareness of the presence of IS in their program and a basic understanding of IS.

Another issue that participants brought up was the desire for them to receive support according to their particular needs. Deku shared, "They were away from home. So, it would be nice... [faculty] checked in... or provide extra support." Another example: Sua shared that she had to advocate for herself to get help on the grammar and sentence structure part of her candidacy exam. She voiced, "When students have a language barrier, educators need to remove those barriers for students' success...achievement... or performance." Additionally, Lili shared,

I think supervisors, faculty members, being more understanding of the specific situations. For example, we did not grow up here. There might be things that we don't know right now, not using that as a way to evaluate us. I think the evaluation needs to be a little more sensitive to that. You can't just use the one criteria. I think that might not be right.

Additionally, participants want faculty to include an international perspective into the counseling and counselor education training. Ana verbalized, "I think they're trying to be aware of having people from multiple backgrounds in their programs, which is beautiful, and I love it. But, I think that international piece also needs to be added in it." There's a need for contextualization and inclusion of IS' viewpoints. Alice also articulated,

When international student comes in, they do...offer cultural aspects...that can contribute to the counseling profession as a whole. So, do not take for granted the reality that you have in IS in your program, but leverage that in into creating a culture that welcomes diversity, and create a culture that just see individuals for who they are, and how they can bring different aspects of how counseling and psychology look like.

Moreover, some participants also mentioned that they would appreciate it when the academic programs or the university facilitated cross-cultural engagements among domestic students and IS. Holly communicated,

[They need to] be cautious to not separate IS with domestic students because we are already outsiders, so doing, international-students-specific events, sometimes are not helping... Instead of doing that, educate your domestic students. How do you interact with international student? How, how do we help them to develop curiosity to other countries?

In conclusion, both IS and domestic individuals have responsibilities to aid the transition process of IS. International students need to be proactive in developing their support system. Domestic individuals need to be intentional in knowing their international student fellows. If both could be achieved, it would create a welcoming, warm, and inclusive environment for IS and aid the acculturation process.

### **Member Checking**

I conducted three member-checking focus groups after the theory was created. The focus groups aimed to present the results of the theory and request participants' feedback based on their experiences. After sending the invitation email to the participants, 10 out of 11 participants that I recruited for this current study responded and agreed to attend the member-checking sessions that I held.

Everyone who attended the member-checking interviews received a \$50 electronic gift card as a token of appreciation. The first focus group consisted of Ana, Deku, Alice, and Shine. The second focus group was attended by Lili, Sua, and Holly. The third focus group was attended by Diya and Hannah; I met with Tika individually to accommodate her schedule.

## **Reflection on the Overall Model**

All participants confirmed that their experiences were depicted well through the model. Ana, Diya, Hannah, Holly, and Sua reported that they felt relieved and validated that other IS experienced similar issues. Ana felt the transition process was isolating, confirmed by other group members and participants. In particular, Sua identified appreciation that the model is not a linear process and gives her permission to come back into the process of acculturation, not need to have it all together as she is transitioning into the new culture while navigating her studies.

Lili and Sua reflected that the burst out of the bubble term is very representative of their experience of coming out from the dream of living in the U.S. or a new country and realizing that there were many aspects that they needed to deal with that were beyond their expectations. Additionally, Deku affirmed that the initial shock that individuals experience is unavoidable.

In the bridging process, all participants said that the process was not surprising. Even so, Alice expressed sadness that challenges were depicted strongly as part of the journey that IS have go to through. Moreover, Diya appreciated the acknowledgment of the context of the American racial issues in the model. Regarding that, Tika also reflected on the current political and racial situation in the U.S. She wondered if the political and racial climate has set a stipulation for when IS step their feet in the U.S. From her experience, she felt that IS are automatically a “secondary” citizen and are seen as “less than.” Furthermore, Holly felt validated that her struggle in the multicultural class and discussions was also portrayed.

Alice, Tika, and Ana shared similar feelings when discussing the bridged cultural identity. While they felt connected with both the U.S. and home cultures, at the same time, there was an element of struggle to feel connected with both. Tika articulated that she is not American enough and not Indonesian enough. Similarly, Ana questioned where she actually fits in.

Alice still experiences struggles even though she has been living in the U.S. for nine years. Additionally, Alice felt some hidden identities were depicted as well in the model. Aside from that, she also feels that seeing the model was affirming for her, and despite the challenges, she experienced growth, similar to Tika's reflection. Tika voiced that she saw growth instead of being stuck, and that she and other IS continue to thrive and not just survive.

### **Additional Reflection Outside the Model**

In the conversation that I had with the participants, some discussed additional thoughts and wonderings. Holly remembered that after the individual interview, she encountered challenges in adjusting to a new role as a counselor/worker. She wondered how professional identity develops as an international student. In addition, Deku wondered what the acculturation process would look like for IS who have been in the U.S. for less than 2 years. Finally, Ana wondered what the experience is for IS who decided to move back to their home country.

### **Summary of Chapter Four**

This chapter describes the data analysis and theory development process and the findings. The data analysis process summarized how I systematically analyzed the data. The theory development process highlighted the thought process that I had while theorizing the acculturation process of IS in counseling programs. Finally, the findings showed that life before the U.S. and intention and motivation to study in the U.S. were a foundation of the acculturation process that IS experience as they study abroad in the U.S. The theme burst out of the bubble served as a "step zero" of the transition process that I called bridging. Bridging is the circular process that IS go through as they navigate their daily lives and academic lives. This process led to a bridged cultural identity, which is the transformation of identity after undergoing the whole acculturation process. This bridged cultural identity is not a definitive result; instead, it is believed to be a

process where individuals could go back and repeat one or more parts of the bridging process. All components that encompassed the theory arose from voices of the participants as evidence. Finally, participants shared some advice for IS who are going through the acculturation process as well as suggestions for faculty members or academic program personnel to better support IS' acculturation process.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study aimed to develop a theory that would answer questions about the acculturation process of international students (IS) in counseling programs, offer accounts for how it happens, and aim to account for why acculturation happens. The main goal of this grounded theory was to fill the dearth of literature that specifically addresses the acculturation process that international counseling students undergo during their study in the U.S. I used the constructivist perspective of grounded theory as it offered multiple perspectives to answer the research questions. In addition, the grounded theory also allowed the researcher's position and perspective to interact with the data as an inherent part of the research reality. This was important as I identify as an international counseling student and have walked this journey myself.

The research questions that guided this study were:

4. What is the process of acculturation that international counseling students experience?
5. How do international students overcome their challenges in academic settings and daily lives?
6. What helps or hinders the acculturation process?

To answer these questions, this grounded theory approach utilized semi-structured interviews and three member-checking focus groups. The data was analyzed and coded for themes highlighting IS' processes. Five themes emerged from the data: *Life before the U.S.*, *Intention and Motivation for Studying in the U.S.*, *Bursting Out of the Bubble*, *Bridging*, and *Bridged Cultural Identity*. These five themes were grouped into three major parts. In the first part, life before the U.S. and motivation and intent to study were foundational influences on the overall bridging process. The second part captured the moment when individuals stepped into the

U.S. and their initial encounter with living in a different culture, along with the experience of cultural shock. The bridging process included the six Cs that shaped the individuals' cross-cultural experiences. The third part emerged from the bridging process when individuals developed bridged cultural identities that were unique to themselves as they transformed and thrived in the U.S.

In this chapter, I explore the study's results in connection with the research questions while considering previous literacy findings. I also explore implications for counseling practices, counselor education and training, and advocacy. Lastly, study limitations and recommendations for further research will also be discussed.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

### **Sojourners with a Purpose**

The first and second themes depicted the participants' experiences, as sojourners, before the study abroad experience and highlighted their decision to uproot and relocate to a different country to study. As the researcher, I found this first group relevant and vital as a lens to understand the bridging process holistically. The participants identified that their heritage culture and experiences before living in the U.S. played a significant role in their transition. As previously highlighted in the literature, how individuals perceive the cultural gap between the host and home cultures will determine the acculturative stress (Berry, 1997; Bochner, 2006; Ward & Geeraet, 2016). Besides that, individuals' cultural identity and sense of membership with a particular racial group influenced their international immigration experiences as they were prompted to reevaluate their membership to their cultural heritage in comparison to the host culture (Liebkind et al., 2016). The stronger identification with the heritage culture provides a sense of security while transitioning to the new culture.

## Changing Realities

This section examines the third and fourth themes. The third theme, *Bursting Out of the Bubble*, highlighted IS' initial reactions when they hit the reality of living in a different culture. Participants had initial perceptions about the U.S. based on their previous knowledge from media, other people, or personal experiences. Once they started living in the U.S., they identified that some prior knowledge was confirmed or denied. This new reality resulted in cultural dissonance or shock, as described by some IS. This linguistic term is very important. Even though culture shock has been used in most literature, Berry (1997; 2005) mentioned that culture shock is an older concept that has a negative connotation as it suggests only negative experiences and outcomes. Berry himself preferred to use “acculturative conflict” (Berry 1997, p. 13). Other literature I found has used the term *cultural dissonance* to capture the experience of confusion or uncomfortableness as individuals experience different values or beliefs in a new cultural context (Bjork et al., 2020; Martinez-Taboada et al., 2017). However, more recent literature still used the term culture shock, which was defined as unexpected psychological stress as a result of individuals' “physical and social immersion in a novel and unfamiliar cultural environment” (Pacheco, 2020, p. 3), which was described by participants in this study during their initial interviews and focus groups. Based on the findings of this study, cultural shock seems to be an accurate description of the experience and is preferred by participants to express their transition.

A few participants mentioned that the way they coped was by assimilating into the host culture. This is consistent with other literature that mentioned that assimilation is a strategy to reduce cultural conflict and stress (Berry, 2019; Ferguson & Birman, 2016). Berry (2019) mentioned that individuals who choose to assimilate have less acculturative stress. Even though participants did not mention how long they experienced the initial reactions, other literature has



highlighted that it varies and can last from a few weeks to a few months upon their arrival in the U.S. and that this period is usually the most challenging (Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

The fourth theme, The Bridging Process, outlines the unique aspects of the acculturation process experienced by study participants. This process consisted of their experiences with the six C's: (1) *changes*, (2) *crisis: identity reflections*, (3) *challenges*, (4) *cultural differences*, (5) *context: racial issues in the U.S.*, and (6) *coping mechanisms*.

These bridging elements are consistent with what is known about acculturation from literature, consisting of two important cultural components: 1) cultural maintenance and 2) contact and participation (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2005). Due to the change of status, geographical location, and culture, participants were forced to reevaluate their identities as those are deemed relevant to the culture they are currently residing. As part of their identity reflection, participants were faced with choices of how much they would retain their cultural heritage and attain the host culture (Berry & Sam, 2016a). This is also consistent with other literature that mentioned that international counseling students who engage in cultural reflection strengthen their personal and professional identities (Oliveira, 2022; Kissil et al., 2015; Li & Lindo, 2015). This also could be a unique factor because of the nature of counseling curricula that emphasizes personal reflections.

Further, IS went through a process where they realized the cultural differences between their home and the host culture created cultural conflicts, recognizing that their cultural heritages do not fit with the host culture. During this conflict, individuals reflected on their identities as they “feel like a baby” and “being like a fish out of water.” This prompted the development of a new layer of identity that fits and is more useful in the new environment (Berry, 1997; 2005).

During the acculturation process, the challenges that participants in this study experienced are also consistent with previous studies, which reported some of the barriers IS face: language barriers, culture shock, lack of support, feeling unsafe because of racial discrimination, visa restrictions, and in the past two years, the pandemic and its immigration policies and racial tensions (Behl, 2017; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hegarty, 2014; Jang et al., 2014; Lértora & Croffie, 2020; McDowell et al., 2012; Ng, 2012; Pollock et al., 2017; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Quinton, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Laws, 2020). Language barriers were the most challenging aspect for almost all IS in this study, which is also consistent with existing literature. The language barrier is the most significant challenge since it impacts individuals' ability to communicate, which is the primary modality to survival. Additionally, due to completing their studies in a different language, IS often feel they cannot grasp materials and concepts as quickly as their domestic classmates. Thus, they tend to feel lost in class and are perceived to be less intelligent and educated (Jang et al., 2014; Behl et al., 2017; Lee, 2013). Counseling as a field uses language to connect and communicate with clients, which may result in additional pressures for IS students in counseling programs.

Besides language, participants also voiced encountering a unique context of racial issues in the U.S., which has rarely been highlighted in education literature. Their acculturation experiences depended on the host culture's receptivity to the incoming culture. This is consistent with other literature on acculturation that mentioned how the host culture's receptivity towards the incoming culture might influence the smoothness of the transition process (Berry, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2010; Ward & Geeraet, 2016; Bjork et al., 2020). Xenophobia, racism based on country of origin and language ability, and islamophobia impacted their sense of belonging, causing feeling unsafe and unwelcome (Schwartz et al., 2010; Berry & Huo, 2017; Ferguson &

Birman, 2016). Some participants communicated that they experienced the difference of how Trump presidential era had also influenced the treatment towards IS and had changed to a less welcoming climate for IS. The lack of a sense of belonging made it harder for them to thrive as an individual (Kissil et al., 2015) and resulted in the experience of being othered.

Additionally, I want to acknowledge that this study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many literatures have highlighted how the pandemic has impacted IS experiences in the U.S., such as fear of getting infected, feeling stuck because of travel restrictions, worrying family members in their home countries, anxiety related to the changes in the immigration policies (Glass et al., 2021; Johnson, 2018; Laws, 2020; Rose-Wood & Rose-Wood, 2017). Many IS felt isolated due to the social distancing policies. Moreover, the pandemic has also heightened the racism and microaggression experiences specifically for individuals who come from Asian countries (Koo et al., 2021; Perz et al., 2022; Zhai & Du, 2020). These experiences were also voiced by the participants who came from Asian countries in this study. Thus, it impacted how they feel being welcomed and accepted, as well as, having a sense of belonging to the U.S. communities.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that the multicultural discussion that is core in counseling programs was hard to grasp because of the lack of knowledge of the history of U.S. cultural issues. They mentioned that not only did it impact their understanding of themselves, but they also felt a lack of self-esteem and confidence as students, future counselors, and counselor educators. This is consistent with other literature that mentioned the nuances of multiculturalism are embedded in American history, and the limited focus on only U.S. ethnic/racial minorities is unfamiliar and confusing for IS (Wah, 2014; Singh et al., 2020; Nayar-Bhalerano, 2013; Loo, 2019; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Anandavalli, 2021). Even though multiculturalism is an essential

component in their field, the internationalization and contextualization of mental health conversations were missing, which has dismissed IS's unique cultural/ethnic identity (Nayar-Bhalerano, 2013; Anandavalli, 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007).

This study also wanted to highlight the within-group differences of IS, as previous literature tends to lump IS into one big category (i.e., Wearing et al., 2021). One highlighted difference was my participants' experiences of microaggression or discrimination depending on where they come from or their physical features—for example, the participants who came from Africa and were Black experienced racism explicitly. At the same time, participants from Asian countries experienced racism more overtly during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the assumption that they brought the COVID-19 virus. Besides that, my participants, one who was a Muslim and came from a Middle Eastern country and one who was from South America, experienced Islamophobia and insensitive comments.

Moreover, participants from European countries and/or had physical features as white individuals experienced different types of microaggressions. One of the participants refers to their experiences as *invisible immigrants*. The term *invisible immigrants* was used to describe the experiences of English immigrants to Canada since 1945 (Barber & Watson, 2015) and Spaniards to the U.S. in 1868-1945 (Fernandez & Arguio, 2015). These authors used this term to describe individuals who immigrate across nations but manage to assimilate quickly, speak the same language, and share similar cultural resemblances with the new culture (Thorpe, 2015). My participants reported experiencing microinvalidation of their immigration status as they were seen as part of the majority group based on the U.S. racial context. They were expected to not struggle during their transition process and understand the context of the prominent racial issues in this country. Thus, they voiced the desire to be acknowledged as international students.

This study also sought to understand what helps the acculturation process. Participants described how they developed coping mechanisms that assisted them to thrive rather than survive. Coping mechanisms were organized into two categories: external and internal. The external support that participants received was tremendous for them. Participants described social support as an essential component during the bridging process. Like previous literature, maintaining social connections with others both in and out of their cultural/ethnic demographic (e.g., IS from their own and different countries; another person of color) is an essential component in their bridging process (Anandavalli, 2021; Berry, 2019; Sullivan-Kashubeck et al., 2015; Kuo et al., 2018). However, participants stated that social engagement with domestic students and supervisors was challenging, and difficulties in building meaningful relationships added to their acculturative stress, which is also seen in the literature on IS' acculturation experiences (Behl et al., 2017; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Moon, 2020; Sato & Hodge, 2015; Woo et al., 2015). In addition, participants highlighted the need to receive support from faculty members in the host culture, which is consistent with previous studies (Behl et al., 2017; Hegarty, 2014; Interiano & Lim, 2018). Having good relationships with faculty who supported their transition helped students bridge the two cultures. When faculty members showed an interest in getting to know an IS, both inside and outside the classroom, it provided the students a safe place for them to be themselves, feel belong, validated, and supported (Gaballah, 2014; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2013; Lértora & Croffie, 2020; Le et al., 2016; Kuo et al., 2018; Interiano & Lim, 2018; Kim, 2020).

Moreover, participants also identified that support from their community in their home country was another vital source of support, which Woo et al.'s (2015) findings mirror this result. Receiving external support while studying abroad aids the process of finding ways in a

new culture. This support also can help maintain their connection with their home culture while they encounter new realities, changes, challenges, racial issues, and cultural differences.

Additionally, maintaining their cultural heritage was found to create a sense of security during the engagement with the new culture. Consistent with Kaya (2020), changes, challenges, and opportunities impact individuals' identities. IS' identities are not static. Rather, they are dynamic and shifting as they encounter new cultures and learn to adopt new cultural, academic, and social norms. Thus, during their evaluation of their identity, they are forced to make choices on how much of themselves they retain or attain as well as how much they show or hide.

In addition to uncovering external coping mechanisms, participants revealed multiple internal sources of support. Participants consistently mentioned that personal reflection was a strategy that was utilized throughout the bridging process. They found that reflection helped them to negotiate their sense of identity and develop a new awareness of who they are in the cultural context. In this study, participants talked about the compartmentalized dichotomies of race in the U.S. This is consistent with other research that has found that through self-reflection individuals can maintain a posture of openness to receive and change to help them grow (Gaballah, 2014; Oliveira, 2022). For the participants in this study, holding on to their cultural identity while learning to be flexible and adaptive to a new culture was found to help establish a bridged cultural identity. This process also helped them move away from compartmentalized ideas of who people are and recognize that individuals interact with their culture in specific ways (Oliveira, 2022; Bjork et al., 2020).

### **Who I Am Becoming**

Finally, participants reported developing a Bridged Cultural Identity, which emerged from the bridging process. In this fifth and final theme, participants talked about adding a new

cultural layer and the transformation as individuals as a product of their acculturation. Adding a new cultural layer was described by participants as gaining a new cultural identity instead of compromising their cultural heritage, which is a unique and important finding of this study. This is similar to the idea of intersectionality, in which a person holds multiple identities simultaneously and, in this study, multiple cultural identities (Crenshaw, 2016).

Furthermore, participants mentioned the development of ‘dual citizenship.’ This is consistent with Berry’s acculturation strategies of integration, where individuals adopt the host culture as necessary while retaining aspects of the home culture (Berry, 1997; 2005; Schwartz et al., 2010). Some prior literature reports that when an individual chooses to adopt an integration strategy, they may have less psychological stress and can find more support from the host, home, and other IS (Sullivan-Kashubeck et al., 2015; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Some participants mentioned that they developed an appreciation for the two cultures, which was helpful as they developed their professional identities (Oliveira, 2022). The previous research may not capture the deeper process of identity development that is not temporary or solely as a means to adapt. The changes described by participants in this study were deeper and an adding of something new.

Further, participants were able to achieve feelings of being a ‘dual citizen’ despite incidences of discrimination they reported experiencing. This is contrary to some literature that highlighted that for integration to happen, the dominant society of the host culture should ideally be open and inclusive towards cultural diversity, have low levels of prejudice, and a sense of identification with or attachment to the larger society by all groups of people within the host culture (Berry, 1997; 2005; Schwartz et al., 2010). Further exploration is needed to understand the implications of integrated more fully versus strained acculturation.

Similarly, participants highlighted that even though they faced challenges, uncertainties, and struggles, they did not regret their decision to come to study in the U.S.; instead, they indicated their experiences were overall positive. This was consistent across all interviews. Participants described ways in which they transformed as individuals and experienced feelings of joy, personal and professional growth, confidence, and achievements. Challenges strengthened and transformed individuals (Le et al., 2016; Kaya, 2020; Oliveira, 2022). Their accounts depict a process of bridging to bridged cultural identity that is dynamic. Participants indicated that they are in a continual process of transformation on a personal and professional level. They are able to come back to the bridging process as they encounter one or more of the six Cs components (changes, crisis: identity reflections, challenges, cultural differences, context: racial issues in the U.S., and coping mechanisms). The strengths they developed are their ability to integrate and perceive the world differently because of their diverse cultural identity (Oliveira, 2022). They developed the skill to self-advocate and advocate for other people of minority status (Kaya, 2020; Oliveira, 2022).

### **Implications**

One of the purposes of this study was to fill the dearth of literature about the acculturation process that international counseling students undergo during their study in the U.S. The implications inform personnel in the counselor education field to better support IS. Furthermore, the findings of this study may assist with the recruitment and retention of IS. In this section, I highlight specific implications for training, counseling, and other IS. These implications were based on the advice participants shared during the interviews.



## **Counselor Education Training Implications**

Participants indicated they desired to be known by their faculty members and supervisors. Specifically, they wanted faculty to be aware of the existence of IS in their programs, understand basic immigration regulations and laws, show interest in understanding IS' upbringings and backgrounds, as well as the challenges they face while living and studying in the U.S. If accomplished, this would create a welcoming environment for IS, which is essential for their sense of belonging.

Faculty members should intentionally reach out to IS to show them that they matter and are heard. Studies have shown that IS who are experiencing culture shock in their new educational environment adjust better to cultural norms when they receive assistance from their instructors (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2014; Oliveira, 2022). Thus, instructors could intentionally check in with their IS, perhaps taking on a mentoring role, to help them acclimate to the new student expectations in the host culture.

Additionally, participants also desired to have a more inclusive environment. Even though the international student office has provided orientation and activities for IS, participants in this study reported that they would benefit from having more activities that involve domestic students. For this to happen, domestic students should be encouraged to interact with IS in and outside the classroom. A practical example is a buddy system or peer mentoring, where IS are paired with domestic students in their programs to help IS adjust to the new host culture (International Education Specialist, n.d.; Gaballah, 2014). This allows domestic students to learn to relate with IS and vice versa.

Further, understanding and appreciation of IS issues within counseling programs may aid in promoting positive and accepting attitudes among faculty and students. Such inclusion may

also provide space for IS to speak up about their lived experiences in class and make a deeper connection with their program. In addition, research has demonstrated that IS whose values align with those of the host institution experience more significant overall adjustment and satisfaction during their time abroad and greater engagement in social and academic activities (Bui et al., 2021; Gaballah, 2014). Thus, greater satisfaction and adjustment may be achieved by intentionally including the experiences of IS within the multicultural counseling curriculum and highlighting the shared values between IS and the program. An intentional invitation to have an open conversation about their multicultural identities will aid their transition process in CE programs (Kuo et al., 2021). By understanding diverse students' experiences and identity developments, instructors could also better advocate, serve the ever-changing student landscape, and help with internationalization (Oliveira, 2022). Besides that, as participants also reported experiencing discrimination, I want to invite faculty members to improve their knowledge of IS experiences to minimize bias and stereotyping toward IS populations.

The counseling field prides itself on a strong commitment to multicultural issues and diversity (American Counseling Association, 2014). Despite this, a critique within the counseling literature states that counseling theories and coursework often reflect a Eurocentric attitude and fail to closely examine the unique experiences of certain multicultural groups (Singh et al., 2020). Expanding the multicultural focus of counseling courses to include the experiences and acculturation processes of immigrant and international student populations can help internationalize and diversify program curricula. This can broaden the exposure to and expand appreciation of IS and sojourners among counselors-in-training, strengthening the mission of multicultural competency within the counseling field.

Furthermore, many of the participants in the study had to navigate applying multicultural and social justice concepts to cultures outside of the U.S. The literature indicates IS often struggle to contextualize the counseling perspective of the U.S. to their own culture (McDowell et al., 2012; Ng, 2006a), and also applying cultural sensitivity through their unique perspective may be a challenge (Jang et al., 2014; Reid & Dixon, 2012), especially since IS may plan to return to their home country after finishing their study. Thus, IS would likely benefit from counselor educators paying attention to this aspect of their experience, helping students integrate their new knowledge globally (Lértora & Croffie, 2020). Counselor educators also need to help carry counseling practices that transcend not only culturally, ethnically, or racially but also help apply counseling practices beyond national borders (Hohensil et al., 2013). IS need mentorship to help them be cognizant of the social and cultural factors that will impact mental health in their home countries (Hohensil et al., 2013). Besides that, faculty members and supervisors could discuss how counseling and mental health services operate in their home country (Hohensil et al., 2013). If an IS comes from a country that has traditional healing practices, a discussion of how to integrate the modern mental health practices is warranted (Admundson et al., 2013).

### **Counseling Implications**

Personal counseling has been found helpful for bridging two cultures. Outside of personal counseling, counselors-in-training peers could also help IS by providing a safe space for them to process during the transition and friendly support. Moreover, it would be helpful for counselors and counselors-in-training not to generalize IS' experiences when helping them in their acculturative process. Each international student has a unique identity and background.

Counselors-in-training counselors should be genuinely curious to understand IS' experiences better. Counselors can use broaching, an ongoing attitude of openness and

genuineness, to invite clients to talk and explore diversity issues with warmth and empathy (Day-Vines et al., 2007). Broaching could also help address bias and discrimination issues that IS frequently experienced. Additionally, counselors could utilize a culturally sensitive and holistic approach to mental health services. This includes the recognition of the importance of religion and spirituality in IS lives.

### **Fellow Sojourners**

Participants in this study also extended their support to other IS in counseling programs. Due to the challenges and struggles that they experienced, they developed a passion for advocacy. Participants mentioned that IS should also seek connections and immerse themselves in the U.S. culture. They reported that IS are also responsible for involving themselves with the new environment instead of passively waiting to be invited. IS must proactively seek help when needed and be bold for their voices to be heard.

In summary, this study added to the literature by elaborating on the acculturation process that IS in counseling programs go through. This study provided a deeper understanding of the bridging process to help inform counselors, counselor educators, and domestic students to be more aware of the presence of IS and their struggles. Besides that, this study highlighted the strengths and resources available for IS as they thrive in the new culture. To improve IS experiences in the U.S., both groups, IS and domestic individuals, are responsible. Domestic individuals such as professors, supervisors, administrative staff, and domestic students need to be aware of the needs of IS. It is the task of IS to proactively reach out, build connections, and seek help and support when they need it. When both groups work together, the IS journey in the U.S. has the strong potential to be successful.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

This study had several limitations that are important to consider when reviewing the findings and implications. One limitation is the participants' diverse experiences prior to living in the U.S. Some of the participants indicated that they had experienced living overseas before coming to the U.S. and some reported that they had a study-abroad or exchange-student experience in the U.S. for a short period. These diverse experiences might have skewed the acculturation process that I was aiming to highlight. On the other hand, it captures the reality of varied experiences interacting and engaging with other cultures in our increasingly global society.

This study intentionally included students from multiple countries of origin. While this was beneficial in achieving a large sample to develop a grounded theory, it did not allow the researcher to examine distinct differences in student experiences based on their home country. While efforts were made to highlight participants' country of origin, it would be worthwhile for future research to explore the acculturation process for IS from specific countries or regions in counseling programs.

Finally, as discussion of multiculturalism is strongly emphasized in most counseling programs, more research is needed on the internationalization of counseling curriculum and their professional identity experiences, which includes an investigation of the experiences of IS who decided to move back to their home countries and how they would apply what they have gone through in the U.S. into the context of their home countries. As for IS who would enter the professoriate, it would also be worthwhile to look into professional identity development as faculty members.

## Conclusion

Even though there has been a decline in the number of IS in the U.S. (Glass et al., 2021; IIE, 2021), IS have contributed significantly to U.S. post-secondary education. Their contributions have brought together diverse cultural groups and also built bridges between the U.S. and other nations through their diversity and multicultural perspectives (Glass et al., 2021; Hegarty, 2014). IS experience unique challenges in their adjustment during their studies that are different from domestic students. Besides that, a transition is always challenging, especially coming to an unfamiliar culture. This grounded theory study has elaborated and explored deeper the acculturation process that IS experience during their study abroad. Five major themes emerged, including: (1) *Life Before the U.S.*, (2) *Motivation for Studying in the U.S.*, (3) *Burst Out of the Bubble*, (4) *Bridging*, and (5) *Bridged Cultural Identity*. Bridging, which constitutes the focus of the model, is highlighted as a process of transition that encompasses changes, crisis: identity reflections, challenges, cultural differences, context: racial issues in the U.S., and coping mechanisms. The findings addressed the dearth of literature by providing a deeper exploration of the bridging process that IS went through and how they developed a new layer of identity to thrive in daily and academic lives. This study aims to inform professors, mentors, supervisors, and peers in counseling programs on how to empower and support so IS can succeed in their academic endeavors and daily life (Mori, 2011; Sato & Hodge, 2009).

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear Prospective Research Participants,

My name is Hanny T. Wuysang. I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program working under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Foster. I am looking for potential participants for my dissertation study. The study's title is "*The Acculturation Process of International Students in CACREP Counseling Programs: A Grounded Theory Approach.*"

The focus of this study is to understand the acculturation process that international students experience in counseling programs. Thus, your participation is valuable and needed in our profession to better support international students.

Eligibility:

- International students who hold non-immigrant visa (e.g. F-1, J-1, M-1, etc.)
- Born and raised in a country other than the United States (birth - 18 years).
- Currently enrolled in or recently graduated from CACREP accredited master's or doctoral level counseling program in the last three years.

If you meet the eligibility criteria, you'll be invited for an initial video-recorded individual interview for approximately 60 – 75 minutes. After the initial interview, you will be contacted by email to participate in a focused group to discuss the initial findings that will be approximately 90 minutes. Your total participation in this study is not expected to exceed 3 hours. Only self-selected pseudonyms will be used, and no identifiable data will be published. You will receive compensation for your participation in form of an electronic gift card of a total \$30 following the completion of the individual interview and the focused group.

I believe that these findings will help inform counselor educators of the transition process and provide insight into the support that can be offered to international students in the United States. Please find attached the IRB approval for the study. If you are interested to participate in this study, please [click here](#) or copy and paste the link below for the informed consent and demographic survey.

[https://wmich.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_3wRzJCIxcV6YbS6](https://wmich.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3wRzJCIxcV6YbS6)

This study has been approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) on **March 16, 2022**

Please feel free to contact me, [hanny.t.wuysang@wmich.edu](mailto:hanny.t.wuysang@wmich.edu), if you have further questions on concerns. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

## **Appendix B: The Interview Protocol**

### The Acculturation Process of International Students in CACREP Counseling Programs: A Grounded Theory Approach: The Interview Protocol

#### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study about your experience as an international student in the U.S. I am a doctoral student at Western Michigan University and this interview is part of my learning experience. As a student researcher, I am interviewing you and other international students to better understand the acculturation process in U.S. counseling programs.

- I will be taking notes and recording the interview, so I do not miss anything.
- All information gathered will be transcribed and de-identified prior to analyzing.
- At which point, the recording will be destroyed.
- I expect the interview to take between 60-75 minutes.
- I am really interested in your experiences, so please answer with what you think, not what you think I want to hear!
- If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you may skip a question or ask to stop the interview completely without penalty.

In this interview, there will be 2 parts. In the first part I will be asking about your experiences prior to coming to the U.S. In the second part, I will be asking about your experiences after coming to the U.S. I am interested in any experience in the transition process when studying and living in the U.S. I am curious to know your: (a) background, (b) challenges living in a different country, and (c) factors that helped and hindered your adjustment.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Since we will not use your real name, please provide a different name that we can use.

First part (Before coming to the U.S.)

1. Please describe your cultural identity prior to living in the United States.
2. What did you know about U.S. culture before moving here?
  - a. What were your expectations of U.S. culture prior to moving?
3. How would you describe the previous community you lived in before moving to the U.S.?
  - a. What did your support system look like before moving to the U.S.?

Second part (After coming to the US)

1. What made you decide to pursue graduate studies in the U.S.?
2. What was your first impression when you came to the U.S.?

3. In what ways are your experiences in your home country similar to your experiences in the U.S.?
4. In what ways are your experiences in your home country different than your experiences in the U.S.?
5. In what ways has your cultural identity changed?
  - a. In what ways has it remained the same?
6. What has been the most challenging portion of your immersion experience in the U.S.?
  - a. Overall?
  - b. Academically? Socially? Emotionally?
  - c. How do you deal with that challenge?
7. How does your experience in the U.S. influence the way you feel about yourself?
  - a. How has your experiences shaped the way you feel about your life in the U.S.?
8. What does your current support system look like?
9. Tell me about the people you interact with regularly.
  - a. How have your experiences interacting with U.S. citizens been?
  - b. How is your experience interacting with other IS?
10. What do you miss the most about your home country? Why?
  - a. What helps you feel connected to the things you miss?
11. What kinds of resources do you have for coping with the stress in an unfamiliar culture?
  - a. How do you deal with the cultural differences?
12. How, if at all, has the ongoing and recent attention to racial issues in the U.S. influenced you?
13. How, if at all, has the pandemic influenced your transition process in the U.S.?
14. What is it like to be an IS during pandemic?
15. What advice would you give to other IS who are at the beginning of their transition?
16. What would you do the same or different with what you know now?
17. In your opinion, how is your experience differ or similar to experiences of other international students in counseling programs?
18. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to share about the experiences you just described to me?

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent and Demographic Survey**

### **The Acculturation Process of Int'l Students in CACREP Counseling Programs**

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#### **Start of Block: Informed Consent**

**Western Michigan University  
Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jennifer Foster, Ph.D.

**Student Investigator:** Hanny Tishriana Wuysang, MA.

**Title of Study:** The Acculturation Process of International Students in CACREP Counseling Programs: A Grounded Theory Approach

**STUDY SUMMARY:** This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to understand what is the transition experience when studying in the U.S. counseling programs and factors help or hinder the acculturation process. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to share your experiences as a counseling international student. Your time in the study will be approximately 7 minutes to complete the demographic survey and 60-75 minutes of an individual interview. After the interviews are being transcribed, you will be invited to participate in a focused group for approximately 90 minutes. Possible risks and costs to you for taking part in the study may be emotional distress or discomfort for sharing sensitive experiences, and the potential benefits may be having your voices heard and hopefully providing support during your transition. This study does not include contingency plans for providing third-party counseling or other support. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

The following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

#### **What are we trying to find out in this study?**

The purpose of this study is to understand the acculturation process, a process in balancing between your home culture and the host culture. This study is conducted to also identify and understand the factors that help or hinder the process. The hope is that this study will provide

information to counseling programs about the complex acculturation process and what concrete steps, policies or resources that counseling programs could do or change to create a smoother process.

### **Who can participate in this study?**

You can participate in this study if:

An international student who holds a non-immigrant visa (e.g. F-1, J-1, M-1)

Born and raised in another country than the U.S. (from birth to 18y/o)

Currently enrolled or recently graduated (1-3 years) from a CACREP accredited counseling program.

### **Where will this study take place?**

Interview via WebEx.

### **What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**

The interview will be approximately 60-75 minutes. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be sent an invitation to participate in a focused group that will be approximately 90 minutes.

### **What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**

You will be asked to share your life and education experiences during your study in the U.S. There will be questions about your personal life and also your academic life, as well as your support systems and what resources you find helpful in the transition process.

### **What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**

The possible risk for you in partaking in this study is emotional distress. This emotional distress can occur because you may be sharing sensitive experiences. If you appear to be in physical or mental distress during the interview process, three potential actions may be taken. First, the topic of discussion may be changed to a less impactful question. Second, the interview may be terminated, with or without a later rescheduling. Finally, you may be removed from the study, either at your request or by the researcher. Because the research topic is relatively low in potential physical or mental risk, and you will be a fully informed volunteer, the study design does not include contingency plans for providing third-party counseling or other support.

### **What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

As a participant, this study will provide you with a place where your voices could be heard and hopefully would provide support during your transition. From your experiences, this study will also inform counseling programs and universities about international students' experiences and how counseling programs and universities can have more strategies and practical steps to help international students in their acculturation into higher education in the US.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

Other than the time to complete the demographic survey, the interview, and focused group, there is no other cost to participate in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**

You will receive compensation for your participation in form of an electronic gift card of a total \$30 following the completion of the individual interview and the focused group.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**

The data that is collected will only be accessible to the main researchers. Most data will be collected and stored electronically, reducing the amount of hardcopies information and increasing privacy. Your credentials and organizational affiliations will only be used for group demographic purposes. You will be asked to provide a preferred pseudonym and will be de-identified prior to data analysis to keep your privacy.

**What will happen to my information or biospecimens collected for this research project after the study is over?**

Should another research study be conducted you will be contacted. The use of identifiable data collected as part of this study will not be used or distributed for purposes other than this study without your consent. You will be contacted through email. If you are unable to be reached to provide consent, your data will not be used.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**

You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse any questions you do not wish to answer. The researcher can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent. Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Jennifer Foster at [jennifer.foster@wmich.edu](mailto:jennifer.foster@wmich.edu) or the student investigator, Hanny Wuysang at [hanny.t.wuysang@wmich.edu](mailto:hanny.t.wuysang@wmich.edu). You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) on March 16, 2022.

Do not participate in this study if the date is older than one year.

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I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. By clicking 'next' I indicate that I have read the consent statement and agree to participate in the study

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Page Break

**End of Block: Informed Consent**

**Start of Block: Demographic**

**Demographic Survey**



Age

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Non-Immigrant Visa Status (E.g. F-1, J-1, M-1, etc):

Where were you born?

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Where were you raised?

---

---

Are you currently enrolled in a CACREP Counseling Program?

Yes. What year did you start the program? (1)

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No (2)

Recently graduated. Please indicate which year you graduated: (3)

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---

What is your university name?

---

---

What city and state you are residing?

---

---



Gender

---

---

Sexual Identity

---

---



Countries that you have lived in before

---

---

Where do you consider home?

---

---

What language(s) do you speak at home?

---

---

What other language(s) do you speak?

---

---

How long have you been in the US?

---

---

Are you willing to share your transition experiences during your study in the U.S.?

Yes (4)

No (5)

---



If you are willing to participate, please insert your email address below:

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**End of Block: Demographic**

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## **Appendix D: Focused Group Informed Consent**

### **Focus group informed consent The Acculturation Process of Int'l Students in CACREP Counseling Prog**

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#### **Start of Block: Informed Consent**

**Western Michigan University**  
**Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jennifer Foster, Ph.D.

**Student Investigator:** Hanny Tishriana Wuysang, MA.

**Title of Study:** The Acculturation Process of International Students in CACREP Counseling Programs: A Grounded Theory Approach

**STUDY SUMMARY:** This focused group consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to understand what the transition experience is when studying in the U.S. counseling programs and factors that help or hinder the acculturation process. You receive this because you have participated in an individual interview addressing your experiences as a counseling international student. This focus group is to explore your experiences and respond and interact with other participants. Your time for the focused group will be about 60-90 minutes. Possible risks and costs to you for taking part in the study may be emotional distress or discomfort for sharing sensitive experiences, and the potential benefits may be having your voices heard and hopefully providing support during your transition. This study does not include contingency plans for providing third-party counseling or other support. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

The following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

### **What are we trying to find out in this study?**

The purpose of this study is to understand the acculturation process, a process in balancing between your home culture and the host culture. This study is conducted to also identify and understand the factors that help or hinder the process. The hope is that this study will provide information to counseling programs about the complex acculturation process and what concrete steps, policies or resources that counseling programs could do or change to create a smoother process.

### **Who can participate in this study?**

You can participate in this study if:

- International students who hold non-immigrant visa (e.g. F-1, J-1, M-1, etc.)
- Born and raised in a country other than the United States (birth to 18 years).
- Currently enrolled in or recently graduated from CACREP accredited master's or doctoral level counseling program in the last three years.
- Have had an individual interview for this study

### **Where will this study take place?**

Interview via WebEx.

### **What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**

The focus group will be 60-90 minutes.

### **What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**

You will be asked to reflect on the individual interview that was conducted previously and any additional thoughts or reflection about your life and education experiences during your study in the U.S.

### **What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**

The possible risk for you in partaking in this study is emotional distress. This emotional distress can occur because you may be sharing sensitive experiences. If you appear to be in physical or mental distress during the interview process, three potential actions may be taken. First, the topic of discussion may be changed to a less impactful question. Second, the interview may be terminated, with or without a later rescheduling. Finally, you may be removed from the study, either at your request or by the researcher. Because the research topic is relatively low in potential physical or mental risk, and you will be a fully informed volunteer, the study design does not include contingency plans for providing third-party counseling or other support.

### **What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

As a participant, this study will provide you with a place where your voices could be heard and hopefully would provide support during your transition. From your experiences, this study will

also inform counseling programs and universities about international students' experiences and how counseling programs and universities can have more strategies and practical steps to help international students in their acculturation into higher education in the US.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**

There is no cost to participate in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**

You will receive compensation for your participation in form of an electronic gift card of a total \$30 following the completion of the individual interview and the focused group.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**

The data that is collected will only be accessible to the main researchers. Most data will be collected and stored electronically, reducing the amount of hardcopies information and increasing privacy. Your credentials and organizational affiliations will only be used for group demographic purposes. You will be asked to provide a preferred pseudonym and will be de-identified prior to data analysis to keep your privacy.

**What will happen to my information or biospecimens collected for this research project after the study is over?**

Should another research study be conducted you will be contacted. The use of identifiable data collected as part of this study will not be used or distributed for purposes other than this study without your consent. You will be contacted through email. If you are unable to be reached to provide consent, your data will not be used.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**

You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse any questions you do not wish to answer. The researcher can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Jennifer Foster at 269-387-5115 or [jennifer.foster@wmich.edu](mailto:jennifer.foster@wmich.edu) or the student investigator, Hanny Wuysang at [hanny.t.wuysang@wmich.edu](mailto:hanny.t.wuysang@wmich.edu). You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) on \_\_\_\_\_.

Do not participate in this study if the date is older than one year.

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I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me.  
By clicking 'next' I indicate that I have read the consent statement and agree to participate in the  
study

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## **Appendix E: Focused Group Prompts**

I would like to thank you for participating in this focus group, which will aim to clarify and expand on themes that were previously mentioned in your individual interviews. The conversation will be video recorded, which will allow me to go back and listen, take notes, and then write a short summary about what was said. The recording will be deleted after the study is done.

There are a few important things to know before we begin. Please keep in mind that participation in this focus group is completely voluntary. All responses are valid, so please feel free to say what you think and feel, not what you think me or someone else might want to hear. You may abstain from discussing specific topics if you are not comfortable. Please respect the opinions of others even if you do not agree. Try to stay on topic; we may need to interrupt so that we can cover all the material. Again, you will receive a \$30 electronic gift card upon completion of both the virtual interview and focus group.

Finally, I cannot guarantee confidentiality, but ask you to help protect others' privacy by not discussing details outside the group. If you would like to participate, please read and provide verbal acknowledgment. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Questions**

1. Upon the initial interview, please share if there any other thoughts or reflections that you would like to share about your transition process in the US?
2. Upon hearing the preliminary result, what reactions did you have?
3. Upon hearing the preliminary result, in what ways do these have captured your acculturation process?
  - a. What is not captured?
  - b. Anything that you would like to change or add?

Appendix F: HSIRB Approval Letter

# WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: March 15, 2022

To: Jennifer Foster, Principal Investigator  
[Co-PI], Co-Principal Investigator

Re: Initial - IRB-2022-48

The Acculturation Process of Non-Western International Students in Counseling Programs:  
A Grounded Theory Approach

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "The Acculturation Process of Non-Western International Students in Counseling Programs: A Grounded Theory Approach" has been reviewed by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) and **approved** under the **Expedited**

The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., **add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.**). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB or the Associate Director Research for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Sincerely,





Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair  
WMU IRB

**For a study to remain open after one year, a Post Approval Monitoring report (please use the continuing review submission form) is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) March 13, 2023 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.**

**When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at <https://wmich.edu/research/forms>.**

**Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.**